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Breaking the Chains: Healing and Overcoming Generational Trauma

Imagine a world where the pain of past generations no longer dwells in the hearts and minds of the present. A place where the cycle is broken, and each new generation is free to thrive without the weight of history dragging them down. This version of life perfectly aligns with Peter A. Levine's powerful quote, "Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence." Levine's words highlight the potential for healing and breaking the cycle of generational trauma by acknowledging that trauma is a part of life but not allowing it to control your life. By not allowing it to define our existence, we open the door to a future where the past no longer controls us. Through this process, and examining generational trauma through various texts, we can break the chains of the past and pave the way for a healthier, more resilient future. Generational trauma can be ended by first learning how to identify, acknowledge, and accept one's trauma, and then by taking steps to protect future generations from experiencing it.

In an article from the *American Psychological Association*, they define generational trauma as "... the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. This phenomenon occurs when the effects of traumatic experiences are not only felt by those who directly experienced them but are also passed down to their descendants." (Connell) . This idea was first introduced in the 1960s by Canadian psychiatrist Dr. Vivian Rakoff while he was studying the children of Holocaust survivors. Since then the understanding of generational trauma has

expanded and includes multiple forms of trauma, such as those caused by war, genocide, slavery, domestic violence, emotional trauma, and more.

Generational trauma can manifest in many ways, including psychological, emotional, and even physical symptoms. For example, descendants of trauma survivors may experience anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder without having even directly experienced a traumatic event themselves. In an article by the *CDC* they say, “Epigenetics, the study of how environmental factors can affect gene expression, has provided evidence that trauma can leave a biological imprint on future generations.” (“About Adverse Childhood Experiences | Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)”) This can happen through learned behaviors, coping strategies, and even genetic changes.

One study done at Emory University and published in the journal "Nature Neuroscience" in 2010 showed the impact of traumatic experiences on the children of mice. In this study, the male mice were exposed to an odor along with a mild electric shock. When these mice later mated, their children showed a heightened fear response to the same smell, even though they had never been exposed to it before. This suggested that the trauma experienced by the parent could be passed on epigenetically to their children, leading to changes in genes related to fear and the stress responses. Generational trauma can not only have negative effects on our mental health but also our bodies physically.

In *The Anatomy of Peace*, the authors introduce the idea of a "heart at war" versus a "heart at peace" (Arbinger Institute). A heart at war views others as objects or obstacles, creating a place of conflict where anger, sadness, fear, and instability preside. This idea is relevant to generational trauma, where unresolved conflicts and negative perceptions are passed down, creating a cycle. For example, a parent who has experienced significant trauma may

unconsciously project their fears and anxieties onto their children. In *The Anatomy of Peace*, the conflicts that Lou and Carol experienced came from their differing perspectives on their son's behavior and the impact of external pressures on their family. This tension leads Carol to feel overwhelmed and anxious, ultimately causing symptoms of anxiety and depression as she struggles to cope with the emotional fallout of their unresolved issues.

Emotionally, generational trauma can result in problems with emotional regulation and emotional detachment or attachment. In *The Anatomy of Peace*, the authors highlight the importance of seeing others as people with their own needs and emotions. When people fail to do this, it can lead to emotional detachment and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. For example, a child raised in a household where emotional needs were neglected (due to the parents' unresolved trauma) may struggle with forming secure/safe attachments and may show emotional numbness, hypersensitivity or emotional dysregulation.

Physically, generational trauma can manifest through chronic health conditions and stress-related illnesses. The book discusses how a heart at peace can lead to healthier interactions and reduced stress. On the other hand, a heart at war continues to cause stress and conflict, contributing to physical illness. *Holly Hills Hospital Research Center* says, "Emerging research suggests that the stress of trauma can lead to physical health consequences. Chronic stress can alter the body's stress response system and increase the risk of various health conditions, including heart disease and diabetes." These consequences are far reaching and can cause a disruption of the physical health system with a connection to increasing mental health concerns and a reciprocal effect on overall trauma.

The relevance of generational trauma today cannot be overstated, but it is constantly overlooked. In a world where we continue to try to learn the legacies of historical injustices,

understanding and addressing generational trauma is crucial. We are able to do this through reading books, studying essays, and learning from others experiences. For instance, indigenous populations around the world have faced centuries of colonization and forced assimilation. The trauma from these experiences continues to affect future generations, contributing to high rates of mental health issues, substance abuse, and other social challenges. Addressing generational trauma in these communities is crucial for healing and resolution.

