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Slave syndrome is about blacks fixing themselves

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Race is not a topic I prefer to write about. It tends to be too emotionally charged. Folks quickly lose perspective. Rational thought is abandoned. Defensive postures are immediately adopted.

So when a few readers asked me to write about post-traumatic slave syndrome, I cringed. I had heard Joy DeGruy Leary, who has researched this for 15 years, lecture on this subject before.

DeGruy Leary maintains that blacks did not heal from past centuries of trauma, and today, still face racism and oppression. So the festering emotional and psychological damage germinates for generation after generation.

And that is what perpetuates learned helplessness, violent behavior and antipathy toward other black people, she says. That is what is at the heart of Portland's gang shootings. That is why so few blacks own homes or businesses.

DeGruy Leary is passionate and convincing in her delivery. But I never felt like she was offering excuses, just insight. So after she asked the other blacks in the room to change the way they think about themselves and each other, I left the room feeling empowered.

So I was shocked when I heard that the novel theory (www.posttraumaticslavesyndrome.com) was being introduced into a Beaverton criminal case.

Isaac Cortez Bynum is accused of murdering his 2-year-old son, who died of a brain injury. An autopsy found Ryshawn, who had broken ribs, also had as many as 70 marks of various ages on his legs, buttocks, back and chest.

Last month, DeGruy Leary was called to testify about post-traumatic slave syndrome. But the information, she says, addressed why Bynum may have participated in self-destructive behavior. She said she never intended for it to be tied to how the child was treated.

"It's totally the antithesis of my work," says the assistant professor at Portland State University's Graduate School of Social Work. "I'm saying we do need to take responsibility for our actions."

What's more, says DeGruy Leary, she has never met Bynum nor talked to him. So she was never in a position to psychoanalyze him. "My role," she says, "had nothing to do with that part."

But misunderstandings are common when people venture, unguided, into a racially sensitive minefield. We need to look no further than the latest headline about a coach, a teacher or a politician making some politically incorrect statement to be reminded that it's easy to take a wrong turn. You need to either be intimately familiar with the terrain or you should align yourself with someone who can enlighten you.

So, consider me a cultural tour guide. By defining post-traumatic slave syndrome, DeGruy Leary created a persuasive avenue for black people to identify their self-destructive behaviors. She wants them to understand why they interact so hostilely with each other.

She questions: Why do we feel so ashamed of our natural hair texture? Why don't we trust each other more? How much of that stems from a false belief system and unhealthy traditions that were seeded during slavery?

"They have not questioned it," DeGruy Leary says. "There are lots of patterns and behaviors that we need to change. But you cannot change, heal or correct what you don't understand."

Historical trauma is being researched by other cultural archeologists, too, such as Mikihiro Tatara, who is Japanese; Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, who is Native American; and Alvin Poussaint, a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School, who is black.

The goal is for people of color to recognize how they pass unresolved grief to their children. And then, to go through a cultural self-assessment that helps change their beliefs or behaviors.

"It has nothing to do with white people," DeGruy Leary says. "It's about giving black people the tools to help themselves. . . . I'm going to stand on it because it's the truth, and our children need to know it's the truth."

DeGruy Leary's medicine is not for everyone. And when you swallow it right, this truth hurts. But it heals, too.

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