

Autobiography Bears Witness

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As a child I first realized the significance of bearing witness.

I am sitting at the kitchen table and have opened my biology textbook, *Web of Life*, to take down notes on the life cycle of a dung beetle. Dung beetles feed off decaying matter. They break down the cowpats that litter the green fields. The book starts off by talking about photosynthesis, the process whereby the grass starts to grow. The cows eat the grass, then shit it out. The dung beetle breaks down the cow manure into the soil and the cycle begins again. Lots of diagrams of cartoon animals leading to arrows that go around in circles, grass to cow, cow to dung, dung to beetle.

I try to take this in over the hullabaloo of my father's voice and the television blaring in the next room.

"You're such a good woman," my father shouts at my mother above the drone of the news.

The newsreader's voice has a steady hypnotic flow. "Two children died in a house fire in Maribyrnong this afternoon. There are no suspicious circumstances." I have some sheets of paper and onto these I write down his words. On small pink squares of paper I write down everything my father says.

"Kill him off, Liesje, you just kill him off." My mother does not answer. In her silence I can imagine her as she sits watching the television, eyes ahead, refusing to be drawn in.

“Why don’t you go back to your lovely family?” my father says. “Go back to your brothers and sisters, your mother and father. Why don’t you go off with them? You’re a stupid bloody whore. And I? I have to sit here, night and day. I have to sit here and eat the muck you serve, the muck you call food. I have to sit here. I work all day. I work bloody hard, Liesje. You don’t believe that of course, do you?”

On the other side of the kitchen, resting on a pan on the stove, I can see the plate of food my mother made earlier. Mashed potatoes and carrots, peas that have turned a turquoise color from sitting out of the can for too long and the congealed fat of a piece of steak, brown as dung, with white streaks of fat bordering its edges.

“You’re such a good woman, Liesje. Nine children. Nine bloody children. I should have taken the pill. All those bloody children. But God loves you. You’ll go to heaven, you and your bloody children.”

“Would you like a cup of tea?” my mother asks in a voice as neutral as the newsreader’s.

“A cup of tea. A cup of dishwater. I don’t want your bloody tea. I don’t want your bloody food.”

I am writing as fast as I can. Writing to keep up with him. All the words, like a newspaper reporter. I write and write and write. It keeps me sane. That is what I think as I write on and on and on. This writing keeps me sane. If I listen to the words, if I try to decipher their meaning, I will go mad. My father is mad. Not just drunk. He is mad. My mother says he is an alcoholic. A-L-C-O-H-O-L-I-C, she says it like that, spells out the word. He cannot help himself. She has joined Al-Anon. She goes to weekly group meetings. She comes home from these meetings full of praise for the wonders of serenity. My mother is serene as she watches the television while my father blasts her from all angles. My mother is practicing serenity. Her serenity seems to impel him further. His voice gets louder and louder. I write faster and faster. I will keep these sheets of paper forever. One day when I am older I will bring them out and I will write them down and let others read my father’s words.

“Nine children, Liesje. I should have taken the *kapotje*. Just kill him off. You kill him off. And you, good woman will go to heaven.”

I hear my father lurch up out of his chair. The heavy thump of his bare feet on the lounge room carpet. My heart seizes. What next? No words now. I stop writing. Waiting. The click of the television knob and it is silent.

“I’m going to bed,” my father says as he staggers across the carpet to his room. I hear the slide of the double glass doors and my father’s footsteps up the hall. The slam of his bedroom door.

I close my *Web of Life* over the top of my notes and tiptoe to the lounge room door. My mother is sitting in her chair, opposite my father's now empty chair. She has her eyes fixed on the television, as if it is still on. Her eyes are glazed with that faraway look she gets more and more these days when she is practicing her serenity.

"We do as if nothing is wrong," she says and turns to look at me as I stand in the doorway. "Just do as if nothing is wrong."

I want to tell her about my notes. I want to show her the evidence. My father is mad. My father is a crazy lunatic drunk.

"Best you go to bed now," she says, a smile spreading across her face. "God grant me the serenity," she recites the Al-Anon prayer.

Now I feel like my father. Rage, red and hot. How can she ignore him so? How can she just let him go on and on and on like this? He is like a wild animal chained to a post and left out in the hot sun waiting till the birds come down to peck out his eyes. She will not release him. Night after night it goes on like this. The Web of Life. I can draw arrows in a circle leading from one to another, from him to her, from her to him, and to us, my brothers and sisters, clustered in the middle. We are the products of this marriage like so many pieces of cow dung left for the dung beetles to break down and send back into the earth.

The child from my memory looks for ways to represent her experience for some future time, as if by putting the words down she can deal with the load of her parents' strife. In this way autobiography bears witness. The witness carries the weight of memory. To remember and to share is to find words for traumatic experience, beyond behavioral and bodily manifestations. Trauma in its essence, the unbearable, the unspeakable, is difficult to put into words and yet, as Leigh Gilmore (2001) argues, those who survive trauma are often required to voice their experience "in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witness who will recognise it [. . .] to tell [. . .] what can't be spoken" (7).

We huddle together behind my mother at the front door and wait. Cars streak by on Warrigal Road. There are only six of us left at home now, and I am the tallest, even taller than my mother. She stands hunched over in her green mohair coat, while the rest of us shiver in the cold. The liquidambar in the front yard, stripped of its autumn leaves, rises like a skeleton against the glare of headlights, while the house, an AV Jennings special in cream brick veneer, is in darkness. My mother tries the door handle and sighs.

