

NAMING AND CLAIMING

The integration of traumatic experience and the reconstruction of self in survivors' stories of sexual abuse

Susan D. Rose

Each segment of our conduct and experience bears a twofold meaning: it revolves about its own center, contains as much breadth and depth, joy and suffering, as the immediate experience [allows], and at the same time is a segment of a course of life.

(Simmel 1971: 187)

With this passage, Georg Simmel launches into his exploration of 'The Adventurer', an essay that profoundly and playfully explores the ways in which the 'adventure' is an integral part of a life, yet marked by its discontinuity with it:

The most general form of adventure is its dropping out of the continuity of life. . . . What we call an adventure stands in contrast to that interlocking of life-links, to that feeling that those countercurrents, turnings, and knots still, after all, spin forth a continuous thread.

(Ibid.: 187-8)

Strikingly, Simmel's analysis of 'adventure' applies well, if paradoxically, to the experience of trauma. Traumas, like adventures, are often marked in parenthetical time.¹ But while Simmel may ascribe to an adventure a beginning and an end much sharper than those to be discovered in other forms of our experiences' (ibid.: 188), the traumatic event often resides in more ephemeral time, remaining unintegrated or 'frozen' in time. As psychiatrist Dori Laub, who writes about the experiences, memories, and narratives of Holocaust survivors, argues:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality. . . . This absence of categories that

define it lends it a quality of 'otherness,' a salience, a timelessness, and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences. . . . Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion . . . and therefore . . . continues into the present.

(Laub 1992: 69)

In what ways may trauma be considered the shadow-side of adventure – similar in form though oppositional in meaning – that draws one in rather than out? Trauma, like adventure:

is certainly part of our existence, directly contiguous with other parts which precede and follow it; at the same time, however, in its deeper meaning it occurs outside the usual continuity of this life. Nevertheless, it is distinct from all that is accidental and alien, merely touching one's outer shell. While it falls outside the context of life, it falls, with this same movement, as it were, back into that context again . . . it is a foreign body in our existence which is yet somehow connected with the center; the outside, if only by a long and unfamiliar detour, is formally an aspect of the inside.

(Simmel 1971: 188)

This connection between inner lives and outer manifestations is illustrated well by shirts contributed to the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline Project.² (See Figures 8.1 and 8.2.) Organized in conjunction with the national project based in Massachusetts and part of the international movement against violence directed at women, the Project invited women to construct T-shirts that expressed not only the violence they suffered but also the healing and recovery they were experiencing. The exhibit was assembled as part of the 1993 Public Affairs Symposium on 'Violence in America' at Dickinson College. Initially interviews with twenty women were conducted; follow-up interviews were then done at the national exhibit in Washington D.C. where over 5,000 shirts were displayed in April 1995.

The resulting video documentary, *Clothesline*, integrates images of these shirts and interviews with women who speak about the making and meaning of their shirts.³ The documentary opens with a clothesline of shirts made by women: white shirts (contributed by family or friends) represent women who had been killed; blue or green shirts had been made by victims of childhood sexual abuse or incest; red, pink, or orange shirts had been constructed by victims of rape and sexual assault; and purple shirts by women who had suffered violence because of being targeted as lesbian. The women drew upon different images and materials to portray the abuse and healing they experienced: black felt and burlap hearts, pieces from childhood dresses, broken candles, ripped-out hearts, lace daggers, and photographs of graduation day.

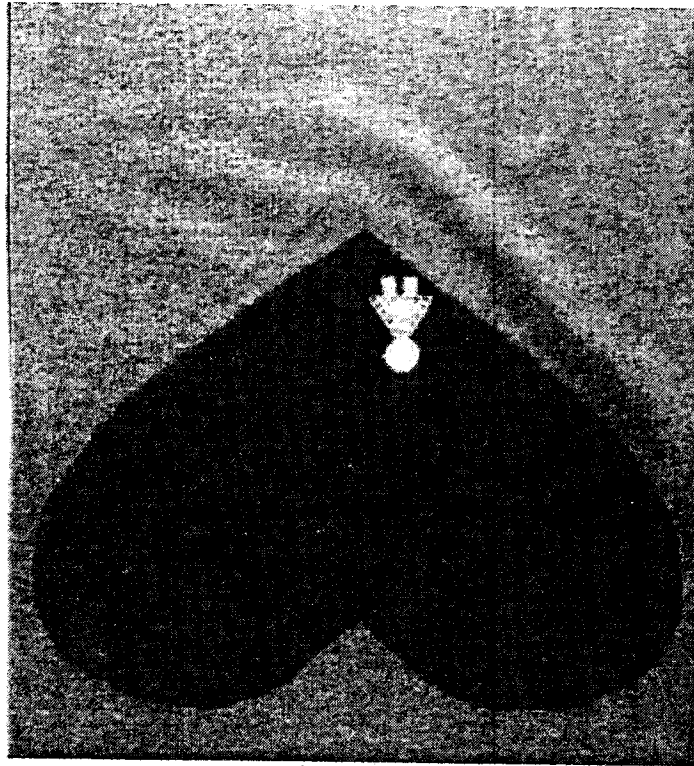


Figure 8.2 A shirt contributed to the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline Project



Figure 8.1 A shirt contributed to the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline Project

On one shirt, a burlap heart configuring the experience of pain and healing illustrates the embodiment of that which is both integral and foreign, and presents an outer representation of that which lies within. (See Figure 8.1.)

