
Hope and Despair in Narrative and Family Therapy

Adversity, forgiveness and
reconciliation

Edited by Carmel Flaskas,
Imelda McCarthy and
Jim Sheehan

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Chapter 5

Despair, resistance, hope: response-based therapy with victims of violence

Allan Wade

Introduction

Eric Blair (George Orwell) (Orwell 1937) made several trips to visit coal mining families in northern England in preparation for *The Road to Wigan Pier*. From his seat on the train ride home after one of those trips he observed a young woman in her back yard, trying to free a clogged drainpipe:

She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore . . . the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that 'It isn't the same for them as it would be for us', and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.

(Orwell 1937: 15)

This passage marks an important shift in Orwell's perspective on themes that recur throughout his essays and political fiction – how oppression works on the individual and how the individual responds. It also points to a distinction between contrasting views of 'the oppressed': a determinist or 'effects-based' view in which oppression is presumed to condition the mind of the individual to the point that she acts as an accomplice in the oppression she endures, and a 'response-based' view in which the individual responds to and resists subjugation, overtly and covertly, through myriad psychological and social tactics woven into the fabric of daily life. It is the latter view applied to the practice of therapy that I describe briefly in this chapter, primarily through two case examples.

Orwell (1937: 15) sees that the 'desolate, hopeless expression' of the slum girl points not to 'ignorant suffering', which is commonly imputed to

individuals who face poverty or oppression, but to its polar opposite, her direct comprehension of the conditions that oppress her. The despair she conveys cannot be construed accurately as an *effect* or *impact* of those conditions but must be viewed as a *directional response* that signals her *orientation* to those conditions *as adverse*. Struck by this realization, Orwell puts the lie to two myths that provide the middle and upper classes with a sense of invulnerability and prop up the smug condescension with which they regard the oppressed – that ‘it isn’t the same for them as it would be for us’ and that ‘people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums’.

Interpreted more broadly, the passage reflects Orwell’s concern with questions that preoccupied him from the age of 8, when the headmistress of St Cyprian’s school publicly humiliated him for wetting his bed, until his death just after completing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ (1952), the sardonically titled essay about his school experiences that he found so painful to write (Shelden 1991). Faced with isolation, surveillance, strict regulation and vicious retribution for any form of self-assertion or dissent, how does an individual build up a psychological barrier between himself and his tormentors behind which he can manufacture some sense of safety, autonomy and self-worth? When open defiance is too dangerous, how do victims express their indignation and act upon their desire for justice? What strategies do the architects of repression use to establish secrecy, enforce conformity and eliminate dissent? More specifically, how do they use language to represent their actions as beneficial and just?

Resistances as acts of hope in the face of desperate times

Orwell (1946: 187) addressed these questions not on the level of ideological debate, which too easily descends into a contest of abstractions, but through the ‘window pane’ of lucid prose. He spoke convincingly to his contemporaries living under Stalin because he exposed in fine detail both the mechanics of totalitarianism where it meets the individual and the individual’s overt and covert responses. When open defiance is impractical or too dangerous, resistance is expressed indirectly and on the micro-level of social interaction. For Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps resistance consisted in part of living in accordance with the ‘ordinary virtues’: the maintenance of dignity, care for others, respect for moral standards and the love of aesthetic pleasure (Todorov 1990). For Aboriginal children who were imprisoned and subjected to physical, sexualized and psychological torture in residential schools, resistance consisted in part of protecting one another, escaping the terror of abuse by mentally leaving the scene, stealing food, retaining connections with family and culture and contesting the authority of their abusers whenever possible (Fournier and Crey 1997).

Milosz ([1951] 1990: 54) observed that, under Stalin, ordinary relationships took on the form of acting:

Such acting is a highly developed craft that places a premium upon mental alertness. Before it leaves the lips, every word must be evaluated as to its consequences. A smile that appears at the wrong moment, a glance that is not all it should be can occasion dangerous suspicions and accusations. Even one's gestures, tone of voice, or preference for certain kinds of neckties are interpreted as signs of one's political tendencies.

The alertness to situational detail that effective acting requires can be exhausting, but if relaxed can result in exposure and disastrous consequences. To obtain a 'sense of relief' from this constant vigilance and to ensure that 'the proper reflexes at the proper moment become truly automatic', the individual may find it necessary to 'identify . . . with the role [he] is obliged to play' (Milosz [1951] 1990: 55).

