

The Ultimate Betrayal

**A Psychotherapy Journal of a Tortuous
Childhood and Survival**

by

Maria Stolz

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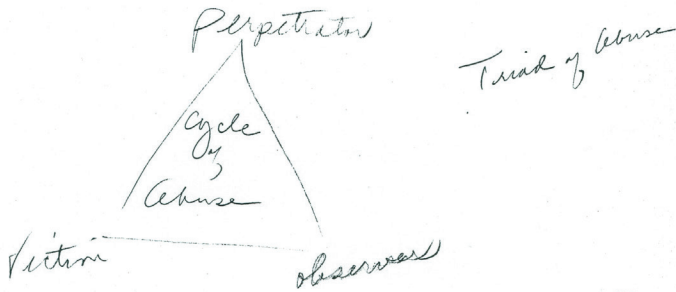
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Maria's Journal

- therapy is an opportunity to tell the things which you cannot tell so that you may dream the dreams you dared not to dream.

Tell me what you cannot tell me
so that tomorrow you may dream
the dreams you dared not dream



Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?
- Life has to be lived for something, not against something,
where does it (tragedy) lead?

Raskin
Kushner
"when Bad things happen"

To Les Kadis, a right-minded warrior, forever a healer, forever a friend

*To my beloved husband Howard, the hero of my story and soul mate, and
the jewels of my life, my children Moana, Asher and Lily, for the love,
patience, compassion and joy you give me everyday, thank you*

Contents

Foreword	9
Preface	11
It Began With a Call	15
Night Sweats	18
The Hard Work Begins –Getting to Know Each Other	21
Ramming Speed	28
Still Dreaming	34
Defcon I	37
Fall Out	42
Dreaming Awake	47
Back to the Present	55
Twenty-something	59
Wild Girl-Child	64
More Work to Do	71
More Dreamwork	81
Aftermath	88
Still Climbing	97
Casting Stones	104
Breaking the Cycle of Violence	105
Falling Again	111
The Trigger	118
New Year’s Resolutions	122
Watershed	130
Deprivations	139
The Deer	144
My Life-script	149
The Third Party	153
What We Care to Know	156
Feelings	162
Saying Goodbye	167
Afterword	172
Appendix	174

Foreword

“...sufferings of a magnitude, the cruelty of which we cannot ever begin to understand.”

Those words were written by a nurse....They encompass the horror most of us feel when we hear the stories and see the scars on the bodies and the psyches of our survivor friends. It makes us all uncomfortable because it reminds us that despicable crimes can be committed by people who walk the streets, love their children, laugh at jokes, and possibly, tenderly nourish their flowers. Just as the survivors are us, so are the torturers.

Torture Survivors Network, Gordie Albi

“Psychotherapy is a journey of revealing oneself to a trusted other”

Author unknown

“Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor to measure words, but to pour them all out, just as it is, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keeping what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away.”

George Eliot

Preface

In the movie *Aliens*, the little girl Newt tells Ripley, “My mommy said there are no monsters –no real monsters, but there are. Why do they tell little kids that?” Ripley answers, “Most of the time it’s true.”

As a child, a real monster lived in our house. My mother was a deviant, psychotic sociopath, who had an insatiable appetite for methodical sadism and torture. In addition to the physical mayhem, scars of which I bear to this day, I was perennially sleep-deprived and starved for food as punishment. Relentless fear, starvation and torture made my siblings and I in effect prisoners of war.

I have no golden childhood moments to recall that were nurturing or loving. All I know is that I had to work very hard as the eldest of nine children, taking care of the entire family, which often included two or three kids at one time in diapers –washing, cooking, cleaning and being up all hours of the night until everything was finished. I was never allowed to eat with the family until everyone including the animals was all fed, and usually in the end, nothing was left but scraps.

Living as a child was learning to find sleep under the cover of fear. Amidst the relentless fear and terror my mother perpetrated upon all of us, for some unknown reason a sister and I were the ones who got it the worst. During seven long years of intensive psychotherapy, I discovered that the beatings and sadistic tortures were not the worse thing, but that all of it...the methodical and pathological way she went about executing her punishments, were sexually motivated.

I remember asking my psychiatrist early in therapy, “Why is all of this coming up now?” I was twelve when I was taken away and left all that sorrow behind. Then in June ‘96 something happened. I was 46 years of age, happily married, raised three gorgeous children, had a nice

house and lived, what I thought, a pretty decent life until I ran into that sibling 35 years later.

Within a week, my life completely fell apart. I was suicidal and needed to be hospitalized because the 20-foot thick steel wall I had placed around my life and my psyche, crumbled to dust and I had to come to terms with the violence of my childhood. The diagnosis –delayed onset of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Up to that point, I had psychologically shut down and shut off anything about my childhood until my breakdown. Ironically, I had lived my life organized around the trauma of my childhood, which made me a nervous, emotional, excitable and out of control mother. I apparently was not easy to live with.

In an email response I received from renowned psychologist Eliana Gil, Dr. Gil suggested that I consider writing a book of the journal I kept during those years of psychotherapy. I kept the journal more for myself than anything else before the idea of this book because my memory was so spotty and disjointed. Early on, my psychiatrist told me that the journey of my therapy would be like going on an archeological dig or peeling the layers of a noxious onion. Another reason for keeping the journal was to track details of memory as much as I could recall chronologically, which for some curious reason seemed so very important to me.

There was also another consideration. In *Treatment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse*, by Dr. Gil, she points out that "...adult survivors always have problems with credibility. He or she will usually be terrified of two things: not being believed and being perceived as crazy." I had to write everything down because I could not believe what I was remembering and I reasoned that certainly my therapist probably could not believe it either so therefore, I must be crazy.

I used to ask myself over and over again, "How did I survive all this?" and now I have some of the answers. While my sister to this day, splits herself into several different parts (Dissociative Identity Disorder or DID), what used to be called multiple personality disorder, I did the same thing too, but was able as a child to return as a whole higher functioning person. I blocked or buried most of what I could not handle emotionally as a child. However, seeing my sister thirty-

five years later not knowing how much she looked like our mother –knocked down that wall I tried all my adult life to keep erect, solid and impenetrable.

That was ten years ago. I am 56 now and I have survived. I have learned what it is to experience joy; I never knew that before. I also think about the future, which was not something I thought about or thought possible. The “bats in the belfry” are gone. In my head was profound chaos. Now it is cleared out, quiet, and focused in the here and now, the present. I can enjoy the simplest of things. I have fewer relapses – times when I lose control or feel small again because I have remembered something hideous. When I see or talk to my sister, sometimes it triggers an avalanche of memories that make me feel crazy. That is when I forget I am an adult and in control and not a child, who was powerless and not in control.

Dr. Gil suggested that publishing my journal could be an inspiration of hope to those who struggle toward healing –that it is possible to achieve it. She said that in her experience, she knows how arduous the work is for an adult survivor to begin therapy, let alone complete it and hopefully thrive. It is hard to take all the credit, however, because as I told her, I believe I was lucky and had won the lottery –a good loving and supportive husband with good mental health coverage. I know others are not as fortunate, but I think in the end, it was worth the expense and effort to try and heal. That is the point of this book –to read my journal of the story itself, the conversations and emails between my therapist and I, and experience the resolution process of healing. May it offer the hope and courage to others to heal as I did. I am living the moment as it comes and I am better equipped to handle the demons that still haunt my sleep.

October 27, 2006

Here's a powerful never ending thought –*imagine what I could have been or done, if...*

It Began With a Call

In March '96 I received a phone call from a sister I had not seen in thirty-five years. It was a shock and startling surprise because I worried immediately about how she got my phone number. For most of my life I scrupulously avoided listing my number, but in recent years decided the fear was ridiculous as no one knew my married name, so I safely listed our family's telephone number under my husband's name. Besides, there was this older couple with the same first and last name, who over the years had been pestered with mail meant for us, and we in turn received medical bills obviously belonging to them. We have never met this couple, but we have commiserated on the phone about the ironic similarities of our names, the fact we go to the same medical clinic and how we should exchange mail.

Back to the phone call –I remember my heart pounding hard and out of control when my sister explained she got our last name from a listing in a brother's obituary when he died of AIDS. But that was quite a while ago and apparently, she only got the nerve to call at that moment.

My sister was planning to come to California the third week of May to attend a younger sister's graduation from Sonoma State University and wondered if we could meet at that time. This particular sibling had been a toddler when I left so she is relatively unknown to me, but the cover of a graduation ceremony seemed to be a harmless way to connect with the sister who called.

I was the eldest of nine children. This sister who called was fourth in line of birth. She was a fragile creature almost from the first moment I can remember. She was born with strabismus, an eye disorder where one or both eyes wander and cannot focus. I remember she had several operations to correct it, but nothing ever improved her condition. I

think that because of her eyes and how they looked, she always looked like a scared rabbit or fawn with a kind of dullard expression that seemed to easily enrage my mother.

The feelings I had for this sister were less as a sister and more that of a mother. She and I, for some unknown reason, seemed to be on the receiving end of horrendous physical and psychological torture more than the others. We lived in three different places before I left, but the first house, an old Victorian in the San Francisco Haight-Ashbury district was a huge Gothic place of unimaginable terrors. It is in this house I remember feeling constantly in a panic to hide her away from my mother's gaze or else she would go on an unending rampage and I never knew if I or my sister would be alive the following day. The prospect of death was a constant companion.

So it was from that feeling of a child I had left behind that I determined it should be all right for me to see her again --to see how she fared, well or nil, although stories I had heard about her had not been so encouraging.

Graduation day arrived. My husband and I drove two and a half hours from the Monterey Bay Area to the Sonoma State campus. We were to connect at an appointed place and while I stupidly forgot to ask what she would be wearing, I suddenly realized that I might not recognize her. Strangely, it was she who recognized me first, although how she did, I have no idea. I felt awkward at first, not knowing whether to hug or kiss her, but was struck by how much she looked like our mother. It is funny now when I think about it, but in my head I kept seeing her as the eight-year-old I left behind and, in truth, she really had not changed all that much. But she was the exact image of our mother grown up. I suppose she always did and that too, was probably another source of irritation to our mother. I do not know.

It was weird. She was extremely animated and told me how much she still loved me. I must have appeared dazed or something because I remember feeling very strange as if I was having an out-of-body experience. It was difficult for me to formulate words or a cogent sentence. I did not know how I was feeling toward her or about myself. I was not happy or sad --just feeling very weird. The gyroscope of my compass was spinning out of control only I did not know it.

Somehow the day's festivities passed with my younger sister receiving her masters degree and we said hello and goodbye to her as if two strangers had met. It is somewhat odd to know there is a blood connection to someone yet not feel connected in any way to that person. Well, we are strangers after all, but the sister who called means a lot more to me, so after our well wishes, the three of us, my sister, husband and I, decided to go out to dinner.

I think we had Chinese food. I vaguely remember the restaurant, but it was quiet and secluded where we were seated so I did not feel exposed in any way. It was small chit chat talk, nothing heavy duty however, once in awhile my sister would mention something fantastic like the fact that she has multiple personalities –ten in all. I remember looking at her and wondering which personality I was talking to, that is to say, was this the whole personality here with us today or only a part?

She told us she had three children, but they were taken away when the authorities determined she was too crazy to handle them. She had been diagnosed with multiple personality disorder in '91 or '92 and that up to that time she was in and out of mental hospitals diagnosed as schizophrenic. By the end of the meal, most of which I had not eaten or could not eat, I felt slightly dizzy with a hollow feeling in my ears and I had a headache. We had to start for home because it was getting late and I did not know it at the time, but I was near collapse. We talked very little on the ride home, my husband and I. I remember he kept asking me if I was okay. I guess he sensed something was wrong. Anyway, it was just another big long day, right?

Night Sweats

I never slept well my entire life. Even after all these years, I had an exacerbated startle response, often awakening me in the middle of the night. Today still, whenever I enter a room, I always look for a wall or corner I can have my back against so I can see the entire area. I don't like surprises.

I read somewhere that soldiers in a war zone sleep with their eyes open. That seems so right and familiar to me. Sometimes I would wake up while my mother was beating me with the belt buckle, thwacking over my head. When that happened, it was sickening to discover that I had fallen asleep. How dare I do that? It was never safe to sleep.

So now I had more sleep problems. I immediately began to have horrible violent nightmares. I would wake during the night soaked through my nightwear and the sheets drenched. I thought I was 5-6-7 years old again, not at the farm where I left, but in the old Victorian trying to escape. None of it was real or had actually happened, but these nightmares were like being inside of a war movie, escaping in the dead of night with someone or something chasing me. I would wake up with an unbelievable thirst and a crushing headache.

During the day I was jittery and could not concentrate on anything. Sometimes I would find myself standing in the middle of nowhere in the house, startling to some sense of consciousness, wondering what it was I was there for. I could not think straight. Reading, a great hunger in my life for which I normally find immense joy and pleasure, became annoyingly difficult and painstaking to follow through on. I could not get beyond two or three paragraphs before my mind would start to wander. I had stained glass studio projects to complete and volunteer commitments to my synagogue, three community boards I served on, our youngest daughter's school, singing engagements yet still, I could

not stay on task. But it was the fear of night, having relentless night terrors that made living increasingly unbearable.

What in the world was happening to me? Here I prided myself on being the world's most efficient workhorse. I was organized, dependable, liked doing many things all at one time, and doing them well. If pressed for a definition of what kind of person I was, people would eagerly tell you, "If you want something done, give it to a busy person. I don't know how she does it." Now, all of a sudden, I could not do anything well. I felt immobilized and lethargic. For example, I could not think far enough in advance to plan for meals, like taking meat out of the freezer early enough to defrost. This from a person who lives and dies by the dictum of home cooked meals and mothering her brood. I could not coordinate anything. Generally freed from gender-based toil in the home, I loved being a mother and cooking for my family, volunteering in the community, running a glass studio, etc., but now life had no meaning to me anymore and I wanted simply to fade away and disappear.

Before long, I was standing at the edge of a cliff, with a long natural rock pier, jaggedly carved upon a local beach I like to go to for solace and contemplation. It is a place right out of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. It is "my place," where I go when I am happy or sad. It was a thick overcast day with heavy winds thrusting the sea toward shore. I remember feeling an overpowering urge to disappear into the mist. I was a very small child again and I was too scared to look back.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of my youngest daughter's voice calling out my name, "Mommy, Mommy." She was not there, of course, but I realized in that instant that I was in desperate need of help. I drove straight to my rabbi's office. I do not remember how I got there, but fortunately he was in and the rabbi immediately ushered me into his office. I was distraught and I think, incoherent. I wanted to tear my skin off that is how agitated I was. I asked him to find me someone to talk to. He gave me three names and I called the first one written on a pink post-a-note pad, a psychiatrist, who was also a physician. I never got the chance to find out what the other two names were listed. As therapists go, the first inquiry was all I had to make. He was an

immediate “hole in one” find for me. I met with him June 12th, three weeks following the meet with the sister who called.

The Hard Work Begins –Getting to Know Each Other

His office was inside of a house that had been partitioned off into three or four offices, which he shared with two other marriage family therapists, one of whom focused on working with adolescents. Being the sole psychiatrist there, I was surprised that he had the smallest office. I do not know why that made an impression on me, but it did –a kind of quiet modesty. Fortunately enough for me upon first meeting him, he appeared to have a very calm and genteel demeanor. I immediately approved of his tie and cardigan sweater. Added to that, besides a warm and endearing smile, he had a full shock of white hair, which obviously spared him the all too human indignity of baldness. For the first day, that was enough comfort for me to take him on, but I still did not trust him and as I said, it took some time. He had to wait and he was very patient about it, which was a great relief to me.

The next four or five months were spent getting to know each other, my psychiatrist and I. We agreed to meet once a week, although sometimes I saw him twice a week. During that time, medication was prescribed to help me cope. My personal physician had already put me on 20mg. of Prozac, but it was not sufficient enough for the state I was in, so it was bumped to 60 mg. That seemed to do the trick for the moment. I could think more clearly and concentrate better. Also, I needed something to help me sleep through the night. I was nearly driven insane with the anxiety of a nightmare every single night. After some juggling of Prozac, Klonopin, Alprazolam and other sleep medication, Desyrel was the magic bullet I needed with Prozac and more than that, I did not have that hung over or drugged out feeling the following morning. What small graces abound in the form of a teeny tiny pink pill.

I was distrusting of him at first because of previous experiences with brief interludes of therapy, although I must admit he was the first psychiatrist I had ever seen. When I asked for references for therapists, I insisted it had to be someone much older, not someone fresh out of school. He or she had to have some experience with Holocaust or war victims, particularly with aggravated brutality. I wanted someone who had been “around the block,” so-to-speak whose wizened years would know the truth when he or she heard it. Truth is everything when you are bearing witness to horror and violence.

All during those months of getting familiar with one another, I maintained some modicum of a life beyond therapy. We danced around each other for awhile; him gently prodding when appropriate and I testing him. I am sure I was frustrating to him at times, but he never showed or expressed it. He was willing to take as long as I needed I guess, until he knew I felt comfortable. I later understood that he was building a therapeutic alliance.

In any case it was for sure aided and abetted through medication, but I was in the world again. Well, maybe I should clarify that by saying I had one foot in the world of a child or the past, and one foot in the present as an adult. “Staying in the present” became the hereafter annoying clarion call, but it was never easy to do that at will. It took me well over a year before I had a better appreciation of that therapeutic agenda, but at the time to me, it was akin to hearing your mother say, “Wear a coat –it’s cold outside!”

I still had nightmares, particularly when I forgot to take my sleeping pill, but they were less intense and depending upon the stimulus or topic of the week, they came and went with hardly an afterthought. Not so for my therapist. I guess that is what they train to do –to look for the hidden meaning of words, thoughts, and images. Once in awhile he would ask me to draw or write my thoughts down. I do not know why, but I resisted doing it for a very long time. What other superb way of gleaning those hidden messages than from a troubled artist? But I was too stubborn and terrified to try. I guess I still was not ready to really let go or “let him in.”

One aspect of my therapy and unusual from what I am told, is that I could email him whenever I needed to and he would respond in

kind, although sometimes it was never quite as fulfilling a response. Sometimes, for example, I would send him a two-page diatribe and he would respond in Zen-master like fashion, a cryptic line or two. He had an unsatisfying and annoying knack for brevity, sometimes replying in one or two sentences. It became a joke in my mind, what I can only describe as Haiku psychiatry. Was he charging by the sentence or the word? We emailed each other, back and forth. I do not think that it was standard operating procedure, but he went along with it.

Another aspect of therapy, which I thoroughly enjoyed, was reading books he would suggest from time to time. Sometimes he would bring in an article from one of his professional journals about something relevant to my case and during those months of settling into each other, this became fertile common ground from which to begin the hard work ahead of us. By late fall, I was certain I had found someone I could call a friend.

Then, with the holidays bearing down, all hell broke loose on a Wednesday in December. The following is the email I sent to my therapist, syntax and grammatical errors complete:

I woke this morning from a nightmare. I remember (husband) waking me this morning to say goodbye, and I guess that's when I had the nightmare. It was a little after 7am when I woke up with my heart pounding so fast I couldn't catch a breath. It wouldn't stop while I lay in bed so I got up to take a shower. I was drenched again from perspiration and I felt yucky, but the shower helped; I was able to calm down.

I'm sitting at this terminal and I'm trying to figure out where to start. This dream I had is a recurring one; sometimes the situation is different, but the results are the same. I call them my "chase dreams." In this morning's dream I was in a dark place like a campground; the night air is noisy with commotion, people running through and fro' and I'm hurt really bad. I can't move fast enough to hide. I'm hiding in something that looks like an outhouse or something like that. I'm completely naked, bleeding and hurting and I don't know if I can make it. My body is wracked with pain and all I know is that I've got to get away, at the same time I'm hoping someone will find me. People pass right over me; I know

they can see me because I want to tell them who did this, but they don't seem to notice.

There are bodies everywhere like some great massacre happened; and they're all children...no one I know, just kids and the adults are stepping over them like rocks in their path. I'm still in some kind of closet only now it looks like a room in a hospital; very sanitary looking, but I'm in the bathroom of this place crawling and these two women are arguing about how they are going to move me. Next thing I know they're lifting me with a bed sheet, but they keep dropping me and every time they do I'm reeling in agony from the pain. I keep wondering why they don't stop the bleeding and none of them are talking to me. I'm talking to them, but they don't respond; I think they think I'm dead. Still, I'm in a dark place and I'm moving my body as fast as I can, but I'm not moving fast enough and the pain is excruciating. If I'm found, I know I'm going to die. They or something will kill me if I don't keep moving. Why can't anyone see how badly hurt I am? I'm feeling like giving up, but I've got to tell someone what happened. I'm thinking I would gladly die if someone knew who did this to me and all the others.

This wasn't in my dream, but in parochial school, I remember this Sister Delphina telling us that to give your life up for the sake of others showed no greater love. What a hypocrite she was; I would come to school in extreme agony from the tortuous practices of the day before, and I knew she knew what was going on. She enjoyed slapping me when I couldn't sit down at my desk fast enough. Another sadist clothed in a black angel's habit. Maybe I deserve this because I'm not white. There must be something wrong with me. I don't count for much. Was I really my "brother's keeper"? How could I save them and myself at the same time? She also said that God never gave a person more than they could handle. I needed to believe in that when I was a child. I thought this was what life was all about --pain and suffering, and that was simply all I was about. There was no other reality beyond gnawing agonizing pain. I woke up this morning in that physical reality of excruciating pain no one cared enough to do anything about. That's what I think my dream is about. And at this moment I feel

crushed into oblivion. I'm going to end this now. I have a place I go to when I'm feeling this way...I'll call you before I do anything else.

Then ten days later...

I had another "chase dream" this morning. I woke up early this morning around 7am and read the newspaper. Madame (an elderly friend my family cared for while she was dying) still was asleep so I laid down again and promptly fell into a dream state, I guess. This time, I was an adult and the characters in my dream were like from a Roseanne episode. Lots of yelling and throwing of objects, and I'm tied up trying to escape. I'm doing everything I can to calm this person down, to appease her, but she keeps yelling at me, and I can't move fast enough. Then I heard my budgie screeching and realized when I woke up that she was indeed, screeching. She lives with us upstairs in our bedroom suite we built for ourselves as a second wing.

So what do you make of that? Very bizarre, and how come after seeing you, which was fine yesterday, I had this dream? I had not had another nightmare since the last one I wrote you about. The last three or four weeks I was in sheer terror all the time because I was "small," I couldn't get big again.

With the increased dosage of Prozac, I feel big, more in control, as if I can handle things again.

I am the teeniest concerned that I was feeling okay until this happened this morning. Am I falling backward again or what? I want to keep going forward. I don't want to be in that place I was during these last weeks. I just know it's not safe for me.

I have to stop this now because I have to run to do another gig at 11:30 for a rest home and elementary school. Since I awoke this morning at 9:30 from this nightmare, I felt I had to get it down before I concentrated on singing again. This whole thing that's going on in my life feels so weird and absurd...

Three or four days later, before Christmas Eve, I had what is colloquially referred to as a "meltdown." That day I awoke extremely agitated and out of control. I cannot begin to recount the events of the day because

I was not in the “here and now,” as they say. I was a lost scared little girl with nowhere to run. I was crunched so tight and so small into a vortex that I could not get a chest of air large enough to breathe. I was in my bed and I was balled up tight in a fetal position, as my son would later tell me, and much of the following was described to me by my husband.

I have vague memories of having been carried or assisted by my husband and son to my psychiatrist’s office. My son had called him early that afternoon clearly frightened because he had never seen me this way before. He later told me that I kept mumbling something like, “I’m in so much trouble...I’m in so much trouble.”

Meanwhile, my husband raced home from work. From the car they took me along this pathway, which seemed long and narrow and suddenly I heard my therapist’s voice, but he sounded so far away. They put me in a chair. In that split second, I expected the ropes to come on next, but nothing happened.

My therapist began talking and calling my name, but I could not hear him. I had a ringing hollow sensation in my ears –he sounded so far away. I was terrified; I was literally frozen in that chair. Then, I think he picked up his chair and moved very close to me because suddenly it felt like he punched a hole in that tunnel I was in. I also heard him more clearly, but his voice was raised and he sounded angry. I think I told him I did not like being shouted at, “Shouting voices scare me.”

When he started to talk softly, he then put his hands on his lap and told me to put mine in his. I was looking down and I could see his hands, but my hands would not obey my will. I tried to make them move, but they would not move. He was very patient with me because the task at that moment was to put my hands in his. It seemed interminable, the time it took for my hands to move, but finally my hands were in his. It might have been five minutes or an hour. I just do not know. This was so unbelievably hard to do.

Next he told me to look up and into his eyes, but I could not do it. I was crying inside to do what he asked, but I could not do it fast enough. He told me to take my time. Again, the time that passed between trying to move and raise my head and eyes was an eternity. And I was faintly

aware of how strangely quiet it was because he was actually whispering his instructions to me.

He did something strange with his index finger. He was whipping it from side to side and told me to focus on this finger. It took a long time before I could follow it and keep up with the speed he moved it. Once we finally made eye contact, I felt completely drained of energy or emotion. An eerie quietness hung in the air and I realized at that moment that my husband was there with me the entire time and I had no sense of his presence at all during that entire episode. He looked like he had been crying. I wanted to reach out to him, but I was too wrung out to care; I wanted to sleep. But for a brief second, it did hurt to see him so troubled.

Before we left the office, my therapist gave me/us some instructions to follow: He showed my husband and I an eye technique called EMDR (eye movement desensitization & reprocessing). We used this to make eye contact with each other when it looked like I was dissociating again. It was a good device because in the days that followed, we relied upon that technique a lot.

Next he extracted a promise from me that I should never (for the time being) go to “my place” without my husband or someone with me at all times. He gave me additional medication to take for the next few days and he told us to be together as much as possible and to relax, maybe go on an excursion, but be away from the house as much as possible. My husband took notes; I could not. Sleep was the prime objective.

December '96

Ramming Speed

The floodgates were finally open. The gatekeeper was cold-cocked because I began remembering things, memories buried so far and so deep, I had no idea I had them inside of me.

What I was remembering were shocking incidents of unbelievable horror that I must have endured as a child. First they came in disjointed pictures, moving forward then backwards. My therapist invariably described it like the peeling of a noxious onion or turning over another rock. The main event would present itself, and then details leading up to it would be revealed in due course, but always in reverse.

Staying in the present or learning how to take care of myself became an art form unto itself. I had to stay consciously attuned to where I was, what I was doing, and whom I was with in case I needed their help. I was on overload; this new information came on hard and fast. I think my therapist was aware it was happening that way to me, but I sure was not. I was used to hard work and I was determined to work hard at this because I had a family who loved me and were worried about me. I was maniacal in wanting to get through this and get on with my life, not just for myself, but for them as well.

But it was not to be, that is, not at the pace I wanted. One hears stories off and on about people in therapy for years and years, and I was determined that I would not be one of those people. I began worrying about stupid things like using up my therapist's time on seemingly unending crap from the past. I mean, when is enough, enough? I would be consumed for days on some recovered memory, talk to my therapist about it, and then experience a sense of relief for about two days before again, more crap sullied my consciousness before I could relieve myself at the next session. It was looking more and more like an end game.

Regardless however, some inroads were made. Working in tandem with recovered memories and the guilt associated with being a battered child, I began to see my relationships with people were changing. For the first time ever, I began looking at all the people in my life, past and present, and suddenly nothing was real to me anymore. All the adults of my past whom I thought loved me, were not all that loving after all, and certainly did not behave responsibly toward me and my siblings.

A week following my meltdown I emailed the following excerpt to my therapist:

What I am remembering is no longer frightening to me; what is left, however, is a lingering profound sadness. And now I am also reflecting upon my relationship with my grandmother, whom I loved and adored --seeing her with different eyes, as it were, and I feel as though something very important to me has been ripped away, the feeling I had for her --like was it real or in my imagination --the way I wished it could have been, or what I thought it was? I remember too, and you were right, I did love my father, almost unbearably so, and that too, I had buried and forgotten.

From my first sense of conscientiousness I was never a child. I always had something to do when I woke up --someone to feed, bottles to prepare, diapers to change, make my mother's breakfast. I used to get to bed after midnight, after I finished folding the wash. I could never go to bed unless that was done, and the dinner dishes washed. I cooked all the meals standing on a chair and I ate my meals after everyone else had finished. Sometimes, I awoke to the belt buckle whipping over my head --my mother was angry about something again, and I often didn't get a chance to go to the bathroom to relieve myself. When the bus picked us up for school, I breathed with the normalcy and ease of a living thing --during that ride to school, and the hours which raced by till the school bell rang to send us home, humanity reigned supreme. It was the only joy and peace I knew. I loved school and learning. It was my Valhalla.

Did you know fear has a smell, an odor to it? On our way home from school, every block the bus turned brought us closer to that smell. I think I was born with a twisted stomach. (Still have it

to this day, like when you raise your voice a few decibels) I threw up blood once in the fifth grade, only to find out later in life I had an ulcer the size of a half dollar --anyway, the trick was whether or not she (my mother) would be standing behind the door, or somewhere in the house to spring some holy terror about our heads, mostly mine and when she got worn out, she turned on my sister.

Peace descended upon the house only when my father was home. We'd hear him whistling as he parked the car and my heart would leap with joy and profound relief because for awhile, anyway, there would be no beatings or tortures. He was always laughing or making some joke. I thought he was wonderful. Now I'm wondering if it was all a cover-up to disguise, what I'm sure he knew was going on. Sometimes he'd pick up one of the kids to fool around or tickle me and I'd scream because of some pain or something, and then he'd kind of stiffen up and pretend as if nothing had happened. We all pretended like nothing was wrong. We became very adept at perfecting that charade because one glaring look from our mother and you knew not to say or betray anything that might be awry.

