***My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies***

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**Main thesis**

Often, as he was growing up, the author massaged his beloved Grandmother’s calloused hands, hence the title of the book. He discovered that the callouses were caused by the thorns on the cotton bushes she picked. She began working at the age of four. Her young hands grew calloused in order to protect them from the thorns. The author uses this image as a metaphor for what our bodies do to protect us from danger, pain and hurt. This includes racialized damage. Trauma is viewed as an effective tool our body uses for safety and survival. Trauma lodged in our bodies, however, can have vast negative consequences. The book takes the reader on a journey not only to understand the nature of racialized trauma, which resides in our bodies, but also to work on practices that can uncover trauma already lodged in our bodies, be aware as new trauma is experienced, and we can learn practices that can lead to healing, resilience and growth. The book addresses trauma in three populations: African Americans and other people of color, whites, and police. The author is a body-centered therapist who specializes in trauma work.

**Summary**

This is a practical book, intended not only to be read but worked through, using the practice exercises that are included in each chapter throughout the book. The introductory sections are worth reading and provide valuable context, including who should NOT read the book, because it may trigger their deep-seated, unacknowledged trauma. The book is divided into three parts: Part I introduces the concepts of trauma in the body, its transmission from generation to generation and from person to person, the historical context of racism, and how to begin the healing process. Part II focuses on the individual level and begins to investigate the impacts of trauma on the body. It presents methods of increasing awareness of what is happening in the body, releasing the trauma, as well as healthy ways of encountering potentially traumatic events in a less damaging way. Part III moves from the individual body to the collective body, investigating means of healing our society and creating cultural mechanisms to move away from creating racialized trauma for ourselves and others.

The approach of the book is compassionate and does not demonize particular groups. Rather, trauma inflicted by one group on another is analyzed through the lens of causes and conditions which reach back millennia and which continue to this day, passed on from one body to another, both through learned behaviors and epigenetics. In sequence the book focuses on Black and brown, white, and police bodies.

The paragraphs that follow highlight salient features of the book.

Part I

The author believes that trying to address white-body supremacy through dialog and education is not very effective because it resides not in our thinking brains but it is embedded in our bodies. He explores relatively recent advances in psychobiology regarding the complex system of nerves which connect brainstem, pharynx, heart, lungs, digestive system and spine, called the wandering nerve or vagus nerve. The vagus nerve, which Menakem refers to as the “soul nerve,” is central to his methods for addressing trauma in the body.” He refers to the brain stem, which is part of the vagus nerve system, as our “lizard brain.” Embedded trauma can trigger fight, flight or freeze responses in the lizard brain, and can manifest as constriction, pain, fear, dread, anxiety, etc. Trauma can pass from one generation to another, through families (as family abuse), abusive systems, structures, institutions and cultural norms, and even through our genes, as indicated in recent epigenetic research. Over time unhealed trauma may manifest as personality in an individual and as culture in the collective body. Adverse effects may present as health issues (both somatic and psychological), substance abuse, poor academic and work performance, and violence. Racialized trauma in Black bodies may develop into adaptive but dysfunctional behaviors, such as hypervigilance, ADD/ADHD and addiction.

African American bodies have been traumatized by the inhumane, violent, oppressive practices of slavery, Jim Crow oppression, and racism in contemporary American society. This trauma has not healed. Menakem also discusses the unhealed bodily trauma of whites on whites during the Middle Ages in Europe. He believes that white Europeans carried this trauma with them into the New World, and, with the advent of slavery and racial identity, inflicted their trauma on Black bodies. The author addresses the myth of white fragility: “…Black bodies are incredibly strong and frightening and can handle anything short of total destruction, while white bodies are weak and vulnerable, especially to Black bodies, so it is the job of Black bodies to care for white bodies, soothe them, and protect them, particularly from other Black bodies.” (p. 97). Menakem calls on white people to recognize their own resiliency, grow up, and do the necessary work to settle their bodies in the presence of Black bodies, and stop inflicting their trauma onto Black bodies.

Bodies of public safety professionals, whatever color they are, also carry deep, unhealed trauma which sometimes manifests as totally unexpected, irrational, fight, flight or freeze responses, even in the mere presence of a Black body. Police who shoot unarmed Black people who pose no threat to them, often say they feared for their life. In addition to their own unhealed traumatic backgrounds, police carry secondary or vicarious trauma from their work in a field that exposes them regularly to the trauma of others. According Menakem, in the past two decades their job functions have changed from protect, serve and keep the peace, to control, arrest, and shoot. Police culture in some areas has an “us versus them” thinking and public safety institutions do not train their professionals in self-care and healing.

Menakem distinguishes between two types of pain: clean pain and dirty pain. Clean pain is the pain one experiences with awareness, walking into the discomfort, and moving through it. As one moves through the hurt consciously, the body can settle, and create room for nervous system growth. Dirty pain, on the other hand, is described as the pain of avoidance, blame and denial. People with dirty pain create more pain for themselves and others. White-body supremacy in many people is stored as dirty pain in their bodies.

The body practices throughout Part I are designed to make the reader more aware of their bodies and the specific responses in their bodies when they bring up certain memories or imagine a scenario outlined in the book. The exercises are sometimes specific to Black and brown, white or police bodies.

