

## Thoughts I Wanted to Share, Part 2

It's always interesting when I write something to record, because it can take some time to get from page to actualization. This is because once I have it written down, my brain goes onto new things and, I don't forget about the thing that I have just written, but it goes into a space where it is considered completed for now until I do the recording.

Such is the case with the first part of this podcast. It relates to thoughts I wanted to share, and really relates to the pandemic and the Polyvagal Theory, and things we can do right now to help ourselves and our families. It won't go away; in fact, I may even record it at the same time as this; I don't know. But, as so often happens with these things, life happens. Or rather, there is a tragedy. Something that impacts us in such a way that we need to stop and put things into perspective. And, for me, I utilize the Polyvagal Theory, and an embodied experience, to help with this.

As we all know, George Floyd had his life stolen from him on May 25<sup>th</sup>. Trevor Noah in one of his reflections used the phrase that George Floyd had his life "looted from him." Part of the reason that Mr. Noah used this phrasing is that for so many in the White community, it is the looting and the rioting that has followed the death of Mr. Floyd that has received the majority of the focus. It is seen as "lawlessness" and must be stopped at all costs. We hear our president talk about the need to "dominate" our streets, and that the "thugs" need to be stopped. Please don't get me wrong, this isn't a political message, but it is one to help us to understand, grow, and, hopefully, begin to heal. For some in the White community, it is forgotten that it was the senseless murder of a Black man that started this, not some random "lawlessness," and this won't be solved by us just getting back to normal.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is quoted in the beginning of the book "My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies" by Menakem as saying the following:

"But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. . . . You must always remember that the sociology, the

history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.” (Coates in (Menakem, 2017))

Mr. Coates powerful message here is poignant when we think of what took place with Mr. Floyd. Mr. Floyd died on the ground struggling and crying out from this embodied visceral experience of blocked airways, ripped muscles, etc. Now, this will confuse many from White communities, because when they hear the autopsy, they will not hear about a blocked airway, or torn muscles, etc. But this belies the affect that systematic racialized trauma has on an individual (both that they themselves experience, and that has been experienced by previous generations and passed down). As we will talk about, Black and Brown bodies experience systemic racialized trauma every day that steals the air from them. As we hear from protesters daily, the death of Mr. Floyd is no abstract experience. To them it is something that Black and Brown bodies feel viscerally. For Black and Brown bodies, this is another trauma added to the long list that triggers and sensitizes the nervous system.

Recently, I was at Target purchasing some of the various and sundry things that we all purchase every day. And, because it is the time of Covid-19, we were all supposed to be a bit spaced out from one another at the self-checkouts. So, when I heard the Target employee caution someone that they needed to stay more than 6 feet apart, I naturally thought I was getting too close to the Black family that was next to me. I was wrong; the employee was actually cautioning them that they were standing too close to each other. This confused both them, and frankly several others as there were several families standing close to one another (all White except for this one family). The about 17-19-year-old daughter informed the Target employee that they lived together; to which she was informed it didn't matter, they were too close, and this was store rules. I could feel her move into sympathetic arousal as this triggered her racialized trauma, and as her protests of living with her mother were ignored.

This is just one example of someone being singled out due to the color of their skin; humiliated because they were shopping while Black or Brown, which is something that so many individuals from the White community would never even consider how that might sensitize their nervous system. In fact, so many from the White community would think, why are you making such a fuss (of the young,

Black woman)? But this was my second time in two weeks at that same Target experiencing that same thing. And, I am certainly not singling out Target, or saying they are racist. I am saying this is an experience that is disproportionately experienced by a part of our society based on the color of their skin. And, it lands in their nervous system. It sensitizes it. It heightens their awareness to cues of danger and take away their awareness of cues of safety. It creates a sense that few White bodies experience ever, but Black and Brown bodies experience daily that we must constantly be aware of whether or not we belong.

Black and Brown men of all different ages report incidents of driving, walking, and/or sitting while Black or Brown, where they are stopped by the police. Often, when they ask why they are being detained, they are treated as if they are being disruptive or disobeying a police order. Many times, they are detained so that a White person can decide their fate (if they have committed some criminal act). Each of these things plays on longstanding distrust between the Black and Brown communities and police and can trigger cues of danger for an individual. These cues of danger alone signal the body that it should be in sympathetic. Beyond this, the longstanding distrust between police and the Black and Brown communities can trigger the embodied racialized trauma that many of these men individually have experienced, and that has been experienced culturally. This can trigger sympathetic and even dorsal collapse or dissociation, where they may act in ways dictated by these survival states.

