

Reflection (of expression) is life

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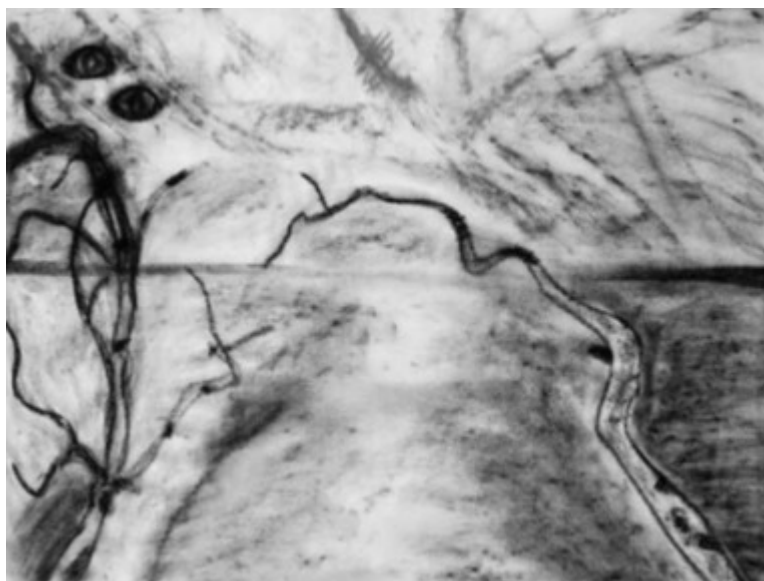


Because I trusted my father, I bonded with him when I was very young. This early attachment allowed me to feel connected to the world. It gave me the feeling that I had a right to exist, to the extent that my survival mechanisms kept the truth hidden. That was until, during puberty, I developed serious sleeping and obsessive-compulsive disorders. It wasn't until much, much later that I started to understand that my attachment, the ties that connected me to my father, consisted solely of his systematic sexual abuse. **My right to exist was built upon a lie. But it had been built.** In that sense, I am what was done to me and, because of that, it's imperative that the abuse is never denied or underplayed.

What I can do, is build a new right to exist, provided I disconnect myself from the old, unhealthy attachment. This process of disconnection brings in its wake a chronic threat of suicide, which only goes away when I fully acknowledge how my father misled and abused me.

As a little girl, my enthusiasm, behaviour and emotions were never mirrored back to me (apart from in the unhealthy context of sexual abuse). This meant that my first chance at adding meaning to my life in a constructive way was lost forever. **Now, my imagery and art are the foundation that lets me build attachment in this world.** This time, it's not my parents but my audience who mirror my expression. In doing so, they acknowledge my existence. My expressive power is life-saving.

It's important that this acknowledgement goes further than my therapists' offices, because those doctors play no role in my social environment. To truly integrate the existential injustice that was done to me, I need to go beyond the safety of therapy.



Inclusion is the magic word

I need others. And the people I need most are those who are courageous enough to connect to the darkness in me. They encourage me to embrace my wounds and include them in my very being. They help me channel my organic and existential rage, so I don't do any more harm to myself or others. They help me cope with the legacy of being the child nobody cared about. In a larger sense, they help prevent the hatred being passed on from one generation to the next. Together we can attempt to heal 'the family', this institution that is the cornerstone of our society.

Building bridges

My recovery would surely have been easier if my parents had also been able to face up to their painful history. If they had been able to feel and understand how much their actions damaged me, I would have felt understood and acknowledged. We could have built bridges between us, instead of burning them.

When, as an individual, I break the cycle of hatred, it is not only my own painful past that I'm taking with me, but also that of past generations and maybe even future generations. In an ideal world, therapy crosses over generations.

My parents failed in many ways. And yet, I've seen and experienced potential in both of them. This part of me must also be able to exist, if I am to feel complete. Which is why it hurts so much when 'society' shows little willingness to entertain or try to understand the many different layers of feelings that can exist and co-exist, even in an incestuous family.

Genetic predisposition?

I'm sensitive and creative by nature. If I had grown up in a functional family, that would have been my trump card. Now, however, my creativity and sensitivity are all too often considered a predisposing factor for serious psychiatric illness.

My chances of becoming a suicide statistic were much greater than my chances of survival. Which meant that the chances of me spending my lifetime as a psychiatric patient, tucked away under a stifling diagnostic label (which doesn't say anything about what happened to me), were much greater than the chances of me becoming an individual with a story to tell.

Instead of sticking psychiatric labels on people, shouldn't we be explaining to society that I was having a 'normal' (keeping-myself-together) reaction to an extreme situation? Isn't it more fair to help people understand that 'psychiatric patients' are, more often than not, victims of early childhood trauma? That 'psychologically vulnerable' all too often means 'psychologically traumatised'? Perhaps psychiatric patients are the real heroes of this society – at least they attempt to better themselves and heal instead of blindly repeating history.