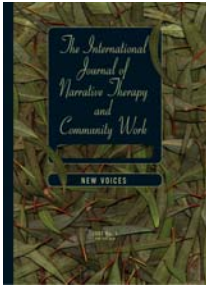


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3.

Embracing the old nurturing the new

by

Silent Too Long¹

This paper was originally given as a keynote address at the International Narrative Therapy & Community Work Conference in Adelaide 2000. Its title, 'Embracing the old, nurturing the new', relates to the ways in which Silent Too Long works as a group. The knowledges and skills of previous members of the group continue to inform the work of Silent Too Long, while the perspectives of current members are charting new courses.

Good morning. We are members of Silent Too Long, a group for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Some of our group members could not make it here this morning but they are with us in spirit.

It has taken us courage to be where we are today. Most of us are community women with few formal qualifications. To identify ourselves as survivors of childhood sexual abuse is a bold step and one that none of us has taken lightly.

It takes courage to speak of our experiences because of the stigma that accompanies the labels of 'abuse survivor' or 'abuse victim', and yet we have so wanted to speak. We want to express the voice, knowledges and experiences of community women who have lived through and survived child sexual abuse. We have expert knowledge about child sexual abuse, about how it happens, about the ways in which abusers gain access to children, and about the conditions in our society that have enabled abuse to happen. We have this knowledge because we have lived through it. We are the experts on our own lives and we wish to share with you this expertise.

Silent Too Long began four years ago when various community women attended a therapeutic group run by Northern Metropolitan Health Service to address the effects of child sexual abuse on women survivors. At the completion of this eight-week group we decided that we wanted to continue meeting for a number of reasons: to dispel myths associated with child sexual abuse; to educate health professionals and the wider public; and to stand in solidarity with other women survivors. Several of the original members have now moved on, however, they continue this work in their everyday lives. Other women have more recently joined the group, and so the work of Silent Too Long continues. Today, Silent Too Long has a number of projects underway which include running an open group for other women survivors, producing pamphlets and information, and presenting at seminars and conferences.

In this presentation, we are going to read to you a number of quotes about our experiences of surviving child sexual abuse. The quotes are all from Silent Too Long members, but are not necessarily the words of the women who are speaking today.

Please note that we can only speak of the experiences of women survivors, as we have only worked with women.

Our presentation is arranged into the following sections:

- First steps towards healing.
- The restraints we have to overcome.
- What has helped us to overcome the hurdles.
- Playing a part in broader change.

First steps towards healing

The first steps on a healing journey can sometimes be the hardest.

The search

The first step was searching, searching, searching for someone who I could share my secret with and who would help me with the consequences, who wouldn't say I was mad or bad or that I deserved it.

Finding the right person

When I first sought help, after escaping the child sexual abuse, I was close to a nervous breakdown – shaky inside and crying all the time. The first person I saw was a psychiatrist. I didn't tell him about the child sexual abuse, but instead about a recent incident at my flat. My family chose to believe my stepfather's lies about what he did to me, and they turned against me. The incident at my flat involved my brother bailing me up outside the front door. He threatened to hit me. I was so weak at the knees that all I could do was tell him over and over that if he touched me I would call the police. While I told this story to the psychiatrist, he sat there with a bland expression. It was like talking to a brick wall with a face painted on it, as indifferent to my pain as my family. I didn't go back to him. Instead I found a counsellor who used a different approach. When I recounted the incident at the flat to her, she almost jumped off her chair with excitement and amazement at me, for the courage it took for me to stand my ground at that moment. Me – courageous? I only felt weak and terrified. She helped me to see the alternative story and it lifted some part within me. I had a long way to go, but that was the start of the healing journey.

Coming through the door

Coming through that door to my first support group meeting, and acknowledging that I had something in my life that I had to deal with, was the hardest thing I've ever done. I came with a friend. She answered the notice in the local paper. I said, 'Well I'm not ringing up, you can. If you go, I will.' And she did. She rang up and she just said, 'Yes, there are two of us to come'. We counted the steps from the shopping centre. We walked slowly because to go through that door was a big step in our lives. Doing it together made it possible. We had each other to lean on. Each week we'd say, 'Are we going back?' And each week we'd reply, 'Yes, yes, we're going back'.

