



Who a Warrior Is

TLC Warrior Robin Zephier (TLC 1998) and His Brother Harley Zephier's Journey to Share the Story of Mato Niyampi

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*If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten
that we belong to each other.*

Mother Teresa

*Empathy: Know it. Show it. Give it. Live it ... and it will
come back to you. Help heal the Circle.*

Harley Zephier and Robin Zephier

Meade County, western South Dakota, 1956. On a dark two-lane highway, an ambulance is driving northbound through the plains toward the tiny town of Lemmon. The ambulance has been driving for about 30 minutes, with another 20 minutes to go to reach its destination. Inside the ambulance is a lidded box; and inside that box is a newborn baby boy.

The mother and unborn baby had been brought by family to the Faith (South Dakota) Community Hospital. The doctor who would deliver the baby, along with the hospital administrator, were called from a social gathering where alcohol was served. The hospital administrator began to argue with the doctor. The argument was because of the race of the mother, who is Lakota.

The mother, and her newborn baby, were being labeled and racially stereotyped.

Why are you bringing so many Indian patients into this hospital? We do not want another Indian patient here.

Get them out of here! I don't want any more of these people here in my hospital.

The doctor called the little hospital in Lemmon, and that hospital agreed to receive the baby as a patient. The doctor then took the baby from his new mother; and, because the ambulance did not have a gurney suitable for an infant, he placed the baby in a box and put the lid over the box. He did not swaddle the baby in a blanket, so the baby was cold. The lid on the box separated the baby from any light. The doctor handed the box to the ambulance personnel, and the ambulance took off for Lemmon.

That is how this newborn baby boy arrived in this world: being racially thrown away—being discarded—because he is Lakota. *He does not belong to us ... get him out of here.*

The infant who was taken from his mother, who was rejected from the first people outside of his family to ever see him, was Harley Zephier. Harley is one of seven children, and he is brother to Trial Lawyers College alumnus Robin Zephier. Harley and Robin come from generations of medicine people, healers of body and spirit. Although they are enrolled on the Cheyenne River Lakota Reservation, their ancestral family extends from Canada to South America.

Both of Harley and Robin's parents endured years in "Indian Residential Schools," an forcible placement wherein indigenous children were taken from their families, subjected to military protocols and coerced to abandon their indigenous culture via physical abuse. The schools would forcibly cut the children's hair, a huge cultural blow that signified grieving and loss; and beat children for speaking their indigenous language, resulting in children being unable to communicate with their parents when they went home. Through the Indian Residential Schools experiment, the United States government snuffed out the culture, traditions and language of multiple generations of indigenous nations by traumatizing tribal children. Harley and Robin's mother and father had been told in every way that they were *Less Than*. That they could find each other, and heal enough to build a family, is a testament to the strength of their roots in Grandmother Earth.

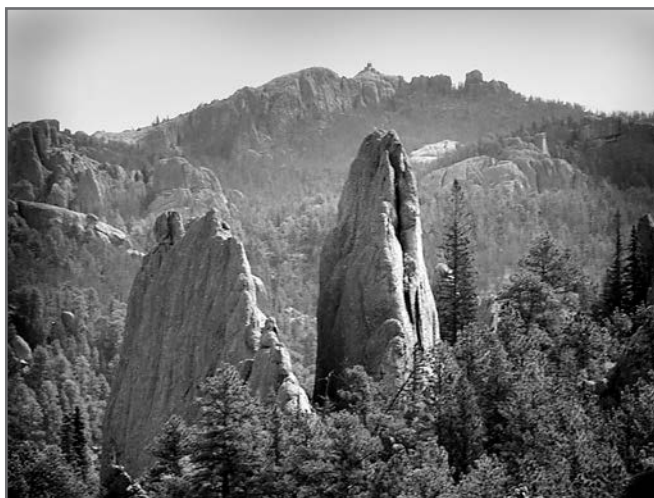
Those roots include Harley and Robin's beloved grandmother, Mary. Grandmother Mary lived in Dupree, South Dakota, on the Cheyenne River Reservation. As small as Grandmother Mary was in stature, she was a giant in spirit. She lived in the physical world and the spiritual world equally: she was baptized Catholic, but never broke her connection to her ancestors, her culture and Grandmother Earth. Grandmother Mary considered everyone to be a relation, if not her child.

If a visitor came to Grandmother Mary's run-down Reservation home, they would be invited in by a little woman in a long dress, opaque stockings, and a scarf in her hair. Grandmother Mary would pour coffee—"black medicine," she called it—and fix a plate of something to eat. She would embrace the visitor, with a handshake if the visitor were male and a hug if the visitor were female. And then, as Harley remembers:

She would pray. She would give thanks for this moment: thanks to the people who gave their lives for food; thanks to the place you were sitting in, safe and secure; thanks to the visitor who came to her home to be a part of this moment. Grandmother would inform you of things that would help you to forget the ugliness of the world. Her face would spiritually open up and embrace you. Her hands would make you feel human. Her breath and her aura would just consume you.

Robin remembers a time, as a Lakota teenager then living in a non-Reservation setting, when he was ashamed of his brown skin. He looked different from his white friends, and sometimes felt ashamed of his heritage, due to the stereotypes cast upon indigenous people. It was Grandmother Mary who encouraged Robin to see the world through her lens—a lens of pure love. Even when people looked at Grandmother Mary with hatred and prejudice, she found the way to love them.

Harley Zephier began drinking "black medicine" with Grandmother Mary when he was just one year old. As he nestled in Grandmother Mary's lap, that is where Grandmother Mary began teaching Harley and opening their spiritual connection. She didn't have to speak aloud to interpret to Harley between



He Sapa praying lands

the physical world and the spiritual world. As Harley describes, “when she would open that up, the spirits could speak to you and strengthen you ... how that’s capable, I don’t understand, still today, but it felt like total immersion in peace.” In Grandmother Mary’s embrace, Harley remembers, “there were no worries, no conflicts. Mind, body and spirit became one.”

