What Happened To the American Dream?

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This May 2005 issue of Psychiatric Annals is guest edited by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk on the topic of child abuse and victimization and the psychopathology that arises from it. Our sister publication, Pediatric Annals, covers the same topic this month from the perspective of practicing pediatricians, in an issue guest edited by Dr. Joseph Zenel (see page 366 for further information).

I did not enjoy reading this issue, but I believe that everyone who wants to reduce the suffering of mankind should study this subject. We then must ask: what is happening to the “American Dream”? What “Great Society” with “Family Values” results in at least 1 million children — likely more — who suffer from abuse ranging from emotional neglect or abuse to sexual and physical abuse, 80% of this occurring in the home?

I am sickened at heart by the direction our society is taking. Sickened — ashamed — to be confronted with the fact that in this country, “the land of the free, the home of the brave,” young minds are being compromised for life and twisted in ways to perpetuate the hatred, subjected to the rage and uncaring lust or disinterest of parents and other caretakers. Children are having their brains distorted by indifference when love and care are absolute necessities for development that will give a child a chance to be a happy adult living a meaningful life.

What is wrong with this society that began in the crucible of struggle for freedom and high ideals for humanity? We are talking about treatment for children who, when helpless and in need of all the love and support we can muster, are betrayed by adults who just don’t have time or, even worse, prey on their helplessness in a quest for self-gratification over any other priority.

Not only these children’s memories but also their brain function have been compromised in a way that promotes their own inability to evolve as humans. They then reenact their abuse on offspring, thus perpetuating and multiplying the pain and the damage.

We talk vaguely about treatment, with few positive outcome studies, while the numbers only increase. We see the work ethic — take responsibility for yourself, work hard, succeed, gain access to material wealth — become perverted into “screw everyone else, “me first at any cost,” “the guy with the most toys wins,” “me, me, me” — a narcissistic frenzy.

We can try to treat the ever increasing disorders spawned by our society, help child and adult victims adjust to attachment disorders, cognitive changes, the inability to self-regulate emotional responses. Can we treat effectively the growing tide of abused people? Has it always been the human condition or are we with our “freedoms,” distorted by competitive materialism and narcissism, producing increasing numbers of people who just want to “turn on,” indifferent to their children, predators who justify themselves by “getting what they want” or material success?

It seems to me that something much bigger than what we can treat is going wrong. Instead of evolving as a peaceful, spiritual meritocracy, we are devolving to a society of seeming post-apocalyptic survivalists, polluting society with perpetuated abuse for our own gratification.

What about searching for love for the divinity in others and gratitude for our freedom and this beautiful earth? Why not work to get this appreciation back as a value much more important than our petty wants and differences?

doi:10.3928/00485713-20050501-01