

COLUMN OF THE AMERICAS

By Roberto Rodriguez & Patrisia Gonzales

RELEASE DATE: Oct. 3, 2005

Diagnosing Internalized Oppression

Patzin -- a special monthly edition on traditional medicine

First person By Patrisia Gonzales

For more than five hundred years, indigenous peoples have survived various oppressions: land theft, genocide, rape, the killing of our ancestors, forced religious conversion, boarding schools, the demise of many of our traditional ways of governance, languages, and cultural and spiritual teachings. This legacy is called "historical trauma" or intergenerational trauma. History has left many of us wounded and it has been passed from generation to generation. One need only look at the impact of alcoholism on families, the disproportionate rate of alcohol-related problems on future generations and codependent behavior among some loved ones who are related to alcoholics. The disproportionate rates of suicide on the reservations, diabetes, and men of color in prison are not solely because of poverty and racism.

"Those disproportionate rates point to internalized oppression as part of the cause," says mediator and peacemaker Roberto Chene. "It's a form of internalized oppression to see so many of your own hurting. It hurts you. The daily expression (of injustice) forces you to shut down and numb yourself. If not, the daily anger would eat you up."

Many indigenous psychiatrists and community healers agree that "internalized oppression" is a result of historical trauma passed across generations that continues to actively wound people. "Internalized oppression is when we take on the attributes (psychological, spiritual) of the perpetrator and use these energies against our families, communities, ourselves," says psychologist Eduardo Duran, who wrote *Native American Post Colonial Psychology* with native scholar Bonnie Duran.

The oppression can be internalized in the form of self-hatred, or we may believe our power comes from oppressing or hurting others. "Internalized oppression affects domestic violence in that the self-hatred is projected onto someone who looks the most like us, i.e. family member. In trying to kill the family member, we are attempting to kill the internalized shame and injury we carry," says Duran.

Internalized oppression has numerous manifestations. Symptoms include:

- o Judgment and criticism of people.
- o Gossip, envy, intolerance of others.
- o Using victimization to make excuses for inappropriate actions.
- o Needing to create crisis and enjoying the rush of the crisis, or feeling that this is the normal state of life.
- o Fear-based reactions - someone in our environment needs to pay for wronging us.

- o Feeling detached from our own feelings or detached from others.
- o Denial or embarrassment of your family, culture or heritage.
- o Speaking your mind in a hurtful or disrespectful way and justifying this as "but I'm doing it for my people."

Strengthening cultural life ways can help people to address historical trauma. As the saying goes in Spanish, la cultura cura or culture cures. But we must also recognize that someone out of balance can abuse cultural knowledge, including that of ceremonies, healing and spirituality, in a warped sense of superiority or to take advantage of others.

One important step in healing internalized oppression is understanding how social structures contributed to, or created, the oppressions. Self knowledge and self understanding is also crucial. Understanding or recognizing what has hurt us is the first step towards changing our behavior and perception of problems.

According to Chene: "A common form of internalized oppression is that when we become aware of our dysfunction of the particular group, we blame ourselves. We ask the question, what's wrong with me rather than what's wrong with us that we're like this. We're in relationship with society. The emphasis on the individual assumes that the dysfunction arises from within ourselves. It's an internalized oppression between human beings and structured society."

In communal cultures, rectifying internalized oppression must be addressed not only at a personal level, but with family members and within communities because the oppression is like a germ that infects collectively.

"The reason for understanding the interaction with oppression is to liberate us from the self blame that takes away from our own change. We're not looking for excuses," said Chene. "We're looking for understanding to free us from the burden of self blame so that we can use that energy for change."

Trauma, Love & History

By Patrisia Gonzales

RELEASE DATE: Feb. 6, 2006

Paztin: venerable medicine in Nahuatl

(a monthly feature on indigenous medicine)

I've tried to write about historical trauma for 10 years. How can anyone write about the effect that history has had on our bodies, our families, our lands, our plants, animals and rivers in 700 words? Can oppression kill love? And why is it some of us, but not all, assume the burden strap and carry the grief for our peoples' sufferings? Start with Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's definition that helped to establish the very idea? Historical trauma (HT) is cumulative, collective wounding across generations "emanating from massive group trauma."

For decades, native peoples have sought to address this wounding as part of mental health, also calling it intergenerational trauma, or multigenerational unresolved grief. As Choctaw scholar Karina Walters notes, "The trauma is targeted to the collective and the collective experience it ... The trauma is held personally and transmitted over generations. Thus, even family members who have not directly experienced the trauma can feel the effects of the event generations later." However, Walters' research shows that not everyone experiences "historical trauma response."

Over the years, I've attended several conferences on historical trauma. The conferences of the Takini Network of native healers, scholars and therapists convened people such as Birgil Kills Straight, Nadine Tafoya, Larry Emerson, Lemyra DeBruyn, Bonnie Duran and Walters, who have helped establish an indigenous application of HT. Much of the development of HT theory for native peoples has its origins in this network when its members in the 1970's became conscious of their own unresolved traumatic grief.

On one occasion, Brave Heart recounted how she looked upon the photograph of her ancestors and began to "sob uncontrollably." A Jewish mentor understood immediately, "That's genocide." The experience of Jewish Holocaust survivors and their offspring has helped native peoples understand the Native American Holocaust. The grandchildren suffered trauma just from having heard the stories of their Jewish elders. And they are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder following a stressful event, thus leading to intergenerational transmission of historical trauma. In ceremonies, Brave Heart released the deepest grief and these experiences lead her to develop the theory of Historical Trauma, which now is one of the foundations of indigenous knowledge and mental health, and as Walters says, is a "fact that needs to be considered in post-traumatic stress disorder." Walters has developed a related concept to HT, that of Colonial Trauma Response in either individuals or the collective. "Living under colonialism and colonial structures puts you at risk," she told a Medical College of Wisconsin conference on the topic. And she's referring to the racism and politics of the here and now of the United States, the memories triggered in the s-word, native mascots, or other desecrations, such as the road being built through native shrines in Albuquerque and terminator seeds. Yes, the earth is also a survivor of historical trauma.

