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Violence, Vision, and Voice:
A Journey from Liminal to Transgressive spaces

Journal of Radical Psychology

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Abstract

This paper was inspired by the author's experiences teaching a required class about feminism to affluent, predominantly female undergraduates who vociferously considered it outdated and irrelevant to their lives until they realized, in painfully personal ways, that this was the dominant discourse speaking, not their own voices. Inspired by these women, and in the hope of further displacing the hegemonically imposed code of silence, this paper breaks the author's tacit complicity with these societal forces of repression. Written on a bus from Boston to New York, the author weaves her narrative with a description of that trip and its passengers, combining imagery and psychological interpretation to reveal her personal journey into the intersection of the social politics that shape and control the legitimacy, experiences, and representation of women's stories, exploring how these forces are resisted and negotiated, embodied and survived, silenced and voiced.

Sexual abuse is not an isolated phenomenon or private event. It is woven into our social fabric. It is a public issue. It is our anger and our outrage, not our silence, that will hold society accountable and provoke change.

Prologue

To unearth the secrets is to tap the costs of silencing
(Fine, 1992, p.21)

I have tried to write this story before. I was always told that it was “too raw;” “too personal,” “too inappropriate,” “too depressing.” Maybe it is. But it is also, damn it, the dominant biographical text for far too many women. I learned this firsthand a few years ago when I was first invited to teach a (required) class about feminism to affluent, predominantly female undergraduates who vociferously considered feminism outdated and irrelevant to their lives. After group activities and discussions designed to make implicit gender biases explicit, we read and spoke about new and classic texts, the controversies within and across the movement, how things have changed over the past decades and how they had not. They were generally a somewhat conservative and highly opinionated group who consistently challenged feminist viewpoints. Over the course of the week we argued spiritedly about ethnic and cultural issues, sexual orientation and mores, economic and political factors. However, when I spoke about child abuse, rape, battered women, and related crimes the class was uncharacteristically silent and unresponsive. I thought maybe the page of statistics I had handed out (along with a page of local resources such as confidential university counseling services, rape crisis centers, battered women’s shelters, AIDS testing, and child abuse hotlines) was overwhelming or, more likely, the topics too far removed from the lives of these generally privileged students.

I was wrong.

Soon after the classes ended a student came to my office and asked if she could talk to me. Between sobs, she told me about her history of sexual abuse by a family member. It was the first time she had ever spoken of it to anyone. I comforted, empathized, raged, reassured, and cried along with her. She left saying that now she felt able to talk about it with a counselor. Over the next several days the scene was repeated again and again. The students and stories changed but the theme of abuse and trauma — some recent, some long silenced — was constant. I was puzzled by this at first but came to realize that the class had not only stirred memories but opened a space where students felt safe talking about what had been repressed and pressured into obscurity by a culture that prefers repetition of the unspeakable to speaking about it. It did this, in part, by providing a larger historical, social, and empathetic context for making meaning that had not been available to these women before — a space that displaced the dominant discourse and its code of silence. My goal in this paper is to open that counter-hegemonic space a little bit more.

I do not intend to do this by providing an exhaustive account of the complex conditions that encourage aggression and support violence against women, all of which have been well documented elsewhere (e.g. Burt, 1980; MacKinnon, 1983; Hanmer & Maynard, 1987; Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Connell, 1995; Klein & Chancer, 2000). I do this, instead, by ending my tacit complicity with these societal forces of repression by remaining silent. I do this by describing a personal journey into the intersection of the social politics that have shaped and controlled the legitimacy, experiences, and representation of women’s stories and by exploring how these forces are resisted and negotiated, embodied and survived, silenced and voiced.

I offer the words and images of my search in the hope that others may find resonance in what has been reverberating¹ in me for more than half my lifetime. I offer it to challenge the traditional assumptions made by academic texts and paradigmatic disciplines — to legitimize “other” texts as valid and valuable resources for making meaning. I offer it to further redefine and de-romanticize what it means to survive. But more about that later. For now, perhaps the following will help it make sense.

