Edith Cowan University
Research Online

'INSCAPE' - ARTCAP November 13-16, 2003 Arts Research Network

2003

Tattoo

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Preface - my herstory

TATTOO

dark ink fills each cell
deep graves of ruins
no sound

sutures etching unseen
to hold it shut
no sound

razor tracing patterns
of tongue cut out
no sound

Roz Thomson

I have been aware of a deep anger within me all my life. I knew all the signs. It would appear as my red finger marks on the arms of my lover, my lips drawn tightly across my teeth, my standing on the shore with animal sounds coming from my gaping mouth and my wanting to somehow cleanse my body. It is a feeling of non-existence; of being behind a glass wall all one=s life - shouting and screaming and no-one is either interested or does not hear you. You hungrily reach out to, and grasp any person who seems to offer a sign of identity - of who you might be...It has taken fifty-four years for me to understand that my feelings of "not being" derive from privation of sensate and emotional needs - necessary for the development of the ego and crucial to the move from the state of 'absolute dependence' to 'personalization' and the rudimentary concept of a separate self.[1]

I examine theories of Object Relations, Transference, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy theory (according to Carl Rogers), my family herstory, and my own psychotherapy case study in an effort to understand the developmental retardation of individuation for me. I then review the therapy interaction process with my psychologist, who I will call Peter, to understand the origins of transference and to closely monitor the psychotherapy method employed by Peter to see whether or not it addressed my needs as I perceived them to be. When I applied the theory to my own experience, I discovered two important observations:

[1] Winnicott, D. in Summers, F. 1994: 139-140.

that my resistance to Peter distancing himself from my responses then revealed itself to be a profound Transference and that this revelation changed the meaning making framework for my theories of therapy practice for myself. As part of my therapy, I made images which I debriefed with Pat Baines (MA Psychotherapy) and with Peter.

> Transference is traditionally regarded as the transferring of emotion, which was usually first experienced in infancy or childhood, on to any new situation in which a close relationship with another human being is involved. Although in analysis, an *intense* transference develops, all human relations contain elements of transference, which is primarily unsconscious.[2]

I was brought up in a struggling working class family where working class values typical of the fifties, prevented any threat to the dominance of male authority and knowledge by engendering girls and women into the maternal, the subordinate and the voiceless. The omnipotent father represented all knowledge and my mother represented the self-sacrificing bearer of his children. Following abandonment by her wealthy mother, my mother, (together with her sister and younger brother), were brought up in an orphanage. Although she makes no mention as to physical abuse whilst there, other important needs such as physical affection and emotional nurturing were neglected. She witnessed the death of her brother at the age of eight who died as a result of peritonitis. It was a catholic denominational orphanage and surgical operations were not permitted on the Sabbath. When my mother came of working age - twelve - she was removed by her mother and stepfather to be employed on farms requiring cheap workers. She had very little formal education; I recall her telling me she went to school from the age of eight to around ten or eleven. While on one farm, she told me of the boys terrorizing her with the entrails and other parts of cattle and chickens when they were slaughtered and of the boys holding her to watch. I was not aware until the age of around eighteen years, that my Step-grandfather, my mothers' step-father, had been physically abusing my grandmother for most of their married life. This was still taking place when my grandmother was in her seventies. I can only guess at the psychological impact this

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[2] Schaverien, J.1992:13.

must have had on my mother, she did not speak of this until after their deaths and then it was with extreme angst. More silence. Another female of the family stifling her rage and denying her right to voice anger. Thirty years later and after the death of my father, my mother still cannot give herself permission to speak pain. To speak of such things in my family was taboo...to speak of who one was or what one felt was taboo.

My father ...when my psychologist asked me to describe my father, I said "Hard. Belligerent. He had no compassion." I could comprehend my mothers' inability to show love or affection - even if I could not forgive her for her neglect; but I could not forgive my father his cruelty; his use of psychological abuse and physical abuse (in the form of occasional beltings with a leather strap on my bare bottom), because I believed he had a sharp intellect and had a reasonable education for the day. I remember him often coming up behind my mother and ramming his fingers beneath her rib cage, causing her fright and pain even after she had said it caused her pain. Following my disclosures of my "Life to be endured", Peter referred to my fathers' attitudes and actions as clinically obsessive. For, instance, as a child, he would instruct me to "go to the lavatory at the same time each day", and the "proper" way to clean ones' shoes for compulsory Sunday school, was to polish the soles as well as the uppers. He was obsessional about posture, coming up behind me repeatedly jerking my shoulders back. As a child or adolescent, one did not question the authority of such knowledge...it came from the father and was therefore the equivalent of Gods' word.

