

## **Interrupting Transgenerational Violence; Treatment of a Victim of Domestic Violence.**

**Paul Valent**

**ISTSS Presentation Washington 21st Nov. 1998**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Domestic violence may be the commonest model of transmission of violence, especially across the generations. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the pervasive effects of domestic violence using the clinical case of one woman and her family, to indicate the dynamics of how such violence can be transmitted, and to offer some speculative ideas on how it may be stopped.

Workers such as Dutton have described how victims of domestic violence may endure traumatic stress without end, episodes of physical assault being only relatively visible tips of icebergs of continuous and pervasive emotional, sexual, spiritual assaults, blackmail and robbery. Victims may be thought of as perpetual hostages, enslaved in isolation through terror of their lives, and brainwashing like in cults.

### **ROSLYN**

Roslyn was referred in Apr. 1996 by her general practitioner with the laconic comment, "She went through 12 years of marriage under total domination." Roslyn was a 35 year old investigator for a government work injury insurance company. She impressed as an intelligent, likable person, concerned for her work, passionate about her children, but distracted in her thinking by her fears.

She and her 2 children James 7, and Adele 4, left her husband George 2 1/2 years previously, but George did not leave her alone until she moved in with her boy friend Roger some months ago.

Roslyn said, "I still behave as I used to with my husband. I live on high anxiety, and any noise, people approaching, any uncertainty, tip me into terror. I fear going out, if I am dragged to a restaurant I face toward the door, to anticipate him rushing at me. Any contact with him over the children, I am a wreck. What precipitated me coming here was me going to pieces when he made threats in our driveway.

Roslyn described how slowly George came to direct her life. He insisted on picking me up and dropping me off at work, because he worried I was having affair with my boss. He criticised my family. I became isolated.

As she was receiving a prize at one Christmas party at work, he made loud denigratory comments from the audience. One evening he tried to strangle me with a cord. I got away but he threatened to kill my mother, so I returned.

A year later I got a restraining order against him and left again. But he came to work, took people hostage at knife point. He cut his wrists in front of the police. They took him to a psychiatric hospital from where he was released a day later. Another time a psychiatric team visited. They just told me he was paranoid and deluded, and advised me to move out. But I stayed with him out of fear.

I lived for years in fear under threats, "I'll kill you." "Today is the time to die." At times he pushed my trachea till I fainted. I was terrified of his power over my body and spirit. He robbed me of my jewelry and values. He gambled away my savings while I was giving birth.

"I finally left when he hit James. If I die I die, but if I stay James may die. He kept finding and assaulting me. Once he served 6/52 in jail, but then in spite of intervention orders he came as he pleased. He masturbated on my clothes in the wardrobe. He stabbed a cork with his knife. I knew I would die, but I let him have sex, to let the children live. He stopped harassing me since I've lived with Roger. But when I ask him to not show porn movies or take drugs in the children's presence, he screams, "You're a fucken bitch." And I shake.

Roger's car was stolen and burnt. George rang to say his brother had done it. Roslyn was in terror. My countertransference and indeed possibly realistic appraisal, shook my sense of security.

### ***Progress in Therapy***

With help, Roslyn set up some boundaries. Through her solicitor, she arranged to have the children to be picked up and dropped off outside the police station. Communication with George was to be through solicitors only. She installed security measures and plans of escape in her house.

She took control by swimming, walking the dog, disciplining the children. She learned to modulate her anxiety. She regained control over her finances and reversed her bankrupt status.

Naming and exploring her feelings and their origins added a sense of control. The term Stockholm syndrome explained and forgave many of her responses. She came to see George in a context too. His father had physically abused him, and was cited in a sexual abuse case of a girl. His uncle was violent with his aunt for 20 years. His brother was a violent criminal. Seeing these things from outside, she became truly horrified at how her life had been at risk in a perpetual war zone. She grieved the loss of her dreams over the years and became incensed at the injustice of her betrayal. She applied for victim compensation.

As she became stronger, Roger left. She saw that the blackmail of abandonment had always been a weapon to oppress her. After he left she

had flashbacks of “Tonight you die.” But she quickly put the feelings in context of past, not current circumstances.

Thereafter her mind cleared and her intrusive images disappeared. Once she saw George, refused to lower her car window and give him a lift, without fear. She was excited, laughing. Fear hypervigilance, bowel responses, constricted throat, slumped posture of years lifted.

At this stage Roslyn’s younger sister sought refuge with her from her violent partner. Roslyn thought that together with mother the three women would form a bastion against male violence. Instead, the mother found a spurious reason to visit the abuser’s home and thereby delivered her daughter back to him. Roslyn realized that her mother had similarly encouraged her to return to her husband.

Mother now laid claim to Roslyn’s prospective compensation as repayment of a loan. When Roslyn remembered that the loan and the house were lost because of her mother’s fearful abandonment of her, necessitating Roslyn to move out of the house, in outrage she shook mother by the jumper. Mother called the police, something she had never done to George.

Roslyn bought a new house with her compensation which mother immediately cluttered with her caravan and dogs, ate all her food and abused the food and phone. Roslyn told Mother to get out.

Roslyn realized mother always stabbed her in the back if she was doing well. In her teens when she had established a home for herself while her parents were overseas, mother wrote her, “Seeing as you are doing so well, I wrote all the family to not support you whatever happened to you.” And “When you will get into trouble, or do things you are ashamed of, make sure you never talk about it to the family.” Roslyn said, “This abuse has been worse than George’s, because what was the point living when your own mother thwarts your life, who abuses and helps your abusers?” This time she saw how she had split her mind in order not see the significance of mother’s actions in the past, and her own outraged response. This time she expressed it, with the help of alcohol. Mother retaliated by calling child protection services saying she was alcoholic.

