

zainab amadahy

# anti-oppression is not a healing modality

*The product of my pain became the cure.*<sup>1</sup> حاصل دردم سبب درمان گشت

*While we see anger and violence in the streets of our country, the real battlefield is inside our bodies. If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict needs to be resolved.*<sup>2</sup>

Traumatized people traumatize people.

I don't make that statement from a location of innocence. I am a traumatized person who has traumatized and otherwise acted unfairly toward others. What's more I am someone who has used the knowledge and skills I gained through anti-oppression training to perpetrate and justify acts of selfishness, irresponsibility and general bad behaviour. To balance that, as the universe has a way of doing, I've been on the other side of that coin, unfairly accused of oppressive behaviour. What's more, in my role as a community worker and consultant to the not-for-profit sector, I have also witnessed this dynamic play out among others, sometimes in the form of individuals from marginalized communities shaming and blaming each other. Systemic oppressions and complicity exist. And they almost always play some role in interpersonal conflicts and group dynamics. But that role can sometimes be blown out

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of proportion or considered foundational to a conflict when it isn't.

Resorting to false or exaggerated accusations of oppressive behavior is often symptomatic of trauma. Not excusable but trauma nonetheless. We all have our traumas: childhood, vicarious, collective, and intergenerational. When traumatized people come together in life partnerships, friendships, workplaces or collaborations, they are going to trigger each other. Despite good intentions, our unhealed wounds will paint us all in blood. There is a spiritual principle that says we tend to unconsciously attract into our lives those people and events best suited to mirror our wounds back to us so we see the need to heal. To a greater or lesser degree, that's the story of every type of relationship, and what makes us feel so vulnerable in intimate ones. Unfortunately, if you're lacking the self-awareness to understand what is happening, you may find yourself

1 Rumi, *Divan-e Shams*, Quatrains 261.

2 Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017.)

looking to transform an undesirable reflection by changing the mirror, rather than the one looking into it.

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آنچ در فرعون بود اندر تو هست  
لیک اژدهات محبوس چهست  
ای دریغ این جمله احوال توست  
تو بر آن فرعون بر خواهیش بست  
گر ز تو گویند وحشت زایدت  
ور ز دیگر آفسان بنمایدت  
آتش را هیزم فرعون نیست  
ورنه چون فرعون او شعله زنیست

Alas, this is all about you  
But you attribute it to the Pharaoh  
That which was inside Pharaoh is inside you  
But you hide your monster in the dark well  
You are appalled if they talk about you  
But you swell when the talk is of others  
Your fire does not have the Pharaoh's woodpile  
Otherwise it would raise flames like the Pharaoh<sup>3</sup>

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The violence endemic (but not inherent) to human relationships and life experience has trained us to compete, protect, and defend in situations where it is not required. We project our traumas onto each other and then judge, blame and shame each other for reflecting back to us what we don't want to see and lack the capacity to deal with. This pattern has accelerated of late.

In the wake of extreme political polarization, increased economic precarity, climate change, and methods of coping with the pandemic, many lives, businesses and organizations have imploded. Because the old patterns of thinking and doing don't work anymore, we are in a position where adopting new patterns of behavior is mandatory to our survival as individuals, communities and a species. Consequently, interest in healing from trauma has soared. There are more publications,

webinars, courses, and trainings than ever on the topic. Many of these resources recognize how forms of oppression contribute to, if not create, trauma and complicate the healing process. For example, it's impossible to heal from trauma when you are still in an actively harmful relationship, whether with an abusive life partner, an exploitative employer, or an unjust social system. This is obvious and recognized in our movements. But it's equally true that you can't heal from harm while you perpetrate harm on others.

Communities, organizations and relationships are reflections of the mindset of their members. We can't establish peaceful societies through practicing violence. Justice is not achieved through unfairness. We can't create institutional integrity by being under responsible or less than honest. Communities are not solidified by promoting division. We can't transform into better people by lashing out. When folks do any of these things it is a clear indication of their mindset and their spiritual injuries.