Although the personal space of my parents was not to be violated (lock on the bathroom door), we children had no such consideration. At the age of seventeen, when working from 7:00am until 6:30pm, if I were still in bed at 8:00am on a weekend, my father would storm into the bedroom and rip the bedclothes from me saying "You are lazy. Get up!" I was doing scheduled home chores from the age of eight including applying wax to polish the floor of my bedroom by hand (down on all-fours) and doing my own ironing. So, I as the youngest of four children (and having been told by my mother that I had not been wanted, including the details of attempted abortions), received little love. I was not deprived of basic physical needs, however, any display of feelings was strongly discouraged; one did not "enjoy" life, my father would espouse, one endured life.

At the age of seven. my brothers tied me up to the post of the Hills hoist. They wound a thick rope around me and then continued it around my neck. The rope was so tight it left burns on my throat. Later, when they released me, I went and sat on the front door step of

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Aunty Rene's house next door. I could not understand why she expressed such horror at the sight of my raw wounds. I do not recall the boys being punished for their abuse of me. On another occasion, I remember coming home from school one day - I must have been about eight or nine, to find my pet Finches dead in their cage. With tears streaming down my face, I ran to the back door and called to my mother who was sitting at the kitchen table playing cards with my grandmother. She did not come to the door and ignored me. I went in to my bedroom, found a small box and filled it with cotton wool. I placed the dead birds in the box, took a spade and buried them in the garden. Nothing was said - no words of comfort offered. When this episode came up in my therapy, I said to Peter: "What sort of mother could just ignore her child's plea for comfort?"

These emotions of resentment, anger and hatred presented themselves to me as "silenced selves" - those repressed parts of me that made me feel I had been gagged. Recently, I was awakened to my silenced selves. Among these was my silenced young child. To give my adult woman-self to speak the fantasy and nurturance that I was denied as a child...almost choked me. I could hear someone saying that she (my child-self) had not had soft toys to cuddle (and yet I now remember I did have a teddy - dressed in masculine clothes and a toy dog filled with sawdust - not soft - but some object of transference) and "this self" was telling a story of fantasy. Then I realised it was myself speaking, revealing the deep pain of feeling unloved. The next day I went to a second hand shop and bought myself soft toys. I brought them home and placed them on my pillow. Emotion overwhelmed me. This softness; this allowing myself to hold, touch and show love, had been denied me all my life. Once this gaping hole was discovered, I further gave myself permission to listen to other parts that had been silenced. I found myself entering a baby wear shop and when I picked up a bunny rug, all the unspoken pain of remaining childless engulfed me. I bought the bunny rug, a pair of tiny bootees and a baby singlet. The image "Silenced Selves" followed.

When I began my therapy with Peter, he asked me what I wanted to achieve - why was I there. My reply was that "My boundaries are porous. I keep taking on women's universal pain and it is consuming me - eating me up. I want to know why and I want to know who I am."

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The Images

Image 1. *Mind map of my emotional life*

This mind map of my emotional life represented a pattern of emotional repression (resulting in deep anger and resentment); feelings of rejection and injustice as a universal concept of women's lives.

When I produced this image in my therapy session, Peter suggested we look at the recurring word "injustice." Using the psychotherapeutic model of Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), he proceeded to encourage me to rationalize my concept of injustice and identify the feelings that arose. My concept of injustice as a universal pain kept coming into conflict with the personal experience of pain. As I opened myself further to feeling that pain on a personal level - moving its contextual meaning from broad philosophy to a personal truth - I found myself weeping uncontrollably:

P. "Who do you cry for?"

R. "I cry for all the women's pain. . . there seems to be no way out for them. And it is cyclic. They just go on experiencing abuse and pain all their lives."

