From Performing Repair to Performing Reverence

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Dancers: Monique Giard and Paul–André Fortier in “Erosiak” (1979)

What is it to be repaired?
My family story left a hole in my being, a feeling of emptiness, an absence.
This hole I filled with a passion for dancing, with a longing for something I did not know how to recognize or ask for—love.

Dance has been a significant part of my life since childhood. During my adolescent years, I danced my becoming a woman with my friends and choreographers.

“Erosiak,” choreographed by Paul Lapointe, offered me the opportunity, for instance, to become aware of my changing physical body, and with it came an emergent longing to become more private.

I did not want to perform “Erosiak” but I did not have a voice to express my refusal. Beautiful and obedient, I performed an erotic encounter without my inner approval.

J’ai fait c’qu’on m’a dit de faire!

For an audience, for their pleasure and entertainment, and at a high emotional cost, I danced and lost a part of myself. I lost my authenticity. I wanted to keep my body sacred, untouched, unseen and did not voice that.

Only in my later years did I become aware that my silenced voice was a result of early childhood incest and sexual abuse by a neighbour.

My unspoken refusal to perform was my attempt to reclaim my virginity, my innocence.

Performing Repair 2: One Day in the Attic Bernice Had a Dream (1990)

The morning after my solo evening performance of “One Day in the Attic Bernice Had a Dream” I read a dance review that made explicit to the readers “the story of a young woman reliving and confronting her brutal past.” At the time, even though I was the choreographer, I was unaware that, unconsciously, I had been expressing within the dance my family incest story. Despite the review, I remained ignorant that the dance was my story.

Review written by Marc Berezowsky and published in Calgary in 1990.

La Compagnie de Danse Monique Giard presented “One Day in the Attic Bernice Had a Dream.” This collaboration between poet/performer Terry Crane, choreographer/performer Monique Giard and composer/musician Philip Djwa, dealt with sexual abuse and psychological abuse. The Vancouver artists brought the sold out audience a vivid, optimistic story of a young woman reliving and confronting her brutal past.

Beginning with a light, simple movement phrase punctuated by arabesques and short runs, Giard created a youthful character free to move, but confined in an attic space of old pictures of Christ. As she danced, the Acid Clown, performed by Crane, spewed malicious poetry and illustrated his control over her by blowing the Acid Clown, seen in a green spotlight, serpentinied his hands through the air, seeming to touch nothing, yet manipulating the helpless Giard on the other side of the stage, while Djwa, played off-key carnival tune. In the background, the voice of a child singing and a young woman graphically telling the incident filled out the emotionally packed scene. This complex layering of elements was missing in the rest of the piece, but still retained its intentions and purpose through the convincing acting and smooth transitions of the three performers. Djwa was especially skilled in playing music which conveyed the shifting moods and scenes, from the pathetic to the spiritual.

I have witnessed the collaborations of Giard and Crane develop with each outing. This one was no exception, showing
her like a feather around the attic. In the most powerful scene the sexual abuse of her past is dramatically shown to the audience in a precise mesh of dialogue, dance and music.

The dance enacted the testimony of a woman who had been sexually abused and was living with an imaginary friend, an Acid-clown who manipulated her, daring her to take risks and live dangerously. The dance was in fact my life, and yet I did not recognize or realize it.

This performance helped me to begin to approach the possibility of healing sexual abuse through performance, although, I was at the time operating at an unconscious level. By dancing my childhood trauma, by making it a social and presentable event, by having this incomprehensible father-daughter sexual relation accepted by an audience, this event became a danceable moment, thus controllable and sane. I was not crazy after all.

By dancing my family story of incest I was staying alive and reclaiming a body that had been sexually abused. By performing my story, I was justifying my confusion and clearing myself, partially, at least, of shame and guilt for a fault of which I was in fact innocent. Performing incest was repairing that childhood event and transforming its social representation. By having an audience accept my disclosure, I was winning a battle against my aggressors, unconsciously.