But acting has its limits. Self-respect and dignity depend in part on the individual's ability to maintain 'coherence between internal standards and external behaviour' (Todorov 1990: 69). In some circumstances the gap between what is psychologically true for the individual and what he is able to practise outwardly can grow to massive proportions. Resistance may then take the form of eccentric or apparently self-destructive behaviour. Nerzin, one of the political prisoners in Solzhenitsyn's novel *The First Circle* (1968), rejected his comparatively privileged status and refused a job that would have led to his early release because, he asserted, 'a healthy plebeian attitude is . . . the only worthy basis for a relation to human beings and their community' (Lukacs 1969: 62-3).

Some Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps committed suicide as a final act of self-determination, to deny the Nazis the absolute control they desired (Todorov 1990). Others sang songs on their way to the gas chamber or entered prior to their appointed time to accompany loved ones. Knowing that they would be brutally beaten, many Aboriginal children challenged the authority of the school supervisors. One woman reported that at age 8 she was strapped until her hands bled onto the floor and still refused to cry. She asserted, 'I would never give them that' (Wade 2000: 67). Gomes (2004: 31) described a young woman who for a period of time engaged in self-harm as a form of resistance to sexualized abuse. She remarked, 'If I had not been cutting, I probably would have died a long time ago.' To romanticize these acts would be to overlook the pain and desperation from which they arise. And yet to judge them self-destructive or merely eccentric would be to miss their meaning entirely: it is through these acts that we glimpse 'the inextinguishable inner activity of a humanity defending itself' (Lukacs 1969: 60).

Bell hooks (1990: 341) argued that it is important to locate resistance on the margins and *in* the experience of despair because marginalized people are widely represented as submissive by writers who would reduce their complex responses to a single, apolitical dimension – individual pain:

Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost.

(hooks 1990: 342)

Despair both embodies and engenders resistance (Adams 2005) while it affirms the insatiable desire for freedom and dignity. What a person *despairs against* points to what she *hopes for* (Reynolds 2001).

Sociopolitical violence committed in the context of totalitarianism cannot be equated with personalized violence such as sexualized assault and abuse, wife-assault, physical assault, verbal abuse or workplace harassment: the structural differences between the two cases are simply too pronounced (Scott 1990). One essential similarity, however, is that both types of violence rely on misrepresentation. In personalized violence misrepresentation has less to do with *doublespeak*, an orchestrated campaign of propaganda complete with its own neologisms, prohibited terminology and odd grammar, than it does with *oldspeak*, the habitual use of obsolete terms, vague grammar and stale metaphors that (a) conceal violence, (b) mitigate perpetrators' responsibility, (c) conceal victims' responses and resistance and (d) blame or pathologize victims (Todd and Wade 2003; Coates and Wade 2004).

The linguistic devices that locally accomplish these discursive operations feature prominently in courtrooms, psychotherapy literature and journalism (Coates *et al.* 2000; Todd and Wade 2003; Coates and Wade 2004). Although violent acts are unilateral in nature, they are often represented as mutual or even erotic acts: rape is referred to as 'unwanted sex' and wife-assault as 'an argument' or a 'domestic dispute' (Coates 1996). Although violence is deliberate, as evinced by perpetrators' strategic efforts to suppress victims' resistance, it is widely represented as an effect of social, biological or psychological forces that overwhelm the perpetrator and compel him to perform violent acts (O'Neill and Morgan 2001; Coates and Wade 2004). Although victims invariably respond to and resist violence (Kelly 1988; hooks 1990; Scott 1990; Burstow 1992; Wade 1997, 2000), therapy is typically conceptualized as a process of treating effects or impacts. And while resistance is ubiquitous, victims are widely represented as perpetrators of their own misfortunes (e.g. Engel 1990; Herman 1997).

