

Memory Politics

The Implications of Healing From Sexual Abuse

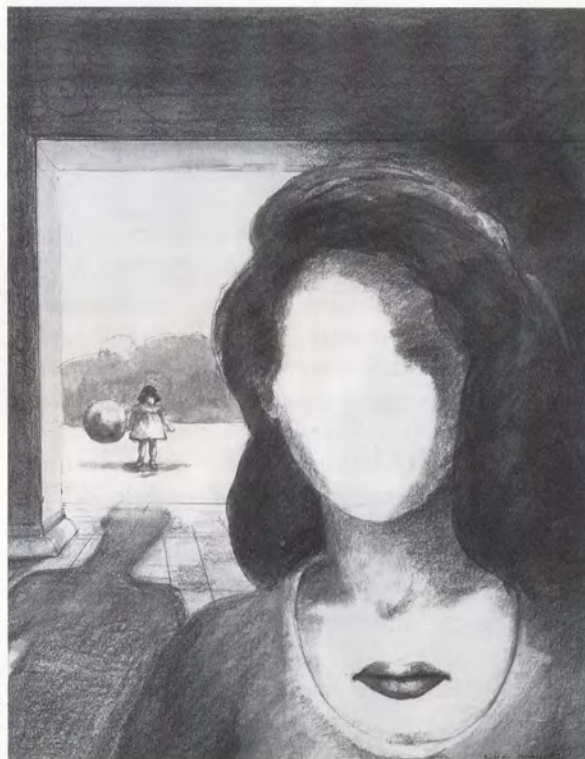
Ruth Wallen

Over the last few years, I have made the harrowing journey common to many—remembering and speaking the truth about being sexually abused as a child. My vagina inexplicably burning, red, swollen, and itching. Nighttime seizures where my legs would part, my body curl and clench, and then begin to heave against my will. Suddenly understanding the life-long mantra, “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me.” Although I had often backpacked alone in the mountains, now I was too terrified to make art or write. Initially the panic was more palpable than any feelings of sadness or anger. I could work for a half-hour before I was reduced to a trembling child clutching at pillows, rocking, rocking, rocking.... My body was trying to remember.

As I learned to swim through the flood of memories, I wondered what else I’d forgotten or failed to notice. I never had illusions of an idyllic childhood and had always remembered some of my experience. Even so, I had often been so consumed in warding off my own pain, that I’d also chased away my dreams. Afraid of my own feelings, I had also shielded my heart from friends’ grief and anger or used a distanced compassion to occlude the commonality of our feelings. As I learned to work with my panic, I felt tremendous energy, relief from no longer defending against a part of my experience. Less consumed with my own trauma, I remembered that outside my window there were mountains behind the dirty-brown southern California smog. I was not only interested in enriching forgotten corners of my private life, but also in sharing my understanding with others. I hoped that breaking the silence about the prevalence of sexual abuse would contribute to significant changes in society.

But my celebration of memory has been tempered by a recent shift in media coverage. Finally, I thought, people were daring to speak about the reality of sexual abuse. Almost every women’s magazine covered sexual abuse, and Oprah Winfrey hosted a special on abuse of children on all three major networks. Yet instead of this

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CYN MAURICE

coverage prompting further discussion about how to stop the frequent abuse of children, the existence of the problem itself is again the subject of debate.

During the last year, accusations of false claims have dominated the news. As the story goes, bright, high-achieving white adults in their thirties or forties seek help for a minor life crisis, only to be convinced by an overzealous therapist that they’ve been horrifically abused in childhood. Or these same therapists, in cahoots with overly protective parents, con kids into thinking they’re being molested. For example, a *Newsweek* cover last year displayed the headline, “CHILD ABUSE,” stamped across the sepia-toned faces of grandparents who had been convicted of abuse. The subheading conjured up “witch hunts” and asked, “when does the fight to protect our kids go too far?”

