

Keynote Speech, Australian Congress 2001

Listening to the Lessons of Survivors: Sharing their Truths and their Lessons.

Dr. Mary Beth Williams

When Lenore Meldrum first asked me to present at this conference, I had no idea that she actually wanted me to do keynote presentations. For months, I have mulled over in my mind what “new words of wisdom” I might present and what truths I could share that haven’t been shared countless times before. I made up my mind that I did not want to be just another one of “those Yanks” that come, supposedly dispel their conclusions as to what SHOULD or SHOULD NOT be done in the world of trauma treatment (that comes at the next keynote). Instead, I decided that the survivors themselves could better share their Truths, their lessons.

A Little About Danny

I want to begin my talk by painting you a picture of Danny. First, though, a few facts. It costs more to execute a prisoner than it does to imprison him/her for life!! No study has provided solid evidence that the death penalty has any deterrent value and, in reality, may sanction violence by showing that killing is a socially sanctioned solution to other violence. The death penalty is not applied fairly nor consistently in the United States. Less than 1% of persons who are sentenced for murder each year receive the death penalty and those who are sentenced, in many cases, did not have the benefit of paid (well paid) counsel, often a factor of their social and economic status, the presence of prosecutors at local and federal levels who see a high profile murder case as a way to “make a name” for themselves, and race (the majority are black) and poor education of the accused. Additionally, because the justice system is not infallible, it becomes inevitable that some innocent persons will be executed, particularly if and when there is a 21-day rule, as there is in the Commonwealth of Virginia, that prevents new evidence from being introduced more than 21 days post-sentencing, when the Supreme Court (the highest level of appeal) is on vacation and a quorum of justices cannot be found, or when the Governor is newly elected and would not find it politically “savvy” to pardon a supposed murderer 7 months into his term!

The United States of America is the only Western democracy that still carries out executions. Take the case of Earl Washington who spent 10 years behind bars. His attorney concealed a syringe so that he could get blood for DNA testing inside a tape recorder. The DNA testing proved beyond any doubt that it was physically impossible for Washington, mentally retarded and from my hometown area, to have killed the elderly woman for whom he was given death. In January 1994, even though evidence showed him to be innocent, his sentence was commuted to life. An appeal for a retrial was denied because of the 21-day rule. It was not until 2001 that he was finally released.

But what does this have to do with Danny King? Perhaps a poem written by Danny might introduce his story

Untitled

**What creates the life of a small child
When Abuse cannot be changed?
The broken pieces not as a puzzle
To be looked at and rearranged.**

**Nor do the child's tears ever really dry
They just fade away from others' sight;
But they still flow, oh, so easily
In the quietness of a lonely night.**

**For each sleep becomes a hidden scar
The adult carries deep inside;
And it takes a very caring hand
To discover just where they hide.
Reaching out can be so hard,
When you fear another's touch
May be the same as those before
And caring can hurt so much.**

**They say I must reach for tomorrow
If I am ever to know real gain,
But can tomorrow bring peace or healing,
If I must reach it through yesterday's pain.**

Working with trauma survivors, no matter their location, involves RISK. To enter into the mind of another, to feel his/her pain, is a risk to the practitioner –with an inevitable outcome of vicarious traumatization and it is also a risk to the client. What harm can we bring through our actions or lack of action? What is our role as advocate, as service broker? When I was first asked, in June 1995, to meet with Danny King to discuss his childhood experiences and how they might have impacted on his life choices, I was taking a major risk. During that initial interview, Mr. King was hesitant, if not appearing outwardly hostile. He eventually revealed a few events that involved brutality, sexual abuse, witnessing of violence toward his mother. He spaced out during the interview, held in a locked cell on death row, and related that he had constant nightmares and intrusive thoughts. He expressed anger that his mother had never been able to protect him and that he, himself, has had difficulties throughout life forming intimate relationships. Over the course of the next three years, I got to know Danny King well. In April 1996, he wrote the following poem (excerpts here) to me:

Come Dear Doctor

Come Dear Doctor and join me here
In a journey through a young child's mind;
No holds barred, to be forgiven or not,
Let me describe what is there we find.

A young boy born to a world filled with fear
I couldn't change or even start to understand.
"Daddy's just drunk and don't mean what he does,"
given as a reason for the pain of his hand. . . .

