

Trauma's Affect on the Immigrant Population

There are some immigrants that make a successful transition into the United States with a minimum of stress. In their cases they may be very excited about this experience. In this category are people who have been recruited by local employers to fill jobs for which U.S. employees are unavailable. Perhaps they originally came to the U.S. on student visas then were recruited upon graduation. Maybe while being a student they married a U.S. citizen and obtained a Green Card and then after some time became U.S. citizens. I'm thankful that they were blessed. Then there are large groups of immigrants who experienced Trauma throughout the process of immigration. I am especially concerned about the psychological phenomena that can occur that causes certain immigrants to detach from their immigrant status and to develop attitudes that distance themselves from their experience. Specifically I am wondering whether this issue may be strongly associated with Trauma in that this detachment is operating as a subconscious self-defense mechanism against the grinding feeling of vulnerability. This is most strongly demonstrated in the following.

I have heard this from many "Self-Made" immigrants. "Yes, some poverty exists here in this wonderful country, but only because that population doesn't work hard for what they need. They wouldn't be suffering if they weren't so lazy. Not only are they lazy they are also wickedly clever to manipulate the bleeding heart ones to provide them with welfare from the taxes on the honest labor of us who actually work hard."

The impoverished are thus viewed as parasites on society. This viewpoint safely supports the illusion that America is "the best system" and encapsules us, its participants, in righteous rhetoric that is self-serving and denies the reality of the negative consequences of a system, which accepts that it's OK that a few people control 95% of the wealth. Why do these successful immigrants accept this inequity? To my way of seeing it, these people accept this distribution of wealth because they feel that if they can join some level of the elite it increases their safety. Therefore they are driven to reflect this inequity thus hoping by espousing a strong identification with the super rich and the rationalization that they deserve the benefit of their status that they will be protected. The second part of this is that their minds frame their outlook to provide them with the incentive to "make it big" which require them to accept the fabrication that for the remaining 5% there is still enough for everyone to get a lot if they also work hard for it. Of course not everyone can get enough with so few taking so much, however if they make it, then their minds fall into the abyss of denial and thus they are emotionally removed from the consequence of the outcome, that being increasing numbers of people falling into the status of poverty.

The psychological disconnect uses the salesmanship of the motto, "If I did it, anyone can, if they work hard enough." That's kind of like saying that if I love basketball and I work at it untiringly I will be able to play in the elite atmosphere of the N.B.A. That may be valid for a miniscule percentage of the people who played basketball. Yet, it is such a misleading and powerful message as it shifts all the blame for not making it onto the individual. Very disturbing. Of course there are very successful people who came to the U.S. under tremendous stress and yet made it big. Perhaps they started out with a little food stand or food truck and eventually through being frugal, working long hours and living cooperatively with their extended family, all sharing one apartment, were able to

open a little restaurant. Hiring only family and capitalizing on their food experience eventually they were able to open other restaurants and developed a business model that allowed for continued expansion. This however was exceptional and an exception. So they came to the attitude of “We did it. So, anyone can do it” and actually were able to live their way into the American Dream that achieving success only requires hard work. Yes, this was true for them, but it doesn’t apply in general.

Not all immigrants came without some level of support. A segment of we immigrants came from an elevated social standing, yet we weren’t able to protect ourselves from persecution at the hands of revolutionary forces that overthrew our social order. We can see this in the highly educated and economically well off situation of those of us who if blessed with foresight, liquidated and transferred our wealth abroad before we fully lost power in our home country. For others of us in this class, we waited too long and in the end we had to flee with only the clothes on our backs, slipping over the border to a receptive country. Those who came with their wealth and identifying strongly from a cultural perspective, often assisted those of our group who escaped with little or nothing. They provided housing, transportation, and work. For those with entrepreneurial skills they were provided with seed capital to startup a small business and with their past experience they soon re-established themselves financially.

