

## 8-9-08 - The difference between victims and victimhood

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Thirty years ago, I wrote a book about the damage Indian boarding schools have done emotionally and spiritually to the Indian people. To one Native American writer this makes me a prisoner bound up in the chains of “victimhood.”

Charles “Wobbie” Trimble wrote that when we (Indians) speak, the white people interject, “Tell us about those awful days in boarding school; tell us how they beat you up.”

I wrote about the Indian mission boarding schools because by putting my pent-up feelings on paper I was able to face my anxieties and put that fear and yes, confusion, behind me. I did not write this book as a victim, but as a victor. I faced my fears and overcame them.

Shortly after my book came out I had a visit from a Catholic nun named Marie Therese Archambault, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. She embraced me and said that when she read my book the catharsis was immediate.

“I thought I was all alone out there with my closeted feelings of guilt and inadequacy,” she said.

She thanked me for helping her to finally understand her anxieties and to assist her in creating new goals for her role in the Catholic Church. Sister Marie Therese passed away a short while ago, but she is just one outstanding example of the hundreds of letters and calls I received for writing a book that brought relief to many, many Indian people that had attended Indian boarding schools.

Last year, I spoke to about 250 mostly elderly people from the Indian nations of the Southwest. As I spoke I could see the tears flowing from the eyes of many elderly men and women. One very elderly man, a member of the Jicarilla Apache Tribe, had his niece help him to his feet to ask me a question. He stood leaning against his cane and as he started to speak his voice broke and he sat down as the tears flowed from his eyes, unable to ask his question.

Time and time again over the years since my book came out and I have been asked to speak, not by non-Indians wanting me to “tell us about how they beat you up,” but by the Indian people that had attended boarding schools, this same phenomenon has occurred. When I spoke to a group of Indian employees from Quest Communications in Trimble’s hometown of Omaha, Neb., the same thing happened. I recall that the lights were turned low at the banquet held in my honor and as I talked about the things that each and every Indian in the room had experienced, people began to lower their heads and they began to cry.

After I had finished speaking many people from the audience came up to me to shake my hand and to tell me how my book and my talk had helped to bring out into the open much of the pain they had kept inside of themselves for so many years. Is that promoting victimhood or is it opening a channel for these victims to realize and to face their own fears?

My book gave many Indians, in the Lower 48 and in Alaska, the courage and the determination to bring lawsuits against the Catholic Church and against individual priests for the terrible sexual abuse that raked across this nation in the past 10 years. Quotes were taken directly from my book and used in a court of law. Some of these cases ended in victory for the plaintiffs and some cases, including here in South Dakota, are ongoing.

My younger sister and several of her close friends went to their graves as victims of rape at the hands of a pedophile at a Catholic Indian mission boarding school. She died a drug addict and alcoholic as did several of her friends. Some of these abused women died not only as addicts but as prostitutes. Were they suffering from that malady Trimble calls “victimhood” or were they, indeed, victims?

One has only to read today’s article in the New York Times about the Gila River Reservation in Arizona and about how the theft of their water, water that contributed to their very survival, robbed them of that right and how they turned to government commodities rich in fat and calories that has turned their nation into one of the largest, per capita, of people suffering from diabetes in America. Are they also suffering from the malady of victimhood or are they victims?

I agree with Mr. Trimble that we have to rethink our position of always being victims and to re-channel our thoughts to something that takes us past this belief. When I started a newspaper, The Lakota Times, a paper I later changed to Indian Country Today, a paper, incidentally that Trimble often writes for, I did it to prove that we (Indians) could build our own media, a media that would lead us away from “victimhood” and into the role of “victors.”