"He's locked us out again."

The day before, my father had gone on a drinking binge. He threw the radiator at my mother because the porridge was lumpy, then fell asleep on the couch. My mother took her coat and purse and waited with us on the nature strip for the blue Ventura bus, which took us to Ivanhoe. We spent the weekend there with my uncle, in his double-story house. But with school the next day, we needed to come home for books and uniforms and our ordinary lives.

My mother taps on the door. I hope it will stay shut and we can walk away. She taps again. My father, sober now but surly, steps aside to let us back into the house. I half hide behind my mother, ready to run again. That night in the shadow of my fear, I make up my mind to rescue people like me, from families like mine. I will become a social worker. I will work with the families of alcoholics.

Every year from the time I am fourteen years old until the year I turn eighteen, I send out letters to the university asking when I can apply to study social work. What do I need to get in? What are the alternatives? I write letters to the technical colleges. What do I need to do to become a welfare officer? I am frustrated by their suggestions that I wait, wait until I finish my schooling and then apply. But I am determined. I will be a social worker, or if I do not get high enough grades, I will become a welfare officer. I am resigned to this latter possibility, convinced my marks will not be high enough. But in the end they are, and for four years I travel to and from the University of Melbourne to study social work. Yet that career is short lived. It lasts another five years during which I train as a psychotherapist.

The Social Work Department at Prince Henry's Hospital is on the lowest floor near Casualty. It is like a toilet block, a series of cubicles feeding off from the reception area. Doctors rarely see the need to make contact with anyone in the Social Work Department apart from requesting that we arrange discharge for some elderly patient who has no one at home to care for him or to offer assistance to some unemployed person who cannot fill out her claim form for sickness benefits. I do not enjoy this work. I want to work with people in a meaningful way, not simply as a secretary or "handmaiden" to the doctors.

One day, ten months after I have begun work here in my first job, a young medical resident, not much older than me, leaves a message: can you please get a social history on Mr. Kemp in ward 5D?

I ring him back.

"What's Mr. Kemp's problem?"

"Problem? There's no problem. He's in for stabilization of his diabetes."

“Then why does he need to see a social worker?”

“Nothing specific, really. I’m presenting a case review at the Divisional meeting on Monday and I need his social history.”

For what? I want to say. So you can pretend you’ve done your homework. Pretend you have a decent bedside manner. Pretend you care?

Two weeks later I resign. I resolve now to escape from social work and the sense of futility I feel in this profession so circumscribed by others. I decide to explore psychoanalysis instead and train to be a psychotherapist. Years later I enter intensive psychoanalytical training, which involves deep exploration of child development, beginning with the infant. The paradox becomes clearer to me only in time that in this process of exploring the infantile, part of which includes undergoing a personal analysis, the candidate is required both to regress within the therapy and simultaneously to function at an adult level during the supervised case work and the didactic parts of the course. The work is demanding and requires a synthesis of the emotional and the intellectual. These paradoxical tensions are exemplified during the work of Infant Observation.

From June 1990 until mid-1991, I visited a mother, Paula, and her baby, Lucy, as part of my training to become a psychoanalyst. Each week I visited the family for an hour, my task to “observe” the relationship between Paula and her growing baby.

At the Tavistock Clinic in London in 1948, the British psychoanalyst, Esther Bick, was the first to introduce the notion of Infant Observation into child psychotherapy training. The practice was extended into adult psychoanalytic training in 1960 (Bick 1964, 558). It is now a regular part of most psychoanalytic psychotherapy trainings throughout Britain and Australia. Infant observation provides each trainee with an opportunity to observe and to think, not merely at a cognitive level, but also at the sensate level, about an infant’s development from birth onwards. Generally, for at least a year, the trainee observes the infant, ideally an “ordinary,” so-called healthy infant, who is surrounded by her usual family members and caregivers in her everyday setting (Bick 1964, 558). Trainees are encouraged insofar as possible to make contact with a pregnant mother who is unknown to them through networks such as the local GP, Infant Welfare Centre, kindergartens, and the like.

Bick explains trainees’ role as observer in the simplest terms. They are there “to have some direct experience of babies as part of their professional development” (558). They then write up their observations after each visit

and share them in a weekly seminar session with their fellow trainees to compare, contrast, and think about this powerful experience.

Initial responses to the idea of having an observer in the family after the birth of a baby fluctuate between the extremes of “how horrible it must be,” how disturbing to be scrutinized so closely (in which case the observer’s presence is felt to be persecutory and most often refused), to one in which the observer is welcomed and considered a benign influence, a thoughtful presence that might help the mother in the process of adjusting to and caring for her new baby. It is anticipated that a mother might be more relaxed after the birth of her second and subsequent babies, though there are still first-time mothers who welcome an observer and some second-time and subsequent mothers who do not. The infant welfare sister at the center I had attended earlier with my own babies gave me the name of Paula as a mother due to have her second baby who was keen to participate in an infant observation. Paula welcomed me into her family, pleased that I should be so interested in the life of her new baby.

It is both a privilege and a responsibility to be accepted into the life of a growing family in this way. Lucy lived with her mother, her father, Jack, and her three-year-old brother, Jonathan, in a two-story house five minutes’ drive from where I lived. The house was painted white and had a picture-book quality to it. A neat lawn and well-tended flowerbeds on a wide street lined with large-leafed plane trees. A toy tricycle lay on its side in the driveway. The house was not fenced in. I could walk directly from my car on the curb to the front door, which added to the sense of welcome.

