



AHMHA

All Healers Mental Health Alliance

Bringing Hope and Help in Times of All Hazards and Disasters

Noose or New Slavery?

The more my work as a psychiatrist challenges me to help my clients remain in the community, the more the staggering profundity of pain my clients endure tests me in a myriad of validations, interpretations, cognitive reframes, and psychotropic compotes. In New Orleans, this task is geometrically catastrophic with a damaged infrastructure slowly healing by second intention. Behavioral health resources expand for nanoseconds and shrink twice as fast. Strain causes healthcare providers to combust with burnout. For my clients there is seemingly little hope.



What is the choice for the African-American adult in a city of endless disillusionment and pointless anticipation of recovery? Opposition meets self-assertion borne out of resiliency. Oppression meets newfound entitlements from evacuation survival. In one week, a client working on grounds restoration (clearing blighted properties) and a client with a Bronze star, scarred with searing wounds and a broken marriage talk about their confrontations with the noose. Resistant European-Americans struggling for their own survival seemingly place traumatic threats of death upon my two African-

American clients. The former occurred in real life with a white boss stringing up a noose over a tree and drove the proverbial pickup truck beneath the noose as a warning to the assertions of equity for all persons of color working on the job crew by this black male employee. The boss said it was “a joke.” Both whites and Mexicans laughed as the 6 feet, 4 inch brother stood in horror. Past incarcerations for physical explosions haunted him as he tried to maintain his freedom of 12 years; and keep calm as he tried to maintain employment that was hard to find. The latter, an Iraqi War veteran, was plagued by nightmares in which she swings and braces against the wall to keep from being strangled. Someone sits in the chair below her and watches. The Army has called her back for redeployment.

These stories juxtapose against a family of four children and one mother waiting for a father to return from prison. A local summer program took the 11-year-old daughter to a rural museum that depicted American slavery of the 18th and 19th centuries. A guide asked the children to consider what a “new slavery” would be in our day and times. The children suggested drug use, distribution, selling as well as killing were the new forms of oppression in our country. In the family therapy, I congratulated the young girl for presenting the day’s events. I asked about how children arrive at such choices to use drugs. Along with her three brothers, she shrugged her shoulders. The restless 9-year-old brother thought that maybe “bad households.” When asked what kinds of things happen in “bad homes” he said, “fighting.” I said, “Oh.” I offered a few examples of fighting that were reminiscent of the previous visit and goals for treatment. All five members looked surprised.

My client, the bronze star heroine, wondered, “Why did God put me here? For what purpose?”