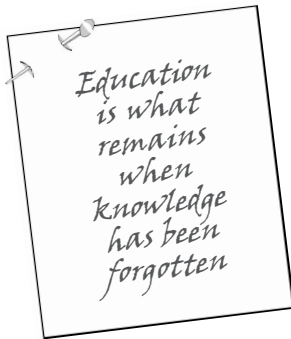


## My JOURNEY HOME: living in a COMMUNITY

JOANNE GRIERSON



I remember reading this poster on the wall at secondary school, and although I had some idea what it meant, now as I contemplate my journey over the last five years it has more meaning. Emotional education for me has been a process of becoming emotionally literate - a process which has irrevocably changed me towards becoming a whole, integrated person with awareness of my feelings, where they originate and how to communicate in an authentic way which builds trust and meaningful, fulfilling relationships. Ultimately the knowledge can be forgotten, but the person retains a sense of connection to self and those around.

I came to Atlow Mill in May 2002 as a live-in volunteer, just for a few months I thought at the time. I realised that I had some childhood issues to work through and in line with my pragmatic thinking, 'a few months counselling and living in an emotionally supportive community' and they would be sorted!

I was a good example of what in society's terms of reference 'a successful person' was. I had a house, a fifteen year teaching career latterly at an independent grammar school, and I had spent the past two years completing a circumnavigation; sailing 33,000 miles around the world as crew on two sailing yachts stopping off in 34 countries and many islands. It was the voyage of a lifetime.

What to do after such an adventure is difficult for anyone and there is plenty written about post-expedition blues. To settle into normal life is not easy and takes time. For me there were further dimensions. There was the immediate loss of my floating family, as our boat crew and the other

boat crews rapidly dispersed at the end of the Rally. These two years had been my first connection with something resembling a functional family - a unit of people committed to a common goal, who were supportive of each other and accepting of me, and we had fun, a word which my step-father disliked and an activity he was incapable of engaging with.

I had formed an intimate relationship with the skipper of the second boat I was on. With hindsight this is not surprising as he was the parental figure I subconsciously sought to meet my attachment needs (Hughes). This relationship ended after three months back on land and I was devastated. Rationally I could see that if he did not want to be with me then I was better off without him, but in between doing some supply teaching I cried most of the time for the next four months. At some level I knew I was not crying about him or even the loss of the relationship, there was

something else, an 'else' that I could not name.

Fortunately one couple from the rally had stayed in contact with me and from experiences in their own therapeutic journey they were able to support me and accepted me in the soggy state I was in. I was a mass of what to me were indefinable feelings; misery, despair, upset, and on more than one occasion I thought about driving my car into the central reservation at high speed to escape from the feelings. Yet somehow emerging through this was a sense of knowing that I had to deal with the legacy from my step-father, twenty-three years of sexual and emotional abuse. To put it bluntly he was a narcissistic, bullying paedophile and I can feel my anger rising as I write this. The abuse started when I was twelve years old and stopped when I was thirty-five, when he died. At that point I thought that I loved him, and his death was my greatest fear. Now I know that I was terrified of him, co-dependently attached to him and my reality was hugely distorted. I understand why he and my mother were such damaged individuals. I even have compassion for their pain that drove them to behave as they did, and while I understand it, there is no excuse. They made choices, choices through fear and emotional ignorance that could have destroyed me.

My connection with emotional education started twenty-one years ago when I did one of Jean Bond's courses in Coventry. Jean was running 'Discovering Your Potential' on the University of Warwick campus at weekends. I think it was one of the few occasions that my mother stood up to my step-father, as he did not want me to do the course. I was twenty-four years old and working as a teacher at the time. I do not remember much of the course, but gained an insight into knowing when I was not telling myself the real reason

why I was making a particular choice. Yet that insight did not permeate across my life, as my survival strategy of disconnecting from my feelings was well established by then, developed as a result of the sexual abuse. I did not conceive that I had the choice to leave home and my step-father's abuse. My life was in two compartments, home and work; he did not permit others.

After the relationship break up with the boat skipper, the Atlow Mill newsletter caught up with me via a postal redirection. I remembered the course of years ago and a sense of it being somewhere where it was ok to have feelings. Knowing that I needed help I decided to do the Healing the Wounds of Childhood course in March 2002. I was determined not to go to my GP. I did not want to be labelled as depressed nor was I willing to take medication.

During the course I disclosed the sexual abuse by my step-father. This was the first time I had told anyone. Until those past few months I thought that the secret died with him. Five years on I know that secrets cannot die. We can bury them deep in our soul but the pain and fear they bear still leaches into our lives and erodes our sense of self. The toxic shame (Bradshaw) of believing it was my fault has largely gone, although I am apprehensive of the judgements of others regarding the longevity of the abuse. I can imagine people thinking, as I did, that I should have been able to leave. The truth was, as in all abusive relationships, he had all the power and I had none.

After the course I realised that I needed to see a therapist, for a few months (I thought)! I also realised that I needed to be with people who would accept me and my secret, and I needed to do something useful. I became Atlow Mill's volunteer



*Joanne Grierson*

Housekeeper, despite only ever have cooked for at most six people. I learned rapidly.