Infant observation involves bearing witness to both the mother’s and the infant’s experience. That this happens in the context of your own experience is inevitable. True objectivity is a myth. This is the observer’s paradox: whatever we observe is influenced by our presence, while our interpretation of what we observe is influenced by our subjectivity. We cannot escape it. The moment I first stopped at the big white house a week before Lucy was due to be born, I was awed at the enormity of this undertaking, my own and that of the mother. It is a challenging task to observe a child’s first year of life from these multiple perspectives: from the psychoanalytic and from the personal. At the same time, I try to take up a neutral position, in the knowledge that whatever I observe will be colored by where I am now and from where I have come.

On that first visit, Lucy’s brother loomed large. His mother had told me at the door that we must cut this first visit short, as she needed to take Jonathan to the doctor. He had developed a chest infection over the last

week that he could not get over. We sat in the small sitting room in front of an unused open fireplace. Jonathan sat on the floor at his mother's feet, but he was restless, pulling at her to get going.

I talked to Paula about the forthcoming birth, the ongoing arrangements for my future visits and her feelings about the birth. The longer we talked, the more agitated Jonathan became. His mother gently prised his fingers from her hand and urged him to wait. "Mummy will only be a few minutes more." But Jonathan could not wait. He picked up the metal poker from beside the fireplace and began to swing it around his head. Before his mother had a chance to stop him, he waved it in my face. He was about to whack me when his mother leapt from her chair and grabbed the poker from him. I imagined that I had come to represent this new as yet unborn baby who would soon displace Jonathan. I sensed then that for the next year my focus on baby Lucy would be a constant source of irritation to Jonathan, even as I tried to acknowledge and include him whenever possible.

"Jonathan is looking forward to the new baby, aren't you, Jonathan?" Paula said. Jonathan nodded. A smear of mucus dribbled down to his lip. "We'll get going in a minute." She wiped Jonathan's nose. He grimaced and pulled away. Paula turned her attention back to me, and as she did so, Jonathan flung himself onto the floor and began to pull at the embroidered roses on his mother's sock. "Roses, roses, roses," he said.

"Don't pull my socks, Jonathan," his mother said, "I don't pull yours." Jonathan gave her sock one last tug then rolled onto his side and pulled at the tassels on the rug.

"I think I should get going now," I said, aware of the rising tension, my sense that Jonathan did not want me there, did not want anyone there, anyone who might distract his mother from him.

"Right then, we're off to the doctor's," Paula said. "Let's get your coat, Jonathan."

"I'm not sick anymore." Jonathan said, standing up from his curled-up position on the floor. Paula laughed. "You just kept us awake all night with your coughing and spluttering and you're not sick?" She turned to me. "He's not usually like this. He was a good baby, really easy, but now he's become this active toddler. It's a good thing that Jack can look after him while I'm in hospital." Paula then explained how her mother would come up from Blackburn during the day while her husband Jack was at work.

"So, all in all, Jonathan's life will go on just as before," Paula said.

I wanted to suggest otherwise, but the role of the infant observer is a delicate one. While it is important to be friendly and polite; it is also

essential to avoid taking on an advisory role. I had to deny my wish to intervene on Jonathan's behalf by encouraging Paula to see that it might not be as easy for her little boy as she had imagined, but I kept these thoughts to myself. I could talk about them later with the other trainees in the seminar, or so I thought then.

Juliet Mitchell (2003) writes about the birth of a sibling as a devastating experience following on from the trauma of one's own birth. The arrival of a sibling threatens our sense of uniqueness (of being the only one). The "ecstasy of loving one who is like oneself is experienced at the same time as the trauma of being annihilated by one who stands in one's place" (10).

In bearing witness to the infant's experience, the observer may be able to get in touch with her own repressed memories, inchoate unformed memories of what it was like to be an infant. We may identify with the infant, feel as we imagine the infant feels. We breathe ourselves into the infant's mind. We imagine when the infant cries that her pain is our pain. It is an unusual process. If we keep too much distance from the baby, as some might, because it is too painful, too evocative and disturbing, we cannot reach into the experience for all the discoveries that lie there. Not only do we as observers reach into the mind and bodily experience of the baby, we also have access to the experience of the mother and, to a lesser extent, that of the father. When there is a sibling, those identifications can trigger our memories of being a sibling, as they did for me. It is like being a performer on the stage with multiple roles. Sometimes we emphasize one character, sometimes another. Our identifications tend to be greatest in roles most closely resembling our own. It is through the slow painful consideration of the observer's experience in the seminars that trainees are able to learn to slow down and avoid jumping to theoretical conclusions.

My identifications fluctuated between the baby and the sibling. In my own family, I had taken up both positions. I was born with a brother seventeen months older and scarcely ready to enter toddlerhood himself. Twenty-one months later, another sister was born. Certain in-between feelings were re-evoked throughout my observation. My childhood difficulty with numeracy became clearer when I read Juliet Mitchell's ideas on issues of "seriality." Mitchell describes how the "law of the mother" (a play on Jacques Lacan's ideas on the "law of the father") points to a mother's need to let all her children know that there is enough room for all of them (53). Given her many children, my mother may have had difficulties convincing those further down the line, those born after my parents'

migration to Australia, by which time both parents were likely to have felt exhausted and overwhelmed.

