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Life is like a box of Derwents - An Autoethnography Colouring in the Life of Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study contains vignettes from my life of unrelated but interconnected experiences of sexual abuse which profoundly impacted my life through moments of epiphanous transformation. I am using my voice as the researcher and researched to write authentically and evocatively as a way of truth telling about a difficult subject. This autoethnography invites you to walk in the shoes of myself as the storyteller and for that reason the vignettes are deliberately provocative and expose aspects of my life that have previously been hidden. The vignettes weave together stories that have had a profound impact on me which eventually led me to a career in education. I contend that these experiences laid the foundations for what kind of educator I would become.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Evocative Autoethnography, Phenomenology, Reflexivity, Sexual Abuse, Childhood Sexual Abuse

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Life is like a box of Derwents - An Autoethnography Colouring in the Life of Child Sexual Abuse

Karen D. Barley

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This autoethnographic study contains vignettes from my life of unrelated but interconnected experiences of sexual abuse which profoundly impacted my life through moments of epiphanous transformation. I am using my voice as the researcher and researched to write authentically and evocatively as a way of truth telling about a difficult subject. This autoethnography invites you to walk in the shoes of myself as the storyteller and for that reason the vignettes are deliberately provocative and expose aspects of my life that have previously been hidden. The vignettes weave together stories that have had a profound impact on me which eventually led me to a career in education. I contend that these experiences laid the foundations for what kind of educator I would become.

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Introduction

Without possibility, I am drowning. I cannot breathe. For me, there is possibility in writing. . .finger stumbling blindly across the keyboard, tears streaming down my cheeks, engulfed in wonder, searching for sense in a senseless world. In my writing, in autoethnography, I seek to bring together the fragments of my experience. (Poulos, 2014, p. 344)

I have always integrated colour into my life. No matter what I was doing or where or how, I invested in colour. Writing could not be black upon white; headings never plain but etched with every shade I had inside my pencil case; every few weeks, a different lacquer on my nails; and now I am older, variegates of colour in my hair. I would never choose plain stationery; instead, I searched for binders, folders and books that had hues that reflected my personality. I did not want white walls when I bought my first home. Much to my Dad's horror, I insisted he paint each room a different colour: grey and burgundy for the lounge, blue for my bedroom, pink for my daughter's room, and apricot for the bathroom—not a speck of white to be seen. Filling my exterior with colour was a way to increase the endorphins in my life so that the struggles didn't seem so bleak. To this day a rainbow will cause me to gasp with glee, for I believe Mother Nature just sent me a symbol of hope.

Since embarking on my doctoral studies, it's fitting that I found a way to add colour to my research via storytelling. Discovering the methodology of autoethnography brightened up my research life because, I'll be frank with you, I found traditional research somewhat beige. Integrating storytelling using the methodological genre of autoethnography is tantamount to adding splashes of paint to the pages of my thesis. Some in academia may believe this borders on sacrilege, but for me this meant that my thesis could be a way to creatively portray my true self upon the page. Autoethnography became the vehicle through which my voice could be expressed artistically and imaginatively, evoking an emotional response from the reader (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

I have a different reason for doing a PhD than most. Whilst I am competitive, my goal is not to garner an academic career; nor to achieve recognition in research, although this would be an added bonus. My ultimate objective is to share my journey through life, both personally and academically, by conducting research that focuses on human longing, pleasure, pain, loss, grief, suffering or joy (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004). This is an enormously vulnerable and honest undertaking where I had to dig deep to find the courage to divulge a layer of myself that is normally hidden from view. However, I find myself as a mature student, on the precipice where the poignancy of my story is bursting to be told and examined at the same time; where “the *mystory* is simultaneously a personal mythology, a public story, a personal narrative, and a performance that critiques . . . taken [directly from my] personal history” (Denzin, 2014, p. 60).

I have grown up navigating a difficult childhood, traversed the tragic teens and wrestled inside my 20s, collapsed into 30 and 40 and emerged fervently into my 50s. I have borne four children, had three failed marriages, and now I am a reinvigorated “Grandy” to beautiful grandbabies. I worked as a teacher for over 30 years in various locations and settings and I’ve also built my own business. I’ve travelled. I have loved, I’ve lived and learned. Having submerged myself into this academic endeavour, I am still seeking a way to colour and even as I write this, a sense of reality melds as my perspective perpetually changes and transforms to illustrate both the human and educator in me (Rickard, 2014).

After reading the seminal text, *Evocative Autoethnography* by Bochner and Ellis (2016) which comprehensively substantiates the autoethnography as legitimate research methodology, it dawned on me that my first autoethnography (Barley & Southcott, 2019) was neither perfect nor resolved. I had hardly been bold enough, for in that piece I had white-washed my life. Revealing more would require courage, as well as augmenting with depth and dimension. As a little girl, I had a friend who owned a pack of Derwent coloured pencils (Derwent pencils are one of the oldest brand of coloured pencils and originate from England). All of those pigments sat neatly in two trays: 72 fabulous, rich, potent colours. My cheaply bought pencils were opaque in comparison. I was jealous of the colour and still am, which provokes me to deliver a resolution to my story. My first piece (Barley & Southcott, 2019) feels pale and insipid, so this instalment must be vibrant and evocative so that I can “make people feel deep in their guts and in their bones, using . . . literary artfulness and storytelling” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 63) as the reader becomes a voyeur to the story. My intention with this work is to be redolent, but also authentic so as to provoke a reaction from the reader. I do not make any apology for this, as it has taken sheer determination to write and may take courage to read.

As I continued to read Bochner and Ellis (2016), I was struck by an epiphany: more of me to reveal, more secrets to be told, more of Karen to lay bare upon the pages. How extraordinary, since I had spent the last 4 months reading about the history of epiphanies, moments in time, aha moments and transformations. I had set out to discover the value of the epiphany in shifting the values and beliefs of current educators and I am, in this moment, shifting mine about myself. My autoethnographic stories have prompted me to reflexively examine myself and life by allowing the storytelling to emerge from within, instigating “moments of personal change and insight” (Berry & Patti, 2015, p. 266).

I grappled with the idea of the personal story, my story being too self-indulgent for a PhD process. How does this become a piece of research? This can be addressed with the explanation that an “autoethnography is to recreate the researcher’s experience in a reflexive way, aiming at making a connection to the reader which can help him or her to think and reflect about his or her own experiences” Méndez (2013, p. 284). These are questions that have been posed before. Manning (2007) questions the self-indulgence of her research until she recognises herself as “a powerful participant in the research process [and] not a passive, objective investigator” (pp. 5-6). More importantly, the “value of her role in the research

process” is acknowledged (p. 6). Sparkes (2002) also comes to terms with the self-indulgent nature of the autoethnography when challenged by his colleagues. He was accused of being narcissistic, and this struck a raw nerve. He came to the conclusion that an autoethnography can encourage writing that is empathetic in a way that potently extends beyond the self. These stories can also “contribute to sociological understanding in ways that . . . are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, and self-luminous” (p. 222).