The story

I am writing this on the bus from Boston to New York. The next thing I realize, I am absorbed in studying the rain-muted view of New England's fall foliage. I have become the observer once again. Disassociated from the pain. It is hard for me to concentrate on writing this piece.

The oranges and yellows are extremely vibrant in some places this year, while for the next mile the leaves are still strangely green.

Even after all of these years have passed, I automatically turn off the emotions — the voices that tear me apart. Such psychic survival strategies have become routine.

I have never seen such glorious color — and I cannot recall ever seeing it so unevenly distributed.

I was young. I was female. I was innocent. He was male. He was strong and smelled of burnt rubber. He had a gun.

The woman next to me clutches her bag and stares straight ahead. She appears to be around seventy and wears red shoes and a red coat, long dangling earrings, and closely cropped hair dyed dark brown. She is carefully made-up. Carefully coordinated.

He raped me. Twice. Once with the gun. Words cannot express the terror. The horror. But I did not die. I was no longer alive. But I was not dead. I breathed. I moved. I hurt. It was dark. I was alone. I was numb. Somehow I found a phone. A pay phone. I must have called a taxi because I remember cowering in a corner of the back seat all the way home, my torn scarf drawn across my face.

Across the aisle, a blond young man with a most unusual ring on his pinkie reads an ornate leather bound volume of Edgar Allan Poe. The ring is silver with a design reminiscent of the style of Pacific Northwest Coast Indians. It is set with a polished cabochon of amber yellow.

"You're home early." came from the kitchen.

"I don't feel well. I think I'll shower and go to bed." I managed on my way furtively up the stairs.

I showered the longest, hottest, soapiest shower I dared. I told no one. Hoping the pounding water would drown out my stifled, convulsive sobs. I told no one. I tried to scrub off the bruises until they bled. I bled. I told no one. I wore turtlenecks and long sleeves. I told no one.

A thirsty lake swallows the rain. Music seeps out from the headphones of the young woman behind me. The lady in red scratches her rouged, wrinkled cheek with gnarled, polished fingers.

How could I? They wouldn't understand. They'd have blamed me for not staying home where I belonged. Or for wearing my skirt too short. Or my hair too long. I tried to forget it. Maybe it wasn't real. Maybe it didn't happen. Maybe. . . I had practically convinced myself that it was merely a nightmare.

The rain falls harder now. Outside my window, sturdy pines rooted in gray rock bear the weight of the rain stoically. Inside the bus, luggage straps dangle from the racks overhead and rock back and forth to the rhythm of the road. Droplet-dusted windows give the landscape a magical, Brigadoon quality.

I felt lousy. I felt queasy. My period was late. I told no one. Words cannot express the shame. The anger. The nameless. I found an ad in "The Village Voice." I went to a clinic. Alone. In another town. I lied about my name. I lied about my age. The test came back positive. I vomited. I went to the bank and withdrew my life savings of \$250. Alone. I handed it to the doctor. In cash. Alone. I embraced the anesthesia that enfolded my numbness. I could tell no one. And no one heard the anguish in my silent screams.

Sturdy pines rooted in gray rock bear the weight of the rain stoically. In front of me an ancient, frail African-American — no — he's too old to be African-American or even Black — He's lived most of his life as a Negro in the proudest sense of the name. He sleeps the entire trip, except for frequent trips to the back of the bus, staggering unsteadily down the aisle to the tiny bathroom there.