Language and ideology

Oldspeak is so deeply embedded as the stock discourse on violence that it does not require an ideological commitment from its users. Rather, failure to speak in its terms amounts to a kind of deviant behaviour that is easily dismissed as zealous or ideological. The ubiquity of *oldspeak* means that beyond the violence itself victims are confronted with accounts that radically distort the facts, including their own physical, emotional, mental and spiritual responses. Still, they may have little choice but to use that language if they want to be treated as credible and provided with the necessary institutional support. I recently worked for a woman who was assaulted by her husband and then labelled uncooperative by the police, who refused to return her phone calls. When the attending officer asked, 'So, how long have you been having marriage problems?' her offence was to reply, 'Why are you asking about my marriage? This isn't a marriage problem, it's an assault'. For perpetrators *oldspeak* provides a handy social resource, a common parlance with legal and human service professionals that already obscures their responsibility and limits their exposure to negative consequences.

The language of effects in the dimming of hopefilled accounts

Especially important is that victims' responses are widely represented as effects. The language of effects is a highly interpretive repertoire that conceals victims' responses and resistance and represents victims as submissive. Indeed, what transforms responses and resistance into problems, and problems into symptoms, is precisely their representation as effects. To address this problem, Linda Coates, Nick Todd and I have been working on a 'response-based' approach to therapeutic interviewing which has required the development of specific interviewing practices and the modification of practices developed in the brief, systemic, solution-focused, narrative and feminist approaches. We focus not on treating effects but on elucidating individuals' physical, emotional, mental and spiritual responses to specific acts of violence and other forms of oppression and adversity. Certain responses – often the very problem itself – become intelligible as forms of resistance that point to 'symptoms of chronic mental wellness'. The examples of James and Nan provide a brief illustration.

Case examples: engendering hope through response-based interviewing

James

James (32) was referred for therapy three months after a group of young men assaulted him outside his home. One man 'sucker punched' him (i.e. punched him in the head from the side without warning). Then they all kicked him repeatedly in the body and head while he lay unconscious on the ground. James's mother Rita (55) witnessed the assault and ran to the door, yelling that she had called the police. James was hospitalized with concussion, bruised ribs and numerous cuts and bruises. Three of the youths were arrested and charged with assault, while two remained at large.

James was sleeping poorly, waking with nightmares, experiencing 'lots of anxiety' and 'panic attacks', and occasionally missing work. He had been living like a 'shut-in' because he was not interested in seeing friends and felt 'afraid to go out at night'. He had become increasingly isolated, 'testy' and 'impatient'. This put a strain on his relationship with Sarah (30), his girlfriend of several years. James stressed that he loved Sarah 'very much' but could not expect her to wait for him to get his life together. He said, 'I just can't commit. She wants to get married and have a family. But I just can't. I don't know what it is. I'm just not sure I'm ready for that. Maybe you can help me figure that out.' I made a mental note of the notion that James 'could not commit' and planned to return to the subject later in the interview after gathering more information.

I then asked James a few questions about his family, to get a better sense of his circumstances. James said that he was very close to his mother and his brother Bill (28). His parents separated when he was 8, after which he rarely saw his father. James said he 'went through a lot' in his childhood and disclosed that at 8 and 9 he was periodically sexually abused by his uncle. I remarked that James had not mentioned this as his reason for coming to counselling. He replied, 'Aw, what the hell, I've got to deal with this some time.' I then asked him to tell me a bit more about the timing and nature of the abuse, in general terms.

As James began to describe the first assault (when his uncle trapped him on the couch and forced him to put his hand on his – the uncle's – genitals), I asked him a three-part question about how he had responded at the time: 'When he tried to trap you and force you to touch him, how

did you respond? You know, what did you do?' The first part of this question refers to the specific interaction and the uncle's actions in particular. The second part (i.e. 'how did you respond?') presupposes that James did indeed respond immediately and shifts the focus to those responses as the key topic. (McGee 1999). The third part, a tag question (i.e. 'what did you do?'), clarifies the word 'responses' by asking James to describe his overt behaviour.

With some additional questions (e.g., How did you do that? Then what happened? What else did you do?), James detailed many responses that I felt were clearly intelligible as forms of resistance: he felt uncomfortable, moved to the end of the couch, tried to get up, squirmed and wiggled to get away, said 'what are you doing' and 'don't', pulled his hand back, felt disgusted, refused to move his hand as instructed and averted his eyes. I then asked James how he changed his relationship with his uncle after the first assault. James said that he avoided his uncle, threatened to tell his mum and complained bitterly when his mother suggested that his uncle baby-sit. I asked if the uncle had also abused Bill. To this James replied, 'No way. I never let that bastard near Bill. I think I would have fucking killed him.' James described a number of ways in which he protected his younger brother, during and after the abuse.