Courage

It took courage to speak about the unspeakable. I thought that I'd never ever speak about it, that this was something that I would never be able to do. But as time went on that changed – now just try and stop me!

Wanting to survive

When I spoke up as a child about the abuse I was punished severely. To walk through the door knowing I was going to bring it up again was very scary. In talking about what you have experienced, there is always a risk you will be re-victimised. You don't know what people are going to say. But I was so tired of being a victim. I just wanted more. I wanted to move on. I was tired of being scared and tearful. Those feelings were stronger than the self-doubt and the fears and the pressures. The sense of wanting to survive and wanting to move on was stronger in the end. It got me that step through the door. It was good but the very first time was very hard. I was trying to think of every excuse I could so that I couldn't turn up that morning. But everything went really well. I didn't have a choice! [laughter]

Breaking the silence

I think the silence had already been broken because the group had been advertised in the paper. I'd been to many health workers before and had felt very

silenced in their rooms. Coming through the door here was different because the silence was instantly broken. Everybody knew why

I was there. In some ways this made stepping in the door harder - it was like wearing a label. But in other ways it was a breaking of the silence already and that was appealing. When I walked into the room I was completely terrified, but then I saw that all the others looked as if they felt as scared as me and in a strange way this was very comforting.

The restraints we have to overcome

As survivors we face many restraints in reclaiming our lives from the effects of childhood sexual abuse.

We are not the problem

Often the first people we speak to in our adult lives about the abuse are health professionals. And often we are put straight onto medication or sent off to see a psychiatrist. We are pathologised, told that there's something wrong with us. Coming into this group is about being able to step away from that. It's about acknowledging the many parts of our lives that have nothing to do with the abuse.

Lack of family support

It is very hard to break contact with one's natural family and to live as an orphan. Emotionally I was always an orphan. Most people do not understand and cannot comprehend what it is like to live without family support. It is hard for my children not to know their grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. But my children's safety is my first priority.

Lack of justice

One of the things that makes it more difficult to address the effects of abuse is that often there is no sense that justice has been done, no sense of righting of the wrongs, no public acknowledgements that what happened was wrong and that it was not our fault.

Stigma and labelling

We've had to overcome stigma and labelling. We live in a culture which even today is still very quick to blame women for abuse. Coming through that door takes a lot of courage because it's saying, 'I'm not prepared to stand with the myths any more'. Self-doubt, shame, blame and anxiety are huge things that try to keep women isolated and silenced. We have to overcome a lot, and keep overcoming a lot, to speak out.

Not being believed

My greatest fear in coming to the group was, 'They probably won't believe me'.

Self-doubt

I think self-doubt is such a huge issue. We've talked a lot about it in the group. A fairly major effect of child sexual abuse is to doubt yourself, to doubt your own sanity, especially if other people around you have never given you credence for what's actually happened. The self-doubt can build and build and leave you thinking there's something wrong with yourself.

Blame

When I came here I just didn't want to hear any more that the child sexual abuse was my fault. I was so tired of hearing that. I kept thinking, 'I can't be that bad, I can't remember ever being that bad'.

Leaving the past in the past

It hurts a lot when people say to you, can't you leave the past in the past. Even well-intentioned loving friends can say it at times. That attitude, no matter how subtle, has often crushed me and made me feel so alien. It has made me think, 'What is wrong with me? Why can't I just let it go?' I tried to be happy for others and keep silent, but a deep wave of sadness kept washing over me. If I ever talked about how I felt, they would ask why I was hanging onto the past, or sigh, which felt the same. I had to live through the abuse every minute for fourteen years, but others didn't seem to be able to listen for one second. A heavy heart cannot heal in silence.

We can't just forget our past. That is asking us to forget who we are. How we survived and suffered is a part of our history, of who we are. If I deny the part of me that experienced pain then I am denying myself. Someone always turned their back on me throughout my childhood and ignored everything I went through. I cannot turn my back on myself. If I try to forget, then the incredible anguish that I went through can seem as if it did not exist in the eyes of others. This can make me feel crazy. It is as if I have joined with the people who tried to make it not important. I have to remember what happened and I need to speak about it, to increase awareness and work for those women and children who are still struggling with abuse. We have to face who we are, all that we have experienced and the ways in which we have survived. The stories of our survival are heroic stories of our time. They must not be forgotten. They need to be told.