Much of the media coverage questioning the

accuracy of memories about abuse has been fueled by conferences and press releases sponsored by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, a group of a few thousand parents who claim that they have been falsely accused. It is significant that one of the lengthiest discussions of arguments promulgated by this foundation, in *Family Therapy Networker* (September/October 1993), mentions that four out of the five women who had retracted their charges of abuse and have become star witnesses for the group, were in fact molested by someone. Despite this fact, when reporters cite these examples, they imply that charges of sexual abuse have been conjured up out of nowhere. Then the discussion typically focuses on supposed false accusations instead of the devastating fact of the abuse.

Stories of abuse have perhaps finally touched too close to home; maybe many middle-class Americans are not ready to believe that members of their communities could do such a thing to their own children. As if in reaction, public discussion has shifted to debate over the accuracy of memory. Whether intentional or reflexive, this backlash is reactionary in the worst sense, since it saps energy and attention from the question of how we can heal from the effects of abuse.

Healing from sexual abuse is profoundly empowering. But the process is slow, subtle, difficult, and unglamorous. In contrast, all of the recent articles that question the reality of sexual abuse focus on individual, sensational case histories rather than on the larger picture. Media coverage of this sort, while perhaps making for flashier headlines, encourages hysteria and a state of continued paralysis, effectively putting victims back in their place.

The bashing of self-help books, the readiness of many detractors to dismiss the challenge of healing, is another manifestation of the backlash. While the critics accuse the survivor movement of oversimplification and overstatement, their contentions tend to be much more reductive than the self-help manuals they malign. Instead of recognizing the gravity of the problem, offering constructive suggestions, or discussing the complexity of the issues, these writers opt for the easier route of trashing recovery movements per se.

For instance, an article last year in *The New York Times Book Review* by Carol Tavris warns, "Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine." The piece lambastes the "incest survivor recovery movement" for its insularity, pop psychology, and claims that understanding past victimization will solve all current problems. While Tavris's claims that too often the broader social connections fail to be made is well-founded, instead of

developing this argument, the bulk of the article indulges in a facile dismissal of self-help books. Tavris discounts the importance of sharing memories, reclaiming self-esteem, and kindling the courage to experience deep rage and grief. Certainly we should all be aware of the pitfall of using newfound awareness as better armor, instead of as a path toward greater openness. But Tavris and her fellow detractors fail to recognize that social responsibility must begin with self-reckoning and self-healing.

Articles such as Tavris's decry what they disdain as the incest survivor bandwagon. They scorn manuals for incest survivors, such as *The Courage to Heal*, by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, for suggesting that one may be abused even if one has no specific memories, that if "you still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did." But in the context in which this statement was written, it was meant to combat our cultural legacies of self-doubt and denial. Those who think they may have been abused and healing professionals must find a middle ground between believing that everyone who fits a generalized list of symptoms has been abused and, as in the past, repressing the very discussion of the abuse that these lists were meant to combat.

Undoubtedly, there are those who will grab at the latest explanation for all of life's woes. But detractors ought to recognize that for most survivors, acknowledging abuse is an extremely painful, disorienting, consuming experience that still carries with it great shame and trauma. It takes boundless compassion to learn to embrace a part of one's being that at first encounter feels so helpless, so wounded—and, from the therapist's perspective, to witness stories of intense suffering. It is extremely important, however, that the therapist, healer, or friend follow the survivor's lead during this process. If the survivor is in charge of the process he or she is more likely to end up feeling empowered rather than duped. Even Bass and Davis condemn the "excesses" of the recovery movement. The therapist must be extremely careful about presuming that abuse is an explanation for current symptoms, asking leading questions, and suggesting what might have happened. Requiring clients with no memories to watch films and read books about abuse and using powerful drugs to recover memory are poor therapies.