As Pat describes the making and meaning of her shirt:

I've always felt that my heart was damaged in some way. And that's why I wanted to start with the heart. I picked burlap because I feel that I'm very rough. I don't feel that I can be caring or compassionate to other people. And I just feel like I have a very rough heart. This is the wound, the incest. It doesn't take like a big part, because I don't feel that it destroyed my whole heart, it's just something that radiated. And the little hammers are what I've used to beat myself into not allowing me to be me, all my life. And these are the things – nature and love and passion and music and things like that – that I consider to be me. And that's what bleeds. The part that's me that isn't allowed to be. The shame which I feel, I carry my father's shame. I am shame. In the middle, the little heart, is God. Because I feel that God is the only one that's brought me through.⁴

Pat simply and exquisitely speaks of the embodied pain and numbness of both *being* and *not being* which is part of the experience of violation, and reveals the layers of meaning that interact with one another, defining and redefining the connections between inner and outer realities. She also speaks of the relationship between violation (the incest) and her father's shame that has bled into her – 'I carry my father's shame. I am shame' – and visually represents it in bleeding red capital letters. She has internalized that sense of shame but in the healing process has begun to unearth it and give it back: 'I decided to name the people that I can remember abusing me. . . . And that's powerful to me because I feel like I need to start giving responsibility to those people. I still carry it as my fault.' And she continues:

I know there's hope. I know it's out there and I know some day I'm going to get there. It's just, I keep trying to trip myself up on the way. I really have the confidence that I can recover. It [the abuse] will always be there, and it will be a part of me, but it isn't going to define me anymore.

Pat is very articulate about the ways she has embodied and blocked pain. She speaks of wanting to embrace the part of her she left behind as a child, and of reclaiming feeling and compassion for herself and others. In the process, she is both coming to understand and redefine the meaning that sexual abuse has had for her: 'It will always be there . . . but it isn't going to define me anymore.' This is not a matter of 'moving beyond' experience, it is

a matter of understanding experience in a new way, one that recognizes both its pervasiveness and its limits. In describing the process, Pat recognizes both the connections and discontinuities between inner and outer selves. For Pat and for other survivors of childhood sexual abuse, recovery involves renegotiation of one's identity.

Renegotiation requires dialogue among one's various selves and between those selves and others who can listen. As Laub argues, in order to undo the entrapment of the traumatic reality and its re-enactment, one must engage 'in a process of constructing a narrative, reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing* the event' (Laub 1992: 69). The act of telling one's story, both through visual and narrative representation, is an important part of the process. Often the narratives of people who have been traumatized reflect what Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman considers to be the central dialectic of psychological trauma:

the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud. . . . People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. (Herman 1992: 1)

Survivors both seek and fear knowledge. The structure of the narrative reflects this dialectic and the approach-avoidance of the survivor to knowing and feeling that often comes with the experience of trauma. Moreover, the narrative is not static; it continues to develop over time and experience. Within the context of psychotherapy, the telling of a story is often a 'slow, laborious process, a fragmented set of wordless, static images [that are] gradually transformed into a narrative with motion, feeling, and meaning' (Herman 1996). As Laub describes the narrative of a survivor of Auschwitz:

She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination . . . her silence was part of her testimony. It is not merely her speech, but the very boundaries of silence which surround it which attest, today as well as in the past, to this assertion of resistance. (Laub 1992: 62)

By breaking through the silence, survivors are constructing oppositional narratives that defy the taboo against *talking about* incest and torture, and in the process are re-creating themselves. In resisting traditional narrative forms, survivors often encounter great scepticism and resistance to the telling of their stories. Speaking out is a political as well as a therapeutic act, and as such, is a claim to power. It involves risk as well as promise. And as these

women who were ready to speak out remind us, we need to consider what it means *not* to risk. While there are dangers involved in speaking out, there are also dangers in remaining mute. Silence stifles the soul, affects the quality of relationship with others, and accepts an unjust and abusive system of power that renders the victim powerless. It makes abuse possible without holding the abusers accountable. In the process of breaking silence, survivors are not only finding their own voices; they also are collectively creating new narratives that challenge the individual and collective denial of abuse and the reproduction of violence. In dialogue with others who can bear witness, survivors are redefining the experiences that once rendered them powerless.

One contributor to the Clothesline project portrays herself as a little girl without aims situated in the corner of a black heart: (See Figure 8.2.)

I knew I wanted to have a black heart on it. Maybe it was because I just felt that way about hearts, and about love. That's all very black. That's me – the little purple girl. I cut out little felt arms. And then . . . I left them off.