I then recast a number of the responses James had described as forms of resistance through a *connective* question: 'Well . . . you know . . . it's clear that you resisted the abuse from your uncle in many ways, right from the beginning, even though you couldn't make it stop. Have there been other times when you've had to resist in this kind of way, or protect others?' James thought about this for a moment and then described how he had protected his mother once, when a boyfriend assaulted her. He also talked about his relationship with his brother in their teens. He admitted that he used to beat his brother up, badly. He said, 'You know, I never thought of it before. But I think what I was trying to do was keep him in line. I know that sounds stupid, but he was into some really strange shit. And it drove mum nuts. She used to call my uncle over (the same uncle) to straighten Bill out. He [Bill] hated me for a long time.' He then talked about how he had since taken responsibility for mistreating Bill and enjoyed a strong, respectful relationship with him.

I then felt as though I had enough information to return to the topic of James' apparent 'inability to commit' to Sarah. I asked, 'James, this might sound like a strange question, but have you ever worried that, because you were sexually abused as a child, you would be likely to

abuse others?' At this, James started crying quietly. He said, 'Well, yeah. Isn't that right?' I explained that this was a popular myth that was not supported by careful research, nor likely given the nature of his conduct. 'It's pretty clear that you have resisted violence of every kind since you were little. We can see that in the way you resisted your uncle's violence, in the way you protected your brother and then took responsibility for hurting him, and in the way you protected your mum from violence. We can also see that by the fact that you have refused to commit yourself to Sarah because you have been quietly terrified that you might abuse your future children.' James cried heavily as we sat for a few moments without speaking.

I went on, 'If you were really a risk to abuse children, you would be only too eager to marry Sarah and have children that you could then exploit. And you probably wouldn't be telling a perfect stranger about your plans, would you? You know, if you suspected that you might be a risk to abuse children and then went ahead and married Sarah anyway, and had children with her, that would be a very serious problem, would it not? I think you have shown extraordinary commitment to Sarah: you have put your commitment to not abusing anyone before your desire to make a life with her. Really, what more profound commitment could you make to Sarah?' James was surprised at this perspective, and greatly relieved. We talked about what differences he might notice as a result of being more closely in touch with his own history of resistance and, in particular, the nature of his commitment to Sarah.

Two weeks later James brought Sarah to our scheduled appointment and reported a number of positive changes. He was working steadily, getting out and visiting with friends, had no further anxiety or panic attacks and had testified effectively in court. He and Sarah had been talking about setting a wedding date. 'It's strange,' he said, 'I don't really feel angry about the whole thing. I just want them to get some help so they don't hurt anyone else.'

Nan

Nan (48) came in because she was 'losing it all the time' and 'feeling really depressed'. Nan's husband Bob (52) had secretly made some bad financial decisions. He blamed Nan for their losses and pressured her to make more money. This was part of a broader pattern of emotionally

abusive behaviour. I asked Nan how she had responded to Bob's pressure and accusations. She replied, 'That's what I mean. I don't do anything. I'm just such a cling-on.' By 'cling-on', Nan meant that she just could not 'let go', that she was 'dependent' and held on to 'dysfunctional relationships'. She said she was repeating a pattern that had been laid down by the women in her family.

I asked Nan to give me an example of being a 'cling-on'. She described how she had been physically assaulted by her first male partner, Chuck. One night Chuck became aggressive and punched Nan several times on the head and torso. Nan protected herself, yelled at him to stop, tried to keep him away with her feet, and finally found cover under their bed. Chuck gave up and fell asleep on the couch in the next room. Nan eventually crept out from under the bed, saw Chuck on the couch and went to sleep. The next morning Chuck was gone and had taken all his clothes. Nan could not find him but soon learned that he had returned to Amsterdam, his home town. Nan boarded the next available flight. 'Can you believe it,' she said incredulously, 'I followed him! How stupid can you be? I might as well wear a "hit me please" sign on my forehead.' I noted Nan's resistance to the assault but this did little to address her assertion that she was a 'cling-on'. Even if she resisted the assault, she still followed Chuck to Amsterdam.