The image I have is one in which I am sitting on my mother's lap. The room is full of children at various activities. We, mother and baby, are seated at the center. From time to time, someone goes to pull me off her lap; someone wants to take my place. My mother's belly is swollen with the next inside baby, and to quote my analyst, "I am off the lap and running." It is an expression she used often and reflected my tendency to rush. Maybe this comes from a sense of feeling pushed out too soon, maybe from a wish to keep moving to avoid pain, or simply to keep up with the others. Perhaps I was precocious in my wish to do the analytic training, as I had been all those years earlier when I wanted to be a social worker. Ahead of myself, trying to be big before my time, not allowing myself to enjoy and endure the journey, but simply wanting to be at my destination without travelling there first. A common enough wish. Perhaps I wanted to avoid the slow painful trudge through life, to avoid the difficulties, slip-sliding past them instead of teasing them apart to examine them for what Leonard Cohen describes in his song, "Anthem": "There is a crack, there is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

My failure in analytic training has been one such crack. I write now at length about the experience of Infant Observation and the seminars to let some light in since I suspect that my approach to these seminars contributed to my dismissal from that training.

Recently, sixteen years after I completed the observation, I encountered Paula at the market. I had not seen her for several years. I had not seen Lucy or Jonathan since the end of my observation. In my mind these children were fixed in time, the baby and toddler.

"Jonathan's at uni," Paula said. "And Lucy's in her final year at school." Paula beamed. "She doesn't know what she wants to do yet. But there's plenty of time."

Time is the great healer, they say, but it cannot rid us of our scars. My experience observing these two small children during Lucy's first year of life was enriching in and of itself. The experience of sharing the observation was not. Only in writing now about this secondary experience of the observation seminars can I get some distance and begin to understand it. By bearing witness through autobiography, by "reconfiguring" my experience, as Drusilla Modjeska (2002) suggests, I can understand it better (91).

The psychoanalytic training involves three processes, which candidates must undertake simultaneously: personal analysis, personal supervision on

clinical analytic work, and theoretical seminars. This tripartite split requires a clear separation between all three aspects. If the associated roles are blurred, particularly the educative and the personal, “wild” analysis (pseudo-analysis outside the analytic frame) can result. Glenn Gabbard and Eva Lester (1995) write about the controversy between “teaching versus treating” as an issue of educational boundaries having to do with the inevitable countertransferences that arise in clinical work, not only from analytic candidates to their patients in treatment, but also to their supervisors (169). Countertransference involves the projection of the analyst’s personal expectations and experience onto the patient; it is inevitable and needs to be considered. Such countertransferences are best explored within the safety of the personal analysis.

The Melbourne Branch of the Psychoanalytic Society includes fewer than forty members at any one time. This creates difficulties. The pool of training analysts from whom trainees might select their own analyst is even smaller. My analyst usually took the infant observation seminars herself, but she could not take our particular group because of my presence. She had needed to continue in the one-treatment role in relation to me. The committee responsible for training therefore elected Dr. L. to take on the task of the seminars, despite her relatively limited experience in Infant Observation.

Teaching in the training program is voluntary, a mark of honor perhaps, but also demanding. Trainees and teachers alike have mixed feelings about the experience. Teachers give generously of their time. What do they get in return? Kudos, perhaps, not necessarily gratitude. Trainees caught up in the rigors of being assessed are not likely to be appreciative of their teachers’ efforts, certainly not at the time of training. Dr. L. gave generously of her time and perhaps felt that her trainees should recognize her efforts. However, the infant observation seminars proved problematic for our training group.

“Aren’t you cold?” my fellow trainee said as we passed through the entrance into Dr. L.’s rooms. It had been a hot day for the end of autumn and warm enough for me to wear a summer dress, but the air was crisp now. I could feel the hairs on my arms stand up straight.

“I’m warm blooded,” I said. “I don’t usually feel the cold.” It was not my turn to present, but I had brought along my notes just the same. Another trainee, the first to present her infant in the seminars, had gone on to her second presentation the week before. I was next in line, so by rights,

assuming this trainee now enquiring about my temperature had not found an infant, it would be my turn again.

By the time we were inside Dr. L.'s room, I felt cold. We sat in silence as if we were waiting for a therapy group to begin. No idle chatter. We waited till everyone arrived and then for Dr. L.'s direction to begin. Her assistant, Dr. F., a less experienced analyst, sat on the opposite side of the room. He too was silent.

"I've found a baby at last," my fellow trainee said. "I'm not sure she's suitable, though. I only met the mother after the birth and I haven't met the father yet."

"That's not so good," Dr. L. said. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. "Let's hear your observation." I tried to tuck my disappointment into the back of my mind. I had been looking forward to my turn again. Lucy had slept for the full hour, and I had managed to stay with it. I had watched her twist and grunt in her sleep, her almost translucent eyelids flickering under their long lashes. I had watched her toes wriggle and stretch under the weight of sleep, her whole body an orchestra of muffled sound.

"There's nothing to see," Paula had said.

"You'd be amazed at what I see." I would have liked to explain something of what the psychoanalytically inclined understand to be happening within the infant. How when we attempt to observe the infant's bodily responses, not just to external events but to internal activity, we can never fully ascertain the meaning. However, we can speculate on the infant's bodily affective experience on the basis of our own countertransference. Esther Bick writes about the conflict in the role of infant observer, and how she needs to feel "sufficiently inside the family to experience the emotional impact," but not fall into the trap of taking on any roles, such as offering practical advice or making value judgments, positive or negative, on how the nursing couple is getting on (558).

