

STORY SHARING, VOICE FATIGUE, AND MOVING FORWARD AFTER DIVORCE: WHEN WOMEN RESIST BEING DEFINED BY THEIR TRAGEDIES

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Following from the premise that story sharing with similarly situated others surrounding salient life transitions is healing and empowering, this inquiry uncovered a provocative phenomenon referred to as "voice fatigue." According to project participants who were six midlife members of a support circle for women undergoing marital dissolution, voice fatigue may occur over time when a woman amidst life transition grows tired of hearing her own pain-filled voice. Voice fatigue also may serve as an indicator that a transitional woman is ready to move forward in her healing process. Such healing is premised to occur via the dynamic shaping of a survivor's story, symbolizing a refusal to view oneself as a mere victim. Feminist psychotherapists may play an invaluable supportive role within this process, and are urged to collaborate with their female clients on their journey towards emotional and spiritual healing, growth, and transformation.

Grounding This Work

As a doctoral candidate conducting feminist research with women in transition, my work was grounded in the discourse of women's relational voice. Following in feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan's (1982) innovative tradition, my central premise was that, within a culture that silences the feminine, sharing one's story with similarly situated supportive others enables women to make sense of their life experiences and is affirming and empowering (Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982, 1991; Jordan, 1997a; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Stiver & Miller, 1997; Surrey, 1991). My research nonetheless revealed a provocative phenomenon. While story sharing is an invaluable aspect of the healing process surrounding traumatic life transitions, women may reach a point in their psychological development wherein they wish to move on with their lives and be agents—not victims—of their destinies. They even may come to express overwhelming weariness at hearing their own pain-filled voices—an occurrence that I now refer to as "voice fatigue."

The data for this inquiry consisted of the accounts of six members of a follow-up

support circle that I facilitated for women undergoing marital dissolution. The circle assembled for ten weeks during the fall of 1994 at a women's service agency located in Central New York. Participants, who ranged in age from 35 to 49 years, had been separated from their husbands for a period of one year or less. All were mothers who reported experiencing moderate to extreme degrees of financial distress. Pseudonyms have been employed to portray these participants, who herein are referred to as Grace, Jody, Martha, Maxine, Sharon, and Tara. While limits on the representativeness of my research follow from the voluntary nature of sampling and small sample size, the power of qualitative inquiry lies in in-depth portrayal (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Voicing Our Fatigue

While I continued to promote the power of women's story sharing, my circle participants expressed that, at an average of eight months post-separation, rather than feeling renewed by speaking personal truths, they actually were tired of talking! As a word-weary Jody illuminated: "I'm sick and tired

of *hearing* my own voice! My life is no worse than anyone else's. It's the same old broken record," adding: "When I hear others, I empathize. When I hear myself, I feel like I'm whining." Her sister survivor Sharon shared similar sentiments in asserting: "Sometimes, it was really healing to share. But [at] other times, it was really painful and hurtful and made me sad and I would've rather not opened up the wounds. I'm really sick of *hearing* my own voice!"

Upon collecting these evocative data, I struggled to make sense of why this assembly of women, who a short time earlier had sung the praises of personal storytelling yet later strove to silence their own expressions of emotional anguish. Witness Maxine, who, regarding the separation and the stressful series of transitions that followed from it, exhorted: "In the beginning, the women's group was really good. Now, I want to not concentrate on all the bad stuff... Maybe I'll get it out of my system eventually." Although a constellation of factors might account for the phenomenon of voice fatigue, perhaps the most revealing one may be gleaned from what group member Sharon suggested. Resignedly, she sighed: "I just want to move on."

Moving On

Moving on: in time, it becomes the dream of most women experiencing an often soul-shattering life transition like divorce. Yet, moving on may demand muffling our demonstrations of distress, even our very voices—at least when the sorrow shows no signs of subsiding. For our voices define us, vastly impacting how we visualize ourselves in the world; this is precisely the impetus for the women's voice literature. Within a patriarchal culture, women cannot simply presume a sense of self, but must continually recreate themselves by speaking out (Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982, 1991; Jordan, 1997a; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Stiver & Miller, 1997; Surrey, 1991). Still, if personal truths

remain bleak for unfathomable stretches, then we may come to despise our situations and, by extension, our selves for "ending up in them." Far better to utter falsehoods—of which silence surely is a form—than repeatedly to reproduce our own ineptitudes.

