

Otherwise I'll be one of the living dead forever

Translation of article in Spiegel magazine - Veerle Van Wassenhove

Do we really long for death? Or have so many of us as young children found that dying on the inside was the only way to survive the daily dose of humiliation and violence at the hands of our parents or other caregivers? Suicide becomes the externalisation of this inner pursuit of death. Research¹ shows that 80% of adolescents and 64% of adults who attempt suicide have a history of trauma in their childhood. It's about time we stop traumatising our young children. This should not be allowed to continue.

From early childhood on, I have felt terrible. It wasn't until I was fifteen that I realised that this was what it felt like to die over and over again. The feeling hovered over me like a constant threat. And although I managed to survive that period, I would eventually pay the price: I would fail, no longer be able to sleep. I'd end up out on the street and eventually die.

I thought it was my fault: I assumed that I had been born flawed and was mortified with shame over that. I felt like an ungrateful child and concealed the fact that I was suffering. It was only years later and with the help of therapy that I found out what the **root of my negative feelings** was, how I had managed to survive my traumatic childhood.

The traumas started piling up from the very beginning of my life. In the past edition of 'Spiegel', a Belgian magazine, I wrote extensively about the sexual abuse that my father subjected me to. Of course, I also had a mother: I remember her as emotionally unresponsive. There is no reason to assume that she was capable of bonding with me when I was a baby or toddler. I wasn't able to **bond with my mother in a safe way** and as a result, I felt **fundamentally unwanted**. Sometimes I still feel like that to this day.

If I had truly had a mother, I would have felt rooted in life. I could have led a normal life. I wouldn't have felt **guilty about my very existence**, about enjoying things (like food). I would have been more resilient when confronted with the sexual abuse by my father. Perhaps the abuse wouldn't even have happened. Terrible. The most terrible of all: that from day one, the trauma felt like it was my fault. And how could I have known better, because I had nothing else to base my feeling on. It had to be my fault.

I believe it's a mistake to think of suicide as being hereditary. Of course, suicide 'runs' in families, but **attachment issues**, unless addressed in therapy, are definitely **transmitted from one generation to the next**. Not so much through genetics ...



Title: 'mamaneverloveme'. Ink on paper. 50X45cm.

From my diary:

In case there is something left to break in me
My heart breaks into a thousand pieces
That I have to write this to you, mother.
How you broke me, rejected me, betrayed me
Abandoned me, and looked on indifferently from the sidelines
Equally rejected, cheated, betrayed

A crater has been formed inside my body
This hole
In which I fall endlessly
A bottomless abyss. The earth is flat and
then I fall off the edge. Burnt, scorched, incinerated. Dust in a black emptiness. Falling forever.
Endlessly falling and forming a life that perhaps I am after all.
I must continuously be dying, in order to be allowed to live.
Killing my self, killing myself, suicide

Wide, wide black hole
Me
Existing for no reason
with foundations never to be found
Like a dog, ungrounded

From my diary:

S. is dead.

My roommate is dead. Her father made his own whips to beat his children with. She is gone. You might say we survived our childhood, since we have long since become adults; that we were able to become adults proves it. Had she been able to as a child, S. would have preferred to die physically, instead of emotionally. Now she had to do it herself.

A message of hope



Title: "loving presence". Etching. 45X30cm.

My belief that my negative feelings and underlying depression and suicidal thought were my own fault, made me feel powerless against my suicidal tendencies. I had been born flawed and this meant that I was beyond any hope of repair: this was how it would always be. My resilience grew slowly when I started to realise that my death wish had been programmed into me (learned) by my parents from my earliest childhood.

I came to understand that, in response to the abuse and neglect, I had no choice but to die on the inside (dissociate). I realised that by instilling a death wish in me from such an early age, what my parents did to me as a small child was tantamount to murder. But more importantly, I learned that because **my death wish was something that was drilled into me, I could unlearn it.** At the age of

fifteen, hopelessly stuck under a suffocating bell jar of 'not being able to live', and not seeing a way out, this realisation was a beacon of hope.

As the adult heir of early (before the age of six) childhood trauma, I have learned to tell myself: 'It was horrible, but it's over now'. The abuse is over. I don't have to die anymore in order to escape. I no longer have to escape. **I am safer now.** And because I feel safer and am now an adult, I can share my negative feelings. **This is where the real hope lies:** in the deeply human contact of sharing my darkest thoughts and everything related to them. **Hope because connection is the best antidote to trauma. Hope because sharing is a step on the way to acknowledging this existential injustice.** Connection and acknowledgement are both essential steps on the road to recovery.

It takes time, courage and perseverance from the **victims**. An environment (home) that is safe enough for long enough to complete the therapy. It takes **doctors and therapists** who are knowledgeable and courageous enough to undertake this journey with these victims. It takes a society that is receptive to the stories of the victims, or at least refrains from denying and minimising the horror of those experiences.

Closing statement

Many people prefer to look away when they come in contact with those who have been subjected to **chronic early childhood trauma** (ECT) by their own parents. Having escaped this fate, it's too painful for them and they would prefer not to have anything to do with it. Unfortunately, ECT is not the problem of an individual or group of individuals. It is **rooted deeply in our society** and has **enormous consequences**. It is up to society to figure out how we can stop so many children being victimised like this each year within their own family environment.

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