

Breaking the Cycle of Trauma

Creating a New Lineage of Healing

Benjamin Olson

Trauma is a subtle dominator of experience. Totalizing yet imperceptible, the massive mental shock re-contextualizes life so fully, one forgets what life was like before it.

Indeed, one forgets that there ever was a before. War, mass shootings, rape, famine, can all cause trauma. In fact, sometimes just hearing about these things (living with a loved one or being raised by a parent who once experienced them), creates its own trauma in the listener, causing a cycle that can intensify over generations.

The cycle can be broken, however, and the key to healing is to break trauma's greatest strength: its silence.

As an example, for the past two decades or so, there's been steadily growing public discourse by indigenous people in Canada about the traumas they endured at the government-funded Indian residential schools, which, from 1876 to 1996, kidnapped 150,000 aboriginal children in an effort to domesticate and assimilate them into dominant culture.

The schools were designed by the Canadian government for assimilation, but also as a component in opening Indian territories for exploitation by forest and mining companies. At least 6,000 kids died at the schools administered by religious orders. Countless others took their own lives after returning home.

In the last decade alone, several residential school memoirs have been published detailing stories like those of Augie Merasty, a Cree trapper from Saskatchewan, whose book, *The Education of Augie Merasty*, details his physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Catholic missionaries at a residential school, and his subsequent alcoholism.

Merasty and other authors and activists seek to interrupt a transmission of trauma that has infected generations of families dating back to the first run-ins with colonization on Turtle Island. The psychic wounds of trauma survivors are sub-consciously communicated to their children, who in turn inherit their parents' unprocessed grief. Simply experiencing a caregiver's constant mental anguish can leave its own scar on a child. The same is true for the survivors of the residential schools, and their descendants.

Psychologist Dori Laub describes trauma as a frozen experience, "automatic and purposeless, bereft of meaning." Scholar Cathy Caruth writes that the inability to process the traumatic experience is a paradox: "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it." The threat is recognized by the mind "one moment too late," as it were, creating an endless feedback loop.

The experience is recreated mentally, amplified, but warped into such a low frequency that the sufferer may not even hear it. The signal becomes the background of all other experiences; the context for life; an existential prerequisite.

According to psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, in the book, *Traumatic Stress*, such an experience is retained and forgotten at once. To remember, that is, to hear it in all its shattering ever-presence, would be to change its very nature.

In response to trauma, we tend to develop compulsions, which serve to reestablish the lost control. As psychologist KL Dykshoorn shows in her essay, "Trauma-Related Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," there is a high prevalence of OCD in trauma victims. The compulsive behavior follows the cycle of the feedback loop. Responding to an

imperceptible frequency of abstracted terror, the sufferer may go through all manner of compulsions to make it stop, without ever realizing it's there.

The human activity of domestication—our domination of the wild material of the world—can be understood as an obsessive-compulsive behavior linked to intergenerational trauma.

From Neolithic times, agriculture and domestication took root when humans “purposefully isolated domestic plants from natural ones, the moment we captured beasts from their homes in the wild and corralled them into human-built enclosures,” as eco-psychologist Chellis Glendinning puts it in *My Name Is Chellis & I'm In Recovery From Western Civilization*.

Glendinning identifies agriculture as the “original trauma,” a severance of human life from active participation in the natural world, beginning with domestication of plants and animals, and intensifying with large-scale civilizations into today's mass technological society.

But domestication isn't just the original trauma; it's also a compulsion in response to trauma, both responding to and recreating the event that made us decide we had to rely on agricultural practices in order to survive, that the earth could not be trusted to provide for us.

Though Glendinning admits “No one fully understands” why we originally started domesticating in the first place, she offers a theory posited by geoarchaeologist Fekri A Hassan that global climatic change altered the planet's growing patterns, forcing humans to “improvise more consciously managed livelihoods.”

Relying on managed gardens meant our previously nomadic ancestors were, for the first time in human history, confined to one area of land. From there, the situation spiraled out of control.

The sedentary lifestyle altered ovulation patterns, contributing to a population surge, which meant expansion, and often warfare or more subtle ways of assimilating neighbors who got in the way.

Just as we had “captured beasts from their homes” to work the land, now we were often kidnapping other humans to use for their much-needed labor sustaining the gardens. Labor became increasingly specialized, and hierarchical relationships began to develop, causing another branch of suffering.

Needing to be in control only made us realize the extent to which we are not, and recast that as a problem to be overcome with more management.

The transmission of our original trauma occurred forcibly via colonization; not only from generation to generation, but also from group to group, as communities were forced to foist their new way of life onto neighboring tribes.

The original trauma eventually made its way to the so-called New World, where even the children forcibly removed from their parents' care and held in Indian residential schools, violently punished for speaking in their native languages, must have already been living in mental anguish from the traumas passed down from their parents and ancestors.

Glendinning recounts Cheyenne activist Susan Harjo telling her “there are no words in Native American languages” to describe the suffering which “European inheritors of this chronic traumatic stress” perpetrated on them.

The compulsions of a trauma survivor, while designed to alleviate stress through domination, only recreate and amplify the pain transmission. While meant to ward off danger, they really ward off healing. If we listen for the frequencies of our suffering, as the residential school survivors are doing, we might begin to heal from its negative effects, by recognizing why we are doing it, and learning how to stop.

The current indigenous discourse, despite trauma's choke-hold on language, is a radical rerouting of the trauma transmission, and arguably a radical resistance to domestication.

Recognizing our original trauma and the social compulsion mechanism we built to cope with it, acknowledging the horrors it causes through hierarchical relationships, is the first step towards healing.

It's time to break our cycle of trauma and begin a new lineage based on rewilding and reconnecting to the earth, thereby transmitting and teaching healthy relationships with the world to our offspring.

Ben Olson is a writer and musician in Queens, N.Y. He performs under the moniker Ben Absurdo and is launching an anti-civ record label called Captives Collective.

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Fifth Estate #401, Summer 2018

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