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اشکال نو به نو چه مناقض نمایدت  
اندر مناقضات خلافی مستریست  
در تو چه جنگ باشد گویی دو لشکر است  
در تو چه جنگ نبود دانی که لشکریست

When new things appear contrary to you  
You see in their contrariness wrongdoing  
You line up your armies if there is war inside you  
You recognize combativeness when there is no war inside you<sup>4</sup>

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Many folks in our social movements attest to how anti-oppression frameworks have helped them recognize and acknowledge their traumas, while allowing them to shift the shame and self-blame they feel for the harm they have experienced. Furthermore, anti-O analyses have helped folks identify coping mechanisms they and others have developed in order to

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3 Rumi, *Masnavi*, Book 3, Chapter 36. All quotes from Rumi in this piece were selected and translated by Gita Hashemi.

4 Rumi, *Divan-e Shams*, Ghazal 458.

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normalize living traumatized in a traumatizing society. These are important and necessary first steps in the healing process, but they are not the end of the process.

Our justice and decolonial movements have been very good at teaching us how to think critically, particularly when it comes to anti-oppression theory, which trains us to look for, analyze, and critique power dynamics in all relationships. It trains us to understand how power dynamics of the past inform today's injustices. We learn how historical and current cultural narratives justify, rationalize, and reinforce injustice. Anti-O trains us to be vigilant about how we have internalized forms of inequality like white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, ageism, human superiority, etc. As a result, we expect each other to be transparent and accountable for our behaviors, to challenge unhealthy power dynamics whenever and wherever we find them, whether these show up within ourselves, in others, or in institutions and systems. We often acknowledge with each other how exhausting all this is. And we're allowed to be exhausted but we're not allowed to give up because, once we are aware, we become responsible for calling out and fighting injustice. Unfortunately, none of this guarantees an environment conducive to healing from our traumas. In fact, it can do the opposite.

Critical thinking, including anti-O, is crucial to our survival. Without it we wouldn't be able to make decisions, evaluate, or reason about how to improve the condition of our lives. Critical ideas can also inform our creativity. These are important functions of anti-oppression education. But anti-O is not a tool of healing. Nor is it a justification or rationalization for irresponsible behaviour, as too many of us have used it. Accusing someone of racism, homophobia, sexism, and other oppressive behaviours in order to derail uncomfortable dynamics is not only unfair to those being attacked, it trivializes movements that have cost people their lives, diminishes the credibility of legitimate grievances and creates a climate of cynicism, fear and resentment toward progressive change.

An emphasis on critical thinking to the detriment of other ideas can negatively impact our relationships. It is possible that Anti-O skills, tools and resources can be more weapons than

medicine in the hands of people who have not done enough healing work. Our ability to identify unfair power dynamics doesn't guarantee we will interrogate our complicity in that unfairness or how we have possibly collaborated in our own victimhood. Nor will it magically provide us with the integrity needed to challenge such dynamics. A preoccupation with critical thinking will also limit our capacity to dream and create the world we purport to want. Allow me to illustrate with a Mayan teaching I received in my own healing journey.

The Maya were experts in thinking critically about our relationship with time. Their calendars demonstrate sophisticated knowledge around the intersections of cyclical rhythms found among the stars, on the Earth and within our bodies. Their astronomical and mathematical skills enabled them to predict the impact of cosmological alignments far into the future. One concept the Maya offer us is the idea of being stuck in time. That is, being so fixated on negative past events that they determine how we experience the present moment and impact our optimism about the future. You might say this is how the Maya conceptualized trauma.

Ask yourself: How often do you dwell on events that took place decades if not hundreds of years ago (or yesterday?), rerunning the story, fine-tuning it, expanding it, and feeling the intense emotions it evokes? You do this over and over, even when you are now in a completely new moment that demands a different response than you are offering, yet you continue to react based on past events.

