

Dr Joy DeGruy-Leary brings message of healing with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome - the history

20 March 2006 Deborah Gabriel

A dynamic woman on a global healing mission

Dr Joy DeGruy-Leary is a woman on a mission of immense significance to the global African family. She has a powerful message to deliver to the millions of descendants of African slaves scattered across the four corners of the globe.

Many of the social problems that affect not only African Americans but black British people and black people on the African and Caribbean continents are a consequence of what she has termed: **Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.**

Now for anyone who might be tempted to snigger at the suggestion, be warned- Dr Leary has impeccable credentials including: a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications, a Masters degree in Social Work, a Master's degree in Psychology and a PHD in Social Work and Research.

Aside from the fact that she is also Assistant Professor at Portland State University, she packs a mean punch. Dr Leary is quite simply a dynamic woman and skilled orator who is passionate about her subject, humorous and refreshingly 'real', making no secret of the fact that she came from the ghetto.

At the start of her lecture she made it crystal clear that her new book: **Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing**, "is not based on conjecture and it is not based on pure theory, it is based on real history. It is a history book."

Dr Leary said that the type of information that escapes the school books such as slave narratives, was already 'out there' but she simply put them all into one book and felt compelled to so because:

"In a lot of ways I felt that the ancestors were saying: 'tell our stories.' As my brother Randall always said: 'the worst thing you can do to a people is to rob them of the memory of themselves.'"

In deciding to write the book, Dr Leary said she was prompted by behaviours she witnessed in black children which she recognised as behaviours that she herself exhibited as a child: **"along with my peers, friends and neighbours in the Hood."**

Dr Leary referred to the way in which some blacks conform to a system of skin-shade hierarchy which puts lighter-skinned people at the top. She said:

"These behaviours suggested to me a level of self-hatred that has never been measured... I realised that these were beliefs passed along within the culture."

In terms of the displacement of Africans during slavery, Dr Leary said that it does not matter where we are in the world today as all black people share the same legacy:

"Oppression, racism and racist superiority; while they may have taken on different forms throughout the Diaspora basically white supremacy is the same all over."

She said that her assessment of slavery is that hundreds of years of unpaid labour, subjugation and oppression guaranteed that the descendants of whites would have wealth and privilege whilst the descendants of Africans would have debt and suffering.

How whites justified their barbarism against Africans

During the lecture, Dr Leary explained how she combined the skills of a social scientist with cultural skills handed down to produce **“an indefeatable reality.”** She said : **“I followed my heart, which is what my people taught me and what my culture has taught me.”**

One of those realities, she argued is that there had to be a mechanism that enabled white people to behave so barbarically and cruelly towards black people. According to Dr Leary, that mechanism is what she termed **“removing the dissonance.”**

It is unthinkable that a sane human being could carry out unspeakable acts of violence against another human being, so what did the whites do to remove the dissonance? They classified blacks as being less than human – 3/5ths of a human being, to be precise in 1800s America.

One of the ‘founding fathers’ of mainstream America, Thomas Jefferson, once said: **“Blacks smell bad and are physically unattractive...”**, a comment that was inconsistent with his own behaviour – Jefferson fathered the child of a black slave girl, Sally Hemmings, with whom he had sexual relations from the age of 13.

Dr Leary stated that her research found that in mid-1800s a census in America counted 600,000 mixed-race children, an indication of how many white men like Thomas Jefferson were **“sneaking out back.”**

She argued that white people have historically invented myths about black people or concocted bizarre stories as a reason to justify their inhumanity. Thomas Jefferson said that blacks were **“dumb, cowardly, need less sleep and are incapable of feeling grief.”** The evil lies were told in order to justify working blacks to death, beating them, raping them and starving them to death.

Dr Leary referred to the recent unearthing of a slave cemetery on Wall Street where forensic evidence showed a high infant mortality rate due to malnutrition and a stress injury where the muscle detaches itself from the bone as a result of exertion. This is evidence that children were worked to death.

Thomas Jefferson, by saying that black people needed less sleep, was creating justification for making them work from sunrise to sunset. Dr Leary asked why Jefferson would need to believe that blacks could not feel grief:

“Because you beat them, you mutilated them, you raped them and you sold them. But [that’s okay], these people aren’t capable of grief.”