One time he did come to my defense. It was so odd. She had strung me up by the lamp chandelier in my room (we lived in an old Victorian home in SF) and she was wailing away with that stick of hers she cultivated from some woodshed and my father busted down the bedroom door and asked my mother if she intended to draw and quarter me while she was at it. I think I was nine and I'll never forget it because he stood there not doing a thing to help me, but huffing and puffing like some great bull. My mother looked stupefied and incredulous that he had the temerity to even say something, then she handed him the stick and told him to finish the job, and left. My father never even looked at me; I'm writhing in pain, naked to boot, and he does nothing but drop the stick and turn to walk away. I spent the night that way until the next morning when she had to cut me down to get the kids ready for school. My father had already gone to work.

For twelve long years, this fear, pain and insanity was all I knew; this was my existence. School was my escape valve, where I maintained my sanity. Now I am remembering the events of that

awful day when I left. I made myself believe I was free at last, no more pain or suffering, no more starving for food or sweets my fifth grade teacher used to sneak into my lunch. I went to a loving grandmother and a grandfather who couldn't stand me; I was made to wear dirty diapers around my neck because I had hidden them instead of washing them, and a million other indignities and humiliations she devised. (I think she was a distant relative of Dr. Joseph Mengele) Anyway, I got away; I was liberated from this prison camp called my home but at what price now? Time lining therapy sessions is really ludicrous because I want to talk to you right now so badly --though if I were you, I wouldn't appreciate it at 2:30am. When we're all done with this, will you explain the logic behind disjointed discussions like these?

Anyway, in these last a few days I have become, and am now living as a twelve year old child in the body of a forty-eight year old woman trying to cope with the fact that I chose to save myself over that of my brothers and sisters. That's the ugly truth of who and what I am and why I wish I could disappear into oblivion. Everyday (husband) accompanies me to that spot on the cliffs where I go, and while he's holding on to my hand, I am overcome with immense grief and sadness that I really do fantasize about taking flight into the ocean mists. I've lived my life as if it were an offering to do good when all I am is really a fraud; why wasn't I willing to die for them then and as I am, and would do now, if it were my own kids? I knew what was going on. Being twelve doesn't let me off the hook. Hell, I was menstruating already. At what age does one become culpable and absolved the next? How do I learn to live with what's happened to my sister, whom I think I loved like my (youngest daughter)? Why me and not her? Was she any less worthy of a break? I am so full of self loathing and despair; the tears seem to flow endlessly.

Something...someone has been guiding the three (therapist, husband and me) of us to this point...have you sensed that in some way? Like we're chess pieces triangulated to make some sort of cosmic move. Where do we find the grace to channel what has been given to us, the good and the bad? And will we still love each

other in the same way, or better...I'm going to close this...I'm quite weary now...I'm sorry, you probably are too.

In a rare moment however, casting haiku psychiatry aside, my therapist responded with this excerpt:

Reality is a funny thing. We call it reality but what we think of it changes from moment to moment. We seem to create our reality in the moment depending on the context. Or maybe it is that multiple realities coexist. As children we want to believe in one reality. As adults we have to learn to live with the many, often conflicting, realities. You seem to be in the process of discovering the good and the bad in each of us. Self discovery may be the ultimate form of courage because facing ourselves is the most difficult.

During this phase of my therapy the focus turned to alchemy. Was the Prozac too much or not enough? My therapist was concerned that too much Prozac might cause too much excitement and reduce my ability to cope with what I was remembering. I was already taking the highest recommended dosage. Then we cut back to 20mg. He put me on Alprazolam, but I have no idea what, if anything, it did. We went back up to 40mg. of Prozac and I took Dalmane for sleep.

Sometimes I had to take two, but I still awoke around 2 or 3am. Even though my sleep was not fitful, I was feeling better nonetheless. The only problem remaining was how I felt in the morning and throughout much of the day.

Before the therapy crisis, mornings were generally the best time of day for me so using that as a baseline I felt rested, but not my usual self. I had to work hard at interacting with my family and family from out of town and having the holidays upon us at the same time only added to the stress. It was hard being around people; I liked being alone or being left alone. I walked a lot and drove thirty or forty miles to get away sometimes. I was still very depressed, but I was not falling into that dark place again.

Speaking of my husband –I know there are plenty of women friends of mine who cannot quite believe he is for real, but he is the genuine article. As I look back, this was probably the hardest period for him,

yet he persevered and never once wavered. He took control and responsibility of dispensing my medication with utmost care and precision. In fact, he kind of drove me nuts with his nurse-hovering ways. Even my kids got into the act. But all things being fair and equal, it was a necessary consequence on my part that I was willing to pay in order to get well.

December '96, January, March '97

Still Dreaming

My “chase dreams” persisted although some of them were not all that terrible. These were dreams where I was either flying or I was towering over everybody. In one dream I was on stilts. These stilts were pencil thin, but I soared over every one and every thing so I could move like the wind. I would keep moving as if I was being chased, but I was not scared at all. I just knew I had to keep moving. I thought to myself, “I can move very fast, past everyone. They won’t catch me.”

Eccentric-looking characters appeared not the least bit concerned that I was on stilts, but I kept moving. It was like a scene out of one of C.S. Lewis’ books on the *Narnia Tales*. In dreams, where I flew, I felt the most exhilarating feeling of freedom and happiness I ever knew. I told my therapist once I thought these types of dreams were tension releasers because I usually felt pretty good afterward. Once my feet touched the ground, however, I began to feel threatened and not safe. Death was around the corner, waiting to get me.

When the holiday season arrived (Thanksgiving through New Years), my therapist usually took that time off for a much deserved break. I did not have the comfort of knowing that I would be seeing him in a few days because at that time, the sessions were intensive, sometimes occurring twice a week. So that meant my husband and I had to keep busy doing things together. This was our homework.

Besides being my best friend and soul mate, my husband was a terrific partner in helping me to stay focused in the present. It was a constant battle to keep the door shut on what I was remembering, particularly about that awful day I left my family for good. These were new and terrifying revelations washing over me like a flood. I began to fear the confrontation of acknowledgment that was to come. Communication by email between sessions became crucial. Somehow I knew it was too

scary and the probability of my slipping into a dark place was just too risky without my therapist being on hand.

We went often, my husband and I, to “my place” on the cliffs dotting the shoreline of Santa Cruz, tightly clutched together or holding hands. I remember we went for a stroll there on Christmas Eve. That particular day was torrential with fierce winds and rain. Most intelligent people run for cover when the weather gets insane like this, but for some reason I found it comforting to face into the rain and get pelted into smithereens. My husband, being the good sport that he is, was game for anything. We got soaked to the skin and then finally, we drove to another favorite haunt, a coffee shop on the esplanade in Capitola for some espresso.

While waiting for our coffee to come, I remember thinking to myself that the deafening roar of the ocean must work on a person’s psyche as a kind of sedative against the intrusion of unwanted memories. However, in the relative calm and quiet of the warm coffeehouse with classical music playing as backdrop, it was easy to lose focus again. My husband seemed to know, before I did, when I was dissociating, an all too familiar coping strategy that I have used my entire life. He would ever so subtly make eye contact with me and start some ridiculous chatter. It was a neat trick my therapist taught us because then I would smile and then he would say, “What?” and we would both laugh because we knew each other so well. What luck to have such a friend for a husband.

Through email, I shared my feelings of that day and my therapist responded:

I'm glad the “trick” of bringing yourself back to the present is working.

You're learning to control your memories so as not to be flooded by them. It's another important factor in getting through this.

All through the New Year holiday, I felt like I was hanging on by my fingernails. My next session was for the 9th of January. My husband had taken vacation time off to be with me as much as possible. Images were coming to me like pieces of a great huge puzzle, and the more I

put together, the crazier I began to feel. As much as I wanted to be by myself, which is a normal reaction for me when I am stressed, I knew instinctively that it was dangerous for me to be alone. The lost memory of that fateful day was the linchpin to unlocking a Pandora's Box of supreme evil, conceived in the mind of a very twisted mother.

Everything emotionally for me seemed to be escalating at a fever pitch. I was just a few days away from seeing my therapist. If not for the medication, I think I would have torn away the skin from my arms and face. Regardless of sleeping medication, sleeping at night was fitful, and when I awoke, I managed to fall back asleep again. It was building up, whatever IT was. I cancelled all my appointments that week and pretty much slowed down my pace of activity. I worked very hard at taking care of myself. Living from day to day was put on hold. When the day arrived, I called my rabbi to ask him to be on standby following my session, which my therapist lengthened to an hour and a half. I was to come to his office immediately following my session. Added to what I was about to reveal, I knew I was in a spiritual crisis as well and would have need of him.

January, February '97

Defcon I

The anxiety of preparing for this session was relentless including the ritual nightmare assaults. My husband was constantly waking me from them. I often woke in the dead of night in his arms, caressing me while he whispered soothing assurances that I was safe. A particular dream I had was so violent that I actually fell out of bed and cracked my head open on the night stand. That required a trip to Emergency for stitches.

One dream I had involved a drowning. I woke up from that dream feeling like I was coming down with a cold. Turns out the drowning was not a dream because it actually happened, almost. I had completely blocked it out from memory, but now I started to remember some details. They came in relentless snippets of flashbacks, disjointed and out of sequence and the memory of it came on hard and fast.

I must have been five or six; I know I was small because my mother had both hands (they were big) around my throat trying to choke me to death. It was an iron grip my little hands could not pry open. She was trying to drown me in the bathtub. Then I had a fleeting memory of bathing my baby brother. I must have screwed up or did something wrong because she flew into this violent volcanic rage trying to choke and then drown me. I remembered that I was fully clothed and my brother was sitting in the bathtub. Two more days and I would be seeing my therapist.

Everything in my head that I had to get out of myself about the day I left was in separate pieces or images. I was in a whirlwind of “craziness” that made me feel absolutely out of control. There was an overriding sense of desperation to get things right –make some sense or order of the pictures flashing in my head. Once I was in my therapist’s office, I felt safe enough to work on stringing them all together.

Before we got started, I asked my therapist if I could hold on to his hands the way we did during the meltdown. I was sure I needed to do that in order to feel safe. He countered by suggesting instead that he would put his hands on his lap and if I needed to, I could place mine in his. He also sat very close to me so that I could reach him easily. I took a deep breath and began. The following is a retelling of what I revealed to my therapist of that day; to the best my memory serves:

We had moved for a third time out of San Francisco to a farm in Sonoma County. If my work at home was a drudge in the city, living and working on a farm more than tripled the work I had to do. I always thought that the day I left my family for good was the most important element of my release from prison; that was what I carried away with me all through my adult life. What I had completely blocked out, however, were the events of the previous day when my mother went completely berserk and mutilated my entire body.

I cannot remember a day ever, in my entire childhood when there was not a beating or an exquisite form of torture being meted out to one or more of my siblings. For example, between my sister and I, were two brothers. I remember the third in line of birth was punished in the most heinous way several times because he could not stop bed-wetting. On threat of having the same thing done to me, I was forced to hold him down while she dripped hot candle wax upon his genitals. But as absurd as this might sound, I do not recall these two brothers suffering an equal portion or number of beatings or assaults as my sister and I did. And always, the ritual demanded that all the children stand in a row to witness whatever it was our mother was going to do to the anointed victim and if she needed help, she would draft one of us to participate as well.

This one time however, was different and I do not recall what it was I was being punished for, but we headed outdoors, her and me, by ourselves to the barn where she barred the doors from the inside.

In the existential world of fear and terror, there is a strange comfort to the pathology of ritual. You know it will be terrible, but you sort of know what to expect – excruciating pain. Here I was a fully developed twelve-year-old, paralyzed with fear because this scenario was entirely different. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

She led me to a part of the barn where hay was stored. She told me to undress and to strip naked. She liked to simply say, "Strip." Over my head was this huge massive hook, which was used to hoist bales of hay from one side of the barn to the other. It looked as big as I was and for some reason I could not take my eyes off of it. She tied my hands together and then wrapped the rope over the hook and I felt my body being lifted from the ground, stopping only to where my toes barely touched the ground.

I remember the weight of my body made it difficult for me to get a full chest of air. I had noticed lately that as I got older, the weight of being strung up was getting harder to bear. This added a whole new dimension to the torture itself because when your body is rigid with fear, it makes the beating feel worse. She began striking me from the front and rotated slowly around my body, I suppose, to mark every centimeter of my skin. She used what I thought was a bamboo stick with three-quarters of the stick cut into strips. When she used it on my body, it felt soft like spaghetti and then stung within seconds of the lash. I do not remember what happened after the first few seconds of that. The next thing I remembered was waking up in my bed. I thought it was late evening, but it was actually early morning because the rooster was going nuts and Betsy our cow was mooing over her uncomfortable situation.

I remember I had to urinate badly so I tried to get out of bed. When I started to move, I was immediately struck by searing blinding pain. The bed felt wet and when I lifted my head to see why I was wet, all I saw was bright red. I thought my period had come and I immediately worried about my mother flying into a rage if she saw that. I had to clean it up fast, but moving was unbearably hard. Thinking about my mother finding this mess forced me to find what little ounce of willpower I had to move. Once I got myself out of bed, I had to hold on to anything I could reach, the wall, a table or chair, anything to stand upright and get myself to the bathroom, which was just off my bedroom across the hall.

I had a massive headache on top of everything else and I felt nauseated. All my energy was fixated upon getting this mess cleaned up before my mother woke up. The next thing I remember, I was crawling or

lifting myself off the floor to scoot myself into the bathroom, pulling myself up on to the toilet. It was then I realized that my dress, which buttoned up the front, was buttoned askew and I had nothing else on underneath.

I do not know how I managed it, but the moment I tried to pee, I had to stop mid stream because it hurt so bad –so much that it made me cry. I saw myself in the mirror. It was not me who stared back; my mother had literally cut me to ribbons and in those areas left uncut, it was turning black and blue. Then I looked down and saw that my genitalia did not look like it did before. The pubic hair that had started growing had all but disappeared and it looked like my vagina was gone too. The pee was coming or dripping from the right side of my leg.

The next memory I have is of waking up on the bathroom floor and hearing strange sounds coming from my mother's bedroom. It was then that I realized my father was home, which was strange because usually at that hour, he was already at work. I had to see what the problem was because the sound of my mother's voice was different. Everything in that moment was different; I just knew something was not right. The door to their room was half-open and in the anxiety of that moment, I did not seem to feel pain as much. I was operating on pure adrenaline because something terrible was happening and I had to find out what it was.

My stomach revolted in a double knot when I saw my father packing this small blue duffel bag with his clothes. As he went through each drawer selecting whatever he needed, he slammed each drawer shut. He stormed through the hallway, past my siblings and I who were all awake by this time and becoming aware of what was happening. He went past us again, back to the bedroom to stuff more things in that little bag of his and paper bags he brought from the kitchen. All of us began whimpering and crying and my sister clung to me like a useless doll. With every clutch and movement my sister made, I reeled in agony. It was in that sickening moment I asked the unimaginable. "Please take me with you."

I saw the look on my mother's face, which almost had a half smile. I think she thought he would not dare take me, but suddenly with his back still to me he said, "Go pack your things." In that moment I

knew I had seconds left, like watching an hour glass lose seconds of sand and my father would be gone. I do not know how, but I knew that if I did not move that very second and pack as much as I could into those paper bags he had on the bed, he would have left me behind.

What energy I had left was locked upon getting a few things together to leave. In the bedroom I shared with my sisters, I moved as quickly as I could. I did not know it at the time, but my sister had followed and continued clinging on to me asking me to take her with us. Without looking at her I said, "Sure, we'll take you." When I went to get another bag from my father's bedroom, I asked him, "We can take (sister) too, right?" Again, without looking at me, he said, "I can't take the both of you. It's you or her, you decide." The last few particles of sand was quickly draining to the bottom of that hour glass and with each slam of the drawers or cupboard doors, I knew I had no time left.

Then with annoying clarity, I realized my sister was hanging on to me and my mind returned to God-awful pain. I do not know what made me do it, but I shoved her away from me and she fell to the floor. I grabbed what I could to get out the door. I placed what stuff I had next to my father's pile as he was loading up the car and I returned to grab my turtle bowl to take my pet with me. As I brushed passed my mother, she grabbed my turtle and said, "Where do you think you're going with that?" and in a blink of an eye, she dropped him to the floor and smashed him dead with her right foot.

Without taking my eyes off of her, I backed out of the house to get into the car. Her eyes seared right through me as if daring me to leave. I do not think she really thought I had the nerve to do it. The last memory I have of that moment was hearing the gravel rumble under the tires of the car, carrying me away to freedom, at long last.

After I unburdened myself of that last thought, I realized my therapist and I had been holding hands quite firmly, actually so tightly that my hands felt stiff to move freely. I released my hold of him feeling a little embarrassed. I am sure I was hurting him, squeezing his hands so very hard, but he never let me know it. I was experiencing that same eerie sensation I had when I came out of the meltdown episode. There I was, sitting in that very same chair, in a dizzying crazy state not knowing what to do or say next.

Fall Out

I do not know what therapy protocol called for at this moment, but nothing prepared me for what came next. My therapist noted that our time was up and then he grabbed his appointment book and proceeded to make a date for the next session. I could not believe it. I was thunderstruck, bewildered, hurt and angry all at the same time. I felt the heated embarrassment of feeling rushed out the door. I might have told him that I was meeting with the rabbi right after, but I do not recall telling him that. And if so, maybe he assumed that I would be all right going right into my rabbi's care. I do not know. All I know is that I was crushed immeasurably by the insensitivity of it all. I mean I literally spilled my guts out about something absolutely horrific and next it's –wham, bam, thank you ma'am!

I got into my car and just sat there. I was too distraught and feeling too out-of-control to drive. I called the rabbi's office to ask that he meet me at my therapist's parking lot. As was always his pattern, he was going to be late. Through some screw up with office staff however, it turned out later, he was not even aware of my need of him at that moment. I went inside to phone the temple staff, hysterically upset and all they could say was that they were trying to reach him. I went back out to my car and just broke down and cried. I could not stop. Where the hell was the rabbi, and why did he (therapist) just dump me like this?

I felt let down by everyone. I thought I could never forgive either of them. Here was a self-fulfilling prophecy coming home to roost all over again. This was the story of my life growing up. When have I ever been not let down? The reaffirmation of all those hidden belief systems or messages you grow up with. "You're getting what you deserve" "What did you expect?" "It always happens this way." "Nobody cares or gives a damn."

Before long, the cantor, assistant to the rabbi showed up knocking upon my car window. Unknown to me at the time, word had finally reached the rabbi who was racing home from the airport to get to me. I was inconsolable and talked like a petulant child bemoaning the events of the day and my disappointment with my therapist and rabbi. Two hours later, while still in the parking lot, the rabbi came careening up the driveway (they told me later) without even putting the car in park, and ran to join me in my car.

We talked for almost two hours. By the end of that time, I was so wrung out I could not maintain my anger with him. I never can stay angry at anyone for very long anyway. We ended up apologizing to each other and laughing at the same time over my incredible timing and his lack of same. I did not know how to feel about my therapist. The rabbi followed me home to make sure I got home all right and I went straight to bed.

All afternoon my children were worried sick because they did not know what had happened to me. Fortunately, my son remembered that I was seeing the rabbi so when he called four hours after my therapy session, the family was now up to speed on what was going on. He helped me upstairs to my bedroom, got me out of my street clothes and into bed. His father arrived home from work soon after. It was all finally coming undone. Everything I kept locked up and buried for so many years was finally seeing the light of day.

Nine days later I emailed the following to my therapist:

Last night (or early this morning) I dreamt about the trip to Oregon. I was very, very cold, and I remembered (or experienced in my dream; I don't know what's up or down anymore) feeling very ill. And it was very still and quiet, except for the rumbling of the car's engine. My father just stared ahead, fixated upon getting there I suppose, but at the time I had no idea where we were going. All I know is that it was a very long trip and very strange. Not comforting at all to be away from the farm and her.

What is surprising to me is remembering that he didn't cover me up with a blanket or even put a coat on me. I was so very cold, and my head and neck hurt. My underwear was soiled (I remember

the pads were soaked through) and I worried about getting the stains off the car seat. I wanted to lie down, but the car was so full of stuff (mine and his) that I couldn't even lie down, except lean against the door and arm rest. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remembered was my father carrying me in and my grandmother scooping me up in a blanket and taking me to what was to be my bedroom for the next three years on the top bunk bed, and the room stayed very dark. I remember staying in bed in the dark for a very long time -I mean, days and days went by and my grandmother kept talking to me in this hushed soothing voice and putting this awful smelling stuff on my body three or four times a day.

It was a miracle of peace I had never experienced before in my life, but I remember I slept and slept. I think, during that time, I fell in love with my grandmother in an entirely new way. I mean, I always adored her, but somehow my feelings for her grew even more long and deep. You would think this would be a happy memory, but for some reason, I feel so terribly sad or let down in some way, and I can't stop crying about it.

I don't like the way I'm feeling about all of this; I just want this all to end...

In session we discussed the likelihood that it was probably my father who found me in the barn, dressed me and carried me to bed. We further surmised that his finding me in this condition prompted his decision to leave the following morning.

A few weeks later, I emailed the following excerpt:

...the strangest thing was this dream I woke myself up from. I was an adult in some office like a bank, and suddenly I was all trussed up, facing a wall and being tortured. My arms ached so bad --stretched taut so I couldn't move and the pain was excruciating, and more than that, I was in such fear and feeling sick inside that somehow THAT seemed more terrible than the pain. I kept telling myself, "I can stand this; it will be over soon," but I just couldn't anymore. All I wanted to do was die --I wished for death, prayed for it. I just wanted to get away. Next thing I know, faceless people

are standing around and no one is doing anything and I thought, "Oh my God, they're all watching me; why don't they cut me down?"

Then hands, many hands were taking me down to the floor and still, there was no one I recognized; I didn't like being handled like that. All I know is, I was gripped in fear again and then I started screaming your name and then you were sitting beside me while I was in a bed or something and I startled myself awake.

In the couple of hours I've been awake (husband) is sleeping dead away and I want very much to wake him, but I don't want to disturb what looks like a sound sleep for him. I've been watching him as he sleeps and wondered what he dreams about? Why didn't I call out his name? He's my soul mate and the universe to me. Sometimes it scares me how much I love him. You know, it must have been the movie we saw last night on video. I got this from the Temple library, of all places, and it's called "The Quarrel" about two men who were great friends as boys in a yeshiva; one left to join the world, and the other chose to stay enveloped in the "word of God" to hide from the world. They meet by accident, each thinking the other perished in the camps; both lost families including wives and children in the Holocaust. Both have guilt about the choices they made and how it affected the outcome of those they loved, who lived and who ultimately died in the camps. Anyway, as they described each other's pain (actually shouting at each other --they do that a lot in the movie, sometimes very hysterically funny) it resonated for me. I felt exactly as they did.

The chance meeting, like that of seeing my sister, was nearly the same. It was bizarre how similar the reaction was. How the memories came pouring out. I kept saying, "yes, that's exactly how I felt, or feel" --guess you could say it was a powerful movie. I wondered how as a child I withstood all of that and survived when as an adult, I can barely withstand remembering. I'd like nothing better than to close the door on all of this, but I'm in too deep to back out. I don't want to feel dependent upon anyone including (husband) and you and yet I do, and I hate it...

My therapist offered the following response:

Dreams are funny in a way. The past and the present seem to merge. Pieces from different parts of our inner worlds come together in strange ways. But they always tell us where we are in our journey through life. This was an important dream. Let's try to figure it out.

March '97

Dreaming Awake

For the next few months all my sensibilities were wide open and I felt defenseless and susceptible to everything. I would be shopping and a lost memory would come to me, clear as day as if it had just happened the day before. Sometimes I would be in the middle of the mall somewhere and suddenly become conscious of the fact that I had been standing in one spot for a very long time. I remember I went to a huge hardware store once to buy some screws. I found myself looking at a hook similar to the one in that barn, and starting to feel as though I was dissociating again. I left the cart with various odds and ends of things I intended to purchase right where I stopped, and got out of the store as fast as I could.

At times it was even a risk to drive any great distance. Something new would come to me and the next thing I knew, I was way past my exit in the middle of nowhere and had to turn around. I wish I had a nickel for every time I did that and every extra mile I put on my car all during these intensive sessions. I remarked earlier that my therapist gave me suggestions of books to read. Sometimes I went beyond his influence and read other books I thought pertinent to my case and ended up greasing up more memories I had no clue were in me.

Added to all these new revelations, I experienced an epiphany of sorts about how I survived as a child in the following excerpted email I sent:

I think I told you I could never stand the sound of my mother's voice. I realized that while she did these things to me, I really had learned somehow to shut out her voice and the pain. I suddenly flashed upon remembering myself as a child standing outside myself watching what was happening to that person's body who was me... I heard my mother's voice...she said things to me, over and over again, "When I'm through, you know what you have to do," and I remember she made me say I enjoyed it, that I must thank her and

kiss her after every torture, and she made me count each strike, and if I forgot, she made me start all over again...

All during this time too I felt unfit for human contact. Months went by before I realized that I had no sexual desire whatsoever. That simply was not us, my husband and I, or me I should say. At that time, we had been together for nearly twenty-seven years. Passion is a big deal with us and had been every single day of our married life until I entered therapy. I could not explain it. I was lifeless inside and out. I began talking about it with my therapist and he thought the Prozac was the culprit, but I knew differently. I simply could not allow it. We tried different positions, i.e. other than the missionary position, doing it in the shower and things like that, and that seemed to be sufficient, for my husband at least. But I was wooden inside. For the first time in our married life, I was false in our relationship. I let him think I was part of the love-making. I was dying little by little inside and I began to fear that something would eventually tear our relationship apart. Where was this all leading up to, and when would it end?

Then finally, I let my therapist in on something, which had been bothering me for a very long time. It was too humiliating for me to handle in person with him; I felt it was sick and twisted so I used the cover of email to tell him:

I think I've discovered something about my dysfunction. Last night, I had missed (husband) terribly and so had he (missed me), so the obvious happened between us, but still, while we were in the dark, he was above me, and for a few minutes, before penetration, I think I was okay. Then something overcame me and I couldn't do it -- allow it, is the word, and I felt something that hurt. When I reacted, (husband) disengaged and as smoothly as I could, I rearranged myself in a way so he could continue.

When it was over, the floodgates opened and I couldn't stop crying. I ruined our love-making AGAIN; I felt I couldn't or wasn't being a WIFE to him, or an equal partner, so-to-speak, and I felt nauseated with fear. He was absolutely great, as always, but the litany of my apologies, and his "don't worry about it," is making me crazy that something, eventually, will pull us apart. (I can just see you shaking your head, I mean, that this is an issue with me

still, but it is.) You notice don't you (I just read through what I've written so far) that I'm beginning my fourth paragraph, and I still haven't gotten to the POINT yet? This is so incredibly hard...here goes...

The reading materials you've suggested has been great, much appreciated, gratifying even, yet painful. It has also made me think long and hard about some things about myself. (By the way, please don't feel that you've overloaded me with reading I could not handle -I'm grateful really, because it has been a kind of "extended" therapy, beyond what we do weekly.) Anyway, something came to me awhile ago --it is so disgusting and humiliating that all it does is make me scared and cry. Somewhere, down deep inside, I know I just can't talk to you face to face about it. So I'm using the cover of email to tell you --see, I'm not as brave, after all, as you might think!

Early in my therapy, we talked briefly about fantasies humans' share and you mentioned something about sadomasochism as being something of a "turn on" and natural. At the time, I kind of breathed a sigh of relief because I didn't quite believe it myself even though during our married life, I didn't feel bothered, as I am now, about the subject. I guess I convinced myself it was natural, albeit reservedly so. I even allowed myself to enjoy it for much of the time. And, to be honest, to achieve multiple orgasm, which once was easy for me (now difficult if not impossible), I would think of books I've read or movies I've seen where S&M was harmless foreplay; all in all, I was a happy sexual being. Now that's all changed, for me, that is.

I'm just going to blurt this out....when I was a child, I now recall instances where I was achieving orgasms at a very young age, although at the time, I didn't know what it was. I just knew it felt good. It occurred at times (I recall now) when it was totally inappropriate --this feeling of pleasure because what I was experiencing or living through. This is pretty sick and twisted stuff, so bear with me.... It would occur when my mother was hurting me; it would occur when I was made to participate in

some horrendous terror upon my siblings; and, it would occur when I read or saw a movie I wasn't necessarily prepared for.

Now, when I see, read or think about anything remotely falling into the S&M category, I feel very ill. I don't experience it the way I used to before. I never realized, or consciously acknowledged that every time (husband) was making love to me, i.e., during my entire married life, my eyes were closed in the dark while I played old tapes in my head (of what I read, saw or experienced). Not the orgasms I experienced as a child, of course—that's a recent discovery. But what I'm thinking, if not realizing intuitively, is that THIS is all part and parcel to my dysfunction.

I feel scared and mortified at the same time. Overall, I'm feeling pretty F___ed up. I don't like myself very much and I'm too afraid to talk about it. Does any of this make sense?

I purchased a book called “When You're Ready: A Woman's Healing from Physical & Sexual Abuse by Her Mother,” by K. Evert. I had been reading a series of books by renowned therapist Eliana Gil, Ph.D., who has treated adult survivors of childhood abuse when I came upon this book in a listing elsewhere of suggested reading.

The therapy this woman went through (not by Gil) was unconventional New Age “touchy feely” stuff and I suspect, would not have been countenanced in the credible world of psychotherapy. The incidents described by the victim however, resonated for me in many ways. And, it was in the middle of reading this book that I recaptured a powerful experience I completely forgot about or did not remember and caused me no end of torment and agitation until I talked about it with my therapist. That was the day I nearly trashed his office.