There was a mission to Grandmother Mary’s care for Harley. It was Grandmother Mary’s calling to give her grandson the story that was given to her by her father. She was called to give Harley this story so that when Harley became a man—when he was spiritually prepared—he could then bring the powerful and consequential story of his great-grandfather, Grandmother Mary’s father, to the world. This was the story of Mato Niyampi, “*Saved By Bear*,” the great-grandfather of Harley and Robin Zephier, and the Lakota warrior who was called to take the life, and the trigger finger, of George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of the Greasy Grass.¹

To be sure, the story Harley was called to tell was not “just” one man’s personal biography. Grandmother Mary impressed upon Harley, and Harley came to understand, that *Saved By Bear*’s story is much bigger than one man’s personal biography. Just as our clients’ stories do not begin at the moment of arrest or injury, the story of *Saved By Bear*’s role in history did not begin on the day of his encounter with General Custer—and *Saved By Bear* was much more than “just” the warrior who ended Custer’s time in the physical world.

As Robin explains, the task Grandmother Mary gave Harley was to bring forward *Saved By Bear*’s story in such a way that,

when someone who may not have any perceived connection to indigenous people may feel compelled to immerse themselves in this story. There is that connection that readers will feel, when they learn the story of this man and these families, and the connection will start revealing itself to the reader ... the reader will come to see that their own families are represented.

That they’re not any different.

That’s the key of where this story has universal truths.

Bringing forward a story with so much significance and such invitation was not a matter of just sitting at a keyboard and starting to type. It would require learning; it would require spiritual preparation; it would require Harley, and soon also Robin, to open themselves to the weight of this story. Knowing that as a storyteller, he would be part of this story, Harley felt in his blood the task of fulfilling that storyteller’s role in the right way.

Harley felt that always. The story of *Saved By Bear* existed, regardless of whether Harley was telling it. The story would be there whenever it was time for Harley to tell it. But to do justice to *Saved By Bear* and all that *Saved By Bear* stood for, Harley first had to prepare himself.

Grandmother Mary had told Harley:

When you become a man, you will prepare yourself and then you will bring your great grandfather’s story to the world. There are many steps you have to take, in order to bring this out to the world.



Harley Zephier at the grave of his and Robin’s grandfather

So you must be strong. The Lakota way of life is hard, and requires commitment and sacrifice. You'll honor your grandfather and our people by going through all that he went through: the sun dance; the vision quest; learning ceremonies. Learning self. Sweat lodges.

For all of his life, Harley had been called *Iyeska*, a word that means “interpreter.” The Lakota *Iyeska* interprets between the spiritual world and the physical world. Harley had long known that he was connected to different planes of these worlds, even if he did not fully understand it as a young boy. When he grew to adulthood, the time had come for Harley to commit to the gifts of his ancestors, to learn who *he* is and how he connects to the ancestors like Saved By Bear. These preparatory steps were necessary before Saved By Bear’s story could be presented even to Harley’s own family.

He undertook *Hanbleceya*, a ceremony which translates to “man on the hill crying.” He is crying for a better understanding of self, for society. For four days and four nights, Harley stood atop a tall hill that had been made sacred. He brought a pipe and tobacco, but no food and no water. In his solitude, Harley prayed to better understand his oneness with all things. He prayed to deepen his understanding of Creator, and his connection to all of his ancestors. He asked for a vision. After four days, Harley descended from the tall hill, and a Lakota holy man helped Harley to interpret, to understand and to protect what he had seen and dreamt.

Harley deepened his knowledge of *Inipi*, the purification rite that includes the sweat lodge. Traditional Lakota would use *Inipi* to prepare for any major challenge, to gain focus and strength to undertake the challenge ahead. Harley was 23 years old when his uncles came to him and said “you’re going to sweat lodge tonight.” Harley had heard about sweats from Grandmother Mary, but did not really know what to expect. He remembers:

As soon as we closed the door and began to sing the first song, the spirits arrived. They came, like the origins of Creation in many colors, circling the fire and circling me.

After that, Harley says, “I followed where the spirits led me, and I learned and learned and learned.” He attended many sweat lodges as he dedicated himself to learning and living according to the traditional ways. His gifts as an *Iyeska* enabled Harley to serve as a guide for other Lakota seekers of visions and dreams who came to Harley’s sweat lodge, looking for guidance.

Perhaps the most important ceremony for Lakota is *Wiwanke Wacipi*, the Sun Dance. The intensity of the Sun Dance makes this ceremony a uniquely sacrificial and profoundly personal challenge. The full Sun Dance ceremony lasts for four days and four nights. It begins with a sweat lodge, fasting from food and water and purification of the dancers’ bodies. The last day culminates in the ritual of piercing each dancer’s chest with either a buffalo rib bone or wooden ash pegs. Rope tethers connect the dancer from the pegs piercing his chest to the tall cottonwood tree in the center of the arbor. Each dancer pulls himself away from the tree, working to free himself from the pegs piercing his flesh. The dancers experience the sheer pain of the pegs tearing

out of their flesh as they are finally released.

The objects of the Sun Dance are for the dancer to request power and insight from Creator, and to offer the sacrifice of his suffering for the benefit of his family and his community and all the peoples of the world. It serves to strengthen kinship not just between the dancer and the immediate community, but between the dancer, the community and with their ancestors. Sun dancing is never undertaken lightly, and never without intense preparation. Harley Zephier dedicated himself to that preparation, and when the time came, Harley became a pierced dancer in the Sun Dance. Since then, Harley has served others as a mentor and *Iyeska* in this ceremony.

Harley’s commitment to connecting and finding the story of Saved By Bear also led him to make his home within view of Thunder Butte (*Wakinyan Paha*), a sacred place on the Cheyenne River Reservation in northwest South Dakota. Thunder Butte is one of the original sacred sites that were given to the people of Turtle Island.² Harley explains that “*the rejuvenators, the cleansers, the bringers of life to the land ... all of the people who live on this land are benefitted.*” Lakotas and other indigenous people who seek spiritual connection travel to Thunder Butte to camp, to pray and to teach each other and learn from each other.

Surrounded by the Owl River, the rolling hills and bluffs of the plains and the rising bluff of Thunder Butte, Harley knew this holy land was where he needed to be. His home is also within view of Thunder Butte Agency, where government superintendents demeaned the indigenous people and robbed them of their land and their hope; thus, as Harley describes,

I live in the middle of different historical and spiritual forces, and most of all civilization—original civilization began here. I have been here at this place for 23 years. I came back to the reservation to learn about my people, their culture and myself so that I could help my brother and my family tell this story. It was a part of my asking from my grandmother and Great-Grandfather that I follow these ways and learn about them firsthand.