My fellow trainee presented her notes in the first person as if she were rehearsing the script from a play. Dr. L. appeared to listen intently while Dr. F. used the tip of one toe to slip off his shoes. Then he pushed back in his chair. He rested the heels of both feet on the low coffee table in the middle of the room. He closed his eyes. He could have been asleep, but equally he could have been listening. Nothing in his demeanor offered a clue, but later during discussion time, he nodded his head in agreement when Dr. L. said the baby was too old. For the purposes of the observation, we needed to observe an infant from birth and it was necessary to interview both parents before the observation of mother and baby could begin.

The “unsuitable” baby presented had a sister three years older than her, my fellow trainee reported. This little girl had spent the observation hour trying to take the observer’s attention away from the baby. Throughout the presentation and particularly in the beginning, I felt as I had imagined this older child must have felt, jealous of her baby brother, in my case, jealous of my fellow trainee. I wanted my observation to be the center of attention, not hers. I resented her having center stage, although I knew it was her turn. During discussion, I agonized over whether I dared comment on this internal observation. How to put it into words without sounding too egocentric or too personal? I took a deep breath.

I talked about my disappointment in missing out. “I think there might be a parallel between the older sister’s experience and mine,” I said. “Like the toddler jealous of the new baby.”

Closed, blank faces. I looked to Dr. L., as obdurate as she had been during my initial application interview, but it was too late now. There was silence, the sort that follows a transgression. I had said too much. Was I guilty of over-identification? Bick writes about the degree to which the pressures of the observation impact on the observer and how much she must avoid letting her behavior be overtaken by these feelings, which are intensified by the projections coming from the family and infant observed. Bick talks about the observer’s behavior, not the observer’s felt experience. There is a distinction. The observer’s experience must be explored and dealt with during her own personal analysis and also during the seminar discussions.

However, it is a feature of analytic training and theory that the initial thoughts of the pioneers, plowing their way through difficult understandings, can be taken up by their followers almost as doctrine. Under the pressure of infant observation, the tendency to rule-based behavior can become powerful. After the seminars each week, we trainees stood outside the seminar room on the nature strip and talked about our experience of them. By the time our infants had reached six months of age, we decided to complain. One of the trainees wrote to me about the group’s feeling, and about our “sense of inhibition of freedom to explore and share experiences, thoughts and feelings within the group.” We sent a group statement along with individual comments to the coordinator and met with him to elaborate our concerns. The coordinator listened and offered to report back to Dr. L. on our behalf. Dr. L. responded by suggesting we could stay on after each seminar in her absence to discuss our concerns in the comfort of her waiting room, rather than talking on the street. She did not want to share our concerns with us, other than to recognize that there was not a good fit

between our expectations of the seminars and hers. We needed to deal with our concerns among ourselves, she said, as best we could.

Over the next six months, Dr. L. and her colleague waited elsewhere while we met alone. During these post-seminar meetings, we trainees squabbled politely like a bunch of motherless children. We turned on one another from time to time, and at other times offered each other support.

Towards the end of the series of observations, after nearly a year had passed, one of the candidate's presentations was set to end prematurely because the mother of the twin infants she had been observing had announced earlier that her family was moving interstate. Throughout the observations, this mother had appeared to handle the stress of dealing with two babies simultaneously in a pragmatic way. She had seemed to keep her distance not only from the observer but also from her babies. When this mother made the announcement that her family would be moving away, she did not express any concern for the abrupt ending of the observation, nor throughout the observations had she expressed pleasure in the observer's visits.

The observer presented this last session with an air of sadness. She had brought each baby a present and commented in her discussion that one of the twins had not worn socks that day.

"Her tiny feet looked frozen."

By the end of the presentation there was a long silence.

"It's excruciating," I said.

"Nothing of the sort," Dr. L. said. "You're being melodramatic. The babies will be fine." She turned a half circle to face me in the chair at her side. "Emotional experience need not be traumatic."

I felt as though she had slapped my face.

In the final session with Dr. L. when we each had the opportunity to stay back for feedback from her, she told me that I had a tendency to "startle like a baby." She said this in a kindly way, as if she empathized. I did not realize then the significance of her words. Could it have been a warning of my imminent dismissal?

Bick emphasizes the need for consecutive observations. Only over time can we see patterns emerge. Each mother and baby unit appears to develop "certain preferred modes of communication." How difficult it is, Bick writes, to "observe," to "collect facts free from interpretation." The moment we start to use language to describe the "facts" of our observations, the words we use color the experience (565).

When my fellow trainee commented on the baby's cold feet, she used the word "frozen." It expressed a feeling. When I used the word "excruciating," I too expressed a feeling. When Dr. L. used the word "melodramatic," she also expressed a feeling. We all observe experience from different perspectives. Some might use language that emphasizes the emotive, while others use expressions that emphasize the rational, the intellectual. But few words are devoid of meaning. Bick offers another example. The observer might alternatively describe how the nipple "falls" from the baby's mouth, or it might be "forced" from the baby's mouth. It might "escape" or be "plucked" from the baby. The baby might "spit it out." All these possibilities describe what on the surface might appear to be the same activity. The observer's role to report accurately on her observations is colored not only by what the observer sees, however objective she might aim to be, but also by the meaning the observer ascribes from internal pressures to what is observed. According to Bick, we choose particular words to describe our observations because "observing and thinking are almost inseparable" (565).