For the first time ever in therapy, I remember walking into his office that day feeling I was unable to remain seated for any great length of time. I paced his office like a caged animal. I was wild and out of control—the wild girl-child was out, in your face and on the prowl for a reckoning. Predominant in my head and in my every day life was this five and seven year old child, who was me. All it took was one image—a douche bag, mentioned in the book that I was reading and now all too real pictures in my head when I was a little girl.

I remember it exactly, a deep red chartreuse color, hanging in the bathroom next to the shower curtain. I can describe the bathroom right down to the color of the tile; it was the same bathtub/shower she tried to drown me in. And I remember feeling extreme cold in my extremities, but nothing else. I do not think anything happened; I just do not remember. Maybe I was too young, but I recall having a dreaded fear of that douche bag every time I bathed. I never took my eyes off of it while I was in the tub, and I always tried to hide it behind the curtain while no one was using the bathroom. I remember being afraid my mother would see it particularly if she were in a rage. That was another coping strategy I utilized –placing things out of her sight so that she would not think of it or use it.

During that particular session and really for the first time I think, I wished my mother dead. If I could have fulfilled my fantasy that day, I would have gladly killed her. I just wanted her dead, buried in the ground, deep and forgotten. No amount of solace or comfort could wrestle me out of that wild girl-child state. I kicked the furniture, swept items off a table, and paced around the office, yelling in an utter rage until my throat was raw. Then I heard clapping. I looked toward the clapping where my therapist was sitting, and he was smiling with a Cheshire grin, extremely delighted about what had just happened. In fact, he was positively giddy. I was immediately ashamed and mortified, apologizing profusely about his office. He said, “Don’t worry about it; it’s child-proof.”

Later that week, I drew for the first time, two images I kept seeing in my head. One of myself as a four or five year old and another as a seven year old. It was as though these two staked out an area of my consciousness and refused to budge. In the next session, I gave photocopies of my drawings to my therapist and we talked about what these girls were thinking. I said the younger girl is scared and she looks disheveled, unkempt. The other is watching all the time, vigilant, wondering what my mother will do next. He also asked if I was doing any writing, which at that point I still resisted doing. The only writing I did was through email, when I really had to get something off my chest. He wanted me to do more reflective writing, journal keeping or write in a diary.

To satisfy him though, I decided to give him some writings I did in college and one missive in particular, which had to do with the death of my first-born son. He was the issue of an ill-fated and short-lived marriage when I was eighteen. This was chapter two of my life, which I effectively scuttled and buried before I met my current husband.

June '97





Back to the Present

My son died when he was three and when that happened, I ended up in a state mental hospital for a ninety day stay when I seriously tried to suicide. It was a near fatal attempt, which I was not supposed to survive, but the joke was on me. When I got out, I completely remade and educated myself and got a college degree in comparative literature. I stopped singing for ten years. I realized I could not bring myself to sing a solitary note; it just was not in me. I had nothing to do with my former life and cut off all contact with anyone who knew anything remotely linking me to my past. Any semblance of it was either buried or forgotten. I moved far away. In the meantime, I had met my current husband and started a new family. I decided for my own sanity, I would never think about the past again. It was, after all, ancient history –it was not my story anymore, i.e. until I stupidly gave my therapist my writings and we began discussing my dead son.

I mentioned earlier that there is this irksome propensity in therapists to always seek the hidden meaning in words, actions or images. My therapist was convinced there was a reason I gave him the writing about my son's death and God knows I have boxes of written work from my days in college. So of all the musings I had to draw from, why did I choose that one? Well, I am an enigma even unto myself. I have no idea why and it was a mistake, which I paid dearly for.

In the sessions that followed, he wanted me to talk about my dead son and not surprisingly, I became ill again. I felt it come on like a bad cold and for some reason I did not marshal the resources I already had to prevent it. After I survived my suicide attempt those many years ago, I literally decided to live another life. Many times throughout my therapy I mentioned how false I felt, that I was truly a fraud. And of course, it was so true. I never allowed myself to be me after my son died. A part of me now is still afraid to let the façade go and just be me.

Camouflage after all is a woman's weapon, is it not? But camouflage in therapy is a useless tool. I began to realize, for the first time, that I never allowed myself to really grieve in whole or in part about my son. Actually, that was something my therapist posited, so now in effect I was forced to think about him and that subsequently caused me to drift into a severe depression and the start of cutting myself.

Just before this time, my therapist and I were honing in on the concept of my therapy coming to a conclusion in a month or so. I had been in therapy for over a year and I felt better about myself. I told my therapist that I made a decision about my grandmother, which seemed to be a resolution of some sort.

I decided not to visit my grandmother's grave. I figured out that I have no need see her now, or ever, or at least for the time being. This is the tenth anniversary of her death. I'm not angry at her, I know she loved me, but I don't need her anymore in the way I thought I needed her.

Then, everything seemed to come apart when we started dealing with the death of my son and suddenly, thoughts of ending therapy seemed premature. The following email recounts the nightmares I began having as well:

Something very scary happened to me last night or early this morning, I don't know or remember which, but all day has been a struggle to stay focused and present. In fact, since I saw you last, it has been a constant battle. It's very seductive, almost like being drugged. I'll feel myself slipping or being sucked in and I have to force myself to focus on something and the way it works for me, particularly when I am alone, is to constantly remind myself to pay attention to this feeling when it comes over me and my hearing begins to get hollow. I don't know if I'm describing this right.

During this period of my life we've been discussing these past two sessions, I used to have two very distinct recurrent nightmares. One having to do with burying a baby (the implication being, I killed it or something) and I bury it under a fireplace and do everything I can to prevent people knowing about it. Variations of this dream have occurred many times, but not in the last twenty years or so.

Last night, I had the second. This one was always more terrifying to me and for the first time, that I can recall, I hurt myself without knowing what I was doing. I think I woke from the dream, but I think I was still in it, because I didn't know where I was. My bed was moving and I thought I was being chased again. I had cottonmouth and I was very scared. I decided to give up and admit I killed my husband, years ago, and had buried him under the outhouse. When I stood still and let the house crush me, the last thing I saw was blood on my arm. His demonic spirit or whatever kept pulsating through walls, doors and flooring. My brother kept trying to catch me with evidence that I had killed him, and all these years long past, had been a lie. My grandmother was sleeping in one of the bedrooms and as I closed the windows in her room, it started squeezing the room smaller and smaller. People are in the house, that I don't recognize, but I know they can't know the truth either. I keep making up stories to explain why things are happening and I am afraid they don't believe me. I can see it in my brother's eyes and I think he's enjoying it. There's this person I'm married to, but he doesn't know about the husband I buried. It's not (current husband), but it's someone I know I care about and I don't want him to know it's after me. Everything I do or say, conspire to make this evil reveal himself to everyone I care about.

I don't know what's happening to me, but I'm not in control. Today, for the first time, I was scared to be alone in the house... I'm staying away from my cutting tools or work till we talk.

I swear to God, I did NOT do this on purpose...

This was a very scary episode because I woke up standing in my office with one of my cutting tools in my right hand, cutting up my left arm. Blood was all over my desk and I could not remember getting out of bed at all and doing any of this. It did not even hurt until I started cleaning up. My husband was fast asleep and I was in a panic to clean everything up before he woke. I hid my bandaged arm by changing into a pajama set and I got back into bed. In the morning when he kissed me in bed before leaving for work, I pretended nothing was wrong. Of course had he known, he would not have gone to work that

day, and I could not stand being the source of another day's worry for him.

In the weeks that followed, I spent a lot of time being frightened and angry with myself all at the same time. Finally, I gave myself over to these hard feelings. I decided that it happened and there was nothing I could do to change it. I basically told my therapist I was laying it to rest; there was nothing else to do. And crazy as it might sound, what I did twenty plus years ago, i.e. forgetting, was really the only thing I could do to survive emotionally. I may very well have gone insane otherwise. Does it matter my children knew nothing of this? What would they think of their mother now?

In a way, it was a very simple decision. I could allow this to destroy my life, my kids, and my husband, or I can store it away with all the other bittersweet mistakes of the past, and move on. I decided I could do this because I do have a family; I am not alone, and I am loved. I used to tell people that God sent me my husband as an apology for the rotten childhood He gave me. I believe that still. For honor, if for nothing else, I could do no less. However, my therapist had his teeth around a bone and he did not want to let it go. "This is important," he said. So I wrote in my journal about my twenty-something life, the deep end of my life; we both dived in.

May, June '97

Twenty-something

When I was sixteen my father had remarried for the third time and arranged for me to live in an apartment next door to him and his new bride, wife number three. I never understood why he decided to be a “father” to me at this time of my life. I was finishing my last year of high school in the South San Francisco area when my grandparents and I finally repatriated to California from Oregon. Haight-Ashbury and the hippie scene were in its heyday, and I was very much a part of that --the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore-West, Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, the Beatles, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsburg --who could forget “Howl”?

When I graduated he took me into San Francisco, rented a room for me in a cheap hotel, gave me fifty dollars and said good luck. In the nine months he took responsibility for me, I ate dinner with him and his wife once. We never interacted --made one wonder why he even bothered. I did try to get his attention once, though.

His wife had to drive me to school every morning and she clearly resented it. Needless to say, we did not get along. I was perennially depressed in those days so it could have been anything that set me off. I cannot even remember what instigated it, but I tried to kill myself by slashing my wrists with a Gillette blade. I did a pretty good job of it too and it scared the shit out of my father.

All the while I was in the emergency room getting stitched up; he was cursing and swearing, calling me a “stupid bitch.” And if that was not enough, the resident stitching me up decided since I did this to myself that I probably did not need anything for pain. I remember his exact words, “This shouldn’t hurt, right?” All I got for my effort were seven stitches and the scars to prove it.

Well, as I said, my sojourn with my father was short-lived and bittersweet and I was on my own in The City. Within months, I began dating and was working in a diamond manufacturing company on Post Street. I met a man who was an American Sicilian; I was immediately smitten. Within months of dating him I became pregnant and no one was more surprised than I when he asked me to marry him. Within weeks of our marriage however, I found out that I was in a new prison. Within a year, the marriage was in the trash heap.

I remember this entire period of my life as having been totally out of control and pretty much feeling crazy all the time. I found myself in a relationship that was not only physically abusive, but sexually as well. In therapy I now realize I had turned to a relationship I was familiar with, which was to marry my mother, so-to-speak, only the opposite gender. I did not know that I had any rights in and out of the marriage bed. I was raped and sodomized and made to perform in ways sexually that have affected love-making for me to this very day. Being pregnant at the time did not seem to matter either. I brought my son into an uncaring world, who later died outside my care due to the careless way I handled my life up to that point.

I do not blame my ex-husband or anyone else but myself. I was not fit for human companionship, not even to mother an alley cat, much less my own son. Because in addition to having the misfortune of having me as his mother, my son was born with a congenital defect no one caught until he was nearly three years old. He was a sickly child, developmentally delayed and cried incessantly. Doctors kept telling me he was fine, but he wasn't. No one believed me when I said, "He is not fine."

I wish I had been smarter –as they say, 'If wishes were horses....' It is hard to make smart decisions about your life when you operate in a vacuum and you're coping at the emotional development level of a nine or ten year old. I had no one to turn to, no one to help me; I had completely screwed up everything in my life. And incredible as it might seem, it actually went from bad to worse, when I made the biggest mistake of my life that I still have not recovered from to this day.

We had left the city and moved to Sonoma, back to the countryside I left behind at twelve years of age. It was not my idea. I suppose it was no coincidence either that my mother lived just a few miles away. My son was about twenty months old or so. It was there that my husband decided to abandon us so we were left alone with no job, no money and we ended up on welfare and food stamps.

Siblings started coming around, telling me that my mother was a changed person. She was not the same woman I knew as a child, or so I was made to believe. This is where, I suppose the irresponsible child in me operated in all of my decision-making, i.e. the one still wishing, hoping and longing for a loving mother. I reconnected with her in Napa County and for a few months, I allowed myself to be lulled into a false sense of security about her. Interestingly enough and unknown to me at the time, she was in contact with my ex-husband, who made himself a frequent guest in her home. While he visited with our son at our apartment, he participated in a dalliance with one of my younger sisters who still lived at home with my mother (I later found out) all the while, in collusion with my mother, trying to lure me back into a marriage I knew in my heart was over.

One day, my son's persistent crying was driving me crazy; I completely lost it and slapped my son across the face. His lip got cut from one of his teeth, so a little blood trickled. I did not know it at the time, but he probably was in great pain and suffered tremendously. He simply could not or would not stop crying, and I was at my wit's end.

There is no excuse for what I did. I was a monster that day. I just came unglued. I called my ex-husband to come over and take my son out of the apartment for awhile. While he was with our son, I went outside to cool off. The next thing I knew, a patrol car drove up to the apartment. The patrolmen went inside and came out with my son, apparently to take him away. Naturally, I became even more hysterical. His partner pushed me to the ground and they drove off with my son. I did not know it at the time, but it would be the last time I would ever see my son alive.

Life for me then became a full feature length theatre of the absurd. I learned that my ex-husband had come over that day not at my behest, but to wait for the police, whom he had called at my mother's urging.

My son was taken into protective custody. Suddenly, I was inundated with social workers, doctors and what not coming out of the woodwork telling me that he was a very sick boy. All during the months of his early development, when I took him to all of his doctor appointments, for his shots and notes about his development, no one listened to me about my concerns. No one acknowledged the fact that his head was slightly larger than normal, that he cried incessantly, and that he was not talking or crawling well enough for his age. I always believed that because I was a welfare mother, nothing I said was taken seriously. Imagine then my shock when it was discovered he was congenitally hydrocephalic.

He was placed in a lovely home in foster care, from what they told me, but for some reason I was not allowed to see him because they told me, he had to have surgery to put a shunt into his scalp. Any information I could get about his condition came through my caseworker, who was a very unpleasant man to start with. No amount of cajoling or pleas on my part could persuade him that it was safe for my son and I to be together. I did not own a car to get around. Finally, a hearing was arranged to determine my son's custody status and it was during this hearing that I finally understood what stood in the way of my ever seeing my son.

There was on hand, fully signed and notarized, a deposition from my mother attesting to outrageous child sexual abuse perpetrated by my father toward me, that my father was also a homosexual and that due to the constant abuse by my father, I was in effect an unfit mother.

As I sat reading the document with my court appointed attorney, we both experienced the astounding revelation that my mother had cleverly contrived to make it sound as though I was really nuts or mentally disturbed. Taken all together, based on what she said, I would not let me near my son either.

I lost custody of my son that day, and as the weeks went by my life continued to spin out of control. I was beyond devastation. I was annihilated, the walking dead. But God or whoever was not finished with me yet. Within weeks of his third birthday, my son passed away. I suppose I was fortunate to have heard anything at all about my boy. I received a phone call from my caseworker informing me of his death,

and that the funeral had already taken place. To this day, I have no idea where he is buried.

I decided at that moment that I did not want to live anymore. I had become the mother I did not want to be. The obscene irony of my mother's role in losing my son was more than I could bear. It was the perfect Greek tragedy, played out to its final conclusion, and I wanted no part of it.

I planned it so carefully because I had no intention of ever being found. I took the entire bottle of a newly filled prescription of medication I was taking for muscle strain called Talwin and walked into a deep wooded area where, I was sure, absolutely no one traversed. The next thing I knew, I woke up into a world I had every intention of leaving. I had been in intensive care, in a coma for twelve days after suffering violent seizures. How the hell did I get found? No one ever explained that to me; Jesus, I cannot do anything right! My first reaction was one of extreme anger and then ultimately, profound relief. Somewhere between being moved to the psyche ward and a mandatory ninety-day stay at a state mental hospital, I resolved that I would never let anything or anyone destroy me like that again.

No amount of reason could convince me that I was not ultimately responsible for my son's death. I feel that hammer of guilt buried in my heart still, to this day. When I gave my therapist my writings about his death, we talked about it, but nothing would ever be resolved about it. Ultimately he told me, "Some things you have to learn to live with." But I knew better then as I do now. There are some things you cannot live with, period.

July '97

Wild Girl-Child

The twenty-something diversion was put aside for the moment. After I drew those pictures of myself as five and seven, the idea of a wild girl-child was an apt description of the chaos going on in my head. I seemed to be stuck in a time frame that involved the old San Francisco Victorian. I went back to see that old house when I was on my own in The City and marveled at how unimposing it was.

As a child it was huge, dark and cavernous inside. When you entered the front door you came into a huge drawing or reception area. It probably was a grand house at one time with servants and a butler. The kitchen was very large. Several people could work in that kitchen without running into each other. It had large drawers that folded out to hold sacks of rice or dry grain goods. Mice used to get into the foodstuff constantly and I remember my father using the end of a broomstick to chase them down.

When I see myself in each room of the house, I notice how dark everything is. It did not mean anything to us then, but we were never allowed to open up the curtains to let sunlight in. I know we had to open them up when my father was home on weekends, but during the day the house always remained dark.

When we moved to the San Francisco sunset district we lived in one of those 'ticky tacky houses that all looked the same' and instead of curtains, we had venetian blinds. They too were always shut tight against the light. The one exception however, was the farm where nothing was on the windows, but that did not matter because we were situated in the middle of nowhere. Who is going to see what? The Victorian remained the scariest place of all. My therapist pointed out that for any child in a house like that, it would have been scary whether I had a crazy mother or not and I must admit that is probably true.

Regardless, a lot of sorrow haunts that house. Most of it surrounds my sister who was battered from the moment she came into the world. She, more than any other sibling, was the incendiary that seemed to always set my mother off. Absolutely nothing prevented my mother from taking her by the arm, lifting her up to fling her against the wall, or throw her down the small flight of stairs. The beatings were merciless and I was powerless to stop it. I used to think that the constant battering contributed to my sister's eye problem. It certainly could not have helped.

A day I will never forget is the time when my sister was about six months old; I do not think she was even crawling yet. My mother put her in the large foldout drawer in the kitchen where we had just cleared out a batch of mice. She forbade me to take my sister out of that drawer while all the while she screamed her head off. My imagination ran wild thinking that little mice would be crawling all over my sister. We did not take her out until she stopped crying and from what I recall of that incident, it was a long tortuous afternoon before that happened.

In my waking dreams I would see images of myself as four or five years old working at something or some task my mother assigned me to. I remember I never played because I was not allowed to. I remember my grandmother once gave me a doll that walked when you wound her up with a key. I so loved that doll because it had red hair and a Scottish plaid outfit. I know I played with it the day my grandmother gave it to me. After that, the doll disappeared. One birthday I got a blue bicycle with training wheels from my grandmother that I never learned to ride on. It disappeared too and to this day, I cannot ride a bicycle, but I plan to remedy that as soon as I am done with therapy.

Until we moved to the farm, I never made a connection as to why we did not have pets in the house. I never questioned it. But now it resonates when I recall an incident when my father brought home this little beagle puppy. It was my dog, or at least I made him mine in my heart. I fed him and worked to house train him.

One day the entire family returned from an outing and I ran to the basement to get the dog and I found him hanging with a rope or his leash around his neck from the door knob. His feet barely touched the ground. His neck was rubbed raw where the skin was torn away,

I imagine, from his struggle with death. I remember screaming and screaming. I wet my pants when I saw my mother's face and I knew in that instant that she had killed him; I just knew.

My father took him down and my mother said he must have wrapped the rope or leash around his neck running around in circles. From that day on, I knew she would always kill anything I loved or destroy anything important to me like she did to my turtle.

I had a fifth grade teacher whom I adored and I think she loved me too. She gave me candy and snacks. We did not talk about it, but I think she knew I was hungry. She wrote a novel called *Norah and the Cable Car*, which she gave me a copy of and she inscribed it to me in Gaelic "M'kushlah m'kree." It means *my darling, my dear* and I knew she meant every word of it. It was through her I derived my love of books. That book too, I watched my mother destroy. I searched always for that book until recently a book hunting friend found a copy. It was a sweet gesture and I was touched he cared enough to look for it and present it to me, knowing how important it was to me. Now I have my own copy again.

When I was not being beaten or worked to death, I watched. I watched my mother's face, looking endlessly for signs or some clue as to what was coming next. I learned to anticipate her, to try to think of what was going on in her head, always calculating on how to keep the casualties to a bare minimum.

She was clever, our mother, almost metaphysical in her ability to read our minds. I used to think she had eyes in the back of her head. Sometimes it seemed she would appear out of thin air, without warning. I lived every moment of my childhood in a hyper-vigilant state even when I slept. She was positively mythic.

I remember being in a constant panic to hide my sister away from our mother's wrath, which seemed limitless. With every corner I turned or room I entered, I never knew what was coming down on my head or my sister's. For years, after my escape from her, it used to annoy my grandfather when I ducked if a shadow passed my peripheral vision, like a war veteran ducking when a loud noise goes off.

In the picture I drew of me as a five-year-old I have wide eyes and my hair needs combing. My therapist asked me what she was thinking and all I could tell him was that I watch my mother's reaction to things and I am very scared. I know I do not play and I do not have a favorite toy.

As a seven-year-old, I drew her as pensive and not happy because she feels very responsible for everyone and everything. I remember having to stand on a chair to cook and wash dishes. It took me forever to fold the cloth diapers because my mother preferred using the long rectangle ones, which needed to be double-paneled when folded. There were endless stacks and stacks, washed and folded each and every day.

I cannot remember a time when my mother was not pregnant. When a new baby was born, I had to sleep on an army cot next to the crib to feed the baby its bottle every four hours. In addition to the diapers, I made formula every day out of PET can milk and white corn syrup. Bottles and nipples had to be sterilized and I stood on a chair at the stove for that too.

One terror I cannot shake is the feeling that a baby died. I can't remember if it was a boy or a girl, but one day I woke to find the baby in the crib gone. Then my cot was folded up and there was no baby to worry about all of a sudden. I do not know what happened, but sometimes I have nightmares that I killed that baby or somehow I am responsible for why it disappeared.

I hated my mother's pregnancies because as my siblings and I were virtual slaves around the house, it was more so when she became heavy with child. It was during this time too when she became very creative in devising tortures, which would not require a lot of exertion on her part.

This one episode I recall was at the house in the San Francisco sunset district. She made my sister and I kneel on a bunch of rice, which she carefully placed on the floor of the kitchen and then made us extend our arms straight up and out to the sides, palms up. In our hands she placed two condensed Reader's Digest books, thick heavy books in each hand. She then sat in a chair behind us and whipped us with the ends of an extension chord or a belt, if our arms lowered at any time. We had to hold them up for an hour. When I think of this, I cannot

help thinking with a twisted sick sense of humor that she could have put a grain of sand in each hand and the effect would have been the same. Our backs became lacerated flesh before she tired of the activity.

When it came to instruments of torture and lengthening the duration of same, like forcing us to recite the rosary while punishment was meted out, my mother employed extreme ingenuity. She was particularly fond of using the kitchen chairs as a means to constrain us while she beat us with sticks, extension chords, belts and something I can only describe as a bamboo whip.

First we were sent to collect and set up all that she needed to accomplish her task. Then she would say, "Strip!" which meant we had to take off all of our clothes. The ritual of setting up and stripping was always an obscene agony to me. God she was patient! The beating has not even begun yet and already you are feeling hot and cold and nauseated, all at the same time. Added to that memory, I remember the sickening eerie sensation I always felt, as if the world were not real. I floated up in the air a lot and watched what was going on below. It was happening to someone else.

She would make us put our feet through the back opening of the chair, place the trunk of our bodies flat on the seat, tying our hands to the front legs of the chair. What made this so efficacious for her was the fact that our backs and buttocks were totally exposed, yet our feet could lash up against the back of the chair and not harm her in any way as she wailed away. Among the many sins for which I was punished in this manner, the one I most remember was the crime of peeling a potato with a paring knife instead of using the potato peeler.

Nightmares by this time were frequent and disturbing my sleep. Even with sleep medication, I ended up waking up, drenched, out of breath and disoriented. What was happening to me I asked my therapist?

I dreamt that I came home (not my home) to an empty house with doors shut tight/locked except this other room which was not the entrance to the house. I was struck by an instant brisk coldness when I came into the room –in fact, I suddenly became bitterly freezing cold. My dog was rustling on the other side of the door, but I couldn't get to him. I heard (my husband) come home, yet he

managed to come through the front door and unlocked the door to the room I was in.

He asked me what was going on and I told him this room was unlocked, but I couldn't get in through the front door; neither of us could figure out how this room could be open to the elements because there's no entry door from the outside to enter through. We went to our bedroom and went to bed and suddenly the doors to a highboy (we don't own one) began swinging open and closed and then started moving toward us. The whole house, walls ceiling fixtures moved wildly as if wanting to attack us. We tried to turn the lights on, but nothing would turn on. Then our dog suddenly wasn't himself and someone, I don't know who, shot him. He then metamorphosed into some kind of demonic creature and chased us through the house. All of a sudden a strange person began taunting us; can't really describe him except his face had a malicious smile and he was the personification of evil, you could feel it. Suddenly he had (teenage daughter) and all I could see was her perfect pure body, naked and bent over while he sodomized her, and I could not move, I just watched; I couldn't move a muscle. I don't think I felt anything, I was frozen. And then, I woke up

...I feel pretty rattled and don't know what to make of this dream except that it is totally bizarre and now involves (daughter) in a way that is impossible for me to accept. Please write something back to me; I'm a little frightened.

He wrote back immediately:

In spite of how awful the dream experiences are they are not to be taken literally. It is important to learn what they mean. (Daughter) is not (daughter) but some representation of you - and in this case most likely the innocent trusting side of you. What is important about the whole thing is that you are as terrified and frozen now as you were then. The way out is through working the dream symbols till you understand and then unfreeze yourself.

Perhaps at this point - since your reading has been so beneficial - is to start reading about dreams....And, perhaps we should be getting together sooner rather than later...

The wild girl-child was all consuming. I simply could not grow up. I was feeling so small that I wondered how my feet reached the pedals of my car to drive home. I did not feel competent or in control of anything, and I could not think straight. All during this time too I was physically estranged from my husband. I could not bear to be held or touched. I felt angry all the time or maybe the wild girl-child was. By this time too, my husband was showing his anger as well, and in an odd sort of way that was good because he has the proverbial patience of Job. My therapist once told my husband that doing therapy with him alone would take thirty years because he was so affable and accommodating. Thereafter, we started going every other week as a couple for therapy.

December '97

More Work to Do

I seem to be in a different phase of therapy now altogether. In the beginning, I was consumed with that feeling of being that scared little girl, which made me feel crazy and out of control all the time. Much of the time it was hard to stay in the here and now, so-to-speak. A whole year was consumed in reliving old buried memories in the mind and soul of a terrified hurt little girl. Well into my second year, I have the experiences of the past, more or less, under some kind of restraint in that I am more aware that this is now, not then.

I am still retrieving memories, but when I do, I have fleeting moments when I don't stay small and paralyzed with fear or feeling overwhelmed by it. I thought once that was accomplished, however, I would have no further need of therapy. But as weeks and weeks of intense therapy go by, it is becoming clear that I am no where near the finish line.

About fifteen months into therapy I thought in a month or two, this would all be coming to an end; there was light at the end of the tunnel, or so I thought. Besides, I feel it was time and I am not the only one who feels that way. Friends and family are showing signs of being somewhat weary by what appears to them as a malingering breakdown. Presumably bright people tell me, "Get over it, already." Then others would say, "Well, you survived, didn't you?" Maybe it was the tone of condescension or the sense of discounting what I had been through, I do not know, but I am beginning to feel the pressure of having stayed too long in therapy. Yet, I also sense I still have some unfinished business. Besides, my therapist keeps telling me, "Who's on a time clock here, you or them? It will take however long it takes."

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner wrote a best-seller called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and in it he says that "Life has to be lived for something, not against something." Victor E. Frankl, concentration camp survivor and psychiatrist, said much the same thing in *Man's*

Search for Meaning. Now I am reading things which say I may have an under-developed adult ego --I don't know where I read that. I told this to my therapist and he looked at me with a half smile to his face and responded, "Too much reading can be a bad thing sometimes." Anyway, it certainly explains a whole lot why I am not sure of who I am or what I am about. I feel like such a fraud, totally made up --making it up as I go.

In a way you could say I am in my fourth incarnation. The first, of course, was my childhood, then came my twenty-something, then my life with my current family, and now me today. All through my incarnations I devoted my entire existence in not wanting to be like my mother, convincing myself that I was nothing like her, that I would never hurt my children as she did, and so on. I made myself into something else different and new, but I never knew the real me --she is only now barely surfacing. In the utter consummation of forgetting, I never completed the natural process of growing up to be me. It was, as Rabbi Kushner describes, a life lived forcefully against what I knew or learned growing up as a child.

It is becoming clear to me that when I entered therapy, my emotional development age was stunted to that of a child. I really never grew up. I am also learning that I have lived my entire adult life organized around the belief systems I formed as a child along with obsessive compulsive behavior, much of which drove my children nuts.

I was emotional and out of control as a mother and I was compulsive about cleanliness, labels of cans facing forward --that sort of thing. When I think of the energy it took for me to maintain my life in such a chaotic state, doing the things I was trying to undo and appear normal, I just can't believe I was 46 years old before it all came apart in the summer of '96.

I have periods where I feel brand new and that I have something to look forward to. Other times however, I feel now that I am approaching fifty, I have little time left --maybe twenty years or so and I feel angry sometimes that I wasted most of my life feeling disorganized and out of control. How many of us at fifty know all too well how quickly twenty years speeds by? I guess my great contribution to humanity will be that I stopped something trans-generational --at least I hope so.

Parents are supposed to teach you how the world works. Through them you learn what love is and what it means. For example you learn things like, this is how a family operates, and this is how people negotiate or compromise. They are our link to learning how to live our lives not only within the context of community, but within the world as well. My kids are grown now, and as a parent, I think I blew it –well, most of the time.

