

I recently read the article by Riki Thompson, entitled, “Trauma and the Rhetoric of Recovery: A Discourse Analysis of the Virtual Healing Journal of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors” which I found to be very useful in contextualizing and connecting ideas I’ve had about other readings and my own healing journey. Thompson studies the discourse within the CSA survivor community in how it helps promote healing in survivors and ending CSA. Though there are many genres/forums in which a survivor can tell their narrative (Fiction, poetry, autobiography, journaling, etc.) sharing in the discourse, Thompson focuses on the online journal and websites. She breaks down the discourse of this community as follows:

-Discourse: Linked ways of talking and thinking that constitute ideologies (sets of interrelated ideas) and serve to circulate power in society. (Patterns of beliefs, actions, and language).

-Discourse of healing: The numerous dialogues pertaining to trauma and recovery that are entered into and acted within. Specialized jargon continually is reconstructed with the shift in belief systems in discussions. It is a “container” that holds many types of texts and ideologies, written or spoken.

-Discourse of Telling: Authorizes survivors to engage in their narratives openly, as it reinforces the claim that to talk about traumatic experiences is therapeutic and healing.

-Discourse of Silence: Influences the discourse of healing as their participation in related discourses has the ability to shift ideology back to the discourse of silence as a preferred option to the discourse of telling.

TB: What do you think about fictionalized ways of telling stories of CSA? Do you think they are detrimental and glorified, or is it just another way to express the situation. I read the novel *Sleepers*, which deals with a group of boys going through CSA at a juvenile boys home in the 1960’s (I think). It was fictional, but apparently the author and his friends did go through what he wrote about (but I’m pretty sure there is controversy over whether people believe him or not). I think these types of stories give people who haven’t gone through abuse an access into what it is like so they can understand, but even so no one will ever truly understand unless if they go through the same thing. Would you say this is a valid way of telling the story if it is healing for the author?

JD: I just recently wrote a short story about CSA, and found it to be a positive experience. I think whether the author is a CSA survivor or not, a fiction story still communicates some reality to abuse. The author of *Such a Pretty Girl* that I read earlier this semester was not a CSA survivor but she felt that it was an important topic to talk about, and she did a lot of research herself to understand the ins and outs of CSA. I am sure her understanding is limited, nonetheless she got a lot of the dynamic between abuser/abused, and the psychology down, while creating an engaging story. Certainly fiction allows for some stretching that could become unrealistic, but I think fiction allows creativity for the writer to explore, express, and understand the topic. Parts of my fiction story were realistic, but I ended up writing the story in the way I wish things could happen. The little girl in my story, Lindsey, was running away from her uncle, the abuser, and an ice cream truck ends up crashing into a telephone pole which falls on top of her uncle. Lindsey ends up eating ice cream while the ice cream man calls the police. This is definitely a convenient ending, but It was really enjoyable to exercise creative liberty to control the end of a child’s, though fictional, CSA experience, juxtaposing a horrible thing in the innocent and sweet light of ice cream. So yes, I would say it is a valid way of telling. The author still can communicate

language of abuse and healing. They can process emotions and ways of thinking about CSA and their own experiences through exploring a fictional world and characters.

TB: Interesting. I understand. I suppose then it is a way of therapy almost.

I find this idea of discourse of silence around CSA interesting. First of all, because when I think of discourse I think of words and speech, not silence, but silence is an influential act just as much as speech is in shaping people's ideas. CSA is not an easy topic to talk about, it's disturbing, and some people rather keep it hidden and silent. In this community, silence is believed to be the enemy to the cause of healing and ending CSA. Thompson quotes from various online websites showing the ideology in "breaking the silence to break the cycle," and "speaking the unspeakable". CSA survivors want others to know the reality of CSA and that it exists. There is also the idea that if you tell then it will encourage others to tell too, so the collective voice grows stronger and more prevalent so everyone will hear.