At the same time, we are inundated with stories online and in the news of Black and Brown families and individuals who have the police called on them while they are doing innocuous things like selling lemonade or sitting on a park bench or birdwatching all just because they were Black or Brown. In each of these situations, had the individual not had a cellphone and recorded the incident who knows how many of these incidents may have wound up differently. The fact that they needed a cell phone, and that the White individuals were calling from their White privilege speaks to the racial divide that needs to be addressed. So often, later, we hear the White individual discuss feeling scared and that they weren't a racist. What is rarely, if ever (in fact to the best of my knowledge I've never heard of it happening), done is an acknowledgement of the risk and danger that the individual who was Black or Brown was placed in because that White person called the police. As White people, we certainly know the danger to Black and

Brown people when they interact with the police, but there is never this acknowledgement. And that is the very nature of the White privilege that is described by so many from the Black and Brown communities.

Beyond these, for many, daily experiences, Mr. Menakem (2017) discusses how “memories connected to painful events also get passed down from parent to child—and to that child’s child. What’s more, these experiences appear to be held, passed on, and inherited in the body, not just in the thinking brain. Often people experience this as a persistent sense of imminent doom.”

He discusses this occurring through the following processes:

- “A fetus growing inside the womb of a traumatized mother may inherit some of that trauma in its DNA expression. This results in the repeated release of stress hormones, which may affect the nervous system of the developing fetus.”
- “A man with unhealed trauma in his body may produce sperm with altered DNA expression. These in turn may inhibit the healthy functioning of cells in his children.”
- “Trauma can alter the DNA expression of a child or grandchild’s brain, causing a wide range of health and mental health issues, including memory loss, chronic anxiety, muscle weakness, and depression.”
- “Some of these effects seem particularly prevalent among African Americans, Jews, and American Indians, three groups who have experienced an enormous amount of historical trauma.” (Menakem, 2017)

Thus, due to the racialized trauma experienced by parents, grandparents, and/or prior generations, an individual’s nervous system may be prone to experience more cues of danger leading to sympathetic arousal or cues of life threat leading to dorsal collapse. Again, as Menakem (2017) says “Trauma hurts. It can fill us with reflexive fear, anxiety, depression, and shame. It can cause us to fly off the handle; to reflexively retreat and disappear; to do things that don’t make sense, even to ourselves; or, sometimes, to harm others or ourselves.” These are the hallmarks of the sympathetic and dorsal states. And, without the healing, restorative ventral energy, these cannot, and will not have a chance to be changed, healed, and integrated.

What about the other side of the equation, the White privilege that leads to the racialized injustices? Menakem makes several important points in his book that we need to consider to help understand this, and to help to heal the racial divide caused by this.

The first point that he makes is that the first victims of what is termed white-body supremacy in his book was in fact other White bodies. Menakem writes: “While people from England, Spain, Portugal, France, Scotland, Sweden, and Holland had all colonized parts of America by the late 1600s, it was the English who controlled nearly all the colonized territories in what would become the United States in 1776. The 1500s and 1600s in England were anything but gentle times. People were routinely burned at the stake for heresy, a practice that began in the twelfth century and continued through 1612. Torture was an official instrument of the English government until 1640.” (Menakem, 2017) One can only imagine how the trauma from this practice, perpetrated from one class of White people on a second class of White people could be embodied such that they experienced sympathetic arousal and dorsal collapse. How this could be written on their DNA, and passed down to their children, and children’s children. Menakem (2017) goes on to write: “For all their talk of the new Jerusalem, the Pilgrims and Puritans were not explorers. They were refugees fleeing imprisonment, torture, and mutilation.” (Menakem, 2017) For white-body supremacy to be addressed, this generational trauma must be healed.

A second point that he makes relates to the invention of race in the seventeenth century, and its affect to create this White-body supremacy. Prior to this time, individuals were referred to by their country of origin. Race became a way to bring White people together and separate them from Black and Red bodies. Menakem talks about how “The phantasm of race was conjured to help white people manage their fear and hatred of other white people.” (Menakem, 2017) In this way, their fears and hatred could be transferred onto Black and Red bodies. And this type of narrative is very consistent with a sympathetic arousal brought on by the embodiment of fears, triggers, and trauma in White-body supremacy. This also, as Menakem points out, requires a numbness to the “deep suffering of a vast number of other people. (Which he ponders:) Was this numbness, this dissociation, a traumatic freeze response?” (Menakem, 2017) or dorsal collapse?