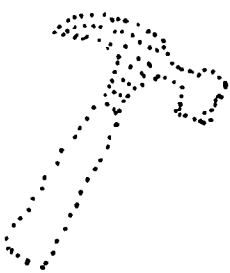
In essence, my circle participants were resolutely refusing to allow their tragedies to define them, or to see themselves as mere victims. The value of espousing a survivor's spirit suffused with courage, strength, and resourcefulness in the face of soul-wrenching struggle was first revealed to me during a group dialogue addressing the psychological efficacy of journaling (Rabinor, 1998). I had urged participants to use writing as a vehicle for exploring their lives *as divorcing women*. In an admirable attempt to situate her identity within a larger framework than simply impending divorce, witty group member Grace wrinkled her nose and countered: "How about the journal of *a woman*?" Unfortunately, I remained ensnared in my preconceived notions surrounding the women's erstwhile need to speak their pain and was unable to hear her words.

Espousing a Survivor's Spirit

With an impetuous tinge with irony and nary missing a beat, Grace swiftly retorted:

"My feeling is, instead of focussing on the fact that I'm a *divorced* woman, to focus on the fact that I am. I *am!* And instead of *dwelling* on the whole issue of divorce, which permeates my whole life, *anyway*, it just comes out naturally because I'm a part of this *group*. Instead of going, each time, 'Well today, as a divorced woman, I feel like—.' When I'm writing, what happens is that all the feelings that can be put down on paper come out, and it's a statement of myself, rather than where I've been or where I'm going."

During the course of this same women's circle conversation, an acrimonious Maxine



also added:

“It just seems like every day, people even have the audacity to introduce you as like, ‘Oh, this is Maxine. She’s just getting divorced.’ Like, Jesus! No one says, ‘She just finished a painting.’ No one says, ‘She does a great job,’ or ‘She’s learning something new.’ No one says anything like that. They’re like, ‘Oh, she’s just divorced.’”

Something struck me as inherently healthy and healing in these straightforward statements of selfhood—despite my feminist equation of silence with sickness. Slowly, it was becoming clearer that, far from signifying self-silencing, Grace and her sister group members were striving to *reshape* their stories in ways that made sense of—and emphasized the success of—their struggles as survivors! From an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that we continually reconstruct our own realities, and that “truth” is more ephemeral than eternal, such accounts are no less real; they simply symbolize an alternative window on the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the wise words of social historian Luisa Passerini (1989: “All autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose”(p. 197).



Planting a New Garden

Sustained by my dawning understanding of these story-steeped processes, I began dialoguing anew with inquiry participants and gradually grasped the value of viewing divorce more positively, as a period of profoundly painful, yet deeply productive, emotional and spiritual development (Bisagni & Eckenrode,

1995; Riessman, 1990). For when a woman’s heart, soul, and life are all but shattered, she may have nowhere to go but inward and upward. Martha thus made positive sense of her post-separation progress in maintaining: “When something so tragic happens, you can’t explain in words the feelings. But through the pain, it’s also a really valuable learning experience. It helps me to grow, and shows me my own strength.” With her penchant for metaphor, imaginative Maxine likened divorce to “planting a new garden” in affirming:

“Sometimes we have to go through this enormous pain to be able to face the truth in our life. And it means wading through the crap...[But] it’s definitely a time of *growth*, and at a time when you can check in with yourself and go, ‘What do I like, what *don’t* I like?’... And because everything’s been wiped away, it’s new ground. It’s like you’re planting a new garden, and you really have *choice*.”

Resuming our previous conversation regarding divorce and diary writing, I asked what the women wanted to write on. Martha replied that she tended to record routine feelings, adding:

“Some of [my writing] is, ‘Do I want the divorce or don’t I want it?’ And that’s hard. But I think I do because, in order to be me and to find me and to be honest with myself, I think I have to let go of that part of my life. And I’m just hanging on by a *thread*!... It’s almost like I’m afraid to let that thread go... But what I keep saying to myself is that, by letting that thread go, maybe something *wonderful* is going to happen. That’s what I’m focussing on now, is the wonderfulness of what it’s going to be like when it’s all over and done with, not the fear of how I’m going to survive and what I’m going to do and that part of it.”

Speaking of the value of reconstructing

one's personal story in the aftermath of divorce, Sharon subsequently exclaimed, "if you don't...you're just stuck!" A journal entry that Sharon shared with her sister circle members shed further light on this intriguing issue of survivors' stories:

"There was a time, not too long ago, when I thought I just wanted to be past all this crap, to get on with my life and not have the days and nights tinged by the separation and all the provocations surrounding it. As impossible as it seemed then, I am there now. My days are not paradisiacal, but I no longer wear my past situation like a straight jacket. I feel free at last to live *my* life, my own life."