Part II

Part II is focused more intensely on working with the body, using various strategies to pay more attention to one’s body in different ways and learn methods to work through trauma and settle the body. This portion of the book begins with an exploration of what science currently understands about the vagus or soul nerve, which is where we experience a felt sense of love, compassion, grief, dread, sadness, hope anxiety, despair and many other emotions that make us human. The bodily responses to these emotions are also the work of this nerve. However, it has no capacity to think and much of its work is not within conscious control. Nevertheless, one can learn to consciously relax one’s muscles and settle the body in high stress situations. The body practices of Part II are designed to help Black and brown, white and police bodies to do this. Some of the practices are thousands of years old, handed down generation to generation as means of settling the body. These include humming, belly breathing, buzzing, slow rocking, rubbing the belly, singing and chanting. Many of these practices are still an integral part of African American culture. Chapter 12 of Part II is particularly significant, as it provides specific steps for moving through clean pain. The five steps or anchors are:

* *Anchor 1: Soothe yourself to quiet your mind, calm your heart, and settle your body.*
* *Anchor 2: Simply notice the sensations, vibrations, and emotions in your body instead of reacting to them.*
* *Anchor 3: Accept the discomfort – and notice when it changes – instead of trying to flee from it.*
* *Anchor 4: Stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience, with all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and respond from the best part of yourself.*
* *Anchor 5: Safely discharge any energy that remains. (p. 168)*

Part II moves on to address how we can harmonize with other bodies, noting that both trauma and resilience can flow between bodies. These body practices can be done with other people, including friends, family or groups that you know and trust. Some of the group practices include singing, group drumming, rhythmic group clapping, humming; and brief, secure, caring touches, as well as braiding or mutual hair combing.

The chapter for public safety professionals provides body settling practices that can be built into daily life, such as getting enough rest and exercise, regular silent meditation, yoga, listening to music, spending time in nature, and talking to someone who knows how to listen. The chapter provides specific recommendations for those in leadership positions in public safety in order to establish a culture and environment that supports the wellness, sanity and resilience of the police officers, as well as necessary changes in training to help avoid unnecessary hurtful or lethal action.

Part III

The final section of the book provides suggestions for healing the collective body. These include ways for leaders of social action to settle their own bodies and the bodies of the participating activists before an event. Some suggestions may not appeal to contemporary activists, such as having everyone, including police and media to hum together, or to ask participants at a march to smile, nod and make eye contact with each officer as they pass. Menakem believes these methods help to harmonize and settle bodies, and he explains why this is important.

The final chapters deal with creating culture. Menakem describes culture as “…how our bodies retain and reenact history.” (p. 245). He sees culture as creating a sense of belonging, which makes our bodies feel safe and that it is this sense of belonging that makes culture so important. The drawback to this view is that this very sense of belonging to a specific culture has led to the “othering” of those considered alien, often resulting in tragic consequences.

Cultural healing practices for African Americans include calling attention to role models who have healed their own racialized trauma, learning, and teaching about traumatic retention and history. The author advocates learning about African history and culture, naming children or oneself after admired Black people, or creating unique names to inspire, and understanding the basics of body awareness and somatic healing. The cultural healing practices for white people include suggestions for creating a white culture without supremacy. Menakem observes that white Americans do not have a sense of community and no culture to build and support such a community. Some of the suggestions for creating a sense of community and culture may seem contrived and rather traditional, which imply a degree of homogeneity among whites that no longer exists.

The chapter on reshaping police culture is an important one, providing a new vision of community policing that is an ongoing set of actions, not simply based upon a philosophy grounded in addressing crime, social disorder and fear of crime. The examples of actions Menakem proposes are designed to make police part of the community, serving, protecting and assisting in order to demonstrate that officers truly care about community members and their well-being. The author offers important suggestions to change the culture of policing. Strategies include creating a community-policing model; getting rid of arrest quotas; recruiting and hiring from within the community; encouraging officers to focus on community improvement, changing focus from crime reduction only; training officers to be respectful to community residents; partnering with local churches and local organizations to host community events; partnering with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to inform citizens of their rights; and much more.

**Methods of Practice**

The methods of practice are explicitly described in the body practices throughout the book. They comprise many useful practices to increase awareness of and attention to the body, strategies to settle the body and work through trauma. Menakem draws on many practices of African American culture and ancient cultures that humans have used to soothe and settle their bodies.

**Strengths/limitations**

The focus on the body to address trauma is a key strength of this book. Drawing upon both modern research and ancient cultural, body-centered practices is innovative. These methods can help process racialized trauma and promote healing and growth, which is a very valuable contribution to the current discourse on racism and needed change. Addressing trauma in Black and brown bodies as well as white and police bodies is a wholistic approach that offers help to the groups that suffer trauma as well as those who inflict trauma on others. This avoids the simple perpetrator/victim approach.

This is a practice-oriented book. It does not provide in-depth scientific research to support the advocated practices. However, there are footnotes referring to various supportive research which are worth reading. Future research documenting the efficacy of these practice methods would be welcome. The book addresses a general audience. Of course, deep-seated racialized “dirty pain” requires work with a therapist.

Since this book focuses on healing trauma, it does not address underlying causes that lead to inflicting trauma on others that stem from greed, hatred, and ignorance. These causes have manifested in colonization and slavery and their unfortunate legacies in present-day societies, where economic gain is valued overt the cost of human suffering.