

# Childhood Memories

Naomi Hunt

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I was a participant at the conference 'Borderlines and Boundaries' at Dartington, and in one of James King's workshops a member had set up a 'group sculpt' of a hospital ward with an equal number of carers to patients. I felt impelled to change the scene to rows of immobile silent bodies, without anyone to care for them. Memories of a hospital experience over fifty years ago were coming back to me, and thinking about it afterwards prompted me to add to John Rowan's discussion of false memories in *Self & Society's* July 1994 issue.

I was shocked at my instant reaction with its need to contradict the caring implications of the previous scene. My emotions came straight back with a memory of paralyzing fear. It was not only a feeling of abandonment, but that I had no territory or physical space of my own. My body was not mine; I had no control; I was an object, and anything could be done to me.

These feelings arose from the time when as a small child I spent two and a half years in an orthopaedic hospital. To survive I learnt not to care about what happened to me. This experience is relevant to John Rowan's three questions.

## *Can Memories be Repressed?*

I believe so. There is a mist over much of this time and it is painful to remember.

## *Is it Therapeutic to Recover these Memories?*

Again I believe so. I still 'work on' this time of early childhood. For me a powerful memory trigger is when I am in similar circumstances, as when I feel abandoned or left behind, or when no words or the wrong words come, or when I have no rights and am powerless, or during work in a therapy group. Understanding this helps explain some of my behaviour today. For example, I will be in a situation where I should be completely confident and capable. If someone there is in an authority role, I may become powerless and crumble.

## *Did the Remembered Incidents Actually Happen?*

I am a creative artist, I frolic with and enjoy my imagination, so for me this is the big question. Is all this a confabulation of mine? I believe not. At that time hospitals allowed visiting for one hour once a week so parents were not available to explain, hold and comfort. Repressive order and correctness on the ward were common at the time, but my body still carries evidence of blunders that should not have happened. I have tried to move on from feelings of fear and blame during subsequent hospital visits.

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As a counsellor I know these experiences have influenced my work with clients. A great deal of my one-to-one practice and group work focuses around imagery and art. I find the physical act of painting can track into body memories and so be a physical release. Images created during an art session can reveal

events too painful to verbalise. So this can be the beginning of acknowledging what happened, to work through the feelings from the past and move on to life in the present.

I would be interested to know if any reader recognises in this description any elements of their own experiences.

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## **AHP/AHPP Conference Reports**

### *Cal Cannon*

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The whole event was characterised for me by what seemed like swings between the poles of 'boundarilessness-and-chaos' and 'tightly-held-boundaries-and-control'. The conference was held at Dartington, a most beautiful setting with delightful gardens and impressive buildings. However, the setting itself epitomised the pole-swings I have described. Arrival was muddled and difficult for many people and there were administrative problems with rooms, with keys, with registration, and eventually, with our departure.

On the other hand there were strict 'rules' — do not walk on the grass, no smoking etc — and one extraordinary incident when, after the 'Saturday night disco', which finished spot on time, a small group of ten or twelve people were doing a 'peace dance' in a circle. The staff, doubtless carrying out instructions as they must, pushed quite rudely through the singing circle, placing tables between us as if completely oblivious to our presence. It was almost as if we did not exist. It seemed as though the boundaries had to be imposed regardless of the human

beings within them.

The poles themselves were held, in my experience of the Conference, by two of the events I attended. The first was Andrew Samuels' keynote speech. This was a beautifully presented, polished, controlled, tightly bounded address, containing some rich and interesting content, at which we all behaved wonderfully, grown-up-ly, quietly and attentively listening and doing our exercises. Even the behaviour of one delegate, whose own inner disturbance spilled out into uncontainedness, was quietly 'dealt with'; the boundary remained (almost) intact, and she slipped through it onto the 'other side'.

The second event was a workshop 'facilitated' by Guy Gladstone, where we were invited — nay, driven even — to reveal and act out the pathological, fear-driven, regressive, oppressive, chaotic, fragmented, (and sometimes creative) aspects of our selves and our structures (political, social, professional) that we (as therapists?) think we are containing, and indeed often mask and hide!

Somehow these two events, outwardly