Early Relational Health: A Model for Peace

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Hoda and I formed a powerful connection the first time we met in September 2022 at the opening session of the UMass Chan Medical School Early Relational Health Fellowship where I am a faculty member and Hoda is a member of the 2022-2024 class. At our third meeting in April of 2023, as I walked with Hoda from our hotel to the campus she shared her excitement over a recent trip to Palestine with her husband and two boys. At the time I was working on a book that centered around the idea of “playing in the uncertainty” as a path to connection and healing. Here we were. I did not know where Hoda was coming from. Mindful of the fraught history between Israel and Palestine, I listened with an intention to be fully present without fear or defensiveness.

I once heard the current conflict in the Middle East described as “hurt people hurting people.” In our fellowship we teach about epigenetics, the process by which trauma from past generations takes up residence in our genes. My ancestors were murdered in the Russian pogroms and the gas ovens of Nazi Germany. The pain of generations of traumatic loss lives in my brain and body. The same is true for not only the people directly fighting the Israel-Hamas war but for all the people watching the conflict unfold.

The writings and teachings of renowned pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, whose research and theories are infused in our Early Relational Health Fellowship, described how he traveled to a number of war-torn countries in the course of teaching about his work. When the things he saw threatened to overwhelm him, he would visit with a new mother and her baby. Taking time to listen to them, he would find renewed hope. Both Hoda and I in our separate career trajectories found our way to a similar conclusion to Dr. Brazelton: Babies and their caregivers have the power to heal the world. Perhaps the peace process calls for us to listen—to hold front and center this idea that others have valid experiences of the world that are different from our own.

My relationship with Hoda—and the process of writing this article—brings a feeling of calm when bombarded by the violence and unimaginable pain splashed across newspaper headlines and social media posts. Hoda and I have a largely unspoken agreement to intentionally resist the use of historical or political rhetoric—taking a lesson from babies who make meaning of their
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worlds well before thought and language come online. While language is the container for our respective experiences, the healing power of connection takes place outside the realm of words.

To work towards peace, we would be wise to center ourselves in these preverbal, infantile elements before engaging in dialogue mediated by the higher thinking parts of the brain. As William Schafer states in an article titled *The Infant as a Reflection of the Soul*, “If we let them, babies can teach us a lot about capacities we lost during childhood. If we are willing to receive it, they can give us the incentive we need to go about the difficult task of recovering these capacities and making them conscious, deliberate, and enduring elements in our adult lives.”

I remember when I first met Dr. Claudia Gold in September of 2022. As certain as I was about the protective effects of healthy parent-child relationships and their power to heal the world, I knew that I needed to join this fellowship. While I did not know what the outcome would be for me on a personal level, something compelled me to embark on this journey with a heart as open as my mind.

During Day 1 introductions, I recall being drawn to Dr. Gold’s experience as a pediatrician and the possibility of promoting child mental health in primary care when taking an approach that centers the family. She then dove into the story of her family’s heritage. As she spoke, I remembered my Jewish childhood friends and our conversations about being limited to a minority group. Before ever knowing anything about Palestine or Israel as a teen, what I knew was that Muslims and Jews had much in common. I listened as she narrated her experience of being the daughter of a Holocaust Survivor and told of her father’s heroic return to Germany as a US soldier to rescue his own parents from a concentration camp. From beneath my amazement arose a deep empathy for the pain, shame, and loss felt by generations of Jews as Claudia
reflected on the impact it left on her childhood. I will never forget what she said next: “My journey to ease my own pain deeply informs my work.”

At that moment, I felt an awakening in my body. Could it be that what has brought me to my work and this fellowship is an intergenerational pain that I have mistakenly thought of as solely my own? Suddenly I began piecing together my story, as I had done many times before. But this time, as she had done, I thought about my life within the context of my parents’ immigration story and their parents’ experiences of living under British colonization in Egypt. I had grown up keenly aware of America’s intolerance for my people. But for the first time, it dawned on me that the way I viewed myself was shaped by my surroundings, and woven in were the negative influences reflected from the lenses of outsiders who defined me and my lineage.

*We often learn from children that people thrive as their authentic selves when immersed in environments that breed safety and understanding. Unfortunately, we know the opposite is true as well, and that a lack of security can become passed down through generations, affecting children even while still in the womb.*

I don’t recall exactly how old I was when I took on the role of diplomat for Islam and Muslims- a daunting task I assumed since the tragic events of September 11th. Only recently, with the wave of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, had I noticed American acceptance of Arabs and Muslims.

But suddenly tragedy struck again on October 7th and within an instant, people regressed to their post-9/11 demeanor quicker than one could say muscle memory. While heartbroken by the loss of Jewish lives and furious at the flood of Islamophobic tropes that once again contaminated the air, I was most fearful of the backlash that I knew would come to my brothers and sisters in Palestine. I wondered who amongst my friends and colleagues would distance themselves from me and who would still talk to me. Would they trust in our relationships enough to recognize the humanity of my people and reject claims of us being barbaric antissemites? Rather than retreat in anticipation of impending alienation, I chose to lean into the courage I had gained from reading Claudia’s book, “The Power of Discord.” I challenged myself to embrace the stance of uncertainty. *How will I know without taking the first step to connect? Regardless of others’*
responses, I reassured myself that fear and retreat were no longer options. So, I reached out to my Jewish friends to check on the safety of their loved ones.

Young children and their parents are the best teachers of the power of “rupture and repair.” I can misunderstand or be misunderstood, but the conversation does not end there. With curiosity and an open heart, we can understand, empathize, and share in meaningful connection.

Our email exchange demonstrated the possibility of connection and a shared prayer for peace and freedom- even amid our own grief. While violence and global powers have caused insurmountable destruction, meaningful relationships are what provide us the capacity to heal through togetherness.

As a mother clutches her newborn to soothe her soul, her closeness helps her infant to regulate his temperature, breathing, heart rate, and sense of security. Similarly, two people can hold space for one another, resulting in emotional co-regulation. How beautiful, is the capacity of the human being, while engulfed in one’s own sorrow, to simultaneously hold space for both oneself and another, and in return feel held by the grieving other?

Dear Claudia,

I wanted to send a note to convey my love and hope that you do not have family affected by the war in Israel. Our hearts have been torn by the ongoing suffering and death and I know it must be the same for you.

May God bring safety and healing to the people and to the land.

Warmly,

Hoda
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Dear Hoda

When I saw you last night on Zoom I wanted to reach through the screen and give you a big big hug. I too feel such deep pain for the people of Palestine and Israel caught up in this nightmare.

I recall our conversation about your family’s recent trip to Palestine. I imagine that makes this all the more painful.

My son had planned to go to farm on a Kibbutz but postponed his trip to spend Thanksgiving with family. It’s very close for both of us.

We together can hold on to hope that peace will come someday.

xo

Claudia