For those people who believe we should leave the past in the past, I'd like to say that growing up with child sexual abuse is like growing up with fishing line and hooks entwined in your body. It becomes moulded and joined with growing organs, pain jabbing from unknown points, forcing you to avoid certain things so the unseen hooks don't pull. But sometimes, they still do, and it's not until you focus on an area, as if under a microscope with a counsellor, that you can see what part is you, and what part is fishing line and hook. Through narrative counselling you are able to gently ease that hook from that one part, and slowly, the new wound can heal. You can't leave the past in the past, because it is still inside of you. But bit by bit, through the healing process, hooks are removed and wounds can heal, but it takes time, patience and courage to undergo it all.

What has helped us to overcome the hurdles

In our experience of being a part of Silent Too Long there are many factors that enable us to reclaim our lives from the effects of abuse.

Understanding the difference between submission and consent – it was not our fault

My first big hurdle to overcome was to try to understand the difference between submission and consent. From the age of eight, I had been forced to agree to child sexual abuse because there were always dreadful consequences if

I did not. He even waited until the so-called 'age of consent' before forcing me to submit to rape. Growing up under the belief that I had agreed and therefore given up any rights, I didn't think anyone would help me, that they'd all blame me. I believed I suffered because I was weak, for agreeing and giving up my rights.

I thought if I was strong, I would be prepared to suffer the violence and even die. But I submitted and suffered alone. For this reason, I didn't escape the child sexual abuse for many years. Understanding that submitting to save yourself and others from further pain is not consent, has allowed me to release an enormous amount of self-blame and allowed me to see that protecting my own life and sanity was not a weakness.

Diversity

One of the things that has made a difference to me is that within the group there are women from lots of different backgrounds and ages. Seeing the older women in the group offers me hope that it's never too late. It's really encouraging. And seeing younger women there is just excellent. We all bring different things to offer. We learn from each other. Everyone comes out with these little gems that I can take away with me. They get me through until the next week.

Amongst our own

When I first sat down amongst the group I thought, 'Oh my god, more experts'. But when they each stood up and said, 'I'm a survivor of child sexual abuse', it was just incredible. It brought me back.

Belief

Walking into this group I knew that whoever was there would believe me. Sometimes, because there is so much pretence, disbelief and silence, I can doubt my own reality. I still have trouble believing it happened. I don't want it to be true, but it is. But sitting and listening to other women's stories, it is different. I can honestly say, 'I do understand you and I believe you. What you are saying is the truth.' It changes it for me too. I am believed.

Naming the effects of abuse

Once we give names to the effects of abuse that we are experiencing, we can find ways to pre-empt them, to prevent them sneaking up on us. We can have more power over our own lives.

Being able to talk

Sometimes when the memories surge it can feel like I'm going crazy. To be able to come to the group and to be able to talk about that, to see how it happens to other people, makes the fear of madness a little smaller. With other child sexual abuse survivors I feel understood, accepted, as if I belong. Even though the details may be different, the themes of our lives are similar. I know the others understand most of my dilemmas.

Claiming our expertise

Abusers often say that they know us and what is good for us. Health professionals too often seem to think they know what is best for us. Sometimes it can seem as if I am the last person to know what is best for me! But no-one knows me better than me! Our journeys are personal, they involve us finding our own answers to our own problems.

Honouring the stands that we took as children to protect ourselves and others

It's been important to me to acknowledge the stands that I took as a child to protect myself - like refusing to be left alone in the house with Uncle Bill or Grandad even if I was threatened with punishment for 'being rude' or 'not respecting my elders'. There were also ways I protected others when I was small. When I was a kid I didn't invite other kids to our house. I couldn't stand hearing and seeing what he did to them. Acknowledging the things we have done all our lives to protect ourselves and others can be significant and powerful for our own healing.

