



8-6-2020

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Recommended Citation

Bhojanam '24, Anusha, "The Holy Trinity" (2020). *First-Year Summer Reading Program Essay Contest*. 18.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/firstyear_summer/18

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Anusha Bhojanam

The Holy Trinity

Accessibility to clean water is a human right that was recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010. Five years later, residents of Flint, Michigan were slowly poisoned by lead in their water. What the Eyes Don't See, by Mona Hanna-Attisha, tells the tale of this violation of human rights. "Villians" such as capitalism and racism hinder efforts to reach a place where "people are cared for, where democracy and equality and opportunity are once again encouraged and advanced. Where poverty is silenced instead of people" (25). This place is the intersection of health, healing, and humanity. This place is where everyone, where humanity, has human rights. Hanna-Attisha portrays the interconnectedness of health, healing, and humanity in her book.

One's health can be good or poor. The book addresses detriments to good health including the lead in Flint water. These detriments are "'adverse childhood experiences' (ACEs) or 'toxic stresses'" (24). Toxic stresses: "poverty, racism, violence" experienced during childhood alter a child's brain chemistry and hinder development (25). Hanna-Attisha also details the toxic effects of lead on children's' development, how lead "[disrupts] the formation of dendrites, [disturbs] the myelin sheath" (41). Lead also causes "swelling of the brain...kidney failure, coma...death" (42). Exposing harm to children's' health is the beginning of how Hanna-Attisha heals others with her humanity.

On a surface level, Hanna-Attisha heals patients as a pediatrician. However, the book progresses to explore healing beyond just physical. It focuses on mental, emotional, and psychological healing. It focuses on healing the effects of racism and inequality in a community

and its children. Exposure to lead is adversity and toxic stress that the children of Flint must heal from. Hanna-Attisha states that “resilience is key” to healing toxic stress (14). She builds resilience by implementing high-quality public health programs that provide children and their families with nutritional enrichment, mental health care, and access to transportation.

The desire to heal others requires possession of humanity. The term “humanity” functions in two ways; it describes the human species, uniting races, genders, sexes, and classes. “Humanity” is also used to describe behavior that shows empathy, compassion, and care for another sentient being. In other words, humane behavior. The book addresses both forms of humanity through characters and their actions.

Hanna-Attisha intertwines the tale of Flint with tales of tyranny in Iran. She talks about Nuri, a great-uncle who “fought for all people, for humanity” even with the threat of death looming above him (213). Mona’s grandfather, Haji, helped Nuri, a display of compassion that could have resulted in his own demise. Nuri and Haji are examples of people with humanity; they exhibit compassion and care for others. The book also shows humanity through activism. Hanna-Attisha’s humanity, advocating for the health of others. Her friends, who taught her about water regulations. Her coworkers, who spent countless nights creating a research study to prove citizens were being poisoned with lead. The actions of Hanna-Attisha, her team, and her coworkers go above and beyond the requirements of their jobs. Pediatricians, scientists, and reporters come together to make clean water accessible. Although they are discredited by an inhumane government concerned only about money, they continue on their crusade for clean water.

The book focuses not only on displays of humanity but also times when they are absent. Exhibitions of inhumanity in this book are almost always motivated by one or more of the big villains: “racism, inequality, greed...capitalism” (14). Acts of inhumanity are used to show detriments in health and the need for healing. This depiction begins with the history of Flint: rife with racism, inequality, and oppression. Flint was founded by pushing Indigenous people off of their land in oppressive “ethnic cleansing” (116). Industrialization through the founding of General Motors was a result of capitalism, a system in which “black workers were segregated to the poorest-paying, most insecure, lowest-skilled jobs” (119). Racism generated cheap labor and Flint thrived by exploiting black workers. Inhumanity is also demonstrated through government inaction driven by racism. A Michigan official said, “I’m not so sure Flint is the community we want to go out on a limb for” (286).

The reason Flint needed to be healed is this blatant racism. The reason Flint faced detriments to child health is “pointed cruelty” (286). The reason Flint needed Mona Hanna-Attisha and her humanity is the “arrogance and inhumanity” of those in power (286). The book addresses poverty, fueled by capitalism and racism, which leads to the poor health of a community in desperate need of humanity. In these ways, health, healing, and humanity - a holy trinity - intersect to champion human rights for all.

Works Cited

Hanna-Attisha, Mona. *What the Eyes Don't See: a Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City*. One World, 2019.