

LEARNING TO HEAL: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF INTRAFAMILIAL TRAUMA AND RECOVERY

Abstract

The basic story of extreme intrafamilial violence is one of survival, the story of living while one is dying, being annihilated by a physically stronger but morally inferior (parental) force. Dying is the act of becoming disembodied, the act of being swallowed into what I have come to know as the dark caverns of the great fish. The biblical whale provides the key metaphor in my inquiry into self, trauma, and survival.

By acknowledging that extreme intrafamilial violence is integral to the childhood experience of many adults, some of whom are teachers, I hope to create a space for their stories to be told as well. How do teachers and students come to grips with the highly mis-educative experiences of terror and trauma that nevertheless hold powerful lessons? Teachers and students need new maps for understanding these lessons, in the hope that they can learn what constitutes an educative experience.

In mis-educative experience lies the seed of educative experience. The student who has been swallowed on the way to death but cast out into life needs the help of a compassionate listening teacher to help him/her make a map of the insides of the great fish. Only then can the great fish be seen as a vehicle, an underwater boat, a slimy submarine. The journey inside the great fish becomes integrated into the story of the whole journey. It becomes a key component in the Jonah-student-teacher's education, rather than a mis-educative detour. The map of the insides of the great fish shows: (1) the way in, which is death-in-life; (2) the "belly" or the place and the lesson, which is life-in-death; and (3) the way out, which is new life. Thus, the belly of the great fish comes to be seen and appreciated as a critical place of growth where the Jonah-student-teacher's new self was being created, a paradoxical type of womb, a new matrix of meaning.

Survivors of chronic intrafamilial violence have been swallowed many times, again and again. Their stories need to be told and heard. But how can they be told? Arts-based storying curriculum creates space for the teller, the tale, and the telling. These stories, like this inquiry, cannot be forced to fit into a scientific, paradigmatic form or mould. They need space to breathe. Their form and content inform each other in a circular, self-supporting dance.

This arts-based narrative inquiry into intrafamilial trauma is constructed like a natural rhizome, growing underground, in darkness. It sends up shoots of unpredictable plural selves and voices, in unpredictable places, at unpredictable times.

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