The perfect analogy describing my life written into autoethnography is that “stories are like pictures that have been painted over, and when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible” (Denzin, 2014, p. 1). It certainly feels like I am undergoing a revelational metamorphosis doing this study. Another question popped out from the previous, asking, “How can my stories be research?” That question was, “What was the purpose of this research”? I mean, REALLY: “What did it matter? What was the point”? The answer came as I felt the dawning realisation that writing manifests itself as a reflection of the real via the writer’s thoughts and feelings (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004). I can’t do anything passionately unless it has a gripping reality attached to it, unless it has some colour. In a way my life has been an exemplification of an epiphany, if there is such a thing. I believe there is...such a thing I mean, so, it would be remiss of me to neglect, NO omit the most excruciating details of my life. The illuminating fact is that telling this part of my story is why I was constantly down the metaphorical research rabbit hole. I couldn’t batten down what I was trying to achieve as I dug deeper and deeper into the layers, but the answer was in the rawness of telling. “A-ha, the light bulb just went on” I say to myself. What is valuable, is how my own personal experience/s can illustrate facets of a cultural and human experience (Ellis et al., 2011) and within this work elucidate the impact of these events on one’s career. I would not be the individual, nor the educator I am today without the experiences I am about to divulge. Without the realness, this would be a monochromatic, sepia instalment. I would rather be true to myself and give you the technicolour version.

So, we arrive—at the truth. Even as I write this, I am aware that the cocoon has burst and the butterflies spread their wings within my gut, the nagging, physical manifestation of what is veritable. I am a child who was sexually abused for almost all of my childhood. I was exploited by some and molested by many. As a young adult, I then sought more abuse by way of comfort, as it was the only satisfaction I knew. Then unwittingly and yes unthinkably, I opened the door to a child abuser when I married the man who would go on to sexually assault my beautiful children.

This particular piece is not designed to be a narrative of emotional healing (although via the writing this could potentially occur). I seek to discover what is the impact of my child experiences on the individual I am today? Why has colour always been so present and sentient? What is the purpose of the epiphanies I experienced throughout my life? Perhaps more importantly, I am seeking to discover myself and that discovery should enlighten both the writer and reader as to how a life can be profoundly and positively changed by trauma. Writing became invaluable to this process because when you have been trapped in the confines of childhood abuse, “finding words for what you [have experienced] is a powerful part of healing. Write them and colour outside of the lines. Express them. In safe places, with safe people” (McElvaney, 2013, p. 13).

Methodology

Why are these stories relevant? And how are they important? Within the autoethnography (Barley & Southcott, 2019) I shared vignettes that reflected upon my life with a focus on my teaching career. Barley and Southcott (2019) state that “borne out of empathy and compassion for others was an interest in educational minorities and ultimately a quest to

find or invent innovative practices that addressed these problems” (p. 3). The writing of that narrative has been impactful and prompted more self-reflection, leading to a deeper examination of what I really wanted this study to capture; by using my love of writing to reflexively and honestly communicate in a way that “gets to” the reader (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I am by nature an open book. It feels disingenuous to avoid the darker stories of my life and I pondered on this thought for months. I couldn’t shake the idea in my mind, that my truth could be a potent piece of phenomenological research told through the lens of lived experience. I woke one morning with the words, “I’ve always invested in colour” and sat at my desk and wrote the first two vignettes in 2 hours.

Many of us are drawn to a life of research by our lived experiences of emotional epiphanies that changed or deeply affected us (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and this was definitely my experience. The events in my life are worthy of observation, examination and reflection, as well as an analysis of how they influenced my perceptions and interpretations of other people’s lives. The traumatic events in my life have moulded and shaped me but I rarely (if ever) make those events known. Using the methodology of autoethnography was useful “in helping [to] make sense of [my] individual experiences and how they [related] to larger collective challenges, particularly around sexual trauma and sexual assault” (Qambela, 2016, p. 197).

My approach was to write the vignettes with complete abandon. I allowed the words to pour onto the page without being encumbered by grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. I wanted the memories to flow as they came to my mind. Employing a reflexive approach, I was able to return to my experiences and relationships within the stories and dissect my memories of the events ensuring the stories had depth and veracity (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015). Autoethnographies are usually done at a distance, creating a space between the event and the emotiveness of the experiences; so, while the memories remained clear in my mind, they were far enough in the past from which I could reflect upon them logically. Studying the lived experience via recollections and storytelling adds a layer of authenticity and empathy (Fox, 1996) because via the stories I could take the audience on a journey back into time with me. Creating evocative accounts can direct the readers’ orientations to the given topic and what I (as the author) presumed to be true and important about the issue (Berry, 2015; Rambo-Ronai, 1995). It was a challenge, to be brutally candid, when writing my stories and there were many times I wondered how deep I should delve. This was especially true when I wrote the third vignette, *Big Yellow Taxi*. Whilst editing the text, the words seemed benign upon the page. I realised I had skimmed on the details because this vignette was the most painful to write. This kind of autoethnographic exploration generates fear, self-doubt, as well as emotional pain and “just when you think you can’t stand the pain anymore, well that’s when the real work has only begun” (Ellis, 1999, p. 672). Ellis was right, for when I revisited the story, I was compelled to add further intimate details. I was able to provide a deeper, private explication of the recount revealing “epiphanies of self. . . and many underground impossibly expressive feelings, beliefs, perceptions, perspectives and events of [my] life” (Qutoshi, 2015, p. 177). It was in this version, I felt more generous with my reminiscence and emotions. I was able to take the reader to the depths of my despair and in doing so I wrote, edited and interacted with myself as “I wrote by objectifying it, judging it, and rewriting it in response” (Rambo-Ronai, 1995, p. 399). It would have felt dishonest to write the recollection in any other way, but I admit to feeling somewhat naked by the revelation.