My body left scarred by the last beating he gave,
I run to hide and wait through the night.
For someone to come and tell me I now can come home
But that someone never comes into sight.

Alone, run away, thinking I just want to die;
Too weak for my hand to make it a fact.
Walking the streets with nowhere to go,
Until streetwalking becomes more than an act. . . .

The faces of others cast aside in your world
Those who shared the journey of my flight;
Remain in my mind as thought waiting for me,
To find the way to make the wrong right. . . .

There's Sweet Pretty Susan, 14 and afraid,
Because Daddy used her worse than the rest.
Selling a child's body along with her soul
Then the courts locked HERE up "for the best."

Pete, who came after I learned how to get high,
And the first one who never cared what they did.
He made a game of their sickness, giggled at their ways,
But his body showed the scars his smile hid . . .

Why can't I touch someone who doesn't strike back?
A question I searched to answer in vain.
Each time I opened the depths of my heart,
I ended standing alone with more pain.

You ask for trust and request I believe
That to you I am more than numbered case.

But I wonder, Dear Doctor, if a year from today,
When you read the number will you remember the face?

There can be no tomorrow if yesterday won't let go,
Nor can another take the scars that I bear.
I've never taken a life, nor felt a meaning for mine,
So I offered it as a last proof that I care.

Can you understand why I couldn't let them do this to her
Why I could not let them another thing take away? (He lied to protect his
wife at first)

What I saw then as honor now marks me a fool,
Another outcast in the games they all play.

Words only words placed in verses that rhyme
Can they tell you of the story held within?
Can you understand that by dying I sought to strike back,
For my death would confirm their world's sin.

Danny King was found guilty of the capital murder of Carolyn Rogers, a realtor, who was beaten and stabbed while showing a house to potential buyers. Evidence seen by me, including the sheet that wrapped the murder weapon with his wife's fingerprints on it, hidden by her, was not allowed into evidence in 1997 or 1998. Also not permitted to be examined forensically were the boots that Danny was wearing at the time of the murder or the shoes that his then-wife Becky wore. This analysis would have shown that the footprints in blood were those of sharp-toed shoes, not workmen's boots. All of Danny's appeals were turned down. I consider myself fortunate to have known Danny well. I do not consider it fortunate to have walked with him into his death, talking with him by phone up until 5 minutes prior to his execution when, with his wife on another line (he remarried Karen while on death row), I helped him dissociate as he had done so many times as a child. He reportedly walked to his death calmly, "as if he wasn't there" – because he wasn't.

Danny has things to say to us that are lessons from trauma – lessons he wants us to hear. He wrote many letters to me as well as helped me develop a paper called "Risk" that I hope to publish with John Wilson in a book on wrongfully accused death row inmates. It is the poetry that Danny gave me permission to use and disseminate, though, that speaks best to his messages.

You seek out my thoughts and scars from the past

Hidden in shadows I hold in my mind.
I wonder if you realize the pain lying there,
Or the fears deep inside I will find.

The tears are not dry, they're only hidden away;
I've placed each on there many times on my own.
And though you open the door, with a desire to help me,
In the end it is I who must feel them alone.

My words are not meant to be a judgment,
But a plea of hope . . . that you will try to understand.
I built the walls to protect me, as well as what is inside
And each stone was laid well, carefully planned.

A minute cannot open a wall built by years;
Nor can one word without music make a song.
You cannot make the man into the child once again,
Nor can today's right correct yesterday's wrong.

Though I dream of the day I can tear down the walls,
And I thank you for each moment you spend,
I still fear the pain I know waits inside
That I must feel again before I can mend.

So as you journey with me into where I have been,
Please realize that some of what I may do,
Will be the mask a part of me wears very well
And to that part of me . . . the enemy . . . is you.

