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BOOK REVIEW

The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture

(2022; Avery)

by Gabor Maté and Daniel Maté

Reviewed by

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One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in
—Franz Kafka (1958/1977, p. 16)

The real hopeless victims of mental illness are to be found among those who appear to be most normal.... They are normal not in what may be called the absolute sense of the word; they are normal only in relation to a profoundly abnormal society. Their perfect adjustment to that abnormal society is a measure of their mental sickness.
—Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (1958)

If *The Myth of Normal* is a meditation on trauma, it is also a manifesto on how to transcend it. Gabor Maté cuts with a surgical precision into the anatomy of the Western psyche and in doing so, isolates and observes the diseased tissues that contribute to, and in many ways create, the sickness of our toxic social contract. And yet this operation, though publicly performed, never feels like an autopsy. Maté is as da Vincian in his dissections as he is in the luminous way that he writes; indeed, his prose is aglow with a Pico de Mirandolian humanistic fire. It was Pico (2012) the promethean fire-thief who set Europe ablaze with his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* and awakened the 15th century to the inextinguishable light at the center of the human soul. Thus began humanism and the rebirth of the world, a period later called by historians, "the renaissance." This rhapsodic explosion of art and science was the first orgasmic rupture with the Dark Ages and set the stage for the later, less exuberant, Age of Enlightenment. Gabor Maté

is writing at the end of *another* dark age—that of scientific materialism—and against that dying light he rages with the certainty of truth in the beauty of humanity while at the same time acknowledging its terrible woundedness. In this sense he joins with Rabindranath Tagore in his belief that "men are cruel, but man is kind." Maté believes this just as deeply as he does that men can be kind too, but only if they do their work. Maté challenges us to do our work—and in this sense he is a postmodern *Mirandola*, his books both suggesting and celebrating the first slivers of light from a new and glorious sun rising on a new and glorious world.

But we're not there yet. Not even close.

Maté's giftedness as a thinker is to seamlessly weave his Renaissance sensibilities (a time when medicine viewed all individual illnesses as somatic expressions of imbalances in the greater body politic) into the modern renaissance of mind-body medicine. His giftedness as a writer is revealed through the balletic grace of his pen, with which

he leave his readers, after having digested a heavy book (weighing in at just under 2 pounds) on heavy subject (a guided tour of trauma in all its hydra-headed multiplicities) feeling the lighter for having followed his lead.

And who better to lead us from the torchlight of our collective caves where all we can see are the shadows dancing on the wall? Gabor gives us the sun and in doing so frees us from the prisons in which we unknowingly dwell, mistaking shadows for substance. In the original allegory, written by Plato (1943), the denizens of the cave are likened to inmates, comfortable in their chains. (Tellingly, “addiction” was a term in Ancient Rome for someone enslaved by law; that Maté would have spent the lion’s share of professional life working with addicts has an undeniable etymological symmetry to it.) In this story, Socrates likens philosophers to inmates freed from their shackles. Maté says the same, if not in those words. The only way out is through, and the only way through is by each of us becoming a philosopher. He’s in good company here. William James once noted that “Our environment encourages us not to be philosophers but partisans.” And it is to our tacit partisanship that Maté addresses this bracing critique. Maté is Jamesian to the core (and by extension, transpersonal), from the pluralistic universe in which he inhabits, to the perspectival acrobatics of his heart-centered methodologies, to the same Socratic prescription/prophesy that we either wake up, choose life, and become philosophers, or remain asleep, unknowingly contagious, sickened and enslaved by our collective shadows.

The core of all philosophical inquiry is curiosity. And Maté enjoins us to start asking uncomfortable questions like: Is this really the way things have to be? Is human nature truly self-interested? Do our unconscious assertions and beliefs in some way co-create the physical and existential cancers that are afflicting us at an accelerating rate?

