

Defining the Possible

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ABSTRACT

A nineteen-year-old survivor of child abuse discusses her journey to self-discovery in hopes of helping improve methods of treatment, and helping others like her to do the same.

I attend The John Dewey Academy, a residential, therapeutic college preparatory high school, with thirty other students who were at extreme risk to self-destruct. The school implements the ideas of Glasser's (1965, 1969, 1972, 1990, 1998, & 2000). Students enter with a myriad of problems. Some abused alcohol and drugs, had eating disorders, self-mutilated, and/or had been sexually promiscuous. A few had been institutionalized and/or incarcerated. Several had attempted suicide. Many had failed to perform academically, which virtually would have eliminated any possibility of entering a real college of merit. Most, had they not attended The John Dewey Academy, would have lived wasted lives. All arrived dishonest, self-pitying, self-absorbed, and consumed by self-hate. So did I.

I write this article now to explain my odyssey to recover myself, in hopes that my insights into my treatment may improve methods of treatment for adolescents at risk, especially since one rarely hears about the success of a treatment from the person who has gone through the experience. Writing this article has been cathartic: it has caused me to re-assess my turbulent past, and appreciate what I have done for myself now. Like my peers, I entered the Academy disheartened and apathetic. Like most, my parents had a great deal to do with my downfall.

Though my parents are dysfunctional, they camouflage their massive problems by pretending to be altruistic, God-fearing people. Both have chosen not to deal with their own traumatic pasts; in turn, both only succeeded in perpetuating their pasts. Neither understands how to have healthy relationships. When she was a child, my mother was abused physically and emotionally by alcoholic parents. At age five, my father was sent to an all-male boarding school, where he alluded to being sexually abused.

I do not understand why my parents have stayed together. My father confided to me that my grandmother (his mother and the person responsible for introducing my parents to each other) would apologize to him for doing so because my mother's crazy. My mother would incite arguments with my father about inconsequential issues and would make both of their lives miserable. Their relationship continued like this for nine years, until my sister was born, then my mother transferred her frustrations onto me. My mother verbally and emotionally abused

me, frequently reinforcing the fact that I was weird, a failure, and bad. As I grew older, she continually told me that she hated me. At one point, she told me she wished I were dead. My father made comments about being relieved that my mother would attack me rather than him, then apologize for how abusive she was; though he never intervened.

My mother hates me for various reasons. She hates me because I did what she failed to do: I asserted myself, whereas when she was abused; she remained silent. Also, my father preferred me over her. Finally, since my mother has made her life goal to look good, she resents me because I tarnished the family name with self-destructive behavior. She also feels I have betrayed my family by voicing their betrayals. She blames me for actions beyond my control, which prevent her from maintaining the fantasy that our family is well adjusted; thus she views me to be a cancerous influence. I am the designated scapegoat; everything that has gone wrong is my fault. In turn, I believe my mother wants me to fail because, with my failure, I confirm her truth that I am the problem. She resents me because she now knows how toxic she has been as a parent.

My relationship with my father was exclusive and lecherous. He converted me into his wife, while claiming to be my best friend.. He used me as his confidante; *he discussed the problems he had at work and elaborated on his sexual exploits as a teenager.* I idolized him. I depended on him. When I was ten, my father molested me by massaging my genitals and breasts. This happened repeatedly. I did not protest or protect myself because I was afraid, confused, and conflicted. What happened felt wrong, but the perpetrator, my father, was the person whom I trusted most. I found it impossible to reconcile these polar realities. I wanted to forgive him, but I could not. I tried to convince myself that my father did not know what he was doing and that it was my fault. I analyzed the situation *ad nauseam*. If I said something, I feared he would be angry or feel embarrassed. I wanted to protect him as well as avoid acknowledging the truth of what had happened.

I was consumed by guilt; I tried to gain a sense of self-worth through pleasing others. I tried to be the perfect child. Until eighth grade, I excelled academically, played on two varsity teams, and took the lead in my school play. I was musically and artistically talented. Then, I let my life deteriorate. My secrets festered, and I stopped working. *Although* I was superficially socially adept, I was unable to create real relationships with people. All I knew was to pretend to be "normal", but I could not maintain this illusion because I was hemorrhaging. I felt alien-

ated and trusted no one. I lived in my head a lot of the time, and by the time I reached eighth grade, I began to feel drained by my family situation and slowly stopped caring about myself.

