

# Shifting Our Battleground Mentality

## From Belligerence to Grief

Louise Dunlap is author of *Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing* available from New Village Press or [www.undoingsilence.org](http://www.undoingsilence.org). This election season she is traveling the country encouraging more mainstream Americans to speak up for the changes we really want in this country. One of her first stories for Peacework covered a ceremonial ride to the Wounded Knee Massacre site during the build-up to the first Iraq war. This review covers *Yellow Wolf: His Own Story*, by L.V. McWhorter (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2000) and other "battlefield books."

Last summer I drove east across the country. After we passed the deep-cutting rivers of Idaho and the great divide into Montana, we saw signs for the Chief Joseph Trail, one I'd crossed years before, hundreds of miles away. Here the land opened into a broad green basin, rich with June wildflowers, rimmed by distant mountains. You could practically see the buffalo of the 19th century enjoying the high grass. We turned off at a National Park Service sign for the Big Hole National Battlefield.

Like so many other "battlefields," Big Hole was a brutal slaughter ground. Moments out of the car, my friend and I both felt its horror in our bones. Joseph's people had camped here just 130 years earlier in the summer of 1877, as they too traveled east, evading the troops driving them from their beautiful Wallowa Valley in Oregon.

Because white settlers had welcomed them into Montana promising peace, they felt safe resting at Big Hole, finding food, and preparing for the march toward what they hoped was refuge in Canada.

The Nez Perces didn't realize their pursuers could telegraph ahead for reinforcements, who would attack in the deep of night, shooting sleeping women point blank, smashing the heads of babies with their rifle butts. The Park Service video told it all—oral testimony from Indian survivors and letters home from terri-



**Bear Paw Mountain, the site from which Chief Joseph conceded in 1877, as it looked in 1990.**

PHOTO: © SKIP SCHIELE

fied young soldiers. I sobbed my way through, and bought a book to take home.

Maybe you too have picked up these regional battlefield books. Maybe you have a shelf of them — stories told by Indian survivors or by white people like Dee Brown, wanting to lift up these forgotten voices. Most of mine have come from journeys through the West; there doesn't seem to be a single beautiful place that wasn't part of it all. I read these books later. Always the details resonate with what I hear on the news.

### Yellow Wolf's Story

Last year's book is *Yellow Wolf: His Own Story*, carefully put together by Lucullus Virgil

McWhorter in 1940, then revised in 2000. The story comes from McWhorter's quarter-century of interviews with Yellow Wolf (Hemene Moxmox). Once a young warrior with Chief Joseph, Yellow Wolf later migrated from a reservation to pick hops near Yakima, Washington, camping each year on McWhorter's land.

Yellow Wolf wanted young Nez Perces, now scattered throughout the region, to know this true history. McWhorter, an amateur anthropologist who wrote about the history of Yakima and Nez Perces Indians, was eager to take up the challenge. McWhorter had wanted to see justice for the Indian people since his childhood in West Virginia. (He supplements

Even if they demand child-free plantations, unless the community decides to change, pressure will have little impact.

While we want to be assured our chocolate is slave-free, Bales explains that boycotting and demanding immediate change actually hurts those cocoa farmers who aren't enslaving anyone, and doesn't effectively end slave labor.

In fact, it often has a worse effect, driving it underground so that it's harder to detect and report. There are several Fair Trade options and the ICI is working with major companies like Hershey's to improve the situation in cocoa producing communities.

Another example is the need to change red light and brothel communities, where trafficking and forced prostitution flourish. After seeing the work of several rescue agencies, and to their credit they are doing amazing work, one of my personal heroes is a group called Freeset.

They work in a large red light district in Calcutta, India, but instead of rescuing the women from the sex trade they employ them to make jute logo bags. As the founder, Kerry Hilton explains, "Slavery is a business, a profitable one, and like any other business competitor, we are trying to drive out the business of slavery with the business of freedom." To Freeset, simply rescuing women from the area doesn't solve anything long-term because it frees up a bed, allowing more children to be trafficked and forced into the same hell. They would rather get the entire community to change from within, and even offer employment to some of the men who may have been or may become pimps. By offering decent jobs at good wages, their company employs nearly 150 women and men from the community. Employees encourage other women from the community to leave the brothel and work at Freeset.

