

TALL POPPIES: THE EFFECTS OF INNER AND OUTER OPPRESSION

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The Tall Poppy, and Similar Patterns around The World

According to Australian National University, a tall poppy is “a person who stands out from the crowd by being successful, rich, or famous. It is often said that Australians have a tendency to cut tall poppies down to size by denigrating them. This is known as the tall poppy syndrome.”

Historians have traced the tall poppy syndrome to the early colonial days in Sydney. Most of the prisoners who were sent to Australia in the late 18th century were poor people who had been convicted of petty crimes like stealing a loaf of bread or a warm coat. The British soldiers, who were in charge, beat convicts for their “insolence.” The “tall poppies,” the ones who stood out, were cut down.

After their terms of imprisonment, these convicts became free settlers and many were given plots of (Aboriginal) land to farm. So these same people, who had been oppressed themselves, became oppressors of a group of people who were even more marginalized.

These tendencies are not exclusively Australian. In many cultures around the world, it is not acceptable or encouraged to stand out or be more successful than others.

For instance, in Scandinavia, there is a concept called Janteloven. This comes from a book, *En flyktning korsar sitt spår*, by the Norwegian/Danish author Aksel Sandemose. It is about jealousy and small village prejudice where those who succeed become the victims of bad gossip. Some of the “laws” of Janteloven include: “Don't think you are anything special. Don't think you know more than we do. Don't think you are better than us. Don't think you know more than us.”

Most Scandinavians would say that Janteloven does not exist anymore, or that it is more hidden than it used to be. These days many people do go all the way with their talents, and the cultures of the region are very artistic and creative. The historical tendency, though, was to not have anyone be too much or too little. This kind of collective leveling might have been summed up in the question, “Who do you think you are?”

It should be said that there can be beautiful aspects to these tendencies. For instance, egalitarianism is a strong part of the Australian national identity. In Scandinavia, this tendency may have contributed to what is largely a compassionate social system that is based on equal distribution and social responsibility, where nobody is too rich and nobody too poor.

These traits are not just found in Northern European and Australian-European cultures. The Japanese have something similar to the Tall Poppy that they call “*deru kui wa utareru*,” which can be roughly translated as “the nail sticking up gets hammered down.”

In India, people who stand out in any form in a social or political context are very suspect and are cut down. There is a well known story about “Indian crabs” and it goes like this: An importer of crabs did not put a lid on the various boxes of crabs that he was importing. When someone asked him how he was not afraid that the crabs will run away, he replied “because they were Indian crabs.” And the crabs all arrived safely; not one was missing. The moral of the story is that in India even crabs will not allow anyone to escape and be different. They will pull them back! So whether covertly or overtly, the masses reign and the lowest common denominator prevails!

There are many stories of in India of social reformers who have been mercilessly oppressed or even murdered like Gandhiji for bringing in social reforms that upset the established system. In families, which are the smallest political unit, children who outshine others are not encouraged because to be different is frightening. And this gives way to internalized oppression wherein taking risks in any form is difficult, for fear of the danger of ‘not making it, and of being looked down by others.’

Though very little of this is written about, it is exercised as a way of life. As in Australia and Scandinavia, we can say that a beautiful aspect is that this helps India to be egalitarian, and it helps maintain the World’s largest democracy, which also has the space for one of the oldest surviving Marxist states.

The tall poppy syndrome can be an inner experience. Each of us may cut ourselves down by thinking we should not speak out, stand out from the crowd, succeed, or try something new. This can influence us in a group process. We might, for instance, think of an intervention that could help the group to move forward, but our inner critic says it is stupid. Or we might worry that our friends, enemies, colleagues, or teachers would cut us down, so we cut ourselves down first by staying quiet.

Inner and Outer Jealousy

It is all too human to sometimes find yourself feeling jealous of other's successes, abilities, even social rank. To just condemn this reaction is to only drive it underground where it can play havoc with your life. It could be more useful to discover how to use your experience wisely. One possibility is to ask the person you are jealous of for her "secrets" on how to do whatever you feel you can't do. If that isn't right for you or for her, then you can do inner work in which you unfold, discover and shapeshift into her essence.

It is also common to be the object of someone else’s jealousy. The jealous party may be a “real” person in the outer world, or it may be a part of yourself that is jealous of your growth. Shamans and traditional healers around the world have worked with similar phenomena for ages. They know that sickness can sometimes be caused by a jealous person or spirit. If you are the victim of inner jealousy, you may want to teach the jealous

part or spirit to do what it sees you are able to do but believes it cannot do. This might help to free both you and the spirit!