Honouring our acts of resistance

After my father would rape and beat me, I would wait until he left the room. Then I would stand up. I would never let him totally win. There was a part of my

inner-being, my spirit, that would never agree with what was happening to me. I couldn't stand up while he was there - it would have been too dangerous. He would have beaten me again. But once it was safe, I stood up. There was a part of me he could never get to - my hope. I knew there were other ways of treating children, that this abuse was not justified - that it would never be. In retrospect there were powerful choices and actions I made as an abused child, even if they seemed small and ineffectual at the time. Speaking about these acts of resistance, sharing them together has made a real difference.

Honouring the ways in which we have protected others from abuse

It's been important to us to acknowledge the acts we have taken to protect others - especially our children. There have been many examples, including: interviewing kindergarten teachers about their understandings of child protection; educating our doctors about child sexual abuse; educating other women in our lives; and calling upon the editor of the local newspaper to ensure responsible reporting of child abuse cases.

Migrating identities

The metaphor of a migration of identity has been a beautiful tool in the group. Visualising the travels we are on has really worked for me. I really like the way that a metaphor of migration teaches you to flow - to acknowledge that there will be valleys that we will have to travel through, but then when we come up over the other side we have a different view of ourselves.

Learning new skills

When you live one way for a good many years and then you don't want to do that any more, you have to learn new skills. You have to learn all over again. I had to learn to say, 'No, I don't want to do that'. It wasn't easy. It's only a little word, but for some of us it's not easy to say. We're learning all the time.

Repelling blame

The group puts the blame back where the blame should be. We say that the perpetrator was completely in the wrong. We were just little girls. That's been

one of the key things for me in moving on in my life. As the blame lifted it was like a weight leaving me. It was unreal. It was magic.

Commitment to justice

An amazing commitment to justice seems to vibrate through the group. It allows people to share in honesty.

Deciding to love

There's been so much hate in my life. I've been a very angry, very violent sort of person. Deciding that there'd been too much hate, deciding to love the little girl that was once me, has made the difference.

Courage and hope

The things that really stand out for me with the group are the courage and hope and how we have just really held onto a knowledge that things could be and should be different. Somehow we've held onto hope and a knowledge of what is truth and justice. That's really powerful.

Viewing it as a process

It's a continual healing journey. We have made some mistakes and we'll continue to. That's one of the ways we learn.

Laughter

This group is good because, although there's lots of sadness and stuff, I love it when we laugh. In fact we've been told a number of times to 'Keep it down'. That's pretty funny for a group called Silent Too Long! [laughter]

Balancing sorrow and strength

It has been very important for us to acknowledge the sorrow that we have lived with, its impact on our lives, and to balance this with the steps we have taken, the things we can celebrate, the stories of survival.

Acknowledging the adjustments

I think it's important to acknowledge that walking out of the door at the end of the group is also a big step. To talk as a group about these issues and then move back into our daily lives is a big adjustment. I still don't sleep the night before or after Silent Too Long meetings.

Acknowledging alternative parts of our lives

Honouring, supporting and encouraging the parts of our lives not damaged by the abuse encourages us to move beyond being wounded victims. Some support groups don't let you get well. That's why I really like exploring the alternative stories of our lives. Even when everything seems tainted by what happened, the alternative story makes me a hero, or at least an okay person.

Seeing all the alternative stories of courage in my life's past, and dispelling manipulative beliefs that were used to control me, has been very important.

I can now be proud of myself where before I hated myself. My partner has played a big part in encouraging me to revalue myself. I've learned to honour all sorts of aspects within me. Today, I have fewer friends, but those that I do have are deep and genuine. I prefer it this way.

Outrage

Outrage comes from the recognition that the abuse was not our fault. Reassessing my life from the position of knowing that it was not my fault, brought outrage - and feminism became very attractive! I felt years of anger, rage and outrage at what was done to me and to so many children.

There are so many actions of outrage. The group process is often a forum for outrage. We acknowledge the multiple ways in which women can step into outrage. One of them can be just getting out of bed. The outrage is such that a woman says to herself, 'I am not going to let abuse keep me in my bed. I am going to get up and step into life. A good life is the best revenge!'

Outrage comes in all shapes and forms. What can appear to be tiny things are really very significant. They speak of women having a commitment to life,

to justice, to keeping themselves and their children safe. For us as women to come together and acknowledge these small steps of outrage can be very significant.

