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Pandemics and Infodemics—Wisdom in the Time of Covid-19

Russell Brand Interview with Dr. Gabor Maté

Russell Brand: Most of us know you for your work on addiction and mental health. With the global pandemic and the anxiety, fear, and dread that it engendered, what have you observed so far? What applicable therapeutic information do you have for us?

Dr. Gabor Maté: Well, you know you're asking bigger questions than my brain is ready to provide answers to. Just today, I was online with a group of therapists that I am training in my particular way of working. Two of them—one from New York City and one from the [First Nations](#) community here in British Columbia—were saying that they are working with a highly-traumatized population. And, amongst them, the panic is just immense about this virus.

They are asking how can they work with it. The first thing to recognize is, when you are traumatized, your brain is affected by that. Particularly, if traumatized in early childhood, the amygdala (the fear center in the brain) is much more easily triggered. That means people experience things in different ways, depending on how they were programmed in childhood. The response isn't only to the actual facts and the actual realities of the spreading pandemic. The

response is also to people's own subjectivity and the degree of fear they've been living with, all of their lives. The more fear-oriented they were in the first place, the more likely they are to panic right now. You really have to address and recognize that. Part of what we are seeing here is the trauma response. You're seeing a genuine response to a real problem, but you are also seeing a trauma response.

Russell Brand: What kind of data is available on the impact of trauma in people's early lives? Is it that people who experienced trauma in early life are generally more fearful? Or is the opposite response possible—a kind of numbness and dislocation?

Dr. Gabor Maté: Well, both can happen. Either you get a heightened fear response, or you get a dissociative response, when you're not as in touch with your feelings. On the neurobiological level, early trauma really changes the brain. At least, it alters the normal trajectory of brain development in such ways that the fear center—[the amygdala](#)—is larger and more activated. Also, when triggering events happen, the prefrontal cortex (which is the part of the brain that considers, makes decisions, makes choices and responds flexibly to situations) it kind of goes offline. People actually function from their emotions, rather than from the thinking parts of the brain. We see this in society all the time, in all realms. These days, it's very generalized.

The virus has gone viral on social media. [The Lancet Journal](#), which is a British Medical journal as you know, had an article about how to fight an [infodemic](#). We don't just have an epidemic, we have an 'infodemic'. The Director General of the World Health Organization actually said that we we're not just fighting an epidemic we're fighting an 'infodemic'. He said this at a conference in Germany in the middle of February.

Russell Brand: Wow! There is nothing in living memory like a global event of this nature. There's 9/11, but it's difficult to quantify. I have never known anything so personal, yet so global. The personal level is about—how is this going to affect me financially and how is this going to affect my ability to travel? It's happening to all of society. Most of us and the world are all being affected. It seems like a unique event.

As you say, my personal fears are not saying: "I might get this virus." It's more about the infrastructure which supports our society, which I have spent a long time saying is conceptual, is a construct, and is based on systems beliefs and hierarchies that are sustained through subjugation. These are all now being shaken. It's an interesting and frightening thing.

Dr. Gabor Maté: Yes, but in a broader context, the kinds of fears around disease we're having now have been chronic for a lot of people who have lived with them all over the world. We just don't think of them because we are not threatened in the same way as they are. Like, diarrhea kills tens and hundreds of thousands of kids every year, but not in the Western countries. So partly it is "out of sight, out of mind."

Even with 9/11—well, 9/11— that was a big shock in the U.S. It was one, big shocking event. All of a sudden, over 3,000 people died in one terrible event. It's not such an unusual event in the

lives of many people around the world, who are being bombed by Britain or the United States based or whoever is bombing who now. But for 911, they remember because it happened, in our case, in the Western world (in North America). When it happens to us, we become aware of it.

The other thing I want to point out is—what if I said to you that there's a preventable condition that kills 800,000 people every year in Europe, 15,000 in Canada, and 8,000,000 around the world every year? What if I said to you there was such a condition?

Russell Brand: I would try and prevent it.

Dr. Gabor Maté: Well, It's air pollution. Those are the statistics.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be concerned about the virus. One of the lessons for me is to realize how naturally easy it is to recognize a threat when it's sudden and strange. But in the meantime, we are ignoring chronic health conditions that are killing millions of people in our societies every year. What does that say about our culture?

