

JACQUI DILLON

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I hear voices, many kinds of voices, voices born from my experience; men, women and children; philosophers, demons and angels; kings and queens; waifs and strays; protective men with sinister voices; a magical, loving mother with a soothing, calming voice; a sadistic tormentor with a wicked sense of humour. There are many frightened children, some who sing and play, others who argue and fight. And a screaming baby who drives everyone mad. Poor baby.

I have heard voices since I was 3 years old. By the age of 7, I slept with a small transistor radio pressed up against my ear to try and block out the roar of voices that erupted every night when I lay down to go to sleep. I still use that strategy sometimes.

My early years were filled with many terrifying and disturbing experiences that literally shattered me into pieces. My family were involved with a group of organised, sadistic paedophiles who abused children and took part in extreme sadomasochistic practices. The consequence of such extreme and sustained abuse is devastating. Its effects are all-consuming, encompassing every aspect of experience. To be betrayed and exploited by those who are meant to protect you leaves a profound sense of terror, isolation and shame.

To survive, I developed a number of self-sufficient strategies. As well as hearing voices, I began to self-harm at an early age. I also developed a complex relationship with food which created an illusion of control over the arbitrary and cruel world I existed in. I became resourceful at adapting to extreme circumstances. I moved between worlds, one where I was at the mercy of sick and twisted adults who blamed me for their actions and one where I was an ordinary little girl, trying to do her best at school. I was creative and had a rich, imaginative, internal world that belonged to me alone. I won writing and drawing competitions and was considered a bright and gifted child. This,

coupled with my innate sense of justice, meant that I knew that what my abusers were doing to me was wrong and that I both wanted and deserved better. I imagined a world where I would be safe, free and loved. One day I would escape.

The abuse ended when I was 15 but the consequences of it lived on inside of me for many years. Despite this, I developed a successful career in the media. I was still hearing voices and self-harming throughout this time but I hid it well. I was adept at inhabiting different worlds and used to keeping secrets locked inside me. Those who had abused me threatened to kill me if I ever told anyone about what had happened, so I remained silent.

It was the birth of my first daughter when I was 25 which eventually freed me to break the silence. My daughter was much longed for and the day of her birth is one of the happiest of my life. I gave birth to her naturally and, for the first time ever, I felt proud of my body and prouder still of the perfect baby it had produced. It was like a wondrous gift had been bestowed upon me. She was absolutely beautiful. But seeing this tiny, vulnerable baby also unlocked many horrifying memories from the past. My voices multiplied and intensified. They began saying things that disturbed and frightened me. I began seeing horrifying images of abuse, torture and death. I could feel it in my body. Marks and bruises appeared on my skin like stigmata. My self-harming spiralled out of control and I became convinced that someone would try to kill me and my daughter. I became intensely paranoid and was terrified to leave the house. I felt like I was going mad.

I lived in a dual world. I was a devoted mother, breastfeeding my daughter on demand, and we had a close and intimate bond. She was clearly thriving, yet I feared contaminating her with all of the poison that swirled around inside me. I desperately wanted to be a loving mother and to raise my child in a safe and happy home but I started to feel as if there was no escape from the horrors of the past. I began to think that the only way out was to end my life. In desperation I called my GP who urgently referred me to a psychiatrist. I was admitted to the local psychiatric hospital that afternoon. It felt like the end of the world.

Despite the threats that my abusers had made, I did start to try and talk about what they had done to me. I was desperate to get home to my little girl and I knew that what had happened to me as a child was the root cause of my distress. To my astonishment, the psychiatrists that I tried to tell either denied my experience or told me that I would never ever recover from what had happened. They told me that I had an illness: I was mentally ill. I was expected to be the passive recipient of treatment for this disorder and medication was the only option open to me. I was being told what to do and given contradictory opinions – that the only way to get better was to take medication

but that, actually, I would never really get better anyway. No one ever asked me what I thought might help even though I felt that I had coped admirably up until that time. What I was experiencing was never considered to be a natural and human response to things that had happened in my life. The fact that I listened to my voices was evidence of my illness, and wanting to keep them in order to understand more about myself was seen as me being resistant to treatment.

As far as I am concerned, I am not sick. What my abusers did to me was sick. I have had a perfectly natural, human response to devastating experiences. Living with the knowledge of what was done to me, and the way in which psychiatry has added insult to injury by blaming me, is enough to drive anyone mad. My first psychiatric admission in 1993 was my last. I knew then that to be in such a desperate state in such an unsafe environment was potentially lethal. Ironically, the place that was meant to provide sanctuary for me became the place that nearly drove me over the edge once and for all.

I was very fortunate that other people in my life didn't blame me or deny what had happened to me. They were willing to listen to me and my voices and to support me in making sense of what the voices were trying to communicate to me. I worked closely with a counsellor and, later, with a therapist who believed in me and had faith in my ability to recover. With their support and that of my partner and closest friends I started on the long and winding road back to myself. It has been an internal process of truth and reconciliation, of listening, bearing witness and of facing the horrors of the past.

A starting point for me was creating a new paradigm for myself that honoured my resilience and capacity to heal. I wanted a framework which would enable me to safely listen to my voices and make sense of my experiences. I read a vast amount of material and became better informed about the many ways of understanding human experience. I researched the phenomenon of dissociation and began to appreciate the extent to which I had utilised this capacity in my own survival. I also read a lot of attachment theory. I began to comprehend the impact of my early experiences as well as understanding, conceptually, what a good enough parent was. Discovering the work of Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* had a profound effect on me. Suddenly, my own experiences were put into a wider context. I was not alone in feeling outraged by the damage done by society, in pathologising survivors of abuse. The personal became political. I began envisaging a brighter future. I was a woman on a mission. One day I would show them all.