Eighth grade was also the time when most of my acquaintances became promiscuous. Disgusted by this behavior, I became more withdrawn from people. My mother's hatred prompted me to hate myself, as my father's actions only confirmed the idea that I was indeed a bad person. Driscoll (1989) has described me: I was consumed with "self-criticism, self-contempt, self-deprecation, self-doubt, self-punishment... seeing the worst in [myself propagated]; by...low self-esteem; and by accompanying feelings of failure, inadequacy, worthlessness, embarrassment, guilt." (p. 104)

I associated care with betrayal, love with pain. I prided myself on being reckless and self-effacing. At ten, I started to self-mutilate to numb my pain. It was the simplest way I could devise to free myself from my suffering. At fifteen, I consumed twenty shots of vodka in twenty minutes. I awoke the following morning in a hospital where I was told my BAC had been 3.82, almost double what a lethal dosage is. I stopped drinking, but became anorexic and bulimic. When my weight plummeted to eighty pounds, my parents finally institutionalized me at Boston Children's Hospital. After seven weeks of being an inpatient, I was released and sent to an ineffectual day treatment program. There, I learned about Ipecac, which I thought was the miracle cure for my purging. For the next three years, I was seen by seven psychiatrists who diagnosed me as depressed. They prescribed Paxil, Prozac, Neurotin, Aderal, Sonata, Celexa, Welbutrin, and several other antidepressant and antipsychotic medications. I was told I had a chemical imbalance, even though no psychotropic medications produced relief. None worked because my presenting problem was not a chemical disorder. Glasser (1972) is right when he writes,

The drug used to alleviate the pain of a failure identity thus becomes itself an obstacle to gaining the human involvement necessary for a successful identity. A mental patient locked in a state hospital with no program for guidance toward responsible involvements will not be helped to give up his symptoms by drugs. The drug may calm his crazy symptoms and make them less painful, it may make the ward he lives on quieter, and it may make the work of the staff easier. None of these reasons by itself justifies the use of the drug. However, when a thus quieter and calmer atmosphere helps the hospital develop a program for patient involvement and worthwhile work, moderate use of drugs does serve a purpose when the hospital has such tranquilizers to help patients calm down and become involved in the program is wise. In a hospital with such a program, the administration of tranquilizing drugs to patients often encourages the staff, who identify quiet and passivity with less craziness, to try harder to reach the patients. (p. 84)

As both the prescribed medications and my various means of self-medicating became less and less effective, I considered suicide to numb my self-inflicted suffering.

I briefly attended a prestigious prep school in the tenth grade, but was hospitalized for depression and was expelled

because I had thirty-four absences. Knowing I was troubled and in trouble, I demanded to attend a therapeutic school. I conceded that life was ruined. I was terrified by emotions which I did not understand, but felt overwhelmed by them. Craving companionship, I would rush into a relationship, but abruptly retreat because I feared intimacy. To defend myself from being hurt, rejected, and betrayed I played games. I had become so dishonest that I no longer could decipher truth/reality from deceit. When others paid me a compliment, I felt the need to prove them wrong. *I rarely felt temporary respite or good about myself, I would punish myself because I believed I did not deserve praise or relief.* When my weight became so low because I refused to eat, I was in constant pain. When that pain subsided, I felt as though I was doing something wrong. I believed it was impossible for people to care about me and, worse, for me to care about anyone. It was ingrained into my psyche that I was inherently bad. The most damage psychiatrists did was when the only resolution they offered as an explanation for my behavior was that I was damaged goods. It was easy for me to maintain what Glasser (1972) termed a "failure identity [person] who lacks a concept for himself as a loved and worthwhile individual, [and] will no work for any long-term goals" (p. 289).