“And I am still learning,” Harley says. “I am always learning.” Throughout all of this study and dedication, Harley received yet more oral history passed down by Lakota elders; more visions revealed in ceremony; and more detail of Saved By Bear’s experience in being called to confront General Custer.

In time, after immersion in these ancient ceremonies, Harley came to feel the need for help and support in this storytelling mission. He could still hear the words of Grandmother Mary: “*When you become a man, you will bring this story forward to the world.*” Harley had now completed traditional ceremonies for Lakota manhood, but he still did not feel ready. He did not feel ready to connect his spiritual learning to the physical world—to the world in which indigenous people live as a minority, separated from the modern European-based world. Harley felt the challenge of bridging traditional spiritualism for readers whose world was European-based, in religion and government and family and resources. He needed confidence.

He turned to the *Cannumpa* way, smoking the ceremonial

pipe brought to the Lakota by the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman. He prayed, as seekers of the Sacred White Buffalo are taught to pray, asking for guidance. “*This is what I understand,*” Harley prayed. “*This is what I know, and this is what was gifted to me—my indigenous self that most of society does not understand.*” The message that emerged was that Harley needed to ask his brother Robin to help him bring this story forward.

And so Harley shared with his brother Robin that his study and immersion in the traditional ways had a special mission—to bring forward the story of Saved By Bear.

When those conversations began, Robin was already a trial lawyer. He based his practice out of Rapid City, South Dakota. He had always loved the tradition of storytelling, and trial practice gave Robin an avenue by which his natural storytelling talent could impact and benefit the lives of people who needed help.

Robin had long envisioned that one day, he would be able to use his training and his profession to research and expose the abuses of the United States government and the likes of United States Army General Philip Sheridan.³ In entering trial practice, Robin says:

I knew deep down it would lead me to where I needed to be to fulfill that goal—having some part of the restoration of justice to our people, and to our spirits, for going through what happened long ago in the loss of the sacred land.

But as his trial practice grew, Robin found himself lost in the everyday clutter of motions and depositions, competition for business and goals for professional success.

And so when Harley shared with Robin that the time had arrived for Harley to begin bringing forward the story of Saved By Bear—and that his wish was for Robin to help him—Robin felt a spiritual pull to join his brother on this journey. Harley knew he would have to teach and instruct Robin into this way. As Harley shared this mission, and his own study to understand and accept this mission, with Robin, Robin began to connect to the importance of feeling *identity* in the way that Harley had discovered *identity*.

And Harley himself felt his own need to become a greater part of the lives of others, including family in the physical world. His immersion in the traditional ways had strengthened Harley’s connection to his ancestors; but he could feel some distance to his living relatives. By inviting Robin to help tell Great-Grandfather’s story, Harley could renew his presence and purpose with the physical world, to whom this story would be told. The brothers embraced this opportunity to walk together in this sacred task.

Robin had graduated from Trial Lawyers College in 1998. After experiencing burnout from being told “no, you can’t do that” too many times, Robin had attended TLC looking for rejuvenation—and TLC delivered. Trial Lawyers College “*turned on something inside of me that had been dormant for some time,*” Robin reflects, “*and I now wanted to devote more time to that part of my life—not just working for professional self-gratification.*” It was about when Robin graduated from TLC that Harley ap-

proached Robin to invite him to help bring forward the story of Saved By Bear. And from the start of those discussions, Harley impressed upon Robin that telling their great-grandfather’s story had to be done the right way—with preparation in ceremony and spiritualism, and taking the right actions with the right intentions, for the right reasons. Robin accepted the challenge.

Harley planned a sacred ceremony to ask for spiritual permission to bring forward Saved By Bear’s story together. He included Robin in the planning, and that was when Robin felt his emotional engagement click in. Harley set up a sacred prayer altar on “Last Stand Hill,” at the Greasy Grass battlefield in eastern Montana. On the morning of September 29, 2010, with other family participating and helping, they allowed the ancient ceremony, taught to Harley, to reveal to them how to tell this story. Robin remembers:

When I was standing in the prayer altar, it came to be my turn to speak to Creator. As I spoke, I heard the horses singing on the other side. Harley was in front of me, leading prayers. Our younger brother was drumming behind me. My sister-in-law was there praying as well. My father, Harley Senior, and my mother, Alverda, were there. I felt my spirit burst—like a bolt of lightning, like coming into life for the first time in many, many years, many lifetimes. It was also at that moment that I felt a presence come right through my body and warm my heart.

We were not just praying for Great-Grandfather as we stood on that hill. We were praying for all of the warriors, all of the people—even the soldiers and General Custer himself. We prayed for the horses that lost their lives. We prayed for all of the beings affected by the conflict, for the sacred land, for the grass.

In that ceremony, Robin committed to not just helping Harley bring forward their family story, but to do so in a way that fulfilled the destiny of this story and of so much else. Robin says,

I became committed to communicating, in this very important time, that We Are Not Alone. That we are all in this together. That we can accomplish the good for all of us ... Because of what our great-grandfather had done on June 25, 1876, we had a tremendous gift that had flowed through our family. The gift was this story, a story that is a great hand reaching out of the Earth. Our duty and responsibility was to tell this story in a way that lets the hearer grasp that great hand and reconnect to all that is in the Earth—all the important messages of life and coexistence and survival and peace and unity and tolerance and love.

We wanted hearers to take that great hand too, and to let themselves be pulled into the spiritual story that resides within the outward historical story.

It was after that powerful Lakota ceremony, and the clarity of mind that the ceremony brought them, that Harley and Robin were able to plan their collaboration for the actual writing process.

For several years, Harley had been writing pieces of the story of *Saved By Bear* in longhand: one piece would come to him, he would write, and then later, another and completely different piece would come to him. He had the story organized in his mind. But the Lakota storytelling tradition is oral, and reducing such an enormous story to writing had felt daunting thus far. After their family ceremony on Last Stand Hill, Harley felt a greater energy, and he found the focus he had been seeking.