The triggering of trauma invokes involuntary physical and mental responses. The partner who snaps at you today invokes the same reaction as your abusive parent. The boss displeased with your lateness invokes the same reaction as the teacher who humiliated you in front of the class. Every uniform you see invokes the terror you felt when the cops beat the crap out of your father (my personal example). Daily microaggressions can keep us locked in the stress response, unable to physically differentiate between the event(s) that traumatized us decades ago and today's minor annoyances that don't merit either the anxiety we feel or the rage we unleash.

هر اندیشه که می‌پوشی درون خلوت سینه  
نشان و رنگ اندیشه ز دل پیداست بر سیما

Any thought that you hide in the privacy of your heart

Its colour and designs appear in what you display to the world<sup>5</sup>

Today's positive psychology is built on ideas that many wisdom and Indigenous healing traditions already knew: you create more of what you focus on and when you dwell on the negative it's measurably harmful to your wellness, including your relationship wellness. It also biases you in favor of a negative orientation to other aspects of your life. That's not an argument for repressing feelings or turning a blind eye to injustice. It's an invitation to consider how what you pay attention to can shape your perception and, consequently, your experience of life events and relationships.

Some researchers note that critical thinking and creativity light up different neural circuits in the brain and that these cannot be active at the same time. In other words, if you're working on a creative idea, you can't simultaneously think critically about it (or anything), although you can switch back and forth in an instant. You can be equally as skilled at critical thinking as you are at creativity. However, what if you devote eighty percent of your time mulling over past, present and potential future injustices and only twenty percent on what a just, decolonized society, workplace, or relationship might look like? We know from neuroplasticity that your brain will physically develop in a way that facilitates how you use it. A brain focused on anti-O is going to get really good at theorizing, analyzing, recalling, educating, and debating anti-O concepts.

But what you don't use, you lose. So, if you spend less time on creating the world you want and the relationships you desire, even if only to fantasize, your brain restructures itself to accommodate that. You will become less effective at imagining and practicing ways of living based on justice and equity simply because you've devoted more time, energy and gray matter to

something else.

What's more, being on alert to find ideas, events, or people to critique, leaves you less likely to notice pro-justice and pro-equity activities, much less value and nurture them. However, if you turned that around and trained yourself to look for ideas, events, and people to appreciate, you will see them everywhere. That doesn't mean you'll cease to notice injustice but it might mean that you will invest more of your time and energy into creating the kinds of relationships, activities and events that promote just and equitable lifeways.

This is the idea behind Thanksgiving Addresses, gratitude rituals, and many other spiritual practices that measurably change brain structure and encourage us to focus our minds and hearts on life-affirming activities. It's simple, really: If you want to master a skill you need to practice it. Want society to be just and equitable? Being a role model for justice and equity helps you and the rest of us get there.

Many wisdom teachings tell us that one significant component of healing is taking responsibility. That is generally something traumatized people are reluctant to consider because they think the idea advocates self-blame. On the contrary, responsibility is not about self-blame and no one is responsible for someone else's behavior. Nevertheless, it is important to contemplate how assuming the persona of a victim and telling your victim story over and over again impacts your capacity to heal. Be honest. How much of your inability to show up, on time, live up to your agreements, and treat people respectfully is on someone else? How much is on systemic oppression? How much is on you?

Admittedly, in a reality where every life form and every event are interrelated there are no definitive lines of separation between me and you, us and them, this and that, etc. Like it or not, we all share some degree of culpability for our world's injustices. And of course, responsibility doesn't eliminate all obstacles and challenges from life. But consider the metaphor of the oyster living in an underwater environment where granules of sand will constantly penetrate its shell, creating an irritation that eventually transforms into a pearl. In confronting the challenges of life, we exercise our spiritual muscles and

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5 Rumi, *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 54.

become capable of creating finer and finer “pearls” with each endeavour.

Life events inevitably provide us with both joyful and challenging experiences. With this contrast, we make and refine our life choices, learning and growing along the way. As discussed above, we tend to unconsciously attract into our lives those people and events best suited to mirror our flaws and wounds back to us. We need to learn and teach each other constructive and compassionate ways of dealing with life’s stressors. With response-ability comes the ability to consider responses in the present moment that can take us farther from or closer to the life, relationships and world we desire. The ways in which we treat our wounds and the wounds of others will determine whether we expand or contract our collective consciousness and at what pace.