I think bad and dysfunctional parenting is the ultimate academy or breeding ground for the intolerance and violence we live with. It is the secret dirty little war that is carried out in a holocaust of its own –within the intimate confines of the Family. It is the sequential crucible that sets out to murder innocence, childhood and the human spirit –the inexorable dismantling of human dignity trans-generationally, which cultivates sub-cultures of criminally prone behavior we as a society, good and bad, end up paying dearly for. I would like to think that for my children and children’s children, I have averted calamity for them in that arena. I’m just not so sure.

I think at this juncture, the work I am facing now, beyond that of surviving my childhood is that I have adaptive personality traits or behaviors to overcome –issues dealing with trust and intimacy, feeling safe, relaxing on the compulsive things I do –all previously unknown commodities to me. Additionally, my fear of losing control has bottled up so much rage, yet unexpressed or even acknowledged that it is now the core focus of my on-going therapy.

I probably would have gone ‘happily into that long good night’ ending therapy had it not been for the reoccurrence again, of violent nightmares. They began accelerating during the Christmas holidays and I found I had to re-enter intensive therapy, i.e., going weekly on a regular basis, sometimes twice weekly:

I’m beginning to sense what it’s like for rock stars who collapse on stage. The pace and bone-crushing fatigue of late is nearly destroying me. Just two more weeks of this craziness! But along with this are the resumptive nightmares I have to deal with. This morning I woke up from a violent one in which I was in an utter rage, tearing through the house, destroying things and objects. So-called friends and my grandparents were over for Thanksgiving

dinner and while we were carving up the turkey my grandmother lamented how sad it was I was not there to help them pack and move. In years past, as the only family member in contact with them, it was I who packed and moved their home four times when Gramps took it into his head to move. He was one of those people who thought that a “good move” would make things better. But as you know, whatever is troubling you just come along with you to your new destination.

Anyway, as she was used to using comments like that to make me feel guilty (she was a great pouter), I absolutely exploded. Of course, in her elegant way, she got up from the table and walked off and half the women at the table got up to comfort her. I threw everything onto the floor and I went into the kitchen and started breaking every dish and breakable object I could find. I ranted about how they (my grandparents) stood and watched while we lived in hell with my mother and they did nothing about it. The strangest thing was, the more violent I became, the less people noticed me. In fact I was pretty much ignored. A guy sitting next to my grandfather tried to be the class clown by cheering up my grandfather and I thought to myself, “That’s exactly what my father does!”

Then somehow I was on a motorbike of some sort with (husband) sitting behind me and we were racing through some mountainous valley and that idiot who comforted my grandfather and all the other friends at my dinner table were chasing us up and down narrow roads on bikes of their own. (Me on a motorbike, imagine --I can’t even ride a gasless two-wheeler!) The closer they got to us, the narrower the roads in front of us became and I suddenly veered off to the right and went over a cliff dropping and dropping, and I absolutely was not scared at all. I was glad, in fact I was excited, and then I woke up.

My therapist responded with the following:

This dream seems too important to let it go - Let your mind wander over it, linger at whatever part strikes you, and free associate to the various objects and the metaphors.

Normally the holidays are my busiest season as a classical vocalist. I had found myself booked solid with concerts practically back to back through New Year's eve. I had not planned it that way, but somewhere along the way I had agreed to step in on a few too many emergency replacement gigs along side earlier scheduled ones without paying attention to the collateral damage. Fatigue became my winter coat. My art glass studio was going full bore as well so that along with commitments to my family, my predicament left me little room for myself to deal with any psychodynamic issues and I suppose the nightmares were an indication of that.

But perhaps there is more here than 'meets the eye.' I must admit to a proclivity (knowing or unknowingly) toward enveloping myself in frenetic activity to avoid thinking or dealing with things. Muriel James in *Born to Win*, refers to this behavior as the "Adapted Child [who] may not dare give in to these feelings, especially if goodness is equated with keeping busy." (p. 142) See, I read too much. Anyway, it appears to be my *modus operandi*.

I began to sink into a deep depression again. The rage inside was barely palpable yet impossible to express or even feel. My therapist sensed my scratching the surface on this and opined that it was contributing to my depression, but Oh God, I cannot let it go, or lose control –I am impregnable.

I was rapidly putting on weight and my blood pressure started going through the roof. I told my therapist that I was suddenly aware of the way I look at myself in the mirror, when I am dressing or just out of the shower. It became clear to me that I never, ever, look at myself in any specific way. I cannot bear to look at the scars or remember anything specific to that scaring so I look at myself with my peripheral vision, all the time. In other words, I can see myself putting on my make-up for example, but I do not really see. I have an aversion to seeing details about myself.

Essentially, I do not like what I see and I told him I hate my body. For example, I do not think my genitalia looks normal. The pubic hair never grew back to my memory of how it looked when I was a twelve year old. We discussed my husband's reaction to it, which is to say he

has no reaction to it at all. What do they say, “Love is blind”? May he never recover!

I noted also an inordinate need to be cradled, hugged and or touched, which my husband was all too happy to oblige. I was feeling small again, but without the fear. I indulged in my habit of rocking myself in order to comfort myself and in bed in order to fall asleep, apparently a life-long practice I never noticed, but my husband affirms has been evident throughout our married life.

My therapist started pushing me and in a sense to get in touch with what I learned not to feel for myself. I am very good at intellectualizing things, reading prodigiously anything I can get my hands on to understand why things happened the way it did, why people behave in certain ways toward me. I could empathize and understand enormously other people’s point of view, but I tend not to feel for myself or that I even have a right to feel. I am very poor at taking care of my feelings. I always expect the least possible thing for myself. I can be hugely discounted by anyone because I assume responsibility for accommodating that person’s agenda, good or bad. I do not wish or hope for anything for myself because I know it will not come true.

Then out of the blue in the midst of this one session, my therapist asked me a strange question, “Do you trust me?” he asked. My immediate reaction was to declare yes I do, but while I was saying that to him, I also sensed that that was not quite true. For sure I trust his abilities to help me. He does make me feel OK when I am in his office. I like talking to him very much. I think he believes my story, but do I trust that he cannot hurt me? As I sat thinking about it, time was passing in silence and I had to admit to myself that I am indeed afraid of him --afraid of his anger toward me. He asked me what I was thinking and in hushed tones, I told him.

I could not look at him while I said it. I told him that I think about it all the time; I worry all the time about not making him angry. Not that he ever has or could get angry, but I do worry about it. I realized then what he was getting at when he told me I feared any kind of intimacy because to be intimate with anyone you have to trust. And in truth I have learned to trust no one. I had to admit that his opinion of me was so important that I could not risk his displeasure, which in effect

meant I did not trust him. The pain of talking about this made me cry. For about five minutes my therapist and I lingered in this moment of epiphany. A few days later, I forwarded the following to my therapist:

I'm not doing too well these days. I've been unbearable to my family and I seem to be on a relentless short fuse. When I start crumbling, I leave the house and stay away for a very long time. I have the excuse of going to the library to do research, but you know what? I can't concentrate very well once I'm there. I am also plagued with these incipient migraines, particularly around bed time. I've also noticed the puffiness around my face has gone down a bit --don't know what that means.

I'm dreaming a lot and they're not scary, but the funny thing is my father is in them. What's funny about that is that I do not (consciously that is) think of him at all except --this will sound strange to you --when I check the obituaries. I don't know if I told you this, but every morning I check the obits to see if my father's name is listed, isn't that weird? I don't look for my mother's name, only my father, and then I move on to other news. What's even stranger is that I don't really feel anything about my father, one way or the other. I mean, if you hooked me up to a stress meter, it wouldn't even blip. But he's there in my dreams, in the background like wallpaper.

Last night while folding the wash, I threw away a sweater of my grandmother's I kept in my drawer because it smelled like her. I had this sudden feeling, while moving it to another side of the drawer, that I did not need to keep it anymore and threw it in the garbage. (Husband) had a bit of consternation about it, but upon seeing my face, he immediately left me alone about it. The family and I are doing this emotional two-step. It's a struggle to keep things under control and not lash out at them. They are not the problem; I am.

I'm feeling the need to see you more often, to talk things out. Something's bubbling up to the surface. I can feel it and I'm very scared about it, but I don't know what it is, I really don't.

We started talking about my father and where he was in all of this. Actually, it was my therapist who brought him up in the first place because I never talk about him. In my mind there is nothing to talk about really because he never did anything bad to me. Throughout all these years, I just do not think about him. It is as though he never existed –except I do read the obituaries every morning to see if he is dead. I do not know why. Idle curiosity I guess. I just know I do not feel anything for him. I remember as a child I adored him, but I think now it had to do with the fact that when he was home, it was the only time I felt safe. The beatings would stop and the appalling fear would abate, at least for awhile.

The day he took me away I remember distinctly the rumbling of the car wheels over the gravel carrying me to safety and I allowed myself to let go and express my joy and relief at finally escaping. My prince in shining armor had rescued me –how pathetic. I remember putting my hand on his arm while he held the steering wheel of the car and I expressed my happiness to be away from her. Suddenly he backhanded me without taking his eyes off the road. I remember in that instant feeling the shock, but not the pain of that slap. I scrunched myself as tightly and as closely as I could against the door away from him. I laid my head against the armrest, swooning in unbearable pain, which awakened again in my consciousness from the previous day's horror. I remember feeling bitterly cold and my head hurting very much so I disappeared in my mind.

I am thinking, as I write this, that for the first time I am “feeling” my way through this episode. Allowing myself to feel is something new to me –something I am only now beginning to understand about myself. Now when I feel my way through the experience of that car ride away from my mother, forever, I am struck by an overpowering feeling of dread or despair I do not remember articulating in my conscientiousness at the time. I know I closed off, that is to say I disappeared, but I think too I had ultimately “given up.” By that I mean I feel very small right now and I am obsessed with dark thoughts of wanting to die. I can see myself giving in to the pain and wishing to be no more –to thrive no more. I know I was critically ill when I arrived at my grandmother's place. I remember drifting in and out and not caring a fig about ever getting up to see another day. I am

convinced that I had one foot over the precipice of death, but someone (I felt it) or maybe my grandmother pulled me back; she would not let me go and now I know why.

In the feverish fog of being gravely ill, I remember clearly the touch of her hands, soothing or attempting to soothe the tattered flesh that was once mine. Up to that time, no one had ever touched me in such a loving and caring way. Previously, anything remotely tactile was absorbed to the core of my being as violent and always, always wretchedly painful. I think I did not want to believe it was real at first or acknowledge that it was truly happening to me. I feel as though I inched back toward life, responded if you will, in halting measured increments. After a very long while, I grew accustomed to that new sensation of being touched –eventually longing for it, maybe even expecting it when she religiously put this putrid smelling ointment on my body three or four times a day. God, I will never forget that smell.

As I slowly came out of it, I remember I slept a lot and I could not speak. I remember how frustrated my grandmother became when it seemed I was getting better and had more waking periods during the day, but I still was unwilling to talk. I think I feared the idea of hearing the sound of my voice. I still felt unreal and I sense that I wanted to luxuriate in the quietness of not being there or worry that I mattered to anyone. It was as though if I spoke, the spell would be broken and I would indeed be alive and Oh God, I think to myself, I am scared to face that now.

When I feel this memory I am overcome with an immense sense of emotion and agitation that is difficult to describe. Now I believe that I was “tricked” back into life or living again, not because I was the world to her, but because her son, my father’s welfare was at stake. And when I think back over the many discussions she and I had regarding my father and why he was not in my life later on while I lived with her, her opinion always strived to supplant his needs and desires over mine.

It carried over even to my relationship with my husband in later years while she was alive. I was never good enough for him. In her mind, I could not do enough for him. Traditionally, in-laws who marry into the family are never good enough for one’s son or daughter. That was never the case with my grandmother. Despite everything she did to

save my life or even love me in her own way, I'll give her that, I was never what my father was to her. All these years I believed –i.e., the child in me wanted to believe I belonged to her, but she was never mine. I belonged to no one. I am dust.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I [grew up], I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known...

Corinthians 13:11

January '98

More Dreamwork

Something critical took place in my therapist's office and I remember leaving his office in an utter rage. I had a dream in which I came to his office for a session and found him ill or dying and I could not find his wife to help and then she ends up dead too. In the session that day, I had revealed that strange dream I had involving him and his wife, who is also a therapist sharing offices in the same building. Yet in describing it to him, I came away feeling he totally misunderstood me and while muddled and confused, I drove away in my car becoming angrier and angrier. Not able to sleep that night I emailed the following:

When I'm in your office I sense very clearly that I am very small, a child, and you are the adult. That's truer now than ever before. I often feel very rattled, unfocused and vulnerable yet somewhat safe when I'm talking to you. You're the first adult who sits and talks to me (the needy child) and listens to what I have to say, most of which comes from the reality of a child's state of mind. I don't want to let go of that or what you represent to me in that regard. This was the battle in my dream.

In my dream you start to change physically and the catalyst to make that change happen is (wife). She's the perfect symbolic catalyst to make you change because not having met her until today; I accept that she is naturally important to you. (Wife) is not (wife), but me the little kid who wants to hang on to the one adult who finally hears my child's pain. I don't want you to change; I want you as you are today in the chair in control and listening to me. You were weak and vulnerable in my dream and it scared the hell out of me. I didn't like it. Like my father, I couldn't depend on you anymore. You're not the one changing, I am. If the little girl hanging on to you decides to grow up or dies as (wife) did, then it will be different between you and I.

I've only recently put all my resources into letting my guard down, particularly when we're in the office together. Heeding something you said to me, I wanted to learn I can trust you, but you know what? It's too risky for me. After today it became real clear that I cannot bear the fear of being misunderstood by you or anyone for that matter. And the perfect example of that misunderstanding came up today around my need to "dress up" or the make-up. I know this will seem incredulous to you, but for the first time ever, I really "heard" you when you intimated a relationship between my dressing up and being sensual/sexual to the outside world. In all honesty, I never thought of myself or perceived myself in that way. What I see about myself when I dress up and what others see are two different universes and you made me see that for the first time tonight. I was surprised to learn that you did not know this about me.

I know people, men especially, react to me in a sexual way, but I do not play that game or even fantasize about it --never! Is that not normal? What I see in the mirror is something I want to cover up and disguise as something else. In my whole miserable life before (husband), I never made so much as a blip on anyone's emotional meter. So I make myself up as something else. I don't know any other way to be. I feel so rotten inside, I spruce up the "shell" thinking the world will see "that" and not what's going on inside. What I see on the outside is an ugly cut-up blob of flesh and nothing defined as pretty or beautiful. (Husband) tells me daily how beautiful he thinks I am and just tonight during our talk, he admitted that he finally just now realized that I wasn't expressing false modesty when I pooh-pooed his opinion of me in the past... that indeed I really don't like what I see, that I wholeheartedly believe that I am not much to look at. It's kind of weird to be misunderstood like that for so many years by someone you're so intimate with.

The sleeping pill is finally taking hold so I'm hoping I can sleep better tonight. Part of me feels like I made a mistake telling you this dream. The other part feels it is what it is as I've told you in this missive and thinking about next week's session fills me with a sense of dread

My therapist responded:

I appreciate your clarification. I, too, thought about how I misunderstood you in yesterday's session. For some reason (I have not figured it out yet) I was trying to be smart at the expense of not being with you. Bad choice. I know that when things are not clear to me I need to shut up and listen harder. You come from a history of not being heard or understood and so, are apprehensive of more of the same next week. I come from the perspective of hearing better and understanding more, so I look forward to next week.

During this time my sister continued communicating with me by email. She had told me at our first meeting that I was “her memory.” I guess hearing similar details about what happened to me validated hers. In truth, it was validating for me too, but in an entirely different way. It seemed each contact with my sister brought me closer and closer to the brink. I did not realize it was happening until my therapist suggested that contact with her was “toxic” for me. I never took what he said to mean anything severely negative against her just that I was having a reaction to every time my sister and I communicated. So I decided to send her some of my writings. I felt that the reading would answer questions I was not willing to answer over the phone or in person.

This was a bad period in my life. I was tilting and on the edge. I was short with my family; I had no patience whatever. I wanted to be left alone; I did not want to be around people. The depression was weighing me down with each passing day and I was hearing my mother's voice in my head. I could not concentrate on work or getting the will up to get out of bed. I wanted to curl up and disappear. I wanted to cease contact with my sister altogether, but I could not muster the courage to do it. Finally I emailed her the following:

After I send this email off I'll send you the two chapters I have remaining. It's a work in progress still and I have probably five more chapters to write before I finish the entire work, but I must share something with you first about why it is taking so long. Yet even before that, I'll comment on your dream as you asked.

This is a dream I relate to as feeling “trapped” with nowhere to run. I've had those kinds of dreams --it certainly resonates. The upside,

of course, is that you are no longer trapped into anything or by anyone any longer.

You are your own person; you have a life worth living with or without (her partner).

I'm sure (therapist) is working with you, if for no other reason than to help you maintain that momentum of self-confidence you have forged with all that you have endured.

If I have any concerns at all about your dream, it is that I fear my writings may trigger more events like that, which is why I insisted I would only do this as long as I knew you were seeing your therapist to help you with this. At this moment, if that were not the case, I don't think I could bear being the cause of any further harm to you. I know I have not told you what my feelings are for you. I am sure you wonder at times why I have not said the words, "love "or" I love you." You see, I am not as strong as you might think. In fact, I am very much a coward when it comes to expressing my feelings --fear of intimacy and all that. I am afraid to let you know how I feel about you because the power of that expression or feeling is too cataclysmic when it comes to you and I.

Our young lives together were a life and death struggle every single day till I left. When you live on the precipice of death, young or old, it molds and bonds you to each other in ways I am not clever enough to articulate or able to clearly describe. Yes, I survived as did you, but nothing I ever did was ever so heroic or even meaningful to undo the damage I did to myself and continue to do --that's why I'm in therapy.

Over the Christmas holiday season, things became very dark for me. I have been very sick, so sick that I was nearly hospitalized for wanting to truly die. I even went so far as to butcher up my hair and cut myself to ribbons on my arms, chest, stomach, etc. Just last week, after weeks and weeks and weeks of therapy, I was finally able to remember in detail the torture I endured the day before I left home for good. You see, I said earlier I only remembered a few seconds of the flogging, but in fact I left my body and hovered on

the left side of my strung up body and watched what our mother did to me.

My psychiatrist has high hope that I can heal from all this, but the fact of the matter is I have lived my life hating myself, my body, and what comprises me on the inside. My life, it appears, has been lived at the service of others or what I could do for people. Even the decision to take my own life is not my own to make because no one would understand why, and the act itself would be viewed as self-absorbed, uncaring of others and a declaration that I did not love my children. In a way, that's my version of feeling "trapped." Whatever I am I made up to hide what is going on inside so others will never know what happened. I am humiliated and ashamed of where I came from and what species of ethnicity bore me.

I'm telling you this, for the first time, because I sense you think more of me than you should. I do not know who I am, or what I am besides being your sister who is afraid and wracked with unbearable anguish and pain when I say, "I love you too."

Soon afterward, I became profoundly suicidal. It was a day or two after a session in which my therapist regressed me to a scene in which I was enduring torture at my mother's hand. I was physically re-experiencing a horrific episode where she had strung me up naked and beat me for some reason, I don't know why. Did she need a reason? I guess it doesn't matter; I was seven or eight and I was in hellish agony. Then, while in the middle of this gruesome retelling, my therapist said, "Time's up."

It was the back-hand slap on my face all over again. I remember leaving his office not wanting or feeling I could go home. I did not want to be seen by anyone; I felt naked and exposed. I could not live like this, not anymore. There was no where for me to go. It was as though I was in suspended animation and I did not feel real or alive. Who cared anyway? Obviously not important enough to my therapist –just one more story in a thirty-year career. He's heard them all. I was devastated, crestfallen, then it was that feeling I had after my father back-handed me when I crawled inside and gave up.

In a day or two, I had decided I had to die to end the fear and suffering. They were my decisions this time, not my mother's, not my therapist, mine. I did not have to live for other people, my family or for myself. I could decide my fate. I would be no one's victim anymore. I was in control now and it was finally my choice. It was liberating and made sense. Finally, some closure and on my terms.

After dropping off my daughter to school the following morning, I went across the street to my synagogue to talk to the rabbi and asked him to take care of my family, that is, to be there for them for me. I remember feeling very mechanical and calm about the whole affair as if I was checking off a list of things that I had to do before I went up the mountain. I had made my decision where to do it.

To me it seemed a very natural chain of events; however, unknown to me at the time, my behavior alarmed my rabbi. He apparently called my psychiatrist immediately after I drove away and a vigil of sorts began once word reached my husband, who flew home from work. I drove up this very long and high mountainous hill. Santa Cruz County is full of mountains and this one was the highest I could think of to drive off a cliff, smash my car and I into oblivion and no one would ever find me. I never wanted to be seen again, not even in death.

I cannot remember what I did all that day, but I got out of my car and stood at the edge of a cliff where it was strangely quiet except for the chatter of crickets and the sound of my mother's voice in my head. She was yelling and her voice always scared me. I hate shouting voices. I was in a panic to make her stop. She told me over and over again that I was supposed to be dead; she meant to kill me and missed her chance. I was never meant to live. Why am I alive?

I knew her intent even as a child. It was a message I knew very well almost from the beginning of consciousness. Finally, seven hours later as it turned out, I started to go to my car to face it across the road to gear up the engine and fly off the hill, but for some reason I could not move my feet. They were fixed like glue to the ground I stood on.

Then like an epiphany, I suddenly remembered my daughter had a performance that evening and then I thought of how stupid it would be to smash the car when it would be paid off in a few months. My

eldest daughter needed a new car. God, my mother was loud in my head. I could not shut her up and the louder she got, the more frightened I became. I could not think straight and I felt very confused and disoriented. Nothing made any sense other than to make her stop yelling. I just wanted it to stop, all of it. I reached through the passenger window to get my cellular and called my psychiatrist.

It's not very clear to me what followed afterward except that my neighbor suddenly drove up in a screech and deposited my husband so he could drive me and my car to my therapist's office. I was exhausted and I didn't give a damn. When we got to my therapist's office, I felt right away that he was angry, but controlling it. Then a wave of embarrassment washed over me. If there had been a hole in the carpet, I would have gladly jumped in. I know now that I scared him very badly; we talked about it months later when he revealed how shaken he was. But within days of my attempt, I was able to collect myself enough to realize that he really blew it with me.

That day of regression, I left his office as the little girl still hanging and in the throes of torture, and not the adult I had to be walking out of his office. I told him that it was reckless of him to have let me leave that way without checking out and making sure I was back in the present. Well, I have never in my life met a person who owned up to his mistake as he did. He was profoundly apologetic. It also humbled me somewhat to realize what affect this episode had upon him months later. To his credit, he was always professional and appropriately sangfroid, but still, it helped me trust him more to learn of his vulnerability that day.

April '98

Aftermath

I'm thinking about these recent tragedies that have occurred --the woman who smothered and killed her three children, trying to kill herself but failing, and now the 11 and 13 year old kids who fired upon a school yard killing several kids, a teacher and wounding several others. I watch the media's take on all of this, the people's reaction and marvel how greedily they pursue the legal means to bring them to justice -- to punish and or execute these "criminals" not wanting to know anything but how many laws they can enact to prevent this from happening again.

I think to myself, that could have been me and no one would care or want to know why --as if anything could justify murder. I could have killed like that --I wanted to. I tried once to smother (son), remember? I nearly bashed my mother's head in with that cast iron frying pan I was holding in my hand. And with a moral certainty, the rest of the world benignly in collusion with my own family, would want me dead or do to me what they proclaim they could never do themselves. What hypocrisy.

How did it happen I did not kill maim or murder? How glib and trite it sounds when I hear the word "survivor." Do I pat myself on the back for not becoming a mass murderer? Am I now a real human being because I didn't actually hurt anyone? Is that what it means? When I watch these tragedies unfolding on TV, I don't want to strangle that mother or those two kids. All I want to know is, what in God's name happened to these people?

I told my father-in-law that I could not face him or the family knowing what they know now. As the days go by, it grows harder to even face you. I keep playing that tape over and over again -- what you said that is, "It's not your fault," but it sounds like such a cop-out to me. In my heart, how could it not be something about

me? How could so many bad things happen to me and how could all the people in my life participate, however directly or indirectly? When you think of it, wouldn't you expect a rational person would question the likelihood of all this happening to one person --the odds of that happening is probably a million to one?

And yet, it did happen, and not just to me. I look for anything I can hold on to in my child's past as something that belonged to me, when something or someone responded to me as a human being and all I can grasp at is nothing. For twenty years or more it was my grandmother. She was IT for me, she was the one person I thought loved me for ME --the stuff inside. She was the fairy tale godmother I made up in my mind, whose magic made me a card carrying member of the human race, finally. But I grew up and do not believe in fairy tales anymore. My perception of how and why people love me are just stories I made up to make myself feel better, to prove to anyone else, a real human being.

This is very painful to say to you, but it's hard to be with you now. I wish that feeling could go away because it's like an elephant now taking up space in your very small office and I can't see past, around or through it to be on an equal footing with you. I miss not being able to look at your face and I sense it will be a very long time before I can really do that. I like what happens to your face when you delight in something and that impish grin you get when you "ding" me on something and I've let you know I "got it." Knowing what you know about me now, I cannot comprehend what it is you're seeing when I know it's impossible for me to see or feel. I feel mortally damaged beyond repair; As my friend, can you please understand that? At the end of our last conversation, when I asked you how can you help me build on the inside from nothing, it makes me laugh inside to recall the confidence in your voice when you said, "I'm very good at it!" I want to hope --to believe, I guess, but right now that seems impossible.

He responded:

I think I do understand that it is difficult for you to be with me now. That is okay because it is not difficult for me to be with you if that is what you want. That is what friends do.

My therapist and I spent a lot of time dancing with two left feet or we were invariably starting on the wrong foot. During that time I did not feel he understood me very well, or that he listened well. Much of the time I was agitated and out of sorts. It was a sign, he told me, that I was trying to deal with some elements of rage, but it never really surfaced effectively.

One of the things that began to bug me the most was the way he addressed email to me. Earlier, it was sort of a funny game to see how little he could write with an economy of words. Later, it became an annoyance for me because for one thing, he never addressed me by name at the beginning of the email, so I felt very discounted as if he were writing to a non-person. One day during therapy I sort of let him have it between the eyes. He did not bat an eye and perhaps, relished the experience as the first inroad toward expressing anger. He then agreed with me –that he would not be happy himself not being appropriately addressed either. It turned out to be very hard to be angry with him after finding out he was not going to argue back. It's very frustrating to be thwarted in an argument that goes nowhere because you are dealing with an emotionally healthy person.

We started messing around with different medication especially to deal with my depression. We also tried medication to deal with the hallucinations or voices of my mother in my head. Some of the time she seemed all too real, kind of 'in my face' as it were and I could not get away. A couple of times I had reactions to the medications like swelling and itching. My therapist and I juggled back and forth between emotional sessions and trying to get the medication and dosages right.

And repeating dreams continued:

Had a very strange dream or nightmare...I went to bed very late last night, about 2am and didn't bother taking a sleeping pill because of the hour...tossed and turned anyway. In my dream, I kept vomiting up something from inside me. It started as dime-sized dark brown droplets (I told myself it was dried blood) connected to some gelatinous strands. The more I pulled on it, the more my mouth filled up with it. Finally, what kept coming out were strands and strands of it, but the droplets turned to very tiny

white pistils on stamens, still on gelatinous strands. I kept breaking them and disposing of it, and still my mouth kept filling up.

In my dream I got myself over to see (my physician) but he was too busy running back and forth. I remember reasoning to myself that it must be his rotating Saturday when he subs. Regardless, he never behaves that way –

Kind of disgusting and weird don't you think?

He wrote back:

Interesting dream...How did you feel when you woke up?

Pistils and stamens can be a very nice transformation of something ugly

Have you had a chance to read-I know you said it's difficult- either of the dream books?

A week later we tried something new in which we did the “Gestalt thing” with two chairs. I the child sat in one chair, and in the other chair, I responded back as an adult. It was very hard work, but I sensed that I had made a move forward of some kind and I began looking forward to the next session to do it again. It never happened. When I asked why we were not doing it again, he said “Why?”

At that point my rage with him and everything was nearly palpable:

Feeling enormous frustration and anger toward you right now...if you have time sometime this week I'd like to talk this out before next Tuesday, i.e., while I'm still in a rage. If it can't happen then this will pass as all things do...

[And]

Memory very disjointed about last night's nightmare --this is what I recall in no particular order:

-suspended in air (just recalled I saw the beginning of “The Exorcist” last night and went to sleep last night bored with all the commercial breaks) arms and legs stretched to all four sides and raped by demon ; very large penis and it hurt very much

-nobody is listening to me

-people took over my house; had to pack and fit all my belongings into my car, no time to escape before they get here

-chased by something evil through a bar or restaurant and hiding in men's bathroom --no one notices I don't belong there

-feeling very very angry all the time -in a pure rage

In the ensuing sessions which followed, we talked about words and their meaning. They also were a great source of anger for me. “Child Abuse,” for example, used as the social ‘coinage of the realm’, is a gross misnomer. Abuse sounds like a tepid kind of slapping as if to say, it really is not meant to do harm. Really? Would you go up to a Holocaust concentration camp survivor and describe their Nazi terror as abuse? Does the word “abuse” make a legal argument for justice? Not hardly! Battery, assault or torture, seems more appropriate –it validates, encapsulates and accurately portrays, in my opinion, what really happens to a lot of children within the secret confines of the family.

I also think, “Today’s victims are tomorrow’s monsters.” While the media focuses more and more on adult perpetrators, I think to myself that more of my generation suffered unspeakably as children and now we of the gentler world reap the whirlwind.

