

# Gabor Maté, MD: Modern Culture Is Traumatizing and NOT Normal

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*partial transcript of Commune video courtesy of [Mad in America](#)*  
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From *Commune*: “In this society, there’s an assumption which shows up in how we talk about things. So when somebody does something selfish or greedy, what do we say: ‘Oh, that’s just human nature.’ But there’s an assumption in that about human nature. Interestingly enough, it’s rarely the case that somebody does something generous or kind or supportive, that people say, ‘Oh that’s just human nature.’ And yet in actual truth, that *is* human nature, and the greed and the selfishness are *not* human nature. It’s not that people can’t be greedy or selfish or aggressive or competitive, individualistic and just plain narcissistic . . . But that doesn’t mean it’s our nature.

It’s like, try to understand the zebra. Where would you want to study the zebra – in a zoo, in a small cage in a zoo, or out in the savannah where the zebra evolved and has lived? Well if you really want to understand the nature of the zebra, you wouldn’t study them in a zoo. And so drawing conclusions about human nature from how we live in this society is like trying to understand a wild animal inside a cage . . . What we

consider to be 'normal,' this 'normal' culture that we have here, there's nothing normal about it, in terms of human needs and human potential. In fact, it's that gap between human needs and human potential, and the conditions under which we live now, that creates so much illness of mind and body, not to mention so much tension, so much strain, so much hostility, so much division in society in general. And so this 'commune' concept actually relates to how human beings evolved: we evolve as communal creatures; we could not have evolved otherwise.

And what we call 'civilization' . . . if you just look at our species, if our existence can be summed up in an hour, then until about six minutes ago we lived in small band hunter-gatherer groups, in a communal context. And we evolved in that, and that is our nature because that's how nature helped us evolve. Every animal has a particular nature that is suited to its particular environment. Now humans can adapt to an infinite range of environments, but that doesn't mean we do very well in all of them. So, what is considered 'normal' in this culture, that is to say what is the statistical norm, it's got nothing to do with what is normal for human beings in general. And it's that gap between the 'norm' in this culture, and what is really the norm in terms of human evolution and human requirements and human potential, that is the source of so much dysfunction, whether on the mental, emotional, psychological, spiritual, physiological, or social-political levels.

. . . We think we're living in a scientific age, but actually it's a very selective relation to the science that we have. We relate only to the science that justifies or supports this particular way of life, this particular socioeconomic system, this particular way of practicing medicine. But we completely ignore the science that shows the interconnected co-arising of phenomena. So that shows up in every realm. Now my colleague and mentor Dan Siegel who's a psychiatrist here in L.A. has

this concept called interpersonal neurobiology, which is . . . a way of understanding the nature of our brains, which is that our brains, our nervous systems are not separate. That how I relate to you, my energetic state, when I look at you or speak to you or vice versa actually affects your nervous system. So we co-create each other all the time. This co-creation, this interpersonal neurobiology, is most dominant of course when we're small and very much under the influence of our parents and their particular backgrounds and vicissitudes or triumphs. But it's true all our lives. So our interpersonal nature means that our neurobiology is interpersonal. Now being a physician, I simply remove the word neuro- and I say our *biology* is interpersonal. So that what happens to us physiologically, and specifically, from the medical point of view, when illness shows up, it is not a unique, isolated event in some isolated, separate, physiological organism or organ, but in fact it's a manifestation of a life lived in a certain context.

So my friend the physician and psychiatrist Lewis Mehl-Madrona, who's partly of Lakota Sioux background, gave me a very interesting example when I talked to him. And he said that in the Lakota tradition, when somebody gets ill, the community says, 'Thank you. Your illness manifests the dysfunction of our community. You're the canary in the mine. So your healing is our healing, and our healing is your healing.'

Now consider Western medicine. You go to a nephrologist with your kidney disease; they don't know about your life, don't even ask about it, except maybe do you smoke and drink. Cardiologists, neurologists, gastroenterologists, dermatologists – they never look at it from the communal point of view, they just look at the particular pathology as if it was only a biological manifestation in a particular organ. So that's the Western medicine, and what's incredibly both interesting and . . . frustrating about it is that we have all kinds of science to show that that's not how it is.

. . . So that's the first theme here today is just the interpersonal nature of and interconnected nature of all phenomena, as taught by spiritual traditions, and as has now been validated by modern science, and is virtually completely ignored by modern society."

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# Gabor Maté: The Dangers of Being Too Nice

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*Transcript courtesy of [Mad in America](#):*

"There's a deep need to belong, a deep need to be loyal, and a sense of betrayal when that loyalty is somehow insulted. Because if you didn't get the love that you needed, you'll be consumed by being liked, and then you'll be very likable and very nice. And you might become a helpful, very helping individual, which is a coping pattern.