I take strong issue with Tavris's claim that "healing is defined as your realization that you were a victim of sexual abuse and that it explains everything wrong in your life." The process of healing is precisely the eschewal of the victim identity and the acknowledgement of the ways in which one was unable to

provide loving care for oneself and others. It cannot be repeated enough that, contrary to detractors' snide claims, genuine healing has nothing to do with justification of one's faults, or winning the badge of a survivor/victim. Healing involves an intense commitment to honesty with oneself, from the development of the strength to feel deep pain and rage, to learning to let go.

Healing also involves developing the capacity for greater intimacy. While Tavis suggests that the newly proclaimed victim soaks in a "love bath" from friends, the reality is more likely the opposite. The legacy of abuse, at least initially, is tremendous distrust of others. For me, flashbacks were like grenades exploding, shattering my insides. The physical contact I craved more than anything, the strong gentle hands to help me relax, breathe, and provide a safe space for the fragments to come together, was paradoxically also what I most feared. Long ago, I had made the choice to reject the voice in myself that wanted comforting before anyone else could, thereby maintaining control. Now, slowly, over and over, I had to learn that touch need not burn, and that I could acknowledge my desire for love and caring. And that was only the start. Only once I experienced some sense of wholeness, of safety, could I begin to access the depth of my emotions.

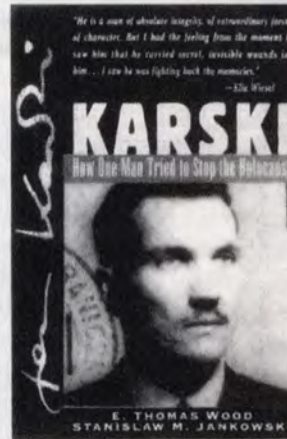
It is incumbent on those who have been touched by the reality of sexual abuse from survivors, their friends and lovers, therapists, teachers, and parents to work to change the course of public debate, to refocus the discussion on healing. If discussions in news media and magazines have something to contribute to the debate, it is in refining the healing process, cautioning against a quick fix or New-Age narcissism.

Remember Freud's legacy. Initially, he published two works on the etiology of hysteria in which he supported his patients' stories that they had been molested as children. But unwilling to deal with the implications of promulgating these frequent charges against prominent citizens, he withdrew his seduction hypothesis, and instead developed drive theory and the Oedipus complex to explain what he now labeled as "childhood fantasies." Therapists maligned in recent accounts appear to be sharing the fate Freud escaped when he withdrew his original hypothesis.

The most conservative figures suggest that sexual abuse is rampant. The lowest estimate cited in *Newsweek* suggests that since the 1940s, 10 to 12 percent of girls under fourteen, (unreasonably ignoring both boys and teenage abuse) have been sexually molested. Many writers estimate the figure is one girl in three and one boy in ten. Diana Russell's *The Secret Trauma* is

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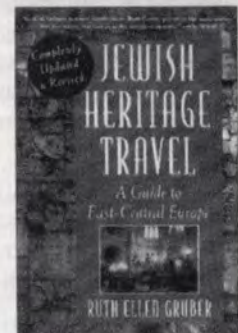
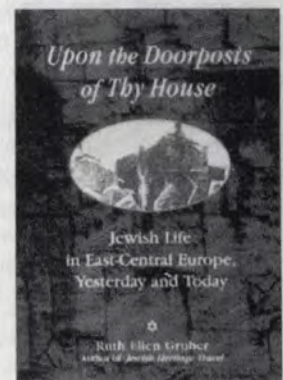
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the most frequently cited study. Analyzing interviews with 930 women in San Francisco, she found that 38 percent of women had been sexually abused (defined as “exploitive sexual contact or attempted contact”) by the age of eighteen, 89 percent of these by relatives or family acquaintances. But even *Newsweek’s* conservative estimate—one out of every nine or ten girls molested—is an outrageously unacceptable number.