Vignette 1: A Whiter Shade of Pale

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you.
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 They always *knew* it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.
 — Plath, Daddy, 1965

It would take too long to explain my birth and early childhood but suffice to say that my Mother had me out of wedlock during the very early 60s, which was a challenging time to be a single mother. Her family was not terribly understanding nor forgiving, although eventually they would all fall in love with me, which meant that vicariously, through me, they forgave my mother. My earliest memories are of being loved by my mother's family. The earliest must have been when I was about 18 months old. I know it had to be then, because it involves my Uncle Stephen who was hit by a drunk driver and killed before I turned two. I was running around my Grandparents backyard, playing and singing gleefully without a care in the world. Their garden was like paradise to me; it was full of beautiful flowers, rich with colour and fresh fragrant odours. My Grandfather loved birds, so he had an aviary attached to his shed. You could walk into the birdcage, as it had a door inside the shed that seemed like a secret passage. The volary was filled with budgerigars and canaries of many colours: blue, green, white and yellow. The blue birds were always my favourite. My grandfather would teach them how to talk, so they'd call out "G'day mate" or "What ya doin'?" as you came near. Anyway, this particular day, I heard my name being called, "Kazzzzz...Kazzzzz." I scampered around the garden, giggling and squealing, looking in every corner to find the voice: "Kazzzzz Kazzzzz."

I knew, from familiar tones that it was my Uncle Stephen, so excitedly, I continued to search. I loved my Uncle and he loved me. We had a special bond that would sadly be devastated by the abovementioned tragedy. Finally, he called, "I'm up here" and I peered up to the top of the house to find him chuckling and jumping on the roof of the house. If I had wings, I would have flown up to him for one of his famous cuddles. In the background, I could hear my Nana call from the kitchen, "Stevie, are you on that bloody roof again"? Stephen, motioned for me to be silent, he pursed his index finger to his mouth, with a whispered *shhhh* as he climbed down the piping of the house and yelled back, "No, Mummm."

Seeking love and acceptance by society, Mum sought love from men. She met my stepfather when I was two and my happy life was irrevocably changed. She moved from the State where her family lived to different State, leaving behind my security and comfort. The rest of my childhood was fraught with fear and terror. Sitting inside the fear and terror was a deep sense of hatred and disdain for those who shattered my childhood. The recollections ebb from my mind like snapshots that captures glimpses and glances; evoking sounds and smells; and stirs a violent, somatic reaction that I have to quickly quell. I can visualise the outside laundry, my step-grandmother, then my bedroom, my stepfather, the purple walls in my bedroom, breathing, burning, seething anger and wanting to die.

My step-grandmother was quintessentially evil. She looked at me with hatred and rage, which felt foreign, as I had come from another world where everyone loved the little blonde three-year-old me. As far as she was concerned, an illegitimate child was the devil's spawn. Her cruelty was cunning and inconspicuous where she'd scowl at me, call me "the child slut" (words of course, I didn't understand) and accidentally lock me in the outside laundry. On one occasion, or at least one I can remember, she towered over me, her presence pushing me back towards the inside of the laundry. As I stepped back, I fell and as I fell backwards, dress up and legs splayed, she pushed the edge of a broom handle in between my legs. I cannot say whether

this was a deliberate sexual violation, but a violation it was, made worse by the ambient darkness and cold. Then by some cosmic joke, a mouse ran over the top of me, increasing my terror further. The laundry had lots of mice and it seemed such a fucking bold act for that mouse to run over me at a time of my most extreme vulnerability. To this day I have an extreme mouse phobia.

I am completely detached from that little girl.
I had more of a connection to her before she was invaded in the dark,
By a desolate woman who had no soul.
—Karen Barley, *Detached*, 2019

My stepfather visited my room in the dark of the night, yet the memories are full of colour. Colour that is scarred with pain and horror. Blood red, a sad turmeric yellow, ice cold blue and a vomiting green all saturated with the murkiness that is sexual abuse. My stepfather on a day-to-day basis treated me with consistent disdain. Every time he looked at me, my presence offended him. Yet, at night I woke unable to breathe, hysterical and my stepfather softly consoling me. “Take deep breaths,” he would whisper. I used to believe I’d had a nightmare and he had come to soothe my fear, but for my lingering questions. “Why was he here? Where was my mother? Why was I on my knees before him”? Uncomfortable questions, yet I did not dare answer truthfully until I was much older. Hard to fathom, but it took until I was in my 30s for the realisation to hit me. Epiphanies often come out of the blue and this one certainly did. I was struggling within my second marriage and my mental health was deteriorating. I was not functioning with day-to-day activities and couldn’t remember what I was doing from one moment to the next. I was experiencing all sorts of flashbacks from my childhood, fragments of memories and pain within my body. My parents visited one weekend and I felt myself sitting on the outside of my body, avoiding any conversation with my stepfather, feeling uncomfortable by his presence and escaping any kind of touch from him. It must have been obvious because my mother asked me why I was behaving the way I was towards him. I did not answer, I never did. After they left, I slept for a very long time. I arose the following morning and went to the bathroom. It was there that the epiphany occurred. As cliché as it sounds, it was a literal lightning bolt of awareness. “Omg! My stepfather had sexually abused me.” I argued with my own thoughts. “It can’t be, can it”? The truth was I didn’t want it to be, because I was fully aware what the ramifications would be, but I could not live with the lie and pretense any longer. I whispered to myself, “What I had believed was a childhood nightmare was actually reality.” The epiphany exploded and imploded from within and the shattering was almost satisfying. All the pieces fell together and finally my life made sense. My aching need to fix everything and everyone, my fight for justice until death, being drawn to the discriminated and the underdog. It was almost pathological but in one second I understood and in that moment I would never be the same again! And I wasn’t. All the time leading up to that moment was heavy with mental instability, anxiety, insomnia, panic and yet as soon as I remembered, an inner strength kicked in and I knew I couldn’t tolerate what was occurring in my life (these details could lead to another whole study). I left my second marriage very soon after, went back to my teaching career and completed my Master’s in Education, which would eventually lead to my work with children of diversity.

Vignette 2: I See a Red Door and I Want It Painted Black

The journey into yourself!
 And like a mine of rubies
 receive the sunbeams' print!
 Out of yourself – such a journey
 will lead you to your self,
 It leads to transformation
 of dust into pure gold!
 —Rumi, *If a Tree could Wander*, (1996)

There is a period of my life where I felt as if I was sitting inside a nebulous and dark cloud that I call the “in between”: a timeframe betwixt childhood and adulthood. I look back and hardly know this girl, for she is foreign to me (although she vaguely resembles the girl who emerged from the mouse story). I was filled with fear, hostility, anger, pain and sadness. Trepidation was painted across my existence with dark greys, blues and black. The paradox was, for a time, I lived in the tropical state of the Northern Territory and whilst I was afraid of adventure, I constantly put myself in danger. I was using drugs from the age of thirteen, I experimented with sex and formed an extremely dangerous habit of sneaking out of my parent's home in the middle of the night to walk the streets of Darwin. I rarely slept and the night had become a time that I found sleeping made me feel vulnerable. (We were in Darwin after Cyclone Tracy as my stepfather had a contract to do the electrical work for the city rebuild. He was rarely home, which meant there was very little abuse from him during this time). I also loved the dark and the quiet of the nocturnal skies which enveloped me into a false sense of security. When you are an abused child, there is an essence of victimology that is instilled in you. It becomes a part of your identity and research evidence identifies that the likelihood of experiencing abuse at various times throughout one's life is a common occurrence (Fargo, 2009; Gray & Rarick, 2018).

