

## FILM REVIEW

# The Wisdom of Trauma

Directed by Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo

Alexandra Algafari



When was the last time you saw a movie that was so deep and powerful you had to see it twice just to make sure you didn't miss anything? I know it hadn't happened to me in a very long time.

My colleagues and I had the wonderful opportunity to see *The Wisdom of Trauma* in a theatre at its first ever screening, which surprisingly took place in my hometown of Sofia, Bulgaria. Two hours later, we knew why one of Sofia's independent cinemas was the lucky venue – it turns out one of the movie's directors, Zaya Benazzo, is Bulgarian and visiting family when she and her husband, Maurizio Benazzo, the movie's co-director, decided to give *The Wisdom of Trauma* a chance in front of a Bulgarian audience. Little did they know that their expectations of a few dozen viewers would be exceeded a hundredfold, ending up with sold-out screenings for the next two months and counting. Oh, you should have seen the amazement on the faces of the two long-time U.S. residents when they discovered Bulgaria had a thriving body psychotherapy community, and colleagues stood up from their seats to wave at them. It is always such a beautiful experience to meet like-minded people from the other side of the globe.

Maurizio and Zaya Benazzo's personal healing journey led them to the work of our colleague Dr. Gabor Maté, a physician and psychotherapist. Hungarian-born, his family endured Nazi atrocities during World War II, but managed to flee to Canada, where he resides to this day. Dr. Maté recalls some of the events of his childhood in Hungary as the baseline traumas that formed his own character, but jokingly claims his mother's love and affection compensated and saved him from being crazier than he already is.

The movie focuses on Dr. Maté's groundbreaking work with drug addiction, antisocial behavior, and cancer patients. It demonstrates, in a simple yet profound way, how trauma can affect our whole life and lead to relational difficulties, deep sorrow and suffering, and mental and physical illness.

Beautiful and moving animations depict metaphors of the feelings of neglected or abused children coming to life. I cried, I was furious, I was desperate. But I also felt hopeful and full of love for every single person whose story was told in *The Wisdom of Trauma*.

The movie explains brilliantly how trauma does not necessarily stem from extremely dramatic events such as war or famine, but rather from events that our nervous system interprets, at the time, as threatening to our life or integrity. Every child has the need to be loved, and to be spontaneous and authentic, and trauma can be any circumstance that hinders these dimensions of existence.

I absolutely loved how the movie portrayed inmates, drug addicts, and homeless people as the human beings that they are. Our subconscious desire to see ourselves as good and honorable often lures us to view these people as lesser beings who deserve their fates. But being trauma-informed lets us see through the haze of our own egos, and allows us to discover the pain and suffering of the human being behind the label of criminal or hobo that we might use to degrade them. We learn that being an addict is not a lifestyle choice, but can often be the only coping mechanism that a person has found to soothe their broken inner child.

But, the filmmakers ask, "can our deepest pain be a doorway to healing?" Yes, yes; it can. As in Robert Frost's poem – "*the best way out is through*." We all well know that if we wish to heal trauma, it cannot be sugarcoated and sprinkled with distraction techniques. All the yoga and positive affirmations in the world cannot silence our suffering if we do not allow ourselves to face the ugly parts of healing too – like admitting and expressing our anger, letting our sorrow stream down our faces, finding compassion for our broken parts, and standing up to our fears. In Jung's words: "Where your fear is, there is your task." The only way to heal trauma is to confront what ails and scares us. And, as one of my all-time favorite quotes goes: "I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain." (Litany Against Fear from Frank Herbert's *Dune*). For this is the only way to embrace that integrated, whole, healthy self that lives in every single one of us. It's there, even when life's mucky road has covered it in dust and grime. And the way to clean that road is through working with both mind and body, as the body can become a scapegoat for our mental suffering, and a beacon that points the direction back to health.

I have recommended *The Wisdom of Trauma* to all my clients, and to anyone who was willing to listen while I was still on the hype train after seeing the movie. And again, after seeing it for the second time. It already has a score of 8.1 on IMDB, which should tell you that I am not the only biased one. So, you should definitely get your hands on a copy, a screening, or an online event, because this is a movie that will make you feel proud of the global body psychotherapy community you are part of, and the work that you and your colleagues do.



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