Surviving “Acceptable” Victimization

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Abstract: In this paper the author demonstrates the occurrence of child abuse using her own history, and explain child abuse using the work of several psychologists and other experts. She also shows methods of recovery she has used and includes methods recommended by experts.

Teacher and author Louise DeSalvo writes, “…Only writing that describes traumatic events and our deepest thoughts and feelings about them, past and present, is linked with improved immune function, improved emotional and physical health, and behavioral changes indicating that we feel able to act on our own behalf” (25).

I hope that by writing this paper I can experience some of these changes.

To begin:

I am the only one who remembers this.

It was March 1992. I was 11, my sister was 10, and my mother was 8 months pregnant. We were standing at the end of the kitchen, near the stove. There was fighting going on as usual. I don’t remember the fight or the circumstances (in his mind) that led to this, but he punched Mommy square in the stomach. She was wearing the white turtle neck with bunnies that my sister and I had bought at Bradlees (about $7). Everyone was crying. I felt totally helpless, as usual. I don’t think any doctors’ visits followed, no ER, but the baby was fine.

This was my opening entry into the activity DeSalvo suggested. Just writing it out, I felt angry, as DeSalvo predicted, “Writing about traumatic or troubling life experiences initially unleashes difficult, conflicting emotions” (93). I felt this way because memories were brought up so vividly, and I regret having this familiarity. I am not alone in this knowledge; children in our country are experiencing horrors beyond belief every day. I hope that by reading this paper you, the audience, will get an insight into this issue, and ultimately use this insight to help someone you know that is being abused. [At the end of this paper is a fact sheet that may be helpful.]

In my family, the abuser was our father. He would act out violence on my mother, my sister, and I. This correlates with the typical hierarchy noted by psychologist Ernest N. Jouriles, Ph.D. Speaking in his article “Child Abuse in the Context of Domestic Violence: Prevalence, Explanations, and Practice Implications,” he says, “It appears that the most typical pattern of co-occurring abuse is that both parents aggress against each other and one or both aggress.
against the child” (233). This co-occurring abuse he speaks of is partner violence and child abuse. In my experience, the two are never mutually exclusive. It makes sense that someone who is abusive to one family member will be abusive to the rest. Usually, in my family, these events happened simultaneously. “Daddy” would have some problem with Mommy. He would begin hitting or pushing her, then my sister and I would rush to the scene. My sister would comfort our mother while I would aggress against Daddy. It was during these times that my brain would undergo what science calls neural plasticity, or the responsiveness and adaptability of the human brain to experience, as it regards the nature-vs.-nurture controversy. I was taught violence, yet I would revert to my usual, nonviolent self later. So, in this case, nature won.

Psychologist Chantal Bourassa notes, “According to Rutter’s (1981) cumulative risk hypotheses, the risk of children experiencing problems doubles or quadruples with the presence of two or more stressors. Therefore, being exposed to domestic violence with the stress of being physically abused interact to contribute to an increase in externalized and internalized symptoms” (698). Stress was a constant part of my childhood. At home, I was afraid. At school, I felt like an outcast because I was too withdrawn to make friends. I got excellent grades, but was terrified of being called on in class or of playing with kids at recess. I was so accustomed to being looked down upon at home that I felt the same way at school. Male teachers were tough to deal with; I felt weak around them, and I felt they thought I was less-than. This is an example of the looking-glass self. Sociologist Charles Cooley, in an excerpt of his writings included in Spencer Cahill’s Inside Social Life: Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology, chapter 4, writes:

In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes

the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one’s self—that is, any idea he appropriates—appears in a particular mind; and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self: ‘Each to each a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass’. (27)

In this passage, Cooley is explaining the idea of the way we are self-conscious of how we think others will perceive us. This idea is one that has been present in my life from the beginning. I remember always being afraid to act or say or think something “wrong” because Daddy would get mad (and his anger was most often followed by violence). I was constantly aware of how he saw me because I had to be. This feeling was, by all means, a survival tactic. If I could predict Daddy’s reactions, then I could know when to hide or when to just shrink into myself. Of course, the very nature of violence is unpredictability. It was at those times when I would become aggressive. I would yell back, physically fight back. At that point I wanted him to perceive me as strong and powerful, and totally unafraid. Sometimes it would work, sometimes not.