Sometimes I feel like the black sheep, the odd one out
 Until I realise that I come from a whole herd of black sheep
 You see, I find it remarkable,
 When people say they haven't experienced sexual violence
 When it is literally the bathwater in which I was steeped
 —Anonymous, *Generations*, 2017, p. 15

I allowed myself to be drawn into numerous experiences in which sexual abuse occurred. Mostly, these were during dates and because the word “no” had been stripped from my vocabulary, I could never use it. So, it felt easier to just allow the thing to happen. I almost can not blame the abuser because I can't be sure they knew I was saying no by my actions as I did not vocalise my resistance. But then, some would say that is blaming the victim. Am I still? The lines feel blurred, because when abuse is part of your DNA, it is difficult to find anyone else accountable.

I believe my inability to say no may have saved my life during one particular brutal and terrifying encounter. My family moved to Darwin after the 1974 cyclone as my Dad was involved in the reconstruction of the devastated city. I was almost fourteen and walking along the highway during one of my night-time sojourns. A man stopped his car and asked me if I wanted to go to town. I initially resisted, but eventually (and I can't tell you why), I got into the car. It was all so fucking congenial at first. I shared about my difficulties with my stepfather and he shared about his marriage breakdown. In my inimitable style, I offered him advice and

solace. He was drinking beer and said he wanted to purchase more. The red flags started to flap.

“I think I’ll set off home,” I say.

“No, I like the company. I’ll buy you a drink, a soft drink of course,” he commanded. The red flags flap furiously with the bloody irony of him not wanting to give me alcohol. I submit, of course. He bought the drinks and handed me a coke.

“I need petrol,” he stated. Fear rises.

“Just drop me here and I’ll find my way back,” a distinct shrill in my voice.

“No, don’t worry. I’ll drive you back,” he replied. I concede. My mind frantically analysed the situation. I can’t jump out, he’s going too fast. If I continue to insist, he might know I am afraid—that won’t be good. Back and forth, I continued to think, consider and throw out every scenario.

I thought, “I’ll jump out of the car at the service station.”

In Darwin, there is one road in and out of the city and the all night petrol station is on the highway that leads out of Darwin. I felt devastated when he parked at the furthest pump and there was only one person at the service station. I didn’t think I could risk it. What could I do? I slumped back and accepted that I was trapped and I would have to trust his word, even though I knew I could not.

He drove out of the petrol station and headed the opposite direction from Darwin. I asked him, “Where are you going?” my anxiety increased. He replied that he was going to turn around. The red flag waved furiously now and I knew I was in serious trouble. He didn’t turn around.

He stated, “I want to have a swim. It’s warm.”

Trying to contain myself so that my voice or actions did not betray my real emotions, I said nothing. I did not want this man to know or sense that I was scared.

“C’mon and have a swim with me, you’ll love it!” He acted as if this was the most normal thing in the world. It was not. I knew it was not worth resisting and intuitively felt any panic from me would make this awful situation worse. I scanned the car for a weapon. But then what?

Thirty kilometres out of Darwin, he turned down a dirt, desolate road and travelled some distance. Escalating fear, but I was powerless to do anything. I was in the Northern Territory. In the outback: snakes, spiders, crocodiles. Pitch black! Alone. I did not know how I would survive in this environment. I made a decision to stay with “the devil I knew” and relied upon myself. After about ten minutes, he stopped the car. He leapt out, insistent he was going to have a swim. I walked with him to the water hole, but I refused to swim with him. He disappeared into the bushes. The tension in my stomach warned me that I was in a really bad predicament, but I didn’t know what to do. I stood in the darkness waiting for him to return. I could have escaped, but where to? He came back and I strangely felt relieved and we walked back to the car. I felt a little lighter, maybe this was an innocent jaunt after all. This proved premature as I stepped towards the door of the car, he grabbed me and tried to kiss me. I tried to stop him, and he continued his attack. Eventually he dragged me to the back of the car. He had hold of my arm tightly and I was begging him to let me go. As he pushed me to the back of the car, internally I panicked but externally my head “kicked in.” I started to talk. (Somewhere I had heard if you keep talking it turns a man off sex. I barely knew anything about such things, but I was willing to try anything if it meant saving my life).

He kissed and groped at me and tried to make me touch him. I rambled, “Why do you want to do this? Surely this is not something you want to do with your life? Is this something you would tell your children?” He persevered groping and slobbering over me as I persistently talked. After what seemed an extraordinarily long time, he stopped and said, “Ok I will take you back.” My heart and head did a collective sigh and I felt a glimmer of hope. Back to the

front of the car. Mentally I urged him to turn on the car and get me out of there. Such a diabolical thing to want your abuser to be your rescuer. He did not start the car, instead turned towards me in tears. Crazy. Bizarre. He told me how sorry he was and begged me to forgive him. He told me how beautiful I was (as if I believed him) and how I had a gorgeous body and that he was really trying to help me.

“Please tell me you forgive me and that you love me.” he whimpered.

As sickening as it was, I spoke the words, “I forgive you and love you.” He wanted me to kiss him, so I did what I had to do. He turned away to start the car and I imagined I was home free and just as I felt the breath of relief on my lips, he turned back and pounced. I endured this man’s insanity for another round. Every time he would attack me, the ritual was the same: aggressive attack, fending him off with my words, pause, apologetic, submission, sickening. After enduring this ritual four more times, he drove further and headed ever so slowly out to the main road. I can still envisage the brightness of the highway lights and the blue and gold of my favourite dress.

Heading home was when the worst assault occurred. It is hard to imagine what could be worse than what had just happened, but strangely it was his words that internalised the terror. Telling me how lucky I was, my abuser explained that his intention was to help me by teaching me a very important lesson.

“You know,” he said. “It could have been someone else. They could have tied you to a tree, raped you and then chopped you into little pieces.” I felt myself fade.