My ability to learn rapidly is a double-edged capability. It was honed by my step-father's erratic/unpredictable bad temper. He had no patience and expected any new task to be mastered without being taught. My childhood perception of how to be acceptable and safe around him was to get it right, do it quickly and make no mistakes. Mastery of this strategy increased the chances of avoiding a temper outburst from him, which would have resulted in myself and / or my mother being shouted at and called names. As a teenager I can remember coaching my mother in things to do or not do, so as to avoid another row with him - a further aspect of me not perceiving my mother as my protector, but of being hers. I became hypervigilant, in Bradshaw's terms, highly attuned to the smallest indicator that things may be going awry.

These childhood capabilities and standards still persist in me, as I drive myself to get it right and make no mistakes. They can be produce very useful standards of performance, but I can pay a high price. I experience high anxiety, fear and self-blame when I cannot achieve them, even when part of me can see that

external factors out of my control are determining the outcome. 'If I just try harder it will come right'. In becoming anxious I cannot work effectively, so I achieve less and become more anxious and the spiral spins downwards, hitting the bottom line of 'I am useless and no good'. The way out, at Atlow Mill has been to tell someone that I am struggling and to have the experience of not being berated or rejected. Living and working in an environment that accepts that humans make mistakes and that does not make me 'bad and wrong' if/when I do not get everything right is allowing me to reconstruct my persistent childhood perspective of how to be around other people and nurtures a sense that I am ok, from which I grow to accept myself.

Completing the PGCEE course in 2002-3 gave me a framework of knowledge which has enabled me to develop the observer part of myself, (Goleman). I can trust this part to keep me safe when I become engulfed by feelings. This is not a conscious process, it has been a slow building of my sense of self trust together with the experience of being accepted by other members of the community. Their acceptance has enabled me to feel safe enough to become aware of my emotion, connect with my feelings and finally express my feelings. In the early sessions with my counsellor she would ask 'where can you feel this in your body?' My inevitable response was 'I cannot'.

As my awareness of having feelings developed also came the awareness of how I would shut off from them. It felt like a steel shutter coming down, leaving me safely in my head talking about events with no connection to the feelings that must have been associated with them. I

found this frustrating as I wanted to get on with the process of sorting out my past issues - getting better. Gradually I came to realise that this is a process, a frustratingly slow one it seemed. My logical mind wanted to get it sorted, but my emotional being needed time to feel safe enough to face the traumas which had caused the damage, without being overwhelmed or re-traumatised. The effects of years of living in an unsafe environment cannot be reversed by a single decision to change, although that is a vital step. I have had to relearn who I am in relation to other people, to allow their love and acceptance into my heart, to allow my view of myself as unlovable to be challenged. Along the way there have been times when I have been overwhelmed by past feelings of fear and pain and by being in a community where I could be heard and emotionally held by people who could sit in the fire of my pain with me. I have learned that these feelings are just feelings, they come and they go. They are important indicators but not significant facts to rule my life.

Everyday life triggers old emotional responses. For me a difficult situation is conflict whether or not I am directly involved. Just to witness anger and rising voices triggers my amygdala (the seat of emotional memories) and my unthinking response is to freeze and dissociate, or get out of the room, accompanied by a fear that I have done something wrong. This pattern was well established by my parents arguing and my step-father looking for someone to blame. Arguments do happen at the Mill, although not frequently, but with time I have learned to stay with my feelings sufficiently to allow my reasoning to establish whether it is my

argument and most of all to be able to verbalise my feelings, check out with other people what is going on and ultimately not be triggered into old response patterns by current events.

Recently, working as course assistant at the Mill with a group of women who have all been sexually abused, I thought about my journey. For me the combination of living in an emotionally literate community, formally learning about emotional processes and having counselling has been a potent growth formula. My everyday life evokes my deep rooted survival strategy responses, as does everyone's, but living here I can be honest about what is going on for me, in a way which would be unacceptable in most work places and not understood in many families. This allows me to check out my perspective, 'is it real or is it "my stuff" ' i.e. related to my past. I can trust those around me to give me an honest reply. This allows me to gather new evidence that can restructure my view of myself and re-author my dominant story. As in any supportive relationship the commitment to emotional honesty and authenticity by all community members makes it safe to be vulnerable and thereby to heal, learn and grow.

My need to have things organised and under control was a way of gaining some semblance of personal power in a home environment where my physical and emotional boundaries were regularly violated. Living communally I have had to learn to negotiate how things are; from which way the dishwasher is loaded to holding someone accountable for their actions. This negotiation has developed my tolerance of other people's ways of doing things, and

required me to examine why I react as I do and explain this to those around me. - not always an easy process because underlying my need for order is a deep seated fear of being annihilated. In learning to trust that the differences of others do not threaten to annihilate me, the possibility of meaningful connection with others is opened up. This dissolves my sense of aloneness, that the only person who will look out for me is me. It rebuilds my sense of self-trust from a position of interdependence, where I can trust myself to deal with what life may bring and also trust that there are people around who will support me. I have learned emotional resilience and optimism.

It has redefined my understanding of home as an environment that is safe, that nurtures me and where I can be me. Home is now a place I want to come back to and be in.

Such rebuilding takes time and commitment. Throughout my journey, my indecisions, fear, pain and uncertainties I have one clearly held determination, 'I will not let my past determine my future'. I still seek knowledge and to understand, but as has been quoted 'understanding is the booby prize' (Rhinehart,) and 'education is what remains when knowledge has been forgotten'. My prize is to be whole, to be all that I can be, to be me so that I can give freely from all of myself.

*The bond that links your true family is not one of blood,  
but of respect and joy in each other's life.  
Rarely do members of one family grow up under the  
same roof. (Bach)*

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