However, often were the times I’d want to shrink into myself. Physically, I’d hunch over with my legs and arms close to my body, head down, eyes averted (which may help explain my poor posture now). This feeling has stayed with me. In his article, “Sociology of Shyness: A Self Introduction,” published in Human Architecture, student Collin Campbell drawing on a statement by another student, Nancy Chapin, writes:

“Parents are transmitters of attitudes that the child adopts in form-
ing a self image”…Of course it is true that many of our values are formed as children when we are most open to the experiences of the world, so it stands to reason that we would be most influenced by the people we come into contact with the most during this stage… (58).

As a child, I was, of course, most influenced by my parents. Since their influence was leading me to be quiet and never tell anyone what Daddy did, I conformed. I was tremendously shy; rarely speaking to people outside the family. Teachers, classmates, and other adults (especially male) were terrifying to me. I thought they all had an image of me in their head that I was weird or unlikable. I felt certain they all hated me. After all, I was constantly being judged at home and made to feel hated, so why should I feel differently away from home?

In his paper “Children: The Unheard Society,” student Aaron Witkowski notes, “Children do not always know what is right. So, they do not question actions that adults take” (112). This was the way I lived until around the time I began going to school. I always knew violence was wrong, but I didn’t realize that everyone’s father wasn’t like mine. I was always so jealous, and absolutely bewildered, by the fact that other kids’ fathers loved and respected them. Classmates would talk about their dads buying them gifts, playing with them, taking them places. This confused me more than anyone can imagine. Witkowski illustrates this kind of unawareness when he says, “...the child might not even know that what they are experiencing is abuse, it might just be the way of life for them” (117).

In the film Billy Elliot the title character experiences prejudice because of his beliefs. This is similar to my experience with my family. Everyone thought I was being over-dramatic, as if I should just resign myself to the abuse, not rock the boat. I could really relate to the way Billy felt suffocated; I felt the same way for years. Billy explained the reason for his dancing, “Sorta stiff and that, but once I get going... then I, like, forget everything. And...sorta disappear. Sorta disappear. Like I feel a change in my whole body. And I’ve got this fire in my body. I’m just there. Flyin’ like a bird. Like electricity. Yeah, like electricity.” Just like he felt justified in his choice, so do I. My choice to overcome the abuse, the stigma, and the familial cowardice sometimes feels “electric.”

In the movie Awakenings, main character Dr. Malcolm Sayer states, “...the human spirit is more powerful than any drug and THAT is what needs to be nourished: with work, play, friendship, family. THESE are the things that matter. This is what we’d forgotten. The simplest things.” Indeed, the awakening I experienced seems to be one of the simplest things, love: love for myself, and for my spirit. I’ve learned to nourish that spirit, to love in me the courage and strength I’ve found.

My mother had put me in therapy when I was a child because I was “exhibiting strange behavior and not sleeping,” according to a medical record I recently found. I never knew why I went to see counselors, I just knew they asked me if Daddy hurt me and I always said no. There was no way in hell I would say yes. If I said yes, he’d be mad, and I certainly didn’t want that. So I kept my mouth shut and put on my “everything’s okay” face. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, “The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (154). The way I put on this face could also be called dramaturgical (dramaturgy is the term Goffman uses to describe self and social interactions in everyday life as dramatic or theatrical productions). My life was very much like a stage show; always acting, pretending all was good and normal, when in reality I was
the actor struggling to learn her lines. Like
the kids in the film *The Breakfast Club*, I was
trying to be someone people thought I
should be, “You see us as you want to see
us, in the simplest terms, in the most conve-
nient definitions.”

As an adult, I sought therapy for my-
self. When I found a wonderful doctor
whom I trusted and felt safe with, I began
to learn more about my childhood, and that
I wasn’t the only one to have gone through
feelings and situations like these. She ex-
plained PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disor-
der) and showed me that some of the
emotions and behaviors I was having were
clinically relevant. For example, the sleep
disruption and hyper-vigilism. All my life I
have been preoccupied with making sure
doors and windows are locked, in part be-
cause Daddy would frequently force his
way into our home, even after he’d been
kicked out. Over the course of the seven
years I worked with my therapist, I was
gradually able to lessen the feelings of fear,
and strengthen the feelings of power.

