

# Building relationships isn't a zero-sum game



**Douglas Kindschi** *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

In games like basketball, there is a winner and a loser. Even in a tournament, teams are pitted against each other, so for every game winner there is also a loser. Such win-loss games are called “zero-sum” since the total number of wins balances the total losses so the sum is zero. Games and game strategy have been the subject of analysis for a few centuries, but in the mid-20th century it became an established field of mathematics, with applications in fields from economics and political science to biology and philosophy. The current usefulness of game theory and its prominence is recognized by the more than 10 Nobel Prizes in economics that have been awarded to game theorists.

Zero-sum games were extensively studied in the earlier years and compared to interactions where the winnings and losses of the players do not add to zero. For me, an obvious example is education. Every time I taught a class, the knowledge of the students (hopefully) increased, but my knowledge did not decrease an equal amount. My knowledge actually increased as I explained something to another person. Furthermore, each student's advantage in learning is not dependent on another student's loss of learning. While there might be competition among students for the top grade, all students can learn and win in this educational interaction.

Even in activities like basketball, while the wins and losses might sum to zero, the activity of playing basketball viewed at the larger level is not zero-sum. Even the losing team benefits from the exercise, the camaraderie, the friendships developed and the experience of teamwork. It pays to look beyond the individual event and seek the larger view to see the total benefit to a group or community.

Unfortunately, when we look at our history, we can find major examples of zero-sum thinking and behavior. Slavery was built on a system where there was financial gain for the slave holder by having slaves who had to work without pay. The owner's “win” was balanced by a corresponding “loss” on the part of the slave. The system was built on “I win if you lose” thinking.

This kind of thinking has permeated, either consciously or unconsciously, too much of our thinking long after the days of slavery. Last week's Insight introduced the work of Heather McGhee, an economics and public policy expert. She described the “drained pool policy,” where earlier in the last century Southern communities drained the public pools rather than allow them to be integrated. The thinking was, if Blacks could win access to this public resource, then certainly the white community would be the losers. Zero-sum thinking prevailed, but the result was loss for everybody.

McGhee's book, “The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together,” documents with story and data the way in which this approach has historically deprived us all of the benefits of working together in diversity.

**The world's major religions have all taught that we should care for others, especially those in need. Short-term advantages do not pay in the long run, and we have responsibilities that go far beyond our own personal benefit.**

To return to the basketball example, has that sport, or the sports of football or baseball, suffered because Blacks are now allowed to participate? How about in the arts, music, theater and film? Are we not all richer because of the diversity in these fields? The progress and health of our economy, society and life together prospers when we take the larger view and move away from zero-sum thinking.

Draining the pool, or limiting participation to just certain groups, while perhaps motivated by zero-sum thinking, actually results in a loss for everyone.

What does this have to do with interfaith?

Zero-sum thinking can also permeate our perspective on religious interactions and practice. Rather than learning from others who might believe differently, there is often a tendency to see it as a zero-sum. If I'm right, they have to be wrong. Why are we sometimes so certain that God can't work in the lives of others in ways that my own religious tribe does not emphasize? We can be confident in our own faith understanding and commitment and still be humble about whether we know the fullness of God's working in the world.

Immigration is also an issue where racism and interfaith interact since people come to America with a multiplicity of faith commitments and skin tones. Immigrants, especially those who are brown and Black, face the kind of discrimination that is based on zero-sum thinking if we think their benefit must be at my expense. Multiple studies have shown that immigrants and refugees have a significantly lower crime rate and are much less likely to be involved in violent activity. The vast majority leave their country to get away from crime and violence.

The percentage of immigrants who become entrepreneurs and create jobs for others is considerably higher than for native-born Americans. This should not be surprising. Since immigrants are not satisfied with how things are, they are willing to take risks and to work hard to achieve their goals. These are precisely the characteristics of entrepreneurs who create new ventures and companies.

Rather than thinking that immigrants are benefiting at our expense, we need to realize that this is not a win-lose situation. We are all benefitting by their contributions; it's a win-win. Likewise, as we learn from the understanding and beliefs of someone different, it leads to our own knowledge and even our commitment being enlarged and enriched.

The business community has also learned that zero-sum thinking in the short term often leads to negative outcomes in the long term. There might be short-range advantages to company profits if one keeps wages very low, employee benefits minimal, and takes no responsibility for environmental care or support for the community. But in the long term, company morale can deteriorate, employees leave, and government and community conflict hurt the company and its profits. Considering the benefits for all can also enhance the benefits for the owners.

The world's major religions have all taught that we should care for others, especially those in need. Short-term advantages do not pay in the long run, and we have responsibilities that go far beyond our own personal benefit. Our lives together are enriched by taking the win-win approach. Let us heed this teaching as we build a better community, benefiting all.

*Interfaith@gvsu.edu*