Robin, who had been writing pieces of the story on his own for many years as well, traveled to Harley's house at Thunder Butte. Harley had bought a small cassette tape recorder and a stack of blank cassettes, and he set it up at his kitchen table. He and Robin shut off all phones and man-made noise. With coffee brewing, the dogs and cats sleeping at their feet and the horses lingering curiously outside, Robin pressed "record" on Harley's tape deck ... and, through Harley, the great story of Mato Niyanpi truly began to flow. The brothers made many hours of these recordings over many days and weeks, which then were transcribed for editing.

The book begins with the Creation time, introducing the story of *story* itself. Harley and Robin introduce readers to the origins of ceremony and the origins of what became the traditions passed from one generation of ancestors to the next. "*That was such an important part of having readers understand what these traditions originally meant, so they can understand why they are important today.*"

The next phase of the book introduces Mato Niyanpi. Harley and Robin reveal how the name "Saved By Bear" became his, and describe events in which *Saved By Bear* became, as they write, "*more fully alerted to his inner strength and spirit in relation to communicating with the spiritual realm.*"⁴ Through rich detail, Harley and Robin show *Saved By Bear* recognizing his connection to the spirituality of the land, animals and other people, both in the physical world and in the spirit world.

Harley and Robin wove the growth and education of *Saved By Bear* into a second story, of the United States Government's open campaign of genocide of the indigenous tribal nations. Chapter 9, "Encroachment," begins with a description of the massacre of 200 people—mostly women, children and elderly people—along the Washita River. From there, Harley and Robin describe the Government's slaughter of hundreds and hundreds of horses, and an explanation of the spiritual wound gouged by the Government in that act:

[I]n order to make sure that the Cheyenne did not have any ponies that were to be utilized by the people or their relatives, Custer and his men gathered all of the 900 horses from the camp. Rather than take those horses with them as part of the army, Custer made the decision that all of the horses should be killed. The cavalrymen stood along the perimeter of the group of horses and shot every one of them, slaughtering all of these horse people, many of them mares and colts. Cries, moans and torturous whimpers rose from the group of innocent horses. They were calling out to their relatives, but nobody was

there to help.

This particular campaign would prove a harbinger of what would come in another eight years, as some of the very same attack tactics that were used on that particular day, resulting in the massacre of many human lives and horses' lives, were again used by the same military leader and the same regiment, the Seventh Cavalry of the United States Army ...⁵

The infamous buffalo slaughter followed. Beyond describing the slaughter of people, buffalo and horses, and the deception and betrayal in the treaties, Harley and Robin give the reader the spiritual significance of these acts of extermination:

The buffalo slaughter was an opening up of one of the ancient, yet ever-present doors to the evil side of existence, the doors that should remain shut. But the doors are too tempting for men who have no conscience or caring. These doors become the beacon for these men, whose only goals are to seek their own personal wealth, and the survival and ethnic advancement of their own kind at all costs. To do this, they must rid themselves of the *redskins* and their beasts. This policy of slaughter of the buffalo, intent upon the genocide of the Lakota, did swing open the door to the bad side, where the evil spirits dwell and flourish.

Death and destruction can serve as an aphrodisiac for those who lust for killing and domination. The bad side feeds the evil part of man in such a way that his appetite will no longer be able to be satisfied. When a man discovers that it is much easier to gain power, influence and wealth by just killing his opponent, then it follows that compromise, peace, civility and humanity are no longer important or necessary. The drive to control all things, and to be in control, is too great sometimes to be denied by the nuisance of life and empathy. Empathy and conscience are the first casualties when the door to the bad side is flung wide open.⁶

A reader will notice that in their storytelling style, Harley and Robin transition fluidly between the present tense and the past tense. Trial Lawyers College was not the first to recognize how use of the present tense in storytelling captivates the listener: it was the original Lakota style of storytelling, passed down through generations. The brothers turned to past-tense when necessary to communicate a character's past experience or perspective. Harley and Robin held fast to the need to use both present and past tense when an editor resisted. Robin explains that "*we couldn't part with [this style], because it was such a natural way to tell the story ... and to do it differently would have been to take away part of the spirit of the story.*"

Robin used his Trial Lawyers College training throughout these collaborations. As Robin describes,

our training at Trial Lawyers College was to place yourself into the moccasins of the other and to see life through the eyes

of that who you're trying to understand. The psychodramatic term is role reversal.

Robin used those skills to envision the discourse between then-President Ulysses S. Grant, Lt. Philip Sheridan, Gen. George Crook and Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman. Robin had studied these men, learned their attitudes and fears and egos, and from that role reversal, Robin constructed the surplus reality of their Oval Office discussion held about seven months before the Battle of the Greasy Grass: the mutual impatience with the pretense of helping the Lakota in disputes with gold miners, the deference to gold investors' interests, and the collaboration to order all of the Lakota to report to their agencies on pain of being declared "hostile."⁷

A particular passage that Robin contributed actually grew from an interaction with Gerry Spence at Trial Lawyers College. Gerry had shared with Robin his view of what gives one human being the capacity to wound the soul of a fellow human being. Remembering that encounter with Gerry, Robin wrote in *Warrior Is*:

The Circle of life moves strongly, simply and naturally when people and all other beings live in a good way. When the life of all beings follows the path of peace, unity, tolerance and love, the Circle is complete, respected and dependable.

However, when a human being directs his or her free will toward the negative side of things, the energy flow is shifted. When a human being lacks conscience, he may not see things in any way except the way that seeks only his own benefit. When a person lacks empathy for other beings or other things, he may not know how others may be or are affected by what he does. A lack of compassion for other lives can cause a person to lose sight of the bigger world in which he lives ...

People who lack empathy are in danger of becoming consumed by greed, spite, envy, hatred, prejudice, destruction, war and death; the idea of having supremacy; and the pursuit of wealth, notoriety, power, political influence, dominion and conquest. It will be harder, if not impossible, for a person who has no conscience to remain connected to the attributes of peace, unity, toler-

ance and love.⁸

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Empathy cannot as easily be taught, as it can be learned. Empathy is easily deflected when someone is indifferent to the plights of others. The less that one sees or learns of someone, the easier it is to avoid having empathy for that person. Oftentimes people prefer to avoid having empathy for their enemy or their rival, setting aside any notion of caring for and being concerned about the well-being of those *others*.

In the matter of war or genocide, the architects of such policies aggressively promote tactics and mandates to specifically avoid any potential empathy. So as to con-

vince those whom they must convince, to do things, to believe, that when they do things to these others, there is no need whatsoever to care for them or their well-being or to be concerned about their present ... or their futures.