A third point that Menakem makes that is important in understanding White privilege, or what is known as White-body supremacy in his book, is a concept referred to as the “Great Othering.” In the book, Menakem discusses the creation of formal institutions and structures by rich White people that were then used to teach poorer White people to help reinforce a sense that Black people were completely unlike them. As Menakem points out, this was not some slow or informal shift, but a deliberate strategy that was carried out to change the attitudes of White people and draw the distinction between us vs. them. As he points out this proved effective in shifting the power divide from rich and poor White people to White people vs. Black people that we still see today.

And, of course, Menakem makes the point that this didn’t end in the past but continues today. My own examples earlier refer to the micro-aggressions that Menakem refers to in his book. They certainly aren’t the only examples though. Menakem refers to a number of practices from White people that fail to recognize the humanity of Black people, including:

- Not listening or paying attention to someone, or outright ignoring them, as if Black bodies were invisible
- Interrupting or talking over Black people
- Not taking someone seriously
- Giving brief, perfunctory, minimalist, or noncommittal responses
- Refusing to acknowledge someone’s lived experience, either by denying that it happened or by fleeing into statistics or legalisms
- Acting visibly frustrated and impatient with someone, as if his or her presence is burdensome, or as if what he or she is saying is childish or ludicrous.
- Saying, “Be reasonable,” then demanding something unreasonable or impossible.
- Speaking words of care or concern, but without empathy or sincerity.

These words become embodied, triggering past trauma both those experienced directly by the Black individual and those in their DNA. They are cues of danger or life threat that are signaled by the White individual’s tones of voice, postures, facial expressions, the way that bodies are held and turned, the tension in the face, neck, chest, and abdomen.

Many White people have pointed to Mr. Floyd's possible drug intoxication, history of heart disease, or the fact that he had struggled with the officers as reasons for his death. Some White people have even recreated his position with a knee on their neck with large smiles on their faces to demonstrate that they are fine. And that, as you can see from what Menakem has written, is at the heart of White-body supremacy. At no point could they put themselves where George Floyd was at that moment. Afraid, fearing for his life, face down, with both his own and centuries of racialized trauma inside of him fueling a movement into sympathetic arousal and possibly ultimately dorsal collapse.

Members of the White community speaking from their White-body supremacy are unable to generate the ventral compassion that allows them to understand the experience of Mr. Floyd and why this affects the Black and Brown communities so deeply. Instead, members of the White community only see how this affects them and yearn for this to stop and a return to "normal" where the rioting and protesting stop. Sadly this sympathetic response has engendered calls for and actual actions of violence, as well as dives down into dorsal collapse which has mimicked the numbness that Menakem discusses in his book as individuals from the White community see Black and Brown bodies and their allies bodies shot with rubber bullets, tear gassed, and otherwise treated inhumanely. This treatment reinforces centuries of racialized trauma and is something that we as a people must stand against.

If you know me, you know that I would never want to leave this at just identifying the problem. One of the things that we need to avoid is having everything go back to normal. "Normal" is a way of thinking, being, and embodiment that got us here in the first place. We need to find a new normal that helps us to heal the embodied trauma carried in Black bodies and the White-bodied supremacy. Menakem addresses this in many ways throughout *My Grandmother's Hands* by interweaving both culturally focused and embodied practices that we all can engage in to begin the practice of healing. For some, like myself, who have White Bodies, we may face truths during these practices that challenge us. Menakem encourages us to watch our bodies closely and notice what sensations, impulses, and emotions arise. For those who have Black or other dark bodies, Menakem discusses that you may encounter certain information and embodied practices that help "your body... experience a sudden shock of recognition or

understanding. Things you hadn't fully grasped before may suddenly become clear. This might be followed by a rush of energy in the form of joy, or anger, or outrage, or a felt sense of clarity and rightness. Let yourself experience these sensations fully, but don't hang onto them. Let them move into and through your body like a wave; then let them go." For everyone, there are Polyvagal (or vagal) inspired practices that Menakem reviews. I would recommend that these practices be done with a co-regulating other, particularly at this time, for the benefits that it provides to our ventral vagal system.

So, I didn't start out trying to make this a review of the concepts in Menakem's book, but I felt this was such an important discussion right now that I couldn't skip his important insights. I cannot recommend Menakem's book "My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies" highly enough for everyone right now. I will put a link to a free racialized trauma course on the transcript for this podcast.

Thank you.

<https://culturalsomatics university.thinkific.com/courses/cultural-somatics-free-5-session-ecourse>

## Bibliography

Menakem, R. (2017). *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press.