

“First of All, Do No Harm”

A Recovered Memory Therapist Recants

In my book, *Victims of Memory*, I included four chapters of verbatim interviews with recovered memory therapists, self-described incest survivors who retrieved memories, accused parents, and retractors who once believed they had recovered memories and have now taken back the allegations. In the final chapter, I offered advice to therapists who specialize in unearthing incest memories: “It will take enormous courage for you to admit what you have done to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of clients, validating their belief in horrible events that never took place.” I called for such therapists to develop a new specialty—helping to reunite the families torn asunder by these false incest charges. “After all,” I wrote, “who better understands the Survivor Syndrome than you?”

Recently, I met just such a “retractor therapist,” a woman who once conducted guided imagery to help clients unlock the horrible secrets from their subconscious and who now realizes that rather than contributing to healing, she was causing untold harm. A Christian therapist who is active in her evangelical church, Robin Newsome (not her real name), 49, is particularly concerned that so much evil has been done in the name of God, she is doing everything in her power to stop this form of therapy from ruining more lives. One by one, she is finding former clients, seeking to undo the damage.

The following interview follows the same format as those in *Victims of Memory* and can be considered that book’s “missing interview.”

Texan Robin Newsome is a soft-spoken, gentle woman. In her junior year in college, she became a devout Christian and joined a Christian campus organization. After graduating with a degree in early childhood education, she married and had two children. In 1982, she returned to school to obtain a masters in counseling, where she embraced Gestalt therapy and encountered her first case of recovered memory.

An Interview With Robin Newsome by Mark Pendergrast

One of my first courses was called “Anger Therapy.” It met every day for three weeks. After a short lecture, we’d meet in small groups with a therapist. This was a very intense, emotional experience. After a round of checking in, each group member was asked whether they wanted to “work” or not on any particular day. That meant doing a two-chair visualization, where you imagined the person you were angry at to be in the chair across from you, and you vented your anger, using a bataaka [foam filled] bat to hit a foam pad. This was supposed to get out your unresolved anger. This was a whole new world to me. I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole with this stuff. Here I was in my placid little world, and this was like entering a subterranean world I never knew existed. It turned me sideways and upside down. I had always been the nice Christian girl, and I wasn’t aware of my great storehouse of anger.

(Newsome explained that she was angry at her husband, who was having an affair. When she figuratively put her

husband in the chair, “I nearly took the head of the instructor off using the bataaka bat.”)

One Friday, a woman in the group told us she had had an image of herself being sexually abused when she was two years old. She said, “I know I was abused by someone, but I can’t see who it is.” On Monday, she told us with tremendous sorrow that she had realized that it was her older brother. The therapist had her “put him in the chair,” but instead of using the bat, she said she wanted to rip his head off. The therapist handed her some magazines and told her to have at it. She started screaming at the top of her lungs at her brother, crying and ripping magazines. Everything was going well until she grabbed one of the therapist’s favorite *Smithsonians*, and the therapist yelled for her to stop and not rip that one. This woman completely shifted gears. She very politely said, “Oh, I’m sorry,” and put it down. Then, with a vengeance, she grabbed another magazine and went back to ripping and tearing.

At the time, I interpreted this to mean that she had control over her anger. I had wondered if people would get so angry during these exercises that they might just lose it completely. This woman’s ability to stop herself so quickly showed me that people weren’t really losing total control. In fact, this incident made the therapy feel more like a play with a therapist/director who had just yelled, “Cut!”

Still, I had no reason to doubt that she had been abused—her tears, her sorrow, her anguish, her rage, her sense of betrayal were painful to witness. I remember being so angry at the thought that anyone could do such a thing to a small, helpless child. The fact that she had remembered her relationship with her brother as being happy prior to this memory seemed irrelevant. Obviously, her mind had shielded her from the awful truth. No one even remotely thought to question the memory of a two-year-old. Also, the idea was that young children had trouble giving words to their abuse, because they were in a prever-



bal state. So there was just this nameless rage buried there all these years.

Throughout my courses, there was a lot of talk about “body memories.” We were taught that anger was stored in the body. During times of anger or stress, you could identify your “stress organ.” Mine was in my neck muscles. The magazine-ripper woman stored her anger in her jaw. I found this concept very useful. During guided imagery, I would ask clients to recall a specific memory and ask them where they felt it, in what part of the body. When they finished their anger work, the tension would usually be gone, which I took as an indication that they had worked through that emotion.

Another woman in our group had come from an unhappy, dysfunctional home. Our instructor led her in a guided visualization and helped her create a new family for herself. At the therapist’s suggestion, she re-invented her childhood, which included growing up in a different state, in a new house with a new, improved family. It seemed to be helpful to her, and

everyone in the group praised her. I wondered at the time what she planned to do with her real family—the one she still had to deal with. But then, I was just a student and the therapist was the expert.

I also remember one woman who had polio when she was young. The therapist asked her what the *purpose* of the polio was. The idea was that your body and mind collaborate, and that nothing that happens is simply circumstantial. Initially, this feels like an insight and explanation for something that seems so unfair and irrational. In this case, the implication was that she was being sexually abused by her father, so she developed polio in order to escape to the hospital.