La fantaisie constitue la ressource interne la plus précieuse de la résilience.  
—Cyrulnik, 2001, 164[1]

Performing Repair 3: An Embodied Theory of Remembering

It is socially so important to keep our stories clean and acceptable that even within psychiatric institutions, many professionals are reticent or simply do not want to hear the disclosure of horrific unimaginable testimonies. Most often family members don’t want to hear about incest. Overcoming social denial of child incest and sexual abuse within families challenges the norm that society has constructed.

In the 1970’s, when mothers, spouses, young female adults and women professionals started to address issues of incest and sexual abuse, two reactions followed: denial and curiosity. Through research focused on the impact of remembering past events, i.e. repressed memories, particularly around the issues of sexual abuse, a new theory on trauma based on neurological biological evidence was born: Its key premise is that if an individual is not well today, physically or mentally, it is because past traumatic events have not been adequately addressed.

We know today from the neurobiological research of Candice Pert[2] that memories are linked to emotions and that we remember our relational experiences more than actions and events. We remember our connections to or absence of liaison with people. According to Pert, as we learn to speak, we learn to connect and as we connect with people, we energize our neuro-peptides that embody emotional memory and feelings. If we do not connect due to negative experiences, this vital energy changes and the neuro-transmission is blocked, frozen. For a sexual abuse survivor, relationships are challenging, particularly intimate ones, because the neuro-peptides are frozen, thereby blocking access to the memories of the abuse.

Sometimes the blockages will provoke a person to unconsciously push through with rage, or respond in anger outbursts coupled with a desire to fight. Sometimes, for some
individuals, fleeing will reduce the tension manufactured by these energy blockages. In psychology, these neuro-peptides responses have been named as Freeze, Fight, or Flight Responses, referring to the possible actions of responses by individuals to traumatic experience and/or abuse. When the response of Freeze, Fight, or Flight is activated, the survivor is at risk of being retraumatized when talking about their experience. Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, renowned psychotherapist in the area of trauma, explains in a graphic how the brain organizes trauma (See Appendix 1).

For many years I was incapable of speaking about my early childhood experience. The sexual abuse I had experienced was not even in my consciousness. My concept of affectivity or being connected to a loved one was altered by my physical experiences without verbal interpretations or meaning. Without the words, without the verbal expression and articulation of what was happening in my childhood, the unhealthy experience increased my angst, which “froze” my brain i.e. my ability to consciously articulate my experience.

“La perte de la parole modifie la représentation du monde.”[3]
—Cyrulnik, 1999:167

Affectivity is the first useful outcome of speaking and connecting through sensory clues. It may be a positive affectivity or a negative one and both have an energetic charge that is set in the brain. This energetic charge is organized in the brain through the thalamus, remembering the sensations, and then transmitted to the amygdale, which remembers its emotional significance.

In a moment of inappropriate touch, and because I was not developmentally ready to understand the experience, my sensory clues gave me a mistaken understanding of love. Love became somewhat associated with fear, angst, coldness, indifference, guilt or negative affectivity. Complete with its narrative, the absence of words, and the context in which it is silenced, energetically, with its sensory clues, incest is an experience of negative affectivity.

A physical experience of tenderness with fatherly words of love would have given me a positive experience of affectivity, or the ability to connect with people with care, warmth and empathy. As parents, we have a responsibility to provide as many positive experiences as possible, which are the foundation of children’s well-being. Through dancing and speaking about incest in my later years, combined with years of counselling, I experienced the transformation from being trapped in a frozen state of being, to a sense of connecting and belonging with warmth and empathy.
Performing Repair 3: A Performative Inquiry – The Urban Native Youth Performance Project (2003-4)

“One Day in the Attic Bernice Had a Dream” had been a creative expression of a trauma not yet present in my consciousness. When my older sister Louise revealed her incest story to me in 1993 through letters and phone calls from Boucherville, Québec, where she was living, I finally got it. I was now ready to accept the possibility of having been a victim of child incest and sexual abuse. It was not my imagination. I slowly put the pieces together and searched for help from professionals. As healing progressed with a number of therapies and taking courses with different teachers and professionals in the field, images and memories of the abuse surfaced. My dancing stopped. I could no longer perform or dance. And later, my dancer-self died with the death by suicide of my sister in 1994.