Some years ago, sometime after I had left analytic training, a psychotherapy trainee who was herself participating in an infant observation spoke to me about her concern at the tendency of her group to "pathologize" the mother. "They seem to pass judgment on the respective mothers," she complained "for not mothering their babies properly." Esther Bick's concern—observers learn to withhold judgment and not jump to hasty conclusions from the comfort of their position as the "knowing" outsider—attests to this tendency. We are all biased in our witnessing. We often seek to blame those who struggle for their struggle. This tendency to blame the mother erupts from our identification with the infant. The unhappy infant who suffers at the hands of her hapless mother grows into the adult who declares "I will never be like that with my own children," only to repeat the same mistakes under the pressure of her unconscious "repetition compulsion," the mind's tendency to repeat traumatic experiences over and again (Freud 1957, 74).

My experience of the infant observation seminars was confusing. We were told to observe and to report back our observations. Naïve as I was then, I did not realize that my performance would be so harshly assessed, that I needed to perform according to some prescribed idea about how a trainee should perform.

"We throw you in at the deep end and see how you cope," the chair of the Progress Committee told me later when I went to him trying to establish why I had been dismissed. "We are not so much interested in educating you

as in seeing how you manage anxiety,” he added when I complained about the absence of support. It was as if we were required to be competent and able to function already as analysts even at the beginning of the training, as if there was little confidence in the training process itself.

“If I knew then what I know now, I’d do it differently,” I said to the Progress Committee chairman. I did not finish my sentence but the thought remains. “I’d keep my feelings to myself.”

To bear witness to my experience in the way I did during the training was clearly a dangerous thing to do, despite the views of analysts like Michael Grignon (2003) who argue that the use of infant observation in training programs introduces “candidates to the complexities of observation as well as the difficulties of thinking psychoanalytically” (429). It is not simply about the gathering of facts but of observing oneself, not in isolation but within the group and in one’s personal analysis. The seminar group, in Donald Winnicott’s terms, provides a “transitional space” in which trainees can learn to observe themselves and others “witnessing” these transformations in a safe holding environment (Grignon, 429).

In an article on the problem of helpfulness in encounters with torture survivors, the social worker Dick Blackwell (1997) argues that rather than being there to help victims of torture and organized violence, it is more important to bear witness. Bearing witness, he argues, is far more difficult than being helpful. Helpful actions, “giving alms to the poor, soup to the homeless, or shopping for a sick neighbour,” assist but they fail to change anything, “certainly not history” (91). When James and Joyce Robertson began their research into the experience of young children in brief separation from their parents during the 1950s, there was an outcry, mainly from professionals and those involved in childcare. How could the Robertsons have let those little children suffer so? Why did they not step in and intervene, put a stop to the pain they were witnessing?

The Robertsons’ film *John* (1953) shows the story of an eighteen-month-old boy whose mother goes into hospital for the birth of her second child. Shot in the 1950s, the film begins with happy scenes of John playing with his mother in the garden, a comfortable, confident child with a lively, attentive mother. Then we shift to scenes wherein John is dropped at a residential childcare center where he is to stay for the next ten days until his mother returns with her new baby to take John home.

During the first couple of days, John is bewildered and restless but he carries on as the child in the garden with his mother. We can still recognize him as that cheerful boy. Certainly he tries to be cheerful, but when it is time

for bed, his composure breaks down and he begins to sob. In the beginning he can be soothed, the carers cradle him and pat his back, but as the days progress, it becomes more and more difficult to comfort him. After the third and fourth days, at mealtimes he sits at the low table looking into his bowl. Occasionally a carer will offer him a mouthful. At first he accepts, but in time he turns his head away.

He wants to be carried now all the time and one particular carer, nurse Mary, seems to form a bond with him. She takes him for bath time in the first few days and he rallies, but there are all these other children in the nursery vying for attention, and nurse Mary and the other carers are hard pressed to keep up with them. These other children, the voice-over tells us, are here more regularly than John. For them, separations from parents are routine. They are hardened to it, accustomed. They jostle aggressively with one another for a place on Mary's lap. Then we see Mary leave as she must do every day at the end of her shift, and John is once again left to his own fast-dwindling resources.

John's father arrives first on the evening of day two. He visits a number of times, always in the evening, and each time when he gets up to leave, John runs off to fetch his own shoes as if to say, I'm coming too. But John's father closes the door behind him and John is left, shoes in hand, once more abandoned, disconsolate. By days five and six, John appears withdrawn. He curls himself up on the floor at the feet of the carer on duty. He sucks his thumb and stares ahead, apathetic to all the noise around him. He cannot settle into sleep. He refuses food. He does not respond to the comforting arms of the carers, even nurse Mary. Most often he curls himself up in the lap of a huge toy bear that sits against the wall of the nursery.

Throughout the film, the viewer is aware of the presence of the photographer and Joyce Robertson the reporter, taking notes. Sometimes John sits on the floor at her feet. She is a consistent presence, but as the observer, she does not respond to him.

When the last day finally arrives and with it John's mother, she stands at the door beaming, ready to swoop him up. John does not rush over but continues to flop on top of the giant stuffed bear. He resists going to his mother and as the carer carries him to her, the camera comes in for a close-up of John's eyes. The voice-over tells us the look on his face is one John's mother has never seen before.

I watched this film as part of my analytic training during the first didactic seminar of the course. Throughout the film, I was often on the verge of tears. I wondered whether I would be noticed and how my response

might be interpreted. I imagined others might feel the same. When the lights came on, it seemed everyone else was dry-eyed but moved. I found myself wanting to run out into the night and check that my car was safely locked. I wanted to speak about how distressing I had found the film, but I sensed that I would be assessed for my emotional response and that I must keep my feelings to myself.

