

## Transgenerational Trauma, Environmental Racism, and Storytelling

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### **My Story**

I think the first and one of the only times I've ever talked to my family about our history and the Japanese internment camps was when I was in high school, my sophomore year history teacher assigned us a family history project that we had to present to the class. I remember that day I got home and asked my dad a million questions about my grandparents, great grandparents, great great grandparents. Instead of trying to explain my entire family history, he pulled me out of history class a few days later and took me to the Oregon Nikkei Legacy center (which is now called the Japanese American Museum of Oregon). I remember the walls covered in pictures from Minidoka, the internment camp where the Japanese Americans from Oregon were taken. There was a book with a list of names of all the internees that I flipped through until I got to "S" and saw "Saito" with my great grandparents' names in front of it. I flipped back to "O" and saw "Okino", my grandmother's maiden name, with my great grandparents' names in front. When I got home, I texted my grandpa and asked him what he knows about our family history. He sent me back almost a full essay telling me how our family, the Saito side at least, came to the United States. The simplified version is that both sides of my family, the Saito and Okino sides, have a similar story. Both of my great-great grandfathers were born in Portland, Oregon to immigrants from Hiroshima, Japan and their picture brides. My Saito side worked in logging, railroads, and laundry, and my Okino side worked as farmers. When World War II hit, the first, second, and third generation Saitos and Okinos were interned in Minidoka. After the war, my Okino side got their farm back because they were lucky enough to have neighbors who kept it for them. My Saito side began operating a hotel in downtown Portland. This is where my grandfather and most of his brothers and sisters grew up. They lived in the hotel until a fire burned it down in 1955, when my grandfather was in third grade. There were four people who died in the fire, and one of them was my great grandmother's father, my great-great grandfather, who died trying to warn the residents. My great grandfather's father, great-great grandpa

Saito, made it out of the fire, rescuing a family tree that his father brought with him from Japan. The building was destroyed, and it's still just a parking lot today. All of the generations that were born after the war were given American names and spoke only English. My grandparents and their siblings were, for the most part, highly successful, working in fields such as architecture and orthodontics. My great grandpa Saito died a year after I was born (his first great grandchild), but his wife, Fumi helped raise me and my brother, and was able to come watch my first collegiate soccer game. I don't think I ever heard her talk about the internment camps or really about her past at all. She was a quiet person in general, at family gatherings she would sit in her chair and watch everyone with a huge smile on her face. All she ever wanted was a big happy family and that's what she got.

Doing this research on transgenerational trauma has helped me to understand how my family became what it is today and the dynamics that made it that way.

## **Racism**

Although race has a profound impact on everyone's daily lives, race itself is not a biological construct, but a social construct (Jones, 2000). There are no innate differences between people of different races and the differences that are seen are the result of racism, not race itself (Jones, 2000). The idea that there are innate differences between people of different races has been supported only by pseudoscience such as phrenology, the study of human skulls as indicators of intelligence and personality characteristics (Kao, 2021). Phrenology discovered differences in comparative measurements of different racial groups, lending itself to support white supremacist ideology (Kao, 2021). Jones (2000) identifies three levels of racism and gives an analogy of a gardener to illustrate the dynamics at each level. Institutionalized racism involves how race influences the access one has to goods, services, and opportunities. It is normative, sometimes legalized, and it is manifested in material conditions and power, such as access to quality education or a clean environment, and having a voice. Personally mediated racism encompasses prejudice and discrimination. It can be intentional or unintentional and manifests as a lack of respect, dehumanization, suspicion, scapegoating, and devaluation. Internalized racism is the individual's

acceptance and internalization of negative messages about their own race. It results in the embracing of “whiteness”, self-devaluation, resignation, helplessness, and hopelessness.

To better understand these levels, Jones (2000) imagined a gardener who is about to plant red and pink flowers in her garden. She has two flower boxes, one with rich, fertile soil and another with poor, rocky soil. Because she prefers pink flowers, she plants the pink flowers in the box with the rich soil and the red flowers in the box with the poor soil. As the flowers grow, she notices that the pink ones grow much bigger and stronger than the red ones, and she thinks to herself that she was right for liking the pink flowers the most. Year after year the flowers drop their seeds into the same box, and if they blow into the other box, the gardener plucks the seeds from the ground before they can bloom, resulting in the pink flowers growing the biggest and strongest for many generations. Over time, the gardener’s children grow up favoring the pink flowers because their whole lives, they have witnessed the pink flowers growing bigger and stronger than the red ones. In this illustration, institutionalized racism is seen in the original decision to separate the flowers into the two boxes by color preference, the structure of the boxes that keep the different soils separate, and the gardener not acting to fix the soil conditions for the red flowers. The personally mediated racism is seen in the gardener’s disdain for the red flowers, and not allowing them to grow in the same box as the pink ones. The internalized racism in this story is more difficult to illustrate, but it occurs when the red flowers refuse to be pollinated with pollen from the red flowers. They have internalized the gardener’s belief that pink is better than red. To set things right in the garden, the gardener or her children could make the red flowers feel better by telling them that red is beautiful. The gardener’s children could convince the gardener to stop plucking the red seeds from the ground before they have a chance to grow. Or, they could break down the boxes and mix the soil, allowing both red and pink flowers to grow to their full potential. This story illustrates the dangers of inequity. To apply this to real life, it’s useful to think about the gardener as representative of the United States government and the flowers as the people.