He insisted I sit close to him chanting, “You are so pretty. I needed to teach you this lesson. I wouldn’t have wanted anything to happen to you. You’re so beautiful though.” Blah bloody blah blah; he talked and talked, but I just wanted him to fucking shut up and get me home.

“Tell me that you like me. Aren’t you glad you met me?” he implored.

I told him everything he wanted to hear, did every damn thing he asked of me. I did it so I could live. For all his proclamations of my beauty, I would never feel pretty again.

At last, we arrived on the outskirts of my neighbourhood. Of course, I did not want him to know where I lived. He stopped the car and I got out quickly. He called to me and I cautiously turned around, wondering, “What now?”

He said, “This is my number in case you ever want to have dinner with me.” He then recited his number (which I could recall without effort for about ten years afterwards).

I thought, “You crazy maniac, are you fucking kidding me? Why in God’s name would I want to have dinner with you”? I did not say the words that screamed from within. I turned and tentatively said, “Oh sure, thanks.” I ran as fast as I could and hid behind one of the houses that had been cyclone ravaged and abandoned. Not totally unlike how I felt in that moment and the analogy wasn’t lost on me. Finally home, I snuck through the door. I sat on the edge of my bed and thought about what had just happened to me. Should I have felt hysterical? Shocked? I should have felt something, shouldn’t I? There was nothing! I couldn’t wake my parents and tell them because I would have had to explain that I had snuck out. I couldn’t go to the police as I believed that they would blame me for wandering Darwin so late at night. There wasn’t anybody I could tell. I knew this idiot’s name. I knew what kind of car he had and I even had his bloody phone number. I wholeheartedly regret the decision I made because I will never know if this guy ever did this thing again. Did he try to rape another girl and was he successful? Did he perhaps kill someone? I will never know.

I did not immediately comprehend the impact this event had on me. Any good I felt about myself disintegrated that night, which led me further down a road of self-destruction. A year later during an insomniac night, I couldn’t get the words he had spoken out of my head. They circled around and round in my memory and without warning, the sheer magnitude of the event hit me. Shaking, I recreated all the scenarios and nightmarish possibilities, which I

imagined in vivid colour. I could have been tortured and killed and left in the bush to rot. I may never have been found. The scenes continued to roll, just like a movie reel and as they did, the terror amplified and I was overcome with the horror of it all. Jesus, I fucking survived this! The epiphany! The flickering of the celluloid, turning from black and white to horrific colour. I wish I could say, the epiphany led to a richly, fulfilling life, but I cannot. It took years (too many) for the impact of the childhood abuse and this event to be transformative in any way.

Vignette 3: Big Yellow Taxi

Never give all the heart, for love
 Will hardly seem worth thinking of
 To passionate women if it seem
 Certain, and they never dream
 That it fades out from kiss to kiss
 —William Butler Yeats, *Never Give All the Heart*, 1904

It was a rare day off and I was home, still in my pyjamas, at two o'clock in the afternoon. I call them "dedicated jammie days." I was settling on the couch, getting ready to watch a movie I had recorded when there was a knock at the door. I opened the door and there stood two policemen and two other women who told me they were from Child Protective Services (CPS). My knees went to jelly, and I felt the immediate palpitation of my heart beating against my chest. They were asking about my children. Fade out. Black.

I would have said my third husband was the love of my life. It feels like betrayal to say this now. I cannot lie. After having four children and two failed marriages, he splashed colour into my mid-life. I felt awakened with him both emotionally and sexually and he is the only person (outside of my family) whom I knew that I loved. I used to think I loved others, but this love was that deep inside knowing kind of love. He was not particularly attractive, but he was intellectually deep and for me that was enormously stimulating. My existence felt joyous and satisfying for a time. Five years into this marriage he seemed to love my children and fitted into the role of stepfather to them. We did normal things and the children did not appear to be concerned about his presence. If anything, the kids seemed to gravitate to him for assistance and advice. People say, "How can the other parent not know?" I can say, with 100% honesty (and even on reflection), that I had no awareness of anything that was happening underneath my very nose.

Fade in. The police at the door tell me that there has been a report of sexual abuse of my children. They also inform me they believe the perpetrator is my husband. I am in complete shock, my legs buckled underneath and my mind raced. They must have it wrong. Wrong family? Wrong information? In barely a minute, every thought raced in and out of my mind as the police continued to talk. I don't recall their words, but my immediate reaction was to say that I felt it was impossible. I exclaim, "He loves the children and would never hurt them. I don't understand. Where did this information come from?" One of the CPS women told me the information came from one of my children and as soon as I heard that, despite my emotions I knew it had to be true. Notwithstanding my disbelief at the situation, I did not even for one minute doubt my child's veracity. I knew who they were and knew that they would not make such a claim if it had not been true. My world fell into the deepest, darkest tunnel and I have to be honest and say I am not sure how I came out of the other side. Fade out.

The agonizing darkness enveloped me, and I was drained from colour. The blackness remained for a long time. Blinded by the love I had felt for my husband, I was ignorant to what he was doing. He had been craven and dastardly in his grooming of me and the children. Each

time that bastard abused my children, he had the gall to look me in the eye. Looking back, I wonder if his constant asking me if I wanted a cup of tea was a distraction for his own guilt and shame. It sounds so devastatingly trite when you think about it.

The pain, the betrayal, the agony I felt for my children. How had I allowed what happened to me, to happen to them? That was the hardest question of them all. I had vowed, that I would be super careful as a parent; I would be vigilant; no-one would get past my watchful eye. Unfortunately, I was wrong. If anything, parents who have been abused themselves are often the most blind. Children who are sexually abused are confused and experience long-term effects from their abuse, indeed, child sex abuse establishes a warped sense of relationship between the victim and society (Rambo-Ronai, 1995). A number of studies indicate a correlation between parenting efficacy, the selection of adult partners and intergenerational incidences of childhood sexual abuse and a history of childhood sexual abuse (Barrett, 2010; DiLillo & Damashek, 2003; Jaffe, Cranston & Shadlow, 2012). Many years have passed since and I have agonizingly searched and trailed my memories for clues, anything that I could have missed. There is nothing, except for the naiveté of my deep investment of love for one so utterly unworthy.

There were times when I wished that my husband would just have a heart attack or a stroke. Sounds awful to say out aloud, doesn't it? Somehow, I believed his death would have been easier to deal with than living through the hell that was enduring the aftermath of your children's abuse. One often hears others say that they would kill the person who abused their children and I almost wished I had those feelings, but I was bereft of any kind of anger or rage. I was torn between pain and love and then pity. Even in the most heinous of times, love does not instantly die. I also felt deeply sorry for my husband and I am aware that this was the same sentiment I felt for my stepfather. The same emotion I felt for the abuser in Darwin. I am struck by the profundity. Is it more potent to feel pity than hate?