Today, most of us know both victims and perpetrators. What is the impact on society of the tolerance of this behavior—an assault so intense, so intimate, that the victim can often only respond by amnesia, by splitting off from the wound? Alice Miller, a psychoanalyst and author of many books on child abuse, is the most eloquent spokesperson for the argument that until the victim can bear the truth, can release the secret held in the body, the trauma will be unconsciously reenacted, tormenting both self and others. Miller contends that children are especially vulnerable to abuse because they are frequently used to satisfy the narcissistic needs of their parents. The proliferation in our society of the means of destruction, from guns, to nuclear bombs, to environmental degradation, only escalates the urgency to turn our attention to ways to break the generational inheritance of violence.

At survivors’ meetings I have attended, I have been most touched by hearing mothers grieve about having unwittingly passed on the cycle of abuse, of having been unable to nurture, love, or protect their children fully because they were too withdrawn, defended from their own pain. Breaking this cycle begins with the courage to be vulnerable, to move into the tightly held energy, the secret places, without any certainty about what will emerge. And if there are those who are unsure whether, or how, they were abused, but feel that they have these wounds to heal, fully undertaking this course of committed introspection can only lead to greater honesty, gentleness, and openness. The initial stages of healing involve introspection, not accusation. Thus, the healing process can serve as an inspiration to all who suffer from disassociative trauma.

The incest victim has mastered the art of disassociation, secrecy, and denial. Pain felt by the body has been called pleasure. Violation has been called love. When the body has actually felt pleasure, or the heart love, mind has felt betrayed, deeply ashamed for having failed to fully resist the encounter. Pummeled by the logic of double-speak, intellect has learned to resist any sensation, distrust all feelings. Mind has been split from body has been severed from heart. “Never tell” is the mantra. Over and over, this threat has been repeated: Something terrible will happen if the secret is revealed.

Even worse than the distortion of the parental bond is the denial of intimacy with oneself. Honesty has been replaced with tremendous fear, distrust, and even loathing of one’s secret, dark experience. And this secret festers, feeding on the ambiguity and silence, coiling inward as a dagger of self-deprecation.

It is not the abuse itself as much as the acceptance of the perpetrator’s admonishment not to tell that is so crippling. In keeping the secret, one is forced to construct a rigid identity that insulates oneself from hidden pain. One perpetuates the abuse by rejecting a part of oneself. The constant struggle to repel pain becomes a habit hard to break, extending beyond the abusive trauma, to all direct experience.

Daring to touch the wound, embracing the “bad girl,” is a radical move. After the initial shock, healing is a slow process of realignment of severed connections and reestablishment of circulation. As one’s heart is cracked open by experiencing the depth of trauma, the confidence engendered by experiencing the emotion, releasing the energy, moves one beyond the sense of helpless victimization. Slowly, the prohibition against experiencing one’s innermost secrets is dissolved. The release of the emotion at the core of the violation turns out not to be so terrifying, or painful, as the years of avoidance and resistance. Speaking the truth can be profoundly liberating. One is no longer at war with oneself. Pandora’s box turns out to be a myth invented by the perpetrator, a terribly pernicious myth that preserves self-loathing and keeps one not only from remembering the past, but from fully experiencing the present. Developing the courage to cease censoring feelings and to name experience honestly, while a slow process, is tremendously empowering. And although the change may initially be unsettling for close friends and family, it ultimately serves as an invitation to all to examine and heal destructive relationships, as well as the secret, discarded aspects of ourselves.

If the public debate over the extent of sexual abuse of the last year has anything to contribute to our understanding, it is that the process of healing is complex and subtle. Since Freud, the therapist has been charged with curing the hysteric, described as someone in an overstimulated state, prone to disassociation and delusion, acting with no connection with his/her emotions. Although in the initial period of experiencing repressed memory, one may feel hysterical, healing involves the antithesis—calming down, slowing down, and developing a sense of safety so that severed connections can be reestablished and feelings experienced in manageable doses.