At the time, I really admired the therapist who led my group. She was bold, outspoken, and fearless—a really good role model for mousy little me. She seemed invincible and infallible. She was very much in control of the group, always starting and ending on time. She had people sharing their deepest secrets and unleashing their

rage from day one. I’d never seen anything like it. Then, after people had bared their souls, she would be very tender and caring, like the Mom we had always wanted. But at precisely twelve noon, the warmth would end. I always had the feeling that if I saw her in the grocery store, she wouldn’t give me the time of day. She was someone I both admired and feared.

Probably because I had not been very open with my true feelings before, I really took to Gestalt therapy. It was very freeing for me. I saw it work, and I still believe it can be very helpful to people. One of my first attempts at Gestalt therapy was a piece of work I did with a woman at my church who was still grieving over a miscarriage. She did a beautiful piece of grief work over the loss of her unborn child. That was one of the most amazing things I have witnessed. I saw her almost transform in my presence. She was able to find peace in her miscarriage and let go of some aspects of it.

Once I graduated with my masters in 1986, I began to counsel people on



a variety of issues, but I also developed a sub-specialty in sexual abuse. In 1990, I ran a sexual abuse group that lasted nine months. While most of the women in the group had always remembered their abuse, there were a few who had vague images or just a gut feeling that they had been abused. I remember conducting a guided imagery session with one such woman. I had her close her eyes, get comfortable, and find the tension in her body. I said to her, "How old are you in this memory?" She said she was about four. I would ask other questions, like, "Do you know where you are? Do you feel like you're inside or out-of-doors?" In my own mind, I did not see this as leading at all. They seemed like innocuous questions. Later, I realized that this was almost like playing scrabble with someone and putting in a little word that suddenly opens up a whole new section of the board. I was helping her to take that little image and let it flow into a specific place. I was actually helping her fill in the details.

She said, "I feel like I'm being smothered. Something's in my face, and I don't know what." I took a pillow and gently put it on her face to simulate the experience. She sat with it for a while, then suddenly she started crying. She said, "I see it now." It was her babysitter abusing her. She remembered a nude woman forcing her to have oral sex. At that point, she sort of emotionally closed down and couldn't go any further with it. I said, "When you're ready, you can open your eyes. How is your stomach now?" It felt a little better, she said. Then I told her, "I'm really proud of you—you worked really hard." Others in the group also gave her feedback, such as, "What you remembered was really helpful to me, because it helped me be in touch with what it was like to be little and to remember what happened to me."

I wouldn't have said I was doing hypnosis at all. I tended to think of hypnosis as induced by a swinging watch chain. This was just guided imagery. I thought I was getting into

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the subconscious. We had been taught in our anger therapy class that you stored memories in your body. No one explained exactly how that was done. I just took it for granted. Another thing we learned was that claustrophobia often indicated a person had had oral sex forced on them. It made a certain amount of sense.

Unfortunately, this client with the babysitter memory never really got better. Few of my recovered memory clients ever improved. This person was always terrifically angry, and the work we did never seemed to help her. In fact, I would say that the sexual abuse group made her worse, and it just distracted her from real issues—her daughter, her troubled marriage, and a stressful job.

Still, I completely believed in the memories I was hearing in my therapy sessions. My first doubts began with Sally, whose story continues to haunt me, especially because it is on-going. Sally is in her mid-30s, and she came to see me almost four years ago, wanting help with her compulsive eating. Later, she told me that her father had been an alcoholic, and we began to focus on her dysfunctional family. One day, Sally came to see me after getting the image of a little girl sitting in a pool of blood. All the details of when, where, and who were unclear. I had her close her eyes and led her through guided imagery, asking my typical questions: "How old are you? What are you wearing? What time of year is it? What happens next?" With my prompting, she began to retrieve little bits of memory. In the end, she saw her father penetrating her when she was three.

At the end of the session, Sally asked, "Can this possibly be true?" She had always felt so close to her Dad. His drinking had always made him a happy drunk, and she was actually



closer to him than her Mom. She had no memory of him sexually abusing her before this image. I gave her the classic line: "Sally, there would be no way for you to have invented this much detail unless it really happened."

After that first memory, she started having others. They would come to her during the week, and she would come to each session more and more depressed. She also had terrible insomnia and pelvic pain, which I explained to her as body memories. They were further proof that her memories were true.

By this time, I had witnessed many clients recovering repressed memories, and I totally believed them. If you saw the emotion, you too would have no reason to doubt. The images were punctuated over and over again by the anguish, tears, contorted face, clenched fists, and rage that was expressed in hitting and kicking and ripping and gnashing of teeth. And there was always the pleading question, "How could he do this to me?" It would have been incomprehensible to think that the person just came up with it to play act. They weren't play acting. We honestly believed the images that came into their heads were the horrifying records of real events.

When Sally first came to see me, she was a relatively functional person. Home schooling is very popular here, and she had been home schooling her two boys for a couple of years. But after she started to get the abuse memories, she became so emotionally fragile that she decided to put her sons in public school. Sally would have horrible nightmares and days of sitting in a dark room just staring at the wall. She couldn't do her housework, so her husband had to do his work and then come home and do hers.

Sally's husband was very supportive of her, yet there were times he would get really frustrated, watching his wife slip away before his eyes. They had no sex life because she wouldn't let him touch her. He would vacillate between being understanding and being really angry.

