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CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

The Difference That Makes a Difference: We Need More Guts!

DJORDJE JOVANOVIĆ¹

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?

As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

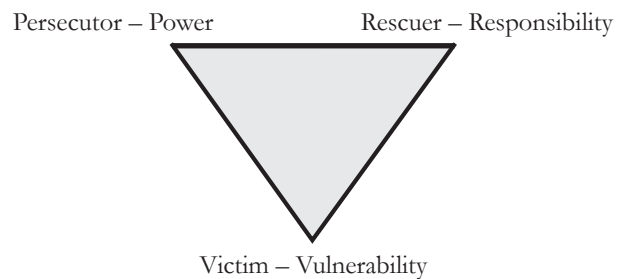
Marianne Williamson

When I arrived on this planet, for the first few years I felt very small and it seemed to me that so many other people were bigger and had more understanding of what was going on. I believe we have all experienced this. Day-by-day, the problematic world of adults becomes our own as we grow. “Teachers” who were supposed to teach us actually do only what was done to them. We find a “new” experience in the process of becoming civilised. This process has different values in different times and different places. In the time and place where I grew up, this process was mainly led by people with low self-esteem who openly or secretly undermined others to make themselves feel better. In such surroundings, being a child, going through puberty or just being alive makes you feel ashamed. If, on top of all that, you are designated as being among the most stigmatised groups in Europe, you are in big trouble. Growing up Romani and gay in the 1980s in Serbia was something you really have to hear about!

When I was asked to write a testimony about the multiple discrimination I experience being both Romani and gay, it became a really big challenge to do so without reliving traumas and tragedies (which are certainly there, and there is a need to speak about them). On the other hand, this story offers the hope that it *is* possible to cope with such things and at the same time feel pleasure and enjoyment in life. Things in themselves are neither good nor bad, but we give them those qualities through our perception of them. Something that most people believe is a curse can be experienced as a blessing.

My growth into an adult was the real drama, and of course I was quite the queen. In my drama, I went through all the main roles: from seeing myself as a victim I turned into a persecutor, full of hate; and then from persecutor I became a rescuer, realising my own responsibilities.

The Drama Triangle² is a transactional analysis model for understanding human interactions. The model posits three habitual psychological roles: Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer.



Here I present my feelings, my state of mind and my view on the whole world (and also some personal moments) while experiencing and passing through the three different states of Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer, and learning to cope with and react to the various discriminations I face.

Being a victim

Vulnerability. Almost every child has the feeling of being dependent on adults. Children are aware of their vulnerability.

¹ Djordje Jovanovic is ERRC Research Coordinator.

² Stephen Karpman, “Fairy tales and script drama analysis”, *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 7(26), (1968): 39-43.

It is interesting to me that, even as a child, I realised that I was different. I knew that my sexual orientation was something I shouldn't talk about with adults or even my peers. Now, more than 20 years later, I realise that I acted entirely properly. In those days, telling my parents that I was gay would have led me to a very traumatising experience. At the very least, they would have taken me to the doctor who at that time most likely thought that homosexuality was a disease. When the doctors would not have been able to "cure" me, my parents would probably have taken me to church or a fortune teller or some other spiritualist who would have tried to drive the devil out of me.

I was alone with myself. For the first 10 years of my life, I thought I was the only homosexual in the world. In a small Serbian village in the 1980s and with only a few radio stations and two television channels, where such things were never spoken about, I was sure I was the only one. But then, one day, while playing in the dump near my house I found a pornographic magazine. There was an ad saying "man seeks men". Oh my God, I felt so weird.



Church. My mother is a very religious woman, and even if the church was not

that popular at that time for my mum it was. With her low level of education, she believes literally in all that the holy books describe. Through her influence I grew up with angels and the devil: dragons which want to deceive people; water that cleans your sins; snakes that persuade you to do evil things. As a teenager at that time, I thought that the desire to have same-sex relations was a curse. The first person to whom I ever confessed that I had sexual preferences towards men rather than women was an Orthodox monk. Of course, he told me that if I ever had sex with men I would burn in hell; that sin would reserve me a one-way ticket to hell. And at that time, I believed him.

Ill-Treatment. When you are a teenager, the word that best describes you is confusion. On top of all the confusion teenagers have I would add fighting against "curses"

and discrimination. There was a lot of discrimination when I was a child; Romani children in school regularly received beatings from their teachers. My teachers never beat me; but from the first day of class my teachers forced me to sit in the last row with other Romani students because it was the custom in that school. Romani parents, who went through the same or even more primitive treatment when they were kids, never complained of such treatment towards their children; they never thought about raising their voice against authority. My older brother came home one day with a broken and bloody nose because his teacher beat him. This was before I started school, so how was I supposed to look forward to it? However, being a kid, there were so many other interesting discoveries about life that I paid very

little attention to these happenings. But, when you are a teenager and you are supposed to have developed some kind of self-esteem, the fact that your peers in school and authorities discriminate against you (and by default see you as a second-class citizen) is very hard to cope with. It is hard to convince yourself that it is they who are all crazy and that, in fact, you are OK. There was no information about discrimination or un-

equal treatment at that time. In the 1990s, Yugoslavia was falling apart along with the value systems of Serbian society. We were living in an atmosphere of savagery, with the strong oppressing the weak.