It is extremely plausible that in the hypercharged,

hysterical state in which many people enter therapy, a person could be quite suggestible to the amplification of existing memories. Many therapists would contend that an overstimulated state tends to be self-perpetuating—on a physiological level, the brain becomes accustomed to the rush of chemicals associated with stress; on an emotional level, it is easier to perpetuate the trauma than to respond to the anguish underneath. Indeed, I remember when my extremely agitated, overstimulated state felt “normal.” I was in a tremendous rush to know “everything,” regardless of whether I could integrate the emotions around what I was remembering. Many healers would agree with Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery* and associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, who argues that in the early stages of therapy when the client feels extremely raw, terribly overstimulated, and vulnerable to suggestion, it is most important to help him/her develop a sense of trust and safety. At this point, recalling additional memories will only give rise to further trauma.

To heal, the survivor must learn to overcome the tendency to disassociate. Disassociation, which leads to the repression of memories, comes from the inability of the abused to assimilate violent, contradictory experience. Thus, more than simply remembering, healing involves learning to be present, unravelling the traumatized language of double-speak. Healing also involves renegotiating the frozen immobility resulting from trauma. Psychologist Peter Levine, in an unpublished manuscript, notes that when animals are extremely traumatized they freeze and play dead. If the animal escapes attack, it slowly reorients itself, gradually gains its bearings, shakes from the trauma, and integrates waves of feeling. Levine argues that people frozen in the shock of trauma need to undergo a similar reorientation process. Judith Herman emphasizes making connections through the thorough retelling of the story of what occurred. Healing is about synthesis, reestablishing connections, and reintegrating feelings and experience.

The last year's debate over recovered memory has also suggested how little we know about how the brain stores and retrieves experience. The goal of recovering exact memory of events that have occurred in early childhood, before the brain has fully developed language, may be impossible. Virtually every media account discussing the nature of memory cites the work of psychologist and memory expert Elizabeth Loftus, who successfully induced a memory in both adults and adolescents of being lost in a shopping mall as a child. But every citation of Loftus's work should be balanced

by discussion of the research of Linda Meyer Williams, who found that 38 percent of women who had been treated at hospitals for sexual abuse as children denied such experiences as adults. To stress the true complexity of the issue, such articles might also cite Judith Herman's assertion that 75 percent of her clients could “corroborate their memories with evidence from independent sources.” One might also listen to accounts of those who have worked as social workers or child-care workers at shelters for children—a position I once held—where it is common for children to deny instances of physical or sexual abuse in homes from which they have been removed, even in the face of conclusive evidence.

I accept the general conclusion of researchers that memory is dynamic and to some extent continually reconstructed. But if memory is reinvented, or selectively recalled, we should focus on the social mechanisms that perpetuate belief systems which foster the telling of certain experiences and the suppression of others. Thus, instead of couching the public debate about sexual abuse in terms of superstition, satanic cults, and witch hunts, a much more fruitful approach would be to acknowledge the power struggle beneath the rhetoric—a battle to determine whose voices will be believed, and what constitutes appropriate behavior.

Furthermore, we must be aware of the temptation to project blame for current societal malaise on the teacher or child-care worker, the “Other” outside the home. In San Diego, a highly publicized trial on sexual abuse charges of Dale Akiki, a child-care worker, came to an end with his acquittal, a verdict I found, from a limited knowledge of the case, entirely plausible. A physically deformed, poorly educated man, Akiki was an easy target for demonization by an over-zealous, suspicious public. While abuse by child-care workers undoubtedly occurs, it is important to recognize the underlying assumptions in such cases: Although devastating, abuse outside the home is less threatening and easier to condemn than abuse within the family. It is totally reprehensible to use those outside the family as scapegoats for the even more pernicious abuse that clearly goes on all too frequently even in the most idealized settings of the middle or upper classes.

Despite the detractors' claims to the contrary, the healing process entails far more than the isolated individual's integration of memory. The best-selling self-help manual, *The Courage to Heal*, states, “you are investing all this time and energy in healing so you can move on to something else in life.” Even in a culture that emphasizes individual experience, trauma has societal implications. Having spoken the truth and begun to heal, those who remember must keep asking ques-

tions, continually probe more deeply, and reach for the knowledge that lies hidden within and beyond personal experience.