Empathy is the enemy of war and genocide.⁹

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Though Robin's conversation with Gerry took place over 100 years after Saved By Bear confronted General Custer, Robin included these thoughts in *Warrior Is*, because the ways in which humans have demonstrated the capacity to wound another human's soul have not changed. It was the absence of empathy and the love of supremacy that motivated the Government's campaign to exterminate the indigenous tribes in the 19th century; it was the absence of empathy and the love of supremacy that motivated a drunken hospital administrator to order his doctor to stick a Lakota infant in a box and send that infant out of his hospital; and it is the absence of empathy and the love of supremacy that breaks humans still today.

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Robin explains that the Lakota were chosen to serve as Grandmother Earth's sacred stewards, Her sacred protectors. Today, the Lakota feel the upheaval of change in their lives, but also the hope and the determination to survive, and to again emerge in a better world. So it was in 1870 as well, as Saved By Bear and the Lakota recognized both the mortal threat and their sacred calling. In Chapter 10, "Strong Heart," of *Warrior Is*, Robin wrote:

If Grandmother Earth is asked to adapt to the ensuing imbalance of her former self, she will do so in ways that will create an unexpected change for the peoples. What was once ritual and reliable will no longer be so. The expected ways of things will become unexpected, unpredictable, unknown, unfathomed, or unnatural. Creator created Grandmother Earth long before Creator created humans. If Creator were pressed by the circumstances caused by humanity to make the future decision between the survival of Grandmother Earth or the survival of her inhabitants, then the millions of years of history and natural cycles of existence may be rewritten, and played out again, as they had before ...

Should the great balance of life be shaken and harmed by the deeds and intents of man, especially the industrialized future human being, then the people who depend upon Creator will realize a need for that which was once dependable and reliable, but which has now become unreliable and undependable. This would be the time of the crumbling of the Circle. This would be the time when the human being's place in the Circle will be viewed as indeterminate. This would be the time when life itself will be unbalanced.

Life, as all have known it before, will have been changed. It could result in a breaking of the world. Should the great unbalancing occur as a result of humanity's greed and errors, then man's very existence will be threatened. Many will not survive. Those who will survive will need to be strong in heart, strong in body, and strongest in spirit.

Those people closest to Creator in spirit will be those that have the greatest ability to withstand the imbalance and the retethering of the world ... It is in these times that well-worn customs and ways will reemerge through kindness of heart and courage of will. The time to reconnect and to regenerate will be at hand. The time to dream again will be here.

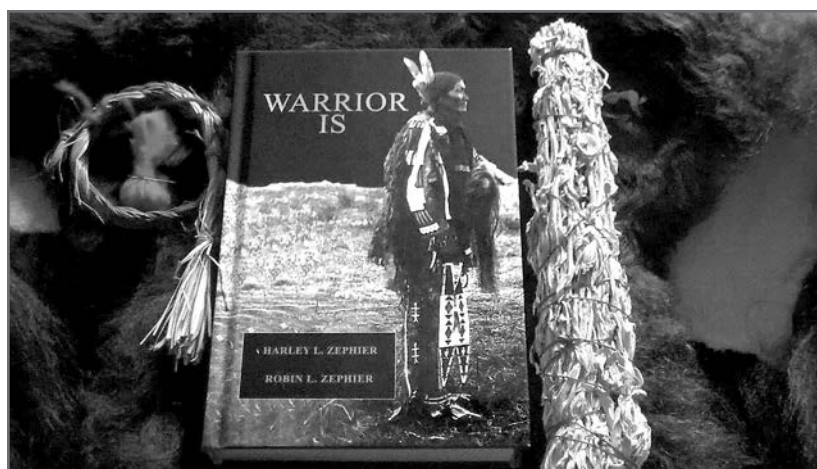
The Lakota plan and pray that life will survive. We pray that the Circle, if broken, will be healed. That the Circle will be eternal. In the times of the encroaching danger and change forced upon the Lakota by the new people and their government and military, the fear and the sense of uncertainty is real. The people long for the times of the old. But now, like their brothers the buffalo, they look to the future with an acceptance of reality. And like the buffalo people, the Lakota will stand up, they will rise, and they will face the coming storm, and walk forward into it with the strength of the spirit.¹⁰

This chapter of *Warrior Is* prefaces the escalation of the Government's campaign of extermination of the Lakota and other indigenous tribes.

Both Harley and Robin could feel the presence of Grandmother with them throughout their collaborations—and the presence of Great-Grandfather too. Once the collaborations at Thunder Butte began, neither Harley nor Robin ever experienced any kind of writer's block. "*In our collaborations,*" says Robin, "*we gave ourselves the opportunity to keep the door open*" to the influence and guidance of their family and their ancestors. Harley's connection to Grandmother Mary gave him the vision of the events of the story: "*I just asked for Grandmother and the spiritual side, and my own being, to come into Circle.*" In that experience, Harley felt the depth of the story and conveyed that depth in his own telling.

The culmination of the story of Saved By Bear's mission comes in Chapter 16, "Our Battle." It is striking to learn the story of the Battle of the Greasy Grass, a/k/a the Battle of Little Big Horn, from the perspective of the Lakota warrior rather than from the perspective of Custer or his soldiers. Even the academic perspective of the "omniscient eye," striving for neutrality, would omit the emotional urgency of this battle to the warriors. As Harley explains:

*People know that place as "Last Stand Hill." That is essentially a truthful description of what it was—but it really was not Custer's Last Stand. It was **our** last stand. Had we not taken the time to prepare and pray and work and*



believe, had we not taken that stand ourselves in that moment against those people (and particularly against Custer), we may well have been totally and permanently genocided.

That battle changed history so that we could live. So that we could speak today.

Like the rest of *Warrior Is*, this compelling part of the story was recorded as oral history in Harley's home—Robin remembers Harley stepping over four sleeping dogs as Harley physically put into action the steps Saved By Bear took in his approach to General Custer.

