

Transmission of Historical Trauma in My Family

2013-11-04

I have had questions about how historical trauma continues to transmit across generational lines undiminished even when several generations have gone by from the original trauma. It has made me wonder. Is it really as simple as one messed up generation messes up the next without interruption? My mom once said, "If the Japanese can recover from WWII in just a generation or two why can't the Indians get over it after all these years?" I flinched under the accusations implied in her statement but it has made me think.

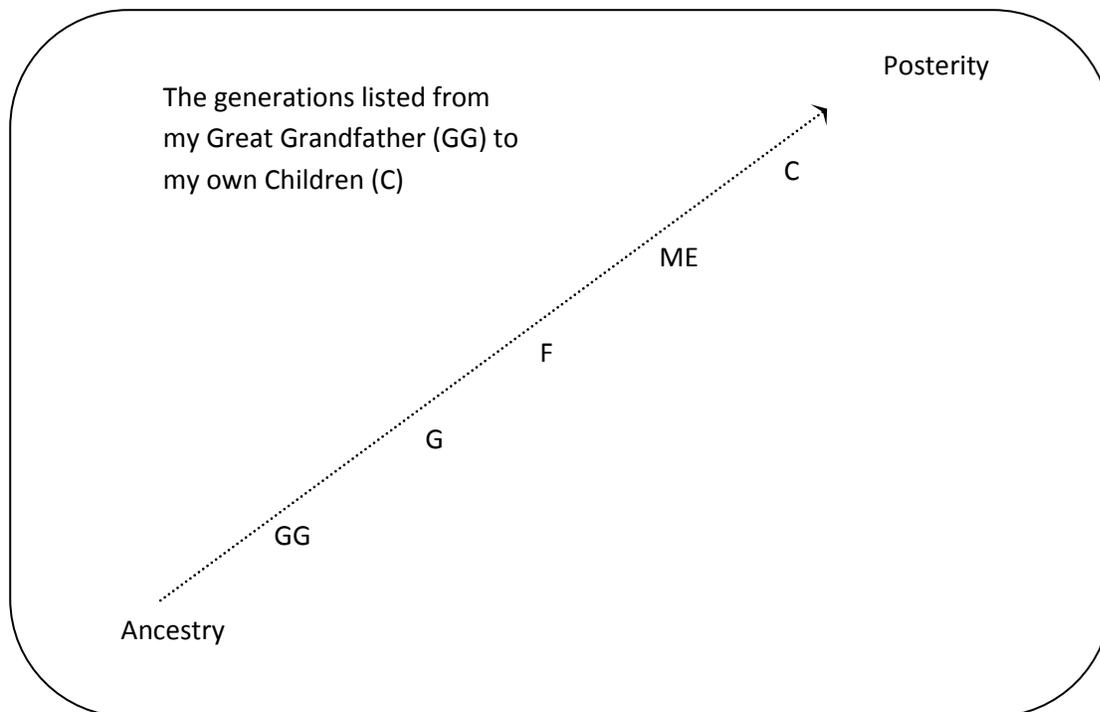
Two vectors of transmission come to mind for me: intergenerational trauma and societal trauma response. Intergenerational trauma in part means hurt people hurt people, including parents hurting their children. Intergenerational trauma happens within the family. Likewise, the families live in their day and times and are faced with potentially traumatizing attitudes and behaviors from society at large. Each generation can suffer a different kind of familial and societal abuse that differs from what the prior generations experienced.

