

1988

Sitting with the Shattered Soul

Kathy Steele

In the last decade, the work done with abuse victims, especially with people suffering from multiple personality disorder (MPD), has taught us some exquisite lessons full of grace and wisdom—lessons about healing, about the beauty of our humanity, about our connectedness, about the reclaiming of power and freedom, about the transcendent self. There are other, darker lessons, too—lessons about incalculable inhumanity, about intolerable suffering, about confusion and despair, about evil. As therapists, we are increasingly confronted with survivors of severe abuse and are being pushed to build new and personal frameworks within which to fit the impact of their experiences. All the therapists I know who do this work have been blindsided at least once by the horror of it. Their own vulnerability, their helplessness in the face of such abuse is staggering. So is the evil. I don't know another word for it. Science has failed us here, so I draw on a spiritual vocabulary.

I'm not referring to "simple" battery, incest, and neglect. I'm referring to what is now being called "creative" abuse, creative in the euphemistic sense of being exceptionally sadistic, bizarre,

horrendous; sometimes ritualistic, organized, and pre-planned. Survivors recount experiences of being buried alive, physically tortured in unimaginable ways, sexually mutilated and abused, bound and gagged, starved, force-fed (sometimes even involving cannibalism), sleep-deprived, systematically degraded and humiliated, drugged, brainwashed, left alone in utter darkness. Any one of these experiences could be devastating; imagine what happens when one's entire childhood is a composite of such torments. These kinds of trauma often fragment the psychological collage we call the "self," creating the disorder of multiple personality. I believe it also shatters, or at least deeply wounds, the soul—that essential being of a person that is more than the psychological self.

None of us has been particularly prepared for confronting such severe abuse. Work with Holocaust survivors and with other victims of political torture and war is the closest we've come, but those collective personal tragedies emerge out of a socio-political context. That is the evil perpetrated by impersonal strangers. What if the context is the family?

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What if the perpetrators are fathers, mothers, uncles, brothers, the people who are supposed to love and nurture us, protect us? What if the rock that is our only sanctuary crushes us?

As these new dimensions of evil and suffering, of meaninglessness and aloneness and annihilation splatter themselves over our comfortable offices, we struggle anew with old existential questions. And our own unhealed woundedness, whatever it may be, is instantly and deeply touched. We hear our deepest, icy fears played out in these stories, and we see the devastation right before us. What price is survival worth, we ask? When they ask us, from their place of deepest despair, "Why should I live?", our answer must be ready, and must not be glib. We must KNOW; this is an answer that must come not from the mind, but from the soul.

Such people come to us harboring their own private holocaust, decimated by their intolerable encounter with annihilation and inhumanity. Through them we have our own encounters, with which we must wrestle. But unlike Jacob and unlike Freud, we do not wrestle only with dreams, fantasies, intrapsychic wars. The people sitting in our offices know the crushing reality of their own blood splattering the floor; the glaring scars of their bodies and souls compel us toward our quaking encounter.

Therapists can experience their own form of post-traumatic stress disorder in response to working with survivors of severe abuse.¹ Particularly in the beginning of such work most of us experience some combination of disturbed sleep, nightmares, poor appetite, anxiety, numbing, hypervigilance, restlessness, preoccupation with the content of the abuse; sometimes questioning our own safety, sometimes uncovering our own histories of abuse. Eventually, most of us are able to move from reacting to the content to being with the process. We discover that as we become part of the survivor's process, that experience in turn becomes a piece of our own personal process. And if we are willing to attend to our own process we can move from reaction to action, from helplessness to hopefulness, although this may only evolve slowly over time, and it may be painful and frightening.

The healing that comes in time (and healing *will* come) touches us, filling us with a solemn wonder, with a sense of purpose and meaning. We (therapist and patient) know at last why we have struggled to do this impossible work. I have shared this experience of healing elsewhere, and in no way want to underestimate its importance.² It is what we work for. What I want to address here is the long night's journey before day, the time before dawn and hope.

There is a vicious jolt that comes

as we hear the unspeakable, as we know the unknowable, as we sit with someone who has experienced the intolerable. What can we do when all our carefully constructed answers to the questions of life and death, of good and evil, crumble around us like a house of cards? As therapists we are often charged with evoking the healing of a wounded psyche; this is familiar. But what of that stunned moment when we suddenly realize there is more: when we come to a terrible knowing that we are not just repairing psychological damage, but that we are sitting face to face with a shattered soul? How many of us are prepared for this?