The last time I saw him, I can still see that one tear that hung below his eye. To this day that image distracts me, for it is the only clear memory I have of him. Such a pathetic figure. He was in jail for the crimes that he had committed against my children and I went to visit him in one final bid to ask for the truth. I am aware now in the writing of this piece that perhaps I wanted him to provide an explanation for all the abuse that had occurred in my life. Why, is such a simple three-letter word that requires so much complexity. The ridiculousness of this awareness hits with me a sudden jolt. Of course, no answers to the "why" questions were forthcoming. It was a futile visit, except that being there my resolve kicked in. In truth, I also felt like a pathetic creature and in some sick way felt complicit and bizarrely aligned to him. Yet, I intellectually knew I did nothing wrong. I was not responsible for what happened, or for him. Perhaps that is why I felt the urgency to hear him say the words I am responsible. Instead, he said, "I know I must have done it, but I can't remember anything that happened." His words slapped me across the face as the colour of rage filled me. Finally, the anger combusted and I raised my voice. He tried to shhh me. The red cascaded over me at this point and I refused to be silenced. I stood with one final question, "So you're telling me, you can't remember using my children for your sexual pleasure"? As he continued to try to quieten me, his face displayed shock and fear. He didn't expect that question. I watched him visibly slump.

"You are never going to come back again, are you"? He whimpered.

"No," I declared. If I could have, I would have screamed; instead, I turned and walked out of that god-awful prison. With every step, I felt energised and not once did I look back. Strident, finally seeing with clarity, I could, maybe see my world in colour again, even if it was in a washed out Polaroid tone.

Vignette 4: Silence is Golden

And every friend that I know has a story like mine
 And the world tells me we should take it as a compliment
 But then heroes like Ashley and Simone and Gabby, McKayla and Gaga,
 Rosario, Aly
 Remind me this is the beginning, it is not the finale
 (Halsey, A story like mine, Women's March, 2018, NYC)

During the formulating of this study was a time, when as a society we were inundated with an influx from the media of shocking recounts of sexual abuse by well-known people. The year, 2017, also bore witness to the rise of the #MeToo movement after the Harvey Weinstein allegations made by many women in Hollywood, where the hashtag #MeToo “provided an umbrella of solidarity for millions of people to come forward with their stories” (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Haley, 2018, para 7). Throughout the years of 2017-18 was an extremely confronting period for me, because everywhere I looked and everywhere I turned was story after story, interview after interview, outrage and more outrage and then the endless bloody debate. This issue was blasted across the news, in social media, on television and the internet; there was literally no escaping the narrative and the endless diatribes, discussions and dialogues (Lee, 2018; Zacharek et al., 2018). And the incessant questions asked:

Why did they wait so long to tell?
 Why tell now?
 They must want money.
 They want their five minutes of fame.

I found myself glued to YouTube (YT), Facebook (FB) and Twitter and even though I knew it was causing me pain, I could not turn away. And all I wanted to do was scream “me fucking too,” but I restrained and silenced myself. Again. Still.

The final straw was watching Dr Christine Blasey Ford during the recount of her story in front of the world. Dr Blasey Ford sat before a US Senate committee hearing that was held to examine her charge that Brett Kavanaugh, nominated for a lifetime appointment to the US Supreme Court, attempted to sexually assault her at a party when they were in high school. I felt resounding empathy with her. I watched her face and I had no doubt that she was telling the truth, because she was me, or just another version of me. Leading to more endless commentary from within the media and ridiculous politicians sprouting questions, asking why didn't she report this earlier? The scream boiled within me. We don't tell for this very reason, because what is the incentive? No one will believe us. It is shameful, embarrassing, disgusting and the reward is ridicule, outrage and cynicism. The chorus decries, “She must have an ulterior motive.”

I push down the scream and heave a resigned and elongated “Sighhhhhhh.” AND I wasn't alone! So many of my friends were struggling during this time and were sharing on FB, Instagram, or Twitter the cry of #MeToo. Also there were the celebrities: Ellen, Reece Witherspoon, Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow and so many more all proclaiming #MeToo. Women from every country or culture joined in the chorus and for a moment in time; in one epiphanic moment of solidarity it didn't matter who you were, or what privilege you may have had - the #MeToo was every woman. My sigh grew into a raging roar, I felt sickened and enraged!

Back to Dr Blasey Ford—as I watched her testimony, I squirmed with her, cried with her and then revolted against what they did to her. Many women did! We tell when we tell

because we cannot keep it in any longer. Or, you feel triggered by the outside flurry and you cannot hold the fury down. No amount of money could recompense the agony of laying your soul out on the table for all to dissect; and seriously, who wants to be famous for confessing to being poked, prodded, or fucked by an unwanted someone in your past? Arrrrghhh, the ongoing conversations bombarded my senses and I could no longer contain the scream. The epiphany hit me! It was not over for me. I have done a really good job of putting my life into all sorts of passions, study and work. I appear on the outside mostly put together. I stand in front of students and confidently teach. I am diligent and hardworking but deep down there is still an irritating blot upon my psyche screaming, “Me too.” And maybe, just maybe if you look hard enough at me, you might be able to tell, but I feel that the collective #MeToo finally has given me a platform to speak.

What all the different stories shared was a sense of revelatory negotiation with the self and the world: an ongoing demarcation, women drawing their own lines to proclaim to a hostile world and sometimes even to themselves, this happened, this was not my fault.

—Kon-yu, Nieman, Scott & Sved, 2019 (Kindle, loc 117)

Discussion

All the Colours I Am

My skin is kind of sort of brownish
 Pinkish yellowish white.
 My eyes are greyish blueish green,
 But I'm told they look orange in the night.
 My hair is reddish blondish brown,
 But it's silver when it's wet.
 And all the [colours] I am inside
 Have not been invented yet.
 —Shel Silverstein, *Colors*, 1974

When I began this autoethnography, I did not intend for this to be a study of colour but it is pertinent to reflect on the impact and reference to colour in this piece because the words sprung in my mind as an epiphany. As mentioned above when I was thinking about writing this, I woke with the words pounding on repeat in my mind, “I’ve always invested in colour.” I felt the urgency of the words and sat before my laptop and the first vignette tumbled onto the screen. The colour theme occurred vicariously and evolved from the epiphany that sprung and precipitated this autoethnographical piece. Colour “introduces both the subjective element in visual experience, and the objective, quantifiable stimuli which produce that experience” and in my story, provided another layer of nuance to the written discourse (Gage, 1999, p. 11).

