

Care and Guilt: Armenian Women's Communal Experience

By

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Sep. 16, 2011**

Abstract. *D. Hogue's notion of soul and F. Keshgegian's 'remembering to re-member' approach will connect communal self to the experience of God within the context of Armenian women's spirituality. Finally, the narrative framework of religious education will be presented.*

Because of memories and imagination, our souls are unique, dynamic and relational processes, grounded in the structures of body and brain. In our souls, our embodied memories and imaginations are bound together, sketching and following internal maps in plotting our course through life.

David Hogue¹

Some Background...

Armenians are a resourceful ancient people. We have survived since the days that Noah's Ark landed on our national symbol, Mount Ararat. Accepting Christianity in 301, our faith became our identity and decided our history. Armenians survived the twentieth century's first genocide in 1915 by Ottoman Turkey. This was even before the term 'genocide' was coined.² One and a half million Armenians were massacred and only one fourth of the population, mainly women, children and elderly, survived death marches through the deserts of Syria. Almost a hundred years after, the ripple effects of denied genocide, up-rootedness, loss of historical land, the formation of Soviet Armenia and forced brutal atheist soviet experience still reside in the depths of Armenian identity.

A typical Armenian woman of my age is a third-generation descendent of genocide survivors. Internalized notions of excessive care and guilt are typical characteristics of our self understanding. If caring is a stereotypical female role, guilt is a rather ambiguous concept that is rarely studied. Though care and guilt are common human characteristics, through my interaction with Armenian women, I observed that excessive care and feelings of guilt are relatively amplified in us.

Classical Western developmental and psychological studies about women do not take ethnicity, national belonging and communal experience into consideration. Such studies, while

¹ David A. Hogue, *Remembering The Future Imagining The Past: Story, Ritual, and The Human Brain* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 159.

² The word 'genocide' was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1946. The Oxford English Dictionary first listed the word 'genocide' in 1955. Samanta Power, *"A Problem From Hell" America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 40-45, 526.

comprehensive in providing general guidelines, very often stop short of being inclusive to a wider range of identity formations.

I believe that the Armenian communal experience is the key to understanding the roots of the excessive care and guilt that Armenian women exhibit. Understanding this communal dimension will help plan comprehensive Christian education that is transformative and meaningful. This paper is an attempt to bring the community dimension to the arena of identity formation. First, I will review the historical roots of the Armenian experience. Second, I will draw from neuroscience to explain the communal experience. Finally, I propose a comprehensive approach of Christian education.

I- Armenian Nationalism

Armenian ethnic identity was formulated early in history, through myths of origin, language, distinctive religion and culture. Armenian Church and family helped preserve the nation from assimilation over centuries. The modern sense of nationalism, with its emphasis on the geographical dimension emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. Armenian intellectuals, educated in Europe brought back these ideas and gave rise to Armenian nationalism. Few women were among those intellectuals. They challenged the traditional understanding of women's role in relation to the new political conception of the nation and national identity. The notion of the ideal mother was combined with the mother-educator of the nation, which extended women's role to being the mother of the nation.³ Nira Yuval-Davis would further argue that, because women have reproductive ability, they are also 'keepers' of the nation and 'producers' of the culture.⁴ Imagining the women as mothers, she also symbolizes the soul of the collectivity and collective's future. Yuval-Davis calls this imagined symbolism the "burden of representation," which also brings together the burden of bearing the collective's honor.⁵

The Armenian genocide of 1915 was part of the Ottoman Young Turks' vision of the "Turkification" plan, which was not only to empty the territories from a Christian Armenian population, "but also the obliteration of all traces that hinted to a past, so that the memory and history would also be wiped out along with the physical disappearance of the population."⁶

Survivors formed diaspora communities around world. New lands brought new threats. Preserving the family, the nation and the church became extremely important. Though a literally

³ Victoria Rowe, *A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880-1922* (London: Gomidas Institute, 2009), 91.

⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation, Politics and Culture: A Theory, Culture & Society series* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997), 37-38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ Viken Yacoubian, "Forgiveness in the Context of the Armenian Experience," in *Forgiveness And Reconciliation: Psychological Pathways to Conflict Transformation and Peace Building*, ed. Ani Kalayjian and Raymond F. Paloutzian, Peace Psychology Book Series, Series ed. Daniel J. Christie (New York: Springer, 2010), 225.

and “culturally orphaned”⁷ generation themselves, women shouldered the task of guarding the Armenian identity from assimilation. The first survivor generation couldn’t make sense out of their experienced and to protect the new generation from such memories regressed into silence.

Care & Guilt - Continuation of The Genocide

A study conducted by Boyadjian and Grigorian about the intergenerational psychological consequences of the genocide, found guilt to be included within complex symptoms of post traumatic experience. Referring to the same study, Kupelian et al concluded that, though feelings of guilt are common with other genocide experiences, in the Armenian case, it is mainly associated with not doing enough towards the survivors: the new generations, the Armenian community and the genocide acknowledgment.⁸

Kupelian et al state that preceding generations see the world’s unawareness about the genocide as a major problem. This is to top the continuous denial of the perpetrators themselves to their crime. Turkey’s denial of the genocide is a denial of the victimization of people and it is a psychological continuation of the genocide and victimization. If the purpose of genocide was to eliminate people and their culture from their homelands, “to deny their pain is to deny their humanity and it psychologically serves the genocidal purpose”.⁹

Baumeister argues that guilt has interpersonal origins. In an interpersonal context, guilt serves as a “factor that strengthens social bounds by eliciting symbolic affirmation of caring and commitment.”¹⁰ From this, we might infer that guilt is the flip side of care. These two are interrelated and bound together closely which makes it hard to distinguish the boundaries of each. When care and guilt are excessive and misplaced they become overwhelming and paralyzing for the family, community and the woman herself. The nation and the family needed women’s care to survive and they did survive. Life moved on but following generations of women unconsciously kept repeating their mother’s behavior.

⁷ Apfelbaum quoting Janine Altounian in “And Now What, After Such Tribulation? Memory and Dislocation in the Era of Uprooting,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 9 (2000): 1008-1013.

⁸ Diane Kupelian, Anie Sanentz Kalayjian and Alice Kassabian, “The Turkish Genocide of Armenians: Continuing Effects on Survivors and Their Families Eight Decades After Trauma,” in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli, The Plenum Series on Stress and Coping, Series ed. Monald Meichenbaum (N.Y. and London: Plenum Press, 2010), 194.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁰ Roy F. Boumeister, Arlene M. Stillwell, and Todd F. Heatherton, “Guilt: An Interpersonal Approach,” *Psychological Bulletin* 115 (1994): 243.

II- Neuroscience: Damasio and Hogue

A- Antonio Damasio: The Self

Antonio Damasio's recent work, *Self Comes to Mind*,¹¹ presents an evolutionary framework about the workings of the consciousness and emerging of the self. Damasio's framework helps explain how communal experience might play a decisive role in an individual's identity formation.¹²

Evolution Of The Single Mind

In his framework, Damasio builds the emergence of the self on the organisms awareness to its physical existence in an environment.¹³ This awareness is consciousness itself and is unique to humans. Self has dual notions; self as an object, which is expressed in a dynamic collection of integrated mental processes, and self as a knower, which is grounded on self as object.

Self as a knower evolves in three stages:

- 1- The protoself, which is the elementary feelings of the organism's physical existence.
- 2- The core self, which is action oriented and is about the relationship between the organism and the surrounding objects.
- 3- The autobiographical self, which is the biographical knowledge or awareness of the past and anticipated future. It is the core self with added awareness to time.¹⁴

Autobiographical self incorporates social and spiritual dimensions and constitutes the person's 'social me' and 'spiritual me'. It also accumulates biographical knowledge about the past as well as the anticipated future. The way a person would perceive his/her self in the context of his/her community would also reflect his/her understanding of the past and anticipating the future.