Imagination. The beautiful world of fantasy: surrounded by so many social diseases that began to erupt from people I ran into a world of imagination. People literally went mad; there was news about killings in Bosnia and Croatia every day. Yesterday's friends and neighbours were slaying each other's children. On the front page of some newspapers appeared a man who had killed children in the war and made necklaces with their fingers. In my world, everything was fine. I was dating a beautiful guy a few years older than me. We had some issues in our relationship, just like those of Brenda and Dylan in the popular TV show *Beverly Hills 90210*.

ERRC Research Coordinator Djordje Jovanovic

PHOTO CREDIT: SINAN GÖKÇEN/ERRC

Motivation to commit suicide. Even in my world of imagination, I had no peace. The loud arguments of my parents through the door of my room were pushed into my imaginary world. Their world was destroyed; we came to the brink of poverty. The war slashed jobs, especially for Roma, and there was no money. People were even crazier than before. Finding no peace in my fantasy world, I decided to kill myself. I was depressed and did not see any way that my situation would change or improve; I had no power to change the circumstances into which I was born. I tried to let my feelings die, though my curiosity remained to live and see what would happen next. Eventually, a glimmer of hope and maybe also fear overpowered these feelings; I decided not to kill myself and see how life played out. So, somehow I did and I did not kill myself.

Being a persecutor

Power of hate. Because I had to kill myself, I began to hate. I hated God and his hell. I hated my parents. I hated my teachers. I hated non-homosexuals. I hated non-Roma. Hate was a power that gave me inspiration to do good things, though not for good reasons. My intentions were selfish; I began to document human rights abuse of Roma, not primarily to help Roma, but more to make myself feel better. I did not know that was wrong. I tried to hide on the side of good, so that I could actually persecute those who had first made me a victim.

Embarrassment gave me power. Throughout my childhood and teenage years I felt embarrassed because I am gay and also because I am Romani. My classmates and my teachers treated me as inferior only because I am Romani: once, instead of calling me by my name to stand up for oral exam, my ecology teacher called me “mulo balo” with reference to the stereotype that Roma eat dead animals. The whole class was laughing at me. I felt embarrassed. I did not know that I should not be embarrassed, but that they should be! I wanted to embarrass those who embarrassed me and so I turned to human rights work. I wished to change things. But, what I did not know was that it is not possible to draw energy for good from a source that is sick; the origin of my motivation was wrong.

Roma have suffered a lot. As a persecutor, I thought it was time that somebody else should suffer; people who treated Roma badly should be made to feel defeated. Licking the wounds of each other as wolves, we should rebel against those who have made us suffer; against those who have per-

secuted us for centuries; writing our history with our own blood and the blood of those who keep our children in fear while receiving rewards for it. In the state of mind of persecutor I was nationalist; I liked someone just because he or she was Romani. I even thought that we, as Roma, have something that non-Roma do not, that we are better people, that we have better understanding and a unique view on things. My partner, who is non-Romani, asked me if I really believed in all of that and gave me some very good examples of why those beliefs were wrong. I did not know that every form of nationalism is wrong, even if it comes as a reaction. At some point, even patriotism is a disease.

Sex. I first experienced sex when I was in the state of persecutor. All the time, I fought with hate for that part of my identity, my homosexuality, that I, in fact, enjoyed. I should also mention that most of my sexual partners did not explicitly know that I was Romani. I am sure that some of them wouldn't have been in a “relationship” with me if they had known. One non-Romani guy I dated had been the one to make the first move. But he dropped his original intentions after realising I was Romani. When people belong to a minority group, it does not mean that they are open-minded enough to understand another minority which has similar or completely different problems. Belonging to one minority can even make you more intolerant of another, which is sad.

Emancipation. The process of turning my attention to human rights began. I was beginning to understand that all people are the same, and all have the same rights. I always knew that, but finally I had the tools to fight and persecute those who were mistreating others just because they were different. I fell into a trap which still holds a lot of people. What I had originally experienced as my personal defeat I tried to compensate by fighting for the rights of those who are treated unfairly, without realising that it is not the fight itself which is the point.

The **Circle** can be ended here. Hate provokes hate. Hate cannot bring any good. Activism for *non*-discrimination, not *against* discrimination. Not against, but *for* something; not to hurt the oppressors, but to help the oppressed. Our feelings must be our guides; if we are feeling angry, if we are feeling disappointment, dissatisfaction or displeasure, people around us will sense the same.