Theoretical foundations

R. J. Lifton's work with Holocaust survivors, war veterans, victims of sexual abuse and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, poor African Americans, and Christian fundamentalists reveals a common theme of victims trying to find purpose and meaning in their experiences (1961/1971, 1968, 1971, 1974, 1992) and so provides an appropriate introduction to this endeavor. Unlike some therapeutic (Carruth, 1991) and theoretical responses to trauma, Lifton's protean view (1993) does not negate trauma, objectify it as a transgression against the individual/autonomous self, or provide an algorithm for "recovery," but is compatible with feminist views of the embodied, relational self (e.g. Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan 1982; Gilligan & Lyons, 1990). A theme of transformation² through the construction of meaning-making narratives permeates this work, as does an emphasis on historical and social contextualization and interaction over time. According to Lifton, the "Protean Self" emerges from confusion and contradiction. The protean person develops a multiplicity and malleability of self in a process of "continuous psychic recreation" that allows for "a self of many possibilities" (Lifton, 1993, p. 5). This is consistent with the creation and constant re-creation of a "life-story" or meaning-full psychological and historical narrative of self that integrates one's identities (McAdams, 1993, 1996). However, traumatic memory is experiential, not narrative. It takes the form of fragmentary sensory and/or memory re-plays, inexplicable rage, crying, and terror or immobilizing body states. Because Lifton goes beyond the word-boundedness of spoken and written narratives (also examining the creative struggles of the artist — of film-makers, writers, and painters), he better enables us to come to terms with this unspeakable horror; with this annihilation of historical continuity, of symbolic immortality.

Because proteanism is intertextual, it underscores how ordinary thoughts and actions we often unconsciously and erroneously assume are trivial may hold a wealth of significance. Intertextuality, by encompassing multiple forms of interpretation including linguistic, semiotic, and aesthetic; bodily, psychic, and emotional, provides a way to see through the surface, to face the depths of meaning and our roles in its construction, to "listen" to our own "voices" so that we may better hear the voices of "others," to be vulnerable with a cautious, not fearful, stance. Thus, as I read and reread this story, several texts emerge. All inform and are formed by sociocultural context(s) and may be identified as psychological, biological, and biographical. Within these texts, certain themes emerge. Voice and lack of voice are primary. Embodiment, what I will call catharsis through symbolization, dissociation, and association also play a role. Although texts are dialogic and mediational, and writing, especially for publication, forces texts and the themes they subsume into an artificial linearity, in the name of clarity and as a bow to traditional expectations, I will address each theme in turn, in reverse order.

The journey

Association

Association is a technique developed by Freud to help in the retrieval of inaccessible memories and emotions (Terr, 1994). Wanderings of the mind can provide us with cues that prompt us to recall old feelings or bits of memory that we "associate" with thoughts, ideas, or sensations evoked by connections to seemingly unrelated recollections.

Association, it seems to me, is evident within the dissociation of the change in voice in my own writing — or what I assumed was dissociation when I wrote this piece. Gilligan's work resonates for me and provides the words with which to express this:

When a process of dissociation which has been incorporated into a cultural framework yields to an associative process of remembering, then people can know what they know and act on the basis of experience and evidence (1995a, p. 34).

Although the images from the bus are actual observations, my choice of passages and focus, I later realized, serve a purpose on another level of consciousness. This goes beyond the unconscious use of alternating passages with long and short sentences to the imagery and choice of words. Audre Lorde tells us, "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (1984, p. 37). Thus, "The language of poetry, like dreams, provide a royal road into the unconscious" (Gilligan, 1987, p.25). Evocative of Freud's dream work (1938), and similarly recognizing my own role in the interpretation, I offer the following analysis:

The paragraphs move from the simple distraction of the scenery to detailed description of several passengers. Contrast the "vibrant" colors of the first scene (vibrant: vigorous; lively; vital) with the threat of loss of physical (and actual loss of psychic) life a few paragraphs later. And part of the landscape still strangely "green." "Green." Young. Inexperienced. Is the landscape a metaphor for the self? "Glorious color unevenly distributed." A girl on the verge of womanhood? Mature in some ways, not all. The glorious color; the exhilaration; the promise of the future as the color spreads over more of the landscape.

The image of the woman in red. Clutching. Tight. Contained. Able to wear bright colors and dangles and, exercising caution (the word careful is used twice), still protect her personal space — her physical (and psychical?) boundaries.

The passage about the blond young man with the ring. I was fascinated by that ring. So much so that I strained to get a closer look at it as he took down his luggage to disembark. I felt a very strange sensation when I realized it was simply an abstract design, and bore no conscious resemblance to Tlingit or Kwakiutl artwork.