"Now, you can be genuinely nice and genuinely supportive of others, and still look after your own needs – that's human nature, I think. But a lot of people are very nice and likable

and helpful by *suppressing* their own needs – that's a coping mechanism.

"Everybody says how nice they are... and when they die at age 50 of cancer, everybody shows up at their funeral and they weep about how nice they were, how selfless they were.

"The child basically has two needs. We have the need for attachment, which is the seeking of closeness and proximity with another human being; and fundamentally the attachment dynamic is the most powerful dynamic in human life. Its basic purpose is the protection and nurturing of the young, so that infants attach to their parents and parents attach to their infants, for the purpose on one hand of being taken care of and on the other of taking care of.

"So that's attachment, and we're wired for attachment all our lives; it's the most important dynamic we have.

"And as General Petraeus could tell you . . . sometimes when our attachment needs get sent in certain directions, it'll trump everything else. That's one need that we have, for attachment; without attachment, there's no human life, it's just impossible. And without mating, without communities, we would not have survived as a species . . .

"So, you know, the whole idea of human beings as competitive and aggressive is total nonsense.

"But the other need that we have is for authenticity: to be ourselves. And that again has to do with survival. If you're not in touch with yourself out in the wild, you don't survive.

"So authenticity is being in touch with yourself and being able to act on the awareness of self in relationship to the environment. So if I feel something, I pay attention to that; if I don't, I'm in danger. So we have this need for authenticity.

“But if a child is confronted with a dilemma: that if I’m authentic, express my feelings, then my attachments are threatened – because my parents can’t handle it, because they’re too stressed, depressed, or traumatized themselves – then perforce the child will automatically (but not consciously) suppress their authenticity. And so the suppression of gut feelings and authenticity is a coping mechanism.

“That means I’m no longer in touch with my needs, I no longer pay attention to my feelings, my emotions, I will no longer be aware of them, I won’t express them, I won’t know what I need. Which has all kinds of implications, but one of them is that I may then compulsively serve the needs of others, ignoring my own, hence disease. Or I may then develop all kinds of false needs, which then really are what addictions are all about.

“So it’s that irresolvable tension between authenticity and attachment that many children in our society are faced with, that results in their self-suppression. And one of the outcomes – not the only possible outcome, but one possible outcome – is that niceness is a coping mechanism.

“Almost anybody when they’re being inauthentic has a sense of [themselves] being inauthentic. How do we know that we’re being inauthentic?

“Like, years before I had any of these concepts formally worked out in my mind or had read much about it, I already knew when I was betraying myself and being less than myself and being other than myself. How did I know that?

“There’s some inner knowledge for many of us, simply because the authentic self . . . when we’re not in touch with it there’s a kind of a shame, there’s a kind of a suffering that happens. So that shame and that internal suffering, that sense of self-betrayal is our sure guide that we’re not being ourselves on one level. That happens to a lot of people.

“And then we may look good in the eyes of others, and yet internally we suffer shame because we know that we’re not being ourselves. When we say ‘how do we know,’ for many of us there’s an internal knowledge that arises. Now why? Because that essential self hasn’t gone away, and it’s calling to us. And we don’t feel right when we betray it or when we’re out of contact with it.

“Now, that doesn’t happen for many people – that doesn’t happen for everybody. For some people, it takes some catastrophe.

“So what I’m saying is that at some point or another, if you’re not in touch with that inner voice, if you don’t hear it, the body will speak to you loud and clear; you’re gonna get something happen to you. And sometimes that’ll happen in the form of illness or symptoms.

“Then the body’s talking to you; the body’s saying ‘no’ when you’re not saying ‘no.’ If the voice doesn’t speak to you directly or if it speaks and you don’t listen, your body at some point is gonna kick in. Or you’re going to get depressed, or anxious, or something else. Or something will happen in your personal relationships.

“And at that point you can say, ‘Well, I’m not with the right partner, screw them, it’s all their fault,’ which many of us say. Or for some people it becomes the opening of a door where we begin to look, ‘Okay, what in here wasn’t authentic, what in here wasn’t genuine, how did I create this situation, how do I keep creating these situations over and over again, am I just a victim of bad luck or is there some pattern here?’

“In other words, something happens, some difficulty happens to shake you out of your complacent belief that things are just fine the way they are.

“And as the California-based great teacher A. H. Almaas says, the most difficult things that happen to us are also the most

compassionate things. Because basically – how he puts it – a part of us that loves us more than anything else puts these roadblocks in our way, saying: that's not the way, that's not the way, that's not the way. So there's roadblocks in the way to bring us to ourselves.

“And so we can look upon our difficulties as problems to get rid of, or we can look at them as teachings to bring us back to ourselves.”

*Dr. Gabor Maté, an addiction expert, developed the psychotherapeutic method called Compassionate Inquiry. He is author of The Myth of Normal, In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters With Addiction, Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers, When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress and Scattered Minds: A New Look at the Origins and Healing of Attention Disorder.*

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