The intellectual development of HT is far more than can be addressed here. For myself, it has led me to a most basic conclusion, that historical trauma has shaken our ability to love. I'd like to know, what happened to love? The ability to love -- to give it and receive it and to know it beyond a fantasy jewel. I wonder what love was like before boarding schools and forced conversion. Trauma corrodes the better part of us, eating away at the generosity still found among elders, a generosity of spirit, of accepting and welcoming people on their own terms, the sharing of yourself and the gifting of kindness.

Perhaps it's as Eduardo Duran says, that trauma is a spirit that must be left offerings so that it will be at peace. Leslie Marmon Silko has written that there are spirits in stories and history. HT is like the phantom pain of an amputated limb. Despite it all, it's a miracle that we can, and do love, and still see the goodness in another. Love may not be talked about, but it speaks in our actions. Yes, to enjoy good relations, with our selves and others, to care and to love is to change history.

I leave a few teas to help as we seek to release the grief and wounding. Drink boraja/borage during times of grief. It feeds the adrenal glands. Drink tea of rosemary flowers to calm the brain. Drink estafiate/mugwort, tila/linden and magnolia flower for the liver, nerves and heart in a 1:1:1 ratio. A teaspoon of herbs to one cup hot water. The plants will know what to do.

In the Spirit of the Ancestors: Reconciling Post Tribal Stress Disorder

by Patrisia Gonzales

Patzin (Nahuatl for Venerable Medicine): a monthly feature on indigenous medicine

Column of the Americas

May 1, 2006

I once heard an Ojibwa woman tell a group of Chicanos working on indigenous liberation that our ancestors did what they had to, to survive.

Our indigenous ancestors survived by passing as Mexicans or mestizos, or being defined away as mestizos by governments. And many married mestizos. As a result, the Mexican community is a pan indigenous community comprised of native peoples of both Mexico and North America. Indigeneity became private and individualized in families. They survived by hiding the indigenous knowledge so deeply that some of us could no longer recognize it. Some were taught to forget and to fear and disconnect from our place in the natural world and the power of nature within our own hands. There was no need for the Inquisition once forced conversion could be regulated by the community itself. Choctaw scholar Karina Walters says that part of historical trauma was established through forced conversion and separating people away from their original instructions, the ancestral agreements and covenants about how to treat each other and how to honor their responsibilities to the natural world.

I believe that among those defined as mestizos many suffer from PTSD or Post Tribal Stress Disorder. I use this term to refer to the suffering and afflictions that result from de-Indianization. Invariably, there is someone who remembers in their family that they are Indian. Or they will recount how one of their grandparents told them to never forget, "we are Indian." But like historical trauma, not all suffer the soul wound of de-Indianization.

Part of their historical trauma is the void where there should be remembrance of the names of our ancestors and nations. They are the other "disappeared" of the Americas, by the processes of social control. Some argue that mestizos are like a brown clay pot, emptied of a native spirit that was claimed by impositions. Others argue mestizos indigenized Spanish culture and that it is, in fact, only a shallow topsoil that covers indigenous Mexico, which is indigenous in the spaces also claimed as mestizo or urban. We are another kind of Indian that does not fit into the current boxes on identity.

Many scholars concur that Mesoamerica's indigenous legacy remains in traditional agriculture and Mexican traditional medicine - and protective factors against disconnection. Zapata asserted that the land belongs to those who work it -- Mexicans still work the land and have relationships with this natural world. But many are taught to deny their Indianness, to even hate it. A Kickapoo elder once recounted to me how a group of Mexican kids in Coahuilla, Mexico, got mad when he proclaimed to them, "you're Indian."

Those people identified as mestizo, Hispanic, or Latino suffer from a particular kind of historical trauma. They are told that they are both the oppressed and the oppressor. Many Mexicans are largely Indian by heritage and do not descend from Spanish colonialists, and when they do, it may be through rape or forced marriage, such as with one of my Kickapoo grandmothers. It is hard to determine who is the “we/they,” who of the relatives were/are the mestizos who benefited from controlling “the Indian.” The Mexican (read Bolivian, Ecuadorian etc.) community has been in a constant process of de-Indianization and each family has its own particular relationship to that process.

In my work, I identify some symptoms of PTSD:

1. Anehlos -- a feeling of longing and that something is missing.
2. Cracked mirror -- a feeling that something wants to break through, or break open and that your sight is refracted from cracks in perception, with some parts distorted and others clear.
3. Rejection -- feeling rejected by Latinos and mestizos as being too Indian and by some Native Americans as almost or maybe Indian, but then again not really (while others welcome you as cousins, brothers or sisters.)
4. Loss-mourning the loss of ancestors, nations and the spiritual teachings that were wrested away and in which you had no say or control.

Fortunately, there are numerous native elders working with, or in, these communities as people resist de-Indianization, particularly the more recent indigenous migrants from the southern hemisphere. Some people argue that mestizos and Latinos should accept their historical conditions, that they have no right to renew or strengthen their indigeneity. Yet, that goes against the spirit of self-determination. If we could hear them speak in the spirit world, would they not ask for their children to return? to fight? to renew knowledge in the spirit of their ancestors? To do otherwise, is to accept colonization, something no community, native or not, can justify as an acceptable human condition. To proclaim their Indianness, someone once said, is the biggest paradigm shift since the Spanish debated whether Indians had souls.