I expected a response from someone in the room, but there was silence. Throughout the training, it seemed we were not meant to be using our countertransference. We were meant to speak about things objectively. Still, one of the analysts taking the seminar said, "It's not unusual to feel anxious watching the film and beginning your training." It was as if he had given us "permission." When the Robertsons first showed their films, people began to complain about how they had not intervened to protect John. The Robertsons could see it happening, but they did nothing. In their defense, the Robertsons argued that John was not the only such child. Over the years, the Robertsons had made several films depicting the experiences of small children in abrupt separation, most often when their mothers were ill or needed to go off to hospital to have another child. The Robertsons were determined to follow through with their difficult work in order to communicate the effects of such unplanned separations on young children. Their work provided the evidence needed to alert people to the dangers of sudden abrupt separation in childhood and led to changes in the system of institutionalized childcare. Carers' shifts were changed to accommodate to children's needs for consistency. Parents became more aware of the need to prepare their children for the inevitable separations. But not for John, too late for John.

Too late for me, too. I remember now, the words of my mentor after I had dared to complain to her months later about how harsh I had found the analyst's treatment in dismissing me from the training.

"It wouldn't happen that way anymore," she said. "People would be given warnings. They'd be given supervision. They'd be given help." But not for me, too late for me. At the time of my dismissal, my world as I knew it fell apart. My sense of myself as a member of my professional community was shattered. I felt for a time as if I were not a fit person to walk the planet, as if I should go into hiding from all but my nearest family and friends. I could only talk about the experience in my own personal analysis. I complained and lamented and attacked my analyst for letting it happen. How could she continue to belong to such an organization that should treat one of its trainees so?

“You thought the training would be like being in kindergarten,” she said. “It’s not. It’s a deeply disturbing experience, demanding an adult response, which is very hard when at the same time you’re in analysis and regressed.”

Then I remembered again how she had tried to warn me when I first wanted to apply. The timing was not right, she said. It was too soon. I had been impatient. But with her words in my mind, I then delayed my application until I was in my third year of analysis, by which time I was thirty-seven years old (anyone over the age of forty years was considered too old to begin the analytic training). Was that still too soon? All these considerations now rankled.

“You think if I don’t resign from the Society in support of you then I don’t care,” my analyst had said. “That I should stand up for you and resign in protest. I wonder what good that would do?”

I had wanted my analyst to walk out of the society. Instead, that session came to its inevitable end and I was out on the street again. I could not bear to get back into my car and drive home to my life of obligations and what now felt like so much failure. I crossed Beach Road and made my way down to the sea. One foot in front of the other, I walked against the wind.

The sun was a pale yellow. Seagulls skidded along the surface of the water. The sand was caked hard and dry. The tide was out. A lone mother called to her child not to get wet. The small boy ran up and down the sand, narrowly missing each curling wave. The foam left behind a frothy line of smiles along the beach. His footsteps were soon covered with each new watery assault. I saw these things in slow motion and wondered whether I might walk forever along this beach. When they noticed me gone, would the analysts worry, would they realize how much it had mattered to me, this wrench, this gutting, this appalling event?

My analyst did not resign but continued to ride the crashing waves of my rage and despair. Over time my sense of trauma subsided but not so much that the experience totally faded. It nags at me still. I pluck at the threads of my memory and try to pull them away from the surface to make sense of why it happened.

As Caroline Garland (1998) argues, each experience of trauma meshes with others from the past (4). For me, the experience of being dropped from psychoanalytic training resonates with familial trauma, a history of incest across two generations. The secrecy of both experiences now spliced into one, two thick strands of life to which I add a third, my childhood experience within the Catholic Church. These three institutions—the

Analytic Society, my family and the Catholic Church—merge within me, but my response to each bears consideration. I bear witness to all three in my struggle to get a clearer understanding of what happened in each situation.

The child is the recordkeeper of family trauma. We know our family secrets. We also know the taboos. But we are bound to keep silent. In “Living to Tell the Tale” (2008), Lynn Bloom writes about her discovery that a second child, her identical twin Linda, had been stillborn immediately following her birth. Bloom’s parents decided at the time to keep this information not only from their immediate family, but also out of all records. They even tried to alter the official medical reports. They did not want a record of their dead baby. Years later, when they disapproved of Bloom’s choice of marital partner, they cut off all contact with her, as if the living daughter who had defied parental wishes must also be eliminated from the family record. Bloom struggled with her need to bear witness to her parents’ falsehoods:

From the moment of my birth, my parents revised the truth of significant aspects of their lives, and mine. Although they came to accept these erasures and additions as true, their revisions are problematic—at times, damaging—to me, to my husband and sons, even to their wives and children. Now it’s my turn to tell the stories.

(72–73)

Psychologist Jennifer Freyd (1994) writes similarly about “Betrayal trauma,” which occurs when the people or institutions we depend on for survival violate us in some way (307–29). It is significant that after Freyd broke off all contact with her parents because of their abusive relationship with her, they established the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in 1992. Such a backlash against their daughter’s efforts to bear witness to her experience highlights the power of narrative, as Gilmore argues, about “which and whose story will prevail” (29).

My story, like that of John, is of an unsupported child who falls through structures that were never designed to be supportive in the first place—for John, the day care center—for me, my Catholic family, followed by the Analytic Society within my professional family. The history of misdemeanors within the psychoanalytic movement is well documented, as are countless examples of the abuses that occur within the so-called safety of the nuclear family and its counterpart, the religious family within the

Catholic Church. Institutions by their very nature, although established to serve a protective or educative function, often fail.