Still others of us came from countries in which we had power sustained only by the support of the United States. We lost it when the United States abandoned this commitment and we had to flee. We were allowed into the U.S. on asylum visas. In our group only the political and military elite had control over large transferable deposits of money. In coming to the United States these elite did as they did in our homeland, they set themselves up by controlling the economics in our new communities by lending money at high interest rates and for an interest in our business and even our homes that we sought to buy. They “encouraged” us to obtain citizenship so that by affiliating with one political party we could by number vote these elite first into city politics and then into county politics. This powerbase of maintaining our cultural ties sustained the belief in our integrity regardless of the general politics of our party to deny citizenship to various minority cultures who came into this country under temporary visas. Still being financially and politically beholden to the elite we worked long hours with little advancement. This entrapment belied the American Dream and reinforced the trauma experienced through emigrating.

The successful ones too often fabricate their success as a result of only hard work and sacrifice. This belief blocks their awareness to how all of us non-indigenous people arrived on these shores. Aren’t we here because we or someone in our past came here as a result of not having enough of something from where our family line emigrated? Maybe the not enough was in a lack of religious freedom, or due to political repression, or a lack of economic opportunity, or perhaps a lack of educational opportunity, or losing a war, or being the surviving few of genocide. For me it is not hard to connect with the desperate feelings that led us to the painful decision to pack up and leave everything to which we were connected such as remaining family, friends, business relationships, love of one’s homeland, etc. In many cases we, or our parents, or our ancestors experienced this as trauma not only the circumstances that forced us to to come here, but also in the experience of the voyage, in the experience of prejudice upon arrival, and in the struggle of getting settled. It’s kind of tragic that some of us who have been here only a generation

or two earlier, having previously been treated with such prejudice, now may stand in line to treat the newly arrived in the same manner.

Because we were abused religiously, economically and or politically in our home country and didn't have the education, resources, and contacts to be a part of those who benefited from our native country's system of life, we came here to escape a hopeless life of inadequate resources. We came here to make it economically. We came here to get what we had and lost or what others in our home country already had and excluded us from gaining. Unfortunately this model of those who have, of excluding others from gaining an equal footing, is the role model that many of us immigrants manifest when we "make it" in the United States. Once we get some of the pie, instead of being compassionate and open to sharing, we unwittingly fulfill the role of those who oppressed us in our home country. By doing this we feel dominant and this feeds our need for the feeling of safety and security. We join political forces of economic and political exclusion. We see anyone who disagrees with this American Model as a threat to our security and so we are open to supporting police abuse against the poor and military violence against other peoples who have a different cultural reality all defended under the guise of protecting our property.

In my experience, we become very emotionally vulnerable as a result of our trauma(s) and our subsequent struggle to cope with the causes and the consequences of pain and suffering. For those of us who have suffered these traumas all we really want is the protection of safety and security that comes from being under the umbrella of a strong government that not only supports our needs, but also has the military to back it. Regardless of having found this in our newly adopted country we can't help but to remain somewhat vulnerable. I can say that because as a consequence of the trauma a primal feeling of fear has been generated and is deeply attached to our subconscious. This fear subtly affects our lives and influences our feelings and perceived needs.

We or our ancestors having failed in our native homeland to protect ourselves and those whom we loved, and being powerless to prevent further loss, we fled, escaping to this country. We came to the United States as victims and in the hope to raise ourselves from this shameful and guilt ridden state. We came in the hope to rid ourselves of carrying the shameful role of victims. We came here to become as powerful as possible so that never again would we be in jeopardy. Should we not be able to rise high enough to secure that full protection, then we have the ability to at least affiliate with those who do, if not by working for them then at least by being free to join their political party.