Effects of Inner and Outer Oppression

Worldwork studies and tries to bring awareness to the inner and outer effects of the insidious and pandemic issue of oppression. We can think of the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed as being experienced both inside and outside of us as also in different levels of reality, consensus reality, dreamland, etc.

There is a general tendency to experience the oppressor as outside and as being someone else. This shows up in a large group process as everyone feeling like the victim without any identifying as a persecutor. The role of the oppressor is commonly marginalized as a ghost role, present but not taken up by anyone.

On the level of consensus reality, there are observable differences designating social rank, which establish who has more power and privilege based on such factors as race, age, gender, sexual orientation and so forth. Those with more power and privilege can (intentionally or unintentionally) oppress groups that have less power and privilege. This oppression has different effects on marginalized and mainstream groups.

Practically everyone internalizes the dominant culture's ranking system, allowing outer oppressions to become inner subjective powers in one's personal life. This can show up inside people from marginalized groups as a figure that represents chronic self-criticism, self doubt, self-hatred, and hopelessness. It is a figure that puts them down in the same way that the dominant culture does because they don't measure up to the standards of how they "should" look or behave. The outer world and its values become internally dominating, sometimes causing people from marginalized groups to think that all their problems are their own fault. This can create shame and isolation.

It is very difficult for people to protect themselves from outside or institutional abuse. The experience of being continually ignored and put down can leave people from marginalized groups feeling that their only alternatives are either to revolt, to get revenge, or to try to numb the constant pain by getting high on drugs and alcohol. Outer oppression can lead to a host of problems like body symptoms, a deadening of feelings, depression, chronic anger and vengeful feelings, exhaustion, low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, etc. People from marginalized groups can also tend to feel responsible for the well-being of the mainstream. They sometimes swallow their own suffering in order to take care of the other side.

The same forces that keep people marginalized can also oppress people in the mainstream. For example, a man who inadvertently marginalizes the suffering of women may also project and repress his own sensitivity and emotions. This can result in, among other things, failed relationships or psychosomatic symptoms, or possibly even a shorter life span.

People from the mainstream can be handicapped by their inability to see their own rank and privilege. Since insensitivity to rank rankles, mainstream unconsciousness can provoke escalation and even violence in the group that feels powerless. Those in the mainstream then begin to feel oppressed by the criticism that they have in part provoked. If they have not had a chance to get in touch with or work through their own past traumas, they are likely to freeze up when attacked, and so look even more like, for example, the "typical privileged white heterosexual man." This arouses a cycle of retaliation and numbing out.

In Dreamland (the level of reality that is composed of subjective, dream-like experiences manifesting in fantasies, dualities, body feeling, double signals, and ghost roles), the victim and the abuser roles are in everyone to some extent. Inner work here can be useful to people from marginalized groups since it allows access to the inner critic's power and confidence. Getting in touch with this inner power also enables them to congruently sit on their own side, as well as speak out and take social action. For people from mainstream groups, doing inner work can allow the possibility of working through past traumas. Finding the inner oppressed one can enable those from mainstream groups to congruently open themselves and empathize with the other side, to express the hurt that can truly protect them, and to recover aspects of their personality that could bring more meaning and vitality to their lives and relationships.

SMALL GROUP EXERCISE

Think about the group process that has been happening in your small group so far.

Inner work:

What people/groups/roles have been marginalized? What people/groups/roles have been more mainstream for this group? Who/what has felt oppressed? Who/what has felt like an oppressor. (Whether or not that person or group or role has identified as the oppressor.) What effect does this have on the people identified with these groups or roles? (How do you feel in your body? Do you feel well in the group? Do you feel comfortable with the other people in the group? Do you feel others like you?) How has the group reacted when someone has a good idea or when someone tries to facilitate? Was the group supportive? Did the group try to cut down the tall poppy? How did this feel to be cut down, or to cut someone down?

Group process:

As the group processes whatever comes up, notice:

- Are the roles of "oppressed" and "oppressor" present in the group?
- If so, maybe check in with yourself about how you feel in either of these roles. Experiment with bringing your personal experiences about this (including body experience) into the group process.
- Does anyone try to facilitate or does anyone stand out in the group process?
- If so, notice how you treat this person, and how the group treats this person.
- Notice how willing you are to facilitate and/or stand out in the group process. Do you feel you will be supported or are you afraid you will be cut down? Experiment with bringing your experience into the group process.