So when I began to write a chapter for a proposed book on RISK, I asked Danny to read what I had written and critique. Among the words he wrote, in describing himself is "It is June 23, 1998 and I exist in a past and future that is now titled by the next 30 days. On July 23, 1998, I am scheduled to be executed. I ask only for those who read (or hear my words) to see them as my attempt to balance the coin on edge so that both sides may be seen, not as winner or lose, but as different parts of a whole." Danny was sentenced to death on June 18, 1991. Yet it was his then wife who was initially charged with the murder when taken into custody on October 15, 1990. At that time, Danny was without funds and requested appointment of counsel during an October 16 interrogation. The police told him that that could not be done until he was charged with a crime other than parole violation. Danny continued to request counsel but none was granted until he was indicted January 4, 1991. All requests he made for new trials, to proceed pro se, to have new counsel were denied and, in fact, the judge carried the case into retirement – into his garage. It was not until 1996 that he was allowed to present a petition for writ of habeas to the federal courts, I will not trouble you with the pro's and con's of Danny's sentence.

Suffice it so say, in my heart and mind, based on evidence, testimony, and knowing Danny, I believe that he walked to death as an innocent man. If anyone is interested, I would be glad to discuss his case with you after. I do believe that two other poems accurately express the plight of a survivor of trauma in trying to decide to share with us, in some way, the anguish they experienced in prior times:

Doctor Doctor

Do you understand how hard it is for me
To open the door I've placed inside?
Do you know the pain I've hidden there
Or the safe cherished places there I can hide?

Do you really see how much the conflict
Your words alone have made me feel?
Torn me between my hidden fears
And the hope that with you I can heal?

If I were now to show you the doorway,
What's the purpose for you when there?
Can you dry the child's tears I once shed alone
Or heal the scars that only I can bear?

Or do you seek just for personal wisdom
Or will you really care for what you find?
Will you see only another tool for advancement
In the guarded memories within my mind?

Can you see with eyes that are honest
The inner question that I must ask?
When all of the walls have at last fallen down
Will I truly welcome the finished task?

Shall my cure be a far greater burden
Than the one I now bear on my own?
For, when the battle is won, you will go home
And it is I who must continue alone.

Will I return to life of pain's shadow
I've confined there and hidden so well?
Will success be a light through the darkness
Or a victory that returns me to hell?

Whatever we do as professionals, caregivers, practitioners, our victory in healing is not to return anyone to a private or public hell. Danny had his own hell –being in death row for all those years, he was witness to 39 other executions. But Danny is only one of many survivors who have stories to tell.

What are some other words about trauma written by survivors:

Trauma is an invasion as audaciously affronting to the natural order of things as is possible; it does not happen casually. Trauma means I still do not feel safe outside, alone, but I am willing to go there.

Trauma makes sure that you have to learn to hold on to the simplest things. I have learned that a lot of what happened had nothing to do with me; I just happened to be there – as a symbol. It has taught me to keep my eyes open so long, to be on guard so much, that I can't rest. So I get wound up tighter and tighter that I blow up.

Trauma teaches you to be always look for and expecting the bad – the other shoe to drop. It teaches you to hold your breath – a lot.

Sometimes trauma screws you on such a level and it is all out of your control that you wonder, "Why the hell try." You learn not to hope and not to risk.

If I don't try to heal from the trauma I experienced, it means that secrecy still claims victory over me and has won. My whole "M.O." has been one of secrecy and it is the therapist who recognizes and honors that M.O. so that I begin to open up.

In a broad, fundamental, almost psychic caveman sense, the most damaging, strongest, hardest fact of trauma to shake is that secrecy and the stigma that is put on the victim. This need for secrecy is taught and imposed by the perpetrator, and conditioned into and brainwashed into the victim until he/she learns to impose it on the self. Thus, the torture comes both from without and from within (Karen). This secrecy becomes both friend and foe, though, ultimately, it is the foe, necessary at times even for personal growth. Therapy honors the power of the secrecy. But I hate that because I hate that it gets any honor since it was born out of dishonor and twistedness. Yet society insists on it. (She has been unable to share a paper about her miscarriage with her aunt because, in that paper, is the story of her molestation by her father. Her father and she have begun to reestablish a very healthy relationship based on his true grief and remorse. However, both she and he realize that, if she passes the paper on, his own family relationships will be forever changed and, with it, so will be the way that everyone – aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—view her. Victim again).

In view of this, who is due privacy and secrecy? Is it a perpetrator about to be released from jail? An incest –perpetrating father who confides his crimes to a therapist and then the therapist honors his telling by keeping silent? Or is it the victim/child willing to talk? The price of breaking secrecy can be high – a loss of privacy, a loss of connection, and, at times, the weighing of loss versus gain keeps the survivor in her place.