In *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, the book's protagonist, Okonkwo, shows the struggle against colonization and the forcing of foreign cultural values. As British missionaries and colonial administrators invade Igbo, they thoroughly dismantle traditional structures, practices and beliefs. This forced assimilation creates a deeply felt sense of displacement and identity crisis among the indigenous people. Okonkwo's resistance to these changes and his eventual downfall highlight the personal and communal trauma caused by colonization.

When we draw connections between Achebe's experience and issues faced by Native Americans, we can see parallels in the ongoing struggles related to education and legal advancements. Many Native American communities continue to struggle with the legacy of colonization, which has led to structural inequalities in education. Schools that are on reservations often receive less funding and resources than those that are not, resulting in lower educational outcomes for Native American students. The historical trauma that Okonkwo experiences mirrors the contemporary challenges faced by Native Americans as they navigate a society that continues to exclude their cultures and identities. Just as Okonkwo's story shows the deep scars left by colonization, today's Native American communities are working to reclaim their narratives and advocate for their rights in a world that often overlooks them and their struggles.

Generational trauma in *Things Fall Apart* is noticeable in the way the younger generation responds to the colonizers in the novel. While some, like Okonkwo, resist fiercely, others, particularly his son Nwoye, find themselves drawn to the new religion and way of life offered by the colonizers. This rift within families and communities is a direct result of the forced assimilation and cultural decay forced by the colonizers. The psychic fragmentation of this trauma can be seen in the characters' struggles with identity, belonging, and self-worth.

The structure of this novel reflects this generational trauma, as it unfolds through the perspectives and lives of different characters, highlighting their responses to colonization. Okonkwo's strict obedience to traditional values contrasts sharply with Nwoye's search for acceptance and understanding in a new culture. This generational divide illustrates how trauma can manifest in different ways, often leading to conflict within families. The resistance shown by Okonkwo, while rooted in a desire to protect his heritage, ultimately reinforces the cycle of trauma, as it separates him from his son and community. Ironically, the very things that Okonkwo and others push away, such as the new ideas and beliefs, could potentially offer healing and reconciliation. Embracing a blend of old and new could allow for a deeper understanding of identity. This will foster a sense of belonging that transcends the pain of colonization and opens pathways to healing for future generations.

These themes resonate with the experiences of many indigenous populations worldwide who have faced similar situations. In an article by the *National Library of Medicine* they say, “. . .cultural congruity and ethnic density, cultural identity, and biological and psychological factors are likely important influences in the development of mental illness in migrants.” The disruption of cultural continuity and the forcing of foreign values can lead to a loss of identity

and self-esteem, contributing to high rates of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. They also touch on the idea that the increased rates of mental illness in ethnic groups can be highly attributed to the lack of understanding about race and ethnicity. The impact of colonization comes as cultures attempt to replace the existing systems, beliefs and structures with their own, forcing a way of thinking onto people who have never claimed to think the same way. This is further intensified when the colonizing culture then restricts, denies or limits access to the new systems of dealing with the trauma either through lack of support given to ethnic groups by poor housing situations, racism, or inability to access medical care. These issues make it almost impossible for the native people to recover autonomy let alone heal from generations of trauma and oppression.

The intergenerational nature of this trauma means that its effects are not confined to those who directly experienced colonization but are passed down to later generations. Children and grandchildren of those who lived through colonization may inherit the unresolved grief, anger, and dislocation of their ancestors.

Similarly, African American communities continue to experience the long-term effects of slavery, segregation, and racism. The trauma from these historical injustices has been passed down through generations, contributing to imbalance in health, education, and economic opportunities. Recognizing and addressing generational trauma is crucial for achieving social justice and equality. This quote attributed to Frederick Douglass famously states, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." Frederick Douglass' extensive struggles through slavery, building himself up from being broken, and owning his education paved the way for future african americans to do the same.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a powerful book that exposes the horrible realities of slavery and its dehumanizing effects on both individuals and families. The book's portrayal of characters like Uncle Tom, Eliza, and George Harris shows the physical and psychological trauma caused by slavery. For example, Uncle Tom's faith and morality are constantly tested by the cruelty of his owners, showing the deep psychological scars that can be left by constant dehumanization. Eliza's desperate flight to save her son from being sold highlights the fear and anxiety that enslaved families endured, knowing they could be torn apart at any moment. Generational trauma is evident in the characters' struggles to maintain their humanity and dignity in the face of relentless brutality. The legacy of such trauma can be seen in generations who inherit the psychological scars and societal pressures imposed by slavery.