My father preyed on my older sister. He sexually abused her. My father's father preyed on his older daughter, my father's sister. My father too was witness, but he never spoke about it, instead identifying with his father and repeating the abuse with his daughter. My Catholic mother chose to deny these abusers in the guise of excessive optimism and her desire to keep the peace. I bear witness to these events, to my mother's duplicity in her denial of my sister's abuse. Between the ages of eight and fourteen, I shared a room with my sister during my father's nightly visits. As for my father's experience of abuse, I bear witness indirectly, gathering knowledge of his witnessing from hints whispered about the past. Last year, in order to try to unravel my father's experience, I travelled to Holland. I was helped in my quest by a Dutch researcher, Barbara van Balen, who found evidence of my grandfather's imprisonment in 1943 in Haarlem, Holland, on charges of *ontucht*, which is Old Dutch for vice, lewdness, pornography, and prostitution. It could well mean incest given that my father's sister, then nineteen years old, brought the charges against her father that resulted in his incarceration.

I bear witness to these events against a backdrop of familial ambivalence. My older sister says she wants the truth out, no more secrets. My oldest brother writes in a book about our father's background: "we were amazed to find that he [our father] had a rich and interesting past. After the years of silence I had fully expected to find a few skeletons in one or other closet, *but except for some incidents that can occur in any family*, there was nothing so serious that it would explain or justify such total and enduring silence" (Schooneveldt 1993, 114; my italics).

Another brother has forbidden me to mention his name or any of his events in my writing. One sister has spoken about her fear that I am opening a can of worms through my writing.

In 1995, after a period of estrangement from many of my siblings, I wrote them all a letter. Some live interstate. I had come up with the idea of our writing a book together, each one testifying to our shared experience within the same traumatized family. I was naïve to imagine that all my brothers and sisters might cooperate in this exercise. A large family fractures and disintegrates simply by virtue of its size. Ours did. We could not sustain the parameters of belonging within this family. My mother's powerful belief in the sanctity of the family, her family, crumbled under the weight of all these divisions. When we were children scrambling for space, scrambling to

be heard above the cacophony of one another's jealousies and resentments, we fought bitterly and my mother wept. She was tortured to see her children so unloving. She could not reconcile the loveliness of her "nether land," the land of her childhood, with this harsh dry land of disappointments.

I can bear witness to "my experience" only. I cannot be representative of my siblings. Nor can I be representative of those psychoanalytic candidates who have also had their training terminated. Three years ago, I thought to contact others whom I knew had also begun psychoanalytic training only to be dismissed. There is a history of sudden dismissals within psychoanalytic institutes, people left uncertain about why they cannot go on. Some choose to leave for personal reasons, but most do not leave voluntarily. I experienced my departure as Kafkaesque. I was dismissed, found "guilty without trial," the charge unclear. My Catholic origins are evident in my sense of any failure as a sign of guilt. The experience of trauma calls on the most primitive of fantasies, including one's sense of inner badness.

My testimony is subjective. It is colored by the multiplicity of selves that exist within me, the child from a family weighed down with secrets, cloaked in the shadow of previous generations and confined inside the respective cradles of psychoanalysis and Catholicism.

To witness involves a level of conscious awareness that those who suffer directly cannot bear. The traumatized at the time of the trauma when the psychic frame is broken must create a set of protective maneuvers to avoid annihilation. They go numb. They disappear for a time into a psychic void and adopt any number of coping mechanisms to survive. It is only after the trauma that new mechanisms of survival come into play—repression, anesthesia, and forgetting, while the witness is traumatized anew, but at a distance.

Memoirist Helen Buss (2002) writes that memoir does not claim to be a "complete history," but rather the testimony of a writer who has "personal knowledge" of the events, the era, or the people that are its subject, including "that of the witness, who observes and records the actions of others from a particular and localized viewpoint in the past time of the action" (12). As Nancy K. Miller (2000) argues, there are "six degrees of separation" between you and me and among generations (433). There are six degrees of separation between baby John and Lucy, between my father and Jonathan, between my mother and my analyst, and between the Catholic Church and the psychoanalytic institute. We bear witness to one another.

Why after over fifteen years do I still expend energy on these issues? Years ago I had a dream that my analyst sat on a couch in the lounge room of my childhood home in Camberwell. She sat in the middle, flanked by two of my sisters. I was the fly on the wall watching. My father sat in his usual chair opposite the heater in the center of the room. My mother, the supplicant, stood over him offering yet another cup of tea.

My father spits out sarcasm and rage at my mother, who all but curtsies and leaves the room. No one speaks. No one tells my father to wake up to himself, to sober up, to speak respectfully to his wife. No one tells him off or complains. He gets away with it, night after night, and my mother just takes it. But in the dream my analyst is sitting on the couch in the middle of the room, and I am flooded with the relief that comes of knowing she can finally see what is going on, that she is witness to my experience, that she knows how bad things are, although she does not speak.

Sometimes, for a few minutes at least, the burden of criticism lifts from my shoulders. The shame of being dismissed from the training, the shame that left me hiding, disappears, but only for a moment. The difficulty in writing about my experience of my family and of the analytic training is that in doing so I potentially traumatize others. As if I am telling tales out of school, betraying both my family of origin and my professional family.

In the end, I bear witness because I want others to realize their mistakes. A childish wish, that they, the analysts, might realize that they had it wrong, that they misjudged me. But a nagging fear remains. They shoot messengers, don't they?

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