Sometimes outrage comes at the strangest of times

I lost my dog once and the whole street went looking. And I knew that if I had told any of those people in the street about my history there is a good chance that they would have been horrified and wanted to have nothing to do with me. They wouldn't know what to do and they would remove themselves from me. But because it was a lost dog everyone knew what to do. I really felt like saying, 'hey wait a minute. I'm lost too – how come you're not out looking for me?'

Meditation

I have found my healing in meditation. Throughout much of my life I have been unable to find words to express many of my experiences. But through meditation I feel I am led through the unutterable. I suffer from panic and anxiety and it was eating away at my soul. Being able to sit still and meditate was what I needed to do. It enables me to carry on with my every day. I can feel myself healing. It is almost intangible and a very gradual process but it has been wonderful for me.

Reconnecting with life and the senses

Now when I burn myself I feel pain. Once this wasn't true for me. I felt nothing. I guess it's a good thing to now feel pain! Actually sometimes it was quite handy not feeling it before! But truthfully I know it is a good thing. I also never saw colours. Well I did see some, but never the different shades. These days I am just amazed by the different shades of green I see in my garden. It is quite incredible.

It is amazing to realise how disconnected one can become. I had a complete dissociation from myself. I didn't know what I liked. If anyone asked me I didn't have a clue. Slowly, two steps forward, one step back, we become more and more connected with who we are and who we want to be.

A two-way process

I've been in a dual role because whilst I've been co-running the group I'm also a survivor. It's been an amazing part of the whole process to have a foot in both camps. The group has had a gigantic impact on me, in terms of my own understandings and healing. One day we were talking about how we didn't want the effects of abuse to continue – things like depression, panic attacks or feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. We didn't want these ongoing effects in our own lives and we had made a commitment not to pass them onto our own children. Suddenly it hit me like a ton of bricks - crash! - that this also meant that I had to stop the abuse from going on inside of me. That this was part of my commitment against abuse. That I had to take a stand against the voice of self-doubt and depreciation that can roll around inside of me. That I had a responsibility to challenge that voice of abuse. This was both a wonderful and a terrifying realisation!

I was trying to co-run the group and meanwhile this amazing realisation was dawning inside my head and heart. I was able to share this realisation with the women and they gave me their support to take this next step in my own healing journey. Being able to not only co-run the group but also be a part of the group has really impacted upon me. But so has just listening to the women and their amazing stories of survival and courage and their insights. The group has so much been a two-way kind of process. I think that's profoundly beautiful.

Playing a part in broader change

Our conversations within the group do not just help ourselves. None of us are islands. We don't live in isolation. What we do between us ripples outwards. We are able to pass on some of the ideas that we've come up with to others in our lives. Our conversations touch other lives. They enable us to be supportive of others. We have learnt to notice the alternative stories in the lives of others. We have learnt how to train our counsellors! Our conversations are like unseen threads, fine but very strong, linking people together. We are creating a network of different ways of thinking about child sexual abuse. It is spreading slowly outwards.

A partner's reflections

The following piece was written by the husband of one of the Silent Too Long women. He sent the group this piece of writing about the changes he had witnessed in his partner since she had joined with other women survivors.

We've been together now for several years and over that time I've seen her pain and fear and deep, deep hurt caused by the sexual abuse. I've felt hopeless, wanting to help but not knowing what to do. I've seen the sleepless nights, the depression, the sense of worthlessness. She's my partner, my love, my closest friend, the mother of our children, and yet there've been times when she was swallowed up by the grief and the injustice of it all. It's like at times she couldn't see these other parts of her life. I've been unable to reach that part of her that has been hurting so badly.

But she's changing since she's been coming to the group. It's like now there is a place where the outrage can be heard and she can be helping herself and other women too. The other women have been in similar places and they can really understand where she's coming from. I still see the pain in her, but I see more laughter and hope. She's liking herself more. It's like we are able to share the same picture of her. And it's like getting my partner back from the abuse.

Cultural change

One of the things that we've talked about in the group is how our culture needs to take a stand against abuse. Up until very recently men's culture has believed that it was men's utter right to use women and children as they pleased. In this context sometimes individual men may not even think about what they do. We say this, not to justify these men's actions, but to make it clear that this is an issue that isn't just happening in one household behind closed doors, but it is happening in millions of households right across this country and elsewhere. We are calling upon our culture to make a stand, to say 'no' to sexual abuse. To acknowledge that it happens, how it happens and that it's got to stop – now. That's the impetus behind presenting here today.