In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass provides a firsthand account of the horrors of slavery and his journey to freedom. Douglass highlights the physical abuse and deprivation suffered by enslaved people, as well as the psychological impact of being treated as "property." For instance, witnessing the brutal whipping of his Aunt Hester left a profound mark on him, showcasing the trauma inflicted on enslaved individuals. His struggles with identity and self-worth, amplified by constant dehumanization, reflect the deep-rooted trauma that is prevalent even today.

Douglass's journey to freedom and his triumph over the oppressive system illustrate that empowerment is possible, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. His fight for abolition emphasizes the vital role of education and self-empowerment in overcoming the legacy of slavery and generational trauma. Current generations can draw strength from his example, recognizing that the issues they face, like systemic racism and social inequalities, are echoes of pain from the past. By embracing their own empowerment and pursuing education, people can

confront and dismantle these challenges. However, it's essential to still honor the difficulty of this journey. We must acknowledge the weight of historical trauma, while also striving for a future where freedom and equality are attainable for all.

Up from Slavery by Booker T. Washington talks about his life from when he was enslaved to becoming a well known educator and leader. Washington's autobiography shows the impact of slavery on his mental health and the broader, African American community. Although he achieved a lot of personal success, Washington acknowledges the constant barriers and prejudices that African Americans have to overcome due to the legacy slavery has left on the world. His emphasis on education and self-reliance is a response to the generational trauma of slavery, aiming to give future generations the tools to overcome systemic oppression. For example, Washington's Tuskegee Institute provides practical skills and education to African Americans, fostering economic independence and resilience. It's institutions like these created by individuals who experienced trauma and overcame it that allows others access to support as they attempt to overcome their own.

Generational trauma is also relevant in the context of war and conflict. Veterans and their families often carry the psychological burdens of war long after the fighting has ended. The *National Center for Children in Poverty* says, "Spouses of veterans with PTSD have higher levels of emotional distress than the general population. Partners of PTSD-diagnosed veterans experience more caregiver burden and had poorer psychological adjustment than did partners of veterans without PTSD." Some soldiers are even faced with the struggles of having to leave their families which not only affects the individual, but on the broader affects their partners, children, parents, etc. They conclude this article by saying, "It can impact a parent's ability to parent appropriately, resulting in harsh, indifferent, inconsistent parenting and management

difficulties.” The trauma experienced by soldiers can affect their children and grandchildren, leading to a cycle of suffering that lasts generations. Addressing this trauma is crucial for the well-being of veterans' families and for fostering a more peaceful and resilient society.

In *Left to Tell*, Immaculée explains her experience of surviving the Rwandan genocide by hiding in a tiny bathroom with seven other women for 91 days. The trauma she suffered is not only just her own, but also community wide. It affected her family and the entire Tutsi community. One specific example of generational trauma is the impact on Immaculée's family. Her parents and two brothers were tragically murdered, leaving her with a lot of feelings of loss and grief. This trauma is caused by the historical context of tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi, which had been going on for decades and were passed down through generations.

Another example from the book is Immaculée's struggle with forgiveness. The hatred and violence she witnessed left deep mental scars. But her journey towards forgiveness highlights the possibility of breaking the chains and ending generational trauma. By choosing to forgive those who killed her family, she not only heals herself but also sets a precedent for future generations to overcome the hatred and trauma rooted in the past.

Immaculée's journey of forgiveness can be perceived differently across cultures. In some cultures, forgiveness is seen as a crucial step toward healing and community restoration, while in others, it might be viewed as a sign of weakness or submission. For example, in certain non-religious perspectives, her strength to forgive could be interpreted as an inability to confront the perpetrators or a lack of justice for her family's suffering. This difference in perception highlights the complexity of healing; what is empowering for one individual may be seen as consent by another.

Additionally, the idea that one person's forgiveness could be another person's consent raises important questions about the implications of forgiveness in the context of trauma and justice. For some, forgiving may signal a willingness to move forward, while for others, it could suggest an acceptance of wrongdoing without accountability. This difference underscores the complex nature of healing processes, showing that each individual's journey is influenced by their cultural background, and personal beliefs. Ultimately, it reveals that healing is not the same experience for everyone, and the path to recovery can vary significantly based on individual and cultural interpretations of forgiveness.