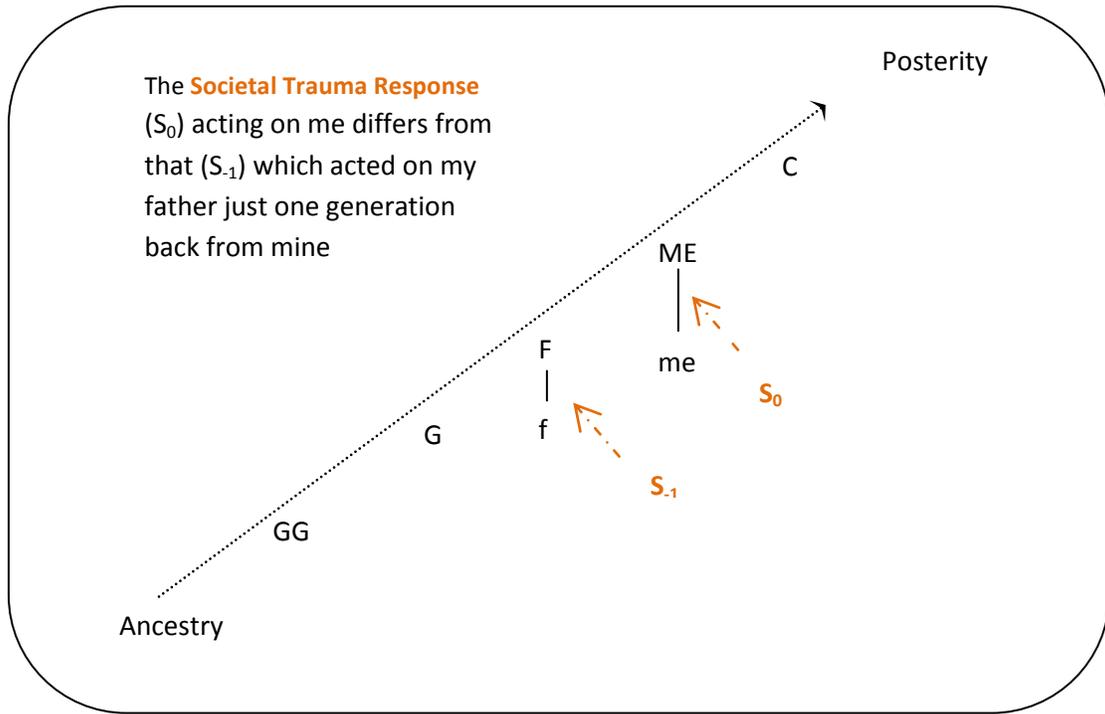
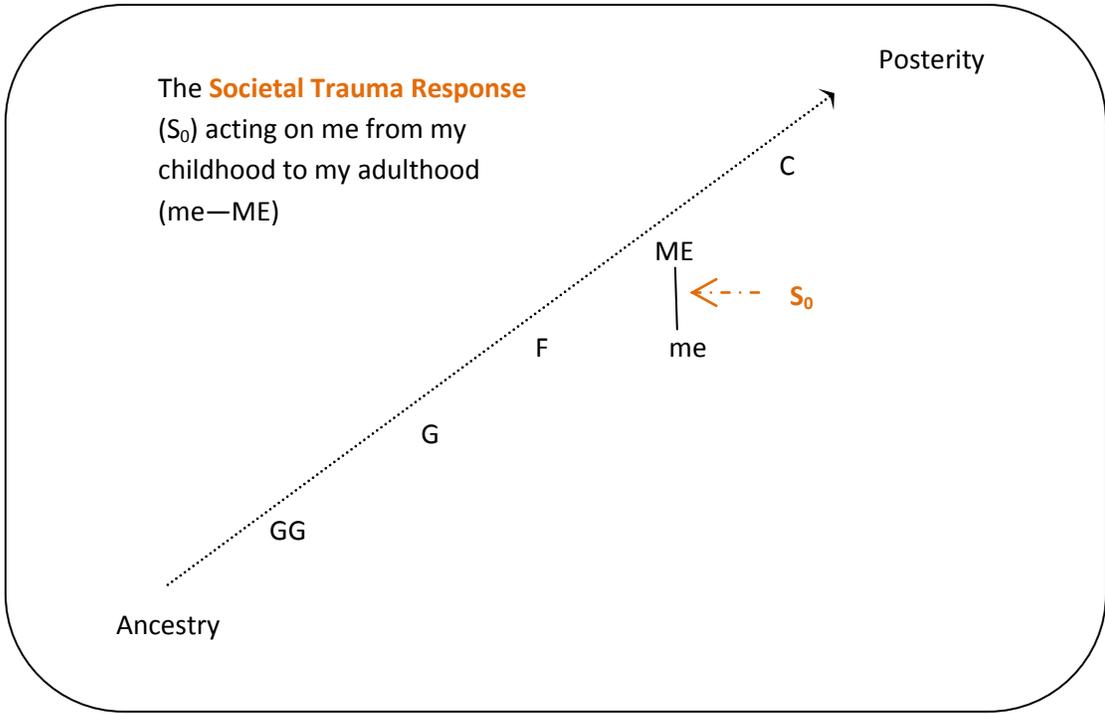
My mom was born within days of the 1929 stock market crash and was raised in the Great Depression. She saw young men she knew go off the WWII and not come back. Her own dad, a second generation immigrant, was a veteran of WWI. There were lots of things my mom went through that I only know about because she told me but I haven't directly experienced them for myself. The things she lived and suffered through seemed to me like things far away and removed from my lifetime, a lifetime which started for me in the 50's and came of age in the 60's (the 60's being very different from the 30's she experienced). New technologies so foreign to her childhood are an integral part of my world. At this point I can't live without a cell phone. She doesn't want one and can't use the one given to her. Her world and my world sometimes seem to be worlds apart, and speaking experientially, they are. Many of the ways she suffered in her world growing up are shrouded in the mystery of a bygone time for me.