Our collective outrage with adult perpetrators becomes a preoccupation with the law to punish, seek retribution and revenge, rather than acknowledging our benign complicity which created these monsters. No, it is far easier to annihilate or bury these people away than deal with the consequences of a feckless, uncaring world. My siblings and I were not abused. Our home was a concentration camp, minus the barbed wire fence and attack dogs. We were assaulted, starved and tortured. Why are we not simply victims of torture? Or better yet, survivors of torture?

My frustration and anger grew unabated. My family seemed to be hovering all the time. I felt I could not breathe. In fact, it was as though when I breathed, they exhaled. I implored my therapist to talk to my husband to explain that I could not be with him and the

children at the moment --explain this process of desensitization as it was now being called.

I was six. I remember screaming and screaming until I could not make a sound. I remember singing midnight High Mass at the great cathedral up in the loft with the big choir. They made me stand on a chair so I could see over the rail to sing. My whole family was there and it was midnight mass, the whole church was full and hand bells ringing and very beautiful. The choir master called me the silver soprano and I remember it meant something special. And then, when we got home my mother became angry when she saw I had not finished folding the wash. I don't know where my father was, but when I did not fold it fast enough she grabbed my hair and dragged me to that room. She told me to strip --I listened to a movie yesterday working in the studio before seeing you and heard that word ordered to a woman about to be tortured and it still chills me to hear that word. I hate you making me remember what that was like, undressing myself and she being so impatient and violently in a rage. I wanted to disappear, but you would not let me and I remembered screaming and screaming until I had no voice and I think now she wanted to hear me scream because I sang

I was on the verge of imploding when he said these are:

Memories...and each is a reminder of the awfulness of your experience... You can't change the past, but you/we can mitigate its impact on your present

I went ballistic:

Is that what it is, just another memory to you and me? I want very much to see you again that is what I want from you, but I feel I don't have the energy for it, to get myself over to you to dislodge this bile in fifty short minutes --damn you and psychiatry. (Husband) called me just a few minutes ago and he says you could/would not tell him anything specific about yesterday. I thought once you had my permission you could tell him, you see, to him it would be another memory and so what? He still would not understand as now you have made it plain you don't either. I thought or hoped that you could explain the details and why I'm all messed up about it. I

hoped you would lay aside the psychiatrist's textbook for five seconds and talk to him in plain layman terms what I revealed and what I am feeling. But ever the clinician, it is all about desensitizing reaction to memory. Do you know how alone you make me feel? Did anything you heard yesterday affect you? I needed a friend to help me with my family, not the psychiatrist. When I left you, I realized I couldn't go home, I felt naked absolutely revealed with nothing to hide behind and I didn't want to be seen by anyone or explain anything. I was hanging like that deer I talked of and you and my family see only a memory —no one reacts to anything I say. I have no way of knowing if it is human at all to feel the way I do. (Husband) told me that I was screaming during the night and the only thing I remembered was waking up on the floor and my throat feeling raw like I was losing my voice; he said I fell out of bed, that's why he wanted to stay home today. I am surrounded by all these wonderful people who say they love and care about me, but I look into their eyes and I don't know if they feel in their gut what I am feeling. And the terrible part is I know, again, that I am alone and will always and forever be alone —alone hanging like that deer —alone because I withstood all that agony and pain thinking if I was brave that she would love me, that she was just sick and didn't know what she was doing —all for nothing.

I love my husband and my children and all I see in their eyes is that I am drifting away from them and I can't explain that I am still here trying to be brave again and keep going through this with you, but hope is turning to quicksand.

I really rode my therapist hard; I guess you could say I was not rational. It just felt like I was being misunderstood again. I wanted my pain validated or acknowledged in some tangible way and saying they were simply memories felt like a huge discount of what I was re-experiencing.

Someone once said, "What are memories, but the dull pieces of disassembled dreams?" Maybe I was being too emotional or sensitive, but I could not shake the sense that I was not being "heard" again.

When we met at the next session, we cleared the air and came up with the solution to our misunderstandings. I suggested we needed more structure in the session, a beginning, middle and an ending. It was particularly important that before I left his office that he check out to see where I was, whether or not I was in the present. Sometimes we would float between the past and present without a discernible beginning or an ending and if I left his office not in the present, I would mostly likely be in trouble. Most of our misunderstandings came from that one problem of mingling past and present and not making sure the door was closed on the past. I needed to walk out of his office the way I normally walked in, which was in the present as an adult.

Then something of a minor miracle happened. At our next session we talked about my sister and how I felt I could see myself having a relationship with her, but it would have to go slowly. I knew I wanted to tell her I was sorry for what happened. I remember sobbing and sobbing in the office at that realization of why I could not deal with my sister. I left my sister and other siblings behind to save myself. A terrible sense of guilt and shame haunted me and still does.

Knowing I left her and seeing what leaving her behind meant —her dissociative personality disorder and the grief she has endured throughout the years —I felt, was due to my unwillingness to stay or inability to take her away with me.

When I started to say I wished to apologize to her, my therapist violently shook his head no! And when I continued my entreaties, he became more assertive in his objection. He wanted me to see that I was discounting my sister in a huge way by not thinking of all that she had endured and survived, especially if I took all the blame. What about her survival and what she had done to get where she was —did that not count for something on her own as a person?

It was like the dawning of a new day —the heaviness that lifted from inside of me, right there in that moment in the office. All of a sudden I saw and knew what he meant and realized he was right. I realized how selfish I had been for taking all the blame and essentially leaving her with nothing as if her self-esteem was not important. I was elated

and I remember smiling broadly –a light had gone off in my head -- one of those few epiphanies that happen once in a while in your therapist's office. We closed the session early and I went home feeling as though my therapist had given me a gift.

May '98

Still Climbing

The anniversary of my grandmother's passing was coming up and I began worrying about having to pay a visit to my grandmother's grave. Again I decided that I did not have to see her. I realized with a start that I had been in therapy for over two years. I could not believe how time had flown. My therapist and I had spent nearly one hundred and sixty hours together --it did not seem possible.

We talked of my grandmother and it was decided it was time to write a letter and say all the things I could never say to my grandmother while she was alive. It poured out of me like vomit spewing from my insides, but it was like cauterizing a wound too and as humiliating as some of the details illustrate below, it was also a catharsis:

Dear Nanie:

I do not know where to begin or even how to start saying the things I could never say to you. And it's ridiculous because you're dead ten years yet still, I am troubled by this notion of, how dare I do this? You taught me that lesson very well, to be grateful I had a home to go to regardless of Gramps' attitude toward me.

You were there at the very beginning, when I was born and I sense you were around a lot. Then suddenly you were not. And the animosity between you and my mother was scary and confusing to us kids when you came during the holidays.

I remember those visits as rays of sunshine coming into a dim lit room, the excitement and pleasure of no ill temperaments that particular day, no sick fear or panic to worry about because someone else was in the house.

But I remember too the silent glances, the knowing glances that all was not right in the house --how carefully you hugged us because of

the bruising and torn flesh and then you carried on as if nothing was amiss.

It is a scene I remember so clearly like the visits described by Holocaust victims when the Red Cross visited the camps—everyone being so cheerful and kind. I was deliriously happy, but I knew it would not last. You taught me the cruelty of hope. I kept hoping that you would see, really see what was happening. I thought if you saw, you would save us or take us away. How could you buy us so many presents and then leave us knowing what she would do to us? She made us pay for our love toward you and your attention toward us. It was a sin to love you in that special way and she knew we did because it was the only time we could laugh and be children. It was the only time when the pressure and terror was turned off. But she bided her time—she was nothing if patient because you gave her another reason to beat and torture us and you knew—I know you knew.

When I was brought to you in Oregon on the last day of my persecution, I did not care whether I was going to live or die. I remember that now. I wanted to be free of care and worry and not feel responsible for any one anymore—besides it hurt too much to be awake. But you persisted and woke me often to rub my body with something that smelled funny. You were kind to me and whispered and I liked that so much, the whispering gentleness of soft-spoken words. Was it heaven or a dream? For a long time I thought it was both.

You wanted so much for me to answer your questions—did this or that hurt; am I hurting you by touching here; do you think you can eat something, why won't you eat something, why won't you talk? If you're in a dream, you don't talk and if you're in heaven talking is unnecessary, right? What I had hoped and longed for was happening—the grandmother I loved was someone who really loved me and she was kind to me like no one had ever been to me before. I started to believe so I opened my mind and heart in a new way and loved you more in a way indescribable and unimaginable.

But I made a mistake and was betrayed again. You became more and more angry when I could not/would not talk and that

infuriated Gramps. You allowed him to come into my room to call me foul names because I hurt your feelings. You were not with me in my pain and suffering; you just worried that I might die and what might happen to my father, your son, if the authorities found out. All my questions I asked later about my father, why he didn't take me with him, why he wasn't there or never wrote –you tossed back in my face as selfish and ungrateful on my part. We never talked about what happened that day when I left and you never acknowledged how close to death I was when I arrived.

I never knew that I was a person of color until I moved to Oregon to live with you and attended school with all white children. I was miserable in school. I tried in so many ways to explain to you what those kids did to me every day -- boys called me “puta” and “spic” and when I asked you what those meant you called me a liar, that no one at that age knew words like that. I ate and studied alone at school, disappearing into the library. No one talked to me; no one befriended me, not even my teachers who treated me like a leper. I was invisible to you and to them yet still, you did nothing. You never believed me when I told you what happened in school. You made me know again and again that I deserved it. That it was I who was not normal. I was ugly inside and out and not worth anything to anybody, which must have been true in your eyes because even my father deserted me.

You hated me when I stayed out too much in the sun and then referred to me often as a “sick nigger” because of my coloring. Where once I was emaciated and thin, during those three years with you, I could not stop eating, I suppose to comfort myself. But now with so much weight, everyone including you and Gramps called me a “fat pig.”

I was not hit or beaten anymore, but I apparently traded one corner of hell for another. I worked very hard to help Gramps on the farm, but nothing I ever did pleased him. Because he did not beat you or me or cheat on you as you said your first husband did, you felt lucky –blessed even, yet you never defended me against his alcoholism and foul mouth. And if you did shout back, which was not often, it was always clearly my fault. I felt guilty for

causing the anguish between you and Gramps, and Gramps with his whiskey in hand, made sure I paid for that in spades. The cuts from my mother's whip hurt no less than the barbs from my grandfather's mouth. His temperament and feelings toward me were no different than those people I dealt with at school or off the farm. I never felt I could say anything or fight back because I owed you so much for saving my life and giving me a home. Gramps and you, in your own way, never let me forget that. Everything began and ended with that cliché –never bite the hand that feeds you.

You often said my body shape, breasts and mouth reminded you of my mother's mother –the ultimate personification of evil in both your mind and mine yet, it made sense in my head because it had a ring of truth to it. After all, I had believed all my life growing up as a child that my body was an ugly blob of flesh. I was forced to look at it naked, shorn, and ugly, without color or line in the mirror. It made an indelible impression in my mind, which I cannot forget or wash from my brain; I never looked back on myself in the mirror ever after that. And it must be true because you saw it too.

You could punish so well by silence. I hated it when you did not talk to me for days, not looking at me as if I was not alive. I was so sorry by a day's end of silence from you that I would have given up anything I had to get your attention back. I thought because I was not hit, beaten or tortured, that what I had with you was love, what you and Gramps did for me by taking me in.

Sometimes there would be moments when I thought, "I want to talk about my father and family back in California," but it was clear we should never talk about it. It was a bad dream and besides, maybe I made it up. How many times did you say, "Forget about it!" I felt crazy all the time, not feeling real. As I got older, I tried to make you understand in so many ways to hear what I hear in my head –that I was not a real girl, a real daughter or granddaughter --I was not a person.

I think I was supposed to have died when I first arrived and many times Gramps said he wished I had so you would not be upset all

the time taking care of me. I always thought you did not think that way, but now I do. And, I think you fought very hard not to say it directly to me, but it seems now all too audibly clear to me.

I wanted to believe you were the rescuer, the fairy godmother in a Cinderella tale. You were magic to me in San Francisco. In Oregon what you said you felt versus what you did were incongruities that brought me no end of craziness or feeling out of control. The more I made myself believe you loved me, the more damaged and irrational I felt.

All I feel now is the humiliation of having been the cause of your leaving Oregon. How many times did you say, "If it weren't for you, I'd still be in Oregon on that farm and it would be paid for by now." I know you moved back to California for me and I thought you did it because you loved me and disliked how Gramps treated me. Months later, my father took me and placed me in an apartment next to him and his new bride. Did you arrange that? I know he would never have initiated that on his own volition. I never did understand how all that happened or why.

Once when lamenting about the lost farm in Oregon, you told me I'd have a better chance meeting someone of my own "kind" in California than in Oregon. Remember that McLaughlin fellow? So very Scottish and so very blonde. He wanted to marry me, but I did not. You slapped me for being a "stupid bitch" when I turned him down. You said nothing about my first husband. Maybe there in your estimation, I finally got what I deserved after all.

I always thought it was funny how you welcomed (current husband) into the family and never let up on me about making sure I was a good wife to him. Most families think their in-law sons or daughters are not good enough for their own children. It never occurred to you to think of me in that way—as something precious or rarely formed, maybe extraordinary. I was this cast-off alley cat without human standing or breeding.

I did, however, learn something from you because you talked so much about breeding. You told me to read anything I could get my hands on. From that I made myself up from nothing. I formed a

life to live with (husband) and my children so I never had to think about where I came from or how I got here. And as the years went by, and I saw less and less of you due to raising my own family, the image I had created took on its own power. You took no interest in my interests except (husband's) work. I know you loved your great-grandchildren, really loved them, and I thank you for that. I know too that it was because they were of (husband's) Jewish breeding, not mine. While you were alive, it did not matter to me. Now it matters.

So many times, in my husband's presence, you thought nothing of the humiliation I endured by your incessant chastisements and censure about how I was as a wife and mother. What I did as a mother bothered me less than what you insinuated. About me as not having been a dutiful and deferential wife. I dealt with it by laughing it off. Inside, it agreed with the voices that I hear inside of me all the time. Nothing I do will ever be good enough, in anyone's eyes. Worse yet, I believed you because I loved you so much. It was easier to pretend that I did not hear it properly, whatever it was you said because I would not believe you could purposely hurt me.

I felt I owed you everything, my resources, my family, my life. When you became ill with cancer it was no great sacrifice for me to drive from Santa Cruz to Foster City, a 100 mile round trip to pick you up and take you to Stanford for treatments every single day for six weeks. (Daughter) was barely a year old when she became a road warrior with me. I was even glad to do it because I thought, "As hard as it gets, she (you, Nanie) would know how very much I loved you." I drove myself to near collapse out of sheer exhaustion because I could not let you down despite the irony that your son lived two blocks away and didn't care a fig about you.

When it came time in the end to move you into my home to die, that was easy too. More opportunities to repay the debt you gave me when you took me in. All that morphine and medications to moderate your agitation and waning energy, finding and cooking culinary delights to tempt your fading appetite. And that one day of silence when you cried with your eyes closed and nothing I could

say would make you talk to me, all because I yelled I couldn't come that particular minute when you summoned me. How do you pay down a debt such as the one I had?

Every evening at midnight (husband) and I woke to check on you and change your diaper. The last night you spent in our home, you awoke screaming at 2am. Again, overshadowed by fatigue, I was annoyed to be awakened again and nothing (husband) and I could do would silence you until we learned that your leg was broken, facing the opposite direction. I couldn't forgive myself after that, I mean the annoyance I felt before we made this discovery. I held you and asked you to please forgive me; I was so very, very, very sorry. I had no right to complain or to be annoyed. I was desperate and frightened. I stayed with you in the hospital till they got you settled and came the following morning to be with you, but you looked different. You were all bloated and your breathing was labored. No one told me you were dying—that what I was hearing was the “death rattle.” You'd just broken your leg, that's all. When (husband) came, I left to get some coffee and when I returned you were dead. You waited until I left to go—why didn't you wait for me? For hours, alone with your body, that's all I could say, over and over again, “Why didn't you wait for me?”

So here we are, you're dead and I'm in my therapist's office reading a letter I've written to you and I can't get you back into my heart. I've lost all my skills at pretending. I can't pretend anymore that what we had between us was what I thought it was. And the irony is, unless I get you back as my touchstone to recovery, I have nothing to build on, which is the core of who I am, or so people like to tell me.

Sometimes I feel angry enough to feel ashamed and humiliated by how I felt about you. I feel like an absolute idiot for not having seen it straight. Then other times I sense there was something real about my love for you, but the betrayal is too overwhelming to ignore. I still have no wish or desire to visit you or put flowers over your grave or say Kaddish. Maybe that is as angry as I can get, for now.

June '98

Casting Stones

It was quite an eruption, yet I felt strangely guilty for my lapse of filial etiquette. At the following session, my therapist and I talked at length about the letter. Later that evening, writing to my therapist, I had not realized that I needed to hear that it was okay or that I had permission to not hang on to or recapture my feelings for my grandmother in order to heal. I considered that it was an old child's stone that I could toss away – the emotionally dyslexic Chinese proverb that said I owed her everything, not the other way around. It was like the earlier epiphany I had when I decided I did not need to keep my grandmother's sweater anymore, so I threw it away. It gave me something to think about along side with a peculiar sense of relief. I also told him that I had a suspicion that it was also tied to something that is culturally based or inculcated – not that that is a bad thing, but that it gave me something else to think about, tangential to the letter or one of those other hair balls that needs untwining. My therapist wrote the following:

It is always amazing to me to realize how many "old stones" we have to toss away at different times in our lives. And I do mean "we" because the process never stops, for any of us. I'm very interested in understanding your cultural history and how it fits in to your story. See you on Tuesday.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

I am trying to break the cycle of violence that was surely, ironically, chronic and trans-generational on both sides of the family. I was never all that proud of my heritage, muddled as it is. It is still difficult to deal with. I have no pride at all about my heritage. Talking about it with my therapist produced only grinding shame.

In the relative safety of his office, we began to unwind family lore beginning with remembering conversations I had with my grandmother living with her in Oregon. Cold snowy days and long winter nights can be great fodder for story-telling.

My grandmother told stories of her great-grandfather who lived on a huge island in the South China Seas. He was of the Spanish-European aristocracy and ran a plantation with many slaves. These slaves were comprised of people indigenous to the area. He was a barbaric landowner who relished using the whip on a regular basis. She said her mother told her of the cruelty and brutality that she witnessed her grandfather and her own father, perpetrated upon servants and the lower classes.

She told me her mother once saw a slave hanging on a tree and being flogged and nearly flayed alive --never forgetting the savagery and the meaning of her status in life alongside the people who served her. My grandmother's mother was raised to be a genteel and educated woman in Europe. All that my grandmother revealed about her was how elegant, angelic and serene she was. Had she not been a wife and mother, she might have taken the veil.

My grandmother's father had English/Scottish/Polynesian ancestry. His people were English/Scottish on one side (hence the name Ferguson) and Polynesian on the other. Folk lore relates that his great-grandfather was a Scottish whaler who jumped ship and married a full-

blooded Hawaiian. Even my grandmother thought that was a stretched romantic tale, but you cannot deny the look. My grandmother's genes were clearly Polynesian. During those winter days I listened to her stories, I always had the feeling though that my grandmother was very circumspect and cherry-picked who was who in her family tree. I really never understood why.

Anyway, through marriage and circumstance, my grandmother was unhappily married to a movie house film producer, living in the Philippine Islands when World War II broke out. She never talked about him either, but apparently he was a cad.

Because they were Americans, both my grandmother and her son, my father, were interned at the Japanese concentration camp at Santo Tomas, which was formerly a university. My father was ultimately released to fend on his own as a young teenager, while my grandmother was held for the entire five years of the war. Once released from the camps, she returned to the United States ahead of my father to make a home for them in San Francisco. Unfortunately, he met my mother and together they both arrived in Florida. To her horror, my grandmother learned of my father's folly in marrying my mother when she started to receive letters from her new daughter-in-law. It was a bizarre coda to what should have been a joyous return to the United States.

My mother's heritage was also a potpourri of German-Dutch, Spanish, Chinese and Filipino. Her father was German-Dutch (hence the name Vander) and her mother was mixed Filipino. She took after her father in the looks department, very fair complexion and light brown hair.

What is extraordinary about my mother's background is that it was common knowledge that her own mother, along with two other sisters, served the Japanese high command as notorious prostitutes. Remarkably, my grandmother even produced a withered newspaper article written about these women after the war. I couldn't believe it. This woman was my other grandmother, and her daughter had married my father.

In talking about my mother, my therapist and I could only conjecture that she was most likely exposed to a lot of violence and probably was an unwilling young teenage participant of prostitution during the

war. It was plain she had a knowledge about physical cruelty that was unusual and disturbing.

One theory we came up with was that during the war she must have witnessed the cruelty and brutal torture of prisoners perpetrated by the Japanese because during some of her methodical and elaborate setups of torture, she would sometimes say, "I learned this from the Japanese." That made her, in my mind, a fearsome living force in the house. What horrors they experienced there I can only guess at, but with this family history, obviously my entire heritage became an amalgamation of familial dysfunction with extreme violence viewed as usual, normal and acceptable behavior that came to full flower in my generation.

Needless to say, thinking about where I came from and the shame it brought me stirred up so much that a huge depression enveloped me. I started to have bad violent dreams again:

Last night I dreamed about it and we were snaking through all these people and the person closest to the door, and the last is my mother. She has that same look she gave me the day I left –daring me to leave. It's getting by HER which will be the hardest work. When I imagine you shoulder to shoulder with me walking out, it's a help, but not that much when confronting HER --at least that's how it looks and feels for right now..

And

afraid to go to sleep tonight...not sleeping very well, even with two sleeping pills. I'm keeping it together during the day, but I'm struggling. The dreams are pretty much the same; the flogging is happening and I'm facing the door (in reality I faced a wall, no door) praying for someone to take me out of there, to rescue me.

I want so very much to be rescued, but it will never happen now, will it?

We talked of confrontation and using visualization, and then he emailed the following:

Being rescued is not the only way to get out. When people are scared they forget they know how to think. And it is possible for the little girl and the grown woman to think this out.

I also had a tough time figuring out what I could tell my sister, to put her off a bit because she kept telling me I was her “memory” and she wanted more details –more I think, to confirm her own memories of what happened to her.

One day, she suddenly got it into her head that she wanted to come and visit. She lives in Oregon. (Aren't the coincidences amazing?) I remember rambling on the phone saying, “Yeah, sure,” and then panicking about her coming. In my head, I remember telling myself that it was very important to keep the present, which was my home and children, separate from my past, which was my sister. But I worried incessantly that I would hurt her feelings. I could imagine if I asked her to NOT come at all, she could view that as a rejection, again, and I did not want that to happen under any circumstances.

My therapist persisted with the confrontation, pointing out that I was not “taking care” of myself thinking this way and yet, I could not do what had to be done, which was to call her and put her off, for the moment.

During one particular session after getting my permission, I sat there in his office while he called my husband to ask him to help us out. Could he call or email my sister and simply ask her to not come at this time? I emailed my therapist later:

I was actually relieved when (Husband) emailed her. I couldn't believe it. And I took your advice and did not look at it --that was easy to do too. I felt like a ton of bricks lifted from my chest. I could not tell you what I am about to reveal to you because talking or uttering the words about my feelings about her sort of paralyzes me and I start to feel that “crazy” feeling again and out of control.

Being there for her wedding that day a year ago was probably the most traumatic experience I've ever had. I told you about the wedding, I think, the fact that it worked like a scene from a Fellini movie but still, it was cool. During this past year, I have been

utterly engulfed and consumed with horrendous guilty feelings. When I saw how and where she lived, I had this uncontrollable urge to take charge and rescue --I know how nuts this is. And when I dressed her after her shower, I began ambulating through a nether land or space that was real and not. I couldn't take my eyes off the scarring and even focused on the teeniest marks, probably not discernable to the average person, but I knew all too well what made them. It was the first time I saw myself from the back and the scarring inside and all over her legs. I still, to this day cannot look at myself, but I could see her.

It wasn't just hard as I told you Tues. --it devastated me and continues to be devastating every time she enters my mind or when we're talking in cyberspace. I gave you my word (I never break promises) and I'm not suicidal so please understand this when I say ---I love my sister more than anyone can know and when I think about her or see her, or even hear the sound of her voice, I DO NOT WANT TO LIVE...

My therapist wrote back:

I know the love you have for your sister is very special, even though it is intertwined with the ugly memories of your torture, of hers and of the leaving. That pain never disappears -you tried that and it worked for a while, at great cost. Healing may be accepting it will be there and recovering from the hits when they happen.

I had been preoccupied with feelings about her that I needed to express, but could not put into words. I thought incessantly about the day when I left my siblings and most particularly my sister. And when I came to the “decision” portion of my memory of that day, I would end up with a migraine headache. It was as though I could not handle remembering that moment and what it meant. I had a feeling I knew the meaning of that decision, but my emotions were rattled inside a child's memory and I felt small and frozen in time. Thinking clearly was difficult when enmeshed in the emotions of a child.

All during the remainder of the year and on into the next, I struggled in a state of suspended animation because I had a fear about talking about

it and could find no resolution to these terrible feelings and emotions. I kept them to myself and could not share them yet with my therapist.

One day however, in his office it finally came spilling out in a torrent of tears and anguish. I had to own up to the fact that I left my sister behind because I thought I was going to die that day. I had a feeling. It was in a second of time, a blip in the cosmos, but I felt it and I cannot describe what that was, hurt as I was that day.

The memory of that day now reveals that horror of truth –that I pushed my sister out of my way to leave the house. I left her behind with a demon from the bowels of hell along with my other siblings, and I was responsible for what happened to her in all the years since. I had protected her all my life living in that environment, but that particular day I did the unimaginable –I decided to save myself. When given the choice, I chose myself. How do you live with that?

While my therapist pointed out that I had no other choice, that I was a child and that it was a child who decided to save herself, not an adult, I understood the words in my head, but not in my heart. I could not accept getting off the “hook” so easily or giving credence to what he said. I knew what I was doing and what I did, but I could never admit it to myself. I escaped physically and forgot emotionally. I did not want to remember why or how I left. I just left. I had cultivated a mindlessness of amnesia about everything until this moment.

I wish I could say I felt a sense of relief once expressing what I held inside for so long because it did not happen that way. Maybe I was not meant to. Ultimately, the guilt of that day would not leave me entirely – that I would always, in some way, remember my part in that fateful day and feel a sense of self-disappointment and failure, warranted or not.

August '98

Falling Again

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year for Jews and on that day in October '98, my world fell apart. I had been conducting a children's choir for the synagogue, which filled a basic emotional need in my life, i.e., working with children and ushering them into the world of music.

Contrary to the rabbi's philosophy of keeping children's services apart from adult services, I attempted to change that philosophy to include children in a very small part of the High Holiday observance as part of the adult service because I believed strongly that religious communities are built on the foundation of families worshipping together. How can we expect our children to feel connected to their faith if they do not see the relevance or connection to their parents, grandparents and the history of their people?

It was a serious difference of opinion, which backfired on me while I conducted the children in a rather elaborate collaboration between members of the adult choir and a soloist I had engaged for the service.

For no apparent reason, the rabbi said something to me that I regarded as a humiliation because he did it in front of the entire congregation while I was conducting. He was clearly unhappy with what I was doing. Whatever it was he said, it sent me over the edge. I experienced a complete breakdown during the performance. I held it together professionally, but thereafter, I was a mess and by the time I got home I was in shattered pieces.

It was completely devastating because I felt attacked for no reason at all and totally discounted personally and professionally. The meltdown became so severe that I self-mutilated. I cut myself to ribbons --on my chest, arms, stomach and. I wrote my therapist:

I'm having a difficult time getting back to where I was two weeks ago. I fight all the time to keep focused and motivated. I feel very small, still. Part of the problem is that I am not sleeping well. I don't remember my dreams if I'm having them; all I know is that it is fitful. I startle awake at least five or six times during the night and when I'm not feeling vulnerable and small, I feel agitated about everything and with everyone around me. The sound of my mother's voice haunts me and I hate the feeling of panic that comes with it. Things get really bad around 4pm to 9pm, just before I take my medication before bedtime. I usually hate taking pills or medication, but right now it's kind of a crutch. I'm scared... and I don't understand why I got so out of control all of a sudden.

He wrote back:

I'm sorry you are having that difficulty but not really surprised. The trauma of the incident with the Temple/rabbi went very deep. It opened you up again –like the first time you heard from your sister, when you saw her scars. Hurting yourself kept –the trauma-alive. You will settle down again, and you will get “it” that your strength is in your resilience, your ability to carry on while this is going on in your head, and your ability to ultimately recover. Hang on and don't hurt yourself!

While I cut myself, I was drowning in my mother's voice. It is strange how a relapse like that induced auditory hallucinations for me. This will sound absurd to the reader, but I think I wanted to look like I did when she finished torturing me. I felt I had to be punished in some way –how perverse. The same tape that played over and over in my head, “I must have done something wrong” I was “bad” or had done something bad supported a childhood supposition that punishment had to follow.

My therapist and I met or talked practically every day. He wanted to hospitalize me immediately, but I had to wait a couple of days before entering the hospital because of the lack of beds. My husband took time off of work to be with me. I could not be trusted to be left alone because I tended to cut myself whenever no one was around.