As she had done with George, Roslyn now owned and found words for her emotions to her mother, and found words for her mother.

After Mother’s father returned from the war, between 5-13, he physically abused mother, knocked her senseless, and bound her up in cupboards. During those years her brother forced her into oral sex. Her mother was also cruel, for instance, she tore up her party dress. Mother’s way of survival had been to hide, grit her teeth, and wait for things to pass.

When 29, Mother married her cousin aged 52. He had been brought up in homes, was not interested in children, but he was not violent.

Roslyn was struck by repetitions across the generations. She remembered mother had torn her party dress too. She realized that she had behaved with George like Mother had with her father - terrified dissociated, just waiting for things to pass.

But Roslyn had been becoming aware of perhaps the most painful aspect of her problems, herself being a passive vehicle for abuse.

While still living with George, James had been reported to be aggressive at school. The school blamed her, as he often arrived late, without books and lunch. The reason was that the children arrived at school directly from the police station where she had taken them for protection, but Roslyn felt bad that she was too passive to stop James modeling himself on George, that is being aggressive if frustrated.

More recently, the school said that they could not tolerate James's bullying. I saw James with his mother. He was a quiet, anxious boy, responding well to attention. He drew a crazy man, with two loaves of bread and an IOU in his hands. This indicated that his father could not provide the basics for his family. In another drawing his father wielded a knife, saying, "I will get you." James expressed grief for not having a father, but also not wanting George as father, because he frightened him. Using me as a model, Roslyn listened to James for the first time, and helped him to express himself. His bullying ceased.

In parallel to Roslyn, James became more confident of himself. This was portrayed thus,

JAMES

Roslyn's awareness of overt and covert abuse deepened. For instance, she noted that because of the limits to 8 sessions, facilitators of a group on domestic violence covertly suppressed expression of the women's emotions. At work she established new protocols to prevent subtle abuse of clients. As a result of her bearing during her compensation case, Roslyn was asked to teach barristers and judges the victim side of domestic violence.

Roslyn broke the generational cycle of violence with her own children, and helped mother and sister patiently with their own traps. She enrolled in a degree in social policy and community development, with a desire to prevent oppression.

### DISCUSSION

It may be seen that factors in the abuser, the environment, and the victim tended to perpetuate or prevent violence.

#### *The Perpetrator*

**Perpetuating factors** in the abuser were his family's culture of violence, facilitated by alcohol and other drugs. The sense of power over a terrified victim may have appeased inner fears, paranoias, and deficiencies.

**Inhibiting factors** were countervailing power greater than himself. Roslyn's drawing a line in the sand, "Kill me or leave me alone." and later assertive stepping out of her victim role may have been important.

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### ***The Social system***

#### **Rescuers.**

***Perpetuating factors.*** Roslyn found that police, legal system, social services, psychiatric services, school, all let her down. Perhaps each was overburdened, but perhaps also afraid, it being safer to allow the designated victim to be the butt of violence.

***Mitigating factors*** were unequivocal intervention by police, and other services, and reliable, constant follow up of such interventions.

#### **Family**

***Perpetuating factors.*** Transgenerational acceptance of a culture of violence and its perpetuation, whether through active aggression and cruelty, or passive manipulation, and blackmail of abandonment, can shape the next generation of victims. Awareness of insidious fifth column abuse can be more devastating than life threatening violence, because it threatens meaning of life. Awareness of oneself having been a vehicle for transmission of violence may be even more devastating.

***Mitigating factors*** were establishment of boundaries, self-esteem, assertiveness, anger and outrage. Ending the conspiracy of silence between generations is beneficial, but is resisted because of the need to become aware of one's own pain, grief, and guilt.

### ***Self***

***Perpetuating factors.*** As carriers of transgenerational paradigms people are vulnerable to perpetuate them, and to find those with whom they can carry out their roles.

***Mitigating factors*** were Roslyn's own basically competent and loving inner personality, her intelligence and inner values, all of which emerged in therapy.

Roslyn utilized with avidity the boundaries, respect, and empowerment which therapy provided. It also enabled her to separate past terror, shame, guilt, injustice, and shattered dreams, from present courage, grief, justice, and rebuilding her life. She achieved a deep sense of self and wisdom.

## **CONCLUSION**

A pragmatic model of domestic violence may depict a transgenerational family system of unsatisfied needs which it is perceived, can only be satisfied by others in the system. Yet the system lacks compassion or empathy between its members, so resources can only be coerced, or traded for compliance. These views are taught early, embedded through primitive and powerful psychological forces (projection, projective identification, identification, transposition, concretization), and are difficult to dismantle, because the cost is seeing the truth of the abuse and perversion of one's life.

So the more powerful perpetrators extract resources by threat of death from physical force and/or threats of abandonment, and victims comply because they see their survival and life's purpose to depend on the perpetrators. Victim and perpetrator roles can change as a helpless child grows up to be a powerful spouse or parent.

### **BREAKING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE**

Intervention in the system may be at different points. Disabling the perpetrator may benefit, as in physical and sexual abuse of children, from recognition, facilitated by public education, anonymous ring ins and mandatory reporting. This needs to be backed up by effective legal sanctions and police protection. Intervention may be with the victims, such as offering refuge. Early intervention in identified areas such as school bullying may be effective.

However, to truly counter the roots of the cycles of violence, requires compassion and understanding for the system and the inherent needs fears, traumatic attachments and processes which keep all hostage in it. A bullying James, a paranoid George and a terrified Roslyn all need safety, concern, empowerment, understanding.

Cultural exposure and education that violence is a symptom of inherent despair, coupled with realistic hope that understanding and compassion can change it, may influence a wave of resourcing its research and treatment.