Dr Leary pointed to Karl Von Linnaeus in the 18th century who invented the classification of humans according to skin colour and race, sowing the seeds for racial discrimination.

Looking at history in relation to healing is not unique

Dr Leary argued that a medical doctor always looks at the history of a patient before making a diagnosis of ill-health. Therefore, looking at the historic past of blacks to help diagnose contemporary social ills within the African Diaspora is perfectly logical.

Multi-generational trauma, she insisted, is not new. She cited the Jewish Holocaust and how it is acceptable for Jews to ensure that it is never forgotten, comparing this to the way in which blacks are always told to ‘let go’ of slavery. **“Isn’t that amazing?”** she told the audience.

“The reason that there is such a level of discomfort between whites and blacks is because we are a reminder to them of their barbarism.”

She added: **“One society that is responsible for some of the most gruesome crimes against humanity in history is the United States of America. While the powers that be are happy to talk about other people’s crimes they seem to be reluctant to confront their own.”**

Dr Leary spoke of how emotionally charged she became when undertaking research for chapter three of her book: **“For weeks on end my research took me to narrative stories and reports that knotted my stomach, moved me to rage and brought me to tears.”**

The lowest figure for how many Africans died during the Middle Passage is nine million. She asked why it is that our children do not know that millions of their ancestors died or how they died, as it wasn’t a cruise ship.

How Dr Leary arrived at Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

According to the clinical definition of post traumatic stress disorder, the typical types of people who succumb to it are: victims of rape, war veterans, heart attack victims, victims of natural disasters and severe accidents. **“It was my assertion that slaves should be included in that list”**, Dr Leary told the audience.

Some of the criteria used to diagnose post traumatic stress disorder bear a striking resemblance to some of the behaviours exhibited by African Americans:

Marked diminished interest or participation in significant activities, feeling of detachment or estrangement of others, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating. These would be people who had experienced a direct trauma.

Although not everyone is traumatised by a particular incident, slavery is not about one incident but a lifetime of incidents. Dr Leary said:

“How plausible is it then, for a person to live their entire life as a slave and not be traumatised? It’s impossible.”

Slave narratives were used to tease out the behaviours they exhibited to see if they represented post traumatic stress disorder. Slaves that suffered from this passed on the symptoms to their children and this is how it became multi-generational.

Dr Leary said that it is highly plausible that our ancestors experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as some of the likely factors that might cause it are:

1. A serious threat to one’s life...
2. Threat or harm to one’s children, spouse or close relatives
3. Sudden destruction of one’s home or community
4. Seeing another person killed as a result of an accident or physical violence
5. Learning about a serious threat to a close friend or relative kidnapped, tortured or killed
6. Fear, terror or helplessness

But the issue is since slaves were given no therapy either when they were enslaved or when they were eventually freed, the trauma continued and was passed down the generations.

Dr Leary also referred to the period after slavery where social exclusion followed and where black people were incarcerated for long periods of up to 15 years for **“looking at a white woman.”**

The practice of jail leasing using blacks as free labour was just another form of slavery that made whites rich.

She also referred to the barbaric practice of lynching which involved **“common folk, not big fat white men but ordinary folk- families, women and children”** who would smile and grin at blacks being hung, or tied to a truck with their bodies dragged through the streets until the limbs came apart.

Blacks were also burned alive and baiting crowds couldn't wait for the victim to die before they cut out the organs and cut the body into pieces to keep as relics and souvenirs.

Dr Leary warned: **“Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome requires not only the personal, mental, emotional and spiritual healing but social justice. It can't happen without it.”**

The reason why many relationships between black men and women fail is because they are essentially **“two sick people in a relationship”**, which results in **“a sick outcome.”**

Just as black people are a reminder to white people of their brutality, so black women and men are reminders of their past impotence to each other.

When women were being raped by slave masters, inside they questioned why the men did not protect them; whilst the men secretly believed a part of the women enjoyed it. A veil of silence meant that they did not confront these feelings.

Dr Leary said: **“We have never had a chance to catch our collective breath; imagine what we could have done if we were just allowed to heal.”**

Reminding the audience why she wrote the book, Dr Leary said: **“It is critical that we know who we are in order to go forward. The reason for the book is to start the healing process, so we can become whole again.”**

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