P. "Can you stop all the pain of the world's women?"

R. "No."

P. "Who do you cry for now?"

R. "I cry for myself. I cry for my own pain."

P. "Yes. You cry for your own pain."

So, this was the beginning. The beginning of understanding that my reaching out and clothing myself in other's pain was a way of giving myself identity and by avoiding the reality of my self, I could avoid the acknowledgment of all the pain of privation of physical, emotional and spiritual nurturing I had experienced as a child, adolescent and grown woman. I had not had "good enough mothering"[3] all my life:

> The environment need not be perfect, but it must be 'good enough' for the maturational process to unfold. If it is not, development is blocked and emotional disorder is the likely outcome. For Winnicott, all

[3] Winnicott, D. 1956a. NOTE: although I disagree with Winnicott's notion of a "maturational process" as a constitutional given that cannot be changed, I agree with the concept of a suitable "facilitating environment" which includes all the sensory interaction between the mother and the infant, as been critical to the emotional development of the child.

> symptoms are manifestations of arrests in development, or blocks in the maturational process.[4]

Image 2. *Silenced Selves*

I produced this work over three months. During the making process I found I had to stop work on three occasions because the emotions evoked in the evolving imagery was overwhelming. As a result of discussions with my mentor and peer, Pat, in regard to my current relationship, the common theme of silenced selves emerged. Pat suggested that the other woman and myself were both experiencing the birth of a speaking self that had been silenced by physically and psychologically violent men and women in our lives. I had been infantalized by an emotionally inept mother who had no concept of a separate or whole self; a tyrannical father, followed by a husband who repeated the pattern of abuse and neglect for twenty-three years. I had also suffered cruelty from my two brothers as mentioned in the Preface. The result of this abuse is that I still suffer from attacks of psychosomatic inability to breathe during the night and cannot bear to wear restrictive clothing around my neck. A string of abusive environments and actions revealed themselves during the making of this work and in my therapy time. When discussing my silencing - my total restriction on speaking who I was - Peter referred to this as my being passive. I disagree with this interpretation. For me, passive implies there is a choice to remain inactive, I did not experience having that choice; it was an experience of being prevented from speaking, from being acknowledged as an individual of worth.

In addition to emotional privation, was the permission I sought to express love: love for self (an impossible concept for one who has little concept of a self), and other animals, persons, causes. Through my relationship with my lover, I became aware of my unexpressed child self; this child who had not been allowed to be a child. I suddenly realized I had not had the experience of having soft toys or pets onto which I could transfer feelings of otherness. [I examined this within the psychotherapy notion of Object Relations as posited by Winnicott (1951, 1956a, 1960a, 1963a) in his theory of the "maturational process" and the "maturational environment".] As a woman, I had also been denied by my husband, my wish to have children. This denial was in the form of his refusing to discuss the possibility at any time over twenty three years and frequently turning his back on me when I approached him for sex

[4] Summers, 1994:138.

- silence as a control over one's wishes being voiced or considered. This constant rejection made me feel I had no voice; that my deep yearnings were of no consequence.

the art therapy images

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Image 3. *Fragmented self*

A small nest (diameter 3cm.), made from cotton wool, gold thread and feathers. It contains a tiny red rose - some of the petals are scattered nearby.

I have been making nests in my art practice over the past four years, unaware as to the extent of pain they symbolized until the recent reclaiming of my child-self in this recent therapy. The small scale and choice of feathers to wrap it in, signify my deep yearning to be held safely, cared for and nurtured. To be cherished and valued was the message from the gold thread. The tiny rose symbolizes the Self - I have always thought of myself as small in stature. The scattered petals are signs of the sense f fragmented selves.

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Image 4. *Cradling my child-self.*

The making of and completion of this work was very moving for me. It consists of a cast of my own hand cradling a nest made from cotton wool and feathers. Inside is tiny felt quilt (the pieces of felt measure no more than 4mm. x 5mm.) sewn with gold thread. A gold name brooch I had as a small child is pinned to a triangular piece of pink felt - a pink triangle is a sign for lesbianism. The nest also contains a small gold heart - symbol of love.

This work involved a long and slow process and I was tentatively reaching for my still illusive child-self; feeling both terrified and drawn to her. I began by making the nest layer upon layer of cotton wool and tissue paper moulded around a golf ball, then, when dry, cut away. I then delicately sewed fluffy white and blue feathers to the outside, leaving the soft ends protruding over the rim of the nest. Each feather sewn on was chosen and so gently wrapped - I was so conscious that I was holding this fragile being in my hand. I then made the tiny quilt by cutting very small pieces of felt from some off-cuts a friend had given me saying 'I know you will make something beautiful from these!"