I did not realize until I first typed these very words from my scrawled notes that the description of the blond man could have described my tormentor. He had said something about being from Oregon and heading back there so he'd never be found. The Pacific Northwest Coast. Home to the Tlingit and Kwakiutl, whose artwork I had recently studied. I have not remembered this in almost twenty years. It feels strange to remember it now. It still feels dissociated. Foreign. Beyond feeling. Ring as Rorschach. Insight into the mysteries of the psyche and how it works?

Leonore Terr says that repression defends against remembering (1994, p.52). It "sets up a barrier between consciousness and what is submerged beneath it" (Terr, 1994, p. 66). I'm not sure I would call it repression, or even denial, since that implies agentic avoidance. Yet, why did this particular memory lay dormant for so many years, even through carefully conducted reconstruction of the details of the event in therapy, if not "repressed"? The most plausible explanation is that it may be explained by the profound alterations of consciousness at the time of trauma. As Herman (1996, p.7) suggests, "highly specific somatic and sensory information may be deeply engraved in memory, while contextual information, time sequencing, and verbal narrative may be poorly registered." This makes sense to me, i.e. it "feels" right. Still, I wonder

if this “new” recollection will alleviate some unconscious “symptom” — whether embodied as psychical, emotional, or physical. I wonder if “forgetting” or not being able to access this memory made me feel safer. Paradoxically, I also wonder if/what the connection is between this new geographical link and the fact that I no longer feel inexplicably compelled to avoid trips to the west coast, as I had until shortly after writing the story that is the focus of this analysis.

Although I do not recall my attacker wearing a ring, his representative on the bus was reading a volume by Edgar Allan Poe. Poe’s tales of terror seem an appropriate point of reference here. And, like the book, my assailant also wore a leather jacket.

The thirsty lake swallows the rain as the shower swallowed my sobs. Music seeps out from the headphones — is it a metaphor for invading my space, my body, my self? Tears seeping out? Semen seeping out? I decide it is all of these. The woman in red has become an old hag. The focus has shifted from her appearance of youth to the damage caused by the ravages of age. Ravage also means rape. Her attempts to cover the ravages of age with rouge and nail polish do not hide the reality. Neither will soap nor long sleeves and turtlenecks undo what was done.

In the next passage, the rain falls harder and the rhythm of the bus and the limp, post-coital phallic dangling straps echo the act of sex. The imagery of the windows and Brigadoon speak, to me, of the strange, “unreal,” mystical quality of dissociation that often accompanies sexual trauma.

“Sturdy pines rooted in gray rock bear the weight of the rain stoically.” This statement is a rather transparent reflection of social expectations that I, as all victims of trauma and adversity, become as the sturdy pine and passively carry our “cross,” which includes taking on the culturally demanded and demanding role of convincing others we are “fine” and completely “recovered.”

I’m not sure how the old man fits in here. Although there may be something in the struggle to “name” him. To name “it.” To say the word “rape” — as much a social taboo in some circles as the word “Negro” is in others. Does his frailty speak to mine? Is it the internal frailty of the outwardly sturdy pine that survives without soil, without nutrients? His sleep is broken only by frequent trips to the bathroom, in the back of the bus. His sleep parallels my own attempts at respite. Like mine, his present is broken by revisiting the past when he would have been forced to ride in the back of the bus, a representation of a long-suffered history of indignities and crimes against the self.

Dissociation

Dissociation separates traumatic memories from normal consciousness. As Terr describes it (1994, p. 85)

Bodily responses, emotions, actions, and memories have little or no relationship to one another. Physical pain is missing from physical injuries. Affect is missing from extremely moving events. And memory may be missing altogether except for fragments.

