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Left-Brained Americans, Right-Brained Russians

By Marilyn Murray

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He was a handsome Russian physician, about 45 years old, attending one of my Murray Method classes in early 2003. As he spoke, his face flushed with intensity.

"The Soviet system deliberately kept us as dependent children," he said. "They told us when to sit, when to stand, what to say, what to think, what to do — we were punished severely if we ever tried to think for ourselves or to show any initiative. Then when the Soviet system fell in 1991, we were like 3-year-olds who someone had thrown out into the snow, saying, 'Here, now you go take care of yourselves!'"

His right arm thrust upward with flexed muscles and clenched fist as he declared: "We are not stupid! We are not lazy! We just don't know how!" Both his arm and his voice dropped as he softly said, "Please help us. Please teach us how to be good husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, friends and lovers, employers and employees. No one has ever role-modeled to us how to become these people in a healthy, balanced way."

I never will forget his passionate words and have often repeated them to Americans who were critical and disappointed that Russians had not "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps" and quickly got on with the process of turning Russia into a functioning democracy complete with Western ideology and modernization within a few years after the Soviet collapse. They expected that most Russians would be clamoring for "democracy and freedom" and would be able to bring those into existence by their own initiative and drive.

But most foreigners do not have any concept of what it truly was like for the average citizen living under 70 years of Soviet rule. The Iron Curtain did a masterful job of not only keeping Russians ignorant of the workings of the outside world but also keeping the rest of civilization oblivious to the realities of the daily pressures experienced by every person in the Soviet Union.

I experienced a small glimpse of this during numerous visits to Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and '80s, when the country was subjugated to Soviet rule. I worked with a pastor there, taking funds that I hand-distributed to needy persons throughout the country. I learned that to obtain enough food for the day, the pastor's wife left the apartment at 6 a.m. to stand in long lines and pray that there would be some type of food available. For us to travel in the countryside, the pastor had to go to the authorities for permission each day. Because KGB members also lived in his apartment building, he kept the conversation casual at home. He would drive me out into the country, where we would get out of the car and walk into a field, before he would discuss our plans for the coming days.

I often walked around Prague by myself and observed that the main thoroughfare was clean and well maintained. But only a block or two from the boulevard, many streets still bore the scars of destruction from both German and Russian wartime battles. The first time I walked from the pastor's apartment, I noticed a huge pile of debris spilling down a hillside and onto the sidewalk. It looked like the results of wartime bombing. The rubble had been there so long that there actually was a tall tree growing out of it. I immediately wondered why someone had not cleared it out and was amazed that other pedestrians were all walking around it as if they didn't even notice it was there.

But the most shocking awareness came when, after about the fifth day, I found myself also walking out around it without being conscious of its existence. It was a crucial lesson for me regarding how the human spirit is able to adapt to what they regard as insurmountable obstacles — they just learn how to go around them and deny reality. But at what price?

The physician in my class certainly awakened me to the fact that Soviet citizens had learned to adapt to their surroundings — to the lack of food, clothing and necessities, and especially to ongoing government pressures — but that it had come with a high price. They lost touch with reality and truth. Many lost themselves.

In response to the urgent plea of this student and many others, I attempted to take materials that I had taught to Americans and other nationalities successfully for several decades and adapt it to the Russian mentality. I soon learned that Russians not only had the huge issue of growing up in the Soviet system to deal with, but they also possessed many cultural values and traditions that differed greatly from most of the other participants in my prior classes and from my clients in the United States. I found the following to be true, although, of course,

there are always exceptions:

The United States is more of a "left-brained culture" that respects and encourages: logical and analytical thinking, rationality, objectivity, responsibility, initiative, independence, honesty, dependability, trustworthiness and punctuality; and an active work ethic that emphasizes quality workmanship and accomplishing objectives in a timely manner. While there are many people in the United States who are innately more right-brained, the country as a whole still remains a left-brained culture in education, business and government. Emphasis is placed on "doing."

Russia is more of a "right-brained culture" that respects and encourages: communication, connections, spirituality, philosophy, subjectivity, adaptability, flexibility, survival, communal concepts, formality, and tradition; and emotions that are deep and passionate. Relationships with friends and family are a high priority, and most Russians have a wide knowledge and love of the arts and culture. They are more reactive than active. While there also are many people in Russia who have left-brained personalities, the country as a whole still remains a right-brained culture, and this affects all aspects of life. Emphasis is placed upon "being."

When I work with clients in the United States who come to me for individual or couple counseling, I often have "thinking persons" whom I help teach how to feel.

But in Russia I work with "feeling persons" whom I help learn how to think.

Both cultures can surely benefit from the other as they discover how to become who they were truly designed to be — both thinking and feeling persons.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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