Adding time dimension to the evolution of the self brings memory into play. As life events are consciously and unconsciously revisited, they go under reconstruction and reformulation.¹⁵ This process of reformulation of memories is the selection of emotionally highlighted experiences. Damasio calls this process a "value-stamped selection."¹⁶

¹¹ Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010)

¹² Damasio makes clear that his framework is a hypothetical and needs further researching. Ibid., 243.

¹³ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8-12, 181- 240.

¹⁵ Ibid., 211

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

Communal Reading Of Damasio's Framework

Countless individual active minds in a given community, becoming conscious of their communal existence, also become conscious to their communal self. The communal self operates as a witness to the collective mind whose existence is acknowledged and framed in history and time. Eventually, collective minds developed verbal and non verbal languages, in the form of culture, religion and rituals. Those languages, in their turn, help shape the identity of the 'communal me'.

The evolution of mind is about emotionally stamped selection of memories, instead of a logical frame, over time. Those memories construct the individual's self and the past of the community's self, which is transmitted through the culture. Armenian communal mind is stamped by the trauma of excessive suffering and is unable to make the move beyond that trauma. Continued denial of the suffering and adds on the feelings of unjust victimization that keeps traumatizing the following generations. In a context of traumatized, victimization and constant struggle for survival, the Armenian woman would only see herself as part of this same struggle. The way an Armenian woman would locate herself in the context of her people's present would project how she imagines herself inhabiting her people's past and the future. With unresolved memories of genocide and continued victimization of communal self, Armenian women would see her consciousness embodied in caring for her community and a failure in carrying her dutiful care would unavoidably produce feelings of guilt. When survival and continuation of the nation is depending on the one woman's choices in life, she will not be able to see herself stepping outside her community's consciousness.

B- David Hogue: The Soul

David Hogue brings the concept of soul into conversation with the neuroscience. I think his notion of soul parallels with Damasio's autobiographical self and the communal reading that I suggest. Hogue defines soul as a process that is rooted in memory and imagination. Soul, as the self, is a process and not an end result. It evolves within context of time, through the interception of remembered history and anticipated future.¹⁷ As it is in individual person's case, the communal soul duels in a place between the past, the present, between the community and its experience of the Divine, in ever questioning the possibilities of here and now, and maybe something more.

Imagination and remembrance play important roles in this process of soul making. In fact, any remembrance is a new imagination of the past. Through the creative process of imagination, the mind makes changes to the lived experience and tries to attach new meanings every times a memory is retrieved.¹⁸

¹⁷ David A. Hogue, *Remembering The Future Imagining The Past: Story, Ritual, and The Human Brain* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

Hogue states, “Our imagination is the grounding of our hope- it is also the seat of our fears.”¹⁹ Throughout evolution, as survival defense mechanism for the species, imagination is hard wired to be more receptive to fear than any positive feelings. An imagination that is overwhelmed with fear in a real dangerous situation might react in an appropriate defensive way but also might “create its own monsters” in the absence of the real threat.²⁰ A soul that is trapped in a process of traumatized memory and distorted imagination would justly create new monsters to prevent such experiences from happening again.

The Armenian soul’s experience of the Divine was dynamic, life giving and sustaining faith throughout history. Though suffering was always part of Armenian experience, our theology of the cross was of the risen Man-God. Past and present were grim but hope in a future with God through the Church was our assurance for the future. Unaddressed trauma of genocide paralyzed the Armenian soul in a tragic past. Trajectory of time is frozen in a struggle to survive and preserve. The Armenian women’s soul, as the Armenian communal soul, is trapped in a traumatized past and lost its unique dimension of personhood as lived out in the present and is unable to imagine a future other than preservation of the nationhood.

