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Violence as a Cultural Norm Must Be Rejected

By Marilyn Murray

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She was a pretty, bright, articulate young woman who had a graduate degree in social work. She stood near the back of the classroom and her voice was strident as she said: "But this is our culture, we cannot change that. We have to follow our traditions and our family beliefs."

I then challenged her and the class regarding when to confront culture and tradition and when to think for themselves regarding what they believed to be ethically right or wrong.

In the United States, when I attended a cross-cultural, post-graduate counseling class, I was often frustrated by the emphasis on being "politically correct" to the degree that it was taught that a therapist or teacher should never challenge a person's cultural beliefs — even if they were unhealthy. I did not agree and felt that one should always seek balance and health in any situation, despite what accepted cultural mores entailed.

In my classes in Russia, participants evaluate their own personal beliefs and values. We

address an old, unspoken belief that exists worldwide and states, "What is common is considered normal, and thus what is normal must be healthy." The major challenge is to realize that often what is common and believed to be normal is actually unhealthy.

I tell students about how in certain parts of the United States it was culturally accepted for several hundred years to own slaves. But to treat men, women and children as less than human and to buy and sell them like animals was immoral, despite what the culture deemed acceptable. I say millions of people disagreed with this tradition of slavery and a horrible civil war was fought in the 1860s in which more than 600,000 people died to break this insidious cultural tradition.

I then challenge some issues that are considered culturally acceptable in Russia and result in widespread damage: the enabling of alcoholism within families and notions that aggression is part of being Russian and that they must have a strong, controlling leader because they are not capable of thinking for themselves.

Many Russians recognize these issues are not good but feel it is useless to change and attempt to become healthy when they live in such unhealthy systems. One woman said: "But we are Russian. This is our destiny. You can't expect us to be any different." A man said: "Why should we even try, it won't do any good. With my family, my friends, my workplace and especially within my country, everything will always continue to be this way, so horribly messed up. I'm just one person, I can't influence anyone else."

I then often reply with a quote from U.S. author and anthropologist Margaret Mead, who said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

While acknowledging that Russians have endured enormous trauma, abuse and deprivation, being a victim should not be their personal or national identity. I know that Russia has some of the most brilliant people in the world and has one of the highest literacy rates. They are talented and competent people. They are perfectly capable of addressing major problems and can make a difference in their own lives and in this country as a result.

When we discuss the specific issues facing Russia today that need to change, the participants in my classes are often startled when faced with actual statistics:

- United Nations studies show that Russia has one of the highest abortion rates in the world. Abortions peaked in 1965 when there were 5.4 million reported abortions — 2.74 abortions for every one live birth. Not until 2007 did live births and abortions in Russia reach near equal figures.
- The World Health Organization in 2006 reported that Russia is No. 2 in the world in male suicide. Nine of the top 11 countries in this category are from the former Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact countries.
- The average Russian male life expectancy has risen in the past decade but still remains 10 to 20 years under other developed countries in Europe and the Americas.
- Alcohol. Russia's statistics are staggering: The per capita consumption of alcohol in Russia is now about 18 liters. But if you remove infants, nondrinkers and the elderly, then the figure reaches 30 liters per capita — almost eight times more than in the United States. Alcohol is blamed for 52 percent of deaths in the country during the last decade,

versus 4 percent average for the rest of the world.

The good news is that many Russians are acknowledging that they cannot change other people, only themselves. They are starting to respond in new healthy ways and showing a willingness to challenge old belief systems. Much to everyone's surprise, as they change, others around them begin to change as well. They are treating their family members with new love and respect and are amazed at the responses they receive from their loved ones as a result.

A divorced mother came to our classes and complained constantly about all the behavioral problems she was having with her 8-year-old son. But by the end of the first class, she admitted that she was a "rage-aholic" who was emotionally, verbally and physically abusive to her young son. She realized that she needed to make major changes in her life and made a strong commitment to do so.

As she continued to work on her own childhood abuse issues, she also learned how to be a healthy mother. This was a difficult struggle because she had never had a role model of a loving mother. But she was determined not to be the same type of abusive mother to her son that she had endured as a child. On the first morning of an advanced class, she reported that her relationship with her son had changed radically. At the end of the day, she quietly came to me and slipped a small note into my pocket. I could not hold back my tears when I read in the childlike hand of her son, "Thank you for killing the monster that lived inside my mommy."

This woman realized that despite all the difficulties in her past, she was responsible for her actions and the life she chose to live today. And for the legacy she left for her son. She decided to change the only part of Russia she could change — her own life.

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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