By the time I arrived The John Dewey Academy March 1st, 2002, I had nearly succeeded in making myself unreachable. If it had not been for harshly delivered confrontations which forced me to penetrate my denial, I do not know if I could have overcome my self-imposed prison. I was lucky that I entered a program that eschews mediocrity and failure. I was not permitted to play the victim because had I been offered the chance, I would have chosen it. I was expected to take accountability for the actions that I could control. I was confronted continually about my irresponsible, deceitful, manipulative, and self-destructive acts. I was challenged when I claimed to be unable either to control my behavior or to change, thus I was compelled to shed the lie that I was damaged goods. The head of my school, Dr. Bratter, describes confrontation in the following way (2000):

[T]he concept of responsible concern is the quintessential value. Simply stated, the message is since I care about you, I promise to prevent you from harming yourself or others but also help you to help yourself, thus promoting the moral growth of the confronter and the individual who is the object of the confrontation. Members of the community intuitively know when confrontation is disingenuous, designed to hurt, to humiliate, and/or to manipulate. Students gain courage of their convictions and the confidence to assert themselves when perceiving any abuse of power, deceit, and/or sadistic acts. [This quasi-Reality Therapy quasi-confrontation psychotherapeutic orientation has two phases, i.e. the painful process of unlearning old patterns of behavior and the nurturing (re)learning phase. During the later phase, the adolescent begins to establish a positive personal identity and to discover a direction to achieve intermediate and long-term goals. [There are] listed seven sequential guiding principles.

- (1) attacking the malignant and dysfunctional aspects of behavior.

- (2) penetrating the facade of justification behavior.
- (3) forcing the adolescent to accept responsibility for his/her behavior.
- (4) helping the person evaluate behavior.
- (5) assisting the adolescent to be aware and to anticipate the future consequences [and payoffs] of present acts.
- (6) Challenging the person to mobilize personal assets.
- (7) Defining a direction to continue to grow (pp. 168-169)

No one at Dewey blamed or accused me of being seductive with my father, though the staff and peers refused to be sympathetic. Like a Greek chorus, everyone demanded I become honest and responsible. Initially, I hated hearing that I had a choice. I hated reliving the betrayal by my parents. This agony was, at first, too intense to endure. On December 31, 2002, after almost one year, I impulsively left. With no desire to return home, I stayed on the streets in two women shelters in Boston. I lived with drug addicts, the mentally impaired, and the clinically insane. After nearly being raped, I trusted no one and made movements to return to Dewey. As it was clear I was more invested in self-destruction than self-improvement, I was told to attend a wilderness program.

I attended Catherine Freer in Oregon. For three weeks, I and a group of seven others were guided by four staff members through the snowy mountains in northern Oregon. I always excelled with physical activities, so the program did not challenge me. However, it was therapeutically effective to have to sit alone and think. For the first time, I realized how lonely I was. All that I had been trying to avoid began to surface and I was pushed to look into my soul.

When I returned to John Dewey, I wrote a confrontational letter to my father concerning everything that had happened in the past. His response confirmed his guilt, but he only justified his actions and caused me to believe that even more transpired that I did not remember. I wrote him again, demanding answers to what he had written and confronting him again. This was the starting point at which I first began admit to myself how he had betrayed me. With admitting this to myself, I opened a Pandora box that I am not sure can ever be closed.

Being at John Dewey with so many confrontations and feedback, I started recognizing my destructive patterns. I could distinguish how I sabotaged myself whenever I felt good, and I felt incomplete without having something to feel guilty about. I saw that these were ways to guard myself from people. If no one trusted me, no one could get close to me, thus I felt safer. I would lie incessantly, sometimes to promote myself and other times simply for the sake of seeing if I could get over on other people. I would attempt to convince myself that my lies were true, and at various points lost sense of what was real and what was fallacy. Recognizing this fact scared me, especially since the longer I was here, the more I felt like I fell into a world of my own making and I was terrified that I was indeed cut off from reality. I butchered my self-esteem with an incredible amount of criticism. I understood that through lying and the

games I played, I was trying to placate the immense loneliness and pain I felt, and I understood that the only way to possibly be close to people, this ideal that I had never experienced, I would have to become honest, and drop all of my defenses.

