

First published in Hoax, 2013

A Different Kind of Cycle: My Family's Experiences of Multi-Generational Healing

Trigger Warning: In this piece I will be discussing experiences of sexual and physical violence. Please be warned and take care of yourself.

None of us start from neutral. We are products of our families and communities. They can give us love and help us learn to be healthy adults and they can expose us to scaring, traumatic events or neglect our basic needs. For most of us, our families fall somewhere in the middle. Mine does.

Through all their imperfections and mistakes, my parents have always worked hard to become ever more loving people by prioritizing their psychological and spiritual practices. They knew the healing work they did, their efforts to understand and grow as caring, compassionate humans, would benefit their children. This is multi-generational healing. My family has practiced it for over half a century and my development as an emotionally healthy person has been built on the healing my parents have done.

A couple of months ago, I came face-to-face with the impact of my parents' healing on my life. Within a matter of weeks I saw a triggering movie while on a date and was mugged. These events left me feeling shaken and vulnerable, but also grateful. As I processed deep fear and shame, it came to me that all my emotional skills and resiliencies would not be possible, or at least would have been harder to achieve, without the efforts my parents put into their psychological and spiritual efforts.

To my parents, healing has always been an act of service to their children. Throughout my childhood, I can remember both my parents engaging in some form of psychological counseling and/or spirituality. I'm not sure if they ever said it, but I have always known that a large part of their motivation was to be better parents than their own.

Although my mother and father grew up in very different homes, both of them felt the burden of distant parents incapable of demonstrating love or affection for their children. Forced to learn the skills of emotional maturity and to challenge the destructive aspects of their gender-socializations on their own, my parents were determined that their children grow up knowing themselves worthy of love and capable of creating it.

Central to my families understanding of healthy living is connection to others. Healing is fundamentally about expanding our capacity to relate and belong with other humans by addressing the wounds and histories that keep us isolated. Research has shown that a key element of deep human relationships is vulnerability, which Dr. Brene Brown has defined as authenticity, the willingness to let go of who we think we should be to be who we are. To be who we are, we must come to terms with who we have been told to be. One area in which we are constantly being instructed how to behave is gender. Gender-socialization is about whom society says we should be and interferes with authentic vulnerability. Furthermore, as male-socialized people, my father, my three brothers and I

were all taught that vulnerability was dangerous. When we were vulnerable we were susceptible to attack or exploitation and were failing our responsibilities to protect our families and ourselves.

Born in the late 30s and early 40s, both my parents grew up in the age of strong, protective men and nurturing, care-taking women. Yet, the cultural shifts of the 60s and 70s resonated with their feelings that things were wrong in our society. Participating in many of the political and cultural struggles of that era (including organizing with the Free-Speech Movement, building women's consciousness groups and collectives, as well as participating in Anti-Vietnam War protests) they formed feminist identities in opposition to the roles they were taught to play and, through this, began more than a half-century of healing work.

This is not to say they were perfect parents or completely interrupted the cycles of violence they were raised in. I can still remember the storms of rage my father would fly into, often times for ridiculous things. I was once thrown out of our car in the dead of winter for farting. My parents were also unable to shield their children from similar cycles of sexual violence they had spent so much of their lives working to undue.

Sometime in the summer of 1988, my next older brother, and I followed an older boy from our religious community, who we will call Nathan, to a nearby park where he molested us. Nathan was only 13, while my brother and I were six and four respectfully. Some days later, I told my second-oldest brother, who was a teenager at the time, about the incident, a clever end-around Nathan's threat that if we told "our parents" he would beat us up.

What ensued was the hot-mess of sexual violence within tight-knit religious communities. My Second-oldest brother told my parents, who told our religious leader, who believed Nathan needed to "learn responsibility." Nathan was put in charge of all the other children during the weekly prayers that my brother and I continued to attend. This was the situation until my family finally moved across the country, some two or three years later.

Like my mother before me, I have spent many years in therapy working to understand, cope with, and undo where possible, the negative impacts this incident has had on my life. My mother and I have had many conversations about the molest and the imperfect ways my parents handled it. Instead of denial or blame, as would have been her parents typical response, she has been able to admit fault where appropriate and honor the myriad of emotions that come up for me. She has read letters of blame and pain from me with grace and humility and offered acknowledgement, compassion, and love to me in exchange. This is an incredibly hard thing to do and has been possible only because of the psychological healing work she has done throughout her life.

Recently, I felt the positive impact of both our efforts to heal from sexual violence. While watching the Perks of Being a Wallflower, a couple of months ago with a date, I

was triggered back into the emotional and physical distress of being molested. Towards the end of the movie, the main character, Charlie, is making out with his good friend and secret love, Sam. During this first-kiss experience for Charlie, Sam rubs his inner thigh triggering memories of molestation that Charlie had not remembered until that moment. In Charlie's ensuing breakdown and recovery we learn that his deceased and beloved aunt, molested him as a young boy.

As a survivor of childhood sexual violence, watching this was a deeply triggering experience for me. I felt my stomach clench, my consciousness pull up out of my body, and my eyes began to water as my muscles tightened. I felt like I not only knew what Charlie was feeling, but was living it with him. As someone who does not remember my molestation, I am often triggered by physically intimate moments without forewarning and usually have trouble interrupting the ensuing cycling of emotional pain.

