

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts 2

How did Gabor Maté learn to see so clearly the role of emotions in the human psyche? It all began in the late 1980's, early in his medical career, when he noticed a common thread among chronically sick patients in his clinic. "Those who were ill were all suppressing some kind of emotion. Over the years, I also noticed that those who got better were doing some kind of counseling to reorient their behaviors and ways of thinking."

Maté investigated the hard science: Brain-development research out of the University of California confirmed what he was seeing. Through his studies, Maté arrived at a simple idea: "There is an emptiness inside each individual." When he looked at attention deficit disorder (ADD), a condition that affects an increasingly large percentage of North American children, he didn't see what mainstream medical professionals saw - a genetically inherited disorder that could be corrected only with drugs. Instead, Maté saw the consequences of what he calls "a massive social breakdown of community."

"When I hear a child has ADD, I immediately think that the child is a product of society, says Maté. "Because of the breakdown of communal supports, the parenting environment is more stressed than it used to be. If there is a lot of stress, the child's brain protects itself by tuning it out. The tuning out becomes the default programming of the brain." As treatment, he advocated reorienting the family dynamics and social supports surrounding the ADD sufferer. He also believes that community breakdowns underpin other childhood disorders and lead some kids to become bullies.

And it doesn't stop there. For Maté, social breakdown also undermines adult relationships and people's ability to keep jobs, and has resulted in much of Western society being "addicted" to something, be it drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex or work. "Addiction fulfills some sort of function - it fills emptiness or kills pain," says Maté. "If you want to help people get past their addictions, you have to at least understand what kind of pain they are trying to alleviate."

Searingly honest, Maté uses himself as an example. Shortly after he was born, the Nazis occupied Budapest. With the stresses his mother faced, she was rarely up to the tender smiles and undivided attention a developing infant needs in order to get a sense of security and unconditional love. For a short period, she had to give him away to save him from starvation, leaving him with a lifelong sense of abandonment. After Maté and his family fled the turmoil of postwar Europe and moved to Vancouver in 1957, Maté's father worked long hours away from home as a house painter, and the family took in boarders to help pay the rent. His mother didn't have time to devote to Maté and his younger brother.

"Right at an age when I needed more structure, when it would have been important for the family to stay together, we loosened up," says Maté. In the 1980's, when his own hectic work schedule began to affect his family life, Maté entered therapy and eventually discovered that he, too had ADD

Today, wherever Maté goes on the drug-infested streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, his patients gather. He has treated many in this population, and he greets each person with sensitivity to the emotional wounds that brought them to the area. He understands what people have endured in their lives. And all the while, he does what he does best: He listens.

Next month, You Wouldn't Believe My Life Story