Although Harley has not attended Trial Lawyers College, his committed exercise in *becoming* the warriors in the battle, and becoming General Custer himself, was a flawless example of how TLC teaches us to discover each character's role in a story. Harley explains that *"what it does is it actually lets me become a part of the story—almost like a drone. I hover, I become a part of the scenery and experience."* By crawling under each character's hide, Harley could see moccasins touching grass, and could feel the smallest movement of a warrior's eyes:

As [Saved By Bear and Swift Bear] take their next step, a vision occurs. A mound-shaped aura becomes visible above the ground. Extending into the field ahead, it creates a bend to the left, heading toward the hill. Then it is blocked from view by the silhouette of the bluff. Perimeters form to the left and to the right. A red luminous line outlined by a yellow glow runs like a border through the grass and brush along each perimeter, emanating a haze of energy that fades in and out of view, with the deadly battle about to drift or fly through at any second.

The warriors feel the energy of the pathway provided to guide them. They will stay inside of and close to this

clearly-defined spiritual presence of support. To visualize this path, picture a man standing and facing you. He extends his left arm out at shoulder level, bends his elbow upward and opens his hand, his palm exposed with his fingers pointed to the sky. This posture gives life to forces well beyond the comprehension of many human beings.

We wait no more! We are not here to fight with you; we are here to kill you. It is time to prove our traditional belief in the practice of who the true warrior is! Our surroundings are allies we depend upon. Unity provides strength and courage. This allows a connection and a spiritual awareness, as does knowing how to navigate the train in one constantly-moving force advancing on Custer. From now on, we communicate with our path, not with words. Toward the palm is where we journey.¹¹

And it was not just the movements that Harley could connect to. As TLC teaches, "it's not just the facts that matter—it's the feelings about those facts."¹² Harley says:

I can feel the anticipation that the warriors felt at the time. You become an empath. You feel physically what you are experiencing. In the time it took me to write [Chapter 16] and go through everything from remembering the words, situations, descriptions and experiencing when Great-Grandfather is running—it feels like I was actually running. I actually had to sit down and rest at times. When you become a part of that world so heavily, and in such reality, it extracts energy. You have to give your energy to receive energy, so you get tired and depleted.

When asked at what point he felt most "there" in the scene, Harley answered without hesitation, *"the point where Great-Grandfather goes to get that carbine. It feels like he is carrying me*



Cabausa and Isota

on his back—I was that close.”

Warrior Is recounts, moment by moment, how General Custer was knocked onto the ground, and was gazing upwards as Saved By Bear entered his plane of vision ... and what Harley learned from Saved By Bear’s feeling in that critical moment:

Those who would call me different, who would hate me, need to know that I don’t hate them. I pray for them. Just as Great-Grandfather did.

Robin adds that conventional accounts of Custer’s death indicate that Custer appeared in death to be at peace, maybe even smiling. In the conventional accounts, it makes little sense for the vanquished soldier to peacefully smile in his moment of repose. But it makes more sense in the context of Saved By Bear’s mission, as Robin explains:

When he realizes that the warrior has come, and the warrior is now offering him eternal friendship and an opportunity to learn, then at that moment, he realized that Great-Grandfather would be his spirit keeper. When Custer knew that Great-Grandfather was taking his life from the physical world, it was almost a sense of relief.

Although *Warrior Is* presents the detail of the confrontation between Saved By Bear and Custer—and its resolution, Harley and Robin strived in their storytelling to convey that “*the bigger picture was what that event meant—not just to Saved By Bear and Swift Bear and those warriors and the cavalry and Custer, but the expansion of that sacred spiritual energy that was focused on that event and still exists there today.*”

When the encampments and major sites of the Battle of the Greasy Grass are drawn, if one draws a line to connect those important places, the resultant picture is, like Saved By Bear’s vision, a left arm being raised up—the arm extended from the elbow, and forearm up into the hand. Saved By Bear took Custer in the palm of that “hand,” which deepens the meaning of Saved By Bear’s task of taking Custer’s trigger finger after his death. Robin and Harley explain that taking a part of a finger was a traditional piece of Lakota warfare, practiced when circumstances dictated an extreme measure:

It is done when you have to take a spirit of a bad and evil way, and actually fight that spirit continually to regenerate the good parts of this human being. Even though your physical self may perish, you are still a part of Life, no matter what you are ... just because you are no longer flesh and bone does not mean you are no longer here, or that you don’t have a right to be here. You do.

And so it was a spiritual measure for Saved By Bear to take a piece of Custer’s trigger finger.

Saved By Bear could have taken a foot or a thumb (or Custer’s genitals, which is what the Government soldiers subjected Lakota people to). But the traditional way is not to torture. Harley makes clear that “*that battlefield was told to not torture, dismember or steal.*” As Harley explained further, the reason for taking part of Custer’s trigger finger was that

it was Custer’s, and the military’s, trigger finger that fired all the pistols and rifles and fired cannons. It was a Government agent’s trigger finger that signed all the treaties of deception and genocide. The bad spirit in that finger was why Custer was nurtured by his people.

And so Saved By Bear was taking that finger from Custer, to the world. Saved By Bear became the keeper of the spirit contained in that piece of Custer’s finger.

To read this part of *Warrior Is*, Saved By Bear’s taking of Custer’s trigger finger is not a glorified act of torture. Saved By Bear shot Custer first, so that Custer would be gone from this world before his finger was removed. And when Saved By Bear removed Custer’s finger, he placed it in a sacred pouch. Then he stood, and prayed to Creator to the Four Directions. Even in completing his mission, Saved By Bear kept his humility before Creator and before his ancestors.

“*That was Great-Grandfather,*” says Harley, “*being the human being he was intended to be, in a positive manner to accomplish what was asked of him.*”

* * * * *

In June 2018, as *Warrior Is* was in the early stages of publication, Harley and Robin were invited to speak about their journey in bringing this story forward at the Greasy Grass battle site in eastern Montana. The occasion was the annual observance of the Battle of the Greasy Grass. Harley and Robin knew that some of those who would hear them speak would be there as scholars of the battle, knowing the significance of the date; others would be there fortuitously, as tourists passing through. This was an opportunity to educate interested listeners that what they had known as “Custer’s Last Stand” was, in fact, a very different story—not of military outcome but of spiritual calling. And it was an opportunity to educate listeners on “*what that event meant—not just to Saved By Bear and the warriors and the cavalry and Custer, but the expansion of that sacred spiritual energy that was focused on that event ... and still exists there today.*”

Harley and Robin, and their friend Dave Johnson, traveled to the battle site in the heat of late June, after a string of days whose temperatures broke the 100-degree mark. Having completed the writing of *Warrior Is*, they had another task in addition to their speaking engagement: Harley and Robin needed to return to Saved By Bear’s own path through the battle site. They needed to commune with their ancestors and with the land, to tell them that the story has now been brought forward and to thank the Great Spirit for guiding them in fulfilling their calling.

