Intersections

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Trauma and resilience

Over the past several years MCC's global partners have increasingly called for more support for addressing psychosocial trauma in their communities. As MCC has become more engaged with supporting psychosocial interventions, we have struggled with multiple questions. Should we understand trauma healing work primarily as peacebuilding or health initiatives? Can trauma interventions in situations of protracted violence and structural trauma be carried out in a way that goes beyond simply helping traumatized people cope to also support efforts to dismantle and transform unjust political, social and economic structures that traumatize people in the first place? When is it useful for "outsiders" to teach about trauma and when it is more appropriate for practitioners to work within their own cultural contexts? How well do trauma materials and curricula translate across contexts? When is a counseling approach most appropriate and when is a community-based awareness approach more relevant? Finally: What are we learning? What are we finding that works (and does not work) when seeking to address psychosocial trauma?

The contributors to this issue of *Intersections* respond to these questions and many more. In these articles we hear about interventions addressing long-term legacies of trauma as well as psycho-social responses to short-term emergencies. We hear stories of practitioners coming from the outside and facilitating narrative storytelling or using art to reflect a story back in new ways. We hear of practitioners from within a context naming the importance of counselors supporting clients, all of whom live within the trauma of a protracted conflict situation. We hear of curricula that have transcended cultures and contexts and have been utilized in meaningful ways and contextualized locally. Finally, we hear a challenge to better support MCC's staff and partners who are living and working in contexts of ongoing violence. We are left with a final question: How can we work to become a trauma-sensitive and resilient organization? We still have much to learn.

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The past is present: the historical trauma the United States does not want to talk about

> We are the sum of all that has gone before and carry the unhealed wounds of history in our hearts, minds and even our genes.

Sharon: *In my mind's eye, I see a woman working in a cotton field. It is an oppressively hot day in Lowndes County, Alabama. The woman is young—less than 18 years old. She is wearing a coarse brown osnaburg dress. Her head is wrapped. Sweat is running down her face and back. The sack she is pulling weighs more than one hundred pounds. That is half of her quota for the day. She has been picking bolls since before sunrise. Her fingers are pricked and bleeding. Her mother is working two rows over. Her husband is in the same field, but out of sight. There is a white man on a horse. He has a whip in his hand.*

The woman, her mother and husband are real people. Their names are Rhody, Easter and Tom. They are my ancestors. During and after slavery, they and countless unknown siblings, children and other relatives were consigned to a societal dustbin with vicious racial slurs standing as unwritten (but often spoken) epitaphs that colored every day of their lives and mine from those times forward.

Close your eyes and see what I see. Feel what I feel when I try to fathom the moral cost of what slavery wrought. Try to feel the profound historical harm that continues to plague us in the form of racism.

Tom: *I see men pull a chair to the rail of the slave ship upon which they are transporting captives from the "slave coast" of Ghana to Cuba. The year is 1790. My ancestor, James DeWolf of Bristol, Rhode Island, owns and captains this ship. He would become the most successful slave trader, and one of the richest men, in the United States. A middle-aged African woman is chained to the chair. It has been determined she has smallpox, potentially lethal to the captain, crew and other "cargo" in the hold below deck. Captain DeWolf orders his crewmen to lift the chair over the railing and push the woman into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. She relinquishes her spirit without so much as a cry, a gag having been tied around her mouth to silence her. The story handed down is that DeWolf lamented the loss of such a good chair. This story sickens my heart.*

Stories like these illumine the fact that the past is present. We are the sum of all that has gone before and carry the unhealed wounds of history in our hearts, minds and even our genes. We must confront the past because that is the only way to come to terms with the preeminent issue—racism—that is tearing our society apart today. In this article we discuss slavery's traumatic legacy, the failure of U.S. society and its educational system to grapple with this historical harm and the Coming to the Table program that seeks to acknowledge and heal wounds rooted in slavery's legacy.

Every state in the Union—and (by commission or default) every white citizen thereof—participated in and benefitted from slavery. As white people smoked tobacco, sipped rum, wore cotton clothing, drank coffee and ate peanuts, they lost sight of the fact that they were living in an economy based on the stolen labor of enslaved African people on land stolen from Native Americans. The road to culpability wended south from New York to Florida and spread westward under the cloak of

Manifest Destiny. Money trumped morals at every step of the way and was resolutely justified by religious conviction.

Well after slavery's abolition, its traumatic legacy continues to shape the United States, reflected in numerous disparities between African Americans and their white counterparts. People of color fall on the negative side of virtually all measurable social indicators. In 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that "the median white household was worth $141,900, 12.9 times more than the typical black household, which was worth just $11,000." Poverty rates for African Americans are more than 160 percent higher, while unemployment rates are double. One-third of black males born today can expect to go to prison in their lifetimes. Young black males have a 21 times greater risk of being shot dead by police than whites. Infant mortality is 130 percent higher for black than for white babies.

