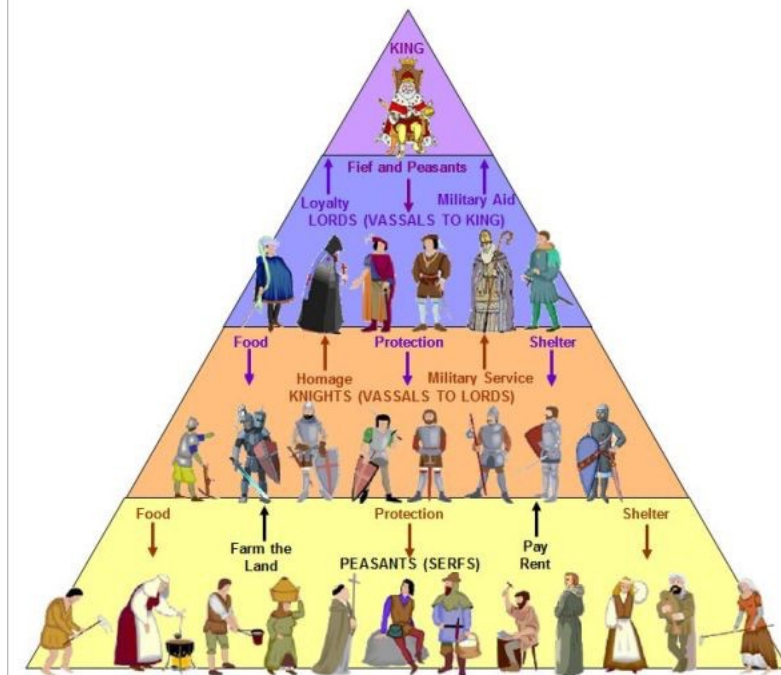


Healing Your Thousand-Year-Old Trauma



by Resmaa Menakem, MSW, LICSW, SEP

During the Middle Ages in Europe, torture, mutilation, and other forms of savagery particularly on women were seen as normal aspects of life. Public executions were literally a spectator sport.

As a result, when European “settlers” first came to this country centuries ago, they brought a millennium of inter-generational and historical trauma with them, possibly stored in the cells of their bodies. Today, much of this trauma continues to live on in the bodies of most Americans.

Most white immigrants to the “New World” didn’t heal from their trauma. Instead, beginning a little over three centuries ago, the elite among them created the concepts of whiteness, of blackness (and redness and yellowness), and of white-body supremacy which sprung from the seedlings of xenophobic and ethnocentric Greek and Roman empires into plants and trees of race, racism in the British colonies and the supremacy of the white body.

The concept of whiteness and of being white is originally a species question not a race question. Are black peoples human or ape is a species question? The answer to that question ultimately determined who was human and then who was white and who wasn’t.

Elite white bodies invented and institutionalized the myth that the white body is the supreme standard by which all other bodies' humanity are measured. Then they blew much of their trauma through the bodies of Africans and their descendants — and made lynching into an American spectator sport. This served to embed trauma in Black bodies, but it did nothing to mend the trauma in white ones.

Much of our current culture — and most of our current cultural divides — are built around this trauma, and then codified in our institutions. As a result, in 2018, in many American bodies, the Crusades, the American Revolution, or the American Civil War rages on.

None of us asked for this trauma. None of us deserves it. Yet none of us can avoid it. It is part of our historical, inter-generational, institutional, personal and national histories. Today we're at a reckoning. We Americans have an opportunity — and an obligation — to recognize the trauma embedded in our bodies; to accept the necessary pain of healing; and to move through and out of our trauma. This will enable us to mend our hearts and bodies — and to grow up.

If we do this, both as individuals and as a nation, America may be able to live up to W. E. B. Du Bois' vision: a country in which human possibilities are freed and we discover each other.

If we don't, we will likely tear each other — and our country — to pieces. This second path — the path of destruction — is the one we are currently walking together. This reckoning is not just about rich versus poor, liberal versus conservative, nationalism versus globalism, Christians versus Muslims (and/or Jews), or any of the other ways in which our country is being pulled apart. It is not even about white versus non-white human beings. These divisions are all reflections of a much older and more elemental energetic conflict.

That conflict is the battle for the bodies and souls of white Americans. This battle has been fueled by trauma as old as the Middle Dark Ages, and it has been simmering in white American bodies since long before we became a nation. Now the heat has been turned up, and the conflict has reached critical mass.

This is a conflict that white Americans must heal in themselves, for themselves, and among themselves. We non-white Americans can support this healing *if we want to*, but it cannot be outsourced, either to us or anyone else.

Americans have reached a point of peril and possibility. We will either grow up or grow smaller. This trauma will either burst forth in an explosion of widespread pain, or provide the necessary energy and heat for white Americans to move through the necessary pain and heal. Only this second outcome will provide us with genuine safety.

For centuries, it was possible for white Americans to accept white-body supremacy without questioning it; to enjoy its privileges and to take them for granted; and to ignore

or deny the ways in which white-body supremacy routinely harmed dark bodies. Those days are now over.

If you're a white American, you can't look away anymore. You have to choose. You can move through necessary pain and heal. Or you can run from the pain and the healing — and create much added misery for everyone, including your descendants and yourself.

This does not absolve us African Americans from addressing our own trauma, which goes back to the early days of enslavement in America. We, too, need to recognize our trauma, accept our necessary pain, and reclaim and mend our hearts and bodies. Through this process, we too can reclaim our place in America and the world.

Resmaa Menakem is a therapist, licensed social worker, and police trainer and consultant who specializes in trauma work, addressing conflict, and body-centered healing. His most recent book is *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*.