Another book that shows this theme is *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom. In *The Hiding Place*, Boom describes the intense psychological and emotional toll that the war and their imprisonment took on her family, very similarly to *Left to Tell*. One specific example of generational trauma is the impact on Corrie's family, especially her father, Casper ten Boom, and her sister, Betsie ten Boom. The relentless fear, stress, and eventual capture by the Nazis left deep emotional scars. Casper's death shortly after their arrest and Betsie's death in the concentration camp further added to the trauma experienced by Corrie. This trauma is not only personal to her, but also to many others. It affected the entire Ten Boom family and their community.

A great example from the book is Corrie's struggle with forgiveness and healing after the war, contrasting what we saw in *Left to Tell*. The horrible treatment she and her family suffered at the hands of the Nazis left lasting trauma. But similar to Immacule, Corrie's journey towards forgiveness highlights the possibility of ending generational trauma.

The Hiding Place and *Left to Tell* touch on how the Holocaust, World War II, and the Rwandan genocide affects future generations and societies. The collective trauma experienced by

the survivors has lasting effects on the nation and the global community. This story, along with *Left to Tell*, shows how the trauma of war and conflict can be inherited by future generations, influencing their worldview interactions and perceptions of people and ethnicities. Their memoirs serve as testaments to the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for healing and reconciliation, even in the face of profound generational trauma.

In addition to its impact on specific communities, generational trauma has larger involvement for society as a whole. Trauma can disrupt social unity, stop the progress of economic development, and continue cycles of violence and injustice as shown in the novels previously discussed. By understanding and addressing this, we can work towards creating a more equal world and a place where individuals are able to heal and break the chains constraining them to their personal and collective generational trauma.

Acknowledging generational trauma is a big step in understanding the long-lasting effects of historical and personal trauma. In *The Anatomy of Peace*, the characters reflect on their family histories and how past traumas, like loss or violence, have shaped their current conflicts. By acknowledging this generational trauma, they can begin to empathize with each other's experiences and work towards healing instead of communicating that perpetual cycle of grief. This not only validates those who experienced the trauma but also fosters healing and resilience. One reason why acknowledging generational trauma is important is that it helps individuals and communities find patterns of behavior and emotional responses that come from past experiences. For example, research shows that trauma can alter brain chemistry and affect how individuals cope with stress, leading to cycles of dysfunction (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2000). By recognizing these patterns, individuals can start to address the causes of their struggles rather than just treating the symptoms they're experiencing.

Adding to this point, acknowledging generational trauma plays a vital role in encouraging empathy and understanding. In works like *The Anatomy of Peace*, characters learn to see their conflicts through the lens of empathy, which is important for healing relationships. This paradigm shift in perspective encourages open discussions, allowing individuals to share their experiences and support one another in the healing process.

In books like *Things Fall Apart*, the impact of displacement on identity is a common theme. Okonkwo's struggles highlight how historical trauma can break apart family dynamics and cultural heritage. Recognizing the trauma caused by this and its effects on generations to come is crucial for healing. Ultimately, acknowledging generational trauma empowers people to break the chain of pain and suffering. It encourages attention to mental health, such as therapy, support, and education. This can help people build resilience and healthier relationships for future generations.

Acceptance of generational trauma requires being compassionate and taking a self-aware approach. This links to living life with a heart at war seen in *The Anatomy of peace*. This process involves recognizing the pain that has been passed down through generations and understanding how it affects others today.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Uncle Tom shows resilience and faith when being on the Shelby plantation. Despite the harsh conditions and the constant threat of being sold away from his family, Uncle Tom maintains his strong Christian faith. He often turns to prayer and seeks solace in his beliefs, which helps him endure the suffering he faces. His acceptance of his situation while maintaining his dignity highlights the importance of inner strength in overcoming challenges. Uncle Tom's character is a powerful reminder that acceptance does not equal giving

up; instead it can be a source of strength that allows individuals to navigate their trauma with humanity.

In his autobiography Frederick Douglass was able to acknowledge the horrors of slavery while also using his experiences as a catalyst for his fight for justice. In *The Anatomy of Peace*, the characters reflect on their family histories and how past traumas, like loss or violence, have shaped their current conflicts. Douglass's acceptance of his past is crucial to his identity and his role as a public figure and speaker. He takes his suffering and turns it into a powerful narrative that not only educates others about the realities of slavery but also inspires a movement for change, paralleling what we see in *The Anatomy of Peace*. His life is an example of how confronting and accepting trauma can create a passion for justice and equality.

