

Independence versus interdependence

tiny (Lisa Gray-Garcia)



Capitalism pushes the cult of individualism. But true wealth comes from family, connectedness and giving (and that doesn't mean presents...)

I hold the world... or try to... on my broken back... I have carried worlds and toasters – the guts of a hundred evictions, couches and king-sized beds and everything else - ... on my broken back I have carried the love of some people and the disdain of others the hate of a thousand landlords, welfare workers, and a few hundred angry creditors... and my broken family... ..on my broken back...

— excerpt from *My broken back* by *tiny* aka *Lisa Gray-Garcia*

Interdependence – what is it really? In a capitalistic society raised on the cult of independence and the notion that an individual's personal advancement are the most important thing to strive for, how can we really comprehend — or more importantly, practice — true interdependence?

What are our personal models of interdependence? And as we approach the co-opted and colonized Christmas holiday — or what I now have dubbed Capitalismas — how will those of us trying to be practitioners of interdependence translate some sense of spirit and true care-giving to our families and communities?

Mine is a story of survival common to many families subsisting in poverty all over the world. My mother was a poor woman of color who was one paycheck away from homelessness. When she lost her job and became disabled it was necessary that I drop out of school in the sixth grade, at age 11, so I could work to support us.

Contrary to Western (US) capitalist standards where healthy families are made up of individuals whose personal advancement and fulfillment are considered paramount, I am honored that I could help my family, that I could help my mother, and like poor children all over the world, I am aware that without my help she would not have made it.

I learned by default that the core concept of interdependence is sacrifice, sacrifice not for one's self, but for others - not in a minimal, time limited, "I've got to go on with my life, you are holding onto me, holding me up, or just plain holding me" kinda way - but in a selfless, "I love you, you raised me, you are my elder, my child, I am there for you" way.

These values didn't come to me easily. For the first part of my life I was raised on US television, US schools, watched re-visionist, Euro-centric history perpetrating US values of independence, ageism, separation, and individualism. It wasn't until my early twenties when I was blessed to study with ethnic studies scholars that I began to articulate my values about family and togetherness, eldership and care-giving, to realize that my struggle to care for my mom by any means necessary could be viewed as resistance and heroism, or just plain normal. It was here that I started to claim my own voice.

Everything began to re-defined, rooted out and examined, especially notions of mental and community health. I re-examined my own organic decision to care for my mama as an adult within new contexts: From a western psycho-therapeutic perspective, my mom suffered from a mental illness. But from the perspective of almost every non-western culture from Asia to Africa and all in between, nobody is ever left alone, the way they are in the U.S. Here, alone-ness, "independence" is valued as a virtue, a strength, a form of normalcy, a barometer for sanity — whereas in other cultures togetherness, the group, the collective, is the norm. So, from a non-western belief system — or "deep structure" as they say in Black psychology — did my mama really have a mental illness, was there even such an "illness", I wondered, or did we as a society have an insane and twisted notion of what sanity was? Perhaps my mother's worst problem was that she had no extended family.

My work as communications director at Justice Matters, a non-profit research and policy institute, has included involvement in the creation of a racial justice education framework, a framework that promotes parent and community

involvement, intergenerational teaching and learning, eldership and interdependence. These are revolutionary concepts within a US educational system.

A system based on dominant US culture alone inhibits community love and care-giving, pathologizes togetherness as co-dependence, perpetuates isolation, and at best, ghettoizes people in need, people alone, people no longer seen as productive. And just in case you are fraught with any kind of pain or guilt for your lack of caring, involvement or sacrifice for your elders or family, you can resolve it with a Capitalism's gift

To truly comprehend, integrate and practice interdependence, we must look into our own lives, families and communities. Are you encouraging or enabling, even if by default, an elder in your life to be incarcerated in a senior ghetto or have separated yourself from your children's lives and/or education? Are you making decisions based solely on what fits with your time, your future, your success? And finally, at this time of year when we are supposedly filled with some sense of spirit and love rooted in an indigenous, Christian, Jewish, or pagan tradition, the most important question remains:

What, if any, connections, efforts or real sacrifices, are you making in your life for others?

About the author:

Tiny aka Lisa Gray-Garcia, poverty scholar, poet, lecturer, revolutionary journalist, Taino/Bori-ken daughter of Dee and mama of Tiburcio. She is also the co-founder of POOR Magazine and the author of Criminal of Poverty: Growing Up Homeless in America, published by City Lights Foundation. She is currently working on a second book, Poverty Scholarship: A People's Text for release in 2012.