

The Climate Movement Needs to Stop “Winning”

by Maya Lemon

As a child my favorite chore was hand-pumping water from the 30-foot well on our family home-stead. The pump was shiny black and the water ice-cold. Then my father was diagnosed with leukemia, a cancer linked to chemicals used in oil and gas production. It’s been nine years since I drank that water.

I am from an impacted community in East Texas, home to oil and gas industry, on the southern route of the Keystone XL (KXL) tar sands pipeline. My involvement in the climate movement is motivated by the reality my community faces.

Nacogdoches, Texas lies along the southern path of KXL and cannot escape tar sands. From Cushing, Oklahoma down to Beaumont, Texas, pipe is buried in the ground and scheduled to go online. We are waiting for the shoe to drop, for tar sands oil to flow through the pipe, for the bend of welded metal to respond to the heat and corrosion of bitumen. We are waiting for an event over which we have little control, despite its potentially disastrous impact on our lives.

Within this experience lies the insight I have to offer the climate movement. My experience is limited by the fact I am a young, white woman from an unconditionally supportive family. Incomplete as it is, however, my perspective is the best thing I can offer. And so, I ask that the climate movement stop talking about “winning.”

My community will not “win” on climate and this idea delegitimizes the extraction industry impacts we already face. I have lived alongside the reality of petroleum extraction my whole life. A pipeline runs down our driveway. I have been woken in the middle of the night by fracking fumes that burned my eyes and nose and made me feel sick. The construction of KXL south near my home has ignited new concerns about the health and safety of my family and community. In communities like mine impacts run deep and come from all sides.

I will never “win” on climate. Tanks containing benzene on my family’s property display plastic signs warning against cancer and requiring the use of a respirator. There are three active gas well sites within a two-minute walk from my front door. Scanning the land I am from it is impossible to imagine a scenario where I have not been exposed to the same chemicals that may have caused or contributed to my father’s cancer.

In fall 2012 the direct action campaign Tar Sands Blockade (TSB) brought national attention to my community. Folks in TSB put their lives and livelihoods on the line to stop construction and raise awareness. I am glad they came to stand with my community but this also marked a loss. National climate groups celebrated Obama’s decision to delay the northern segment of KXL, intentionally over-

looking that this supposed “win” was paired with an endorsement to fast track the southern arm of KXL, connecting a preexisting tar sands pipeline that ended in Oklahoma to refining communities and shipping ports in Texas. There was no delay for us—pipe was being put in the ground. In search of a “win,” the people of KXL south were written off as a loss.

Like cancer taking over the body, the oil and gas industry is too entangled in the organs of my community for a simple “win-lose” dichotomy. The

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industry employs us, pays for community festivals, and improves our roads. They also contaminate our water, deny us access to our land, and take away our sense of agency. Extraction industries have impacted our land, bodies, and minds in ways that can’t be erased or won.

Checking a thesaurus suggests further complications of a “winning” framework. Synonyms to “win” include “come in first” and “conquer.” In communities with an intersecting history of oppression, “winning” doesn’t seem to be the most appropriate message. Utilizing ideas of “coming in first” and “conquering” among individuals living a legacy of racism, classism, and colonialism seems intrinsically problematic. Environmental Justice leaders ask

instead that we “lift up” impacted communities. Will our movement be one that “conquers” or “lifts up?”

Obama’s decision about the northern segment of KXL is important but whatever is

decided the southern segment has already marked my home. Even if KXL north is denied I will not “win.” Neither will people living at the end of the pipeline in Manchester or Port Arthur, or the people in Alberta, Kalamazoo, Arkansas, or countless other impacted communities. We will not “win.” This doesn’t mean we give up on the northern segment of KXL but it does mean that we broaden our focus to

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include those already facing extraction impacts. It means that we pour our energy into stopping all tar sands—not just KXL north. It means we stop talking about winning the northern segment of KXL and we start talking about changing the access extraction industries have to our land and our bodies.

Hope provides momentum and “lifts up” the individuals and ideas of a movement. For me, however, the concept of “winning” doesn’t offer hope but instead says my experience isn’t real and KXL south doesn’t matter. Working only towards a “win” would force me to abandon my home. If we are to be an enduring and inclusive movement we must provide a hope that welcomes joy and acknowledges loss. We must not ask impacted communities to abandon their homes for the cause.

There is loss and pipe buried from Oklahoma to the Gulf Coast of Texas and if we rally around a “win” my home will continue to be overlooked. If we only engage in “winnable” struggles our movement will be shortsighted, lacking compassion and leaving many behind. Instead let’s dig in deep, go back for the overlooked, and be with those that will not win. Let’s be a movement that looks complexity in the eye, offering a place for both hope and loss to sit together at the table and work to be a movement built on lifting others up.

Maya Lemon is an outdoor educator born and raised in the pineywoods of deep East Texas with a love for the outdoors. Her experience with the realities of living alongside the petroleum industry have led her to writing and activism focused on energy alternatives. To read more of her writing, visit untoldstoriestold.wordpress.com