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# How Survival Mode Destroyed the Tsarnaevs

By Marilyn Murray

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Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev lived most of their lives in survival mode. It was also their kiss of death.

The Tsarnaevs' paternal ancestors were forced out of Chechnya into a harsh exile existence in Kyrgyzstan by Josef Stalin in 1944. Their father, Anzor, and mother, Zubeidat, both had a deep heritage in the Northern Caucasus, a region populated by dozens of ethnic groups, many of whom have perpetuated blood feuds for centuries. In this culture, being a ferocious warrior is seen as heroic, and violence is so commonplace it is widely considered normal and expected.

After marrying in 1985, Anzor and Zubeidat spent the next 15 years moving five times between Kyrgyzstan, Kalmykia, Dagestan and Chechnya, attempting to find a safe place to settle with their four children. In 2002, when their oldest son, Tamerlan, was 15, Anzor and Zubeidat applied for political asylum in the U.S. They took their 8-year-old son Dzhokhar with them and left Tamerlan responsible for his two younger sisters while they stayed with an uncle

in Dagestan.

The Tsarnaev family, like many in the former Soviet Union, probably has been stuck in survival mode for generations.

In 2003, Tamerlan and the two girls were able to join their parents and Dzhokhar in Massachusetts. They received welfare benefits from the U.S. government and were welcomed as refugees. Zubeidat became a beautician, while Anzor, who had a respectable job as a prosecutor in Kyrgyzstan, could only find work as a car mechanic. They lived in a small apartment where there were many family conflicts. Angry fights could be heard coming from the Tsarnaevs' apartment, prompting several police visits.

Tamerlan was tall, good looking and strong-willed. It was difficult at age 16 to go from one of the most violent areas of the world to Boston. After graduation, he applied at the University of Massachusetts Boston but was rejected. He tried a community college part time but dropped out after three terms. He partied heavily, drinking and smoking, but stopped in 2008 when he became a more devout Muslim.

Yet even then, Tamerlan was still arrogant and flamboyant. He loved wearing fancy clothes and drove a Mercedes. He had big dreams of representing the U.S. at the Olympics in boxing and was able to twice win the New England Golden Gloves championship. His application for U.S. citizenship was tabled because of a 2009 domestic violence case against him, and he became enraged when he found that non-citizens were not allowed in the Tournament of Champions. Tamerlan's boxing career came to an abrupt halt.

Tamerlan regarded women as inferior and was obnoxious and abusive toward them. He dated Katherine Russell, the daughter of a well-to-do physician. When she became pregnant, they married in 2010. She converted to Islam, but he still harassed and controlled her.

Then Tamerlan's life underwent a major change. He and his mother became more consumed by Islam and began discussing conspiracy theories regarding the 9/11 attacks. He became combative and even argued with the imam during his sermons at the local mosque.

His parents divorced in 2011, with Anzor moving back to Dagestan. Zubeidat was arrested for shoplifting but skipped bail and fled the country to join Anzor in Dagestan.

In contrast, Dzhokhar was an easygoing kid who arrived in the U.S. at 8 and fit in quickly with his new homeland. He was popular with many loyal friends and he idolized his older brother. He excelled in wrestling and was so well liked by his colleagues that he was voted team captain. He was a cool guy with a sharp wit and a good heart, and he was fond of smoking

marijuana. Grades came fairly easily for Dzhokhar, and he was awarded a $2,500 scholarship for college.

But university life proved more challenging than he expected, and he failed seven classes in three semesters. As a sophomore, he found he was already $20,000 in debt to the university. He became depressed, and his pot use increased. Meanwhile, following his brother, he began to watch Islamic websites and posted verses of the Koran on his Twitter feed.

To understand present behavior, it is always necessary to address the past. In recent years, much research has been done regarding how the human brain reacts during times of trauma and deprivation, especially the developing brain. The brain has many components, but three major segments are important in this study:

1. The brain stem or reptilian brain. This is the first region to develop, and its main function is survival and maintaining basic vital life functions.

2. The limbic system midbrain. It contains the capacity for emotions, memory, the need for attachment and belonging. This system is reactive and directly affected by trauma and deprivation.

3. The neocortex, especially the pre-frontal cortex. The executive thinking component is necessary to develop personality, goals, decisions, motivation, organization, problem solving, impulse control, cause and effect reasoning. It also enables empathy and altruism. This area does not fully develop until about age 25.

When children feel unsafe and powerless, and especially if exposed to violence, their reptilian brain and their limbic system become activated as a survival and defense mechanism. If a stressful, fearful situation is unrelenting, the child's mind becomes literally arrested emotionally at the age of their duress. I have worked with thousands of people who grew up in the former Soviet Union, and almost all of them will admit to feeling stuck in survival mode before they began their therapeutic process.

Unfortunately, the long-term consequence of this survival state is that the energy and attention that should be directed toward developing a pre-frontal cortex, which produces mature, adult behavior capable of solving problems, is instead diverted into residing permanently in the survival mode of the limbic system and reptilian brain.

There are several common characteristics of people with this profile. They act immaturely and are unable to process problems appropriately. They can become easily angry and violent. They will not take responsibility for their errors but blame other persons or events, or go to the other extreme and take all the culpability. They are out of touch with reality and remain stuck in a fantasy world. They also become vulnerable targets for radicals because they lack emotional control, especially concerning anger. In addition, they become victim narcissists expecting special favors, and no matter what is given to them, it is never enough. Finally, they move from victim to victimizer. Some victimize only themselves, while others victimize themselves and others they deem as enemies.

The Tsarnaev family, like many in the former Soviet Union, probably has been stuck in survival mode for generations. Even when they came to the U.S. and were no longer

in danger, this mode had become habitual. The constant conflict within the family and their failures in the U.S. only exacerbated their internal problems.

Tamerlan, Dzhokhar and their parents each were greatly disappointed and disillusioned when reality hit. Even though they were intelligent people, they were unable to think through their problems and come up with a "Plan B" when their "Plan A" failed.

The father left the U.S., and the two sons and their mother became vulnerable to extremist ideologies that attached themselves solidly into their mid-brains where emotions and the need to belong reside. For Tamerlan and Dzhokhar, the idea of placing bombs at the Boston Marathon was an act devoid of empathy or adult reasoning.

It was an ancient survival code that simply said, "You are my enemy and you deserve to die." They served a God of vengeance and violence, not one of love and respect.

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 over the past 10 years. Her book, "The Murray Method," is available in English and Russian.

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