She agrees with me that forgiveness
must be earned. In *Tuesdays with Morrie* au-
thor Mitch Albom recalls the passage from
his sociology teacher Morrie Schwartz,
“Forgiveness is the key to action and free-
dom” (166). Over the years, many people
(including my father) have given me the
advice that I should “forgive.” This will
never happen. I will never forgive Daddy. I
deserved a happy, healthy childhood just
like everyone else; I deserved a father I
could depend on, and one who would
teach and nurture me. I got none of that and
it is unforgivable. To purposely hurt a child
is deplorable and should never be forgiven.
Many people say that forgiving others is to
lessen one’s burden; I strongly disagree. I
own my emotions and I fully deserve to
hold anger against a person who has
harmed me so horribly. To deny me the
right to be angry is to belittle my authority
and strength.

In addition to seeking therapy, I sought
the help of law enforcement. At the age of
21 I had the opportunity to go to court and
make my voice heard. I stood before the
judge, literally trembling with fear, and pet-
tioned the court for an Order of Protection
(aka Restraining Order). Daddy was there
in the courtroom, not appearing ashamed
or apologetic. As I spoke, I felt myself gain
strength and power. I had written a seven-
page letter to the judge, detailing the most
recent event, and the history of abuse lead-
ing up to that day. The judge patiently read
the letter, and then granted me the OOP. [I
had the help and support of Assistant Dis-
trict Attorney Maria Judge, and the District
Court of Western Norfolk Victim Witness
Office]

Writing this paper has been very dif-
ficult; I’ve experienced anger, and also joy.
Revisiting some of my childhood experi-
ences has been difficult, but ultimately it is
rewarding to embrace the truth, never to
deny my own strength, and more impor-
tantly, to put my story out there in the inter-
est of helping others. Louise DeSalvo notes,
“Writing testimony, to be sure, means that
we tell our stories. But it also means that we
no longer allow ourselves to be silenced or
allow others to speak for our experience”
(216). I am no longer allowing Daddy to
speak for me.

**EPILOGUE**

To this day I find myself envious of
people with loving fathers; I think how un-
fair it is that I will never know the joy of
having that experience. At that moment, I
tell myself to be thankful for what I do
have—the strength I’ve gained through
hardship.
Works Cited


Resources

*Massachusetts Child-at-Risk Hotline*

1-800-792-5200

*National Child Abuse Hotline* 1-800-4-A-CHILD

—See next page for more information—
Understanding

Child Maltreatment

Factsheet 2008

Child maltreatment includes all types of abuse and neglect that occur among children under the age of 18. There are four common types of abuse.

- **Physical abuse** occurs when a child’s body is injured as a result of hitting, kicking, shaking, burning or other show of force.

- **Sexual abuse** involves engaging a child in sexual acts. It includes fondling, rape, and exposing a child to other sexual activities.

- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviors that harm a child’s self-worth or emotional well-being. Examples include name calling, shaming, rejection, withholding love, and threatening.

- **Neglect** is the failure to meet a child’s basic needs. These needs include housing, food, clothing, education, and access to medical care.

**Why is child maltreatment a public health problem?**

The few cases of abuse or neglect we see in the news are only a small part of the problem. Many cases are not reported to police or social services. What we do know is that:

- 1,530 children died in the United States in 2006 from abuse and neglect.

- 905,000 children were victims of maltreatment in 2006.

Child maltreatment has a negative effect on health. Abused children often suffer physical injuries including cuts, bruises, burns, and broken bones. In addition, maltreatment causes stress that can disrupt early brain development. Extreme stress can harm the development of the nervous and immune systems. As a result, children who are abused or neglected are at higher risk for health problems as adults. These problems include alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, eating disorders, obesity, sexual promiscuity, smoking, suicide, and certain chronic diseases.

**How does child maltreatment affect health?**

Children are never to blame for the harm others do to them. However, some factors can increase the risk of a child being abused. The presence of these factors does not always mean that abuse will occur.

- **Age.** Children under 4 years of age are at greatest risk for severe injury and death from abuse.

- **Family environment.** Abuse and neglect can occur in families where there is a great deal of stress. The stress can result from a family history of violence, drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, and chronic health problems. Families that do not have nearby friends, relatives, and other social support are also at risk.

- **Community.** Ongoing violence in the community may create an environment where child abuse is accepted.

- **Who is at risk for child maltreatment?**

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**www.cdc.gov/injury**

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