When I cut, I felt better. It was like a drug, a distinct physical release and it had a very calming effect on me afterward. The next focus was

on stabilization, what medication to set, which was the main reason for the hospitalization. A round of Haldol became the drug of choice along with Serzone for depression and Ambien for sleep. While hospitalized, I wrote the following poem:

*I try to catch them, one by one
The water like rain that threatens to fall,
So I do not have to feel the press of that sweet dew
As I imagine it hitting the ground.
I fear for my ears to hear them fall as well although, as hard as I try
I cannot press my ear to concrete to challenge its weight.
Who would dare, not I they say
To catch them all for how could anyone be so vain?
But still I try and try against time, sense and human capacity,
For it is a dogged mistress whoring against my shame and loneliness.
I know only what I know and what I know has no mantle upon
which to study
To understand, to empathize, to recognize or validate except in the
benign
Weariness of the formidable resignation of careless people.
I try to catch them one by one, but my hold is shallow and base for
wanting.
How then shall I gather them all one by one, for I am the rock they
beach upon with no promise of a harrowing reckoning from the
here and now.
For they are mists of children such as I, where tears flow too much
in abundance
And no promise of seasons to come
-November 1, 1998, while in recovery*

Once released from the hospital after a 4-day stay and healing from the cuts, my husband accompanied me to my therapist's office for a post mortem of sorts. I felt embarrassed and humiliated. I could not

understand why I was doing it and I felt like I could not stop –would not stop. My mother’s voice bellowed non-stop in my head. I was increasingly agitated and there seemed no end in sight. I was feeling suicidal again, but I said nothing to anyone about it because I did not want anyone mad at me. I felt trapped again with no where to hide, no where to run other than to leap somewhere into oblivion.

“Well, I’m emboldened by this latest event,” my therapist began. My husband and I were stunned. We looked at each other in incredulous disbelief. Did we hear that right? He looked directly at my husband and began explaining a theory he had about what had happened and why.

He said that the issue of what happened went to the very core of me –that when I perceived that I had failed with the children, it was a reenactment of the failure of leaving my siblings and not helping them to escape. It was losing my son again, my out of control behavior with my eldest daughter when she was twelve, my sister –all of it was core issues that hit home. The humiliation by the rabbi was a further confirmation that I was not worthy of respect, and I counted for nothing.

In subsequent sessions, I felt very small for a very, very long time. It was three months before I set foot back into the synagogue. It was amazing to me to discover how very disconnected I felt to weekly services, the building itself and the congregation. It was all the more difficult because of my involvement as an artist in the building of the new temple seven years earlier. I thought it secured some higher regard for me as a person in my own right –all of the art so prominently displayed and visible to anyone entering the sanctuary –the twelve large stained glass panels I researched, designed and constructed; the ritual needlework of the Torah covers and three chuppahs (wedding canopies) –were all work of my hands. I lost all of my spiritual moorings. My relationship with the rabbi was never the same after that.

For months, I was easily triggered. The Yom Kippur incident and what transpired afterward only made things worse. The appalling silence and awkwardness of members of the congregation, who witnessed the breakdown and pretended that nothing happened, just heightened the tension. The child in me wanted and wished for acknowledgement and

an apology, but neither was forthcoming. That in itself made me feel more crazy.

The most disturbing aspect of this trauma was the lack of sleep and that I was having dreams of being in that room I was tortured in. I kept jerking awake during the night and the constant agitation made it hard for me to be around people. I wanted to be left alone. None of the sleeping medication was doing its job well and the days wore on endlessly; I was listless one moment, anxious the next. I was exhausted and had days when I did not want to get out of bed. It was a vicious cycle, an endgame.

For awhile, I got off Haldol and was put on Risperdal. I suffered adverse reactions to some of medication. Zyprexa and Seroquil made me swell up and I put on over twenty pounds. One morning I woke with the shakes, bitterly cold and extremely agitated. I kept dreaming about that room; I was out of control again. We switched medications and went back to Haldol. I wrote my therapist:

Thinking about why I haven't heard from the cantor agitated the hell out of me and I began to have thoughts of hurting myself. I was so cold, shivering uncontrollably and I was suddenly in that room of my childhood where I hung and then was cut down suffering in darkness and the cold. My arms were frozen as they always were and I couldn't move to remove the ropes. I was in a bad way when I contacted you yesterday. Thank you for responding so quickly. I began wishing (husband) was around too and I couldn't burden my kids with this.

I realize now I need medication to control these urges. I kept fighting the idea of drugs because it means to me that I am dependent upon them and I don't want to be. But I'd rather stay on these drugs than hurt myself...that I now accept. I feel like I'm failing all the time and I worry about failing you most of all. I'm working very hard on those old tapes in my head. It's the biggest struggle to me at this time in my life. Thank you for being there yesterday

His response was:

The recurrences, that is the way post-traumatic stress disorder works. Do what you can to banish the thoughts from your mind when they recur-work in the studio or do other projects, but don't let yourself dwell.

Easier said than done.

I just woke up from a violent nightmare about (youngest daughter) and me. We were traveling to this train stop and people I knew from Temple were saying goodbye to me and (daughter) and I had to go to this train station. They made me drink some kind of poison because wherever we were going, we'd be at the camps. I was frantic about (daughter). Lately, I've been having wild dreams about her both waking and sleeping. We were both separated and she went one way and I went another and I knew I would never see her again. That's when I woke up at 2:55 am. I've been having a lot of dreams like that.

Yesterday, I was ill with the flu or something, vomiting pretty much of the day, so I took a Jacuzzi bath and (daughter) came to join me, just she and I. She has grown up so much that I was shocked to learn she had EVERYTHING, pubic hair and all. Then I thought she'll be twelve this January and her menses will probably come any day now and I felt like I had to avert my eyes to keep from staring. She is so pristine, beautiful, nearly a perfect child. It scares me how much I like hugging her these days. She still likes her morning 'sit on my lap for a back rub and scratch' while she's tightly clutched her arms around my neck. That's something I did with all my kids until they weighed too much for my lap.

Since I've seen you last, this has been my sleep pattern. I wake several times during the night. I thought it was near 6am but it was close to 3. Isn't there something I can take which allows me to sleep through the night? I'm feeling sleep-deprived these days. This isn't critical I guess, but I wanted to tell you right away so I'm writing this to you. I feel as though my life has been turned inside out and the core of whatever I am is hanging out for the world to see. It's very hard to NOT dwell on these images once they come, but they're becoming terrible obsessive-like dreams and they're all about (daughter). What am I afraid of?

My therapist emailed back:

In your dream it is possible that (daughter) may not be (daughter), but you-or part of you. Think of it from this perspective and see what you come up with.

The first day of December is my birthday so my husband decided to make a day of it in San Francisco, including going to see *Miss Saigon*. I have always had a phobia about being in San Francisco. Strangely, it never was a source of concern when I was in my late teens, early twenties. I guess I had anesthetized myself so well that I had successfully blocked out everything bad about my youth in the Big City. I had a psychological 20-foot steel wall keeping everything at bay, but now that wall was gone. So it was no surprise when my husband set up this wonderful day that I was in a veritable whirlwind of anxiety about going. We planned it so carefully so that I would be in the city during the evening and not during the light of day:

I'm physically feeling jittery and full of anxiety. I hate SF. I generally don't mind it as much in the evening, but the prospect of waking up in a hotel and seeing SF in the full light of day, fills me with dread. It's ridiculous, I know, but it's like I expect the boogie man to pop out of the woodworks any moment. I'm afraid I'll see or remember something I don't want to think about. I feel fragile as hell. I want to enjoy this show and it's all jumbled up with this horrible sense of foreboding.

We made it into the City before 4pm and took the elevator up to the Crown Room of the Fairmont Hotel for a little drink. We are not drinkers by any stretch of the imagination, but this was a moment where sobriety was not high on my list for the evening. And I was intent on enjoying the show, which we did, immensely. The following morning we were on the freeway out of San Francisco within one short hour. I could not stand it anymore. Standing at the counter checking out, I kept seeing faces I thought I knew. As they say in western movies, we got the "Hell out of Dodge" like scared bunnies. Well, one bunny did!

December '98

The Trigger

The depression continued unabated and then everything went haywire when my sister called me late mid-December. She was definitely a trigger. During our conversation, I felt the hairs of my neck go up because the strength and timbre of her voice was not her own.

At first I did not believe what I heard. I thought it was just my imagination, but when I relayed this to my therapist, he was convinced that I did hear exactly what I heard, i.e., the sound of my mother's voice and it was not in my head, it was coming from my sister. He was pointedly direct about his comment and I detected a note of anger in his voice. That stirred up something in my brain and I began to focus cognitively instead of emotionally.

It might have been one of her alters he theorized, but there is no way to know for sure. That was an odd thing for him to say, I thought, because he made it quite clear in the beginning that he was not a huge believer of multiple personality disorder. I thought what he was intimating was absurd. She is not purposely doing this to me, but then again I noted the character of her voice somehow changed after the first few minutes of conversation –that I know for a certainty and it unnerved the hell out of me. Ever my advocate, my therapist believed I was being manipulated. That, I could not believe.

However, even more disturbing was my sister's description of a torture my mother apparently did to both of us, but I had no immediate memory of it. That idea rocked me to the core, throwing me off balance. I began stewing about it and wondering if I needed to remember something that might have happened to me. I spent a whole session with my therapist trying to remember.

“First of all,” he said, “why would this conversation even be brought up during a short telephone call?” I did not bring it up, she did, I thought

to myself, although I cannot remember the context in which it came up. “Secondly,” he asked, “what was the point?”

The intensity of his questions made me start to think, “Why would she do this? What is her motivation? Is she mad at me? Does she want to exact some measure of justice or something? What is really going on here? For the first time, I started to think instead of react, but then a couple of minutes later, I dismissed it as crazy. I started to feel bad about what I was thinking. This is not right. Something happened to me. What she told me was so familiar, but I could not remember. I began spiraling out of control.

The image that leapt to mind when she told me what happened to her was this feeling of my mother’s hands inside of my vagina, gouging it with her fingernails. Yet, it didn’t feel real to me because I did not remember seeing it actually happen –just sensing it. Did I imagine this? Why can’t I remember?

What is true and what I do recall is that when my mother was provoked and needed to mete out punishment, she would dig her manicured nails into the soft flesh of the under arms or our crotches to usher us into the room of torture. Since I predominately wore dresses, her infliction of pain with her sharp long nails was quite severe in both areas, but that was the extent of my memory regarding her fingernails.

I was a wreck, again. I managed a migraine about every other day. I didn’t tell my husband about the content of the call. Nor could I tell him anything about what was going on in my head because I felt humiliated and degraded. The holidays bore down and with my therapist on holiday, I barely hung on. Thank God for email:

I’m feeling somewhat lost inside like I’ve veered off course. Feeling terribly depressed. (Husband) hovers patiently and says now and again, “I know you’ll tell me when you’re ready.” I force myself not to listen whole heartedly to him otherwise I feel I’ll feel worse. I’m shutting down; I feel I have to. I have a terrible sadness inside... it’s all muddled and screwed up inside.

Three days later:

Yesterday I was still bothered with the headache, but not as severe until I had a bout with diarrhea. Right then, I had severe attack on the left side of my brain that was strobe like, with my eyes closed and colored circles. I took the last of my Stadol and went straight to bed. I thought I was having another bleed (an earlier episode of subarachnoid hemorrhage)

I had a weird dream this morning, still waking up with a headache. I was in an apartment for a rehearsal of some play or musical and all these guys were milling about getting the room ready. They were like students camping out in an apartment. Then they hurried around cleaning up because someone who was maimed slowly climbed the stairs to their apartment outside giving them time to get things straight and the reason, I found, they wanted to clean up was because this person was a "frommen" or righteous Jew. He had a clean white shirt and tie, but he had a strange carved out patch of hair in his close cropped hair.

He was helping them with the score for the play and I thought that was strange because his people do not take to regular music unless its Klezmer. I was supposed to descend a flight of stairs singing in Yiddish pointing to a library of books about psychiatry.....No one looked at me and in fact they all behaved as if I didn't exist. Then I dreamed something about my mother and woke immediately up.

My neck and head feels like a fifty pound weight is attached to it. Today I have a rehearsal, which I can't back out of because it's the only one we'll have. I feel as though I'm hanging on by my fingernails...just having to get through this one last gig. When I'm not pressed about this, I think and worry about what I can't remember and it involves my brothers in my dreams.

I know you're on holiday and probably won't get to any of this for quite a while, but the pressure seems to be relentless with each passing day and I need to feel as though I'm talking to you even if it's through email.

I still haven't told (husband) everything and he doesn't seem to be pressing me about it either

Then two days later:

These last few days, my mother's voice is in my head. I woke from a dream this morning remembering only that these guys were standing in a row and I had to cut them with a huge butcher's knife. I think my sister was there too. I immediately woke up.

I keep thinking about what she told me. It does not seem to go away and I worry about not remembering that anything like that happened to me. Haven't had a full night's rest in days. I get pretty fatigued during the afternoon and my stomach is still a mess from the flu. Still feeling jumbled up inside

With still four days to go before my therapist returns from vacation, I had survived the holiday performances. I started to think that I would not be able to sustain a relationship with my sister, after all. Part of me hoped it was not true. I relied upon my medication all during this time before sessions resumed and the bombardment of panic attacks persisted. Part of the time I was fine –the next I was full of anxiety, heart racing, the whole bit. Finally, my therapist returned and wrote:

I can understand your dread. This has been a very difficult process. I don't know where you will end up with your sister. I know it is important to persist so you will "know" but perhaps we can find a way to go slowly so you won't be overwhelmed. I don't think you do "slow" too well.

January '99

New Year's Resolutions

When the holidays passed, I dreaded our first session back. I wanted to talk about what I was remembering and not remembering because it preyed upon my mind for days, turning into weeks. I do not know what happened, but from the first minute in the office, my therapist and I seemed to have gotten off on the wrong foot. In fact, he suggested that I go out the door and come back in again so we could start over because even he felt the miss-footing too. Then I revealed something personal about my sexual life and it felt like I risked something huge. After hearing what I had to say, he said something off hand, in a somewhat blithe manner about “recovered memories,” and when I left his office that day, I was in an utter rage:

Yesterday I ventured out, gave you a look at an inner world of mine and it feels like I risked death. I don't know how to gather the gumption to face you again next Tuesday. I know I have a friend in you, but all day today, when I thought of what I told you, I could only bury my head in my hands in utter humiliation. Why was it important for you to know that about me and why is it an issue of validation? Does that mean everything you know about me rings true now and not before? At the same time, I feel devastated and hurt for some reason and I don't know why; I don't know what it is you see in me worth dealing with after knowing this.

I think what I learned yesterday is that I still need to be careful or maintain a sense of being guarded. I know it's hard on you. I really got a glimpse of just how hard it is and I felt terrible about it. But on the other hand, I needed, I thought, to lance this wound. I wanted to go full steam ahead and work this thing, but it felt like I was clamped down. That's what it is like, my life in the adult world feeling clamped down. You're right. I don't navigate well with adults. I have to be very very careful around them. I thought

about when you said I view things literally. You're right about that too. They say a child views or sees things as black and white and that's exactly how I operate. I guess I'm stuck in a child's world. It's either right or wrong, no grey areas. Truth is truth and I have to know it as real. That is what has been driving me since I first saw my sister. I don't know what to think about your professional view on retrieved memories. I have to admit to you I was vastly disappointed. I thought that was what I was doing these past two and half years. Somehow learning your opinion on this matter made my compass spin out of control.

In therapy with you I have had to be available in two worlds... that of an adult and child. I know I was acquainted with physical suffering and pain, but the emotional part of my childhood has been new terrain for me and difficult to traverse. Remember Tony Bennett's song "I Left My Heart in San Francisco"? My song is more like "I Left My Soul in San Francisco." I don't feel like a real human being with a soul. Instead, I am a malformed convolution of hideous ideas and concepts, which I grabbed out of thin air to live one day to the next. Somehow all that stuff makes up who and what I am. There's nothing you or anyone could say to make me feel otherwise. I simply won't believe it.

I appreciated your last minute "check out" before I left. I wish you knew that every time I show up for our appointment, it is a triumph of will to keep going...to live out each day toward the next. From now on, it will be all the more excruciating..

He responded with the following:

I am sorry that my ill-spoken response to your statement evoked the strong reaction it did. I should have listened more before I spoke because my response was not to what you wanted but to something within myself. And that has always been most important to you—someone who will hear you out. I also think I may still be missing something because what you talked about is, in many ways similar to what you have previously related, yet the impact on you has been greater. This I don't understand and believe I need to, as well as want to. Let me know if there is some way I can make the process easier for you next Tuesday.

I felt I was not being listened to properly. I started the session by asking what he thought about “recovered memories.” I did not like his answer to put it bluntly; it was the manner in which he said it that touched off a spark and blew the dynamite –and it was not what I wanted to hear because I felt discounted when he said he did not believe in them. Moreover, he seemed to say that trying to remember the details was not important so in effect, I did not feel I was going to be listened to and I suppose even –believed. I felt put off and shut down. Whenever my therapist and I hit inroads like this, I usually exploded in email. I know now that emotions are hard to impart to the receiver of an email. Once you hit that “send” button, however, it’s a done deal. The following showed the depths of rage I was feeling and unfortunately, I took it all out on him:

The impact is greater because you couldn't listen and I couldn't tell it. It's greater because if what may have happened is true and the last vestige of what I needed to hang on to regarding my feelings for my mother will vanish. The child in me won't believe otherwise. Can you understand that? I don't want to believe that my brothers held my legs apart while she gouged inside my vagina with her fingernails. I am overwhelmed with actual vaginal pain when I see it in my head. I don't want to believe she did this to me. I loved her and tried so hard to understand why she did the things she did. I can't muster up the rage this whole scene might normally call for. I thought all she did was hurt me physically not sexually. Maybe it's not in the realm of childhood battering and torture to think there's a difference, but to me it makes a big difference. I feel different...like a freak. I can't be with my husband right now. I feel suicidal, but I consciously fight to stay alive for you, my husband and children. I guess finally, in the end, I just need to know and feel the acceptance of all of this coming from you at the moment. I can't deal with anyone else at the moment. Enough for now...I'm rambling

He tried to help me accept, however unwillingly, that the details were not important to remember as much as I thought I had to try. It was enough that I knew something had happened to me and that it had been sexual. But why did it feel worse than the beatings and torture, knowing something sexual in my mother’s behavior was attached to it?

I thought my head was going to explode with the migraines. They were such a daily occurrence by then that they were becoming debilitating.

My therapist suggested that I read Sylvia Boorstein's book, *It's Easier Than You Think*. I discovered through that reading that a way to punish yourself when you're depressed or angry is to give yourself a migraine. Maybe that is what I was doing to myself. If the premise is true, I was beating myself up mercilessly with these headaches.

Two episodes were particularly frightening because I thought I was having a "bleed" or a reoccurrence of a cerebral bleed that I had in '94. So, my therapist recommended I see a neurologist again, just to check things out. This was the third MRI that I had since '94, which showed the same 7mm lesion in the right parietal lobe just as indicated before – an old injury, probably when I was a child. Nothing had changed since the secondary bleed in '94.

After the "all clear," Depacote was prescribed to treat the migraine and so far the medication has worked. It seemed to work wonders because I became migraine free within a week. Or maybe I finally talked myself out of it. I didn't like having to sprinkle the dosage on my food three times a day because I am terrible when it comes to remembering to take medication that often.

...this book reminds me of people in my life who tell me all the time to give myself over to God or whatever, and then I'll be happy, they say. It's kind of like the Jesus freaks that raise their hands to heaven and proclaim they've given themselves over to Jesus, only in this case Boorstein argues to give oneself over to acceptance. That is what I can't do yet...Maybe I'm still grieving, is that possible?

He answered:

Yes it is more than possible; it is probable you're still grieving. And no, I am not hoping you will become a believer in anything but yourself. I see this as a way to get beyond the "noise" of our personal histories to the core of yourself, to accept whatever is in ourselves for what it is, and go on. It does seem, if you will permit me a small joke, that the suffering part of pain may be particularly Jewish.

And later:

Part of acceptance is accepting who you are – a person who cares. That comes with a price – you can't care, as you do, without being vulnerable to pain. I doubt you would have it any other way. Be proud of who you are. The world is better for what you do.

In one session with pad and pencil, he asked me to write these notes to myself:

- worried if I express rage and get out of control, I will be like her*
- accomplishments are yours, not your mother's*
- list them on a sheet of paper, looking at mother's picture*
- accept the potential bad side of mother in you*
- accepting is acknowledging the potential for violence, but you're not her*
- accepting is equivalent to recognizing the OK side of me, which means I must let go of my mother*

After each session I always had homework to do. One task was to list my accomplishments on a sheet of paper looking at my mother's picture. Bad idea. Actually, it was a dumb idea because when you think about it, how in the world can I look at a picture of my mother and think good thoughts about myself? That was another indication to me that he wasn't listening to me, but he was working just as hard as I was, so we abandoned it almost immediately.

I'm writing because I'm feeling her inside and want to feel separate. I'm not hurting myself but I want to feel better so I'm writing you instead, I did everything like she did only she got away with it. I forced myself to get out of bed to do something. I did three things today and went back; very hard to stay motivated. Can't talk to my family about any of this; they're trying to leave me alone, can't seem to keep my head above water. I just want to sleep and never wake up..

He responded with the following:

I am glad you are writing me instead of hurting yourself. I don't know what you mean by "I did everything like she did only she got away with it" - You are not her and you did the best you could. You are not mean! Keep on keeping busy

At this time, my therapist believed that it was time to "access the rage," as he called it. We tried a couple of experiments to do just that, but it was a dismal failure. One experiment was to take out a picture of my mother and write a letter to her. It turned out to be hugely counterproductive because I became sicker, feeling crazy and out of control. This is how far I got:

Mother

I could not bear to call you "dear" isn't that funny? It would be a betrayal to address you as dear or "mom" or even mommy because you were (are) neither of those things to me. I have fought all my life to divorce myself from you and the knowledge that your blood runs through mine is intolerable -purely an accident of birth I say. You stole my childhood so here I am, wanting to get it back, and I cannot.

I've spent my entire adulthood trying to reclaim my lost childhood. I feel stupidly idiotic having discovered that about myself. I never grew up. It's like I developed this incredible tension between repeating the abuse to myself and trying to gain mastery at the same time, regenerating a new life. Instead of becoming a competent adult, I became something in between (does that make sense?) Getting over you is my life struggle -the fact that every day I lived until I left, I lived with death around the corner -- that that was the way things were; it was expected. You humiliated and tortured me, and made me watch as you killed animals close to me. In the back of my mind, I do not know, maybe it's a hallucination, but I think a sibling died. Maybe you killed a human being after all, I do not know, but it's worrisome to me. I worry I was responsible for it, but I can't remember.

I learned unquestioned obedience from you and I think I now obey so excessively I will do anything that is asked of me. You have a strange stranglehold on me and I want you off my neck. I want to

answer back when I hear your voice in my head. I used to think it was me or an alter of me, sort of like in the comics where the devil is on your left shoulder and the angel is on your right, both yammering at the same time. I take medication to shut you out and it's effective. Your vile tongue is finally sheathed in a blanket of silence and I can function, but it's a dependency I can't rely upon anymore.

I do not want to see YOU when I see myself in the mirror. I want to see myself, but it's impossible right now. I know I am safe and I am loved. I raised a family in spite of you and as much as I am better than I was two years ago when this all started, I still feel bereft, a longing, an emptiness inside that is boundless and can never be filled –what is it?

I felt angry writing a letter to my mother. It felt more like an assignment than something I needed to expunge or experience as a cathartic release. I just could not make the connection, I think my therapist was trying to make. There was an ambivalence I felt about how to express my feelings, and at the same time, control the rage doing it. Ultimately, the chaos and craziness I felt made it difficult to continue with the letter writing. My therapist thought he sensed some emotional distance in the writing, but then surmised that obviously was not the case and advised that I back off the assignment.

I can't back off, that's the problem. The other part is that I'm having difficulty staying grown up when I write. The rage is coming from the child not the adult. Emotional distance is impossible with this process, but I don't want to back off. I'm committed and I guess I need you there at that same level of commitment, if that's possible. I know I'm asking a lot of you. I don't think lessening the medication had anything to do with it...

Poor guy. If he had said the opposite, "Continue writing it," I might have said the same thing..."I need you there at the same level of commitment..." Damned if you do, and damned if you don't. See? I'm not easy to work with. He responded with the following:

Funny you should think of the possibility that backing off on the medication may have made you more vulnerable to emotional flooding. Something to think about as we proceed.

Then a strange thing happened. One day I came out of the shower and while toweling off, my eye saw something, a scar perhaps on my body and the next thing I knew, I was bleeding. I had cut myself in several places using an eyebrow tweezers made out of a high grade metal, the kind you can purchase at a knives specialty shop. It is extremely sharp and mechanically efficient.

What is remarkable about the choice of tools is that I have two tweezers—the other the quality from a common drug store and not very efficient. They both sit in the same compartment and I was shocked to learn that I had completely blacked out while I proceeded to cut myself. I do not remember picking up the tweezers and doing the act of cutting. I began to panic and told my therapist what had happened at our next session.

I remained in a heightened state of agitation, worrying that I might black out again and cut myself. For a while there I had stopped taking the Haldol, but with this episode and the fear of it repeating, he and I agreed that I should go back on the medication. I considered this to be a great setback and a failure of sorts, but my therapist always found some way to see setbacks when they happened as a positive outcome. He was real good at that sometimes. The therapeutic alliance was making it safer for me to persevere even though I was mired in virtual despair. He also told me to email him if ever I felt the need to cut and so that is what I did.

January/March '99

Watershed

Talk therapy notwithstanding, life events were throwing me into an emotional whirlwind. A friend was dying of cancer in an agonizing protracted manner; I could not withstand any form of sexual intimacy with my husband and my work in stained glass doing church windows, was garnering national and local attention. Suddenly I was giving out interviews, my work was being published in national publications, and reporters were coming into my home. I began to feel very exposed. It was a whole new awareness of me and my work that was all too frightening to accept.

I had just finished twenty-one brand new panels for a resurrected Baptist church in Seattle, which was destroyed three years earlier due to racial hatred and arson. I had been working with the National Council of Churches in Washington, DC when national media threw a spotlight upon all the church burnings happening in the Deep South. It was then that I volunteered my time and skills to repair or replace windows that had been destroyed. I was honored at the dedication with dignitaries arriving from all over the United States, with the church filled to capacity with over 1,000 congregants. The building of this new church had such a high profile nationally that even Bishop Desmond Tutu sent a check in support. So much for critical exposure.

I had, in addition, an irrational fear of someone in my family, particularly my mother, finding me. “So,” my therapist asked, “what would happen if your mother showed up at your door?” I told him I would just freeze and the idea of it tipped me over the edge. I was consumed with “bad feelings” and the attention and notoriety I received felt undeserved.

My therapist told me that he once felt he did not deserve something. He had just opened his new office, starting his career in psychiatry after having been an anesthesiologist and was overwhelmed by a feeling that he did not deserve it. I thought that was an interesting insight on his

part, but I could not imagine why he would feel that way except to note it was a second career for him.

Then an unimaginable horror struck my husband's family. A cousin our age was found savagely stabbed to death in her home and in an advanced stage of decomposition, which meant she was murdered weeks ago. My father-in-law was devastated. To make matters worse, a second body was found in the bathroom –an apparent suicide, but in early stages of decomposition. The authorities surmised that this person had murdered our cousin, probably left the scene and came back days later, horror struck by what he had done and then shot himself.

It was a vile obscene story and hard to accept. Added to that, my mother-in-law had to color the situation by intimating the whole thing probably happened because of drugs. It was as though she had to have a reason as to why a senseless murder happened. Our cousin's indictment had to do with a former life of addiction with pain killers. Anyway, it pissed me off to hear her say it and I believed the authorities were really stretching it on their theories of the incident.

The strangest thing, however, was my reaction to the whole affair. I began to have numerous nightmares again, and I found to my amazement that I was visibly and psychologically unnerved by the murder. I dreamt about our naked cousin, watching how she suffered the brutal attack. I saw her in my mother's house, beautiful with white alabaster skin and her hair cascading to the side while strung up by ropes and savagely stabbed with a butcher's knife, but the repeated attacks did not produce gaping wounds one would expect –only deep cuts and abrasions. I watched in horror, in my dream, and I could not move. I was frozen –not as a child, but as an adult stuck in a dream within a dream.

In my next session we talked about the dream. I could not understand why this was happening to me and my therapist said, "Of course you're bothered by it." He told me that I was all too familiar with this kind of violence and it was natural for me to "imagine" and experience the murder in the way I dreamt about it. In examining the dream, he said my cousin represented me, that my mother was destroying something beautiful in me. That seemed to make sense, but it irritated me too, to think of how neurotic I had become.

With this happening on the heels of all this publicity on my work, I was shaky and feeling terribly isolated. For several months, I had been sexually estranged from my husband. I could not explain to him why I was feeling that way and it was becoming a huge problem.

I was thinking yesterday that with everything that has happened to me recently, I mean the good stuff that nothing basically has changed. My head is filled with self-doubts and just plain bad feelings again. I think that somewhere inside of me I thought something would be different or that I'd feel better after all the accolades, but I think it didn't make a bit of difference. I think I expected something different to happen or that I'd be different somehow.

(Husband) has been overly amorous of late because he's so proud and happy. Last night he wanted to make love to me and I felt like I wanted to wretch because I knew what he wanted to do to me, so I made love to him instead. I can't explain to him what I'm feeling because it has nothing at all to do with him. He's not the problem, I am. When he tries to make love to me, the image that comes into my head is that I'm spread eagled and feeling violated and nothing could be further from the truth. I see my mother over me as he is and I am revolted. I feel suffocated and want to break free. I know I'm not making any sense...all I know is that I am in deep trouble.....

And...

What am I integrating, exactly? I don't know who I really am; that is who the REAL me is. I hurt inside my heart all the time; it never abates. Finding a way to comfort myself is a struggle of limited options, like trying to keep my head above water. I feel like a shadow in my own home. The kids I see have grown past me. I don't long for their dependency; it just makes it easier for me to drift in their midst without them really needing or worrying about me. Maybe that's a good thing right now. What am I going to do about (husband)? I feel I'm living half a life with him and he deserves better. I want to fix this sex thing with him, but I'm trapped in this contract about not talking about her or the past. Hope is wearing thin...