Lifton (1993, p.208) recognizes that dissociation or psychic numbing, “is invoked usually unconsciously, to prevent the self from being overwhelmed and perhaps destroyed...” Although it has also received a considerable amount of bad press, dissociation served me well as a

protective (which I prefer to “defense”) mechanism. I became a disembodied self observing a body in a state of detached calm that held the terror at bay while simultaneously transfixed on the surrealistic scene playing in front of my eyes in slow motion. Yet, if I had not separated my "self" from my body during the attack, I'd probably be (actually and not just symbolically) dead. (Can one "be" in a state of non-being?) Facing and weathering major crises creates a “strength” (although I’m not sure I want to call it that) of a sort I don't think one can acquire in other ways, even though the cost is great. This is not the romanticized “strength” of “overcoming” adversity and is not meant to imply that trauma of any type is worthwhile in any way. It is conceivable that the somewhat Panglossian outlook that considers such an experience of value arises from a combination of factors including the mediational role played by linguistic limitations and societal expectations in attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962); to reclaim the necessary illusions that enable us to go on. While it is true that in addition to the many and severe negatives to trauma there is also a strange sense that some have called power, as well as a lingering overpowering fear, in facing death and living through it — even if one does it in an altered state of consciousness. Yet, the words “strength” and “power” do not feel right. Like “survivor,” they are irony-filled terms and do not accurately convey the experience. It is more of a heightened awareness of both life and death, a sort of double-edged consciousness that is difficult to express by using the social scripture that serves as stricture for the experience and processing of trauma. Language makes the unspeakable indescribable. Or, as Yoder (1996, p. 285) puts it, “The narratives available to describe experience inscribe experience.” That is where the power really lies (pun intended).

Thus, although one could say that dissociation surfaces again during the writing of this piece by turning off the voices during the narrative and turning to the visual — a change in sensory modality, it can also be seen as an attempt to capture what is beyond language, beyond verbal expression. This does not include just the abstract symbolism of metaphor but also the more mimetic symbolism of the more concrete sensory modalities and mechanics of the genre. For example, the narrative part is written with many short sentences. Besides their verbal content, their physical structure (short sentences of a rhythmic regularity punctuated by short pauses) may be said to mimic and thereby suggest repetitive penile thrusts on one level, and on another, a lingering difficulty in dealing with the event in more than small chunks at a time. The narration pauses at each period to (almost physically) allow a breath to enable the voice to speak or, alternatively, stop it from saying too much — cutting it off. (And is that a reference to an unconscious wish to castrate the rapist? At what point does one read too much into a text?)

Catharsis & Non-Verbal Symbolization

A significant part of this story and its analysis centers on what may be called artistic catharsis and non-verbal symbolization. By catharsis I mean a technique used to relieve embodied emotional tension by releasing repressed feelings and fears therapeutically through symbolic processes. Non-verbal symbolization refers to the engagement with non-linguistic ways of making meaning, such as flashbacks, somatic sensations, behavior, nightmares (Brett and Ostroff, 1985) and other semiotic systems like the arts (See Spina, 1995, 2002). Although not included in the “story” presented earlier, these processes warranted inclusion here since they are, for me, critical to the slow and painful processes of re-creating a new self from the shattered pieces of a pre-traumatic self. (One could argue that there is no such thing as a post-traumatic

self since the traumatic experience always remains a part of one's self.)

My emotions were vented in thick, dark paint violently slashed onto canvas; in stark, raw, sharp, graphic woodcuts; in the agonizing poetry of pain. The release was in the process — the unity of body and psyche. The paint, the form, the wood, the body, the clay, the canvas. They all became a symbolic and kinesic substitute for what I could not articulate with language or resolve with action. Art served as a metaphor for what had happened to me and a way for me to express the inexpressible rage and to somehow process the trauma. In retrospect, it also may have given me a way to hang on to some concepts of self (such as "self as an artist") that were familiar and to re-integrate some of the fragments (such as competence and other positive aspects of self-concept). The artistic experience served as a mediator of internal and external worlds as well as past and present. In trauma, the victim is powerless to respond. Although it cannot change what has happened, the creation of art returned some of that power — that voice. After hours of intense work I was able to sleep more peacefully for awhile.