My options were very black and white. I had to open up to people, otherwise I would have to leave John Dewey. John Dewey did not allow me to continue to play all the games I had been playing for my whole life, and if I insisted on continuing them, I knew I would be asked to leave. I also understood I had to be honest for another reason. I discovered that when I kept all of my thoughts and feelings inside, I would become indifferent about my life, and sabotage myself by physically hurting myself, lying, or by purposely breaking rules to get in trouble. Again, John Dewey did not tolerate my self-destructive behavior, and I understood that I either needed to do what terrified me, i.e. be honest, or leave.

The simplest, most important revelation I had was when I was expelled the third time from John Dewey and had to leave for a period of a week. I did not even have the option of going home because during this time, the state of Massachusetts was pressing charges against my father, and I legally could not go home. I stayed with very generous friends in my hometown. It was surreal. It was a very learning experience for me. Though the family I was staying with was incredibly inclusive and kind, it was impossible for me to ignore the knowledge that I felt completely alone in the world.. I knew that many people there cared deeply for me and wanted to see me succeed, but it was I who was preventing myself from doing so. I finally saw that it did no matter whatsoever what people did or felt for me, I was the only person capable of changing and bettering myself; a message Dr. Bratter had been trying to hammer into my head from the first day I set foot in his school.

I was given another chance at Dewey Academy, and peers and staff kept me on course; even though I wanted to avoid/hide from my reality, they confronted me with the truth which empowered me. It was incredibly important that no one let me play the victim any more, and this caused me to grow up.

I began to deal with my relationships with my parents. After confronting them various times and in various ways, I discovered the fortune cookie wisdom still stands that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks, as my mother continues to oscillate between being vicious and trying to repent and my father has said nothing. I have come to terms with the fact that my mother will be the way she is, and it is wiser for me not to become engaged with her, as she is unpredictable and unhealthy. I have said all I need to say to her, how she has hurt me, how I feel about the past, and have apologized for my behavior. She has chosen not to hear a lot of it, and so be it. Likewise, my father has not answered any of my questions, nor do I expect to have anything to do with him in the future. I accepted the fact that I essentially do not have parents.

Undergoing this harsh realization, I found that I was also supported and pressed to make a decision about who I would become and what I wanted. I went after what I wanted, which was, and is, to be happy and to be a success, and, in essence,

slew my demons. I survived the most painful experience of my life, of becoming honest, becoming close with people, and caring about people. The highs I felt from the accomplishments I made became the most intense positive feeling I ever had. Glasser (1976) termed this phenomenon a "positive addiction

[A] positive addiction is something that people choose to do, physical or mental. They believe it is something that has value for them, and it is something that they can do on their own. [It is something that they think they can become proficient in doing. It has to have an inherent value in itself so that it will stick to it long enough to reach the PA state. Once they have reached the PA it is easily recognized by the fact that if they attempt to stop the activity, they suffer withdrawal, some sort of pain, discomfort, anxiety, or guilt that is satisfactorily relieved only by resuming the activity. (p. 48)

Prior to John Dewey, through events outside of my control and through my own actions, I had cut myself off from others; from feeling, from living, and from success. Entering my senior year, I am proud of what I have done for myself and feel indebted to The John Dewey Academy for giving me the opportunity to resurrect myself. These past three years have been the most important of my life, and I will be leaving John Dewey with hard earned and well deserved self-respect. *I am hopeful that I will attend Barnard College next fall, and continue to pursue my broad academic interests, ranging from astrophysics, to philosophy, to English.* Being in an unrelenting and uncompromising environment ultimately drove me to better myself, and in turn, I have become a driving force at the school, and am helping others better themselves. I now understand two treatment cliches - only I can do it, but I cannot do it alone which means I need people in my life to be able to be happy and be who I want to be. In addition, I cannot keep it unless I give it away; when I confront a friend, I internalize values of which I speak and confront myself. *I now understand the meaning of honor, integrity, decency, goodness, choice, excellence, and responsible concern.*

I have filled the void left by what was supposed to be my family with others who genuinely love me, as well as with a love for myself. I sadly understand that the past cannot be simply be buried and forgotten, but that it haunts and lingers. I know I want to go far in life, and the past is the past, and really, I determine how much of it I carry with me. There are too many wonderful things to squander it on self-pity or fear.

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