Having my own personal crisis plan was essential when things were really difficult as I was determined that I would never return to a psychiatric hospital.

however desperate I became. So I developed ways of keeping safe and focused on taking life one day at a time. I had a list of twenty things to do when desperate which I kept by my phone in times of crisis. I reminded myself of previous times when I had felt suicidal and what I would have missed if I'd succumbed to the despair. I had mantras that I repeated to counter terror and that helped me to rebuild my belief in myself. If a voice kept saying to me: 'You are a bad mother', I would say, 'I love my daughter and she loves me'. Or, if a voice kept saying: 'You are doomed. You will die a horrible death', I would say, 'I am safe now and I am free.' I would repeat these words of power over and over, both in my head and out loud, and, slowly, I began to believe them. I stopped having contact with people who undermined me and slowly developed relationships with those who supported me, both with friends and, later on, through co-counselling. Over time, I created my own support network. The love and wisdom of both my counsellor and my therapist was essential in guiding and sustaining me on my journey. I could not have undertaken the work without them, yet I have done much of the hard labour on my own.

It was important for me to find structure in my life with ordinary activities which enabled me to take care of myself. Getting enough sleep, keeping my house clean, listening to music, keeping busy or slowing down when things got too much, provided a safe basis to work from. I also found taking care of myself physically really helped. Complementary therapies like homeopathy that work holistically, taking account of the whole person – mind, body and spirit – really appealed to me. My homeopath accepted my voices as part of me and not as some problem that needed to be eradicated. More recently, I have been influenced by new research into psychophysiology and the impact that trauma has on the body.

I also developed my own creative strategies. I began drawing and painting images that haunted me and painting became my alternative to self-harm. I would use paint and my bare hands to release and illustrate intense feelings and, gradually, I stopped hurting myself. I also discovered that singing is a great release and that it's hard to listen to voices when you are singing. Expressing intense emotion like terror, rage and despair was also really important in helping to release my distress and lessen the intensity of disturbing voices and visions. I did this in many ways both in therapy and also by going out and dancing with my friends all night, going to the countryside and screaming on the top of a mountain, sitting by the sea and crying an ocean of tears.

I began writing a daily journal which gave me a sense of order and structure in what often felt like a chaotic environment. Writing became my way of putting the different voices and feelings that were troubling me outside of

me. I was able to gain some perspective, which enabled me to make more sense of what was going on. I began to see patterns and triggers and I would ask my voices questions which they would then write or draw a response to. It was at this point that I first began to grasp that my voices were more than simply voices. I began to realise that I was inhabited by different people. These 'voices' had different names and identities. They had defined and distinct personalities. This realisation was a startling relief. My sense of my own identity shifted. I moved from being 'me' to 'we'.

My relationship with my different selves changed over time. I wanted to encourage communication between the different selves and eventually worked towards a mutual collaboration with them. As far as I was concerned we were in this together. However difficult they sometimes were I knew that the voices of my different selves reflected important truths about my experiences. So, if a voice was threatening me, I immediately wondered if *they* had been threatened. Through writing and internal dialogues I was able to ask my voices questions which they began to answer. My curiosity and non-threatening stance was transformatory. Instead of the terror and retaliation that had previously existed, an atmosphere of safety and acceptance was created. I began to understand that my voices were dissociated selves that were internalised representations of the world that I grew up in. These various selves had been born from my experience. Each self was a part of the whole of me. What they really needed was my unconditional love and support, much in the same way a loving parent supports a child. I began to see that I needed to listen to them and understand them and the context in which they emerged and to greet them with compassion and understanding. I began to honour them as they had helped me to survive. Slowly we began supporting and understanding each other and an increasing sense of connectedness and wholeness grew. Life became a shared project. Gradually, I felt less ashamed about who I was and began to marvel at how creative I had been in surviving such monstrous abuse. I became excited by what my mind had managed to invent. At times it felt like I had created a work of art.

It has been an arduous journey, a mission we have dedicated ourselves to for many years and recorded in more than 145 journals to date. I plan to publish an account of my life, as I feel I have an important story to tell about the human potential to destroy, and create; a testament to the persistence of the human spirit to survive in the most extreme circumstances. My survival story is both extraordinary and an ordinary, everyday human endeavour.

Pathologising the creative endeavours of ordinary people to survive the raw deal that life has dealt them is not only insulting but diminishes the achievements we accomplish with so very little. It also colludes in protecting abusers from being held accountable for their crimes. I know for a fact that

the man at the centre of the ring that abused me is still operating – for now.

Abuse thrives in secrecy. We must expose the truth and not perpetuate injustice further, otherwise today's child-abuse victims become tomorrow's psychiatric patients. People need to know of the horrific cruelty we human beings are capable of, and of our magnificent and heroic resilience in the face of it. We need to expand our view of what it means to be human. Instead of asking the question 'What is wrong with you?', we need to ask 'What has happened to you?' This sense of outrage is what has driven me in my work.

They say that living well is the best revenge. Well, I do my best. My life isn't perfect but I do live it to the full and, each day, find myself becoming closer to who I want to be. Having multiple selves can still drive me crazy sometimes but that isn't my fault. I am driven mad by what has happened to me but that's only human. And it has become easier. More troubling is my struggle to find meaning in a world that often makes no sense to me. My work helps, both in the connections I make with people and also through my sense of influencing positive change.

For someone who was told by the system that she would never recover, actually, life's pretty good! Personally, I am more content than ever before. I have a fabulous partner and I am privileged to have some wonderful people in my life. I would not be here if it were not for the love of good people. I marvel at my own and at others' capacity to love, despite the odds. I am a loving parent to my daughters, although I received no nurturing myself as a child, and, to my delight, they love me back. They fill me with hope. The greatest truth is love.