Miller (1976/86) has written extensively on the use of creativity to combat dehumanization or what she calls the threat of "psychic annihilation" (p. 59). The experience of sexual objectification is, in Miller's words (1976/86 p. 60), "particularly destructive." I would add that it is also particularly deep-rooted and long-lived. Miller (1976/86) highlights creativity as a means to express and conceptualize experience in the continual process of struggling for authenticity; for relationship; for integration. Lifton (1979, p. 120) describes artistic experience as "psychic action around transformation of images." It is "more about [psychic] energy than object." Psychic energy is "formative energy" which involves "a highly functional equilibrium between immediate and ultimate psychological dimensions...[and] also a struggle with or against separation, disintegration, and stasis" (Lifton, 1979, p. 121). Perhaps that explains not only my reliance on visual arts but also my metaphoric use of "the story" that forms the basis of this paper.

Artistic involvement does more than express or evoke feelings, provide insight, and enable psychological integration — it embodies them. By unifying mind and body, behavior and consciousness, the arts offer a way around the dissociation of mind and body. As Nelson Goodman expressed it, "What we know through art is felt in our bones and nerves and muscles as well as grasped by our minds...All the sensitivity and responsiveness of the organism participates in the invention and interpretation of symbols" (1976, p. 259). The intimate connection between mind and body becomes apparent in the unity of psyche and soma in the artistic process.

Embodiment

According to Foucault, narrative discourse concerns not only the internal relations of psychoanalysis but also the conflicts between the individual and society. The body functions as the most fundamental site of these struggles (Brodkey, 1996).

Perhaps the pregnancy, by embodying the trauma in a most literal sense, was helpful although it strikes me as an absurd thought and one that is imposed from the outside rather than coming from within. However, it did force me to confront what I was trying to pretend had not happened. It gave me grounding in a sense. I realize this may sound strange and incredulous,

but it gave me an opportunity to do something — to take some purposeful action — to regain some measure of control of my body (or at least to rationalize it in that way, even if delusional). Resiliency, as Rutter (1990) says, is "not just a matter of constitutional strength or weakness; it [is] also a reflection of what one did about one's plight" (p.182). Raised in a religion I had already rejected as a weapon of oppression³ — a religion where a fetal life took precedence over the mother's and women who died protecting their virginity were called "saints," I, instead, chose life — my life.

The recent legalization of abortion provided some moral solace. Yet, for many years, it was difficult not to second-guess my decision; not to wonder if I was inherently "bad." I realize now that this is a common result of the (especially sexual) objectification of women in our society. But knowing something on an intellectual level is not the same as knowing it incarnate.

I have often wondered how much of this trauma still remains embodied on a deeper level. Ironically, for example, my son is a "miracle" baby — the result of infertility treatments after multiple miscarriages. I can make a strong argument either way — in favor of or against both psychic and physical causes. Yet they remain simply intellectual arguments; well-crafted debates; exercises in logic. I can toy with "pros" and "cons;" play with weighing and measuring. But I don't expect I'll ever really "know" the answer.

Voice and lack of voice

By choosing silence (although it did not feel like a choice at the time, I was aware that there were other options), I chose to remain socially, if speciously, validated and to avoid the consequences of speaking (or of speaking and not being heard). To tell my family would have been to invite banishment as the penalty for disgrace. As Herman wrote (1992, p.8) "When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality." My behavior allowed me to outwardly maintain social connections with my family that would otherwise have been lost. I had forced myself into a position where I had to carry on my life as if nothing had happened, even if only because I saw it as the lesser of two evils. The connection to ordinary daily life — to routine, to order, to social expectations — was probably helpful. Yet, it also served as a Freudian "compromise formation," accommodating the tension between inner and outer worlds (Gilligan, 1995b) and leaving a psychological wound.

The wound, although it is generally not conceptualized in these terms, came from giving up relationship; it marked the tearing away from or walling off of the most vulnerable parts of the inner world in a self-defeating and often inchoate attempt to protect the capacity to love (Gilligan, 1995b, p. 31).

Like the girls Carol Gilligan wrote about, I could not maintain both voice and relationship. Although, situated as I was in the culture of my family, I had separated my inner from outer worlds to some degree long before being raped, the Poe-etic Amontillado wall was not sealed until then.