Liz cannot articulate just why she left off the arms: but she knows it is significant that she cannot attach or position them: 'They didn't fit, I just couldn't get them to fit right.' The absence of arms or hands is commonly found in drawings of traumatized children, and is often interpreted as representing a loss of power and ability to act.⁵ Liz, now a successful magazine editor and lay-out designer, has chosen to speak out publicly about her abuse. When asked what she wanted to tell the public, she immediately replied:

It's important for people to realize that those statistics represent people. Behind every one of those numbers [of abuse] is a person . . . [who is] struggling. . . . It's not just something you get over. And so there's all those hundreds of thousands of walking-wounded women out there. And we're all struggling. I'm trying to find ways to make it less black.

Liz reports that she always remembered the physical abuse inflicted upon her by her father who 'became quite violent after a brain tumor'. She recalls, too, being sent to her aunt's and uncle's for the summers after her mother died. While she talked about 'the vivid memories' she had about the summers there, she also says: 'I just don't remember anything about [the sexual abuse] within that time frame. Although it went on for six summers [from the age of six to twelve], it's like I remember it as one summer.' After graduation from college she experienced a flood of memories.

Liz describes moving in and out of awareness, both at the time the abuse was going on and later, as she recalls the details and remembers more fully the emotional impact it had. As many contemporary feminists and

psychotherapists would describe it, recovery actually involves re-membering the connections between body and mind and spirit. It involves picking up the threads of discontinuity and making sense of them; it calls people to reweave the fabric of their being (Davis and Bass 1994). In the process of recovery, the abuse becomes redefined as it becomes more fully understood. For Liz, it became integrated in new ways as the adult-she and the little-girl-she become more aware of one another. The little purple girl with no arms can now be embraced by the adult woman who is re-claiming parts of herself, a process that Liz describes as a journey.

The adventure that leads one into new encounters, stimulates the senses by challenging them with new sounds, smells, sensations.⁶ When one leaves behind familiar territory and enters new terrain, adrenalin rushes to prepare one to meet the unknown, the unfamiliar, the stranger who is potentially an enemy but also potentially a friend. The 'alter-adventure' of engaging past trauma may likewise lead one into unexpected, though strangely familiar territory. As one embarks on the interior journey, it may feel as if one is revisiting a minefield. The challenge for the survivor is not only to explore the old terrain but to carve a new landscape out of it. With both the adventure and alter-adventure, the journey invokes risk but also opportunity. By expanding and exploring new boundaries, the adventure/alter-adventure can revitalize. It can also terrify. It can lure us further or paralyse us.

While culture shapes how we interpret experience, what meaning we attach to it, biology puts certain constraints on this. In the case of inescapable trauma, the psychobiological response is more likely to numb than to mobilize one for flight or fight.⁷ As psychologist Elizabeth Waite describes it:

Traumatic experience typically produces an overwhelming need to escape what is, in reality, inescapable. Dissociation is a psychobiological mechanism that allows the mind, in effect, to flee what the body is experiencing. . . . The shock of trauma produces states that are so different from ordinary waking life that they are not easily integrated with more normal experience. As a result of this discontinuity, the traumatic state may be lost to memory or remembered as a dream is sometimes remembered, as something vague and unreal.

(Waite 1993: 14)

Because of its place in our psychic life, remembered trauma, like adventure, tends:

to take on the quality of dream. It often moves so far away from the center of the ego and course of life which the ego guides and organizes that we may think of it as something experienced by another person [or as something] alien.

(Simmel 1971: 188)

In the case of sexual abuse, this dream-like quality of experience results from the sense of one's self being so assaulted, so bombarded, that one psychobiologically 'escapes' in order to avoid destruction.

This phenomenon is well described in the narratives of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Dissociation, which gives rise to a form of temporary transcendence, is one of the major defence mechanisms resorted to by traumatized children. The mind or spirit leaves the body and the child may come to feel no pain, may leave the scene entirely, neither experiencing the abuse at the time nor remembering it afterwards. The escape from self – from what is being done to the self – creates a safer space, a retreat. It may be temporary or longer lasting, depending on the severity and frequency of abuse. The responses of others help shape the meaning of the experience, and the possibilities for integrating the experience or rejecting it, for either dealing with it in the present or putting it aside to deal with later. Over time, one becomes accustomed, even entrained, to follow certain patterns of response, whether dissociating from or acknowledging pain (Herman 1992; van der Kolk *et al.* 1996).

In the case of adventure, one seeks revitalization through excitement. In the traumatic escape, rather than seeking more stimulation, one seeks less; rather than excitement, one seeks safety.⁸ As Liz recalled her escape into the wallpaper:

I remember being on their bed and he was laying on top of me. And I had my hands stretched out. And I was touching the wallpaper. And it was that flecked wallpaper, you know, the kind with the white stuff with gold specks, and just feeling it. . . . I was trying to focus on it . . . rather than on . . . yeah, I [was] dissociating.

Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse have described the experience of becoming observers of their own abuse, of symbolically leaving their bodies and watching the enactment of abuse from another place, for example, from the ceiling or through a window. This figurative flight may protect them from abuse that might otherwise be impossible to experience and recover from, given the psychological meanings for the self. As Ferenczi, Freud's student, analysand, friend, and colleague wrote in a 1933 paper shunned by his psychoanalytical peers:

It is difficult to fathom the behavior and the feelings of children following such acts of (specifically sexual) violence. Their first impulse would be: rejection, hatred, disgust, forceful resistance. 'No, no, I don't want this, it is too strong for me, that hurts me. Leave me be.' This . . . would be the immediate reaction, were it not paralysed by tremendous fear. The children feel physically and morally helpless. The overwhelming power and authority of the adults renders them silent.

(In Greven 1990: 158)

The effects of trauma on personality formation and integration vary according to the type and severity of the trauma, and whether or not one is able to speak of and process the trauma (Terr 1990). Both experience and expression are critical here. As Waites argues,

The integration of identity is closely allied to the development and experience of autobiographical memory, a sense of personal continuity and consistency over historical time that forms the background for the individual's interactions with others and serves as a reference point for self-reflective activities.

(Waites 1993: 14)

For some, experiences of severe abuse have led to dissociative identity disorders (DID), formerly referred to as multiple personality disorder (MPD) Cathy, who identifies herself as having MPD, symbolically portrays the divides within by splitting her shirt in half:

Well, this is the side that is the part of me that was in bondage. And then over here, this side, is freedom from it. . . . And then I put this name, Audrey here because I have another persona and her name is Audrey Katherine Lovett. And she gets me out of a lot of jams and she's my best friend, but it's really me. I give her a lot of credit when it should be me that takes the credit – because she does all the good. And, so, it's really me. She's gotten me into a couple of jams though too, along the way. And then this represents my arms because I was very, very destructive. I've got scars all over my arms.

Cathy points out quite literally the outer manifestations of her inner pain, and the ways in which her abuse led to internal divisions and multiple personas. She also divides the shirt with the words 'despair' and 'hope'.

So I put here . . . 'despair'. And then I come over here and I put 'hope'. . . . In some ways I did this the way I thought people would want to see it, and to portray it in a better way than sometimes I feel. . . . Sometimes I feel that to survive is punishment. . . . But I didn't feel it was offering survivors anything. And so I decided to put 'hope' there instead. And for the most part I feel more hopeful than I ever have in my life.

This sense of hopefulness grew out of supportive dialogue with professionals and other survivors, and dialogue between her own split selves:

There's no reason why I should be breathing, but for some reason I am a survivor. And I need to learn to accept that, and go with it, instead of resisting it. And I know it will take the rest of my life.

After years of severe familial abuse, foster care, and recurrent hospitalizations, Cathy is for the first time living on her own and employed. She is grateful to a supportive community of people who can listen to the stories of abuse she has to tell, help her sort out the meaning of those experiences, and move on:

It's great to know that there's people that are there for you, who believe you. . . . I might have a long journey ahead of me but I'm willing to do it. And I've got the support to do it this time. And there ain't no stopping me.

For another contributor, the split is displayed through the images she drew on the front and back of her shirt. As Marty describes it:

It's got sort of a healthy family on one side and a very dysfunctional family on the other. . . . Actually this is the front. What I always did in the past was, I sort of used the good things in my life to sort of cover up the bad things and that contaminated the good things, because it made them unclean. So, what I did was, I put this on the front so I could just . . . be out with this. And just say, this was wrong, it was wrong, and it was reality. And then the good things won't be contaminated.

Marty then discusses her motivation for working through her childhood experiences of abuse:

I live apart from myself. You know, I kind of float around. And I want, I'm twenty-six years old, and I want to experience the rest of my life. And there's something that follows me around. And it's just terrible. And I need to admit that it exists because otherwise, you know, I get real crazy inside. And I feel separate from my life. I'm just sort of watching it from a distance. And it's not feeling real to me. And I have a real sense that I don't want to lose the next twenty-five years of my life and wake up and be, you know, have lost all those years.

Some theorists and therapists argue that until the selves are integrated, reunited, and one is able to tell the story of the abuse as experienced and witnessed, the self cannot alter the meaning, and therefore the impact of the abuse. Other therapists and survivors argue that integration does not necessarily have to take place, that for some survivors, there may be a conscious choice or subliminal warning not to force integration but to allow the co-existence of parts of the self. In either case, awareness of one's experiences and recognition of the complexity of one's self/selves is fundamental to embracing rather than 'losing oneself'.

To lose oneself is to become so involved in something that one is no longer self-conscious about what one is doing. One is, in a sense, taken away. Whether in the context of work, or making love, or dealing with trauma, being so engaged can be powerful and productive as long as one can return to an awareness of self again. It is not losing one's self per se that is to be avoided, for we may find ourselves anew in the process of being lost and found. The danger is to lose touch for so long that one becomes unaware of some of the most potent sources of action and motivation (Miller 1981: 1990). To be 'lost in the moment', is one thing. To be lost for months, or years, or for a lifetime is quite another; it is to become alienated from one's self, and less responsible to and for one's self.