I don't know about you, but for me I wonder what all of this means. Does this Trauma live on through the generations overtly or ever so much more subtly? In my way of understanding life and especially the insular way we treat people with different opinions, our mannerisms must be in response to the experience of a devastating encounter that was so traumatic that it affected our very genetic makeup. This being ever so possible, then the trauma and the associated behaviors our ancestors experienced may be genetically passing down through the generations. This means that in our lifetime when we do encounter our own personal traumas that it resonates with the ancestral genetic line of traumas and the amplification of this combination results in our psyche being affected far above the level that is warranted by our encounter with our personal trauma. This combining mechanism creates something like an emotional tsunami that when it hits our lives it does so with devastating affect.

What is so difficult to recognize and to accept is that so many people who have experienced trauma through the immigrant experience are unable to engage fully or in a healthy manner in life's requirements. While the desire is there, as is demonstrated by the effort they made to emigrate, however the emotional impact of the trauma incident(s) are overwhelming their ability to moderate their feelings in a consistent manner. This causes debilitating damage to perform in relationships at home, in the community and at work. Regardless of our financial success or struggle we all have family members in this group. So the issue isn't that those who make it are the only ones who worked hard. They have also been more educated, had an employable skill, were more resilient emotionally and may have had more support upon arriving in these lands. The one's who have made it would benefit from acknowledging their advantage and the one's who continue to struggle would benefit from having this recognized by those who have made it. Those who have made it have much to offer those who still struggle. Those who continue to struggle regardless of hard work at low paying jobs also have a great deal to offer.

It all seems to be totally unfair. However, regardless of whether there really is a fairness about life, we are caught up in it and it has terrible consequences that we blindly encounter. This carries me to the point of evaluating the element of being blind to it, and whether this condition has to continue into the future of our lives and into the lives of our children and future generations. What I would like to suggest is that we need to become conscious of being in denial or actually unaware of the existence of our Trauma, specifically as to how it is affecting our attitudes and behavior. But how to do this as an experience with trauma all too often blocks the conscious connection between the event and the subsequent dysfunctional behavior that results. Not only this, but it can also kind of take over the mind to such a degree that the person unknowingly vehemently defends the attitudes and behavior that are so injurious to a healthy existence.

In my way of understanding Trauma, it is so powerful because it is an unexpected event that catches us completely by surprise. I mean even if we know something like it could happen to us, the actual moment of impact is still cataclysmic. Yet, rather than only thinking about preventing or surviving such an occurrence, wouldn't it be even more productive to actually recognize the circumstances that may lead to the onset of Trauma and the consequences?

This leads me to wonder as to how we might be better able to manage such an event with a little bit of anticipation and perhaps a touch of planning. Would it be reasonable to develop a Personal and Family Trauma Disaster Plan that might in some way mitigate the influence that Trauma has on us? Instead of living in a state of Trauma Denial, we can work together to provide critical support to those of us already experiencing trauma, or who will eventually experience trauma, or who already are encountered their own personal trauma. Of course, in my way of viewing life, all of us are in some category of this experience.

Perhaps an image that parallels with our personal experience with Trauma, would be to view it as encountering the pre-stage of an unavoidable war, one in which we are to be invaded with no escape possible. Our only choice is to run away or to fight. While some may have the ability to escape most of us don't have such resources. This being the way it is the bottom line reality is if we survive all of us will experience wounds. Knowing this, wouldn't it be wise to designate a portion of our citizens to undergo medical training and prepare to treat the wounded by gathering together the needed

medical supplies. In looking then at Trauma as a wound, The Trauma Training would emphasize treating the inner isolation resulting from traumatic events. So what I'm suggesting is that all of us, just like we are encouraged to take CPR and Red Cross Training, should have a course in Trauma. This would help prepare us to anticipate and recognize signs of trauma and the steps to be taken to help a person recover from or at least moderate its impact. In addition, this course would cover the impact on the family and even the community of the one experiencing trauma, types of support and how to obtain such support that an individual, a family, or a community might need. Most importantly they would have the means to help and or to seek immediate help in dealing with the experience. In this sense, Immigration would be one of the categories listed as a Trauma Event.

Should this article resonate with your life experiences and you would like to participate in the development of such a Citizen Trauma Survival Course, please contact me.

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