



SOCIAL JUSTICE AND BLACK MAMA TRAUMA

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Social Justice and Black Mama Trauma

How healing the trauma related to the killing of unarmed black men can lead to shalom and heal our land

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Abstract

This paper will address the issue of trauma triggered in the black community, especially among black women when young black males are killed by law enforcers and para-law enforcers. More importantly, it will explore ways that we as social workers can facilitate the healing of that trauma and ultimately bring shalom to our land. The past several years has been rife with racial tension resulting from what some perceive as the unjust killing of several black teenaged males. From Trayvon Martin to Michael Brown and beyond, cries for both justice and peace have ascended to the atmosphere and to the high courts of our land. Those who have lamented the most are women, the black women who birth black boys, the women who suffer “Black Mama Trauma.”

Introduction

This paper will address the issue of trauma triggered in the black community, especially among black women when young black males are killed by law enforcers and para-law enforcers. More importantly, it will explore ways that we as social workers can facilitate the healing of that trauma and ultimately bring shalom to our land. The past several years has been rife with racial tension resulting from what some perceive as the unjust killing of several black teenaged males. From Trayvon Martin to Michael Brown and beyond, cries for both justice and peace have ascended to the atmosphere and to the high courts of our land. Those who have lamented the most are women, the black women who birth black boys, the women who suffer “Black Mama Trauma.”

Black Mama Trauma

Trauma is the physiological, psychological, and spiritual bruises that make us flinch at every new encounter and sometimes make us despair of any new outcomes—is ongoing and low grade (The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice, May 2015). Dr. Valerie Bridgeman, Ph.D. (2014, p. 1), coined the term Black Mama Trauma¹. She noted:

Women of the African continent and the African diaspora have history with facing political and death-dealing powers when our children and our sisters, mothers, and aunts are lynched and dismembered. Oftentimes these brutalities happen in the midst of war and political conflict, *as well as in the face of ongoing violence in the streets in which we live*. The threat of death is just below the surface and creates a low-grade fear that sometimes stymies the ability to thrive. This fear is often accompanied with concomitant issues like hunger or disease. These circumstances create what I have labeled “Black Mama Trauma”. (*Emphasis added*)

¹ Dr. Bridgeman is a poet, peace activist and an interdisciplinary scholar in the areas of the Hebrew bible, worship, preaching, and art. She conceived the term “black mama trauma” for her Friday, September 20th, 2013 lecture: *Black Mama Trauma: Managing Ongoing Grief in the Work of Justice*. (<http://blogs.luc.edu/socialjustice/2013/09/18/sept-20-black-mama-trauma-managing-ongoing-grief-in-the-work-of-justice/>)

Black Mama Trauma is one expression of the historical trauma of the Black-American community. “Historical trauma is trauma shared by a group of people spanning and/or having an impact on multiple generations. Contemporary members of the group may experience the injury without having been present for the past traumatizing events. Historical trauma explains one aspect of disproportionate rates of stress and illness in communities of color (Blitz, L.V., Greene, M.P. & Bernabei, S. 2015).”

This type of trauma has also been called “post-traumatic-slave-syndrome (P.T.S.S.)”, a syndrome first espoused by Dr. Joy DeGruy, Ph.D. subsequent to 12 years of quantitative and qualitative research. According to Dr. DeGruy (2005, p. 5),

P.T.S.S. is a theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora. It is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. A form of slavery which was predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to whites. This was then followed by institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate injury.

Thus, resulting in **M.A.P.**:

- **M:** Multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression;
- **A:** Absence of opportunity to heal or access the benefits available in the society; leads to
- **P:** Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.

Black mama trauma fits well into both descriptions.

The video of Toya Graham², the mother caught on camera scolding her son during the Baltimore riots went viral on the Internet and was shown repeatedly across the network news shows. There was a traumatized black mama acting out the pain triggered by her fear that her unarmed boy was going to be gunned down by policemen. By almost any metric, what she did wasn't appropriate. In fact, the state of Maryland launched a child protective services

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVd3sEWteaM>, 2015

investigation of her hitting her son repeatedly in the head on national television. Still, social workers know that hers was a visceral response. When she recognized her son headed into the midst of trouble, this black mama had a gut-level intuitive reaction. “If I can just beat some sense into his head,” one can almost hear her say, “I can keep him away from the bullets that seem to only target black men – unarmed black men.”