In daring to remember and speak about what they remember, survivors encounter both loss and gain. Sylvia Fraser, in *My Father's House: a Memoir of Incest and Healing*, reveals this as she describes her process of recovering and integrating memories of childhood abuse:

In retrospect, I feel about my life the way some people feel about war. If you survive, then it becomes a good war. Danger makes you active, it makes you alert, it forces you to experience and thus to learn. I know now the cost of my life, the real price that has been paid. Contact with inner pain has immunized me against most petty hurts. Hopes I still have in abundance, but very few needs. My pride of intellect has been shattered. If I didn't know about half my own life, what other knowledge can I trust? Yet even here I see a gift, for in place of my narrow, pragmatic world of cause and effect . . . I have burst into an infinite world full of wonder.

(Fraser 1987: 253)

In order to step back into the fullness of being and embrace the wholeness, in both its good and bad aspects, survivors speak of the need to pick up the strands of their being; to re-member the connections between the body, mind, and spirit and to re-integrate knowing and feeling. This is not a matter of finding the one, authentic or monolithic self, but rather of recognizing the multiplicity and complexity of one's experiences and the continual evolving of identity (Bruner 1990; Lifton 1993; Strozier and Flynn 1996).

The task of re-connecting to oneself and others, however, is not an easy one. There are many reasons why people forget or deny (Freyd 1996), why parts of our being go into hiding to protect, or at times expose, or wage war with other parts. The challenge is to develop not only an awareness of all these parts but also a sense of empathy with that self-as-other which may have been created as a means of enduring trauma. If the trauma is survived and a sense of safety is secured, then a reunion of the split selves may be possible. A recognition of other-as-self may create a sense of identification, of empathic understanding. Rather than an 'other' co-existing as a stranger or

foreign body within, it may come to be seen as a friend, even an integral part of one's being. Even though one may experience oneself-as-other as a way of surviving great violation, the selves are materially embodied together, and help to define one another. Not to identify and embrace the other-as-self is to deny the diverse experiences, both connective and discontinuous, that have helped shape who one is.

The consequences of this denial may take many forms: alienation, projection, psychosomatic symptoms, disembodiment. One may come to feel disconnected from self or others; unaware of what one is doing or feeling; unaccepting of responsibility for what one does. The defence mechanisms of denial and dissociation are used by abusers and witnesses of abuse as well as by survivors. This helps explain how ordinarily decent people can also come to torture and abuse others, and how people can witness such atrocities and still deny that such abuse exists.⁹

Judith Herman argues in her study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among war veterans and sexual-abuse survivors: 'The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable'. She goes on to argue that:

Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work.

. . . Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.

(Herman 1992: 1)

In order to gain a greater understanding of the impact and reproduction of violence, we need to examine the interactions of psychological and biological processes with cultural and social forces. We need to ask, under what conditions and through what means victims are likely to be silenced or enabled to speak; likely to forget, recall, or retrieve memories; likely to panic, become numb, or resist; to dissociate or integrate experience; to identify with or challenge the perpetrator? How do various kinds of social support affect the experiences and responses of survivors to violence and resistance? Violence in its various forms and intensities challenges not only theoretical models but also emotional responses. It is therefore critical that 'we', as individuals and the body politic, examine our willingness to explore the sources and consequences of familial, institutional, and cultural violence, and our resistance to doing so. Where do the sources of support and challenge lie? Where does denial cover up violence, and where are violence and denial confronted? Which stories are told, which are buried? What do we believe and what do we refuse to believe? What do we know of violence? What do we not know? And why?

'Knowing', let alone recalling, involves complex processes that are mediated by cultural, social, political, and psychological factors. Being human means having the capacity to reflect upon the past and alter the present in its light, as well as to reinterpret the past in light of the present. As Kenneth Gergen argues, the 'immense repository of our past encounters may come to be salient in different ways as we review them reflexively or come to reconceptualize them' (Gergen 1982: 18). Jerome Bruner further argues in *Acts of Meaning* that, 'Experience in and memory of the social world are powerfully structured not only by deeply internalized and narrativized conceptions of folk psychology but also by the historically rooted institutions that a culture elaborates to support and enforce them' (Bruner 1990: 57). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the processes of knowing, forgetting, and remembering are as complex as human beings themselves, who continually have to negotiate their social worlds, and their understanding of what is true in the present as well as in the past. These are philosophical, political, and sociological issues as well as psychological ones. It is clear that one's position of power in society (marked by 'race', class, gender, age, etc.) influences whether one is seen as credible and authoritative. It is no coincidence that formal resistance to memory recovery is associated not with survivors of car accidents, stroke victims, or even war veterans but with survivors of childhood sexual abuse.¹⁰

As Milan Kundera writes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1994), 'Man's struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. The resistance to acknowledging and then acting upon the reality and pervasiveness of child sexual abuse in the United States is well documented. It is difficult to deal with the number of children who are taken to emergency rooms and who die each year as a result of abuse. But denying that that reality exists does not alleviate the suffering of those children nor prevent the reproduction of violence. Neither does denying the experience of adult survivors of child abuse. In order to understand the degree of violence in the United States today, we need to examine the process and function of denial – at individual, institutional, and cultural levels. As Herman reminds us, while atrocities may be repressed, they are not forgotten (Herman 1992: 7).