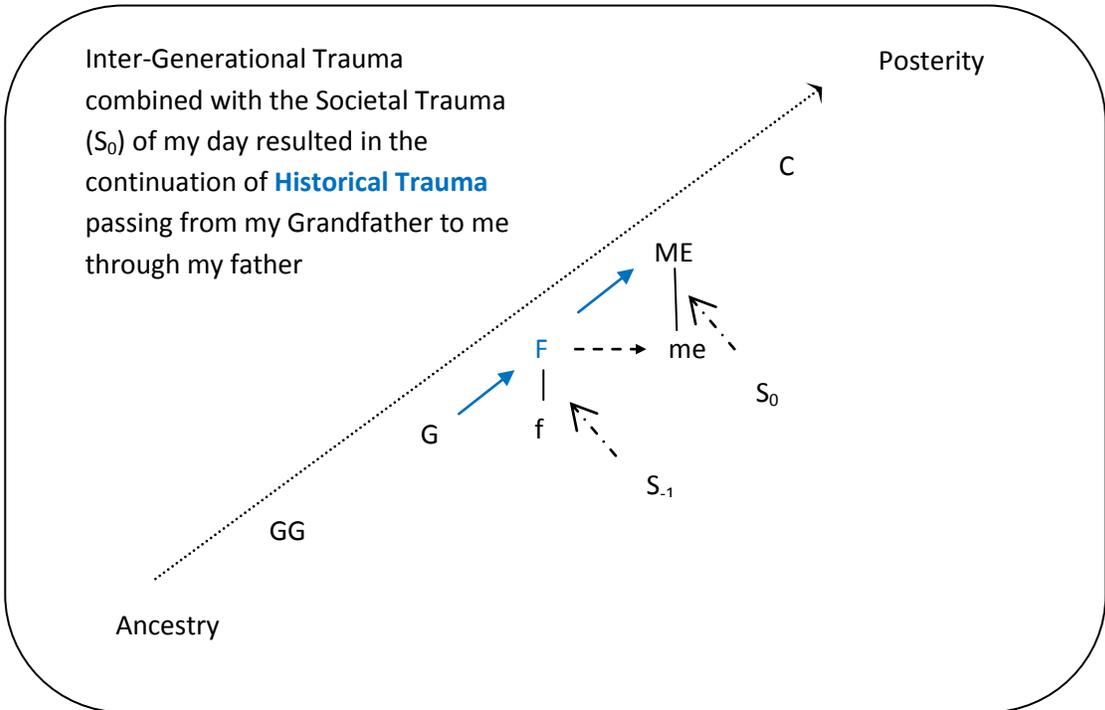
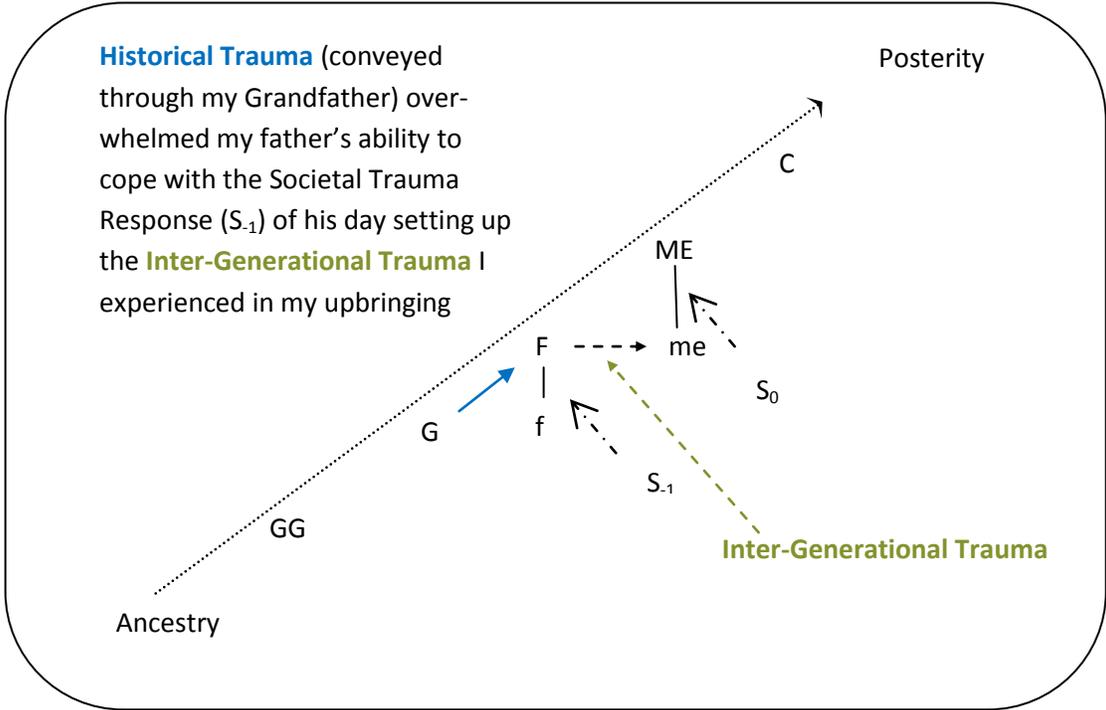
In my world I am, in part, an Adult Child of an Alcoholic (an ACA). I know the abuses I suffered. I know about alcoholism because my dad's behaviors "taught" it to me. I directly experienced alcoholism. When I grew up and became an adult I came to understand how alcoholism made me hurt. Alcoholism hurt me and, sadly, I in turn emotionally hurt my kids. I am an adult child of an alcoholic making my kids second generation ACA's and the grandkids of an alcoholic they didn't even know. My kids do know they were hurt by me (fear of my angry demeanor and impatience, the inherent neglect that goes with having a workaholic father, etc.) but they don't know by firsthand experience the role alcoholism played in it. There was no alcohol problem in our home so my father's alcoholism is something of a mystery to them, just like the things suffered by my mom in her childhood are a mystery to me. We are often one generation away from understanding why we were "taught" what we were taught. By "taught" I mean "traumatized". We don't quite see where it comes from so we can't clearly see the connections of trauma across generational lines even as they occur within our own families, even though we clearly know we experienced something that badly hurt.

