

A Client's Thoughts on Therapy:

A Victim's Views on Abuse

by "My Mother's Daughter"

The author of this article lives and works in a large Canadian city. She encourages all women who are victims of abuse or violence to "break the silence" if possible; and to seek out help and support in their efforts to deal with the effects of abuse.

I wish I could speak freely about this, but I cannot; the information, in the wrong hands, could be used against me:

What? She's had three years of therapy, and presumes to counsel others? Imagine! She admits to having abused her child, and wants to give advice about family violence! Really! And she calls herself an educator!

so — I write anonymously.

Yet, I've known for some time that I have to write this in this issue, of this journal, for this audience — but most especially, for those who have grown up in similar pain and not yet sought help.

The message, quite simply, is this — there is help for you, and you can change.

You are not condemned to spend the rest of your life with the same dull ache of knowing that "something's wrong, or different, about me" — nor destined to helplessly repeat the mistakes of your parents in your own life.

Patterns can be altered, habits can be broken, new ways of being can be learned.

We called the therapist initially for marriage counselling. Things were "falling apart" following the birth of our first child after over a decade of marriage. Life style changes were drastic, often unanticipated. Adjustments were difficult, especially since we both tended to avoid concerns rather than confront and discuss them.

In the first session, our anger, frustration, and tears poured out. At the end of the hour, the therapist had one question for each of us in turn: "What do you most want from the other?" Then (to the other): "Can you try to do that?"

Our relief was immense. Here was someone who had heard and accepted our pain, and could cut through the built-up emotions to point the way to action. Things could be changed!

I recall the next few months of joint counselling only vaguely. There were many highs and lows — sensuous interludes and heated arguments — unlike our former state of "rolling along on two parallel tracks." We discovered the things we did which led to conflicts, explored why we acted this way, and learned how to handle issues differently.

However, I knew that for me there was more to be done — I had felt for some years that I should try individual counselling. The therapist agreed to continue seeing me alone when our marital "work" was over.

I knew that my family background had a lot to do with my sense of frustration, emptiness, and feeling different from others. My Father was an alcoholic. My parents' marriage was stormy because of this, as far back as I could remember. They finally separated after the youngest of the five children was finished high school, and I had had very little contact

with Dad in the years that followed. I had also cut myself off from my Mother in many ways, resolving to do things differently (and "right") with our child — none of the constant criticism, emotional coldness, strict controls, and physical punishment that I recalled from her.

What I was quite unaware of (especially ironic because of my active work on social issues such as sexual harassment and sex role stereotyping in my job) was how much my own stress and tension was typical of almost all women of my age group and "status" in Canada today. Social mobility, work place inequity, and changing marriage roles take a personal toll on us, as well as being broad categories to describe group experiences. I'll never forget the day when my therapist (herself married for thirty years, with three grown children) suggested that my deep scorn for my new role as a Mother simply showed that I had accepted the "male" view of motherhood, as it were, "hook, line, and sinker!"

It was like a handful of cold water in the face. Me, Women's Studies activist in a progressive educational institution, longing for my maternity leave to be over so I could get back to doing "something worthwhile" with my intellectual abilities, totally unconscious of the fact that I had internalized the most traditional, stereotyped, view of family roles! Humbling, indeed.

Coming face to face like that with your underlying assumptions about yourself, others, and the world, is what makes therapy "the hardest work you'll ever do" (as my therapist often reminded me). You not only "tease out" and face unstated assumptions, but also emotions formerly denied, repressed, or kept out of conscious awareness; and perhaps also emo-

tional traumas never before admitted or disclosed. Let me explain this a little more for those who have never been in therapy, especially those who were victims of abuse as children, for I feel it is crucial.

Think of it this way: some things in life are just too much for children to bear. Such things give us problems later in life not only because they happened to us (which was bad enough), but also because we somehow had to block out or deny the pain and suffering they caused lest it overwhelm us. I see this as applying to all types of abuse — from emotional neglect, or verbal abuse, up to extreme physical and sexual abuse. In my own case, it felt even as an adult that I would “die” (emotionally that is) if I ever really admitted how much my Mother’s psychological and physical abuse of me had hurt — how much it hurt never to have felt loved and accepted as a child.

You may wonder whether it is worth it to face the pain and trauma of past abuse. It certainly isn’t pleasant — I know, because I have done it. However, there are two strong reasons why I would urge anyone who has been abused as a child to find a therapist they can trust and to deal with the past.

One is that the coping strategies used by a helpless child to deal with abuse tend to underlie many problems with adult relationships. It is only when you see where a certain tendency came from, and why, that you can begin to accept it as inappropriate in the different circumstances of your adult life. (It took more than two years of therapy for me, for instance, to stop assuming and expecting that my husband would leave “someday” like my Father had — despite the fact that we had then been married over fifteen years! “Just because he hasn’t left yet, doesn’t mean he won’t leave tomorrow,” I’d say to my therapist. I know now that such an absence of basic trust in people came from the abuse I had endured.)

From my personal experience, there is a second, even more urgent, reason for dealing with the past; if you don’t (or when you don’t) you run a much higher risk of repeating the abuse yourself, as it is your model from the past, upon which you may fall back in times of great stress. Adamant as I was about condemning my Mother’s harshness, I found myself getting out of control in using physical force on our child as he “tantrumed” his way into the “terrible two’s.” The feeling of “becoming what I most hated in my parent” was truly terrifying. It was not until the therapist guided and supported me through admitting and feeling the pain

and rage I had denied all those years, that I was able to conclude: “It is wrong to abuse a child. She was wrong to abuse me. I didn’t deserve it. No one deserves abuse. My child doesn’t deserve abuse. I WILL NOT ABUSE MY CHILD!”