And there is yet another piece to address, if we choose: our Shadow self that is mirrored in the Abuser. We see the embodiment of evil conceived in the darkest deepest places enacted in someone's life, and we wonder, how can a human being do such things? What is it that prevents any of us from committing atrocities? Not me, we say. But the banality of evil jolts us to a screeching consciousness when we realize that evil lurks in Everyman.

Her dad's picture in the album reveals a mundane looking, slightly bored man, a distant father perhaps, preoccupied a little by tomorrow's burdens; but he looks like a decent man. But we look again and again at the picture for some clue, some hint of what lurks beneath the surface. For the person in our office is recounting

unspeakable atrocities tendered by his hand. Is it so hard to believe? History reminds us of the terrible mistake of judging a book by its cover: the men of Nuremberg looked like no monsters. Yes, it is a hard thing to know that we, my neighbor and myself, are capable of such evil. We must know it *could* be us, for in that knowing we have the power to choose and we can secure our freedom with that choice.

And with this freedom we now sit with the shattered souls before us, working in whatever way we know to give healing rather than hurt. Desperately enduring day by day, these people come to us in search of something they cannot name, something that will ease the desolation and the pain. And though the actual abuse is history by the time most of them reach out to us, its tormenting legacy remains. They tell their story without knowing it—with their eyes, with their bodies, with their actions, but not, at first, with their words. To them words are anathema: they have been told with knives to their throats, they must NEVER tell. Besides, they think, saying the words will only underscore the despair, the horror, the shame. Silent screams only. And by night, fragmentary flicks of horror—scenes, sounds, smells, sensations—wreck the darkness. Sleep is the enemy, dragging them down into a howling hell beneath the surface. But they don't tell us this as

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they come into our office—not with words. No, in the beginning we have to hear what they cannot say. We hear them talk about relationship troubles, problems with drugs or eating, depression, anxiety—we put them into a frame of reference we feel comfortable with; this is familiar territory. There's evil out there, we know, but it doesn't touch us; we are safe in our sheltered cocoons. But an ominous darkness looms: they begin to report flashbacks, hints of horror; their terror spills out. And soon we ourselves feel the sickening brush of evil as their histories unravel our cocoons from around us, leaving us, for the moment, naked and shivering. Our innocence ends abruptly.

Then we try the standard protective maneuvers. We deny. We close our eyes and ears, we deftly change the subject without knowing it ourselves. We do not look too closely at their eyes so that we cannot see the searing pain. We call them psychotic. We disbelieve. We tell ourselves the facts may never exactly be determined: one can, I suppose, make up such horrible stories, but it takes an awful lot to shatter a soul, this shattering one cannot feign. If you've ever sat in the presence of one, you know that. The moment you connect with the reality of that shattering it pierces you with a hot stab, sucks your breath away in a vortex of permeating sadness and horror, then fills you with a heavy coldness—maybe just for a moment,

but you'll know it, and you'll never forget it. Some of us do believe their stories, and we believe them with a vengeance; we become angry, rageful. We focus on the perpetrators, play detective, push for action, for revenge; we work for justice. Yet there is something in this scathing anger that veils the nagging terror we are feeling from a deep place inside. We pull back in a hundred little, subtle ways, becoming detached observers, leaving the survivor alone.

And then, finally, if we are honest with ourselves, we stop. We turn around and face that from which we are so desperately running. Some may face it with courage; most of us face it reluctantly, with fear and trembling: our own Victim Self, if not of abuse, then of our mortality. In all our vulnerability and helplessness, in our aloneness and despair, we find ourselves precipitously facing the Void of a terribly personal existential angst. The legacy of our mortality is brought home with raw-edged reality: aloneness, annihilation, meaninglessness, lack of freedom. We see it manifested in the eyes of the soul in front of us; it stares us down until we must either run or stare back. If we do not run, we grapple with it—with this existential uncertainty—as each one must do, with whatever faith one has.

So we sit, no longer only healer and healing, but two souls on one journey, each facing the Void, each alone and together. A clamoring din

of anguish swirls around in the deafening silence between us. This sound emanates from the past, from the moments during the abuse that were most intolerable to the survivors; we will hear it if we choose. They are ensconced in it, despairing of ever being released from it, unable to realize that they did indeed survive. We can teach them, we can help them break free of the deadly grip of the past, we can heal the mind with good therapy; but it will demand more of us and take more out of us to mend a shattered soul. In order to accomplish that, we must know our own soul. This, then, is what must be done: we must be willing to tend to ourselves first, to empty ourselves, to sit mindfully with those sounds heard with the soul rather than the ear, to face our own Void with clarity, to know our own terror and anguish, our own soul's sorrow.