The consequences for those who are enabled to tell their stories and for those who are silenced are clearly different, as psychologist Lenore Terr shows in her work on childhood trauma. In a systematic, longitudinal research study of children who had experienced a range of traumatic incidents (from kidnapping to car accidents to sexual abuse), Terr found that the psychological and social adjustment of traumatized children depended less on the severity or duration of the trauma and more on whether or not the child was able to speak of the trauma, and if so, how people responded (Terr 1990: 1994). Were they able to listen, and to act as witness in support of the child without blaming or silencing the child?

For those whose speaking meets with denial or derision, the original

betrayal is reinforced and the secondary trauma becomes retraumatizing. Pat for example, says that for a long time she was more angry at her mother for not protecting her than at her father who sexually abused her.¹¹ At the same time, she recognizes that her mother's continuing denial and inability to deal with the incest is rooted in her own abuse history:

That's how she survived her abuse. . . . My mother is very honest about her denial. She does not want to know. When I told her, she said it didn't surprise her at all. . . . But she also said, 'I don't want to know anything bad about him.' And then she gave me the, 'Oh, you're doing so wonderfully' She can't handle anything that's negative.

Pat clearly identifies the patterns of denial that enable the perpetuation of abuse:

What I would say to the public is that I strongly believe you are the problem. The perpetrators are given permission. It's the people like my mother who had to turn their back – and I say that to myself too, because that's how I survived, turning my back on people. . . . Like being at work where people would make abusive comments or make fun of people sexually, I just couldn't deal with it. And it's only going to change if we've got the guts to turn and look at ourselves and ask 'Why? Why are we so afraid to face it?'

There are many reasons why denial is an easier, if less effective, mechanism than acknowledging and dealing with an abusive relationship, especially when it occurs within the context of the family. It is hard to listen to stories of abuse for they threaten our identity as human beings; they challenge our notions of family and our sense of ourselves as belonging to a civilized society. And the strongest resistance, as Alice Miller (1981) argues, stems from self-defensiveness, for listening to such stories may unearth the listener's own repressed experiences of pain. We conveniently find ways to avoid what is hard to believe, to bury and conceal that which is not supposed to be. From time to time we are made aware of the existence and consequences of domestic violence and political torture, and of the coping strategies of victims and witnesses, as earlier writings and studies show, but the opening through which recognition can turn to action is quickly sealed off from collective investigation.¹² Silence protects both perpetrators and the notion (no matter how illusory) of a harmonious community and family; it also retraumatizes and isolates victims.

Ultimately, recovering from trauma is not just an individual act but a collective process: it demands dialogue. While bearing witness to trauma is a process that involves the listener, many people are unable or unwilling to

listen, and trauma-survivor narratives often meet with great resistance from the larger society. A backlash against speaking out occurs because it exposes the atrocities in our midst and challenges both those who abuse power and those who stand by as muted witnesses. It is 'easier' to side with abusers than to serve as effective witnesses to the abused, as Herman clearly articulates:

It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering. In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies; it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself, and in any case, it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.

(Herman 1992: 7-8)

The organized resistance to survivors speaking out is both predictable and revealing. The False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF), organized by the parents of Jennifer Freyd, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon, is a prime example. Freyd's parents organized FMSF a couple of months after Jennifer entered therapy. Although she had not spoken to the public or her parents about her childhood abuse, they went on the offensive by organizing the FMSF, whose major aim is to repudiate claims of recovered memories. After Jennifer declined their invitation to serve on the Board of Directors, her parents pressed the attack by sending unsolicited materials that questioned their daughter's integrity and character to her colleagues while she was undergoing her tenure review. The invasion of privacy and violation of boundaries in these contemporary and public actions reveal, in and of themselves, the problematic nature of her parents' relationship with her.

Interestingly, Professor Freyd's research focuses on the epistemology of knowing. Her new book, *Betrayal Trauma: the Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*, draws upon current psychological and neurophysiological research to posit a theory of betrayal trauma which explicates why it makes sense for

children who have been abused by family members to forget that abuse. As Bickerton points out in his review of *Betrayal Trauma*, 'Freyd marshals the psychological, neurological, and cognitive-science literature with impressive skill' (Bickerton 1997: 20) to suggest that when pain comes from betrayal by someone very close to a child, and the abuser (and everyone else) acts as though nothing is amiss, the child - who is dependent upon those adults - will find ways to minimize, deny, or forget the abuse in order to survive. This is especially true in a culture that tends to believe and support adults, while questioning the credibility and experience of children (see Ceci and Bruck 1995).

Given the social forces that act to preserve patriarchal and parental power, and to protect adult perpetrators, it is no surprise that many survivors of sexual abuse have found it nearly impossible to speak of their abuse. Social, institutional, and cultural forces have often colluded to silence such stories which threaten the ideal of family harmony and community order. To reveal the range and depth of perversion and abuse is to threaten that very order. The irony, of course, is that not to reveal it, is to ensure the reproduction of violence and distortion, and thus ultimately the collapse of the very systems people are trying to protect.