Universality. All human beings have equal rights. That is something that a person who feels like a persecutor will never accept. I realised that I was on the wrong path for a long time,

I realised that I had to make change. First I had to accept myself; by doing this I truly accepted the universality of rights. As my personal development progresses, as a Romani person and a gay person, I would prefer it if these two groups could accept each other. I am sure that will happen in the future.

Taboo. In the society in which I grew up and live, it is more or less taboo to speak about certain things. There are lots of people I know (and some of them are very close to me) who find it difficult to speak with me about being Romani and gay. Even if they are very interested in these topics, they do not know how to approach it. For some, it is totally taboo (especially this part, being gay). In the state of mind of persecutor I was afraid to respond to them; having moved from that role, I now encourage them to speak open about this topic.

Objectivity. This is something that is missing from a persecutor's judgments, although the persecutor himself thinks that all his tendencies to make others suffer are perfectly justified. What is more interesting is that a victim accepts those justifications. I was playing this "game" with myself: even if in general I accepted myself for my whole being, sometimes I still persecuted that accepted part of me by going back to old feelings that it is wrong to be gay. At times I still felt more comfortable in that role. What concerns me is that some people I personally know who belong to Romani or LGBT minorities think that they deserve the unfair treatment that they receive. Actually, what is happening is that the surroundings in which they live never really give them the opportunity to accept themselves. Even if from the outside it looks like they can deal with it through their behaviour, sometimes you can see this incongruence.

Reaction. In the state of persecutor, there was no waiting for me; I reacted immediately to everything that I perceived as a provocation and which reinforced stereotypes. This kind of reaction can be good, but such behaviour can be without wisdom and shows only the power of youth and energy. However, sometimes a strong immediate reaction is something that the Roma movement is missing. Sometimes we need to have more guts.

Being a rescuer

Religion. My own relationship with God is the most important thing for me. I first have to be in balance with

myself and my religion, and then I believe my actions are balanced and correct. How I regard religion at this moment is perhaps best described by this quote:

Someone once asked why the Master is so distrustful of religion. Is not religion the best thing that humanity has? The Master's response was enigmatic: The best and the worst – it gives you a religion. Why the worst? Because, people usually adopt enough religion to hate, but not enough to love.³

Emotional intelligence. This is something that every responsible person needs to have. If you want to be an agent of change in the world, and I certainly have the desire to be this, you need to understand your own emotions and the emotions of other people. However, understanding is not enough; the key is in regulation. We need to regulate our emotions and to use them for efficient and creative thinking to achieve change.

Security. We all want to feel secure, it is easier to see the things around you if you feel that you are in a secure position. It is easier to make plans and to bring decisions. We must feel secure to be able to help other people; but different people feel secure for different reasons. To live in poverty and feel secure is almost impossible. Of course, there are people that choose that way of life because of ascetic reasons. However, the greatest numbers of people who suffer in poverty have not chosen to do so and we must all understand that we are also partly responsible for their plight. Taking for ourselves more than we need, we are responsible for the poverty of others. Working for the human rights of Roma, and living in conditions ten times better than those we advocate for, is something I am not sure I will be able to cope with in the moment of truth, in the moment when I will have to leave this world.

The Circle ended here for me. When I accepted and started to love myself, I stopped hating others, and not just that but I also started enjoying life. What we achieve in our life can not only be measured by the achievements we have, but must be also measured from the position in which we started.

Universe. It is so big and unexplored and there are so many means for exploration. I thought that being Romani and gay was a burden to carry through life, but now I see the different elements of my being as valuable to the way I

3 Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*, 1998.

learn about and discover the universe in which we live, and also the way to understand God and his creation. It is hard to explain with words but I think we have all experienced that moment when our inner self tells us that there is nothing we should be afraid of and that the things that are happening to us were really meant to happen. Put simply, I can not imagine that my life could be different and from this perspective if someone would ask me if I *wanted* something to be different in my life I would not want any change. I think that the situation in which I grew up contributes to the fact that now I feel good and happy.

Every change should first come from ourselves. I had to change myself first and the greatest task was to accept and respect myself in that change. Now that I respect

myself it is easier for me to venture in to help others. If we wish other people to treat us with respect, we first have to respect ourselves. If you want to change someone, first change yourself. “*We must become the change we want to see*”, as Gandhi said.⁴

Responsibility. It is very easy to hide from responsibility but I learned that I have to accept it and that, actually, I am responsible. Sometimes we are not aware of the responsibility we have. I am not just talking about the usual ways of showing commitment or dedication; here I mean the responsibility we have to ourselves, that which we are so afraid of – the responsibility to examine our own life.

As Socrates said: “An unexamined life is not worth living”.

4 See: http://thinkexist.com/quotation/we_must_become_the_change_we_want_to_see/11442.html.