I gently tucked it inside. My heart, already spiritually in there, I symbolized in gold paper and glued the tiniest feather imaginable onto it. Lastly, I attached my name brooch. The nest sat by my bed for some weeks before I decided on a way to care for this fragile child; my own hand was the obvious solution. When the casting was ready to be broken away, I remember the strangest feeling - the sight of one's own hand detached from the body can be quite disconcerting. But I lovingly cleaned every crevice of what is now 54 year old flesh, complete with wrinkles and cracks of life. When I placed my child-self into the palm of my woman-self hand, I gasped. I now recognized who she was, but it remained to accept and love her.

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Image 5. *Her first bunny rug.*

I find even as I write this part of my journey, tears are coming to my eyes.

In December 2002, i suffered physical and psychological breakdown. This was a result trom 'burn out' and depression. The impact of client related trauma, financial pressure and the breakdown of a personal relationship, culminated in physical symptoms such as, lack of emotion on any level, inability to function normally, lack of motivation and no interest in my academic work or my research - both of which I was normally passionate about. However, throughout this depression, my art practice sustained me and with the help and support of my therapist, a sensitive and compassionate lecturer, Rinske; and my friend Pat, I recovered slowly over the next six months.

I undertook a Textiles unit offered by Rinske. Over the past twelve months i had felt a connective relationship with this gentle woman in a spiritual way - we appeared to have travelled similar paths of growth and felt a living connection with our art making and the purpose of our lives. Rinske attuned to my need for healing. She gently suggested I sit in on one of the classes and to give myself permission to simply "be in that space, in that moment" - no expectations - no demands would be made of me. I became aware that I have always intellectualized situations and emotions. I think one of the reasons for this may be that in some circumstances, it was a detraction from my deep pain. I had not long finished my Visual Arts undergraduate degree and so when Rinske suggested I try to take myself into the most basic of making (cloth) - to totally become part of what it meant to be cloth - to understand the properties of weaving and fabrication, I resisted the process; desperately making conceptual work. Patiently Rinske would repeat, "I want you to make me a piece of cloth, that's all." I went home and picked up the bunny rug I had bought at the babywear shop. Back at the studio, I carefully cut some of the rug into very thin strips. Using soft wool for the warp, I began weaving a new version of the rug - this child-self which is not one. My resistence to where I knew this was taking me was apparent in the first dozen rows of the work; the thread was twisted and taut. As I proceeded, feelings of anger, resentment, calm and acceptance could be seen in the cloth. On completion of this

reconstructed rug and reconstructed self, I felt a tenderness toward my child-self developing; compassion for this little girl.

Image 6. *"And I ran to her..."*

This poem signalled the breakthrough in my therapy I had been seeking for so very long. As part of a Writing Therapy workshop, I had written my flow-of-consciousness for twenty minutes. I then read back through the work, underlining emotions and recurring themes. I then noted how these feelings changed their meanings according to context. We were then asked to write a poem about these feelings. This is the result - unedited - blurred in the original from the tears that continues for most of that day.

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Image 6a. *Book of reclamation.*

"Roslyn"

Born 1949

Self owned 2003

This book,
made from felted rayon
is the celebration of my beautiful child-self.
Because rayon is cellulose, it has the characteristics
of both paper and soft fabric. Rose buds and gold thread
are woven into the felting.
The binding is plaited rayon - I had plaits when I was a child.
The photograph on the cover was taken when I was three years old.

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Image 6b.

Another miniature bunny rug woven from the same one used earlier. The inscription reads:

With this hand woven bunny rug
I bathed my body
in a ritual honouring of my child-self.

As the cloth passed over my skin
I erased the layers of
resentment, hatred and anger
which silenced her for 54 years.

I gave her permission to love me, to laugh, to play
and to speak.

Image 6c.

Photograph of me aged around six, blanket stitched onto another piece of the commercial bunny rug.

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Image 6d.

A photograph of my siste aged eight and myself as baby. This photo wa reconstituted by cutting tw copies of the photograph an weaving them into reconstructed whole. Th process symbolizes m breaking free from th obsessive and infantilizin care of my sister. Here acknowledge that our live are interwoven but that I A SEPARATE FROM HER Where J's hand lies acros my infant's legs, I hav placed a name brooch secure by gold chain stitching.

Image 6e:

Myself aged six, standing straight and strong.

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Mind map of my emotional life

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Silenced selves

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Fragmented self

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Her first bunny rug

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“And I ran to her...”

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Book of reclamation

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I gave her permission

Preface - my herstory

Aged six

Preface - my herstory

You do not own me, sister.

Preface - my herstory

Standing tall

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