There have been many examples of the ways in which we have taken action. First we joined a group ourselves. Over time, some of us have joined with workers in co-facilitating groups for other women survivors. Being involved with helping other people's journeys has had a big impact on many of us.

The work also ripples out into the wider community as women take their knowledges and educate people around them about child sexual abuse, its effects, and how it is a cultural issue. Child sexual abuse happens because the patriarchal culture in which we live does not/has not recognised the rights of women and children. We wish to speak more broadly, to be 'silent no more'. We have given papers at conferences and been involved in videos that have been shown in workshops to educate professionals. Now we're educating others, our doctors, dentists, hair-dressers, the people who feature regularly in our lives. A lot of people just don't have the information they need in order to be helpful. There have been many ripples from the work of Silent Too Long.

We have been on the 'Reclaim the Night' march a few times. Women have made banners about the group. To be out there in the streets with a banner saying why we are there has been enormous - especially for some of the women because the perpetrators of the abuse they experienced are still here in Adelaide. The women could have been spotted as the march was broadcast on commercial television evening news where the banners of Silent Too Long were clearly shown. Still the women carried the banners.

Joining with supportive women and standing together against the injustice and misconceptions of child sexual abuse offers us a second wind. For years we've felt helpless to fight against these things alone, but now our desire to create changes has been reinforced. We want to make it easier for others who are this minute suffering the guilt and shame of child sexual abuse. We speak out today so that others may escape as soon as they can.

We'd like to end this section on a short poem that sums up the spirit of this presentation. It is about embracing the old, and nurturing the new:

*Yesterday is history
Tomorrow is a mystery
And today is a gift
Which is why we call it the present.*

We'd like now for Pam to speak about her own story ...

Pam's Story

I was number 17 in the orphanage. They took away my name, my toys, the necklace my father made for me. They took away everything that had been me. By five years of age, I was a nobody. And I stayed a nobody for years. In time, it became safer for me to be a nobody. I endured years and years of pain, hurt, physical and sexual abuse. I was beaten, abused, locked away: silenced. I lived in a world of darkness and fear.

The darkness tried to swallow me up totally. It tried to take over my whole life, my whole existence. It nearly succeeded. It kept me tightly bound up. I could see nothing in life apart from the darkness.

But there was a light deep inside of me. It was a light of love that had been lit by the kindness of one of the sisters in the orphanage, Sister McMillan. She was the only person who was kind to me when I was that frightened little girl. She treated me with gentleness and caring. I kept the light of Sister McMillan alive deep within me. No matter what happened to me, I kept that light of love alive. I knew that if it ever went out, I would have died. But - over all the years, over all the pain and abuse and fear – I never let the abuse get to that love. That was mine, it was my secret. I felt no-one could take that away from me. It kept me alive: it gave me the reason to go on living until I had my own children to love. And until I had Silent Too Long to share the light and loving with.

Because of the abuse, I was a very angry person. My whole life had been restricted by the abuse. I hated the world and what it had done to me and to the people and the animals whom I'd loved and cared for. It felt like I lived inside a dark and terrifying tunnel. But always in the deep centre, was the light. Even until the past year, when I slept, I was always curled up in a cocoon, too frightened to stretch out in my own bed for fear of something happening to me. It was like that for fifty years.

Then just a few years ago, I found a counsellor, Susan, who listened to me, who believed me, who had faith in me. I cannot tell you how important that was in my life: to be believed and to be treated with respect. She helped me see other things in my life, she listened to the story of Sister McMillan, and she helped me bring that inner light inside of me out into the wider world. Through her help, I began to see light, colours, birds. I felt like I was being reborn: I began moving out of the tunnel. It was scary, but it was also wonderful.

Susan introduced me to Silent Too Long and to the other women who had been sexually abused and treated badly as little children. I met other women who knew, who had been through similar things. They listened to me and believed me. They shared their outrage with me about what had happened. They said the abuse should never have happened. They laughed and cried with me. It made it so real to be believed by other survivors.