The word “environment” in “environmental racism” goes “beyond the traditional conservationist and preservationist definitions of the nonhuman world to include those spaces where human beings also

‘live, work, play, learn, and pray,’” (Pellow & Vazin, 2019, p. 3). Environmental racism is embedded in every story. Environmental inequality affects housing, economics, healthcare, immigration, and consequently all other aspects of life (Ramirez, 2021). For decades, researchers have reported that the communities that are most likely to contain hazardous waste sites, be the most affected by climate change, experience the most natural disasters, and be located where there are high levels of contaminated air, water, and land, are those with high percentages of people of color, low-income persons, indigenous people, and immigrants (Pellow & Vazin, 2019). These same populations experience food injustices such as inequitable access to healthy, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and sustainable foods (Pellow & Vazin, 2019). Because of the hazardous living conditions, these communities suffer from worse health conditions. “Cancer Alley” is the section of the Mississippi River that stretches 85 miles between New Orleans and Baton Rouge has 150 plants and refineries, and it has the country’s highest risk of cancer (Ramirez, 2021). Another example of environmental racism described by Benz (2017) is the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, a city of 100,000 residents, the majority of which are black. To save money, the city sourced its drinking water from the extremely polluted Flint River. The Flint River was so polluted that it corroded the city’s plumbing infrastructure, corroded auto parts in a General Motors manufacturing plant, and in 2015, it had lead levels 880 times higher than the actionable federal level, exceeding the EPA’s standard for toxic waste.

The “minority move-in hypothesis” is the argument that low income persons and people of color choose to live in highly polluted communities because they are cheaper (Pellow & Vazin, 2019). Recent research has shown that this hypothesis cannot be supported because industrial and government facilities disproportionately target these communities, putting them at much higher risk for adverse health outcomes than their high income, majority white community counterparts (Pellow & Vazin, 2019). The falsity of the minority move-in hypothesis is especially evident in the prison system. Pellow & Vazin (2019) describe the environmental hazards involved in prisons and immigrant detention centers and the health outcomes for the immigrants and inmates, the majority of which are people of color and low income persons. There have been reports of serious environmental threats in dozens of prisons and

immigrant detention centers, the most common being that the prison or detention center is located on or near toxic superfund sites that contaminate the water and air, or is in a natural disaster hazard zone. There have also been reports about inhumane punishment methods, harmful medical care, and unhealthy and abusive food services. Additionally, Krippner & Barrett (2019) noted that there has been documentation of epigenetic alteration of sperm for three generations after the initial exposure of environmental toxins such as vinclozolin, pesticides, plastics, dioxin, and jet fuel.

### **Trauma and Identity**

Trauma is the result of a real, distressing or disturbing event that breaches the psyche and disrupts the sense of self (Connolly, 2011). Here, I will be talking about trauma that results from a conflict between humans, not trauma that results from a natural disaster or other non-human threats. There are different terms for the different ways in which trauma is received and the effects it has. Collective or historical trauma is used to refer to a trauma that affects a large group throughout many generations (Tcholakian, 2019; Patel & Nagata, 2021). Although this concept was initially framed as a response to a big event such as the Holocaust, it has been expanded to cover the response to forces of structural violence which have persisted for centuries such as the forced removal of Native Americans from their land (Avalos, 2021). Chosen trauma is a similar, but more specific kind of reaction to a traumatic event. Volkan (1998) uses the term chosen trauma to refer to the mental representation of a traumatic event at the hand of an enemy that “has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury” (p. 8). The word “chosen” reflects the group’s unconscious choice to pass this mental representation down to future generations due to their inability to mourn losses and reverse the humiliation. Chosen trauma does not refer to more recent traumatic events such as the Holocaust because the survivors’ stories are still “alive” through direct memories, pictures, and belongings (Volkan, 2019). Over time, when there are no more direct links to the traumatic event, no actual memory of the event, the function of the trauma changes (Volkan, 2019). Groups experience a number of traumas, but only the most significant become chosen traumas because they are linked to

entitlement ideologies, the descendants of survivors feel entitled to regain what was lost in the event (Volkan, 2019).