On the issue of child abuse, I found the books by Alice Miller, Christine Herbruck, and Eliana Gil most helpful. A local parenting course, and authors such as Penelope Leach and Stanley Greenspan, provided alternate strategies and ideas for dealing with conflicts.¹

As I explained earlier, when we entered couple therapy I had no idea that abuse would emerge as a key issue for me. In fact, I blamed most of our problems on my husband, not on my ways of relating to him. Convenient, but too simplistic, I now realize! I knew that I didn’t want to redo all the things I had hated my Mother for, but I had no idea how deeply they had scarred me. I can see now that the verbal criticism devastated my sense of self worth. Having a Mother who alternately took care of me and physically abused me, and an often-absent Father who couldn’t protect me from her, also left me unable to trust and depend on others. As I explored these aspects of myself, I suddenly understood the shock of recognition and empathy I had experienced when reading about the effects of child sexual abuse or incest: although the nature of the trauma was different, the damage to the psyche was substantially the same.²

I have also learned that many children of alcoholics share a definable set of psychological tendencies which affect later life and relationships. As a child, I was very aware of the way in which alcoholism prevented us from having a normal family life. However, I did not previously understand that habits of thinking and behaving developed to accommodate the alcoholism would carry over into adulthood. It seems to me now that, if you have any of the following in your family background, you should consider yourself potentially “at risk” for psychological problems: drug or alcohol use; any abuse (severe criticism, physical punishment, or forced sexual contacts); and divorce, separation, long-term parental conflict, or family violence. A good therapist will help you resolve issues from such past problems.

When I entered therapy, I felt overwhelmed by all the things I suspected were wrong with me. Some of these have changed or improved three years later. Others, I now realize, will mark me forever — but I can accept them more readily knowing where they came from. I have a

better sense of what was not my fault, and what I have to take total responsibility for. I don’t feel I am leaving therapy “cured” (that is, “perfect,” as I expected when I started); but rather with the wry, tolerant wisdom that comes of having faced my own personal hell in an environment in which it was safe to do so, and with someone skilled and caring enough to help me through it. Therapy is a journey of self-discovery which may change you forever.

I have referred several times to “a good therapist.” One of my main reasons for writing this article was because I have heard so many stories of women with “bad” experiences of therapy that I wanted to try and convey a sense of what “good therapy” feels like. Your therapist should be interested in, accept, and value what you say — s/he should come to know “how it feels to be you.” S/he should be human and sharing of her/his own experiences, not cold and impersonal, for the therapist can be a powerful role model of “a different way of being” due to the intensity of the relationship. Once a solid basis of trust has been established, s/he should challenge you to interpret things differently: “What if...? Why didn’t...? Did you ever consider...?” All these things help to make personal change easier for the client.

*In the early sessions, you ask yourself
is this the therapist for you?*

*You need someone to whom you can
tell “all the secrets”*

*You want to tell them now —
someone has to know
someone has to help
the “little-girl inside”
who is hurting so badly.*

*You’ve protected her all these years,
but you can’t help her alone*

*You need someone who will simply,
and gently, say
as they hear “the secrets”
you’ve never disclosed before:
“...and what else?
and what else?...”*

*someone who would hold you and
comfort you
if, like me, you finally admit
it was that that you’ve longed for
all those years.*

*I found her —
I hope others in need will too.*

¹On child abuse:

Gil, Eliana M., *Outgrowing the Pain: A Book For and About Adults Abused As Children*. San Francisco: Launch Press, 1983. (An excellent introduction — deals with all types of abuse).

Herbruck, Christine Comstock, *Breaking the Cycle of Child Abuse*. Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1979. (Written by the sponsor of a Parents Anonymous group — a self-help group for abusive parents. These “real-life” stories gave me hope at a critical time).

Miller, Alice, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983. (I suggest reading this first, of her three books).

Miller, Alice, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. New York: Basic Books, 1981. (If the terminology is confusing, read her other books first).

Miller, Alice, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*. New York: New American Library, 1984.

On Parenting:

Greenspan, Stanley I. (and Greenspan, Nancy Thorndike), *First Feelings: Milestones in the Emotional Development of Your Baby and Child*. New York: Viking Press, 1985. (Birth to Age Four. A section at the end of each unit helps parents understand their own responses to their child, pointing out how personality style and past history may affect this).

Leach, Penelope, *Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977 and 1978. (The one book I believe all new parents should own).

²For example, Golden, Judith, “Incest: It's Time to Talk About It,” in *Canadian Woman Studies*, 4:4, (Summer 1983), pp. 82-84.

³I first encountered this term (“little-girl inside”) in Eichenbaum, Louise and Orbach, Susie, *Understanding Women: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Approach*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. (Covers a wide range of counselling modes, and includes descriptions of stages of a feminist psychotherapy relationship which I also found personally helpful).

TOO FEW TO COUNT

Canadian Women in Conflict with the Law

Too Few To Count is an incisive and controversial book about women and crime in Canada. Its nine articles challenge traditional theories of female criminality and examine the consequences for women of a criminal justice system designed for, created and controlled by men. Written by some of the most respected people in the field, this book helps fill a huge gap in criminology literature.

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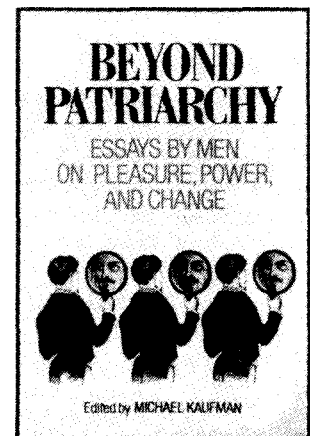
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