III- Liberating Christian Education for Armenian Women – Redeeming Memories

Seymour, Crain and Crockett present the purpose of Christian education as formation and transformation. Christian education is about teaching of faith that helps in “basic meaning-perspectives which a person views reality.” It is to help a person live his/her life through lenses of faith. Faith transformation is the “dynamic process of reinterpreting both life experiences and one’s meaning-prospective.”²¹ Formation and transformation of a person’s meaning prospective is a dynamic process that keeps evolving in a forward pull towards the future. Trauma in the person’s life, or in the community’s life, might interrupt this process. Armenian faith lost its ability of making sense and froze in preserving the pregenocide time when life made more sense. A Christian education that is critical faith re-formation and transformation of redeeming memories has this potential of resetting this process.

Flora Keshgegian introduces the theology of redeeming memories as a form of narrative theology. She suggests that the purpose of remembering is to expand the narrative to include the new generations.²² She emphasizes the need to remember our untold genocide stories to re-

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Ibid., 49.

²¹ Jack L. Seymour, Margret Ann Crain and Joseph V. Crockett, *Educating Christians: The Intersection of Meaning, Learning, and Vocation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 124-125.

²² Flora A. Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 122.

member with our faith. Reflecting and remembering on the presence of the divine, makes human experience situated in history, connects with one another and with the divine.

Armenians created a national narrative over the past years in a nonconscious reactive mode for survival. While faith in God and Church were major characters in this narrative in the past history, they were shaped in the terms of preserving the nation, not extending hope and life for the future. Armenian women's souls and faith narratives are lost within this national reactive narrative.

A study by Eliz Sanasarina with fifty five genocide survivor women, found that they all affirmed faith in God and the Armenian Church as being essential for their survival. They were unable to answer how their faith helped in coping with genocide but never-the-less faith was essential.²³ Those women were unable to translate their feelings into words even to talk about their experience. Apfelbaum suggests that children of uprooted families tend to be psychologically healthier when their families' experiences are acknowledged.²⁴ This might suggest the same intergenerational effect of acknowledgment in the Armenian case. Uncovering and telling grandmothers' stories, Armenian women might uncover their own faith prospective.

Hogue and Damasio, both stress that soul and self are dynamic processes. Communal soul and communal self are the collection of dynamic processes of individual souls and selves seeking meaning. In other words, it is community's dynamic activity of seeking meaning and faith to face life in its subtle and utmost mysteries. Christian education of redeeming memories that uncovers past stories and affirms present stories' rootedness in the past experience of the community is a process that names the experience of past generations and brings hope for healing for the present.

Why would survivors regress to silence? Why would faith be instrumental for their survival but still exhibit excessive care? Were they unconsciously accusing God for not doing enough to protect their families? Why would the following generations of women keep repeating what their grandmothers did? How could faith in God form and transform Armenian women's behavior of care and feelings or guilt? A Christian education of redeeming memories might not be able to explaining genocide and answer many questions of faith, but it might start a process of naming and healing, a process of re-formation and transformation.

²³ The author explains that the women could not answer the question of how faith helped them cope simply because 'cope' is a Western concept and has no equivalent translation in the Armenian. Eliz Sanasarian, "Gender Distinction In The Genocidal process: A Preliminary Study Of The Armenian Case," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4 (1989): 452.

²⁴ E. R. Apfelbaum "And Now What, After Such Tribulation? Memory and Dislocation in the Era of Uprooting," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 9 (2000): 1011.

In conclusion...

An Armenian woman's identity is part of her community's self. Her identity and faith formation is shaped by the way she perceives herself as a mother of her people. Her excessive guilt is related to her feelings of not caring enough for her family and nation. A Christian education of redeeming memories provides an alternative narrative not only for her but also for the whole community. Comprehensive Christian education agenda of faith formation and transformation that is based on naming past generations' experiences and going beyond it to include and name present narratives of the Armenian women, has the potential of setting the Armenian soul back on the trajectory of past imagination and future memory with God.

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