At first, the wall was protective; the separation welcome. As time went on my silence no longer served any useful function for me. Yet, I found myself trapped and mute against my will. I wanted to reach out — to connect, but I was speechless — powerless. Not because I had no

voice but because I was gagged by others (including two therapists) who did not want to hear what I had to say. Anyone less persistent than I might have given up. (The "training" I received in daily battles against familial strictures came in handy, I guess.) I suppose one could say that I was used to struggling through life. Firstborn to parents who had picked out only a boy's name, I was labeled with a "feminized" version of the same by disappointment and default. I grew up in a working class extended-family atmosphere of traditional first and second generation ideology where I was tethered, chaperoned, and damn near stifled to death — all with the sole purpose of protecting my "virtue" and maintaining the status quo of the family. I was well-versed in fighting against such invisibility and what amounted to annihilation. But this time, I found that resistance was exhausting, debilitating, and futile.

A life-long tendency to research and rationalize what I did not understand provided some resonance, even if third-party. Reading was one of the few activities I was allowed to pursue as a teenager and I did so with a vengeance. Reading allowed me to vicariously experience other worlds; to feel fully alive; to think; to know; to be. It provided the only kind of mirroring, of validation, I could find. (Is it any wonder that I've wound up in academia!) The knowledge I acquired gave me a sense of control and power and wonder — and of being part of something larger, something akin to what Lifton (1993) calls the "omnibus" or "species self." Reading feminist work on the subject of victimization and rape made me feel less alone. As I came to see it, reading and thinking helped me meet the challenge of survival by enabling me to construct a text for my actions that supported my choices as the most viable solutions in my context. (And it is no coincidence that I wrote that sentence in an "academic" voice.) It was the only way I could survive.

Conclusion

What one does first and foremost is survive the trauma — to persist in spite of it. Then one works (perhaps for a lifetime) to process it, often in uniquely personal ways. Thus, it remains a part of one's history, one's self. Some after-effects of trauma will always be with me but I suspect that most of these are common, although possibly in a lesser degree, to the fortuity of having been born female. For example, I startle more than most at loud noises or sudden movements. Until a few years ago, I went to great lengths to avoid traveling alone at night, even if just a short drive to the local grocery store. I remain hyper-vigilant, but given the proclivities of the society we live in, that is more likely prudence than psychogenic pathology.

The point is that the goal is not to transcend trauma but to endure — and not without cost. Proteanism recognizes that the pain and despair never completely disappear. It is not an effort to "fix people," but to understand them in all of their complexity so that we may demystify the role of society and better understand the practices that construct our sense of self, other, and "reality," and thereby fix our inappropriate social structures instead. In order to do this, we must challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic order. We must create "becoming spaces" (Derrida, 1981, p. 27) where we can think, speak, and act in ways that both mark and transgress imposed limits; where we can disrupt the dominant discourse and so reconstruct it. Sexual abuse is not an isolated phenomenon or private event. It is woven into our social fabric. It is a public issue. It is our anger and our outrage, not our silence, that will hold society accountable and provoke change.

Notes:

¹ I use the term “reverberation” to distinguish the present-tense mirror-like sense of the use of the word “resonance” from the long-term persistence of its after-effects on one’s perceptions — the lingering of resonance and the ontogenetic quality of its endurance.

² Transformation is used to mean change and should not be confused with a necessarily teleological progression along a hierarchical developmental path. Lifton’s view of transformation is contextual and situated in the continual search for and struggle to make meaning. It is neither a continuum nor a sentimental view, but a cautious optimism tempered by reality and seasoned by hope. (See Author, 2002)

³ Religion was taken very seriously and literally in my sociocultural context. Catholicism, especially the omnipresence and fear of “God” was frequently used as a means of controlling children’s behavior both in school and at home. While many consider religion a source of strength, I came to see it as a myth propounded by hypocrites. “Love thy neighbor” did not include members of the non-dominant group (i.e. anyone not Irish Catholic) in my parochial school. (I always found it interesting that parochial is defined not only as related to, supported by, or located in a parish but also as narrowly restricted in scope or outlook. How apt!).

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