Getting triggered is never fun, being triggered on a date with a new romantic interest is really quite distressing. However, because of the multi-generational healing work my family and I have done, I was able to recognize these feelings for what they were, practice self-grounding exercises, and seek supportive physical contact from my date. After the movie I was even able to name that I had been triggered, a very vulnerable thing to admit. All this allowed me to continue the date in an engaged and emotionally present state, instead of burying my emotions and pretending to feel something I did not. Being willing to be vulnerable was key to moving through this experience.

This is not to say that the triggered state disappeared, in fact, the next morning I woke still feeling the emotional effects of being triggered. In response, I continued to practice healthy behavior made possible by generational healing. I called my mom, again engaging someone from a place of vulnerability. She was able to emotionally comfort me, while being reminded of her inability to protect me from sexual violence and the harmful effects it has had on my life. This is not an easy thing for a mother to do. However, because of the psychological and spiritual work she has done, she was able to provide this supportive and healing function for me.

After our conversation, I wrote in my journal, exploring the pain and vulnerability of being so easily knocked off my game. Journaling about our emotions and our lives has been in my family at least since my father's 20's. When I was 9 years old, my mother helped me start my first journal, writing down my dreams and discussing their meanings with me.

Although none of this "cured" me of my emotions, nor does it mean I will not be triggered by similar events in the future, they did allow me to get on with my life in an emotionally grounded state.

All these practices are predicated on my ability to be and admit vulnerability. Being "intense" with a new date, seeking comfort from someone who has failed you in the past, and admitting to yourself that you are not always in control of your emotions requires being ok with your imperfections, drawing boundaries, and willingly trusting people

whether or not they have earned it. This willingness to be vulnerable is both necessary and hard to achieve. It requires work over many years, more years than I have been alive. It requires our parents to engage their own healing practices, so that ours can start already equipped with many of the emotional tools they created for themselves.

Vulnerability was made important and ok through the hard work of my parents who have been going to therapy and/or engaged in spiritual practice since the 1960's. This is not trivial, nor is it work that is generally accepted and promoted in mainstream society and culture. In fact, due to the challenges to traditional power structures and cycles of violence that therapy can offer, these practices are often much maligned and stigmatized. Only in the last 10-20 years has going to therapy become a relatively socially accepted practice, which is still often a sign of "something wrong with you." My ability to even admit my feelings much less have the emotional maturity to dialogue with others and myself enough to transition from a place of distress to catharsis is a direct result of my parents' self-healing efforts.

As a male-socialized person, learning to be vulnerable has required me to challenge many of the ways society says I should interact with the world. This is work my father began for all his sons. Throughout his life, my father engaged with other men around questions of masculinity and vulnerability. He taught himself to understand the gender dynamics that had been at play in his home growing up, acknowledging his father's inability to express love or caring was, in large part, because of the way my grandfather had been taught men should behave. My grandmother both fit within and challenged many of the gender stereotypes of her day. She raised two boys mostly on her own while holding down a full-time job and never shirked from challenging authorities that threatened the health of her family. She was caretaker and breadwinner, nurturer and defender. From her, my father began to understand his own male-socialization and its many harmful characteristics, which he hoped not to pass on to his children.

My father sought to understand the power of vulnerability. Throughout his life, my father longed for the close knit friends he saw my mother create "so easily" and worked hard to try to build that for himself. He learned that his anger was destructive to his family and sought out counseling and support to begin to control it. My father loved his family and wanted to be so much more to us than a good guard dog. He wanted to be a confidant, a support, a teacher, and most of all, he wanted to be a model of a deeply loving man.

All this healing work came in hand one morning a few weeks after seeing the movie. I was on my way to a strategic-planning meeting for the organization I was working for, when a man approached me to borrow my cell-phone. I gave it to him. He used it to make a call and then a short time later began to run away. After a brief chase, in which it became clear he was not going to out run me, he turned around to confront me, asking me, "what are you going to do about it," clearly challenging me to fight him. My masculine socialization screamed for me to do just that. However, having just heard of a

friend who was stabbed and nearly died after fighting with a mugger over a phone, I made the choice not to.

Clearly masculinity was not the only dynamic at play and my decision reflects the class privilege I have, for I knew I could afford another phone. However, I do not believe that my father could have made a similar choice at my age, or at the very least it would have been considerably harder and fraught with much more self-shaming than it was for me. For my father, it would have been very difficult for him not to see this as a challenge to his sense of worth as a man socialized to protect himself and his loved ones with violence. However, because of the work my father and I have done, I was able to see this as a self-affirming experience that, although traumatic and charged with self-shaming, was a sign of my families efforts to undo the cycles of violence inherent in US mainstream definitions of manhood.

Through acknowledging and addressing traumatic and triggering events, I experience not only the psychological work I have done, but also the efforts my parents have put into healing from the cycles of violence they were raised in. I was able to resist the normative responses called for by my male-socialization, find support from loved ones, and deal with my emotions so as to be able to continue to live my life without the need to suppress or self-medicate. These represent powerful changes in how people in my family experience healthy living and I am grateful to my parents for making it possible.