We shared our stories, shared our beliefs, trust, respect, acknowledged our pain and recognised our strengths. It was such an amazing thing to meet other women who'd been through similar circumstances, who'd lived, who were strong, and who were loving and kind. I learnt from them about different ways of crying: that there are tears of sorrow, tears of pain and anger, and there are tears of joy. All of this was new to me. All of this helped me to step out of the tunnel and into the light of a new world.

I feel like a bird that's been let out of a cage. I'm free. I'm light. I now can have connections with other people, other living things like the birds, the plants, flowers, animals, people. I have been able to see the world through really different eyes. I get up in the morning and say how lucky I am. I've got a second chance. I used to wake up and regret that I was alive.

Now I wake up and feel at peace. It's lovely. I feel things from the heart now. I used to be guided by my head, but now I'm guided by my heart: I'm living heart stuff now. I feel that I have a future, and that's something I've never felt before.

Other people see the changes in me. My daughters tell me about the changes they see. I recently told them that I loved them for the first time in their lives. They both wept, but they are both delighted.

I've learnt that it's never too late. It's never too late to leave the darkness. It's never too late to tell my children that I love them. I've got my grandchildren now to love and I really enjoy them.

I can see the future, whereas before I couldn't.

My journey has been one from the dark, the cold and the pain, out into the light, into the wide world of wonder. This is a different story from being just number 17. This is the story of hope, and I thank the counsellor and Silent Too Long for making it possible for me to change my story. Now mine is a story from the heart.

‘Gentle sun in a darkened room’

a song by

Carol Coulter

(Dec 1999)

There have been people, animals, toys in all of our lives who were significant companions during our hard times. This song is dedicated to them. The words were written by Carol. It is about her grandmother.

*Grandma, you never knew for sure
The truth of what faced me before
I know you tried to lift the curtain
But all of us were sunk in fear,
Paralysed and uncertain*

*And whenever you gave
A smile was enough
To gratify
Your loving heart*

Chorus

*You didn't talk much
But your eyes were clear
When they rested on mine
They reached my heart
How deeply you cared*

*Anxiety slipped away from me
Beneath that loving blanket
As a withered plant absorbs as food
The gentle sun in its darkened room*

Chorus:

*You were so much to me
Through the terror in my life
When I was lost inside
Your presence was a calming tide*

Chorus

*Beyond your death
And for all this time
You're still a shining light
Through the darkness that was mine*

*Your love entwined
Your soul and mine,
Unfailing and unattached
To expectation*

Silent No More

After singing 'Gentle sun in a darkened room', we then asked everyone if they could share in a moment's silence – for all those who did not survive childhood sexual abuse, and for those who are this very minute suffering through it in silence.

This moment's silence was broken by us all joining together to sing the song 'Silent No More' which was inspired by a poem by Margie Thomas.

*Generations bring down generations
Filled with broken dreams
So-called happy families
That are not what they seem*

*We've been silent too long
Breaking cycles upon cycles
That have gone on too long
Showing the ugly side
That was hidden and wrong*

*Facing all the fears
Learning a new way
Because it can't stay like this
It cannot stay this way*

We've been silent too long

*And now that we've found each other
There is one thing for sure
We won't be silent no more*

Acknowledgements

Silent Too long members thank David Denborough and Dulwich Centre for their assistance and for making this paper and presentation possible. We also thank all the women survivors with whom we have had many, many conversations, and whose wisdoms, courage and reflections echo throughout this paper. We dedicate this paper to them and also to our children for whom we hope the world will be a safer and more respectful place.

Silent Too Long – how did we get our name?

We were sitting around the kitchen table one day in the health centre discussing the effects of child sexual abuse on women's lives and the ways in which our culture makes it difficult for survivors to be able to even speak about the abuse. One of the women said that we'd been silent too long. We jumped up and said, 'That's it! That's the name of the group: Silent Too Long'. We will be silent no more.

Information and poems

We ask that any material used from this article acknowledge Silent Too Long. The poems by Carol Coulter and Margie Thomas are copyright and are not to be reproduced without their permission.

Notes

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1. Silent Too Long is an action-based group for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. They can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre Publications.