

## Brainwashed

*Our imaginations are like swollen rivers, flooded with the falsehoods of the ages as they have been passed on to us across the generations. Who we are, who everyone else is, and what we can be – all are defined by this river, which is not of our making.* Rolf Gates

*We were brainwashed.* Marianne Williamson

Have you ever listened to a child talk about his or her dreams -- about who and what he or she wants to be when they grow up and about what their life will be like? Their joy is infectious -- the sparkle in their eyes almost magical. When they look into their future, they see possibility and unlimited potential rather than roadblocks and doubt. They can be pirates and princesses, football stars and famous singers, garbage collectors and cowboys, police officers and teachers. And then, at some point, they start losing that twinkle. They learn that boys don't wear dresses and girls don't play football. They learn that garbage collectors have to work every day, not just the day that trash gets picked up on their street. And they learn to fear. They pick up deeply rooted family paradigms about how life is and how they must "be" in the world.

Sometimes these messages are empowering. Often times the messages we get from our families and communities don't just constrain us, they squash our souls. We learn to be afraid to live our dreams. For many of us, fear was the backdrop to how our family lived their lives. We learn to live in the fear of scarcity rather than trusting in the principal of abundance from parents who, no matter how much money they made, worried about not having enough, or parents who pushed themselves ever harder to prove to someone that they were good enough. We learn to hoard things from parents who were afraid of not having enough stuff or of losing some precious memory. We learn not to take risks from parents who see only danger. We lose our trust in possibility from parents who focus on the negatives of every situation.

The fears that we picked up in childhood impact us even when we can see that they are ridiculous. When I was in grad school, for example, I had a roommate whose parents had survived the holocaust. One day, she flipped out in class. We were discussing a book about the KKK and she broke down in tears. At home, later that night, she told me that she was afraid that the KKK would break into our house. She was terrified in part because she didn't have a secret hiding place. I was mystified until she explained that when she was a child, her parents had built a hiding place behind their pantry. Her parents had instructed her and her brother to hide in their hidey-hole if the police or any other dangerous person came to their door. All her life, she'd lived in shadow of her parents' fear. Reading about the KKK had been enough to stoke the flames of that fear. We also come to define who we are through the messages and definitions that our families give us. For example, last week, I was looking through a box of photographs that I'd inherited from my grandmother for a story idea. I came across a picture of a cat that I'd drawn when I was eleven. I had dreamed of becoming an artist, so when I saw a book on drawing, I bought it with my allowance. The cat was the first thing I'd drawn using the techniques described in the book. I was proud of my work. I tentatively took

on the identity, “artist.” And then I showed the picture to my father. For years he’d made fun of pictures, but I thought that when he saw how well I’d done, he’d see my talent. He didn’t. He criticized my drawing and humiliated me for even thinking that I could be an artist. I don’t remember exactly what he’d said, but I do remember slinking back to my room in tears. I threw the book away and gave up art. I learned that I was not an artist.

Not only do we take in our family’s verbal messages, we take in what they model for us. Some people stay with their partners for years after the relationship is viable because their parents stayed together and they assume that that’s just what families do. Others never really commit to relationships at all because one their parents walked out or because they watched their parents endure loveless, unrewarding marriages. Others skulk through life in misery because of an unspoken family belief that life, by definition, is hard or that living is all about suffering.

These limiting messages chain us to not only our personal pasts but to our familial pasts. They prevent us from trying to live our dreams. Worse still, sometimes these messages cause us to bury our dreams so deeply that we don’t even hear their call. They cause us to go through the motions of life, putting one foot in front of the other, totally lost to our deepest longings. Without our dreams, we feel stuck, anxious, depressed and miserable.

The good news is that we don’t have to stay brainwashed. The bad news is that it’s a bit of work. The only way around these messages is through them. In order to learn to dream again, we must pull our selves out of that river of our imagination that Gates was talking about and examine the messages we picked up from others from the objectivity of a safe shore. And when we have gained enough distance, we must release the old messages into the past where they belong and learn to be fully present to reality as it is now. Then, and only then, can we reclaim the sense of possibility for the future that came so easily when we were children.

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