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# Why Many Russians Feel They Are Nothing

By Marilyn Murray

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She is a psychologist who works in an orphanage near Moscow. You could hardly hear her voice as she stood in front of the class and described her drawing. She pointed to a small black dot that was almost lost in the corner of a large piece of white paper and said, "I am only a spot, a tiny little spot. I have no worth at all."

For many Russians, one of the most profound unspoken tenets that formed the Soviet system was that human life has no value — except for the lives of the rulers and authorities. "I am nothing" forms a grim legacy inherited from the Soviet Union where multitudes often were repressed, oppressed and sacrificed in whatever manner the leaders deemed appropriate in order to accomplish their goals. It derives not only from that oppressive system, but also from centuries of being subject to autocratic rulers who regularly regarded citizens as property to be used as needed.

For most people raised under the Soviet system, the dogma that an individual has no personal

worth is reinforced by "tapes" — internal messages that still play in their heads, rebuking them in endless ways that deny all personal worth. While often not consciously acknowledged, these tapes can still rule their lives.

Today, this ruinous conviction is reflected by the fact that carelessness regarding one's safety and health is considered normal for countless people. Motorists often think it is unnecessary to follow the rules of safe driving. Some people ridicule anyone who is careful regarding his or her personal well-being. Many males and females of all ages drink, smoke or do drugs to excess without being concerned about whether they will die in the process. In the past, life was often so problematic that some people did not care whether they lived to see another day; their depression and hopelessness were drowned by alcohol or other addictions.

As I present classes to health professionals and clergy here in Russia, I have heard scores of incredible statements that echo the cry, "I am worth nothing!" Unfortunately, the resulting aftermath of this destructive tape reveals that abuse and neglect flourish in painful environments where people do not know how to love and respect themselves, or others.

These pronouncements from my students about their experiences remain in my mind and heart as an aide-memoire of the malevolent power created from the rejection of valuing human life and spirit:

- "I had a ringside seat on the edge of hell."
- "Until the day she died, my mother constantly told me that I was only a worthless burden. She would rage about how she tried to abort me and wished I had never been born. She died 10 years ago, yet her cruel words still rule my life. ... I am a nothing."
- "I awoke to loneliness, I spent my days in loneliness, I went to sleep in loneliness."
- "Your motherland was always your first priority. It was more important than anything else in your life — especially you."
- "'Work hard for the future of communism. Put the Soviet state above all your needs. If you lose your health while working for your country, it is a heroic deed.' My parents still tell me this — they so believed in that system. I still take so much work upon myself that I feel like I will just die. To pay attention to my own health would be to betray my parents and the system."

Learning to value one's self is difficult for many persons throughout the world, but it is especially so for many people raised in the Soviet Union. The journey from "I am worth nothing" to becoming a healthy person often is a very daunting one.

The reality of this fact was impressed upon me by a special woman who traveled a long distance and sacrificed greatly in order to attend our classes. On the first morning, she was embarrassed and apologetic as she stated that she owned only one dress and hoped I would not mind that she would have to wear the same thing every day.

I was intrigued when she drew her first picture — it featured a high spiked fence with a forest outside it; a small bundle lay between the fence and the trees. She spoke without emotion: "I was born in a gulag. I know nothing about my parents. I was told that when I was about 6 months old I became ill and was thrown over the gulag fence. There was a forest nearby with many wild animals — it was assumed I would be destroyed by them. But I know that God intervened because a peasant was walking home through the forest and heard me crying. He

took me to his village, and I was placed in an orphanage. When I was 3 years old, a couple came and adopted me. They did not want a daughter — they wanted a servant who would take care of them. I was never allowed to call them mama or papa; I was only there to serve them. The man died 12 years ago and the woman died last year. I am now 52, and this is the first time in my life that I have been free. But I do not know how to live. I still feel I have no value and am not worthy of reclaiming my own life."

She came to six classes over the next three years and was very pleased when she was accepted into one of our instructor training classes. As I looked at her, I was amazed at the changes in her life. She truly was learning "how to live" — her eyes sparkled as she shared that she was planning to teach a Murray Method class in her church and was most eager to share with her friends there. I looked forward to hearing from her regarding the results of her teaching experience.

Instead, I received a message saying she had undergone emergency surgery for a heart defect that perhaps was caused by the physical traumas she experienced as an infant. Tragically, she died on the table.

I grieve her loss but value her as an inspiring role model regarding the human spirit's ability to survive.

I know many Russians today who are becoming free from the destructive mantra of "I am worth nothing." They are learning not only how to survive, but how to become the persons they were created to be — persons worthy of love and respect. It's time to live.

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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