I opened this review with a quote from the cultural critic Marshall McLuhan, who popularized the expression that the last animal to discover water would be the fish (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968). McLuhan was speaking about the ubiquity of culture which, by virtue of its omnipresence, is

invisible to us in the same way water is invisible to those creatures that call it home.

Reading Maté is to be initiated into a postmodern mystery school. Just like the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece were meditations on the tripartite journey from life, to death, to rebirth, Maté structures his book along the same alchemical lines: Solve et Coagula (Dissolve to Coagulate). Only a complete dissolution of our old ways of being in the world will allow us to emerge as something better. Something *new*. In doing so, we become a school of fish who come to see and know the water. Put differently: We become initiated.

Initiation is another theme that is implicitly threaded throughout this work. The word literally translates “to begin again,” and has been marked since the birth of memory by rites of passage the world over (christenings, bar mitzvahs, sun dances, etc.) that are outward expressions of an inward event: coming of age. In a very real sense, addiction and recovery is, for modernity, an imperfect simulacrum of what rites of passage were in the past.

Storyteller Micahel Meade is not exaggerating when he calls America uninitiated and out of control. Maté interviewed Meade for this book, and is careful to explain that the use of “myth” in the title is in the conventional sense, not in the Campbellian sense of a fiction that tells the truth. Meade (1994) has written that, “If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not intentionally and lovingly added to the hearth of the community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth” (p. xxx). Maté extends this prophetic warning all the way to the womb, showing us the science behind what happens when we are not “intentionally and lovingly” welcomed into the hearth of the community.

The costs are incalculable.

For Maté, the most important rite of passage of all is the arc of infant development, from conception through birth to early childhood. That we sterilize this sacred process with our scalpels, surgical gloves, forceps, and fluorescent lights, betrays our deep distrust of nature and our adversarial orientation to it as well.

Much of the book is spent in sharing the science of mind-body medicine and revealing

the epigenetic science of how adverse childhood effects create adult lives beleaguered with adverse consequences. Where do these adverse childhood effects originate? In the modern myth of normal.

The fictions may be toxic, but the effects are all too real. The collateral wreckage of “big T” trauma (including childhood abuse, violence, and rape) and “little t” trauma (rejection, bullying, racism, classism) are omnipresent. In both cases, we negotiate our authenticity for the sake of attachment. And we remain anesthetized and unaware—like fish—of the radioactive water in which we swim—which is why we tacitly accept these aberrations as normal. Hence the “myth” in the title.

This is a message for the entire world. Not just because every one of us falls somewhere on the spectrum of trauma, but because the real thrust of the book is that the only way to truly heal is to acknowledge our complicity and recognize that we are *all* responsible for the collective healing of the world—from the climate crisis, to the conflict in Gaza, to the Pyrrhic emotional victories won each night between couples in the battles of their bedroom.

In this sense he writes for the world. He is Martin Luther, nailing his 95 theses to the door of the cathedral of Western civilization. And what cathedral is that? Not any one church, but to the only religion we still seem to follow in the West: the religion of me, mine, and more;

His goal is not reformation, but revolution. And revolutions begin where they always do, in the margins, in the statistical deviations from the mean, and in the subversive, interstitial sciences of unorthodox fields like psychoneuroimmunology, interpersonal neurobiology, and psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. In graduating to this role of public intellectual he assumes the heavy mantle of his illustrious predecessors: Tillich, Sagan, Sontag, and Gould

And the world is in desperate need of elder statesmen. Today’s surfeit of bloviating counterfeits, (Jordan Peterson certainly comes to mind) lamentably traffic in the facile crudities and civilized barbarism that is one of the primary targets of this book.