In attempting to speak out, survivors must not only tell their story of abuse but counter the abuser's version that is typically normalized by dominant cultural narratives about victimhood, the family, and relationships between parents and children. The survivor of childhood sexual abuse has to break through the traditional story line that places blame and responsibility on the victim, and calls (in the Fourth Commandment) for children to obey their parents without a reciprocal emphasis on the responsibility of parents to children.¹³ The challenge for survivors of childhood sexual abuse is to create a new language by which they can speak of abuse and of parents who violate their responsibility to children. In challenging the old story, survivors are seeking a new positionality *vis-à-vis* the dominant discourse. They are creating alternative narratives that enable them to speak of childhood sexual abuse and to resituate blame and responsibility, to give the shame back to those who abused them rather than accepting it as their own fate. In radically challenging the 'official story' that upholds the status quo, these new stories do not come without struggle (Rose 1993).

In the act of violence, the perpetrator controls the story he enacts. This is seen in such expressions as: 'she asked for it', 'that'll teach her a lesson', 'she made me do it, it was her fault', 'spare the rod, spoil the child'. Within the context of this traditional and patriarchal narrative, the targeted person becomes a victim because she deserves it. 'Our sense of the normative is nourished in narrative, but so', argues Bruner, 'is our sense of breach and exception. Stories make "reality" a mitigated reality' (Bruner 1990: 97). Trauma narratives (whether they recount experiences with sexual abuse, lynching, or political torture) point to the unjustified violence done to people, and hold abusers rather than victims accountable. They expose the

illegitimate use of force, power and authority, and in so doing, de-authorize the credibility and legitimacy of the abusers.

By naming and claiming the experience of abuse and survival as their own story, survivors reconstruct the story of abuse rather than accepting it as the shameful bequest of parental violation. The survivor narrative names the violation as an act of cruelty, control, or hubris, not as justified punishment visited upon a recalcitrant inferior or 'sidekick'. This act of naming and narrating seizes the story from the violator and gives witness to the struggle of the survivor and to her multidimensional self. The survivor is no longer objectified, her identity no longer relegated to a unidimensional victimized or stigmatized status; rather she may emerge from the fire as a strong, resourceful, and diversified self.

Although silence may serve as a refuge, it is also a place of bondage. In speaking out, the victim-survivor finds her own voice through which she can tell her story. Instead of living with the split, polarized identities of the good-bad selves projected onto her by the abuser, she can come to appreciate and experiment with both the resistance and the accommodation that was part of her survival strategy. Taking the story away from the abuser, and redefining the experience and oneself in relation to it, is an act of self-determination. As a consequence, resourcefulness and responsibility rather than reaction can come to characterize relationships and life choices. Volition, rather than violation, then becomes the driving force and opens up the possibilities for healing.

Notes

Many thanks to Kim Rogers, Graham Dawson and Linda Crockett for their thorough and thoughtful readings and insightful comments on earlier drafts.

- 1 Although for those whose abuse begins early and is chronic, trauma may be the consistent and continuing reality.
- 2 Growing out of a grass-roots group in Cape Cod, the National Network for the Clothesline Project is now located at P.O. Box 727, East Dennis, MA 02641, USA. When the project first started in 1991, there was one clothesline with thirty-one shirts on it. By February 1995, 250 clotheslines representing 35,000 shirts had been assembled around the country. In April 1995, more than 5,000 shirts were exhibited as part of the National Clothesline Project on the mall in Washington, DC.
- 3 A 53-minute documentary film, *Clothesline*, based on interviews with women who contributed artwork to the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline Project, was co-produced by Donna Malmshelmer and Susan Rose. It is available through South Mountain Productions, 93 Old Town Rd., Gardners, PA 17324, USA.
- 4 All excerpts are from transcripts of interviews with women who contributed to the Central Pennsylvania Clothesline Project in February 1993, Carlisle, Pa. Each of the interviewees is referred to by first name.
- 5 For more detailed discussions of drawings as diagnostic tools and the significance of the omission of hands, arms and feet, as well as the uses of art therapy,

see Peacock 1991, Spigelman *et al.* 1992, Magwaza *et al.* 1993, Burgess and Hartman 1993, Burgess 1981, Di Leo 1973, Kelley 1984 and Lemley 1990. The response to new challenges can be arousing and energizing, and at optimal levels, can facilitate learning, problem solving, and a sense of competence. But trauma, in contrast to interesting challenges, can overtax the mechanisms for responding to new or dangerous situations. Systems regulating arousal may become hypersensitive, too easily switched on or too difficult to moderate or turn off. (Wailes 1993: chapter 1).

7 Inescapable shock tends to produce lasting and deleterious psychological changes. See Krystal 1990, van der Kolk 1987, van der Kolk *et al.* 1996.

8 The adventure can draw us into an exciting exchange with worlds beyond our ordinary experience. But these times of adventure need to be complemented by periods of reflection. If the adventure is not to become just a frenetic run from self as ordinarily perceived and experienced, then periods of quiet reflection and integration need to follow. If we do not move inward, and contemplate that which we have experienced, then we are forever on the run. Or if the process of reflection is too interrupted, we – and our experiences with adventure (or trauma) – become fragmented, splintered, dismembered. If people are not given the space to reflect, or are warned not to remember, then they are more likely to forget and stay split.