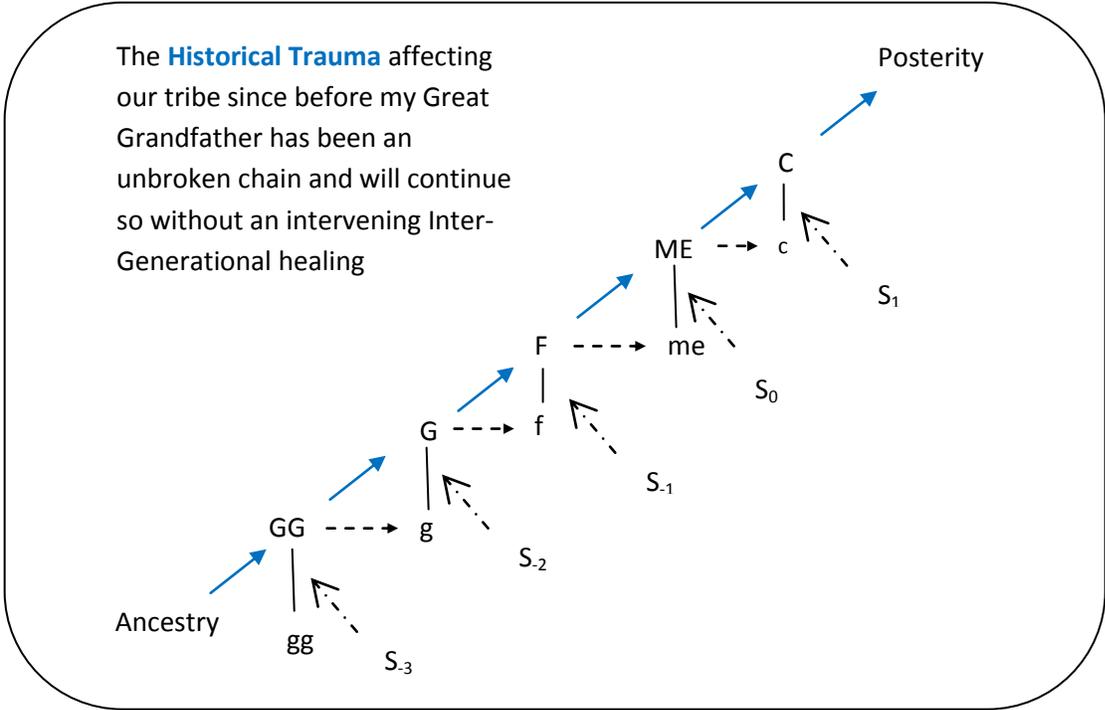
My great great grandfather as a child (born in the 1830s) was raised in times that were traumatic for our people. In his day he saw our people trying to survive the onslaught of a war waged by an enemy tribe bent on the extermination of our people, desperate and violent neighboring tribes who were killing us so they could survive. He saw the effects of deadly diseases on our tribe. He was there while the sustained press of immigrant Euro-Americans depleted our land making winter-time survival a serious and life threatening challenge. I also didn't know that I was the great grandchild of a man (born in the 1850s) who saw the effects of some terrible acts of inter-tribal warfare of our people. He saw the removal of our people from their homeland. It marked the end of many of our ancient tribal lifeways on the Great Plains; and he saw the deprivation, diseases, and death that accompanied it. My grandfather (born in the 1890s) was a child sent to a boarding school. I never recognized that I was the grandchild of a traumatized boarding school child. It was invisible to me. I didn't personally know about the trauma carried within my great grandfather that "taught" him to send his own child (my grandfather) to a boarding school in the hopes that it might be a good thing. In a similar fashion, jumping ahead to the present, all that my kids knew is that for some mysterious reason I was a father who hurt them emotionally and they didn't know why.

Here are some diagrams to help illustrate things:









These diagrams are my way of noting the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next via the mechanisms of intergenerational trauma (that done to a child by a parent) and the assorted behaviors that characterize societal trauma response (that done to a child by the society at large). Both these things (intergenerational trauma and societal trauma response behaviors) combine to perpetuate the historical trauma, where historically traumatic events stay current in the present generation. The chain stays unbroken until something happens to stop the intergenerational traumatization and disrupts the way society at large contributes to the problems. The key, according to this model, to healing historical trauma is to intervene in the intergenerational and societal trauma response behaviors thereby creating the necessary space for addressing and healing the old wounds of our fathers that we carry within us.