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POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME

AMERICA'S LEGACY OF ENDURING INJURY & HEALING

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Foreword by Randall Robinson, New York Times Bestselling Author.

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America's Legacy of Enduring
Injury and Healing
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BE THE HEALING

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Contents

Innocent and angry little boys threatened by a glance; proud parents reluctant to praise their children and feeling the need to inhibit their natural exploratory instincts; friends not being able to celebrate the successes of their peers; organizations torn asunder from within . . . and there's more: parents feeling the need to protect their children from the police. Issues of skin color and hair texture continue to dominate discussions regarding beauty and physical preference. There's an excessive focus on material accumulation; people needing, wanting, and dreaming, yet fearing they will not succeed. Most of all, there is frustration. Frustration and anger, at times even rage, are feelings that seem to dominate many of our lives.

If you're black and living in America, perhaps none of this is news to you. Contemporary social scientists might offer an explanation as to why an African American boy might feel disrespected by a peer who simply looks at him. They may suggest that television, newspapers, and magazines project negative images of black males as pitiable, ignorant, violent, and criminal contribute to the overall poor self-image of black boys. Black scholars might even point out that music videos and movies depicting masculine and feminine beauty neatly wrapped in fine white features and straight hair have further deteriorated the self-images of black boys and girls, causing them to despise the reflection in the mirror.

And they would be right. However, what is not often addressed is the role our history has played in producing these negative perceptions, images, and behaviors. We rarely look to our history to understand how African Americans adapted their behavior over centuries in order to survive the stifling effects of chattel slavery, effects which are evident today. I believe that the behaviors in the scenarios described above, as well as many others, are in large part related to trans-generational adaptations associated with traumas, past and present, from slavery and ongoing oppression. I have termed this condition Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, or PTSS.

So, what is trauma? Trauma is an injury caused by an outside, usually violent force, event or experience. We can experience this injury physically, emotionally, psychologically, and/or spiritually. Traumas can upset our equilibrium and wellbeing. If a trauma is severe enough, it can distort our attitudes and beliefs. Such distortions often result in dysfunctional behaviors, which can in turn produce unwanted consequences. Since even one traumatic experience can result in distorted attitudes, dysfunctional behaviors, and unwanted consequences, this pattern is magnified exponentially when a person repeatedly experiences severe trauma, and it is much worse when the traumas are caused by human beings. Recent research in the field of epigenetics has revealed that trauma can actually impact an individual's DNA, and the

manifestation of the traumas experienced by prior generations can be passed along genetically to future offspring.

The enslavement experience was one of continual violent attacks on body, mind, and spirit. Men, women, and children were traumatized throughout their lives and the violent attacks during slavery persisted long after emancipation. In the face of these injuries, those traumatized adapted their attitudes and behaviors in order to simply survive, and these adaptations continue to manifest today. Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome examines these adaptations with an eye toward identifying, today, those that limit us and those that make us stronger.

Now, viewed through the historical lens of slavery and its aftermath, one may better understand the hesitancy of African American mothers to acknowledge the fine qualities of their children. When we roll the scene back a few hundred years, we see a slave master walking through the fields and coming upon an enslaved woman. He approaches her and her children and remarks, "Well, now, that Mary of yours is really coming along."

The mother, terrified that the slave master may see qualities in her daughter that could merit her being raped or sold, says, "Naw, sir, she ain't worth nothin'. She cain't work. She stupid. She shiftless."

The mother's denigrating statements about her daughter were spoken in an effort to dissuade the slave master from molesting or selling her, and of course, no one would fault her. This behavior was nothing special. For hundreds of years, enslaved mothers and fathers had been belittling their children in an effort to protect them. Yet what originally began as an appropriate adaptation to an oppressive and danger-filled environment has been transmitted down through subsequent generations.

Evidence of this adaptation today is found in behaviors like those exhibited by the black woman at the school meeting. While on the surface seemingly harmless, such behavior serves to both humiliate and injure the young black children of today, who cannot understand why their mothers and fathers, who are obviously proud of them, speak so poorly of them. All too often these children actually begin to internalize the demeaning criticisms. Furthermore, the criticisms create feelings of being disrespected by the very people whom they love and trust the most, their parents. It is not hard to imagine the impact of these painful, vilifying remarks on the self-esteem of many black children, especially when one considers the years of repetition. Sadly, neither the black mother nor her children understand the historical forces that have helped to shape her behavior.

With the same historical lens, one can better understand why the mother in the

bank insisted that her children be near her. In the slave environment, and continuing through the period known as Reconstruction and the long night of Jim Crow, it was inherently unsafe for a black child to stray, wander, or question white people. Such behavior could result in severe punishment or even death. Thus, black slaves were hypervigilant about the whereabouts of their children, for such hypervigilance might have meant survival.

It is equally understandable, when viewed in the light of slavery, why an African American might feel threatened by the accomplishments of a peer. The enslaved were divided in many different respects; those that worked in the fields, versus those that worked in the house, those that were black, versus those that were black and white and so on. Often these different designations meant access to or denial of privileges, and sometimes freedom itself. It was common practice for slave owners to set one class of slave against another. Slave owners perpetuated feelings of separateness and distrust by sometimes ordering black overseers to beat or punish their friends, peers, and relatives. When the master promoted a slave, that individual often joined the master in the rank of oppressor.

These are just a few examples of behaviors that have roots in slavery and have been passed down through generations. Most of them helped our chances of survival at one time or another. Some of them will inhibit our ability to survive and thrive today if they are not brought to light, examined, and where necessary, replaced with behaviors that promote and maximize our progress.

The primary purpose of this book is to encourage African Americans to view their attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors through the lens of history to gain a greater understanding of the impact that centuries of slavery and oppression have had on our lives. With this understanding we can explore the role our history has played in the evolution of our thoughts and feelings about who and what we are, as well as our beliefs about how we are to behave. While it is true that some of this evolution has resulted in behaviors that have become both destructive and maladaptive, it is also encouraging that in spite of the oppressive conditions our ancestors endured, they were able to pass on their phenomenal powers of resilience and adaptability. It is essential that we build upon these strengths in ways that will sustain and advance future generations. In this way we can begin the healing.