Clearly, the women wished to emphasize their considerable personal progress since their separations. Participants also insisted on seeing their identities in broader terms than simply their divorce status. By reshaping stories that revolved around personal survival rather than relational loss, the women were radically redefining their own realities while weaving unique tapestries of triumph. As such, they were not so much silencing personal pain as speaking their own survival, attesting that there is indeed life after even a devastating divorce. Their words also underscore the compelling power of hope in the healing process: hope provides potent fuel for survivors.

Enabling and Empowering

How might feminist psychotherapists support divorcing women as they embark upon the journey towards emotional and spiritual healing, growth, and transformation? Congruent with a passionately relational, client-centered model (Greenspan, 2003; Jordan, 1991, 1997b; Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1991; Stoppard, 2000), professionals should acknowledge and appreciate women's cues when they complain of voice fatigue. After all, voice fatigue may

manifest a woman's readiness to move on in her healing process. Clinicians also may enrich such women's recovery by empathically sustaining them as they shape evolving survival stories. This work involves assisting clients in identifying widespread societal sexism and its potentially deleterious psychological impact, as well as nurturing awareness of their accomplishments in coping with consequential life losses and changes. Through authentic reflective listening, therapists even may facilitate clients' formulation of achievable next steps on their path to personal empowerment.

Given women's traditional expertise in nurturing relational connections, one viable client aspiration might be to assist other females in their efforts at self-empowerment through diverse forms of personal action and/or political advocacy (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990; Surrey, 1991). I have witnessed both sorts of initiatives. Sometimes, my participants' efforts were as seemingly simple as setting a constructive example for their children, especially daughters. As Maxine depicted this dynamic: "Women really do have it bad. But I want to show my daughter I can *do* it... Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you." Others expressed altruistic impulses through more public channels, thus targeting a wider assembly of women. Tara lauded female mentors and shared her desire to act as an enlightened role model and advocate for other women:

"I want to help turn things around for myself and the kids and make things better for other women...I feel like I have a lot to offer...My goal for years is to be financially secure, even to set up a fund for other women...I'm in this for other women. I've been through way too much unhappiness in my life. There's got to be a happy ending here, somewhere!"

Regardless of the precise means that a woman amidst marital dissolution adopts in

an effort to enhance and enrich her own life, and/or the lives of other females, relationships and reaching out offer an enormously creative context for emotional and spiritual healing, growth, and transformation. The express role of feminist service providers should be to sustain and support female clients in their various attempts at recasting voice fatigue as storied survival.

Reflecting Back

While, as women, our personal stories are seldom static, neither are the life pathways that they purport to chronicle. Our lives indeed are rich tapestries of the unexpected, replete with love and loss, hurt and healing, transition and transformation. Since my days as a doctoral candidate, and largely inspired by the pioneering personal work of my circle participants, I have reinvented myself professionally by training as a clinical social worker. Today, as a psychotherapist with powerful feminist leanings, I frequently reflect upon the wisdom and grace of this extraordinary group of women with the understanding that, while life is an ever evolving process in an inherently unpredictable universe, we do have a choice regarding how our journeys unfold. We can shut down emotionally and spiritually and thus come to stagnate in our own pain, or we can strive—hopefully, with sisterly support—to embrace the beauty in the everyday, to believe in ourselves, and to trust that we possess the resources to cope with whatever hand life deals us.

I nonetheless would assert that, while interpersonal connections may offer inherently fertile ground for personal healing, growth, and transformation, our most vital relationship is with ourselves. Unfortunately, as women, we all too often are socialized to sacrifice aspects of our core selves, allegedly in an effort to remain relationally connected. Ironically, such a stance ultimately engenders emotional and spiritual disconnection (Miller

& Stiver, 1997)! From my own constellation of experiences, I have come to envision voice as an iterative process, a dialogic dance between self and other. Voice thus encapsulates honing truths in dynamic interchange with supportive others, while remaining ever mindful of the intricate rhythms of our inner truths—which sometimes may necessitate seeking solace in the silences. To the Donnean adage that “no man is an island,” I would counter that neither is any woman a mere cacophony of discordant sounds. Rather, each of us ultimately must learn to speak in our own distinctive voice.

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