Russell Brand: I think what it says is, as you already explained, out of sight, out of mind. If it doesn't penetrate our awareness or if we can operate without being impeded by it, we'll happily do so. But I also think the socio-economic impact of Coronavirus means that whether or not you are affected biologically by the condition, you are also affected psychologically.

Also, I think it has tapped into a deeper archetypal fear that we are not in control of reality because we are just not in control of reality. I am reminded of this [Osho](#) quote of all things: What is society, just a clearing in the forest? We can suddenly feel that not only in the botanical world could the vines and plants reclaim us, but in the micro-biological world, there are invisible forces that await, that can be weaponized at any moment. I am a man dedicated to recovery and to participating in awakening in any way that I can. The personal experience of supermarket empty shelves has a visceral sense of foreboding that I did not anticipate. Here, in a relatively remote part of Australia, I am fortunate to be with my family.

We consistently live with uncertainty and with disease. But the ideas that our structures and systems are impermanent; that they are faith-based systems; economics and air travel even. You know they're asking for bail out money for the airlines in the UK. All these things are being held together by faith and beliefs; and then, they are shaken. But I look at this optimistically, I see a great opportunity for reordering.

There is a level of uncertainty about how long this all may endure. Who knows when people may freely travel again? In three months, six months, or nine months? Who knows? If ever again. The silver lining is that, eventually, people may consider living more harmoniously and connected to nature. It's very interesting because I am affected egotistically like an individual and I am wondering when can, and how do I go back to England? How does this personally impact me? What does this mean for the reordering of civilization?

Dr. Gabor Maté: One thing that arose while you were speaking was something that a Buddhist teacher said once ... well, what happened was that I was supposed to give a talk on addiction at Columbia but my airplane had to turn around because of a mechanical issue. There were 300 people waiting at a church hall for me to give a talk on addiction. I did not show up. In the audience, waiting for me to come, was a Buddhist monk. They recruited him to give a talk about a Buddhist's view of addiction. I got a recording of the talk and it was really great. What he was saying was In the West, we are always saying to panic, panic everything is out of control. Whereas in the Buddhist world, they are saying [relax, everything is out of control.](#)

So, one of the teachings to learn is ... whether you are Buddhist or not ... the idea of impermanence. Everything changes. We are not in control. How to be with whatever happens, to stay in the present moment, regardless of what happens? Every crisis like this is a combination of danger and opportunity. You know that. So, in the crisis, there is always danger, but there is also an opportunity. I wonder, will this (Covid-19) function as a teaching moment for humanity? I am not that optimistic that it will, but it's certainly a possibility. It's certainly has potential, doesn't it?

The other thing is: doesn't it just clarify your values? Don't we all at some point realize what's really important in life? Hasn't that been shocked into us by this pandemic? All of the sudden, all the things we thought were really important ... hmm, what is really important? It is a possible learning moment. The question is, will we take that opportunity or not?

I think the system dictates against us doing so. They will want us to go back to our ordinary, narrow, individualistic, disassociated, isolated mode of thinking. That is how the system survives. So, whether or not we can transcend that, we will see.

Russell Brand: In my optimism, I imagine if you could see this through some kind of thermal lens, you would see across the world a kind of stirring, or a global recognition of the principles you've described. What's important to me is the people I love, community, access to amenities and resources. And I live in a system that doesn't allow that or permit that. Thinking about it I don't want to travel all around and do my job and all these things. Or the only reason I'm doing these things is because I want to participate in an economic system that will dispatch me very quickly. All the while propping up banks and airlines.

There is no doubt that using the apposite Chinese definition, opportunity is part of this. Gabor, I have wondered often when speaking with you, and listening to you (and because of your brilliant essay you wrote that Martin Freeman read at the event I did at the Old Vic ... on the nature of mental health, suicide and addiction), what you can extrapolate from your work with individuals? What could be mapped onto sociological models in terms of disconnection, isolation and the impacts of trauma? And, also, the possibility of recovery? I know that's a big question, but we have time.

Dr. Gabor Maté: The point that I really want to make is totally unrelated to what you asked.

Russell Brand: Oh great, why don't you just sing a song.

Dr. Gabor Maté: I'll come back to your question. Please note something. In January, the [World Health Organization asked the donor countries for 675 million dollars](#) so that the agencies could respond to the virus. Do you know how much they received from all of the wealthy countries? Just 54 million. So even in response to this virus, what is our system doing? Even in the face of this, the people making decisions with our money are being so short-sighted. I know that's not what you asked me, but I had that fact in front of me and I had to throw it in.