The U.S. educational system has failed to adequately confront slavery and its ongoing harm. Take, for example, a history textbook written in 1916 by Mary Simms Oliphant. Commissioned by the superintendent of education in South Carolina to update an 1860 history written by her grandfather, Oliphant posited that slavery was a "necessary but benign institution" and glorified slaveholders, depicting their victims as ignorant savages in need of Christian salvation. Oliphant credited the Ku Klux Klan with restoring "truth and justice" after the Civil War. Her retelling of her grandfather's tome was adopted by the state Board of Education. In 1932, she wrote her own history, a 432-page text that informed the public high school curriculum from that point forward. Will Moredock, a South Carolina native, recalls that his parents "used Oliphant's books in the 1930s; I used them in the 1960s." He observes that "Later editions of Oliphant's book were somewhat toned down, but this was by and large the official history of South Carolina—taught to black students as well as white—until 1984," with the state educational system thus perpetuating slavery's historical harm and preventing a serious reckoning with its traumatic legacy.

Poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry argued in a 1970 essay that racism is the "hidden wound" of the U.S.'s political body, asserting that racism involves an "emotional dynamic that has disordered the heart both of the society as a whole and of every person in the society." Sociologist Joy DeGruy shares this understanding of slavery as a traumatic wound that continues to perpetuate harm, poignantly asking: "What do repeated traumas visited upon generation after generation of a people produce? What are the impacts of the ordeals associated with chattel slavery, and with the institutions that followed, on African Americans today?"

As descendants of slaves and slaveholders, respectively, we encountered one another in 2008 as participants in a Coming to the Table (CTTT) workshop at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Through CTTT we learned about "historical harm" and the transmission of traumatic legacies from one generation to the next: these understanding were deepened through participation in training organized by the Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) program. These workshops helped us make sense of our distinctive, yet intertwined, pasts. We learned about "Cycles of Violence," a theoretical construct that translates to "hurt people hurt people." We emerged from these workshops convinced that both African Americans and white Americans

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DeWolf, Thomas Norman. *A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience). http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/

Coming to the Table. www.comingtothetable.org

Our Black Ancestry, a website founded by Sharon Leslie Morgan to help people explore and appreciate African-American family history and culture. http://www.ourblackancestry.com/

DeGruy, *Joy. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing.* Oregon: Uptone Press, 2005.

have been damaged, albeit in significantly different ways, by slavery and its ongoing legacy in the form of systemic racism and that both are in need of healing. CTTT workshops designed to confront this legacy and to foster healing push participants to engage in four main activities in this healing journey:

- Research, acknowledge and share personal, family and societal histories of race with openness and honesty.
- Connect with others within and across racial lines in order to develop deep and accountable relationships.
- Explore ways to heal together.
- Champion systemic change that supports repair and reconciliation between individuals, within families and throughout society.

Breaking free of cycles of violence and healing historical trauma take work. It requires that we transcend what we were taught in misguided history books and embrace the values we find true in our hearts. It calls on us to amend how we view and treat "others" and actively engage in changing ourselves and the society in which we live. We can either continue a legacy of racism and doom future generations to racial conflict and inequality or change the paradigm to make this a better world for all. Our hope is that when, in the words of the psalmist, "Mercy and truth are met together," then righteousness and peace will follow.

Sharon Leslie Morgan and Thomas Norman DeWolf are co-authors of Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade *(Beacon Press, 2012).*

Learn more

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EMDR and trauma healing in Palestine

Palestinian society has been and continues to be profoundly shaped by the trauma of political violence, both through mass displacement in 1948 and ongoing military occupation since 1967. In 1989 the East Jerusalem YMCA, a long-standing MCC partner, founded its Rehabilitation Program, aimed at meeting the needs of the many Palestinians who sustained lifelong, disabling injuries during the first Palestinian *intifada* (uprising), including their physical, mental and livelihoods needs. Mona Zaghrout has worked with the Rehabilitation Program since its founding. Over the past quarter century, Zaghrout has become a leading practitioner in the Arab world of a trauma healing approach called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), finding EMDR to be an effective therapeutic tool in helping traumatized clients cope with and heal from traumatic incidents.

The East Jerusalem YMCA Rehabilitation Program utilizes a holistic approach to rehabilitation, supporting interventions ranging from home or school modifications for persons using wheelchairs, to vocational assessments and trainings, to awareness workshops in schools for teachers and students about how best to support classmates with physical disabilities. The program's holistic approach includes psychosocial support both for persons who are traumatized by political violence and for persons with disabilities coping with trauma.

The program started by using an eclectic approach to trauma healing, trying everything from psychoanalysis to behavioral therapy to gestalt therapy.