IDENTITY THEFT

Why It Can Be So Difficult to Come to Know Oneself

AS A SOCIETY, WE TURN A BLIND EYE TO OBVIOUS TRAUMA, MAKING ONE'S STORY MORE DIFFICULT.

IN PREVIOUS ISSUES of *S&H* I've written about my traumatic experience, or rather, about my responses to trauma. But what, readers asked, was the trauma itself? What am I holding back?

We're accustomed to wanting the full story. But part of what was difficult about my experience was that I didn't know—and still don't fully know—the details. I was very young. I had no language for what had happened. My parents did not know; they had not been trained to look for trauma or to recognize the symptoms. And so I had no trauma narrative.

It was only in my mid-30s that I started to have physical memories and to understand that the symptoms I had been experiencing throughout much of my life but had been unable to name were symptoms of dissociation. And it was only by listening very closely to my body and connecting the dots of various occurrences in my life that I was first able to come to certainty that something had indeed happened. Then my mother went back in her memory and remembered a strange man who had babysat for me one night in Paris when I was very young. When she came home, I did not sleep that night, and when he came again, I ran to the corner and stood facing the wall, something I had never done before, until finally my parents decided not to go out and he went home.

Was this the memory key that fit the lock? Why had my mother not remembered this story before?

Anytime one talks about recovered memories, one must also confront the false memory syndrome. Our early childhood memories in particular are notoriously inaccurate. But I do feel quite certain that something very bad happened to my physical body that cast a shadow over much of my life, and I know that when I followed the trail, without anyone's external suggestion, and could name that shadow, I gained the tools that made healing possible.

But part of what made that healing difficult was that there was no external confirmation, but instead the specter of an accusation that I was simply crazy. To admit that you are a trauma survivor is to make yourself vulnerable. To admit on top of that that you are not sure exactly what happened is to make yourself yet more vulnerable. And I believe all of that is part of a larger narrative that says sexual abuse is not really that common and not really that damaging—and that those who argue otherwise are delusional.

In fact, Freud's "hysterical" women—*often locked up*—were women, Freud wrote, who imagined they had been sexually abused; their hysteria was their repressed desire, misplaced. And this notion of repressed sexuality became the foundation of Freudian psychoanalysis.

But—and this is a big but—this was not Freud's original analysis of his patients. He originally concluded that the women were having somatic symptoms because they had been sexually abused. And he believed they had been sexually abused because they told him so. He wrote his findings in a paper, and Vienna objected to it: After all, if so many middle-class women had been abused, what did that say about the middle-class men? And so, forced to choose between the wrath of society and altering his theory, Freud altered his theory. The women, Freud wrote, had made up their abuse stories and were "hysterical."

Freud's capitulation no longer surprises me. When I first began to remember, I thought of my traumatic experience as something that set me apart. Then I was really stunned by how common my experience is: When I shared my experience, woman after woman, many of whom I have known for years and never would have guessed share a similar past, told me of her own experience of sexual abuse—stories not only of forgotten memories, but also of painful memories that are rarely shared but devastating nonetheless. Now, of course, the abuse problem is openly presidential. What chance did Freud have?

Now, of course, the abuse problem is openly presidential. What chance did Freud have?

In any case, when I tell the story of my trauma, it is not the trauma itself that I can narrate as much as my recovery of memories and my healing. And part of that healing had to do with accepting ambiguity: I needed to accept what I did not know. But in accepting what I did not know, I was also filling in the blanks of what I *did* know. Let me explain:



Bouquet
Danny Neece

In my 20s, I was obsessed with not-knowing, with the unspeakable, the unnamable. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation about the unnamable in W. H. Auden's early poems. The first poem I ever published starts with these lines:

> She knows that not knowing is
> difficult
> And tries to forget the price of sugar

The poem was about the painter Chardin's wife, and about the relationship between the material and immaterial world. In my 20s and early 30s, though I had been in school my whole life and had a PhD, I was overwhelmed by all that I did not know: What was the relationship between the body and mind? What was God? How do you live a purely moral life? Wherever I looked, I saw ambiguity.

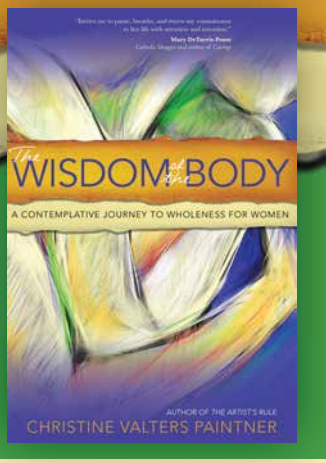
It was only much later that I realized that what I did not know was not only the big abstract questions of meaning but also more specifically what had happened to me. I think my psyche was trying to speak the unspeakable, was trying to know the unknowable. It was as if my little self were tugging at my own coattails, trying to get my attention. *Look at me*, some part of me that had been cut off kept saying, *look at me, here, my body, in bed, hurting. Don't forget me*.

And when I finally had the tools to really pay attention, it was very painful. The narrative of a young girl growing into womanhood had been broken before it even began—and the subsequent story was thus wrong. Realizing how much I had needed to compensate for that little person pulling at my coattails, how much I had needed to contort my life to get out of her way, was painful. And realizing that I still did not know what had happened was painful. Was I, after all, crazy? That question was painful, too. Would other people think I was crazy? Would other people think I was somehow damaged because I had been hurt?

So when I tell my story of trauma, it's partly a story of ambiguity. But over time, it has become more and more a story of knowing, because for all the details I don't know, I know enough.

—NADIA COLBURN

A Contemplative Journey to Wholeness for Women



The Wisdom of the Body
CHRISTINE VALTERS PAINTNER

The distorted view of the perfect female body created by popular culture, television, movies, and the media often causes women to become uncomfortable with their own bodies. Christine Valters Paintner, popular author of nine books and abbess of the online retreat center Abbey of the Arts, draws from Celtic, desert, and Benedictine traditions to help women connect with their bodies through writing, visual art, and movement.

224 pages, $16.95

"A good map for the journey to wholeness."
—Cynthia Winton-Henry
Cofounder of InterPlay

AVE
Ave Maria Press

Look for this title wherever books and eBooks are sold.

For more information, visit avemariapress.com.