9 See, for example, Kristof 1997. This article focuses on the stories of Second World War Japanese veterans who, more than fifty years later, are still haunted by the memories of crimes they committed against other men, women, and children during the war.

10 For current brain and memory research exploring the ways in which experience is recorded, and how the processing and storage of traumatic memories may be quite different from the processing of more ordinary experiences, see van der Kolk *et al.* 1996. As we gain better data about how bio-chemical and neurological processes interact with trauma, we will be better able to assess the processing, storage, and retrieval of a range of events along the spectrum from ordinary to traumatic. See Herman 1992 and 1996 for a review of studies which indicate that traumatic memories from childhood have been retrieved after a period of dense amnesia and later confirmed beyond a reasonable doubt. See also Terr 1994.

11 This is a common response of incest survivors who feel betrayed by their mothers who failed to protect them then; they are often more angry at them than at their abusers. This holds true, conversely, for fathers who stood by while their wives abused their children. One explanation is that the ineffective witness who did not protect the victim is a less threatening object of anger.

12 See Herman 1992, Greven 1990, Gordon 1988, Pleck 1987, Rose 1993.

13 For a more detailed discussion see Rose 1993, Greven 1990, Brown and Bohn 1989, Poling 1991 and Jay 1992.

References

- Bickerton, D. (1997) review of Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma*, in *New York Times Book Review*, 26 Jan., p. 20.
- Brown, J., and Bohn, C. R. (eds) (1989) *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: a Feminist Critique*, New York.

- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge.
- Burgess, A. (1981) 'Children's drawings as indicators of sexual trauma', *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, vol. 19, pp. 50-8.
- Burgess, A. and Hartman, C. (1993) 'Children's drawings', in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 17, pp. 161-8.
- Ceci, S. and Bruck, M. (1995) *Jeopardy in the Courtroom: a Scientific Analysis of Children's Testimony*, Washington, DC.
- Davis, L. and Bass, E. (1994) *The Courage to Heal*, New York.
- Di Leo, J. (1973) *Children's Drawings as Diagnostic Aids*, New York.
- Ferenczi, S. (1933) 'Confusion of tongues', quoted in Greven 1990: 158.
- Fraset, S. (1987) *My Father's House: a Memoir of Incest and Healing*, New York.
- Freyd, J. (1996) *Betrayal Trauma: the Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*, Cambridge.
- Gergen, K. (1982) *Towards Transformation in Social Knowledge*, New York.
- Gordon, L. (1988) *Heroes in Their Own Lives: the Politics and History of Family Violence*, New York.
- Greven, P. (1990) *Spare the Child: Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*, New York.
- Herman, J. (1992) *Trauma and Recovery*, New York.
- (1996) 'Crime and memory', in C. Strozier and M. Flynn (eds), *Trauma and Self*, Boston pp. 3-18.
- Jay, N. (1992) *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity*, Chicago.
- Kelley, S. (1984) 'The use of art therapy with sexually abused children', *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*, vol. 22, pp. 12-18.
- Kristof, N. (1997) 'A Japanese generation haunted by its past', *New York Times* 22 Jan. A1, p. 8.
- Krystal, J. H. (1990) 'Animal models for posttraumatic stress disorder', in E. L. Gillen (ed.), *Biological Assessment and Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, Washington.
- Kundera, M. (1994) *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, New York.
- Laub, D. (1992) 'Bearing witness', in S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York.
- Lemley, B. (1990) 'Pictures of the pain', *Social Issues Resources Series - Mental Health* vol. 4, p. 14.
- Lifton, R. J. (1993) *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, New York.
- Magwaza, A., Killian, B., Petersen, I. and Pillay, Y. (1993) 'The effects of chronic violence on preschool children living in South African townships', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 17, pp. 795-803.
- Miller, A. (1981) *Prisoners of Childhood*, New York; also published in paperback as *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1983).
- (1990) *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence*, New York.
- Peacock, M. E. (1991) 'A personal construct approach to art therapy in the treatment of post sexual abuse trauma', *American Journal of Art Therapy*, vol. 29, pp. 100-9.
- Pleck, E. (1987) *Domestic Tyranny: the Making of American Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present*, New York.
- Poling, J. N. (1991) *Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, Nashville.
- Rose, S. (1993) 'Child sacrifice: projective Christianity', *Anima* vol. 20, pp. 1-18.
- Simmel, G. (1971) 'The adventurer', in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago.
- Spigelman, G., Spigelman, A. and Engelson, I. (1992) 'An analysis of family drawings', *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, vol. 18, pp. 31-53.
- Strozier and Flynn (eds) (1996) *Trauma and Self*, Boston.
- Terr, L. (1990) *Too Scared to Cry*, New York.
- (1994) *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found*, New York.
- van der Kolk, B. (1987) *Psychological Trauma*, Washington, DC.
- van der Kolk, B., McFarlane, A. and Weisaeth, L. (eds) (1996) *Traumatic Stress: the Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, New York.
- Waite, E. (1993) *Trauma and Survival*, New York.