Russell Brand: You do what you like, Dr. Gabor Maté. When I do an interview with you, I don't imagine for a moment that I will be in charge of how it goes. Yes, even when the rhetoric emerging from political leaders often indicates that the priority of the system is self-preservation and all else subsequent to that. We naively assume or at least hope that these systems of governance exist in the most primitive forms of social contract. We exchange taxes for protection from sovereigns or states. We can see in revelation of crisis what is genuinely important is that the system is able to withstand the shock of this crisis. Even as recently as January, when it was dislocated in non-Western countries, we were willing to go for the gamble of not making substantial donations.

Dr. Gabor Maté: To come back to your brilliant question of before...

Russell Brand: If you can remember it...

Dr. Gabor Maté: I remember it. So, you were asking about working with traumatized and addicted people. You were asking what can I extrapolate from that to social transformation, social dislocation, and so on.

Russell Brand: Alright, you do remember it.

Dr. Gabor Maté: The first thing is that the two are not separate. I have a brilliant friend, Bruce Alexander. He has written the second greatest book on addiction ... [The Globalisation of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit](#). It's about dislocation and he says addiction is an outcome of social dislocation. It's the second most important book ever written on addiction. I say that with full modesty. (Laughter). I am forgetting that you wrote one, too.

Russell Brand: Ha ha, you're very funny. Listen, I'll do the jokes and you do the therapy. I don't tell people how to run their lives. Oh no, I do tell people how to run their lives. (laughter).

Dr. Gabor Maté: Bruce is saying that addiction is a mark of social dislocation, to start with. He points out that for example that the [Gin Craze](#) in England in the 17th century ... happened as a result of ... there had always been drinking and drunkenness, but there wasn't alcoholism on a social scale. Until ... In order to shuttle people into satanic mills as Blake put it, (the factories), as they closed the commons and people were dislocated. People had to leave their homelands and they had to leave their villages. They had to move into the cities. People were dislocated socially and economically. That's what gave rise to the Gin Craze. He makes the same argument globally.

You can see it in China, where they push people off the land and into the cities in a couple of decades, now there's a huge addiction problem. So, that *individual dislocation is the marker of social dislocation*. One is not to be separated from the other.

In terms of what we can learn from it, though, is that, oh what can we learn from it? What I can extrapolate from personal to social? It's that when individuals learn the sources of their problems instead of being in denial about it. When they are getting over their shame and acknowledging their own behavior and dysfunctions, and they learn that they didn't do it deliberately. Their actions were a defense, a protection, and a pain-relieving mechanism on their part. If they open themselves humbly, as you talk about the 12 steps, they can actually transform. That would also be true on a social level. What if as a society we actually admitted all of our dysfunctions. What if we said that this doesn't work, that doesn't work. What if we stop being in denial?

Somebody's written a book called [When Society Becomes an Addict](#). The fourth best book on addiction. (Russell laughs) So, what if we apply the same kind of thinking to the social level? What's really going on? Let's not deny it anymore. Let's acknowledge that there's poverty, there is inequality, there is dislocation, there's discrimination, there's oppression, there's prejudice against certain genders, certain colors of people and certain classes of people? What if we actually acknowledged, though, that as a society, and instead of shaming ourselves for it. We said OK how do we wish to move forward?

And my answer is, when you look at when revolutions happen, when look at the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution or an individual addict. It's when things get intolerable. There a certain point when things get intolerable. I know revolutions have a bad name because they've had some pretty negative outcomes in places, but that's just the nature of history. But the point is they always happen people actually get that something is intolerable, and they can't keep going in the same old way anymore. Now nobody can make that happen. But it's when ... and I think from our point of view, what we've seen in Western society, certainly over the last four or five years, people are asking a lot more questions about the fundamental assumptions of society.

And so, this virus may contribute to that question. Like for example when you look at the response to the virus, what was it? Denial was everywhere it was happening. In China there was denial. Had there not been the denial in China, there might not be this huge epidemic. When doctors first spoke the truth, they were shut down, they were silenced. And the same thing happened in Iran first, and originally, although the Koreans have done a lot better, but there was that initial response. So, what if we stopped being a society in denial. Even this viral outbreak would have been different. I don't know, did I pontificate enough on that one? (Russell laughs)

Russell Brand: Could you end all of your announcements with that statement?

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