Identity, specifically large group identity, plays a major role in how collective trauma is passed down through generations. Large group identity is a part of your individual identity that is shared by thousands or millions of people. Volkan (2019) describes two forms of large group identity, one that develops in childhood and another that develops in adulthood. Large group identities that develop in childhood exist worldwide and some are internationally inclusive. They are core pieces of identity that make up who we are, and they're given to us by our parents and other important people in our lives. Children learn from a very young age what belongs in their large group identity and what doesn't through trial and error, the same way they learn the difference between a dog and a cat. These identities came into being from "myths and realities of common beginnings, historical continuities and geographical realities, and shared cultural, linguistic, religious and ideological factors," (p. 140). Examples of large group identities that develop in childhood are tribal, ethnic, national, religious, and identities. The large group identities that develop in adulthood are up to the individual and the choices they make. Examples of this kind of identity are being a fan of a football team or having gone to a specific university. As adults, we are exposed to more ideas and have much more of a choice in what we believe, and it is possible that the identities that we choose in adulthood can be problematic or even dangerous. When adults pick and choose which aspects of core identities to exaggerate or forget, it is possible that they gain a large group identity that is being a part of a religious cult or terrorist organization.

The development of a "we" constitutes a development of an "other". Volkan (2021) describes Freud's remarks about communities or countries with adjoining territories in the context of modern times. The issues that used to be fought between neighboring tribes, clans, colonies, cities are now fought by different countries across the world. This is due to the development of technology and its ability to reach far countries as easily as you reach a neighbor. The more stress a group has, the more they feel threatened, then the more they will engage in acts to strengthen their large group identity (Volkan, 1998). "The main task of a large group is to protect the large-group identity," (Volkan, 1998, p. 4).

Volkan (1998, 2019, 2020) provides the tent analogy that is useful in trying to visualize large group identities. Growing up, we learn to wear two layers, like fabric or clothing. The first one we wear is fitted to us and grows as we grow, but we can't take it off. It is our individual identity, the part of ourselves that is consistent and provides a sense of internal continuity as we move through life. The second layer is the canvas of a tent that is shared by thousands or millions of people. This layer represents our large group identity that developed in either childhood or in adulthood. Woven into the canvas are threads that represent different aspects of being a part of the large group. The threads are the "we-ness" that was established in childhood, the shared identifications, the projections that define the group in terms of the "other", the chosen glories, chosen traumas, the influence of the leader and their ideologies, and symbols. Holding up the canvas of the tent is the leader of the large group, the tent pole. The members of the group idealize and identify with the leader, sharing their sentiments. Because the idea of belonging to a specific large group means that the people wear the same canvas and share the same ideologies, there is an inherent ingroup bias. This ingroup bias creates tension with the "other" specifically because they wear a different canvas. Large group identities that develop in adulthood can be sub-groups or sub-identities inside the core large group identity that is developed in childhood and can be shared by individuals who don't share a core large group identity. These sub-identities can be easily changed, and it may come with some anxiety, but not always. Changing your core large group identity, on the other hand, always creates a lot of anxiety. When you make this kind of change, you have to identify with the "other". For example, getting a new job may come with some anxiety or it may not, but either way it is easy to adapt to being in this new sub-group. Moving to a new country comes with a lot of anxiety, and it is much harder to adapt to bi-culturism than it is to adapt to a new job.

### **Transmission**

Urie Bronfenbrenner was a psychologist who created a theory of child development in the 1970s called the ecological systems theory based on the dynamic interactions that a child has with their environment and the developmental impact that these interactions have (Guy-Evans, 2020). Guy-Evans (2020) explained Bronfenbrenner's five interrelated ecological systems called the microsystem,

mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem. The first level is the microsystem, which encompasses the parents, siblings, friends, and everything else that has direct contact with the child on a regular basis. The interactions within this system are the most personal and have the greatest influence on the child. The mesosystem is the second level, encompassing the interactions in which the child's individual microsystems work together to influence the child's development. An example of this is a child's parents communicating with their teachers in order to provide the best fitting educational plan for the child. The third level is the exosystem, the social structures that influence a child, such as their neighborhood, their parent's friends or workplaces, and the media. The fourth level is the macrosystem which involves cultural elements such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or nationality. The last level is the chronosystem, consisting of the big environmental changes that happen over the course of the child's life, such as starting at a new school or their parents getting a divorce. The course of development of the child depends on the various interactions between the system and the child as well as between the systems themselves.