This principle applies to all forms of relationships, including those forged in workplaces and across communities. When discomfort of any kind arises in a relationship, the formula that promotes expanded self-awareness and healing is to acknowledge its presence, explore it, learn what it has to teach, and allow that information to transform you. The triggering of wounds provides an opportunity to go inward and investigate what needs healing. As individuals heal so do communities. Communities that make space, provide encouragement and offer resources for healing their members accelerate the expansion of consciousness.

When we have healed from our traumas enough that we can enter a space with other traumatized individuals and hold an interest in learning more, being more, and helping others on their path to do the same, it’s inevitably going to have impact across our species. We will no longer be traumatized people traumatizing people. We will be relatives enjoying healthy relationships.

## Post-Script

After so many references to healing, it might be helpful to define how that term is used here. Healing is not a static state of being one can arrive at and rest in for all of time. It’s an ongoing process of adjusting to life events in a way that provides you with a general sense of safety, confidence and connection in the world. There are many ideas about how one heals from trauma and many modalities and therapies available, from spiritual ceremony to psychedelics to somatic therapy, etc. Whatever modality, the process tends to fall into progressive steps that deserve a lot more space than can be taken here. Nevertheless, below is a brief overview of three steps:

1. Recognition that a traumatizing event has occurred and/ or a trauma reaction has been triggered. You become aware of being triggered by noting your specific physical and mental reactions, such as tightness in some part of the body, fast beating heart, dizziness, nausea, loss of breath, a tendency to freeze, feelings of terror and/or rage, etc. The first concern after this recognition is to determine your level of safety and take action to remove yourself from danger (or danger from you), if that is necessary. Once safe, it is important to name and feel your feelings deeply without judging, storying, or rationalizing them.
2. Learning and practicing skills that reverse the trauma response and build resiliency. Some of these can be practiced when in the triggered state. There are many practices to choose from but examples include breathing techniques, tapping acupuncture points, and soothing self-talk. Other strategies that build resilience and awareness can be done consistently over time. These can include meditation, exercise, regular interaction with nature, journaling, certain yogic practices, etc. This is the phase where taking responsibility and making intentional choices that balance the best interests of yourself and others become important.
3. Reintegration. Trauma causes a fragmentation of the psyche. Or as my teachers have said, a fragmentation of the soul.

A part of who you are “flees” or is suppressed to keep you safe. After a traumatic experience you can lose your sense of innocence, trust, curiosity, personal sovereignty, self-control, freedom, safety and/or passion, for example. At your core you have trouble believing you are valuable, loved and worthy of enjoying life. When you can retrieve some or all those aspects of your soul, when they become a part of you again, you are reintegrated. At this point you may find a sense of meaning in the traumatizing experience because it taught you something or motivated you into a purposeful course of action. Consider the sexual assault survivor who becomes an activist or the refugee who advocates for political change.

Many modalities provide a framework for taking you through these steps, at different speeds. It's unfortunate that some proven processes are not covered by medical insurance, recognized as effective by health care professionals, or even legal (as in the case of psychedelics). The good news, however, is that there is a plethora of resources aimed at enhancing our collective understanding of trauma and exploring various approaches to healing. These should help you make the right choices for you as you embark on your own journey.

Editor's note: This essay was commissioned and written in the fall of 2021. Conversations within decolonial and justice movements about trauma-awareness and ways of healing and caring for ourselves and others have expanded since, yet Amadahy's perspective remains fresh and critical and is therefore included here without later revisions.

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Zainab Amadahy lives in Nogojiwanong, Ontario, Canada and has authored works of fiction and nonfiction including *Wielding the Force* (2012), *Resistance* (2013) and *Life on Purpose* (2017), and published in magazines including *Muskrat*. Now semi-retired, she has worked in community arts, not-for-profit housing, Indigenous knowledge reclamation, women's services, and migrant settlement.