The heat broke, giving the brothers cool 70-degree air for their holy walk. Robin confesses that he had been skeptical about returning to Saved By Bear’s path, given the heat and the likelihood of encountering snakes. He shared his concern with Harley:

But as we approached the high grass, two to three feet high in some areas, Harley just said, “let’s stop. Let’s ask those beings to let us be. To not mind us and not bother us. Let’s

tell them we're just coming through, we're not going to harm you."

That gave Robin comfort, and they walked through the tall grasses with their focus on their task, without distraction.

As they walked parallel to Greasy Grass River, Robin and Harley felt every rise, every dip. They felt the spiritual presence of the ravines to one side of them and the bluffs to their other side. At one point, they turned their heads upward, toward a ridge to the southeast where the warriors had made their turn in the battle—and in that very moment, Robin and Harley saw thirteen riders on horseback, wearing blue vintage Calvary uniforms, arriving on that ridge to lay a wreath on the National Park Service's monument. Robin says:

We all knew what we were seeing ... but we knew there was a reason why we were there to see it. It was a moment in time when the portals kind of bent time back to that moment in the original battle, so that we could have that vision in our eyes and in our hearts. So that we could know that what we're doing here is good and right. So that we had confirmation, that "you brothers are doing this the right way, and we're going to show you the rest of the way."

It was a physically difficult terrain. We're not young men. All of us have physical ailments, but something was carrying us. What a grand accomplishment, to walk in these people's footsteps and to feel how tremendously hard that part of their journey was. Feeling what the warriors needed to do and how Saved By Bear needed to respond in that moment. It was like a lightning bolt of feeling and intellect. In that moment, we felt exactly like Saved By Bear. It was moving,

it was exhilarating, it was joyful. There is no way it could have been planned.

Harley adds that *"the best coincidences in the history of mankind were never really coincidences. We were shown that, because we were intended to be shown that."*

Their walk along the physical and spiritual pathway of Saved By Bear returned Harley and Robin to the grandeur of that grounds, and the medicines that have always existed at this battle site. Their walk emphasized to the brothers the message they had come to convey, and hoped to convey in *Warrior Is*: that instead of seeing the site of the Battle of the Greasy Grass as a place of conflict and struggle and suffering, they can see it as a place where healing could begin—where, when Saved By Bear took Custer's finger and prayed, the suffering one miserable Government soldier had caused could begin to lift.

And so when Robin and Harley gave their presentation the next day (on June 25), they invited the historians and tourists to consider that this place, known for negativity and death, could now be seen *"as a point of origin, a point of growth and healing."*

One listener to their presentation was a little girl. As Harley spoke, Robin watched the little girl. He could see in her eyes that she was absorbing knowledge that was totally new to her. She was hearing a story that she had never heard before. And, Robin could see that the little girl was rapt with attention. She was excited and engaged.

"Maybe someday, she'll come back," says Robin. Harley responds, *"and maybe someday, she will help others to understand."*

Why did Harley and Robin give this epic story the title, *Warrior Is*? Harley and Robin explain that the title is meant to show the universality of this important story—and to challenge the



Harley Zephier and Robin Zephier at the Greasy Grass Battle site

notion that a warrior can only be a man. In Harley's words,

[Warrior Is] is a child who is innocent and curious and is able to be nurtured. It's a woman, the lifegiver who brings each and every warrior into existence, caring for her family and her people. It's the man born of the lifegiver, taught by other lifegivers early in his life to be compassionate and to feel his emotions.

Warrior Is is everyone on the planet today in humanity. We also call the other beings, who are not human, for they all have the same protocol in order. They teach their little ones, just as we do. Our learning and our education as human beings came from what the world knows in the animal world, because we as humans are the youngest and the last of creation. There was a time when one language was spoken between all of creation's beings—we all understood each other.

The language that is spoken is still alive in many of us. I still practice it. We can still understand each other—if we are willing to listen.

* * * * *

I have known Robin Zephier since 1999, when I went through Trial Lawyers College as a student, and Robin was a member of the teaching staff. I have had the wonderful experience of working with Robin as co-counsel, observing his heartfelt service to a Lakota woman whose son died of suicide in the jail of a small town bordering the Pine Ridge Reservation. When I read *Warrior Is*, I asked Robin if he and his brother would share with our readers the story of their calling to bring forward the story of *Saved By Bear*. They said yes.

The resultant interviews (six hours over two days) were not just helpful for gathering information, but were also a great personal privilege. Robin lit the sage in his smudge pot to bless our gathering. His sweet white dog, JoJo, slept on his lap (and sometimes on my lap) while I listened to Harley and Robin and took notes. Harley called in from Thunder Butte, but he might as well have been physically present. Harley's spiritual storytelling brought him into our physical space just as much as if he had driven the 160 miles south to Rapid City.

A reader can feel the universality and connectivity of *Saved By Bear's* story; but it became all the clearer as I heard Harley and Robin tell their personal story in conveying it. Harley shared his soliloquy over the importance of his calling, especially knowing that bringing forth a very different narrative of an unchallenged battle story would be difficult:

I was thinking to myself, "why am I doing this? Hardly anyone wants to believe anything different—so why am I doing this?" And then I realized, "you're doing it because it's who you are. You can't not do this. You were called to do this and your task will never be complete if you don't do this." So that is how I can stand today.

As I heard Harley's soliloquy, I could connect. I thought of my

own strong wish to honor my late father and my mother who is still in this world, and I told Harley that is what motivates me. Harley replied:

What you just said joins our circle of families. Your father and our grandmother are now sitting together, as it should be. Little by little, each circle is coming into contact with another. This is how we will heal the earth.

I felt tears in my eyes to hear that, with the scent of sage and the sighs of a sleeping dog in the space of our room.

Warrior Is is not a fluffy "beach read." But that is not to say that *Warrior Is* is hard to read, because it is not. Harley and Robin are magnificent storytellers, weaving the sacred history of the Native land and people through the troubling history of the United States Government's betrayal of the Native tribes, and narrowing the broad opening of the book into the personal story of *Saved By Bear* and his calling to confront General Custer. It is a sweeping, epic story filled with beautiful detail, complex characters and compelling action.