The following words of survivors describe what it is like to live in the world of abuse and molestation. Both are survivors of sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators. Their

words help us understand their private hells and what it is for them to share with outsiders in any capacity.

Sandra Heidel, who asked to be named so that she can be quoted later, if anyone wants to use her words, writes that:

Don't be fooled when you see my face, for I am a master of wearing many masks, depending on whom I'm with. I've done this all my life, so to you, I would appear OK without a worry. Please don't be fooled by me! The confidence you see is only to fool you and the rest of the world so I appear as if I need no one. Behind my mask you would see fear, loneliness, weakness, shame, and guilt and the real secret a child dressed as an adult to fool you. I panic that you may find out who I really am so I continue to pretend.

I have also built so many solid brick walls to keep people away, but, in reality, I cry because I long for someone to help, to extend an open hand, but I know that the very hand I want I would probably push away. . . I pray that someone would love me enough to try to break through those brick walls (but I would be . . .) afraid that when you saw the real me, you would push me away and reject me as I always have been. , the child inside is starving for affection but, because of fear, we cannot take that risk of taking off our mask, so our life continues as it always has. , , , Will you listen and hear what is between the lines – my life depends on it. I am getting tired of hiding. . . I need your help! , , , The closer you get to know me, I may strike back. I fight against the thing I cry out for. Please remember the child within as you try to set me free.

The final description of what it is like to be a trauma survivor is my a young woman with DID – dissociative identity disorder – and approximately 60 different selves, parts, alters, whatever they chose to be called. She writes:

Who am I? I don't know. Others think they know, but they don't. Lies, all lies. How are you? Fine. It's acceptable, but not true. How I would love to say awful – I am very depressed and have given up on life. Most people could care less. If I truly said how I am, I would no longer be seen as people "see me." I would either be treated with kid gloves, committed, or avoided like the plague.. . magically transformed into a beast unfamiliar to them. Yet I am still the same person before and after. . . the truth does not always "set you free" and can trap me further into myself and I get so lost I forgot who I am.

Who am I? Hide, hide, hide. The truth? No way. "How did you get those scars?" Accident? "car?" Yes, Yeh, Right. 90 degrees – long sleeves. 95 degrees. Long pants. I look odd in warm clothes but I look even more odd with scars. Which one is more acceptable, guess? Somehow, what (most) people don't know is best. "You cut yourself on purpose? Are you crazy?" No, just can't handle life. You drink, I cut. It's not much different. But it is. Self-mutilation is shame, shame, shame. How to escape? Escape. That's what started the shame. Escape. Cut. It's all about the same to me. Me? Who am I? . . . I am 12, 3, 7, 19. That's me, at any given time. . . I am someone who is scare—alone. I need people, but people scare me and I scare them. How to connect? Lies. Shame. . . Jesus – the ultimate love. Love? Am I that unloveable that Jesus cannot accept me? Is that who I am? Rejected by God? Probably more perception than

reality, but perception is everything. How I see myself? Self? Shame, Fear. Escape. Who am I?

What are some Lessons that others have learned:

At any given moment, someone somewhere is going to disapprove of you – you will piss people off, without even trying, without knowing.

The price you pay for healing is no dearer than the price you pay for staying stuck in a victim mask. It is a clearer, cleaner exacting of a tariff than the unspoken blackmail that victims are always paying to the people who use them.

Exposure to all the traumas has given (me) an incredible, unbelievable survival and growth instinct, a lot of compassion to others (even if I can't show it).

My experience with trauma has taught me that you can't map out your life; you only think you can. All you can do is be flexible; inflexibility (not control) sets you up for failure because control is a fantasy.

No one gets through trauma untouched.

Anyone can handle the “moment” of crisis – it's the day to day living afterwards that's the real hell.

Trauma teaches you to be careful, careful, careful.

So, in the light of all of these words, what is healing and what does healing mean to survivors:

Healing is an absence of fear. It is being reborn, a new beginning.

Healing is giving yourself permission to live.

Healing is a journey to the light.

Healing means I am defined by what I do now or do not do and who I am now; it is not being defined by what somebody else did or did not do to me. Healing is allowing yourself the possibility of joy in your life.

Healing is waking up one day and choosing life.

Healing is being prepared for future adversity so you can roll with the punches.

