

Bibliotherapy with Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Helen Lamb

'When I was 6 I learned
People die,
Life can change,
Love can leave'

These words sum up the emotional watershed in Jayne's life which still haunts her to this day, the death of her beloved Nana. The words came out of an exercise which asks you to choose an age and write about something important you learned around this stage in your life.

Jayne is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and first came to Open Secret for one-to-one counselling. When she joined the creative writing group it soon became clear that, as well as her father's sexual abuse, she was also struggling to come to terms with the role her mother had played in enabling the abuse. In the following extract, Jayne begins to explore her mother's denial. The poem came out of the prompt 'I am Lost'.

'I used to visit my 10,000 black stallions in our back garden
And Mam would say - she's lost again.
Silly Mam, I was only down the steps.

Mrs Irvine asked my Mam how I got the bruise on my cheek
And Mam said she's so clumsy, always lost to the world.
Silly Mam, she knew Dad did it.'

In our group meetings, there was one point that Jayne kept coming back to. It troubled her that she couldn't remember her mother being in her life at all until after her Nana died although she knew her mother must have been present. The trauma of sexual abuse often results in memories being blocked and, in some cases, several years can be lost. This kind of amnesia can be a protective mechanism and it's important to respect it and not try to force recollections. However, the significance of

her Nana's presence in the early years of Jayne's life was clearly positive and one she wanted to explore. The extracts from the next poem came out of a 'Show, Don't Tell' exercise which asks you to take an abstract word or concept and describe it in physical terms, using imagery that draws on the five senses. The word Jayne chose was 'Love'.

'Love was a full belly, a cosy cardie, a clean bed,
A cuddle from my Nana after a warm bubbly bath,
To be cherished, invincible and most of all safe...'

'Love was the smell of lemon curd bubbling in the pan,
The aroma of my Nana's perfume soaked scarf...'

'Then love became a word,
Payment for my pain, a reward for my silence,
A word that was our deep dark secret,
Hissed through tight, unsmiling lips.'

What I'm going to say next might surprise you. Jayne is luckier than some of the survivors I work with at Open Secret - for one simple reason. Jayne's Nana gave her unconditional love and she has that experience to fall back on. She knows how love feels. When her Nana passed away, the loss of her love and protection must have been hard to bear. But why could her mother not love her like her Nana had? This is the painful question Jayne was still grappling with almost fifty years later. Instead of love and acceptance, the message she'd received over and over as a child was that her birth, her very existence, had trapped her mother in an unhappy marriage.

The writing exercises I have referred to so far were aimed at everyone in the Open Secret writing group and couched in neutral terms. They were most definitely not designed to elicit poems or stories of abuse. For example, Jayne could have chosen to write about learning to tie her shoe laces. I think it's vital that we don't define ourselves only by our negative or traumatic experiences. First and foremost, the members of Open Secret writing group are writers – not victims – not even survivors – and as writers we should be drawing on all aspects of our lives.

However, sometimes after a flow writing exercise, I will home in on a theme or image that crops up and suggest the writer tries to develop on it. In Jayne's case, I'd noticed she often referred in the passing to things she'd learned from her mother and, after spotting it again one day, I suggested she try writing a piece on this aspect of their relationship. It's worth noting that this was only a suggestion and it was important that Jayne felt free to reject it. There should never be any pressure to write on a particular theme. Fortunately, Jayne was receptive to the idea and in her poem, *Scraps*, she explores her mother's positive influence, including their mutual passion for political activism.

Scraps

My knitted suits and homemade swirly skirts,
My unique cable and moss stitch poncho,
My red hot-pants and white Aran jumper,
My time to brag - a Mam who loved me?
A light coloured scrap takes shape -
Learning to knit and dropping stitches,
Making pastry and ironing shirts,
Cleaning windows and dead-heading roses,
Life's lessons absorbed – a Mam who loved me?
A patch emerges -
Puppy shopping and mange ridden Bob.
'You can't have him.' 'YES she can.'
Taking my side – a Mam who loved me?
A thread to bond the patch and the scrap –
Reading Black Beauty, not watching it on T.V.
Delivering leaflets and knocking on doors,
Learning to listen, learning to care,
Learning to question, learning to speak,
The two legged terrier with the four legged collie,
Being nurtured without knowing – a Mam who loved me?

Reflecting on the writing of this poem many months later, Jayne wrote this:

'*Scraps*' was the hardest piece I've ever written. During previous therapies, I'd demonised my mother. Accepting that she had made many positive contributions to my personality and the core values I hold dear was a massive turning point in my healing. I began to be able to acknowledge the things that happened but not to dwell on things I cannot change, to accept that we cannot always get answers to questions that haunt us. To keep searching, churning over the same issues did me more damage than the original abuse. I stopped enabling myself to be a victim.'

Since *Scraps*, Jayne's writing skills have developed considerably. These days, she's more confident about editing and revising her work, and her latest poems are leaner and more crafted. For all members of the Open Secret writing group, the page is a safe container. It's safer to get feelings out on the page than have them leak out or burst out some other way. However, the redrafting of the raw material can be even more therapeutic than the first draft and can increase your understanding of what you have written. When you go through the process of editing and shaping the raw material, you're taking control of the raw ideas and raw emotions. You can change the outcome, or you can alter the focus – because you are in charge – and this can be especially helpful for survivors of childhood abuse who had no control over what happened to them when they were young.

Open Secret, www.opensecret.org (Based in central Scotland, Open Secret provides confidential support for individuals and families whose lives have been impacted by childhood abuse)