Tcholakian et al. (2019) proposes that collective trauma resides in cultural rituals and artifacts, community events and commemorations, and family narratives. Collective traumas are stored in the cultural, communal, and familial sociocultural repositories. They are transmitted unconsciously through social learning, social identity, and psychodynamics, and this transmission has the possibility of positively influencing resilience, forgiveness, and empathy in leadership. Cultural rituals and artifacts are part of what makes up the canvas of large group identity, promoting solidarity, determination, and validation while increasing empathy, self-esteem, and social integration. Social learning theory explains how individuals, beginning very early in childhood, learn from others through observation, imitation, and modeling. It is a mechanism by which individuals draw sentiments, in the form of cultural rituals and artifacts, from the group, and deposit them into their own ideologies. Social identity theory explains how identification with a large group shapes the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of the group members. Every individual member of a large group has a mental representation of the group's history, and just by being a member, one experiences the emotions involved with this history. Psychodynamic theory explains

how children develop emotional and unconscious processes that aid their personal development. Trauma is transmitted from parents to children as a family legacy, both explicitly, through stories, and implicitly, through emotions or behaviors. Although collective traumas stem from a terrible event, the results of the transmission can be positive, especially in leadership. A leader who is a member of a group with a collective trauma often develops the values of resilience, forgiveness, empathy, justice, and perseverance. Resilience and perseverance develop from the individual's experience dealing with prejudices and inequity. Justice comes from the desire to refrain from traumatizing other groups in the same way their group was traumatized. Empathy is developed when the trauma narratives that are passed down involve acknowledging some kindness or goodness from other large groups, even more so if the kindness comes from the persecuting group. Forgiveness is developed as a mechanism to move forward and fix past injustices, because a lack of forgiveness equates to holding on to past conflicts and prolongs the feeling of victimization.

Volkan (1998) describes the transmission of collective trauma as the depositing of an image. The image is a kind of projection of the self or of the trauma reaction that children pick up on and incorporate into their own developing identities, becoming like a psychological gene. Transmission is a result of stories told by parents or group members from older generations, but more often, it is the result of unconscious processes that deposit the image and give children certain tasks. This can be thought of in a simpler context as a daughter who attempts to repair or reassure her mother's worries.

Patel & Nagata (2021) describe the ways in which the trauma of Japanese-American internment during World War II affected the internees and the ways in which the trauma is passed down through generations. Being a former internee affected not only psychological health, but also physical health. Former internees had a much greater risk of cardiovascular disease and were twice as likely to die before the age of 60 than their non-interned counterparts. The children and grandchildren of former internees report having very few conversations with their families about the internment camps. This was likely a protective measure done for the sake of the former internees not wanting to retraumatize themselves or traumatize their children. To further protect their children from future targeting, the former internees

attempted to blend in with mainstream American culture by minimizing or omitting the teaching of Japanese language and culture and urged their children to excel in school and in the workplace. This is how Japanese-Americans became portrayed as the “model minority”. Tran, Yabes, & Miller (2021) explain how the model minority myth is more detrimental than it is complimentary. Asian-Americans who internalize the myth are often characterized by a lack of confidence, chronic anxiety, imposter syndrome, and they show higher levels of psychological distress, and negative attitudes towards help seeking behaviors. The model minority myth itself is built into the racial hierarchy within the United States, putting Asian-Americans below white people but above all other racial minorities. This is just one example of the racist mechanisms that perpetuate collective trauma.

There is also biological evidence of the transmission of trauma through generations that comes from the field of epigenetics. “Epigenetics is the study of cellular variations that are caused by external, environmental causes that switch genes ‘on’ or ‘off,’ thus making changes in the phenotype or genetic expression without concomitant changes in the DNA sequence or genotype,” and can be thought of as a kind of memory (Krippner & Barrett, 2019, p. 53). Krippner & Barrett (2019) describe human and non-human studies in which PTSD or susceptibility to PTSD is higher in offspring of parents who experienced a traumatic event. The most established evidence of transgenerational epigenetic change is in cases in which mothers were pregnant when they experienced a traumatic event. Yehuda et al. (2014) performed a study on the epigenetic influences of maternal and paternal PTSD on the offspring of Holocaust survivors. They found that “paternal PTSD was associated with a dismissing, fearful, or insecure attachment style, as well as more dissociative experiences and greater sensitivity to violence,” and, “maternal PTSD was associated with more self-reported symptoms of depression and higher trait anxiety,” (p. 9).