More importantly, silence is what originally enabled their abusers, and abusers today, to continue the abuse in secrecy, and silence in children is a result of abuse. According to *The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome* by Roland C. Summit, secrecy is a complicated reality for children, which involves initiation, intimidation, stigmatization, isolation, helplessness, and self-blame. Initiated by the adult, they may intimidate the child into keeping silent so as to keep the secret, saying things like, "Don't tell anybody," or "Don't tell your mother, or she will hate you, and/or it will break up the family, " or "Everything will be alright if you don't tell". Summit notes, "A child with no knowledge or awareness of sex and even no pain or embarrassment from the sexual experience itself will still be stigmatized with a sense of badness and danger from the pervasive secrecy"(181). Secrecy is also encouraged by the child's helplessness in the sense that they depend on adults, they are their source of security and livelihood, and are required to be obedient and affectionate, especially to trusted caretakers like family members. Children keep silent too because they can be isolated by adults denial or disbelief of their disclosure. Children also blame themselves, since they are dependent it would be destructive to believe that their parent/or caretaker is so inherently bad, that they place the badness on themselves, seeing their parents as good, and strive to be good to earn their love. So ashamed of their badness they will keep the secret. It is very rare that a child actually tells. Usually children only disclose if they are called on to disclose, if they have permission or are granted the power without the threat of a negative response. This latter note was true for me, I didn't disclose till I was asked. I doubt it would have come out of me otherwise.

I know for myself that having been silent for so long, for very similar reasons and causes, there is so much freedom and healing in communicating one's experience. In the process of healing Thompson talks about common sense notions circulated in the community, like notion of telling trauma to emotionally heal, but one important notion that is continually verbalized is that they are not to blame for the abuse in their narratives. Though this is commonly believed to be true by people outside the community it is vital for survivors to make this speech act, such as, "I have done nothing wrong," in order to feel empowered and fight against their internalized self-blame. I relate to this fully, as this was something I had to do as soon as the secret came out. I had blamed myself and felt shame for something I wasn't guilty of and finally becoming conscious of what I felt shame about, I was able to realize that I was not at fault. Outwardly verbalizing or

writing it was necessary for me, it made the statement real, as I related to it, putting it in my world, and reshaping my circumstances with my words. This too separates the abuse from the self.

DK: and this is a form of taking responsibility...

CG: Could you speak more about the continued internalized self-blame that required this speech act to be made for yourself? What disappeared or was easier to approach once that speech act was made?

JD: I think it was easier to approach myself. I was able to have more compassion for myself and began to respect instead of mistreat myself, punishing myself for this presumed badness. On the note of responsibility, I was also able to approach and own up to my mistakes, finally understanding where my behavior was coming from. I was finally able to approach God, and come into a full relationship, since I never could come to accept God's forgiveness because I thought I was so inherently bad that I was incapable of forgiveness, and I couldn't even be forgiving of myself, then realizing I was denying forgiveness for something that wasn't even my fault. I also would think that this played a part in my anxiety disappearing, which was so bizarre to me. When the secret came out, it just vanished, and I haven't had it since. I think too I was finally capable of approaching my own power and freedom.

In the article, "I Am Not A Victim. I Am A Survivor": Resilience as a Journey for Female Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse, Newsom and Bowman studied what defines a resilient woman, and one factor was the "ability to shift their self-perception to not center on the trauma"(935). Resilient women would decide that the CSA does not define them or is their sole identity. In relation to this Thompson talks about how narrative allows for survivors to transform their remembering to have mental coherence about the abuse, their life, and who they are. CSA survivors have a need to "re-create the flow of their life and to re-create a stable sense of self". This retelling of the self allows a person to no longer be identified as victim, moving into healing. Thompson goes on to outline the "characteristics of self maintained through language" in narratives:

-Continuity of the self through time: Shows there is a relation, though not a complete identity, between the narrator in the beginning and end.

-Relation of the self to others: Linguistically marking the narrator as separate from others, by use of names and pronouns.

-Reflexivity of self: The act of telling a story about one's self in the past, while actively editing and reshaping the tale while in the present.