As for the brilliant, Athena-inspired Susan Sontag, who, like the warrior goddess herself “loved

the clash of battle,” she was the antithesis of Maté and maintained with a beguiling, Orphic lyricism until her death that there is nothing metaphorical about illness—and that the social-ethical implications of saying so places blame squarely on the person who is suffering—and does something worse than rob them of their agency, but rather inscribes their spirit with a scarlet “C” for cancer, proclaiming them both architect and executioner of their own disease and death process (Sontag & Silvers, 1989). Sontag is right about a lot of things, far too many to go over in such a short space. But she is spectacularly wrong about others. It is to Maté’s credit that his perspicacity and generosity honor Sontag’s intelligence, wisdom, and depth, while at the same time challenging her on some of her conclusions. Maté dives into a forensic analysis of her journals, correlating her fluctuations in mind and mood with the precise ecologies of disease specific to the cancer that she died from. In doing so, he does not blame, but empowers others to discover their own agency through exploring the subtle biopsychosocial mechanics of disease.

In speaking of cancer, W. H. Auden (2004) echoes the anecdotal folk wisdom that is often only spoken of off the record by medical professionals: “childless women get it and men when they retire, its as if there had to be some outlet for their foiled creative fire” (cf. Irwin, 1970, p. 76)

Auden was romantic, believing that in each of us there is a nebular creative project that only we can give birth to, lest we risk an early, unactualized death. Our creative fire is foiled when we exchange acceptance for authenticity, not when we don’t write the next great American novel.

McCluhan wrote the words of the opening epigraph the same year Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy were assassinated and the landmark Civil Rights Act was passed into legislation. The human potential movement now became the anti-environment to the Nixonian norm. And what initiated this anti-environment? An influx of fresh ideas from Eastern teachers, psychedelic prophet-professors, and scientists who dedicated their lives and professional careers to exploring and mapping “the farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1971).

We need anti-environments to show us the negative spaces in our gestalt—this is the only

way we can ever truly grasp the contours of our consciousness and our geometries of the possible. And therein lies the power of the comparative method, something Maté is exceedingly good at. He is, at heart, a comparativist. Neither unduly exoticizing others' ways of knowing, nor hubristic in believing that they are evolutionary prototypes of ourselves, but that they are living libraries of deep and noble truths about things not dreamt of in our terminally sophisticated philosophies.

McLuhan was not the first to make these observations, nor did he commit the cardinal sin (a favorite of Edison and Freud) of playing it off like he did. The first recorded usage was by a Japanese count over 130 years ago (Lloyd, 1909) and it has been acrobatically expressed in a number of iterations over the years, but it was McLuhan who popularized it and did so within the context of his training and expertise—cultural studies.

Maté is not the first writer to note that something is rotten in the state of the union, nor the first to systematically delineate the decay of Western civilization. Jiddu Krinshamurti wrote in 1960:

Is society healthy, that an individual should return to it? Has not society itself helped to make the individual unhealthy? Of course, the unhealthy must be made healthy, that goes without saying; but why should the individual adjust himself to an unhealthy society? If he is healthy, he will not be a part of it. Without first questioning the health of society, what is the good of helping misfits to conform to society?

Nor was Maté the first addiction scientist to lambast the naked emperors peppering the political platforms and popular presses for their ridiculous assertions that addiction is an aberration from the American way of life. That distinction belongs to Stanton Peele who argues that no, addiction is the *essence* of the American way of life and the silent source of our cancerous, capitalistic fever. Maté is the first, however, to marshal together all the requisite evidence to support the necessary paradigm shift and to speak to its societal, global, personal, and transpersonal dimensions.

Far from being some lugubrious obituary lamenting the decline of Western civilization,

the book is actually a beacon of hope. Although that hope often shines through in some dark and unexpected ways. In one of its more poignant and hilarious moments he describes his peculiar pastime of reading obituaries and taking note of the fact that the very qualities of those being memorialized were the very same ones that killed them (i.e., the self-sacrificial tendency “which undermines the immune system and poses a risk for malignancy and other illness,” p. 104).

There is a psychopompic quality to reading Maté—the voice with which he speaks carries within it the echoes of thousands of suffering patients, many of them long since passed. In many ways he is the speaker for the dead.