The contract refers to a declarative statement my therapist made about not taking on the subject of my mother anymore. He learned his lesson and I think he got weary of it. I told him that I wanted to really deal with her and after many attempts in the past to try that very thing, I suppose finally he decided it wasn't worth it. One day in a session, he surprised me by being quite emphatic about it. "No, let's not deal with her." I felt "shut down," but what else could I do?

I thought maybe I need to double up on the Haldol. I was tossing and turning all night, not able to get any restful sleep and when I awoke, I was extremely fatigued and agitated. I was fighting the urge to cut again and could not handle the assignment/homework of not thinking of the past –the other contract. In fact, the exact opposite occurred and it was impossible to stay "in the present." I always thought that asking me to stay in the present and not the past, was kind of like asking an anorexic to start eating. I mean, how can you alter negative life-long behavior patterns particularly if you had no awareness that it was even a problem?

I can't do what you've asked of me. I have to concentrate very hard to not feel or relate in any way to my past. Doing what you've asked of me is a kind of purgatory. I actually feel as though I am being punished. I don't know any other way to be or feel. Nothing seems right or natural not thinking about the past. There isn't anything I can latch on to. I'm hurting inside all the time and my skin stings with pain. I've never walked so much in my life nor fought so hard to stay in the present; I want to give up...

He responded:

Sorry it is so difficult. Obviously do what you have to - just don't hurt yourself. And you are a lot more than your past. What do you think about increasing the Haldol to 4 mg at bedtime until the internal tension is lessened? I will check the e-mail in the am and then be gone for the day, available by pager.

Finally, during a session I let my therapist in on a long held secret I had been keeping. Actually, I was too embarrassed to talk about it before, but out of the blue my husband introduced a dildo into our lovemaking and I did not know what to make of it. Weeks had gone by

when he brought it into our lives. Extraordinary as it was, it was totally out of character for him to do this and at first while I was bothered about it, I let him go ahead and use it.

Then I finally brought it up in session. I was remembering my first husband and the time he brutally sodomized me. It was a memory I knew about, but the details completely obscured in an amnesia or blackout. During this session I realized that I must have had blackouts all the time; I just simply never remembered the details. It was the first time I recognized that for most of my life, I lost time a lot.

The issues then, about the dildo, became more focused and I began to understand why I was uncomfortable about it. I told my therapist that my first husband was inordinately large when he had an erection, and to be totally honest, I never enjoyed sex with him. It was always a very painful experience. My ex-husband was not a very large man—in fact, he was of average height, but when he was fully erect, he was abnormally long and 2.5 to 3 inches in circumference. I thought all men were this large, what did I know? After this session I emailed that evening:

After I left your office I went to “my place” on the beach and stayed until the sun set. It’s funny how a memory comes into full focus watching the sun go down. I have a terrible sadness inside of me at this moment because I remembered something about that episode with my ex-husband, which I have to own up to. I remembered that I allowed him to tie me down. He told me that it would be better for me if I didn’t move too much while he was going to do this thing to me and I think he asked me if it was okay if he tied me down. It was my fault, (therapist), I let him do this to me. I had to tell you this before the day ended because I think I left you thinking he did this on his own, violently against my will --in essence, I got what I deserved --that’s how it was when I was young and naive. It’s a bad memory and I’m glad I don’t remember the act itself. I just remember how tore up my insides felt and my bottom, which felt like a fifty pound weight was attached to it. I think I remember how desolate and lonely I felt afterward and that’s sort of how I feel tonight. I’ll work on being okay during the week while I deal with this and I know to write you if I get stuck...

The following morning he wrote:

As you work on this issue remember that we began from the perspective of forgiving yourself rather than blaming yourself. You tried to please him, without the knowledge of how this would feel for you. In his tying you down, with or without your consent, he knew it would hurt you. So give yourself the “break” of understanding and empathy

How stupid could one get? I could not get over how stupid and naïve I was and now it all seemed to fall into place –that right after that incident, I was in a heightened state of craziness, which precipitated everything that snowballed from there –losing control with my son, losing custody, his death and my serious suicide attempt. Now it all made sense, all the events leading up to and including my mental aversion to remembering it. From that time of purposeful reincarnation, I determined to forget everything and live my life differently, leaving behind everything remotely connected to that part of my life.

It also pointed out what was directing me away from my husband and our marital bed. God, he was patient! I do not know where he found the fortitude to stick by me through these three years of therapy. Where had the time gone? I could not believe it was three years already.

As June approached, I even thought of sticking to a goal of getting out of therapy by the end of that month. I thought I could do it and besides, wasn't it time? The main hang-up, of course, was the medication I was still on. How could I wean myself off the stuff and remain stable?

Then out of the blue my therapist announces that he and his wife have decided to take a four-week Safari in Africa. On the one hand, I felt very happy for them that they are making this trip, but then on the other, I started to panic and worry about what I was going to do while he is gone. I was still on a double dose of Haldol and the thought of keeping things nailed down till he got back, made me all the more unsure of myself. I could feel an implosion waiting to happen.

Additionally, a new turn of events occurred when my private physician wrote and informed me that he was taking an early retirement. He had

been my physician for twenty-seven years. This happened just before my therapist took off on his vacation and I wrote him in a hysterical state:

I got a letter yesterday from (physician) informing us that he is retiring. I fell apart and can't stop crying. He's the only physician I've ever allowed to touch my body. He took the time and effort to get to know me and empathized from the beginning what sort of patient I was. It feels like a member of my family has died and I don't know how to say good-bye to him. And as if this was not enough, I am wrestling with the reality of what I did to myself with my ex-husband. How do you forgive stupidity? I allowed him to make garbage waste out of my body and when I think of how pure (husband) thinks making love to me is, I just want to die. Am I repeating the abuse with (husband)? Have I idealized (husband) and our marriage?

I became very suicidal at that point. I grew despondent and very depressed for days thereafter. I did not want to live anymore:

I lost track for a few hours yesterday and found myself on that mountain. Then I remembered my promise was still in force from your phone call so I turned around. My head swirls with plans and ideas of how to do it and every time I play back the promise and what you said about a strength in me. I keep teetering on the brink and the only thing holding me back is a promise

He responded immediately:

I am glad you are holding on to the promise. See you tomorrow

Everything came into a kind of sickening focus. I needed help to dispel the image in my head, now that I was conscious of it. I saw myself being spread-eagled and probed and gouged inside by my mother and my brothers were just standing around the table I was tied to. If I persevered and tried to stay in the present, I was right back there every time my husband and I made love in the missionary position.

Before he went on vacation, we decided to schedule a longer joint session with my husband so I could tell him what was going on in my head about sexual intimacy. I was sure my husband would abandon

and divorce me once he knew. It was not so much that I had a lack of sexual drive, but that during our entire married life, I discovered that I had been disassociating during love making. I was not sure whether or not I even liked it.

During the act, I would kind of go numb and I went mentally somewhere else. And it wasn't because I did not care for my husband. I thought our "way" of doing things was completely fine for me. However, in this session, I was about to reveal that for twenty-seven years of marriage, I was not present or actively engaged. My therapist offered to mediate and provide a forum to help me talk to my husband. Finally the day came. We all sat together waiting for the words to come, but to my amazement I could not utter a single word. I could not even get out of the start gate!

Thank God my therapist jumped in to break the ice. He began by asking my husband what the "dildo" was all about at this particular time in our lives? He asked my husband if he understood my reaction to it and then proceeded to explain what was bothering me about it. Yet, more to the point, how it provoked memories that I did not want to confront or remember.

While my therapist was talking to my husband, I felt completely detached from my body, as though I was not physically in the room. I heard my husband admit that at times he had noticed that I was not completely "there." The pain I felt and what ran through my head while my husband and I were being sexually intimate was not a complete surprise to him. I was thunderstruck that he was not offended as I had expected. And the bigger shock was that he totally understood why I behaved the way I did. My therapist carefully explained that our sexual relationship must necessarily change to help me stay "present."

Intellectually, I knew the love-making had to change too. I just did not know how. I told him I felt like a wounded animal and that this new behavior with the dildo scared me and I wanted to be treated gently. I could tell my therapist did not approve of my choice of words, but I wished to convey the sensitivity I needed in being penetrated.

He told my husband that for the time being while we had sex, he would have to keep checking in on me, making eye contact whenever

possible, perhaps only doing it during day light hours –not in the evening where I can hide as I always did, using the cover of darkness to mask not being present. What I wanted to convey these many months was that I could not find the words to express or the voice to describe the desolation and failure I felt in my heart as his wife.

May '99

Deprivations

My feelings for my therapist were also becoming complicated. I felt as far away from him as I had ever been in three years of therapy. That realization shattered me. My therapist's voice was soothing, even hypnotic at times, but I knew we were disconnected. He told me that dissociation was a common strategy I used in his office. That would explain why some sessions seemed very short to me. Time literally flew by, but what I did not know was that I was losing time all the time, both in his office and outside his office.

I was hallucinating regularly too. Once, while getting into bed, I caught a glimpse of what was supposed to be myself in the mirror over our bed and saw my mother instead. It scared the hell out of me. I remember shaking my head as if I had seen an apparition, but it did not go away. It was the internal haunting and possession that would not leave me alone and contributed to the never-ending craziness and chaos I had in my head.

We had a philosophical discussion about the “meaning of life.” What was the point, I asked him, to have lived an entire lifetime feeling miserable, afraid, and not sleeping well through the night? What makes you think we can change things for the better at this late date? One thing was for sure –I did not have the energy for it. He asked me what I thought about when I think about the future. I stopped talking and sat silently in his office for about two or three minutes. “Nothing,” I said, “I can't even think beyond today much less tomorrow.” “That's what I thought,” he answered. “Ever hear of Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*?”

I read this book in college so my new home work assignment was to read it again. It's a very short book, but it is not easy reading the second time around. What the hell is “logo therapy”? I have read hundreds of accounts of concentration camp life, but never from the point of view

of a psychiatrist who was himself, a victim of Auschwitz. His thesis was simply this: if a man could understand the true meaning of his life in whatever cause he is pursuing such as simply trying to live, thrive, and survive, then it is possible to survive the deprivations of hell, so-to-speak. But who comes through a serious trauma physically, emotionally and psychologically equipped knowing the meaning of one's life?

I was captivated by his explanation of the three psychological shifts a person goes through living through the horrors of concentration camp life. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up because it accurately mirrored my own experience. First there is the horror, then the sickening vigilance of fear of the unknown that might lead to certain death; second, the apathy and blunting of emotions, feelings, even memory, which I perfectly understood, particularly from the standpoint of my siblings who had to watch and/or participate then third, the manic preoccupation of finding, securing, and consuming food.

No one knew more about the preoccupation of food than I. One scene he describes resonates so clearly my own story that only the characters are in a different time and space. I pocketed pieces of bread too, eating little bits at a time to save for a later time and made deals with myself to see if I could hold out long enough before I could touch that morsel of food again.

I did other similar things—I stuffed food under the mattress, in my dress pockets to eat later in the middle of the night. But often, I overshot on my sleep because I was so tired. When I awoke, I couldn't eat because my stomach was tied up in knots anticipating the psyche games my mother would be up to that morning while I tried to get the kids ready for school.

The next session was about starvation itself. We never talked about it before. We touched upon it briefly from time to time when I mentioned that I was starved as part of my torment. It is very hard to talk about starvation because of the humiliation associated with it that becomes part of everyday living. You are relegated to the status of a dog or species of the lowest denominator. Furtive glances and the constant and persistent vigilance of finding and hiding food are shaming:

In thinking about today's session, I decided to tell you about what being hungry was like for me. I don't think we ever talked about it. I'm sure you've read stories as have I about instances of starvation, but it's important that you understand or hear what it was like for me.

As a child, it was a part of everything else that was a daily struggle. The hypervigilance of watching her, watching out for my siblings, and trying to make sure I had food at night before I went to bed stored away underneath the mattress. Many times I went to bed too tired to do anything other than sleep, particularly if it was a night I had been whipped. Some of the food rotted and stained the underside of the mattress and I worried about that. Sometimes, hungry as I was, I was too weak to lift the mattress to reach the food I stored away. The wrapping, wax paper, was evidence I had to put in the outside garbage so no one would know. The preoccupation regarding food was as menacing as she was and it wasn't portions of anything, mainly scraps, the kind of thing you or I would feed to our dog.

My stomach was never fit company for food. To this day, it still feels like I swallowed a foreign object, like a rock sitting just below the sternum, when I eat. You see, my problem with food, sitting down at the dinner table and everything, is a lot more complicated than it seems. The paradox is that food is a fearful thing to me as much as I obsess about it and need it, obviously, for nourishment.

Watching and listening for her while trying to eat was as painful to experience as the physical torture I endured. My stomach, as much as it twisted from hunger, didn't welcome food very comfortably. Being sick with fear and anxiety wreaked havoc on my stomach. The only time it stood calm was when I was at school. Cramming food down quickly was apt to cause an eruption (vomiting) as quickly as I swallowed it down. I think I was about ten years old when I finally learned to eat very tiny bits at a time. As I think of this now, I remember how the idea of it came to me as a kind of epiphany --maybe a minor miracle of desperation.

This is the present for me as it has always been in the past. These past months, I think I've told you, I have had less and lesser moments

of separation between the past and present. They are melded as one and in the background is her...I don't exist as an entity and I don't know what the real me is like yet.

It was never easy to sit down with the family sharing a meal. It just did not feel right. I had to be moving, doing something. It often drove my husband nuts. "Please sit down and join us," he would say. To me it was a normal way to be –on my feet, serving, moving dishes around.

As for dishes, one positive outcome of my marriage to my husband is that he vowed always to do the dishes. I never had to wash pots, pans, dishes, silverware, anything that needed cleaning from the stove or dinner table, ever. It's the gift that keeps on giving.

I told my therapist that I eat alone and when I do, it is in large gulps. I wolf down the food, always, when I am by myself. I don't think I even chew my food properly. I don't like people watching me eat as would be the case if I sat down to the dinner table. I don't feel comfortable eating with people. "That's because you don't feel you deserve to join them," he said.

As we talked about this, it was clear I had learned that it was not safe to eat with people. I avoid kitchen tables because it is not safe either. For me it was used as an instrument of torture. As children, we ate all of our meals at the kitchen table. I raised and fed my own family on the kitchen table. That table from my childhood was grey marble Formica with matching chairs.

Some brilliant person in the interior design industry recently put an ad in a magazine promoting 50's Americana furniture, and there it was –an exact replica of that table and chairs. It gave me the willies. I brought it in and handed it to my therapist. "What do you see?" I asked, and in a heartbeat he said, "It's the kitchen table and chairs." See? It's real and I'm not crazy.

Even now when I picture myself eating at the kitchen table, it looms large and menacing –not a place for a family gathering to eat meals. The compulsive behavioral system I organized around the subject of food looks manageable enough on the surface, but it really is not a

good coping strategy for today. That is the cruel legacy of hunger and starvation.

July '99

The Deer

I remembered something about a deer...On the farm in Oregon, my grandparents lived on a parcel with fourteen acres. The buildings of the farm lay in a valley with surrounding acreage and a high road out of the farm lead us up to the main road, which on the other side of the road was high ground, almost a long wide high hill, some of which was part of the fourteen acres my grandparents owned.

It was a very cold and snowy day when my grandfather and I were in the truck on our way home and just before our turn onto the road leading to the house, a young deer came rambling down from the high hill across the road and slammed into our truck. I remember my grandfather and me getting out of the truck. The deer's right shoulder was ripped out its socket and the rest of her body looked like it had been bent in half at the waist. It was dying and I just stared at it while my grandfather swore like a longshoreman because he didn't have his rifle with him, so he ran down the road to the house to get his gun, leaving me alone with the deer.

The next thing I remember is waking up the next day late in the evening and not remembering a thing about what happened to the deer or what. I remember my grandmother wouldn't let me out of bed, although clearly my grandparents were upset with me...I sensed it was a mixture of worry and upset and I didn't know what I had done.

Later, I was told that when my grandfather arrived with his gun to put the deer out of its misery, I was nowhere in sight. The accident happened about mid-morning. Soon they spent the entire afternoon and evening searching for me. They got the neighbors to form a search party covering the entire acreage and then finally the sheriff's department with dogs was involved. They didn't search the high ground because they thought I couldn't go through the barbed wire

fence, but that's what I apparently did. I was found about ten o'clock that evening leaning up a tree with my arms wrapped around my legs staring off into space not responding to anything. They thought I was in shock due to severe hypothermia. I was taken to the hospital where I stayed over night and I was brought home by noon the following day. Nothing beyond this information went beyond why I wandered off. All I heard about was how much trouble I caused everyone and how irritated I made everyone feel, even the sheriff's department.

I don't know why I didn't recall this till now, but when it came to me, I kept coming back to that scene with the deer. I had cradled its head in my lap and this piercing sound from the back of its throat....have you ever heard the sound or howl of a deer crying in agony?

I was watching a show about wild life. A deer was being treated by a veterinarian. The TV did a close up of the deer's head and boom, just like that, it swallowed me up and I remembered the deer incident in Oregon. When I think of the sound of that deer's cry, it gives me the creeps. I started to think of my brother the bed-wetter, but I also thought the sound was coming out of me. My therapist wondered if this memory was yet another example of people not attending to me.

Something is pushing to the surface; I don't know what it is. It's like I cannot get the sound of that cry out of my head. It wasn't just the deer. It's just that I've heard that sound before. I just cannot remember where or when. There are so many gaps in my memory. I remember very few things in any given sequence. For example, I don't remember being eight or eleven years old –at all. In therapy I learned that dissociation was an adaptation that worked wonderfully as a child, but was not helping me as an adult because it was presenting itself during therapy sessions. I would slip out and in without an idea I was doing it. The moment something unpleasant happened or I felt bad, I would go out. I would wake up to the sound of my therapist snapping his fingers or whistling. It also was becoming dangerous.

The blackouts seemed to be increasing and threatening my ability to drive safely. I was coming home from a rehearsal one day and ended up in the middle of on-coming traffic not remembering how I got there. When I "awoke," cars were passing fast trying to avoid hitting me. At the

next session I told my therapist about it and suddenly his face became hard like stone and he said, “Not on my watch.”

He then ticked off three or four things in succession that I had to do, and if I didn't do them, he was going to call the DMV to have my license pulled and have me hospitalized again. I was stunned, but it got my attention. I had to stop all of my singing engagements and other commitments on three community boards. We increased sessions to twice a week for a brief period and medication was altered because it was pretty noisy inside my head.

These have been desperate days and at nights, I have no peace; I feel like I'm dying little by little. I'm writing you because I am close to the brink. I close my eyes at night praying I won't wake up in the morning. The pain of my life and the images I see in my head and most of the time during the day is unbearable. I feel like I'm in the body of an eighty year old woman. I hurt all over my body. I see myself over and over again lying on the cold floor waiting for someone to help take me away. I'm holding my breath waiting for someone, anyone to help get me up off the floor. I see hands, my mother's hands and they are menacing. She's manicuring them, probably for me. I can't believe in the rape. It still feels unreal. I don't remember anything, but the image haunts me. I have a body sensation of the image, but I don't remember her being inside me. If I know it, I know I will die. I cry all the time and all I feel is like dying, there's no healing or comfort possible from this. I'm eight years old and I'm asking God, is it okay to die now?

And

My memories are like snapshots and I can't think of one positive moment ever, like how about something innocuous like birthdays? Everyone celebrates it as kids, right? But I have no memory of ever celebrating birthdays. I can't even remember them happening to my siblings. I can't remember being eleven, for example, and I know I was on the farm. My brother reminded me that I was ten when we moved. I don't remember anything about the move, packing or anything about leaving San Francisco. It's just boom...I'm on the farm.

And when you asked if the cousins saw anything? I don't know why I said yes because I don't really remember that much except that there was a lot of violence in that family too and instinctively I felt the answer was correct, but that's not enough is it?

I remember the day they arrived and I think it sticks out in my mind because of the absurdity of it all. It was bizarre how they just moved in and no one raised a fuss about it—their nine children along with our nine and four adults with one bathroom. I guess I'm writing about this because it is so important to me to be accurate, yet on second thinking, I'm not always sure.

I remember when they left, I left. A huge explosion happened and I think it all was done within a few days of each other. Accusations about the “affair” and my uncle putting his hand through a glass window in the barn, otherwise known as the torture chamber. He beat (cousin) and the others in the barn. That became our place of torture too.

Today I had pockets of time that I lost, not gross amounts, but significant to say that it still occurs. I didn't hurt myself, which is one good thing, but I worry. I'm most worried about driving...I drift so easily and I don't mean just mentally. I'm becoming a prisoner in my house.

Notes to myself:

-secret thoughts regarding sex, privacy, forgiveness?

I don't know why I'm thinking of this now, but when I was very little, my mother shaved off all of the hair on my body—my hair, eyelashes, eyebrows, everything. She made me stand naked in front of a mirror as punishment for a very long time. Why the mirror? What was that about? What was the point? Why did she do it? The thing standing in front of the mirror was a glob of something that was not real or human to me. There was no line or definition of anything resembling a girl. No arms, legs, fingers or toes, just a blob of flesh.

To this day, it is still hard to look at myself in the mirror. I'm afraid of what I will see. I am meticulous about my make-up because I want to cover everything up, hide the scars. I have a lot of them on my face, scars

inside my lips. I wear false eyelashes because they never grew back the way they were. But I don't really see myself. It is somebody else, another canvass I'm painting on

"What is Real?"... "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams

During Yom Kippur, I finally remembered why she did it. Fasting this year was unusually hard, but it stirred something up and I remembered the punishment of twelve days starvation on bread and water. She'd done that before, punishing us for days with bread and water and it was always twelve long days. Why twelve? What was significant about the number twelve? I was allowed half a piece of bread and a bit of water three times a day.

When the twelve days were over, I sat down to eat a full meal, which I gobbled down completely. I then immediately vomited everything up, which enraged my mother so much that she grabbed my hair, only it came out in huge clumps in her hand. That is the image that came back to me when I woke from a nap on Yom Kippur –when she shaved everything off, punishing me again because I threw up.

October '99

(Note: This was another homework assignment)

My Life-script

What early decisions did I make as a child to help me survive?

- It's not okay to be
- I must be bad for her to hurt me; not good enough to protect
- Nobody wants (loves) me
- Don't let anyone know how bad I feel
- People can't be trusted; can't depend on anyone to help me; I am alone
- If things get really bad, I can always disappear (disassociate, forget, not feel, run into the street and get hit by a car)
- I can't die; who will protect my sister, my other siblings?
- Adults always leave

What were the injunctions I felt as a child?

- Don't
- Don't be
- Don't feel
- Don't be a child
- Don't trust

What were my counter injunctions?

- Work hard, but don't be important
- Take care of siblings, but don't protect them (feel)
- Do household chores, but don't play (be a child)
- Pain is usual, natural, but don't show it
- What you see is not real (body)
- Talk but no one will believe you

What old feelings or rackets trip me up?

- Recognition for a deed never seems enough
- Compliments are heard as falsehoods, or easily dismissed
- Must always be busy or else I'm in trouble again
- What is there to love?
- Kindness means they want something from me

What social exchanges or games can I identify to feel okay?

- Set myself up in situations where I feel needed or of use to somebody, e.g. political causes, synagogue, community groups
- I am the solution to something/someone
- I can give endlessly, effortlessly
- What can I do to please others

What basic position (being okay, not okay) did I take regarding people or myself?

I'm okay if I:

- Don't feel
- Don't cry
- Don't trust
- Take care of others
- Watch my mother's behavior
- Don't tell
- Work hard
- Don't love my pets
- Don't become attached to anything/anyone
- Don't be me
- Hate me

What gender script or script role can I say relate to me?

- Wise Old Man / Mother Hubbard
- Sir Lancelot / Suzy Wong
- Superman / Wonder Woman
- Caretaker, rescuer, compelled always to take care of others

What bad-feeling payoffs can I identify?

- They would like me if I came from a better family; if I were white
- They will want me because I work hard
- I am true to my word because they value honor

What is my script payoff?

- Terrified something bad will happen
- Good events never last long
- Waiting for the sky to fall or other shoe to drop
- People love what I do, not who I am

What escape hatches can I identify?

- As a child, disassociation, disappearing, forgetting, not feeling
- As an adult, forgetting, disappearing, suicide
- Overwork myself, then I won't have to think, feel
- Turn anger inward, depression, cease to function

What relationships did I have with a tragic outcome?

- First husband, master-slave relationship, abusive physically & sexually
- Unfit mother to first born son

How do I think I will die, and how long will I live?

- I feel life for me will be short; will not experience grandchildren growing up
- I pray to die before my husband
- May die in a violent car accident or be hit by a car

What would my epitaph say?

- Others would say, "She could do anything, and do it well"
- I would say, "No one believed her; what happened to her was not important or significant"

What is my contract for change?

- I want to accept personal validation as readily (easily) as say, (therapist) seems to
- I want to believe I am worth while; that I have value
- I want to be able to listen, hear, and take care of myself when I need to
- I want to be able to look at my body, remember, and not become small again
- I want to abandon my fear of losing control; to cry for my hurt and pain; to finally let go and just be

- I want to be able to revel and enjoy the moment and not worry about impending disaster

What are some of my unfinished issues?

- Looking for acceptance, understanding
- Being heard, that my story does not fall on deaf ears
- Without my therapist's validation, no one will believe it anyway; how could they?

February '00

The Third Party

The medical insurance coverage for my care became a battleground of its own –a war on another front to keep the benefits I was due (52 sessions a year), and being able to stay with my therapist. The insurance company started asking him to submit and go through the process of being recredentialed, which he found frustrating, insulting and humiliating after a thirty-year career as a psychiatrist.

Insurance companies began enforcing annual enrollment schedules, usually in the month of October, which meant an employee had to choose an HMO or PPO coverage. The doctor had to be in either or both networks. That was simply a guise or ruse to begin squeezing out established doctors like my psychiatrist to qualify under very stringent guidelines that limited their ability to treat long-term patients like me, and force them to submit requests to certify 10 visits at a time, and stipulate the reason –often violating medical ethics and confidentiality.

You're probably not aware of this, but our relationship was ripped apart by the insurance thing. I keep thinking about the last three months before the New Year, I was on a firm footing with you. Going twice a week was tremendously helpful. I think it was rather successful, don't you? But we're not there anymore.

The depression is very bad; I don't sleep very well and I have no energy to get up and bring on the day. All of last week, my life was wrecked apart thinking about our relationship, --the possibility that you might no longer be my therapist, or my friend and what would I do? But you know what? Something curious came over me --a kind of resignation of giving into this situation being dropped on my head. It's familiar territory, after all. I appreciate every thing you do to help me and I do TRY to listen when you speak "truths." You've always been very good about "owning" up to something, particularly if it was a misunderstanding with me. My

heart aches because I had a whole bunch of stuff to talk out with you, but a little voice in my head keeps saying, "He's leaving." I know you've said that you have no intention of doing that. I heard that and part of me accepted it as fact and I believe it to be true, but I want you to know that that little voice weighs heavily in my mind --that other part of me which is unbelieving, distrustful and not sure how to continue. I'm trying to be clear about what's going through my mind. I hope you take it in the context it is written; I'm not angry with you or anything

He answered:

With respect to the "insurance thing," I understand it caused a disruption in our relationship and regret that. I am assuming that recredentialing will go ahead without problems and I will continue to be your therapist as long as that works for you. But that is what life and relationships are all about. We can never know what will happen, so we proceed as if the relationship is forever, and check in with our inner resources to deal with the consequences of life's unexpected crisis.

Having this "third party" in the middle of our therapeutic alliance, added more stress than I could tolerate. It was the safety issue all over again –not feeling safe because I might not be able to afford treatments, not feeling safe because mental health benefits were being cut back, and not feeling safe because I could lose my therapist because of it.

By this time, my therapist began talking about not dealing with insurance at all and going independent, so that meant he would not be on any approved "network" that insurance would cover. Oh, you can choose your therapist all right, but only those on the "approved" mental health network system, which doctors contract with at reduced fees.

The thing of it is, everybody knows the quality of experience and expertise on that list is often the lowest common denominator or they are fresh out of school and couldn't find their (you know what) with two hands and a flashlight. All the best psychiatrists in Santa Cruz went independent. How much more panic and untold human wreckage did that cause, especially if you were middle-class or poor?

Mental healthcare treatment, thereafter, was handled like treating a toothache –you’re in and then you’re out. If it’s more than two sessions, that’s too long. Put them on anti-depressants, numb them up and move on. Books were coming out on “abbreviated therapies” and you were a hero if you could treat people on an assembly belt.

Maybe it’s the Grover Norquist dogma coming home to roost after all: Starve the mental health system into non-existence and then drown it in a bathtub.¹ No psychiatrist worth his/her salt wants to mess with insurance hassles and bureaucracies. They have enough out-of-pocket paying patients –who needs the headache?

Besides, it is a disease for dilettantes, malingerers and neurotic rich people.

February ‘00

¹ *“My goal is to cut government in half in twenty-five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub”* Grover Glenn Norquist, neo-conservative, one of the “Gang of Five” by Nina Easton.

What We Care to Know

When an abusive caregiver uses force and threats, including emotional and physical coercion, it destroys childhood. Children learn very early that human interaction will literally kill them. Exponentially, the vile destructive things that are perpetrated upon children make ghosts out of the adults they become –they are here and not here, and most destructive of all, they are haunted by the child they were. I read somewhere that emotional growth gets stunted –that for the adult survivor, everything is experienced through a child’s prism. It means they never grow up emotionally.