### Do the Impossible

As Bales describes several factors that allow slavery to exist and flourish, he suggests concrete actions that can and should be implemented immediately. Perhaps the most provocative of these proposals is Bales' re-



**Sitting on History I, A bench by the sculptor Bill Woodrow, in Bronze, 100 x 107 x 300 cm, 1995.**

PHOTO: © WWW.BILL-WOODROW.COM

sponse to people's demands on their governments and international agencies. "Why isn't the government doing something about this? What about the UN?"

He does give suggestions to those bodies, but turns the question back at the reader, "Why are you, as a customer, purchasing slave-made goods?" It is our responsibility to educate ourselves about the commodities we buy and what steps we can take to ensure they are slavery-free. Bales points to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Article XX of the GATT Treaty, and the Slave Trade Cases of 1864 as legal prohibitions of slavery-produced goods from even entering the US.

These laws need to be updated. But if we, the consumers, demand that companies adhere to no-slavery standards, and show them we mean it with our purchases, things *will* start to change. It can be daunting, since "a little bit of slavery is in a lot of commodities" including cocoa, steel, clothing, carpets, sugar, firecrackers, and jewelry.

But who really wants to wear a shirt made by slaves, or kick a soccer ball stitched by abused children in Pakistan? I certainly don't, and last year gave away all my clothes that I didn't know were made in fair labor conditions. While my family and friends thought this was extreme, why is it extreme to refuse to tolerate slavery? While Bales encourages the reader not to be overwhelmed, to do what is reasonably possible, I would encourage you to get overwhelmed and do

the impossible. We can no longer claim ignorance.

The people who I feel are making the most difference are those who've literally committed their lives to ending slavery. Freeset's founder, for example, unknowingly moved his entire family into Calcutta's red light district and, after discovering the situation, dedicated his life to changing the community. The Emancipation Network's founder, Sarah Symons, has given every penny, even her house, to provide economic opportunities to survivors of slavery.

Triveni Acharya, Director of the Rescue Foundation, literally sleeps in the same shelter as the girls she's rescued from Mumbai's brothels. Silvio and Rose Silva, a Brazilian couple, moved to Nepal to raise survivors and street children in their home — which now has over 120 beautiful children! And to his great credit, Kevin Bales is also one of these non-stop heroes, who answers my emails within an hour even when he's supposed to be on vacation with his family.

I get emails from many people applauding the work we do, saying, "I wish I could come there and help." Stop wishing and find your own way to help. If coming to India doesn't appeal to you, find something that does and commit to it every day. The traffickers and profiteers are living and breathing slavery. So, if we aren't living and breathing freedom, how can we expect to change anything? ☞

the tale with old documents and photos of himself and Yellow Wolf revisiting the far-flung sites, even Big Hole.)

Twenty-one years old at the time and carried by a spiritual vision that he could not be killed by bullets, Yellow Wolf fought battle after battle, heading with his companions into the mountains to avoid General Howard and his cannon.

But at Big Hole, things were different. There was no night-watch. Because they felt safe, men like Yellow Wolf slept far from their family tepees without most of their weapons. On August 9th (yes, that very date!) when the first army shot was fired at three in the morning, Yellow Wolf pulled on his moccasins and ran out with only his war club.

Meanwhile the white soldiers' savagery enveloped the tepees, many of which were set afire while children and mothers ran out, if they could, to hide in the willows along the river. In one tepee a baby had been born in the night. Yellow Wolf entered it himself:

*This tepee was standing and silent. Inside we found . . . two women lying in their blankets dead. Both had been shot. The mother had her newborn baby in her arms. Its head was smashed, as by a gun breech or boot heel. The mother had two other children both killed in another tepee.*

Amazingly, the Nez Percés were able to bury the Big Hole dead, round up the wounded, and move forward on a remarkable loop through Yellowstone. The end of September found them in the Bear Paw Mountains, just thirty miles from safety in Canada and days ahead of General Howard. Again, they could not anticipate military reinforcements. This time General Miles, who later came up against both Geronimo and Sitting Bull, attacked their camp as cold weather descended. In 1990 I visited the so-called Bear Paw Battlefield just off US Highway 2 at the northern edge of Montana. I saw the shallow pits scraped into the soil for protection.

