

The Trauma in My Veins: Transgenerational Trauma And the Need for Black History Month

“How frightening is the past that awaits
us.”

Antonin Slonimski

Few questions spark critical self-analysis like the question: *What happened to you?* Depending on variables such as voice inflection, the trust relationship one has with the inquisitor, or the self-image one is projecting at the time, this question can cause a myriad of responses ranging from critical-offense to critical-affirmation. However, no matter the asker's motivations, we are certain of one thing: the question seeks to draw a comparison between our current selves and a past version of ourselves. We might have lost weight (or gained weight). We might have come into a new wardrobe (or taken on a more ragged garb due to tough circumstances). We might have experienced a personality breakthrough and become more vibrant and magnetic (or become less available and more reserved due to the harsh realities of life-lessons). Whether the question is attempting to raise our awareness to a perceived progression or digression, the *pop-quiz* will call us to muster our cognitive energy to compare ourselves to ourselves, and give a rational explanation that satisfies the investigator's contrast to who they remember us being.

Yes, most of us take this question quite personally and rightfully so! We hear it and begin thinking about ourselves as an individual unit who has experienced life singularly and has made decisions based upon our own desires, convictions, and values. To an extent, this is true—owning our actions is a key part of our maturation process. Taking responsibility for your day-to-day activity and accepting the outcomes of those decisions is a foundational growth-step for anyone seeking to establish a healthy independence.

The Roots of My Reactions

With this being conceded, it is important for us to also see our daily activity as an interconnected system of expressions that include more than our individuality or personal philosophy. We are, in fact, acting out the lives of our ancestors. We are making decisions, albeit unconsciously, that our progenitors made. We are playing a role based upon a pre-written script. As an actor or actress must take ownership of the roles they decide to play, so we too must also fight the temptation to relinquish responsibility for the characters we assume.

But here is where the acting metaphor falls short in accurately depicting how we are psychologically impacted by the lives of those who have gone before us. This psychological script is not primarily adopted consciously. Instead, it is accepted subconsciously and can only be realized through intentional psychotherapy. For example, scripts like race-based trauma have been written

for twenty generations and have found willing actors and actresses, throughout our family lines, to perpetuate the retelling of its plotline. This is an example of a *transgenerational script*, a subconscious legacy of wounds, victories, failures, and triumphs (Welford, 2019). Most of us are unaware of our transgenerational scripts. Therefore, we are grossly unaware of how these scripts are playing out on the stage of our daily choices. So when you hear the question, *“What happened to you?”*, you might want to start considering more than your weight fluctuations or the new job you landed or the new friend circle you have developed. It might serve you well to consider the ancestral story of unresolved trauma that continues to play out in your life largely unbeknownst to you. Or in the words of Dr. Noriega Gayol (2019), “When our ancestors die, they also become the soil that nourishes the roots of our family tree. This is a common energy field that remains in the tree or family through future generations” (p. 279).

Transgenerational Trauma

The unearthing of your transgenerational script begins with you understanding how trauma has impacted (and consequently shaped) your family history (Welford, 2019). And so, we find the familiar African axiom –*You must know where you’ve been to know where you’re going* – to have more merit than we might have previously believed. We are acting out the hurts, concerns, fears, and abuses experienced by our ancestors, and we cannot fully understand our current trajectory until we come to terms with the previous wounds suffered by our predecessors. This transgenerational script is so accurate that French Psychologist, Ann Schutzenberger (1998), welcomes us to realize ancestral trauma as a phenomenon that tends to play-out in our lives at the very age or on the very date of the originating trauma. She calls this the “anniversary syndrome” (p. 66).

How frustrating it must be to continually manage trauma responses that are not just based in our own experiences but are greatly based in the experiences of our ancestors! Enid Welford (2019) comments further, “Where trauma belonging to ancestors is concerned, we need to be alert to such trauma reactions emerging in their descendants and know how to support clients in completing the natural healing response to trauma” (p. 326). With this in mind, the question, *“What happened to you?”* merits some reconsideration and editing. Maybe we should all be asking a different question. Maybe we should all be empathetically asking, *“What happened to your ancestors that’s still happening to you?”*

A Month for Revising Scripts

As we continue to deal with the prevalent post-racial narrative of our time, understanding how transgenerational scripts play-out today might help us better appreciate moments where we give particular attention to the lives our ancestors have lived. Our daily activity is sprouting out of the same soil (transgenerational script) that nurtured the growth of family members who predate us by hundreds of years. “Human beings are like trees: Both have roots, trunks, branches, and leaves and are connected to a family system and to Mother Earth by our [ancestral] roots” (Gayol, 2019, p. 280). Therefore, understanding or adjusting our individual behavior cannot be holistically undertaken unless we understand said behavior in the context of our

transgenerational script.

Our DNA carries the memory of past, ancestral traumas. The field of epigenetics has confirmed what we all have felt, but few of us have ventured to articulate: We respond to the traumas suffered by ancestors as if we lived when they lived and experienced what they experienced. To put it more simply, we live out responses to stimuli that we cannot fully understand, and we cannot gain the necessary understanding until we are reconnected with “*What Happened?*” in our family tree (Dias & Kessler, 2014). Because we are all the product of family, we all carry within our veins the collective history of our ancestors. And if we all carry these memories in our veins, most of us are unconsciously (and a very small percentage of us consciously) acting out the script that accompanies these memories.

Black History Month is an opportunity for the African descendants of slaves to revisit the trauma that still impacts our bodies, our souls, and our spirits. As we reverently rehearse the stories of our families—the stories of resilience and traumatization—we equip our own psyches with much needed information. The transgenerational trauma that flows through our veins can only be addressed as we move these subconscious scripts from the background to the foreground of our self-awareness. From this awakened state, we have a chance to begin healing centuries of unresolved trauma.

Enid Welford (2019) concludes, “Clients who recognize that they have been unconsciously repeating experiences of ancestors have a chance to change the family narrative” (p. 328). So while many advocate for us to *move past* our traumatic history, I have accepted the ancient invitation to truly remember—to reconnect with my ancestry, to reexamine my transgenerational script. And I believe moments like Black History Month remind us of how important remembering the past is if we aspire to heal the future.