As a child, I quickly learned that the world is dangerous, not safe and inconsistent. I learned coping strategies that supported decisions I had made that said I was worthless and undeserving. I learned in therapy that I allowed these belief systems to control, dominate and dictate the course of my life. In an obsessive compulsive way, I organized my life around the trauma of my childhood. And most damning of all, when trying to explain or tell what happened; I would always sense the trivialization of the “abuse.” Then I received the following email from my therapist:

I have a story to tell you about a personal experience I had this past weekend during a professional meeting. I don't think I can convey what I want in this email so I will tell you tomorrow. The bottom line is that I know you are right. I have been guilty of trivializing what happened to you and I am truly sorry.

It was Memorial Day weekend. He had attended a professional conference on family violence and one of the speakers incited a sense of outrage in him, which he shared with me during our next session. Apparently, the speaker had made a reference to something that seemed relative to my experience and it provoked a surprising feeling of rage in my therapist toward the speaker. He told me that what he saw in this

person, i.e., the egregious lack of empathy and the trivialization of the violence in dysfunctional families, he realized he had to hold a mirror up to his own face.

This revelation was timely because in an earlier session, my therapist characterized my situation as sexual and “just abuse,” which sent me into a tailspin and serious relapse. I felt crazy and out of control and amazed by his lack of comprehension, so I wrote a ferocious email:

I don't understand why it appears okay...the things that were done to me, something classified as “inside the family,” the terrible secrets no one wants to hear about and now will remain a secret between the four walls of your office.

I feel so marginalized and somewhat betrayed. I thought you agreed with me that it was more battery, torture than abuse and I wanted the world to see or know the difference, but there is no difference, now you tell me. That was going to be the “justice” I was seeking. I still don't see that everything that happened to me was strictly sexual. I was tortured and made to suffer over length of days. I was starved, humiliated in public, I was turned into a subhuman species and have never ceased feeling like something beneath someone's shoe...I now know that I am really alone. My lifeline snapped away on Tuesday. I'm just a victim of abuse, my mother gets away with it and I can't tolerate being alive pretending that everything is okay, that what was done to me for twelve long years doesn't amount to anything but simply abuse. I know you didn't mean to, but you hurt me very much.

The word “abuse” is a misnomer to me and I never use it to describe what happened to me. Is it possible to imagine going up to a Holocaust survivor and describe their Nazi terror as abuse?

When an ordinary person is assaulted physically, does the law characterize it as abuse? When a police officer is touched or resisted physically, is that abuse? And isn't it interesting that when a female is raped or beaten it's called sexual abuse and domestic abuse respectively? Sounds kind of minimizing doesn't it? If it were happening to a man, it would be called assault and battery, and that includes rape when it happens to an adult male. Every time the word “abuse” is used in the

context of what happened to me, it makes me feel crazy. It's like saying the Holocaust, i.e., the one that was happening in my house, didn't happen.

It was June '00 and throughout that entire year, my therapist and I had numerous misunderstandings and it always seemed to center around my perception of not being heard. It would also lead to a flurry of dreams or nightmares like the following:

I dreamed that I was at my sister's house somewhere in the City and I was in bed in one room and my grandmother was in another. My brother was expected (he's coming today for a visit with the family) too. Suddenly some huge explosive sound woke me up and my sister was screaming my mother was killed by my father.

I got out of bed shaking like a leaf and couldn't make my legs move. There was something in my eyes like some thick goop and I couldn't see and make my way through the halls and stairwell; it was dark. I leaned my back up against the wall trying to walk, but with great difficulty. I worried that I might miss a step on the stairs and fall. I was extremely frightened because there were cops and strangers everywhere. My sister was remarkably calm and my brother was standing like a sentinel, completely detached from what was going on. No one seemed interested in talking to me or asking questions.

I tried to get through the house and still couldn't move or see very well. I wanted to see whether or not my mother was absolutely dead, but I didn't see my mother or her body anywhere and my father was nowhere to be found. Then all I wanted to do was leave, to run and get away, again my legs were lethargic and felt glued to the floor. When I got outside, I found a frog statue telephone that felt like it was mine (never owned one) outside the door and wondered how it was connected and why I couldn't remove it and bring it back into the house? The cops told me I couldn't move it.

Another dream:

...I dreamt last night that my mother came to the door. I thought it was the same dream about to happen with my son showing up, but instead of finding him, I found her in a wheelchair on a breathing

machine attempting to get into my house. One of my brothers was standing with her with that glassy eye look they all had whenever they passed me during a punishment or beating. I heard me saying to myself that (daughter) was in the house and that I'll tell her I'll go with her if she doesn't come into the house. I thought about the prospect of her killing me and that didn't frighten me as much as the idea of her touching (daughter) or being in my house. The thought also came to me that her finally killing me would feel more or less natural and ordinary. And just as I was about to tell her I'll come with her, I woke up in a sweat...

These dreams were auguries of things to come. I was not feeling well so changing medications and/or adjusting the dosage usually became the first line of attack especially when I relapsed. At the time I was taking Neurontin and Serzone and then was advised to stop cold turkey when I started having more blackouts, which included sessions I had been to, but could not remember what had occurred. I started on Risperdal and Wellbutrin. Unfortunately, during this time of adjustments, my therapist went on an African safari. I think he was gone four weeks and had arranged for a back-up psychiatrist to be on stand-by. All during these four weeks I felt just awful and I seemed to be getting worse, feeling more and more physically ill. In addition to everything else, I was visibly shaking really bad, so my private physician prescribed Ativan.

Within days, I ended up in the emergency room suffering hallucinations, rapid heartbeat, agitation and strained/stiff neck problems. That experience was a total blank to me; I didn't remember a thing about it. My husband told me. Clearly, I was having some reaction to the meds so the emergency doctor, my private physician and the back-up psychiatrist all came to the conclusion that I probably backed off the Neurontin and Serzone too fast without tapering off. I had to get off the Risperdal and went back on a night dosage of Serzone, Ambien and Wellbutrin during the day. The back-up psychiatrist thought it was not a good idea to mix Ativan with Ambien so I went off of it. It was just as well because I did not like the way I felt on Ativan anyway.

My physical complaints continued and I began to suspect that it was all in my head. I was not improving very much so on a whim, my

physician decided to do a thyroid check and whoa and behold, it was way off the mark. I was already taking thyroid medication, but it needed to be changed so once the dose was corrected, within a week or two I was feeling like myself again. In the meantime, I did some reading about thyroid problems and learned that the thyroid thrown off balance like it was, while interacting with the medication I was taking, probably contributed to these weeks of my feeling lousy. So, once again, I had the validation I needed that I was not crazy and that it was not all in my head.

Added to all this turmoil was the pain. I was wracked with tremendous body pain. In addition to feeling ill, I had to cope with aggravated physical pain. All my nerve endings seemed to be alive. My neck, back and shoulder areas were screaming. As violent memories were coming to the surface, I would fight with the pain of remembering, and then my body (I was told later) would remind me of the physical pain. I began to notice that I was never entirely left alone with either the memories or the pain. It seemed as though my therapist and physician just didn't get it:

I had high hope that physical therapy with my physical pain could reverse some of the damage, but when it came time to be more specific about "how" I sustained an injury, suddenly a "disconnect" happens and I'm back to square one, faced with isolation, trivialization and feeling very alone. I began to wish fervently for the solace of dissociation, when I didn't have to feel anything.

The pain I have is REAL, but I don't think anyone believes it's real. I suspect a portion of it is somatic, but doesn't it make sense to anyone that I may have sustained permanent injuries too? No, instead I have a permanent stamp on my forehead --female mental patient. What I say and feel is irrelevant. I was so weary of it all that I plunged into a deep depression this week

The "disconnect" you see in people's eyes when you talk about something traumatic or hurtful, is the most damaging aspect of telling your story to anyone who will listen. All of a sudden you are put into the position of protecting or helping the listener cope. To illustrate this point, I wrote the following:

I didn't mean to "charge" you with anything per se, but merely to make a point that people's reaction to my past is a kind of burden I have to be responsible for so others are not overwhelmed. It's like being a black person walking into a room of inexperienced white people and having to take on the responsibility of making certain individuals feel comfortable. Despite how I'm feeling, I have to be concerned about which people I involve and when. And when I do, I have to be prepared for that "look" of non-comprehension and deal with their unintentional fear. Their worldview of a decent and fair world gets disrupted and personally threatening when faced with the potential of man's inhumanity toward each other. I know what it means...how can something like that happen and --it's beyond belief as well. For someone like me however, validation and acknowledgement are rare commodities and far from actual experience. It took nearly fifty years before world understanding of concentration camp survivors' experience elevated them to a revered status that no one questions anymore. Their trauma is immediately and emotionally accessible and comprehended

My therapist responded:

I was surprised as I sometimes am; when we work through (at least in my understanding) a difficult point and then I find it is not as I thought. I understand -- at least I think I understand -- based on your experience, how misunderstandings, miscommunications, and disconnects are experienced as hurts. I hope that won't always be so. It is true, with respect to your pain, the body holds on to pain experiences as it does to other memories -- we do know that, although the knowledge is so recent that few MDs understand the phenomenon, let alone knows how to treat it. If you want we can talk some about the newer understanding about chronic (I hate that word, but it has special meaning in this context) pain on Tuesday.

September 27, 2000

Feelings

It is strange the things we try to hide from ourselves. You sense it and feel it, but somehow the “thing” is imperceptible, out of focus, and unreal. My memory was refocusing all the time like a camera lens; the details revealing themselves always in reverse. In the first few years of therapy I was telling my story as if I was talking about someone else. What I was revealing were snapshots of memory, disjointed and out of sequence. It was the out-of-sequence part that I found most troubling and worrisome. I wanted to be accurate and precise, that was key to me because you want so much to be believed. Now, these last few years of therapy took on a new dimension dealing with feelings. Memories that were once devoid of affect and feeling were activated with an emotional landscape that was scary and overwhelming:

I can't believe I told you all that I have disclosed --the shame and humiliation of knowing I told you everything, is excruciating. I've been on a crying jag since I saw you last and I'm wondering how I can face you again this coming Tuesday. I haven't been able to eat and I can't talk to (husband). He's wondering why I have withdrawn from everyday living these last few days if not weeks. I'm sleepwalking through the days --no energy to move. When I need to talk to you comes at a time when I feel this awful pull to hurt myself. I want to feel the blood lacing down my body just so I can feel something. I'm sorry I said that but who can I talk to, even about this? I want to feel better inside, not think of it over and over again, what she did and all the time I'm asking "why," what did I do to make her so mad? That is the one question I keep asking myself, as if the answer or reason would cure everything. I am a stupid, stupid woman. This is all the same, this stuff --it's not even a big mystery is it? I hurt so bad inside, I can't make it stop. I'm hateful, dirty and lower than a slug. I keep returning to the coldness of the table on my skin and am wondering why I

didn't think about why I avoid kitchen tables. I don't have that same reaction to my dining room furniture but I do for the kitchen area. I get a quick nauseous feeling then it's hard to hang on. Did she rape me? Is that what you call it? Why is this so much more terrible? I'm thinking, "Can I disappear now? Is it okay to just stop"? I'm drowning...

As is evident here, feelings and the emotions attached to them can be overpowering, deleterious, merciless, pernicious, and energy depleting. Thinking processes get skewed and one's sense of equilibrium is thrown off. This period of 18-24 months of therapy was the most difficult. My therapist kept saying, "Where is your rage?" He had a theory that I had learned that having any feelings of rage was dangerous and not safe. My mother, he said, had beaten that into me. Whenever I felt rage, it scared me; I was afraid to know what that meant. It was easier to blame me or take it out on myself. Emails went back and forth and the responses were my safety valve between sessions:

...Your pain was doubly apparent. I think I must be missing something because you continue to blame yourself when you are/were the victim. Is it possible that is the way you protect yourself from feelings of rage? What makes those feelings so problematic that you choose to hate yourself rather than the perpetrator of the evil? Possibly you would think you are just like her if you express rage. You are not. Sharing one set of feelings – rage – does not make you like her. There is so much more to you. I hope I have not said too much. Take care of the little girl who is in pain and reliving her past. Nourish her and cherish her.

In one email, I wrote that I was shaking the tail of a demon that would not go away. I could not escape it even if I wanted to. As a child, I always tried to reason out things in my head. If I could understand why, I could bear anything my mother did to us, but my therapist said that knowing why did not matter. He said of course as a child I wanted to figure out why. When the why was unknowable, as a child I blamed myself. Then he said, as an adult we often have to accept that we cannot know why. "Evil," he said, "is evil without a reason."

During this time I sought relief from the aches and pain I was having with my back, shoulders and neck. I went to a physical therapist who

introduced me to electrode stimulation and deep tissue massage. I was feeling crazy with the pain and I obsessed about cutting myself for relief. Her hands were exquisitely warm and strong. I would have daymares where I would be watching myself as the child and really feeling the slices and bruising all over my body. Then I would see my mother laughing at me. I was plagued with migraines nearly everyday. Pain was my constant companion. I thought the physical therapy was helping me, but all it did was make me feel worse and my therapist anxious:

We talked about this happening. Several things come to mind. Most important – stop your physical therapy, now. You have made too many gains to let yourself slip back. Your body's tightness has been another layer of protection. The warm hands feel nurturing, but regardless of the intent, for you, with your history they are doubly dangerous. Their warmth is seductive and their power to unleash archaic forces is dangerous. So stop it now!

My body was absolutely screaming. It was on fire as though the epidermis of the outside skin was flayed off, oozing with exposed nerve endings. Adding to the burden of reliving the pain, the past, my husband was suddenly laid off after a sixteen-year career at one of the largest companies in Silicon Valley, losing our entire retirement of stock options accrued over that work history, and healthcare benefits.

My therapist by this time decided to go entirely independent of insurance companies and while our benefits lasted, I think I was the only patient he had where he was willing to bill insurance, despite the enormous bureaucratic hassles he put up with. I felt terrible about it. When the benefits went away, we were at the crucible of my therapy and we had to take out a second mortgage to cover not only our household expenses, but my continuing therapy, paid out of pocket. We were in the thick of it and we could not stop now. My husband was absolutely adamant that I keep working toward healing. He was willing to hock everything to get me well.

My therapist charged me the same as if he were being reimbursed by the insurance company, which was 30% less than his normal fee. Now he was, in effect, financially supporting my therapy as well. The

burden and pressure of his good will after nearly five years of intensive psychotherapy, weighed heavily on my mind and heart.

We kept going, moving forward and we were finally getting somewhere. Therapy was more about confrontation now. I was ready for it. I started making notes like:

- It doesn't matter what you feel
- It's not faking when you're changing things
- It's really you; it's real; you're real
- Don't worry about what (therapist) thinks or feels
- Fake it till you make it

The thought came into my head that it is probably irritating to talk about what I feel all the time --is that worrying again about what you think? When I couldn't talk to you last week, when you asked a simple question, I felt an overwhelming sensation to cry and make the images go away; I had an incredible urge to run out of your office --I think I might have if you persisted. Why can't I get angry about what I keep seeing and feeling?...Something is going to happen, I just know it...

One of the things we started talking about was the cost valuation (both physically and psychologically) –implications with decisions I try to make, i.e., am I taking care of myself in the process?

...I have no answers and I need to figure out what are things I need to do to protect myself when I get fearful or agitated or feeling bad about myself. What are the things I can do to cope? How do I trust what I am doing is safe? I've been dreaming about my mother and I have this awful sense that something bad is going to happen. I wish she would just die and fall out of my life. I feel something is wrong, a bad feeling...

We talked about strategies, what I can do to divert myself when I become agitated, specifically with memories. We talked about the dichotomies of experience I have when I either relive pictures or words, which crop up in my head and then try to busy myself so much that I don't have

to think or feel anything. I know now that both are deleterious and harmful to my safety. I began to understand that I can't relive them without consequences, so I had to "think" my way out of these feelings and emotional chaos of flashbacks.

We decided that I should "stamp my feet" if I began to feel overwhelmed, but that sounded like I was getting ahead of myself because sometimes like the "kitchen experiences," it was not natural yet to "think" my way out quite so easily:

I didn't get a chance to tell you that what gets in the way are the words I hear in my head..." I don't belong there; I'm last and have to wait; I don't want anyone to see me." I see myself eating with immense greed, gulping food so I'm neither seen or yelled at. I hate yelling when I eat. The tension I feel keeps me away from the table and the table represents an instrument of evil...How do I keep myself safe from that? ... Curiously though I thought about all this stuff during the week and I noticed this contract of writing between sessions is helping to keep me on target and not so disengaged. I feel like I can take a step forward with you without feeling I am falling behind --on some weird level, doesn't that seem wonderful?...

We stayed on track, both of us like blood hounds on a hunt. I was beginning to feel better. Things were changing, for the better.

February 9, 2002

Saying Goodbye

Flashbacks continued to be a problem. I never knew what it was like not to have them. It never occurred to me that being in a constant state of flashback was not a natural state to be in. In fact, it wasn't until I asked my therapist one day, why the flashbacks were happening even when I was doing something pleasant or enjoyable, that I think a light bulb simultaneously went off in our heads. He knew I was having them, but I don't think until that very moment he understood how flooded I was by them, every single day. That is when he started me on Tiagabine or Gabitril to control them.

He asked me to count them and to keep a log; I was having so many of them that I could not count them. It took months and months before they lessened in frequency so that I could count them. Then things started clearing up. I could think more clearly and the bats in the belfry were disappearing. The gauze and noise in my head started clearing away and I began to feel less chaotic. I was calming down and we continued to talk strategies.

One day on a classic rock station, the rhythm and blues song "Protect Yourself" was playing and for the first time I really listened to the words. Protecting me was one of the many core issues that disturbed and disrupted my everyday life. I discovered that I never established boundaries with people. I could not say "no" to anyone and I did not feel that I even had the right to say "no."

Most of the time when I got into trouble with people, it was always about not setting up limitations with me, and it would end up with people taking advantage of me. I took a look at my relationships with family, friends, neighbors and acquaintances and learned that a lot of the interaction between them and I were abusive of my person, my time, financial resources and emotional well-being.

The old belief system was one of accommodation toward other people and their agendas, not mine. I did not know how to take care of myself as a process and feel good about it. Also, when bad feelings happen, I had to ask first, “What are the things I need to do to protect myself? What are the things I can do to cope? Do I need to stand and move around, stamp my feet so my feet are touching the ground? How do I trust that what I am doing is safe for me?”

We talked about different scenarios and strategies with an eye to protecting me first. If someone calls and makes a request, say for example, “Can I get back to you on that?” or “Let me check my calendar and I’ll get back to you later today.” This would give me the chance and the opportunity to think about what is being asked of me and question whether or not I am okay with it. “Is this a good thing for me to do? What is my investment? Am I taking care of and protecting myself? Other questions included, “Will this impact my family in any way?” or “Am I physically and emotionally safe doing this?”

At this time too, my sister became a focal point that I could not or was unwilling to protect myself from. When she called, she seemed to be in a crisis all the time. Her relationship broke up, she lost her house and she was having problems with her alters.

Sometimes when she called, her voice would sound different, strident and hard one moment, soft or child-like the next. I did not know how to comfort her. I said all the right things, but inside I could feel myself drifting into a fog where my feet would not touch the ground. I would start getting a hallow sound in my ears as if sound went out of the world.

When I talked to her, I was learning that I had no protection from her. My therapist and I talked many, many times about her and my reactions to her. All my instincts would gather up to protect my sister again. I would think, “I left her behind and look what happened to her.” I was responsible for what happened. I could not separate myself from the guilt of leaving her and every time she called, I would be lifting into a dissociative state. She’d tell me things like one of her alters hurt her badly, or she would ask me to come see her perform in a choir because “our mother never attended such activities” and that my coming would be like making up for that loss. Hearing things like that

would completely suck me in and I would immediately feel I had to be her mother again, caught in a spider's web of indecision.

In thinking about my sister, since I've seen you last, I realized that having anything to do with her bring all the bad stuff I think of about myself. My mother is here and thriving. I think of the beatings and the whippings, I see the instruments she used and I see what happened to my sister didn't happen to me, but why not me? The voice in my head is my mother and she's very noisy saying bad things to me and I feel small. When I try to grow myself up, I begin thinking of the knapsack and all the things I can put in it to ward off my mother and my sister --one of them is telling my mother that I am not like her, I have my children whom she can't touch; I am a good person, I'm not a fake, I matter and I am real. That's the battle I'll always fight when I talk to my sister. I can hear us both wishing our mother would apologize and wondering if she'll ever forgive us. Neither of us could make her happy. If I risk a disconnection with my sister knowing all the things she told me about what happened when I left, I worry that she'll harm or kill herself and then where would I be? We're so connected in some ways that I get unraveled every time, down that slippery slope I was in when we first met. I feel so guilty about her --I need to be free of her, but how?

Finally, my therapist could not restrain himself and he forwarded this email:

...It's OK to consider and OK to remind her that you are not her mother and in fact, the comparison is unfair and puts you in a bad place. The only way you can survive in a relationship with her is if she cleans up her act and can be present and accounted for with you. Those alters are dangerous to you too because she seems to not recognize the impact her machinations have on you. Keep your distance.

Talking to my sister was like “rubber-banding to the past,” my therapist would say. He said the challenge was for me to recognize that what my sister says and does, how she looks and sounds is all about her and has nothing to do with me. Being free of my mother and sister was part of

acknowledging that I was the person I was, the me back then when I was a child.

By the way, regarding that knapsack, my husband offered up an additional consideration: pack stakes, a mallet, and a Star of David. Good advice.

Ultimately, talk turned to the inevitable. What would our relationship be like when I left therapy? He asked me what I thought it should be. I imagined all sorts of things, but primary among them was that he would forever be part of my family, my nuclear family. Not with my husband and children, but the nuclear family of my youth. He was there for me, when I was little. He did not do anything more than listen to me. That meant that I was a real person and that I mattered. Because you see, I grew up in his office. How could I ever sever or separate from a bond like that?

I asked him what usually happened with patients who left. He told me that we would go our separate ways. He would always be my psychiatrist. I could call him or see him if I needed to, but always within the confines of the therapeutic alliance. I would always be his patient. “Always,” I asked? “Yes, always,” he replied. “Think of it this way: missing me will be like missing one of your children, always there, always connected.” That felt fine and exactly right.

It has been three and a half years since I left therapy. My therapist and I communicate either through letters or email. When I am visiting in California, we get together for an hour or so in a small coffee shop in Carmel, where he and his wife live. He is retired now and the last time we met, his wife came and the family dog. All three are superb together.

I think we have kind of broken the rules, though. He is no longer my psychiatrist and we do not communicate in that way anymore. That relationship has ceased. In fact, it is strange to say this, but if I ever felt the need to talk to him like we used to in his office, I do not feel I can anymore. More to the point, I do not want to.

For seven long intensive years of psychotherapy, he was entirely professional and appropriately sangfroid. That was absolutely critical to my healing. When we finished and I left, I felt like I had been freed

from prison. He had set me free. I know now what it is to experience joy, I never knew that before. I look forward to a future –that’s new too. He has given me far more than I have given him.

I am grateful that we remain friends and that the relationship is easier now, no longer professional or constrained. It was not suppose to turn out that way, but then again, what is the point of life if you can’t change the rules? That is the joy I am living now.

June 14, 2007

Afterword

It is the New Year 2011. In January '06 we moved to Minnesota to escape the California economic collapse that was to come and the grueling 24/7 workshop environment Silicon Valley had become.

For all the years my husband behaved and is the hero in the saga of my life, it then became my job to step into his shoes and take care of him for a change after his physical collapse. We got off the treadmill of “working for the house” instead of “living in the house” that was the life of living in California, and moved to a more tranquil albeit culture shock of country living in Minnesota.

He is happier there and loves the laid back quality of living and working where clearing out from work at 4:30pm is more prized because of family values than working at all hours of the night to beat the competition, trying to make the fastest chip or whatever to operate new electronic gadgets. The only drawback is that we miss our kids in California and look forward to retiring back there, but that will not be for some time.

My therapist, as I said, is retired now. He and I communicate every few months by email mostly exchanging information on each other's lives. He has a new grandson, his long-awaited first grandchild. We do not talk about therapy or how I am doing psychologically or any of the stuff we hashed over the seven years we worked together. We talk as friends do and little of the therapeutic alliance and all that entails remain and has now become a distant memory. I am grateful we saved something of each other for the friendship I am sure I could never part with. I think he feels the same.

He is more or less out of the psychiatry business although he and his wife do run the Carmel Institute for Family Business. Out of that work he and his wife use family systems theory to consult with

families negatively enmeshed or disengaged within a family's business. Some time ago they wrote a book about that subject called *Reconciling Relationships & Preserving the Family business: Tools for Success*.

My therapist is in his late seventies and I am more aware as the days go by that one day we will be parted from each other through death. We actually talked about that once –what it would be like when he passes. Will I know about it when it happens? If invited, will I make it to the funeral? Will I have the opportunity to say a final good-bye?

I only know that I will be heartbroken and bereft of losing one half of myself while my husband occupies the other half. Strong feelings of loss will be hard at the beginning, but as with all strong emotions they are transitory, are they not? It will pass toward living robustly to honor what he did for me, which was freeing me from the bondage of the past. Such are the small graces we give to one another as human beings. As I move on soon to be a newly minted marriage family therapist, my task will be to pay it forward as he did for me.

January 6, 2011

Appendix

A college paper of creative writing that I wrote about my dead son in my twenty-something years...

Remembering

“It was a rare cold misty day and all I remember was that I left my car and ran and ran, until I thought my lungs would burst. I ran until I found myself above the winding housing development of a peninsula suburb where directly beyond the thin skyline of a highway, there rose a high scrub oak ridge wearing a dark green.

I was hot and sweaty, and although the cold wind was a welcome relief, I still felt like running –off the face of the earth if I could, fatigue and chest pains got the better of me, however.. Instead, I stood still rooted to the spot and while trying to collect myself an ordinary breath again, I was remembering.

Looking across from the highway, I saw the heated brown grass as the land dips then lifts slowly to a small tilted ridge, almost to a hill. Beyond that, and hidden from view, there was a meadow where horses were kept.

My son and I used to go there because it was bordered on the south by a quiet creek shrouded by the thick shelter of willows. Their bleached green grey leaves alternately rippled with the wind, or gently sloped up the wet clay bank on a warm day, and I recall many times, sitting under those trees, feeling safe and warm within the womb of willow branches

Along the opposite side of the meadow ran a dirt road, eroded and furrowed by the pressing rain of past winters. Wearing a narrow strip of dried grass down its back, it bent and curved with the contour of the land, and while Jason and I never ventured too far on that

road, it seemed endlessly bordered on either side with the poison oak infested richness of gnarled sage and thick pasture shrub. After a rain, I have seen the large leafed vines entangle the shrub with their soft green and the gentle grass quietly part the earth, spreading a carpet beneath the sage.

At one time, it was possible to crawl through the oak and see it spread open onto a tractored-out clearing and then simply retire from attention. The clearing widened into a fire break and sharply climbed the back of a rippling ridge.

From a distance it seemed to lie at an easy angle. Cradled in the lap of the aged ridge was a water reservoir not more than a quarter mile wide, but extending for several miles to the south. At the north end of the lake, the land was divided parallel to the shore by the short subtle water cress and the dried remains of a thatched city of marsh reed. There, a limp and languid finger of the lake stretched to catch the spill from a falling creek, while the highway drew a thin grey line adjacent to the lake, broken only by the moss-stained bodies of mired concrete.

I must have stood on that spot a long time viewing the land where we once lived. I was thankfully alone and didn't want to see anyone. I remember also suddenly thinking that someone might be coming after me, so I found the inside of a dry culvert and sat down. Overhead at times, the thunderous roar of cars and trucks was deafening, but nothing quite as deafening as hearing those words on the telephone, "Jason is dead."

There before me, still within view, the land smelled of the richness of seasoned foliage, fermented in the heat of summer. Jason's hair used to smell of it. I would see him standing upon that small ridge, separated from the mountainous spine of the peninsula by the fenced meadow, waiting for me to catch up to him, whereupon I would tell him, "You smell like the sun, baby."

We found and named a twisted oak tree "Jerome" because of its impressive size, since it seemed to own the earth around its trunk for about a mile; one of its falling limbs, partially broken, absorbed itself into the earth and saplings were found just a few feet away,

obviously belonging to Jerome. Together we also found a knoll, rock-encrusted and occupied by the contoured carcass of a dead tree with splintered limbs around which, the thick green scalp of the rounded knoll was an easy temptress for afternoon sleep.

How I wished I could sleep like that again with Jason, who was only three, enveloped in my arms lying beside me, while the heat rose from the grass into a shimmering mirage; or feel him start at the whinny of a horse in the meadow, protesting the sun and brutal lack of tree shade; or hear again his squeal of rapturous joy at seeing a lone duck swooping low over the still lake, cut a long straight furrow with his limp webbed feet, and settle smartly upon the scratched glass, shattering it; or share, again with him, his amazement at encountering a colorful butterfly dangling on an invisible string.

For months afterwards, I remembered most things in a kind of vague pattern. Life went on like a picture show, but I wasn't in it. I wasn't connected to anything I could feel or touch. I was so unaware of what I was going through that I became seriously ill. I was losing control, going mad, and fading away from everything and everyone around me.

I developed an aversion to the country, meadows, mountains, parks, trees, and the color green, anything that reminded me of Jason. Finally one day on a busy street in San Francisco, something snapped and came unwound in my head. Like the spring in a watch, the guts came apart and went spilling out onto the streets.

Later with help, I realized that what was killing me was the fact I couldn't accept Jason's death; that in spite of my inclination toward the feminist movement and a belief that I was a liberated woman, I was first and foremost, in my guts, a mother, who was close to hysteria because her child was no longer with her.

Seven summers have passed since that day in the culvert on the land, I relieved those days of summer repose with Jason. I have regained my sensibilities so that now, when I view a struggling oak tree, with a painter's eye, it is inked in somber tones against a softer blue, content in a fertile earth. But I hope never to return, or see, or hear of that place, where part of my heart is buried for all eternity."