The survivors' gift to us is that they bring us to this place; we may, in our sheltered lives, never have otherwise reached it in such depth. And then we shall come to know the sound which is our primal own, blending with the ancient collective anguished cry sent up from a painful world; for a long and terrible moment we know the whole agony of this mortal, fallible planet, and we are part of it.

We stand at the interface of our world as we know it and this other, this nightmare world, feeling so

terribly lost and small, having suddenly been transported from our green pastures to the valley of the Shadow of Death. The basic assumptions with which we ground our own security crumble, and we become confused and anxious. The credo shatters: I believe the world is meaningful and comprehensible; I believe the world is safe and I am invulnerable; I see myself in a positive light; I am free; I can choose³. For the survivor, these shattered assumptions have prevented them from living their lives; for the therapist, this can be new and frightening territory.

Except, of course, when the therapist is a survivor. Therapist-survivors are the crucibles from which emerge a terrible blessing, a gracious curse. This is the blessing: that they intimately know the way of healing, that they choose this precious gift for themselves and then share it. This is the curse: that they intimately know the way of anguish, that their own shattering is the price exacted from them, their own soul wrenched for a time into wretched darkness.

Yet, even the therapist who is not a survivor begins to experience the dissolution of the credo of stability. We must all go about the difficult and painful task of rebuilding our ontological security—to know that we can safely be and belong in a world that has meaning. While yet facing our aloneness and

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vulnerability, we must turn and find the power and strength of all those connections that provide us with that security.

Sometimes I come home after a difficult session still visualizing a particularly brutal moment in another's life. I cook supper; having an hour before stood again on the edge of a dark chasm. The incongruence strikes me as funny and tragic. It is then that I watch, with awe and relief, the silly antics of my children; their loving bickering; their exquisite vulnerabilities; their ready openness to love and be loved; their earnest, explosive zeal for simply living. They are Life—growing, fresh, clean, good. I am powerfully reminded of all that is this side of my inevitable encounter with death. I have life, I have meaning. I know pain, and I know healing. For now, life is good. I am grateful. I am full. The vast expanse of darkness (my own and that other's) recedes and seems less demanding of my attention than this small and ordinary slice of life in my kitchen. Perhaps I have utilized a dissociative skill to re-balance my security; we see from survivors that one merely exists, but cannot Live, without that security. On the other hand, perhaps this ordinary slice of life contains a greater power than we dreamed: it is a moment pregnant with the possibilities of love and creativity (spontaneity). It is for this that we live.

Then, when we know we will

not have all the answers, when we know there are many things bigger than our small selves, we take a deep breath and find a way to put ourselves back into the cradling mercy of goodness. We turn back to the task at hand and find the survivor still sitting on our couch, waiting.

So how do you sit with a shattered soul? Gently, with gracious and deep respect. Patiently, for time stands still for the shattered, and the momentum of healing will be slow at first. With the tender strength that comes from an openness to your own deepest wounding, and to your own deepest healing. Firmly, never wavering in the utmost conviction that evil is powerful, but there is a good that is more powerful still. Stay connected to that Goodness with all your being, however it manifests itself to you. Acquaint yourself with the shadows that lie deep within you. And then, open yourself, all that is you, to the Light. Give freely. Take in abundantly. Find your safety, your refuge, and go there as you need. Hear what you can, and be honest about the rest: be honest at all cost. Words won't always come; sometimes there are no words in the face of such tragic evil. But in your willingness to be with them, they will hear you; from soul to soul they will hear that for which there are no words.

When you can, in your own time, turn and face that deep chasm within. Let go. Grieve, rage, shed

tears, share tears. Find those you trust and let them be with you. Know laughter, the healing power of humor. Trust yourself. Trust the process. Embrace your world, this world that holds you safely now. Grasp the small tender mercies of the moment. Let you be loved. Let you love. The shattered soul will heal.

Notes

¹J. Olson, K. Mayton, & B. Braun, "Secondary post-traumatic stress and counter-transference: Responding to victims of severe violence." In B. Braun (Ed.), *Dissociative Disorders* (Chicago, IL: Rush University, 1988)

²K. Steele, "The Healing Pool," *Voices*, Vol. 24, #3, 1988 pp. 74-78. (copies available from the author for \$1 at address given below)

³R. Janoff-Bulman, "The aftermath of victimization: Rebuilding shattered assumptions," in C. R. Figley (Ed.), *Trauma and Its Wake* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985)

[Editor's note: I am deeply appreciative of the author's courage and compassion in writing of her soul-wrenching and ultimately healing work. I urge readers to write for her companion article, "The Healing Pool," listed in Note 2 above.] She writes, "I am a psychotherapist in private practice in Woodstock and Atlanta, GA, and work primarily with adult survivors of childhood abuse."

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