The intensity of the rage associated with remembering demands explanations. What is the relationship between the violence and abuse in a nuclear family and the construction of that family in Western society? What circumstances in twentieth-century America, including perhaps the pressure for assimilation and rampant materialism, are spawning the current epidemic of sexual abuse? What are the mechanisms by which one's experiences have been so thoroughly written out of history that one has lost the faith of one's own memories? And what are the implications of this time in which so many have found the courage to remember and, however begrudgingly, are beginning to be heard?

Three years ago, an article in *Newsweek* on sexual abuse ended with the statement, "If survivors have their way there will be no more forgetting." If the editors of that magazine have lost their conviction two years later, this reader still recognizes the profound truth of their earlier statement. Because memory is selective, arguments over memory politics challenge everyone to examine the basis for his or her choices. For instance, despite the many protests and scholarly discussions generated by the quincentennial, few people consider the implications of living in a society founded in part on the genocide of Native Americans and the rape of African-American women. We need to examine in more detail the relationship between the mechanisms encouraging amnesia of personal and societal trauma, since denial and disassociation clearly function on a societal as well as a personal level.

Memory is the wellspring for re-envisioning the world. A recent article in *Common Boundary* (November/December 1993), while analyzing scientific debates about the locus of memory in the human brain, also wisely included a discussion of creativity. The author, Randi Henderson, recalls that the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, was also regarded as the mother of the Muses, the inspiration for all of the creative arts. When we bury our shameful secrets, we also run the risk of hiding, forgetting, or wrongfully casting aside a great deal of what is precious.

As one remembers, direct perception is no longer pushed away. Feelings of both vulnerability and strength are welcomed. One can begin to experience an expansive sense of self, beyond the bounds of ego or anthropocentrism, where one comprehends the sanctity of all living beings. As one learns to trust one's own experience, it becomes possible to feel the experience of others. As compassion toward one's wounded self

replaces shame, this compassion can be expanded outward. As one fully accepts one's tenderness and need for love and caring, it is possible to nourish these needs in all beings.

Joanna Macy, in *World as Lover, World as Self*, discusses the importance of despair work, the ability to move beyond self-centered protectiveness and feel despair and grief about the devastation around us. Remember when a sign reading "homeless, need food" was a shocking sight? When the water from a mountain stream was safe to drink, or when the chirping of frogs at night was taken for granted? Those who remember know the truth of Macy's argument that the outrage we feel both for both personal and societal losses contains a seed of tremendous wisdom and power. Feeling means acknowledging the depths of our concern. Even in the face of hopelessness, the courage to feel brings the potential for change. The memory of the survivor is one of heart as well as mind.

At the current moment, many people are quick to dismiss the testimonials of sexual abuse as a passing fad, perhaps impelled by the urge to raise doubt before the victim's voices have had time to make connections or to recognize the patterns that go beyond their individual experience. I am slowly coming to the realization that however much I remember, I will never know every detail, never know exactly what happened. A part of me will always shudder in disbelief. But despite external pressures, I need not choose the powerlessness of self-doubt or victimhood. Together with other survivors, I can share my broken heart. Together, we can feel our grief and rage and not shy away from naming our experience. Contrary to what we have been told, something terrible will happen if the secret is not shared.

Once the memories have been spoken and the connections have been made, it will be hard to destroy the web of understanding. We can recall our own trauma. We can move from paralysis, shame, and self-deprecation to strength, self-love, and compassion. We can join with all who are concerned about the consequences of sexual abuse. We can utter the secrets others dare not speak. We can recognize the relationship between our own pain and that of those around us. We can give voice to *los desaparecidos*. We can remember the mountain behind the brown haze. We need not pass on the legacy of violence. We can demand that we begin to make changes that will heal ourselves, heal our communities, and heal the Earth. □