But he is also a speaker for the plants.

Toward the end of the book (in the Coagula part) he tells the story of traveling to Peru to lead a retreat especially designed for doctors, but that before he could begin his professional ministrations, the Shipipo shamans organized an intervention and essentially fired him from his duties that week, instructing him to isolate himself and refrain from contaminating the energies of the other participants with his own “dark, dense energy that our *icaros* cannot penetrate” (p. 451). “As a medico,” they told him, he had “been absorbing griefs and traumas... . working with troubled people ... and ... have done nothing to clear that out That is why your energy is so dense We can help you” (p. 451).

In spite of his naturally glum disposition and habitual tendency towards saturnine self-doubt, he agreed to follow their guidance and submit himself to their shamanic ministrations. After several days of nothing, he experienced the biggest breakthrough in his life. I won't spoil it for the reader, but it would melt the most recalcitrant ice formations on one of Saturns' frozen moons.

There is no attempt on the author's part to compulsively rationalize his choice to listen to the medicine workers by coming up with some “quasi-quantum mechanical” model to sanitize the shamanic, or even psychologize it to make it palatable to his own Western sensibilities. He knows better. And therein lies his glow—and exemplifies the very best of what it means to be both a scholar and a human being: reverence and respect for

what Frederic Spiegelberg called “the bewildering, monstrous miracle of this our being here and now” (as in Kabil, p. 44).

He is courageous enough to recognize that there are some things we can *never* know and yet still learn from them and shower in their grace. When we do so in humility, reverence, and trust, we are transformed.

We all contain Whitmanian “multitudes” and all too often choose to suppress and repress so many of them by amputating our extremities on both sides of Bell Curve (don’t want to be too bad, don’t want to be stand out and be too good). We crucify ourselves, as well as our greatness, on the procrustean cross of the “norm.” We sacrifice our muchness—but for what? To “be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society”?

There is something deeply Weberian about this book. Weber believed that “the progressive disenchantment of the world” was the side effect of industrialization. Mate goes back even further, locating one of the primary sources of our sickness to the adversarial relationship that we in the West have valorized as dominion over nature. Weber’s actual expression, “die entzauberung der Welt,” translates to the far more evocative “un-magicking of the world” (Landy & Saler, 2009). Maté makes no attempt, as so many sloppily written self-help spiritual psychology books, to re-ensorcel it by contemplating figures of light. He knows that and skips unscrupulously through the necessary alchemical arithmetic of solve. And we are not in a place, yet, to re-form until we thoroughly dissolve the ubiquitous vestigial attachments to the myth of “isolation.”

At its core, however, this is a book about wounds.

After all, like the poet Rumi (1996) reminds us, the light enters in through the wound. And our woundedness is where we encounter and then enter the world. Suffering is what grants the soul its gravity. Only through a broken heart, can it be awakened. In fact, the very word compassion means, in Latin, “to suffer with.” We can only ever connect once we have connected with the wounds that define us.

But this is also where our greatest gifts are hidden, etched in our autobiographies, stored in our

sinews, waiting for us to uncover and heal them. Again, it is no linguistic accident that in ancient Greek the word for wound (trauma) and the word for magic (thauma) are only one letter apart. They are two sides of the same coin. One begets the other. Our wounds (trauma) are the wellsprings of our miracles (thauma).

Maté cites the work of Abraham Maslow, in his study of self actualizers, and how they rarely fit in growing up. Self actualization (or, in alchemical language, the successful completion of coagulum) can only occur after total dissolution. These are ones to whom culture does not stick. These are the fish who recognize the water, but don’t identify with it. They are, in the deepest sense, free.

There are no easy answers here. This is bitter medicine. But just like another bitter medicine, ayahuasca, beyond the first bracing shock of its acrid earthiness lies an expansive, brightening sweetness: a kaleidoscopic explosion of pure possibility. Also like ayahuasca, there can be some challenging moments and processes that the reader must go through first ... the solve side of the alchemical equation.

