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When Hopelessness Becomes a Deadly Tyrant

By Marilyn Murray

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The hospital waiting room is cold and empty except for members of my family. We all are eagerly awaiting the birth of my new great-grandson. It is 3 a.m. in Arizona, and today is my 76th birthday.

I know this baby boy has a multitude of people waiting to love and support him throughout his entire life, but I also realize there are so many infants worldwide who have never known what it means to be loved unconditionally.

In a few days, I will be back in Moscow and again will be listening to Russian class participants share unsettling stories of childhoods filled with pain, not love.

I am very aware that all of us carry our parents' pain. This is especially true in countries that were formerly ruled by the Soviet system and that endured the wrath of World War II. One of my Russian students said: "We live in a country covered with a blanket of fear. Many of us

were raised by parents and grandparents who became emotionally unstable from fear. They self-medicated with alcohol, food or by keeping busy taking care of others."

These children were told that their lives would always be difficult and they must learn how to simply survive. But what happens when a person feels they have no options other than a life of pain, fear and deprivation?

The answer was confirmed in a recent class that consisted of 34 professionals.

- Olga, a psychologist, said that when the Soviet system fell, her father was hopeful and excited about the possibility of Russia becoming a truly democratic country. He was eager to start his own business with his wife by his side. Gradually, he and Olga's mother became successful as they worked in their small kiosk selling rotisserie chicken. But they could not avoid pressure from the local mafia and corrupt officials. Eventually, criminals seized their business. When Olga was 27, she found her father in a blood-filled bathtub with slit wrists.
- A young man named Timur shook visibly as he shared the most difficult experience of his life. His beloved grandmother, who had raised him, was distraught over the failure of the Soviet system. Almost everything she valued was now gone: The strong, powerful motherland that she grew up in was disintegrating, her life savings were now worthless, and her small pension that during Soviet times was enough to provide her with food for a month, now only supplied enough for a few days. Her alcoholic husband was dead, and her only daughter had been killed by a drunk driver. While she loved her grandson, this love was not powerful enough to repel the overarching feelings of hopelessness that enveloped her. She hanged herself on the fence in front of her village cottage. Timur, 16, found her when he arrived home after school and had to cut her down. He wept as he told us how he struggled with her dead weight while blinded by his tears.
- Igor was 11 and was beaten with a belt almost daily by his violent, alcoholic father. His mother stopped trying to intervene years before because that would only divert his rage onto her. One night after an excessively vicious beating, Igor felt he was not able to endure the pain any longer. Seeing no other way out, he took his Pioneer scarf and after securing it around his neck, tied it onto the balcony railing of their little second-story apartment. He then slipped over the railing. But his scarf was made of silken-type fabric, and the knots did not hold. He fell to the ground — heavily bruised but still alive.

The honesty and courage shown by these class participants seemed to open the flood gates. Within a few hours we learned that of the 34 people present:

- Four had close family members commit suicide.
- Ten had attempted suicide or seriously considered taking their own life.
- Three had been kidnapped.
- One had been robbed at home by the police. They came three times.
- One was forced as a child to watch his father and mother torture his brother by beating and burning him and tearing off part of his ear.
- One at age 6 saw his grandfather attempt to kill his grandmother by choking her.
- One was born in a gulag settlement. Her mother was serving her third prison sentence

there during Josef Stalin's reign of terror.

These people are ordinary Russians. If you saw them walking on the street, riding on the metro or shopping in a store, there would be nothing strange or different about them. They represent an average cross section of Russians: people who inherited a conflicting, contradictory legacy from parents and grandparents who lived 70 years in the Soviet system. The Soviet period was an amalgamation of stability and fear, confidence and confusion, love and resentment, pride and shame, joy and despair.

Many shared stories of their childhood when they genuinely considered killing themselves. This generated a long discussion. I related that when I was studying for my graduate degree in psychology 30 years ago, the general consensus was that child suicide was extremely rare. But I now am aware that a number of my clients and students seriously contemplated, or attempted, suicide as a child but did not succeed. It was not that they weren't serious about their attempt, but they simply were not old enough to realize, or to obtain, all the lethal options potentially available to them. Or they were not physically strong enough to produce fatal results.

As this subject continued to be deliberated in class, the reasons mentioned for these acts of self-destruction by children were very similar: a history of physical, emotional, verbal or sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; bullying; and a sense of powerlessness to stop other family abuse, alcoholism or crisis situations.

Those who had made serious attempts stated that as their feelings of hopelessness, despair and of having no other options increased, the reality of suicide intensified.

When asked what they needed as children to remove this torment, their replies all contained something similar to this: "I desperately needed parents who not only loved me, but who were genuinely concerned about my health and safety. And I really needed for them to love and respect each other."

Almost all state that they feel grateful to be alive today and are learning how to be healthy parents to themselves. "I know no one else can do that now but God and me," everybody said in one form or another. In addition, they know they must do this first so they then will be capable of being truly healthy parents and grandparents for their future generations.

They each deserve this as much as my new great-grandson.

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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