Through my research and own personal time spent healing, I find I am constantly writing about the connection and differences between myself at the beginning and my self now. I write about my relations to others as well in light of my abuse. But I seem to always be in the reflexivity of self, reliving and redefining my abuse through research, and personal reflection, applying new meanings and ways of seeing over what happened. A factor that emphasizes the importance of recreating a stable sense of self by narration is putting pieces together. "Another thread found throughout narratives is the idea that survivors are fragmented and must work through recovery to become whole...linked to the psychological concept of dissociation, which most survivors

report experiencing at some point during their lives”(663). Dissociation(a mental process of disconnecting from one's thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity) is a common defense or coping mechanism, and I have had my fair share. Memory loss and depersonalization (sense of being detached from oneself, the body or mind, observing oneself from the outside) were regular for me up until a year ago, although I still don't have all my memory, and that might also be because it's been so long since it happened and my head blocked it out all that time. But I remember always trying to find those pieces of myself that I couldn't seem to reach or understand growing up. I doubt my memory of the actual incident(s) will ever come back fully. But as an example to emphasize this desire in CSA survivors to put together fragments, not long ago, I was so frustrated at my lack of memory, that I meditated on the bit I do remember, which I've never done before. I remembered that my grandfather started by rubbing my back under my shirt, before it got worse. This little piece of the puzzle definitely triggered me, but it was also like a breath of fresh air.

Even though I have experienced a lot of clarity and healing, it is still extremely frustrating to not understand all the ways in which the abuse has influenced me and not having all my memory. But healing is a journey and I have victories and bumps along the way as I try to reframe my thoughts, behaviors, beliefs. I like how Thompson, after reflecting on many journals, describes the survivors healing journey's as a trek through rugged mountainous terrain, instead of a linear progression. I can tell you myself that she's spot on, “The trek would be filled with long strenuous hikes up hill (filled with difficult lessons of learning and growth), moments of plateaus (signaled by moments of insights and calmness), short descents (signaled by moments of falling back into old patterns of thinking or remembering pain), and a continued striving back up the hill toward the destination of wellness”(665). This description is interesting in comparison to fictitious narratives. Thompson talks about the hero on a journey who goes through trials and at the end is changed. I recently watched Captain Marvel as part of my research and she struggled with her identity and power. She lost her memory and was trying to put together her fragmented self while under the manipulation of a man. But through her journey of discovering those lost pieces with the help of her friends, she realized who she was, Carol Danvers, a strong women in herself, before she even had super powers, and realized the lies she was told. At the end she comes into herself, embracing the full potential of her power, her hands no longer tied behind her back. This character completed her story, finished her race, there was an end to this personal journey for Carol Danvers, but not so much for the CSA survivor. There is not so much a sense of finality, but a lifelong journey, no matter how advanced in healing.

CG: How do you cope with this understanding that there probably won't be finality to this part of your life? Is it frustrating when so much of our entertainment and stories are built around a closed story or when we see in our day to day that people try and frame their lives as building towards goals (whether they're attainable or not), that this is now something that you will always have with you. How are we supposed to feel when we accept that our baggage or trauma is going to continue to follow us?

JD: I will admit that this conclusion is a bit disheartening, but such is life. We always have hardships and struggles, and if not this, it would be something else, it's unavoidable in the imperfect world we live. And this benefits to the growth of my character, I've grown so much as a person, and if I didn't have this experience I would be without, something. I think too that

traumas sit so deep, it is probably unrealistic to think it will completely go away, at least while on earth. People are incapable of being in an 100% healthy state anyway, minus trauma. I am honestly happy to just know that my life doesn't have to center around my trauma anymore. That I have power to remove myself from its power and can live independent of it. I'm content knowing I have the ability to be emotionally, mentally, spiritually stable to some extent. My trauma might be following me but it's not leading me the ways it wants to go anymore, not if I have anything to say about it. I think too that narratives and entertainment that have an end of a goal are encouraging to continue onward in the journey. And I think the journey is where all the substantive stuff is, I'd rather be there than at end, not knowing what to do with it having reached it.

An important takeaway is the survivors retaking of power from the abuser in telling their stories, without a fear of consequences, knowing abusers fear the truth. "This ability to feel power in the face of events that were once disempowering is key to understanding the reasons why survivors chose to go public with their stories" (669).