It was here, after five days of siege and slaughter, that Chief Joseph famously conceded, "I will fight no more forever," expecting his people could return home, if only to a reservation. They were sent instead to Oklahoma,

where many more would die of starvation and the harsh climate.

### Contemporary Resonance

I am reading this book in spring of 2008, listening every day to the news from Iraq. One day it's the story of Nisour Square in Baghdad, where 17 civilians died in an attack by Blackwater operatives last fall. An eyewitness speaks to documentary filmmakers at the scene. In his translated account, a mother begins to scream when her son is shot and tries to pull him out of the car. She is the next to get blasted. As journalist Jeremy Scahill told *Democracy Now* on April 7, "the first victims in Nisour Square that day were a twenty-year-old medical student and his mother, not al-Qaeda operatives, not insurgents. A nine-year-old boy named Ali was shot in the skull; his brains splattered in his [father's] hands."

While honoring Indian voices, most of these battle books are written by white people like me, and they do carry bias. But in these times, I'm drawn to white voices that push the boundaries of their times. People who see themselves as allies can help shift the monolithic attitudes that shape our battleground mentality.

I can take inspiration from people like McWhorter, even though there's also some paternalism in his writing. Change has to start somewhere, and more of us need to speak up even though we may not have it fully right. Most important, as Katrina Brown says in *Traces of the Trade*, her stunning new PBS film about her connection with the largest slave trading family in New England, we begin to "make things right. . . not out of guilt but out of grief."

We need to feel and express grief if we dream of changing the murderous direction of our national DNA, the habit-energy we bring to solving problems. Until we look back as a nation and weep and use the profound energy of grief to change our ways, the racist violence of Big Hole, Wounded Knee, Nagasaki, and Nisour Square will continue. I think that's why I am drawn to write about these battle books.

### "Battlefield" bookshelf:

*Black Elk Speaks: Being a Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, by John Neihardt (U. of Nebraska Press, 1961). The book that always grounds me. Neihardt uses translated interviews with an Oglala Lakota elder who, as a young man, wrestled with his visionary calling at the time of Wounded Knee.

*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, by Dee Brown (Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1970). This classic covers the war against multiple western tribes from 1860-1890. Brown's own viewpoint offers a victim frame that grates on today's consciousness. Still, his book gives a passion-filled map of the territory.

*Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, by Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (Bishop, CA: Chalfont Press, reprinted in 1969). Though covering few battles, this book has the rare distinction for its time of an indigenous person's name on the cover, that of an outspoken woman. Winnemucca interpreted for General Howard one year after his attacks on the Nez Percés and knew General Miles. She later toured Eastern cities to speak against reservation abuses. Two Boston women helped her publish this eloquent book in 1883.

*Death, Too, For The-Heavy-Runner*, by Ben Bennett (Missoula Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1982). North of Big Hole is country called "Ground of Many Gifts" by the Blackfeet people. There I found this evocative book about the Marias River massacre in the winter of 1870. US troops whom Blackfeet called "the seizers" destroyed a village that was starving and wracked with smallpox, but friendly to whites. One bitterly cold January morning there, "the seizers" slaughtered 15 men, 90 women, and 50 children.

*George Washington's War on Native America*, by Barbara Ellis Mann (Praeger, 2005). Lest we forget events 100 years earlier in the East, here is detailed research into the "extirpation" of peaceful Iroquois villages and others in New York, western Pennsylvania, and Ohio between 1775 and 1782. The atrocities committed by Washington's troops in these villages are documented in the letters soldiers wrote home to their families. ☪