Throughout *Warrior Is*, Harley and Robin pause from the historical plot to impart spiritual and cultural education on the significance of the major events of the story. A reader will know, when she closes the book for the last time, that she has learned a very big story. And, a Trial Lawyers College alum will see TLC storytelling methods, known intuitively to Harley and honed at Thunderhead Ranch by Robin, in how they draw the reader into the action and the emotional moments of the story.

Harley and Robin committed themselves in ceremony and in brotherly collaboration to bring forth a vast story. That vast story comprises both family honor that is personal, and at the same time truths and powerful exhortations that are universal. I am thankful for the Zephier brothers' grace in allowing me to learn their story of answering a calling that was urgent and real.

When I interviewed Harley and Robin in September and October 2019, the word "coronavirus" was not known within the TLC Tribe. As I write this coda in March 2020, one in five Americans has been directed to shelter in place, as part of a frantic and fumbling effort to contain a rapidly-spreading and deadly disease. Harley is preparing a prayer, with his *Chanunpa*, for all of the world in this time of uncertainty and fear. Robin observes that the Lakota were chosen to serve as Grandmother Earth's sacred stewards and protectors, and that the Lakota feel the upheaval of change that we are all experiencing—but that the Lakota also feel the hope and determination to survive, "*and to again emerge in a better world.*"

Robin brings to my attention an excerpt from Chapter 10, "Strong Heart," of *Warrior Is* that has bearing on this moment:

If Grandmother Earth is asked to adapt to the ensuing imbalance of her former self, she will do so in ways that will create an unexpected change for the peoples. What was once ritual and reliable will no longer be so. The expected ways of things will become unexpected, unpredictable, unknown, unfathomed or unnatural ...

Should the great balance of life be shaken and harmed

by the deeds and intents of man ...[then] this would be the time of the crumbling of the Circle. This would be the time when the human being's place in the Circle will be viewed as indeterminate, [and] when life itself will be unbalanced ... [T]hose who shall survive to live again, shall live again in a time of bringing back many of the older, reliable and dependable means of existing, resulting in a new manner of trusting what is worthy to be trusting.

It is in these times that well-worn customs and ways will reemerge through kindness of heart and courage of will. The new ways will be much like the old: old friends will find each other in the new age and new existence. The two-legged will join the four-legged in compromise and selfless coexistence. The winged will observe from aloft. The time to reconnect and to regenerate will be at hand. The time to dream again will be here. The time to know what to forget, and what not to forget, will grow out of necessity ...

And the Grandmother will show signs of growing trust and love for her children once more. The Circle will be reformed. The Circle will be mended and healed. Creator will mold it in Creator's great hands. The Lakota belief in the virtues of peace, unity, tolerance and love will hold true for all things and all peoples—not just the Lakota, and not just the human beings. The Lakota plan and pray that life will survive. We pray that the Circle, if broken, will be healed.

In the times of encroaching danger and change forced upon the Lakota by the new people and their government and military, the fear and the sense of uncertainty is real. The people long for the times of the old. But now, like their brothers the buffalo, they look to the future with an acceptance of reality. And like the buffalo people, the Lakota will stand up. They will rise, and they will face the coming storm, and walk forward into it with the strength of the spirit.¹³

Creator, we pray for Grandmother Earth and for her protection, for her to protect herself from all destructors, and for us to protect her and her people in good faith, in good will, and with good intentions. We pray for the healing of Grandmother Earth, and we ask that through her healing, we will be healed, so that we may live our lives in the manner of Wakan Tanka¹⁴, with peace, unity, tolerance and love.¹⁵ ☸

Endnotes

- 1 The Battle of the Greasy Grass, on June 25-26, 1876 in eastern Montana Territory, is the Lakota name for what has been popularly referred to the Battle of Little Big Horn. "Greasy Grass" refers to the appearance of the grasses in the waters running around the battle site.
- 2 Turtle Island, Kheya Wita, is the land now known as North

America.

- 3 It was Sheridan, in the midst of the Indian Wars in 1869, who was heard to say "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." Sheridan denied making this statement; irrespective of whether he actually said those words, his actions confessed his attitude toward the Lakota, Cheyenne and other Native tribes. Robin believed that the Lakotas' claim to the sacred Black Hills (He Sapa) was something he was destined to become a part of. Robin notes that this is especially true now, at a time of a renewed second coming of the natural resource grab in all places, including the sacred He Sapa, by the Government and its wealthy benefactors.
- 4 *Warrior Is* at 160.
- 5 *Warrior Is* at 250.
- 6 *Warrior Is* at 259.
- 7 *Warrior Is* at 333-35.
- 8 *Warrior Is* at 297-98.
- 9 *Warrior Is* at 319.
- 10 *Warrior Is* at 280-83.
- 11 *Warrior Is* at 511.
- 12 This particular lesson is attributed to John Nolte.
- 13 *Warrior Is* at 280-83.
- 14 Great Spirit, Creator and supreme being.
- 15 *Warrior Is* at 280.

Harley and Robin are presently devoted to pursuing their dream of making their Great Grandfather's life story into a major movie, and have been finalizing the screenplay. The fact that this story is the one and only historical biography of the Lakota warrior who took Custer's life will draw widespread interest, as it is portrayed through the eyes and the spirit of Mato Niyampi. Harley and Robin and their family also are devoted to the dream to build, and operate a cultural camp in the sacred He Sapa (Black Hills) so that the cultural, traditional, and spiritual aspects of life on Unci Maka (Grandmother Earth) can be shared, taught to and learned by people from all backgrounds, all origins, all nations and all beliefs worldwide. Should you or someone you know be so moved in your mind and in your spirit, to become involved in the movie or the culture camp projects, you can contact Harley and Robin through Greasy Grass Warriors, LLC, P.O. Box 9025, Rapid City, South Dakota 57709, and through their websites at www.warrioris.com and www.scarleg.com and on the Scar Leg Facebook page. Come join us in heart and spirit, and become part of our tiospaye in seeking a better world for us all, in honor of our ancestors and the Circle of Life, in peace, unity, tolerance and love. Mitakuye Oyasin. Pilamaye.