The term “black mama” is used throughout this paper as an honorific term bestowed on the women in the Black-American community who parent children, be they biological or fictive. She’s known as Big Momma, Mama, and Auntie. She has all the rights and privileges of a parent, whether she birthed the child or not.

A black mama’s love is fierce. Like Emmett Till’s mama Mamie Till-Mobley who let the world view his bloated body with his eyes gouged out and the bullet hole in the back of his head to highlight the brutality of racism. Or Jordon Davis’ mom, Lucia McBath who speaks around the world about the need for systemic change, a black mama will seek justice for her sons even after they are dead. Both these black teenagers walked into a small market to buy some candy; both ended up dead. And it is only when justice is achieved can trauma be healed.

Recent killings of unarmed black men have triggered trauma responses in the Black-American community-at-large and in black women who mother Black-American males in particular. Deep-seated prejudices and systemic discrimination have become topics of discussion, moving many to ask questions and draw lessons from events like those in Ferguson, Missouri (Kavar, L., 2014) where the killing of unarmed Michael Brown led to riots. Importantly, these events have surfaced Black Mama Trauma.

The Impact of White Privilege

Incidents of unarmed black men killed by police officers and other white perpetrators have spurred protests and refueled the “race conversation.” Deep-seated prejudices and systemic discrimination have become topics of discussion, moving many to ask questions and draw lessons from events like those in Ferguson, Missouri. One lesson is “it’s not wrong to be white”. Maybe a few people in America think so, but that’s it.

What racial justice activists and those protesting in Ferguson *do* think is that it’s wrong to not scrutinize what race means in our society today — how implicit bias shapes everything from our neighborhoods to our economy to who gets to live and who gets to die when they’re doing nothing else but holding a toy. That’s what’s wrong. We don’t have a choice about which side of that equation we’re born on, but we do have a choice about whether we acknowledge the reality of bias and talk honestly — together — about solutions”. (Kohn 2014, p. 1)

So more precisely, what is white privilege and how does it impact the process of healing from the trauma that the mothers of the slain experience? “The idea of white privilege is that whites, simply because they are white, have important advantages. More than that, some of these advantages were part of a social system that often required no further information about people than their racial identities to distribute privileges (Zack, N., 2015, p. 5).

In an interview with George Yancy, Naomi Zack (2014, p.1) observes:

The term “white privilege” is misleading. A privilege is special treatment that goes beyond a right. It’s not so much that being white confers privilege but that not being white means being without rights in many cases. Not fearing that the police will kill your child for no reason isn’t a privilege. It’s a right. But I think that is what “white privilege” is meant to convey, that whites don’t have many of the worries nonwhites, especially blacks, do. I was talking to a white friend of mine earlier today. He has always lived in the New York City area. He

couldn't see how the Michael Brown case had anything to do with him. I guess that would be an example of white privilege.

It is this kind of inability to see how the circumstances surrounding the slain son of a black mother that deepens the grief and trauma she experiences.

Shalom

According to Strong's Concordance, shalom (שְׁלוֹמִים) means completeness, soundness, welfare, and peace. It can be translated as well-being, safe, secure, or who were at peace. The American Heritage Dictionary states, "It literally means peace."

To begin the process of healing trauma, mothers of slain black males must believe they are in a safe environment and that law enforcers and para-law enforcers will indeed execute arrest peacefully. If peaceful arrests occur, that mother can be reasonably certain of her child's well-being, decreasing the risk of her being traumatized. A process in which statutes like "stand your ground" does not because a loophole for those actually guilty of abuse of power and/or murder.³ A society in which shalom prevails is one in which the offspring of black mamas are secure in their social, economic, and judicial environments.

Social Workers, Social Justice and the healing of Black Mama Trauma

The second ethic principles identified by the NASW is that *social workers challenge social injustice* (National Association of Social Workers, 2007). It is in both the challenging of social injustice and in the application of the social workers' ethical responsibilities to broader society (ibid) that shalom will arise that will lead to the healing of the trauma).

³ Many states have enacted so-called **stand your ground laws** that remove the duty to retreat before using force in self-defense. Florida passed the first such **law** in 2005, generally allowing people to **stand** their **ground** instead of retreating if they reasonably believe doing so will "prevent death or great bodily harm."
<http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-law-basics/states-that-have-stand-your-ground-laws.html>

In his New York Times piece, Dr. Epstein (2013) argued that, “The willingness to face traumas — be they large, small, primitive or fresh — is the key to healing from them...” The recent killings of unarmed black males is a clarion call to social workers to facilitate the involvement of the Black-American community in shaping policies related to how law enforcement engages the public. It is a must for black mamas to lead the charge in helping to forge new laws and policies because, of all those in this historically traumatized community, they are the most effected.