It seemed to me that the phrase 'cling-on' encapsulated an effects-based interpretation of Nan's conduct, according to which Nan was conditioned to accept abuse and cling to abusive men. Moreover, this view was supported by a previous therapist and confirmed what her husband Bob had been saying for some time, that she was 'messed up' and needed to get her 'head on straight'. Although Nan had resisted Chuck's and Bob's abusive behaviour, she seemed to doubt her own instincts and ability to parent Tom (13). I felt that the label 'cling-on' distorted Nan's prudent responses and resistance to various forms of abuse and adversity. However, I could not immediately grasp how being a 'cling-on' might comprise a form of resistance because I had not yet obtained the necessary situational detail.

Later in the interview Nan mentioned that her boss was sometimes 'a big bully'. I asked how Nan responded to his bullying and learned that she sometimes followed him around the office, pestering him with trivial questions. She smiled as she said, 'Oh, yeah, he hates that.' This account suggested another perspective from which to view Nan's trip to Amsterdam. I asked Nan what had happened in Amsterdam after she

found Chuck. 'Oh,' she said, 'we got back together but it only lasted three months.' She added casually, 'Then I left him.'

I had the sense that Nan had flown to Amsterdam less to be with Chuck than to retrieve her dignity. As this view differed sharply from the view Nan initially presented, I wanted to give her the chance to evaluate its suitability somewhat at a distance and so proposed it through an invented scenario. 'Can I ask you something? Imagine you and I are looking out of my office window. Across the street we see a young man and woman, yelling. Suddenly, the man punches the woman in the face. She hits the ground hard and sits there for a moment, stunned. Then he stomps off down the road. The woman gets up and runs after him, yelling at him to stop. Why? What is she after?' Nan thought for a moment and said, 'She can't let him just walk away like that.' 'Why not?' I asked. 'Well,' she said, 'she can't let him get away with that.' I then proposed, 'Could it be that you went to Amsterdam for the same reason? When Chuck hit you and then left, he took something important from you – your dignity as a person.' Nan overlapped, 'Yeah, my self-respect.' We smiled and nodded. I then went on, 'Could it be that you went to Amsterdam to get it back? And once you did, you no longer found it necessary to be with him?'

Nan then began to cry. She said, 'My God, I never thought of it like that. It feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders.' I continued, 'I agree that you're a cling-on. It seems that you cling to your self-respect for dear life – not to violent men. Also, from what you've told me, it seems like this condition is chronic. I'm pretty sure I won't be able to help you get over it.' I then asked a connective question: 'Have there been other times when you've had to preserve or reclaim your self-respect in this kind of way?' Nan went on to describe a number of related ways in which she had preserved her dignity and resisted disrespectful and abusive behaviour. We met five more times over a period of several months. Nan decided to stay with Bob for the time being as she did not want to traumatize Tom, who was very close to Bob. The important thing, she said, was that she knew she was 'not crazy'. Nan continued to assert herself more confidently in a manner that preserved her own and Tom's safety, while she planned her escape.

Conclusion

While violence cannot be reduced to a problem of language, neither can it be effectively addressed without accurate accounts of perpetrators' and victims' actions in specific instances. In legal and therapeutic settings language is often used in a manner that obscures the unilateral and deliberate nature of violent acts. Victims are widely represented as objects in a language of effects that conceals their responses and resistance to violence and other forms of adversity. As participants in this shared language, James and Nan initially presented their concerns as effects. The attributions 'I can't commit' and 'I'm a cling-on' presumed that they had submitted to violence and, in the process, had acquired lasting psychological problems (i.e. effects) that diminished their ability to address current difficulties.

But language is flexible and can be put to more judicious use, as Orwell's writing attests. The new and more accurate response-based accounts revealed that James resisted sexualized abuse and other forms of violence in childhood and, as an adult, devoted himself to a life of safety, respect and partnership with Sarah. Nan refused to adopt a submissive role in relation to men, even as a child, and later resisted physical and psychological abuse by two male partners. Like the girl in the slums, the despair James and Nan felt reflected their orientation to their circumstances as adverse. Response-based counselling does not replace collective efforts to address violence or other social problems but affirms individuals' despairing and hopeful responses as eminently practical forms of social action and expressions of human dignity.

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