



MR SHANEMERRITT

TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE



This podcast accompanies and complements Shane Merritt's presentation entitled "Transgenerational Trauma" also found on this website. We began by asking Shane about slide 5 of his presentation. Shane, in the presentation you actually pose and answer the question, "How does the past have anything to do with now?" (Merritt, 2009, slides 5-6). What does that mean for you and why does, in general, history impact the present?

I think what it means to me is ... What we're talking about – transgenerational transmission of trauma, grief and loss issues, mental health issues - any sort of dysfunctional issue can be transmitted so that it'll affect more than one person in that one situation. Things can be handed down through parenting styles or personality issues with that individual person. And it's not just to their offspring but people in general who come in contact with them. I think it's just the importance that things don't end with that one person's experience. I think a lot of people talk about that it's transmitted down spiritually as well, and some people would even say through the DNA and changes within the DNA.

Trauma, we know, can switch genes on and off and, I think, talking about the influence that has down the generations. We're not just talking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their experiences here in Australia, we're also talking about any sort of big trauma that affects down the line. In the presentation I talk about the holocaust and civil war and the soldiers bringing back the implications and, I guess, what's happened to them and it having an impact upon their family life and their children and then their children's children. I'm an Aboriginal man but it's something that was brought to my attention (I list Judy Atkinson in the slides and give a few quotes from her because I first saw her presenting on this issue) back in 1997 at a conference on grief and loss at Sydney University. And that's the first time that I, back then as an early academic, thought 'this is something that has real implications' and something that really answered a lot of questions for me in my life and what I was seeing as an Aboriginal person – and it gave voice to that. I think, hearing it talked about so eloquently then, it started me wanting to look at that and incorporate that into what I was lecturing.

In the presentation I've included a poem that resonated with me, it's from 1995. I use it a lot to illustrate the type of things I'm talking about. I'll just read it out, it's called 'At the White Man's School' and it's by Rob Riley:

*At the white man's school
 What are our children taught?
 Are they told of the battles our people fought?
 Are they told how our people died?
 Are they told why our people cried?
 Australia's true history is never read
 But the black man keeps it in his head.*

I think that's really important for talking about what's happened here in Australia. The fact that the past has been denied and, a lot of times, Aboriginal people are still feeling the effects but it's not acknowledged and it's passed down. 'But the black man keeps it in his head,' that line I think is just showing that the effects still resonate so they still have implications and they have implications for 'the black man keeps it in his head' but it'll have impacts on his family, his community and his children, his nephews, his nieces.



Shane, you present a number of troubling statistics such as: that Indigenous women being imprisoned at a rate nearly 21 times higher than non-Indigenous women, that 54% of young people detained in juvenile facilities in Australia are Indigenous, and that most deaths of indigenous people occur before age 65 but in the non-indigenous population most deaths occur after 65. Can you speak about the transgenerational genesis of these statistics?

I'm talking about the idea that the past has an influence and that it's been passed down generationally and that the effects of colonisation and the stolen generations in and with that generation and even though we may not, technically, be having people being stolen now, we still have the impact of that ... that we're living with now and into the future unless that cycle's broken.

So I wanted to get those statistics to hit home that there are still issues that need to be addressed and there's still things that are being passed down generationally. And being passed down not just by Aboriginal people but being passed down because of influences of past and present government policies and the impact they're having on Aboriginal people [quoting the 'Bringing Them Home' report that everyone's familiar with - the Equal Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission one from 1997 (it's from page 222 of that one but it's quoted in Ralph, p. 119)]. This report also determined that the impacts of Aboriginal child removal and policies did not stop with the children that were removed, rather that these impacts had continued to resound through the generations of indigenous families and the effects were inherited by their own children in complex and sometimes heightened ways. That's what I'm talking about and, again, non-aboriginal people I've lectured in the past have sort of said "well, why are you dredging up the past?" and I think "that's why". It's to try and hit home the point that, if something's an issue and it's unresolved, such as unresolved grief and loss or the affects of trauma, it's passed down.

One of the quotes that resonated with me, originally from Judy Atkinson when I did see her in 1997, was "where there's been a great hurt, there has to be a healing." Obviously there's been a great hurt here, but there hasn't been an acknowledgement of that, there hasn't been a huge healing, and so the cycle continues. In a healthy, normal community or in a healthy, normal individual - we hurt, and it gets acknowledged and there's reparation or an apology or whatever and then we heal, we move on. If that's interrupted in any way with an individual or with a community or with a country - if things haven't been acknowledged or if culture has been interrupted or if a person's coping mechanisms have been interrupted, if their parenting has been interrupted (by drugs and alcohol, by stolen generations, by whatever it is) if that's interrupted and you don't have that natural progression of 'this is what's happened to me,' (and again I'm not talking about just about Aboriginal people I'm talking about the country as well), if something happens to them, if it's not acknowledged you can't heal healthily and move on and it's interrupted. With anyone, that's going to come back and that's going to have an influence on how you interact, how you deal with people from then on.

Sometimes we've lost our own innate abilities to heal, to acknowledge, because things have been interrupted like parenting, but also because we're so busy dealing with the morbidity and the mortality (that's why I give those statistics in the presentation later on). We're so busy having to deal with the latest funeral we have to go to or the latest bout of physical ill health that we're having, or our child's having or our grandparents are having that, sometimes there's no energy left there to heal and to go through what needs to be done.

Again, to talk about Dr Atkinson, she talks about how it's almost like an onion where you have layers and layers and layers of trauma, abuse, grief and loss issues that need to be peeled back and dealt with and that's a lot of work.

After there's been a great hurt there has to be a healing and it has to be multi-layered. The reason behind this need – the colonisation and the stolen generations and the assimilation policies – all of these things were really multi-pronged antecedents and I think we really need multi-pronged approaches to healing to address that.



Shane Merritt, Network consultant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, is a Kamilaroi man, psychologist, academic and a co-author of an international textbook on problem-based learning and curriculum development. Shane has worked with those with disabilities and the mentally ill on various Government tribunals. He also has experience as a member of the National Reference Group, the Conference Steering Committee and the Stream III Funding Selection Panel for AusEinet (The Australian Early Intervention Network for Young People with Mental Health Issues). Shane has also been a member of the Steering Committee for LSIC (the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children) for a number of years.



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