It is significant to note that my intent is not to draw on colour theory, though it is important to provide some context. What is the value of colour in my life and how is colour pivotal to this narration? I grew up in Australia and this has influenced my view of colour based on my exposure to art, culture and the environment within my life and education (Gage, 1999). My first notion of colour came from my understanding (in early education) of the three primary colours and then being taught in art classes about Charles Hayter's *colour circle* and reference to the tone and climate of colour (Gage, 1999; Hayter, 1815).

The wheel above is the "painter's compass" which is a practical resource for painters and divides colours into cold colours and warm colours.

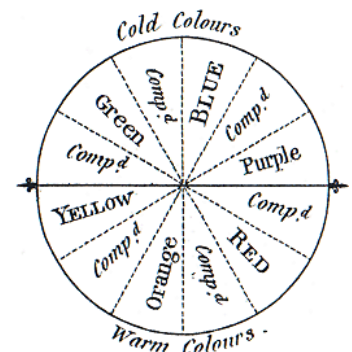


Figure 1 (Hayter, 1815) p. 161 - Plate XVII Figure 4

"The greatest warmth . . . will always be found on the illuminated side of the object, which you will find that when looking *towards the light*, . . . the distance, and sky, will possess most of the gaiety and warmth of your pallet, with all the light possible; and the fore-ground will be cool and sedate."

Hayter, 1815 (p. 167)

Colour is a powerful communication tool and can be used to denote action, influence emotions and even physiological reactions (Mollard-Desfour & Spinney, 2007). Colour is an impression, or a sensation transmitted using symbols and "colour words, perhaps more than any others, reflect a society: its values, its practices, its history" (Mollard-Desfour & Spinney, 2007, p. 44). I have had a particular interest in colour in literature, especially poetry. Being influenced by poets such as Eliot, Plath, Blake and Yeats, as a teenager I began writing poetry that was rich with colour as a way of arousing emotion and mood. Attaching a feeling to colour by way of synesthesia, which is a perceptual condition of mixed sensations, that is a stimulus in one sensory modality (e.g., hearing) that involuntarily elicits a sensation/experience in another modality (e.g., vision) was a way to arouse the senses in this piece (Cazeaux, 2005). In synesthesia, being multi-sensory, is where colour can be attributed as the added value of vision and awareness, so that using colour inside the story can make it more real (Cazeaux, 2005; Kemp & Blakemore, 2006).

The evocation of colour throughout the narrative is my way of inviting the audience to be a passenger on this journey via the stories (Flemons & Green, 2002). The allusion to colour intends for the story to be sensory and feeling in nature, so that the reader is an active participant in the autoethnographic tale; and where they are also able to share the insights and epiphanous moments that occur in the writer's life. Colour, then is like an epiphany made manifest out of the darkness when illuminated. Aristotle believed that colour becomes visible when light is present and that it is difficult to see colour if light is not present (Miller, 2002; Sugiyama, 2009). Elucidating the past using anecdotes has been my way of retouching the life experiences of Karen, bringing us to the heart of the matter and "creating a world" via colour perception (Miller, 2002, p. 94). Adding tints, shading and highlights with literary brushstrokes, portrays a life that is accented, depicting a "phenomenology of color [that] brings us to the colors of the world that bind us together as social creatures" (Miller, 2002, pp. 93-94). Jones, Adams and Ellis (2015) refer to this as impressionist autoethnographies, where instead of using paint and a paintbrush, the author utilises words, rhythm and silence to create an image that catapults the reader "into the sights, smells, tastes, and movements of a place, space or context" (p. 86). The impact of this concocted vision is to "engage readers emotionally and explore the meanings of the storyteller's identities, challenges, joys, and epiphanies" (Jones, et al., p. 87).

Keeping Secrets (The Role of the Epiphany)

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind;
The access of perfection to the page.

—Wallace Stevens, *The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm*, 1954

The more I have pondered on the concept of epiphanies and epiphanous change, the more deeply I needed to dig. What transformations occurred in my life and did they occur by osmosis, or were they precipitated by my own phenomenology (lived experience)? Essential to the autoethnographical genre, epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which impact a person's life; so much so they explore and examine fundamental meaning structures in their life. This shapes an individual's character and provides meaning to their noteworthy lived experience (Denzin, 2014).

There are numerous definitions of the word, epiphany, from other researchers, but it feels more organic to provide my own. First, a definition from an online dictionary suggests that an epiphany is “a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience” (Dictionary.com, 2019). I would like to extend this description. An epiphany is a light bulb realisation, occurring out of the blue, providing profound and life changing insight and revelation. What you thought previously has been inexplicably altered and a newfound awareness emerges, which forever changes a thought, way of existence, or even one's life.

I don't want to sound trite or diminish the impact of my experiences of sexual abuse but I do not like to use the words, victim, or survivor. Both words seem generic to me and really do not represent my personal experiences. My life has been full of rugged terrain and for me, that's okay. Without them, I am not sure I would be where I am today; Bochner and Ellis (2016) state that “these moments leave their mark on us. You could say that our bodies are tattooed by them, though not by choice” (p. 68).

That's why epiphanies often bring us to a decisive moment in which we may feel as if we're standing on a sheer existential cliff. How do we survive the chaos and confusion? What can we do to shine a ray of hope through the boundless darkness to find positive meanings in even our gloomiest experiences? (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 68)

Autoethnography is the perfect vehicle for the exploration of personal epiphanies, as writing is a tool to explore trauma, sadness, love and life experience. As writers dissect their personal experiences, they are, at the same time, offering “complex, insider accounts of sense-making” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 27) demonstrating how a particular event impacted their sense of self and life. More importantly, this dissection can demonstrate what transformational experience, (i.e., epiphany) occurred that in some way validates the events in the first place. Throughout the four vignettes, I offer numerous epiphanous moments, sparking further introspection. The ultimate epiphany has stemmed from writing this piece, as I now understand why I felt compelled to write these stories. I needed to lay to bed any sense of shame or guilt I have felt because these things happened to me. By exposing them to myself and to the reader, they are no longer hidden in the dark.