Most of the book is pure solve. The elegance of this logic is clear: for until we recognize all of our outrageous attachments to a culture that is literally killing us, we cannot dissolve our illusions. Once we take the red pill, it is possible to see just how far the rabbit hole goes.

And the thing about holes, when you dig deep enough, you come out on the other side—into an entirely new hemisphere.

And Maté’s book accomplishes this task with admirable precision and economy. We can finally see the water—and though it might be murky, festooned with plastinated pieces of man-made junk, at least we can see it. Or, to circle back to McLuhan, to “discover” it—seeing our culture through fresh, disillusioned eyes, perhaps for the very first time. Then and only then can we begin the process of coagulation.

Rilke (2016) wrote that we should attempt to *live* our questions, rather than try to find final answers to them. There are no final solutions of any kind. And final solutions, perhaps, are the biggest myth of all. Maté closes his book with an

alarming vignette from Hannah Arendt, in which she describes Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Nazi's "final solution," having been given an exemplary bill of psychological health by three psychiatrists prior to his trial. Perhaps this shows that it is in our normality, our very fixedness, in our absurd, destructive cleaving to the final forms of anything, that the real core of our collective cultural cancer can be found. Thankfully, Maté bequeaths us with the bones with which we might build a new and better world governed by an ever-evolving living constitution. A global, transpersonal kind of patriotism that repatriates us to the here-and-now.

This review opened with Maté's scathing indictment against the "barbarians of civilization" who, through their savage cruelty and bombastic blindness fail to recognize, let alone honor and revere, the intrinsic dignity of all life. They are Orwellian (2021) in their colonization of other cultures and their fervid posturing of material progress: "all animals are created equal but some are more equal than others" (p. 134).

To close, I turn to the words of another public intellectual and ambassador of the plants, Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultz, the first modern Westerner to write on ayahuasca:

The ethnobotanical researcher...must realize that far from being superior individual, he—the civilized man—is in many respects far inferior. (Archival materials)

Schultz understood—and advocated for—a pluralistic nonpartisanship, arguing that we in the West do not hold the premium on truth—and that our hubris blinds us to the other truths we might commune with from the "multitudes within" our global body. We might never possess another soul, as Charlemagne is rumored to have claimed, by learning another language (or cultural tradition). The idea of "possession" itself is littered with the Borg-like legacy of consumption and assimilation. What Maté argues is that we can only come to know our own soul through connection with others—and the core of connection is always through story. As the French poet Muriel Rukeyzer (1968) reminds us, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms."

And stories are for listening.

And perhaps this is the deepest message of this book: the value of listening. To listen to our bodies when they tell us to slow down. To listen to our fellow humans when they speak to us about their pain. And to listen to the wisdom keepers of indigenous traditions that cultivate a kind of knowledge far beyond our modern ken. I do not believe it to be some kind of anatomical coincidence that we are only able to orient ourselves and walk through the world when we have a healthy functioning *inner* ear.

This is as alchemical as it gets (as above, so below). If the physical body is only balanced when its organs of listening are healthy, so too, the body politic. This book goes a long way in diagnosing the vestibular disease process that is our dangerously inflamed culture. Inflammation (which Maté writes a lot about) means "to set on fire." How poetic, then, that Maté brings balance to the smoke and flames with the healing water of his words. In listening, we restore balance; in finding balance, we are restored. After all, the origin of our word "diseased" means, literally, "to be unbalanced."

Maté may not be the first fish to have discovered water, but he has certainly been the first in this century to give us the tools and instructions to design and build our very own instruments to discover the water for ourselves. And even the periscopes to peer beyond its pale.¹

Note

1. In Ireland in the late Middle Ages, to be "beyond the Pale" meant to live outside of imperial British control. A fitting metaphor for the work this book asks us each to accomplish.

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