## **Storytelling**

One of the main ways that collective trauma is transmitted is through storytelling. Once time has allowed the direct memories to fade, the function of the trauma changes. The process and functions of chosen trauma, as described by Volkan (1998), begins with the chosen trauma, then is transmitted

transgenerationally, and changes function. Because the initial event and the specific memories related to it are now only history, the function of chosen trauma is to bind together members of the large group, because it has become like a psychological gene that everyone in the large group has. Over the course of many years, the trauma gets reactivated by various events either in the individual lives of members or in the group itself. Events such as these, have the ability to enhance the leader-follower interaction. A leader may choose to reactivate a chosen trauma in times of conflict or stress for the purpose of reconfirming or enhancing the large group identity. When this reactivation occurs, it leads to a time collapse. Time collapse refers to the “fears, expectations, fantasies, and defenses associated with a chosen trauma that reappear when both conscious and unconscious connections are made between the past trauma and a contemporary threat. This process magnifies the image of current enemies and current conflicts. The sense of revenge becomes exaggerated. If the large group is in a powerless position, a current event may reactivate a sense of victimization,” (p. 10). These kinds of situations have the ability to make leaders and members make irrational decisions, and in the worst case, perpetuate cruelty against others.

Empathy is often developed as a result of transgenerational trauma, but it is also one of the most important values a leader can have, and storytelling plays a crucial role in building it (Ginwright, 2018). By being vulnerable and honest, you create a space where others feel comfortable being vulnerable and honest with you (Ginwright, 2018). This allows for closer bonds to be made between members of a group as well as between the members and leader. Empathy and power are inversely related in the sense that those with more power typically have less empathy, and those with less power typically have more (Young, 2020). Power in this sense can be defined as power over others or destructive power. People with a lot of power-over are in a position where they don't need to ask others for help, so they are less inclined to think of others (Young, 2020). People with less power-over have to rely on each other much more, meaning that they spend more time attempting to understand others (Young, 2020). Empathy is like a muscle, the more you use it, the more empathetic you become (Young, 2020). By telling and listening to stories, you are working and building your empathy muscle. Leaders of collectively traumatized groups

have a different kind of power. This kind of power comes from a place of having empathy, compassion, and understanding for others, making it much more “powerful” than power-over.

One of the main ways that collective trauma is transmitted is through storytelling. The Marshall Ganz (2011) storytelling format is centered around the elements of self, us, and now. The story of self communicates a leader’s values, their call to leadership, and individual identity. The story of us communicates shared values, strategies, points of intersection, culture, and distinguishes “we” from “others”. It is the story of a large group identity. The story of now communicates the urgent challenges and demands immediate action. Your public narrative needs a plot, character, and moral. The plot has to be engaging and show how the character deals with the unexpected and overcame adversity, including chosen traumas. Stories need a protagonist for listeners to identify with empathetically in order to experience the full emotion of the story. If empathetic identification is present, listeners should walk away with a felt understanding of the character. By communicating emotion through storytelling, we are communicating values and either inhibiting or facilitating action. Conflict or threats to a large group identity creates anxiety, and with storytelling a leader can pair that anxiety with despair, which produces withdrawal, rage, or freezing, or the leader can pair anxiety with hope, producing curiosity and leading to exploration, learning, and problem solving.

## **Discussion**

Leaders have a huge amount of power and influence because their followers identify with them under the same large group tent. The followers rely on their leader to hold them up, keep them together, and motivate them for action when needed. Volkan’s tent analogy is a great illustration of large group structures, but I think that he leaves out one very important large group identity, that of living things on Earth. This tent encompasses everything on Earth that interacts with the environment, and is held up by many leaders spread across the globe. This tent is torn and caving in where the leaders don’t hold it up. In those places, leaders need to step up and take responsibility for holding up the tent. In the fight for environmental justice, there is no chosen trauma because there is no “other”, there is only “we”, so the trauma that has torn this tent has been self-inflicted. This makes it difficult for leaders to rally their group

around an urgent threat because they have no true collective or chosen trauma to draw on to bring this large group together or motivate them to action. Because of the various traumatic histories between large group identities within the largest group identity, living things on Earth, it's extremely difficult and may not even be possible to bring them together at all. The powerful countries are unwilling to patch these holes in the canvas so they pick and choose where the holes are made. The holes themselves are placed disproportionately in powerless places within powerful countries. Just like how the gardener puts the red flowers instead of the pink ones in the flower box with poor soil because she prefers pink, the United States chooses to locate hazardous materials in low income and minority communities. This environmental racism perpetuates collective trauma by contributing to the inequitable access to necessary resources. The only way to fix this institutionalized racism is to break down the flower boxes and combine the soil.

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