Limitations and Ethics

I don't want a day to celebrate.
I want a life to celebrate each day with every fibre of my body;
That screams
That shout
That feels

That makes me more humane towards perspective.
 Towards change
 Towards voice
 Towards life.
 Let me be me.
 — Ritz, *Let me be me*, 2019

In retrospect, this study has become the pivotal one. This story is the prelude as it is the most representative of myself as the researcher and without this study, any future work would lack sense and poignancy. This autoethnography is a presentation of the real Karen exposed, where I invite you to be a companion to this process (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 1999). Part of what seeps through is the researcher revealing herself as someone who is passionate, and compulsively seeks equality for all, as if her life depended upon it. Because it does, and whilst that sounds somewhat dramatic and self-indulgent, without verisimilitude, all other ventures and pursuits are insignificant. I have come to understand my experiences of sexual abuse through the medium of writing, as a stage of the research process of interpretation and participation (Méndez, 2013). It would be erroneous to retell such catastrophic events from one's life from the view of an outsider, which is why the autoethnography is a potent tool "when it is evocative, emotionally compelling, and when readers can feel their lives deeply touched by the stories that they read" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2015, p. 75).

This vignette also presented some ethical challenges as one of the vignettes involved members of my family, in particular, my children. I consulted with an experienced member of the university ethics committee who in turn consulted her colleagues. They advised me that as I was not collecting data from my family ethical oversight was not required. I believed that my story should be told and when I discussed this with my children, they agreed. As a collective and family, we believe remaining quiet perpetuates sexual abuse. We don't want to be shaped by shame and whatever views society might have for us because we have been through these experiences. Each member of the family has worked through their challenges individually, had extensive mental health intervention and we have remained strong and united as a family. To deny my story, would feel like denying their own. I asked each of my children individually how they felt about this study and allowed them to read the work. Without equivocation, they gave me a resounding yes and green light to go ahead. It is also important to note that none of my children share my surname, so this provides them with some anonymity. This resolved any questions I had about revealing anything about them within this study. I thought long and hard about my position as the author of autoethnography and the fact that by revealing my identity this would be implicitly identifiable. When I look back at each of the vignettes my children are not the focus of my work as I have only discussed my relationship to the abuser. This work concerns me primarily and the only person that I'm putting at risk is me. My stepfather, the main perpetrator of my abuse is dead (as is my mother).

The larger concern I faced was how much was I willing to reveal? At what point did the comfort of the writer and the audience cease? Sexual abuse is a murky subject area that is rarely discussed in public (Greydanus & Merrick, 2017; Zacharek et al., 2018). It is still considered one of those taboo subjects as "children and adults everywhere are shamed into staying silent about their abuse because our culture does not have a way to comfortably frame the experience" (Rambo-Ronai, 1995, p. 412). The years between 2017 and 2018 seemed to be a time when there was a public awakening, or a societal epiphany (as it were); but what was more significant was that there was a shift in the societal framing of victimology. Zacharek et al., (2018) state the "silence breakers have started a revolution of refusal [and] this reckoning appears to have sprung up overnight, [but] it has actually been simmering for years, decades, centuries" (para 8). There was a real movement that seemed to snowball. One heartbreaking

story after another emerged. One celebrity after another facing accusations and women around the world felt emboldened by a united front that epitomised a revolt against victimhood. The first #MeToo women's march was witness to women across 67 countries galvanised proclaiming the #MeToo chorus. This provided me with the impetus and courage to tell my own story because my #MeToo was a reflection of the stream of global stories being told, but also a declaration of "enough is enough"! To dilute my history would also dilute the data because for the first time I felt united in a common cause and culture where the shame and guilt of being sexually abused no longer belonged to the victims.

I was faced with a dilemma which was ensuring that this autoethnographical study was provocative and authentic, but at the same time remain mindful of the propensity for the subject to cause stress in others (Méndez, 2013). I concede that some aspects of the vignettes might cause others to feel squeamish, but I feel comfortable enough not to sacrifice the power of the story. A good story should be gripping, confronting, requiring soul searching, by causing the reader to feel, care and respond to what is written (Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Ellis, 2004). I am personally fascinated by what precipitates transformation and epiphanous moments of change and I am not deterred by what lies in subconscious difficult and self-denying moments in one's life. As a result, articulating these events using autoethnographical writing can evoke emancipation and emotional transformation for the researcher and the reader (Qutoshi, 2015).

Another limitation to consider was opening up my feelings and thoughts necessitating an open and honest dialogue of self-disclosure (Méndez, 2013). This exposes me to scrutiny, both personally and professionally and in essence, possibly affects my reputation and ability to transform how I am perceived in the future (Flemons & Green, 2002). I am mindful that my story is difficult to digest, but to retain silence would perpetuate the age-old problem of keeping the secret. Do I keep the secret because it may change the reader's view of me because it makes them feel uncomfortable? Or does that guarantee complicity in my own abuse? I feel this is the foundation of the original problem because I am not the perpetrator.

She is disgusting, other, alien-a threat to decent society. She would contaminate all the nice people with her bizarre thoughts and feelings. Only silence can conceal her contamination. The silence is so dense that the very motions of living are labored. In an ecstasy of mute rage, she pounds desperately on the wall, rattling it, warping it, hating it and herself. (Rambo-Ronai, 1995, p. 397)

Carol Rambo-Ronai (1995) also wrestled with this question and it was suggested by well-meaning colleagues that she should hide her stories inside interview data and not self disclose. She was informed that she should consider her professional reputation and it was inferred that by revealing her abuse that her work may not be taken seriously in the future. She rightly asks the question: "Does this imply that there is something inherently wrong with me because I have been through this experience?" (Rambo-Ronai, 1995, p. 402) My answer (on her behalf) is that we are in the era of the #MeToo movement, so I am saying a resounding "no"! to silence. I refuse to do it for another millisecond. Our stories are invaluable because as survivors "we put enormous faith in our stories. . .not only can we be transparent to ourselves, but that our stories will peel away untruths and obfuscations to uncomplicatedly convey some bedrock layer of truth to others" (Kenny, 2019 , loc 249).

Conclusion

Memories of yesteryou
 They just keep swarming back
 Now your life is drenched in colour
 Instead of white and black
 —Anonymous, Yesteryou, 2018

What can we learn from the revelations inside this autoethnographical study? The most poignant aspect of writing these stories is to provide a resolution to a life, spattered with incidental and interconnected experiences of sexual abuse. I don't want to be viewed through the veil of pity, or sadness, or even pain. What is more important is that the reader appreciates the complexities of these experiences upon an individual's life and sense of self. As I have borne witness to my own light bulb moments, my hope is that you will have your own moment of illumination. It is not for myself (as the author) to dictate what that might be, but my investment in this process is that it will be consummate and life altering. I do not wish to normalise sexual abuse, but what I do want to do is normalise the discussion, so that in the future, a child like me chooses revelation rather than silence and that as a society we comprehend the prevalence and danger of childhood sexual abuse for our children and unite as a community to implement appropriate strategies to address the problem.

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