Healing is learning to use the three most necessary bones in your body – your wishbone, your funny bone, and your backbone.

Perhaps Joan says it best.

Lessons learned from Trauma – I could list things like

Keep your house locked

Buy a guard dog

Check the backseat of your car before you ever open the door.

Avoid books and movies that might trigger you. But I don't think this is what you're looking for (she wrote to me).

Trauma. I've learned that, although the memories never go away, they do a "step down thing." First, the flashbacks are so real, the pictures in your head can raise your blood pressure and make your heart pound in your ears. The more you talk about particular instances, the sooner the flashbacks become thoughts, and then the thoughts become dreams left somewhere in the unconscious state of sleep. It's strange to wake up and think, "Damn, I just got a handle on this."

The words "trauma" and "victim" go together in my mind. Because of this connection, I have always struggled with being the ultimate victim. It has become so debilitating that, at times, I have been afraid to get the daily mail, won't answer the phone unless I know who is calling, jump at loud noises, and need a clear shower curtain. People who have never experienced trauma don't have a clue. It is very important NOT to take their advice. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps, keep busy, forget it, it's the past. You need someone to help you who acknowledges your trauma and your responses as real. If you are seeing a therapist and don't look forward to your appointment, you're at the wrong place.

(As Sandra said, too), people with PTSD become good actors. You learn to fool everyone; you learn to hide your pain and confusion from everyone; you watch your friends closely to see to whom you can confide and whom you cannot trust. People will get tired of you and your problems and slowly drift away; even close family members may abandon you. Use your energy to continue your healing, not to try to explain to persons who will never "get it." . . . So, seek and Ye shall find. And the children of God said "AMEN."

To conclude, I want to give testimony to one final trauma survivor. I will simply call him Bear. Bear was a Lakota (a Sioux) a Shaman. The traumas he experienced gave him an incredible depth – the gift of sight, a different perspective on life, the ability to see past the petty consequences of life's little mistakes. He survived many things: the death of his parents before age 4, enduring repeated foster homes in which he was abused and eventually molested between ages 7 and 8, He did several tours in Vietnam and then was at Wounded Knee in 1973. He wanted to help make a statement about the genocide of his people. The legacy of trauma and the lesson that Bear leaves us with is to accept what happened in the past and its consequences, recognize that trauma will constantly "grab you," but make the decision to keep going. Bear even endured Agent Orange related throat and face cancer. In the early morning hours of December 17, 2000, he sat up in bed and said to his wife, "Mary, I'm dying." She made a 911 – 911 call to us and we were there 45 minutes later, on icy roads. Bear had passed. We put the eagle feathers on his chest and sat by him, waiting for the funeral home staff to come. Bear made noise in many lives. He died with dignity, fighting to the end. His courage is the spirit of the trauma survivor. And to that spirit, we all owe our respect and admiration.

Where does this leave us? I would like to think that it leads to my own personal alphabet of what survivors need.

Dr. Mary Beth Williams is in private practice in Warrenton, VA. She has authored 6 texts for professionals and survivors concerning treatment of PTSD. She is in the process of writing a workbook for survivors who are dealing with PTSD symptoms for New Harbinger Press. Dr. Williams is also a school social worker in Falls Church

Virginia. She is the past president of the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists and a former board member of ISTSS.

NOTE: Mary Beth Williams is in our video “When Helping Hurts: Sustaining Trauma Workers.” Her books are also available in our A-V resources list.

["Creating a Comprehensive Trauma Center : Choices and Challenges."](#) (Plenum Series on Stress and Coping). Mary Beth Williams (Editor), Lasse A. Nurmi (Editor) (Hardcover). \$90.00.

["Handbook of Posttraumatic Therapy."](#) Edited by Mary Beth Williams, Ph.D, L.C.S.W., and John F. Sommer Jr. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994. \$140.00.

["Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing."](#) Dena Rosenbloom, PhD, and Mary Beth Williams, PhD, Guilford Press. List Price: \$18.95, Amazon's Price: \$15.16, You Save: \$3.79 (20%).

["When a Community Weeps : Case Studies in Group Survivorship \(Series in Trauma and Loss\)."](#) Ellen S. Zinner (Editor), Mary Beth Williams (Editor). \$44.95.

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