Promoting Shalom that leads to healing of the land because Black Mamas are no longer traumatized

As social workers, we know what happens when trauma goes unacknowledged, when the struggle to heal must happen in the context of denial of injury. Some of us are getting better at listening to the trauma of enslavement of Africans, genocide of Native peoples, and colonial practices that obliterated cultures. Others adhere to colorblindness, denying history for those who suffered in it, refusing to acknowledge the continued impact of what trauma created in our present time (2015).

In the Christian and Hebrew sacred text recorded in 2 Samuel 21:10, after King David allowed her son's to be sacrificed as political pawns, Rizpah refused to allow them to be further humiliated in death. The text states she was there for an entire harvest season, day and night. “Rizpah's stance looks crazy in this text. Really. She looks crazy, out on a rock protecting dead bodies from vultures by day and wild animals by night. And she does it for a long time. Someone had to be with her, to relieve her while she slept. Someone *must* have stood with her, even if she started it on her own. Else, how did she survive? When did she sleep? How did she eat? In order

to start the healing process, we must join with traumatized black mama, the Rizpah of today, in forcing, as it were, the powers to be to do right by black sons (Bridgeman, 2014, p. 3).”

As social workers, we must be those others supporting and at times relieving black mothers from the fight so that they can take a healing breath. We must help mothers of slain black bodies challenge the social norms and political intrigue that promotes the killings. And if the killings do occur, we must metaphorically stave off the ravens and other scavengers. How do we do that?

In the aftermath of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown, the media engaged in a frenzy of trying to find disparaging information, especially criminal information, from their past. Ostentatiously, they needed to sensationalize to keep their ratings high. The information they provided had nothing to do with the matter at hand – these young men had been shot while unarmed. While it can be debated about the criminal behavior of Michael Brown at the time of his death; the same is not true for Trayvon and Jordan. Trayvon went out for skittles and tea. And Jordan, who was not shot by law enforcement; but the stand your ground law came into play, was simply enjoying his music. Again, how do we as social workers abate the trauma? We must challenge the media in their portrayal of the slain’s life.

An activist movement called “#BlackLivesMatter”⁴, which emerged in 2012 gained greater prominence in the aftermath of the 2015 Boston riots sparked by the death of a homeless man in a police van. Rather than affirm the black women who raised their voices, a countermovement arose saying “all lives matter.” One doesn’t go to a fundraiser for breast

⁴ #BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime, and dead 17-year old Trayvon was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder. Rooted in the experiences of Black people in this country who actively resist our de-humanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society. (<http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>)

cancer and begin raising money for Alzheimer's disease. Social workers must be at the forefront of creating spaces, like the "#BlackLivesMatter" movement and other forums where traumatized black mothers, whites, and law enforcers/para-law enforcers can be honest with one another; not hostile; just honest.

Moreover, it is important for social workers to continue to advocate for justice. Advocacy is a key principle for the profession's integrity. That advocacy happen regarding policies and laws. It must take place in the halls of justice, the aisles of congress, and within neighborhoods and communities.

Finally, social workers must do justly. Just advocating (talking) changes nothing. Social workers need to both speak and act with integrity, honesty and courage. Behaving justly in the profession models how other professionals should behave and moves the needle forward on social justice and race. Doing justly sends the message to those who write the laws and those who enforce them that without justice there is no peace, there is no shalom.

Conclusion

Women who give birth to black children have been traumatized historically and continue to be traumatized presently. One of the most devastating causes of onset is the slaying of their unarmed sons by law enforcers and para-law enforcers. Even when law enforcement is not involved, the legal system is still complicit through laws such as the "stand your ground" statute in the states of Georgia and Florida.

As Dr. DeGruy, who herself is a social worker, observes, for there to be the experience of peace, there has to be more than clinical treatment. There must also be a profound social and structural change in Americans and American institutions that continue to promote inequalities and injustice. One such institution is law enforcement.

Healing is possible. Shalom for our land and internal peace for black mamas can be achieved. Social workers as clinicians can provide care for the emotional and mental well-being. Social workers as community developers and social justice activists and advocates can facilitate shalom in the land.

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