Similarly, *Up from Slavery* illustrates how acknowledging and accepting one's past can lead to empowerment and a positive change. Washington highlights the importance of education and self-improvement as tools for overcoming the legacy of slavery and the trauma of psychological abuse. His narrative encourages people to embrace their history while actively working towards a better future.

Preventing generational trauma is imperative for creating healthier families and communities. One of the key steps in preventing generational trauma is having open communication within families. Encouraging discussions about emotions, experiences, and family history can help people better understand their backgrounds and the impact of past traumas in the family. According to a study published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, “..open communication can lead to increased emotional resilience and better coping strategies among family members” (Katz et al., 2015). When families create a safe space for conversation, they allow each other to share their feelings, which can help reduce the effects of trauma.

One of the most significant elements of limiting the effects of generational trauma is promoting mental health awareness and access to resources. Many individuals who struggle with trauma may not seek help due to lack of knowledge about support. By raising awareness about mental health and giving access to counseling and therapy, people can get the tools they need to heal. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration emphasizes that early intervention and support can significantly reduce the long-term effects of trauma (SAMHSA, 2021).

Unresolved trauma in a family setting can lead to alarming behaviors and patterns such as: Communication issues which are when family members struggle to express emotions or discuss difficult topics, leading to misunderstandings and conflict. This can create a space of silence, where important issues are never talked about. Emotional Dysregulation is when individuals experience intense emotional responses, such as anger, sadness, or anxiety; often out of proportion to the situation. This can result in either outbursts or withdrawal, making it hard for the family to maintain stability. Substance Abuse or Self-Destructive Behaviors can emerge when family members turn to drugs, alcohol, or other harmful behaviors as a coping mechanism for their unresolved trauma, further enhancing family dysfunction.

If left unaddressed, these patterns and behaviors can perpetuate cycles of pain across generations, leading to long-term psychological issues for family members. Stopping it can pave the way for healing, healthier relationships, and a more positive family legacy. Educating yourself through therapy or support groups can be a crucial step in breaking these chains and fostering a healthy family environment. Education plays a vital role in stopping generational trauma. Teaching children about emotional intelligence, resilience, and coping strategies can empower them to handle stress and change more effectively. Programs that focus on emotional

learning have been shown to improve mental health outcomes and reduce behavioral issues in children (Durlak et al., 2011). By giving the younger generation these skills, we can help them navigate their own challenges without passing on the burdens of unresolved trauma.

An additional way to prevent future generations from experiencing the same trauma, is to be able to look at history to learn and grow from it, whether that's family history, or writings from the past. By looking at the experiences of characters in books we read, we can learn important lessons of resilience, forgiveness, and why it's crucial to break the chains of generational trauma that may confine you or your community.

In *Left to Tell*, Immaculée's journey of healing is deeply connected with her community's experience during the Rwandan genocide. While she undergoes personal healing through prayer and forgiveness, the broader theme highlights the importance of community support. Immaculée finds strength in her memories of family and friends, and her healing process is not just about her own recovery but also about the trauma experienced by her people. Conversely, in *The Hiding Place*, Corrie's story illustrates both individual and communal healing during the Holocaust. Her individual healing journey involves her faith and resilience as she faces unimaginable hardships in a concentration camp. However, the ten Boom family's efforts to hide Jews during the Nazi occupation also reflect communal healing. Their actions create a network of support and protection, demonstrating how collective efforts can lead to healing in the face of oppression.

Acknowledging and accepting generational trauma is a complex process that requires empathy, self-awareness, and a commitment to healing. Through education, open communication, and healing practices, we can prevent future generations from experiencing that same pain and create a more compassionate and understanding world.

In summary, breaking the chains of generational trauma is not just a possibility; it is a necessity. Not only for the well-being of the individual, but more so for future generations. By recognizing and addressing the trauma through literature that has been passed down, we can create a more compassionate and understanding world that promotes healing. The acknowledgment of past pain allows us to understand its impact on our lives today.

Utilizing skills and tools such as open communication, mental health support, and education can help protect future generations from experiencing these same things. As we come to understand the idea that trauma does not have to control our lives, we empower ourselves and our descendants to live free from the burdens of history. The path toward healing and resilience is a shared effort, one that can lead to a brighter, more hopeful future for everyone. Every single person on the planet is faced with and leaves behind a wake of trauma. What's our role in cleaning it up?

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