In 1998, four years after the death of my sister, I sought to understand my family dynamics and the impact of childhood sexual abuse on myself, youth and young adults. I first completed a three-year program at the Counsellor Training Institute now renamed the Vancouver College of Counsellor Training. I then completed a Master of Art in Education in curriculum and instruction. A wonderful community of fellow doctoral students and professors introduced me to moving through memories, learning from enactment and transforming through improvising our experiences. I met Lois Holzman, director of East Side Institute and author of “Performing Psychology.” Together, we discussed the co-creation of new forms of life, new meanings. Performance is the “human capacity to transform ourselves, sometimes in a matter of seconds, into who we are not.” (Holzman, 1999, 67)
For my doctoral studies, concerned by the high rate of suicide amongst youth, I designed a performative inquiry project with urban native youth in Vancouver. Through the making of two short videos, fifteen Aboriginal youth performed their stories of discrimination and racist bullying, which they then presented in schools and educational settings. Through this inquiry, another family secret was revealed: I discovered my own Native origins.

Troubled by the damage of trans-generational Aboriginal trauma and youth testimonies, I returned to Quebec to visit my family. While in a conversation with my other sister, Suzanne, I learned that our Algonquin mother had hidden her Native ancestry to fit in the colonized Caucasian world. Her unexpressed grief and oppression, a transgenerational silencing, affected all of us. Additional answers to my sister’s death by suicide emerged.

A new awareness of the meaning of oppression and discrimination grew in me as the Aboriginal youth and I performed their lived experiences. Presenting the videos to different audiences gave the youth I worked with vitality, motivation and desire to perform their social engagement within the society in the ways that they chose to. They moved through their past stories, their family trauma, to be and live who they are now.

Youth performing their refusal to being treated as less-than is what I would call performing repair, as the youth found their voices and confidence to speak to their experiences through the video production and presentations. Simultaneously, I was performing my own aboriginal identity. Performing repair in those moments of risk\(^5\) and high affective responses allowed us to stand in the interplays between bullying, incest, suicide, and hope, together, reconnecting and relating to one another with warmth and genuine acceptance.

As a witness and participant of an amazing transformation, I simultaneously discovered my
own survival coping mechanism and dissociation responses to life challenges, particularly around intimate relationships, through the making of my own video and dance projects. In particular, as discussed below, the making of Life is a Masquerade and Dancing Wings provided me with a portal to heal my past.

Through dancing and other performative expressions—including slide shows, videos, and poetic visuals—I was able to access my grief and sadness over childhood losses. Through performing a head taller and bigger than life, I reclaimed my right to live, and so did the Aboriginal youth. Witness and participant in this transformation through the filming and presentations of “I am First Nations and proud of it!” (2003) a stream of consciousness flooded me with hopes of healing and understanding. I had never accessed a sense of hope to such a degree before.

**Performing Repair 4: A Performative Inquiry – Life is a masquerade (2003)**

Each survivor of trauma needs to find an outlet and a safe environment within which healing is possible. For me it was an educational and creative environment where science and art co-exist: psychology and performance. Inspired by Lynn Fels’ doctoral dissertation “In the wind clothes dance on a line: Performative Inquiry, a (re)search methodology possibilities and absences within a space-moment of imagining a universe,” I followed her path and envisioned healing as “moving through” and not so much as “talking through” as most therapies are. All other therapies had failed me and certainly failed my sister. Healing is about bringing out the spirit.

Through creating, dancing and performing “Life is a masquerade”—the story of my sister’s death and our family secret—my spirit was brought back to life. With this performance, with a combination of theatre, dance and sculptural effects, I explored Judith Butler’s feminist views of the theory of masquerade. The dance is a conversation between two sisters interrupted by two characters, Phallus, who embodies the Freudian theory of the phallus envy, and Two-Lips, who embodies Judith Butler’s feminist theory of socially constructed identities.

> Whether masquerade conceals femininity that might be understood as genuine and authentic or whether masquerade is the means by which femininity is produced.
> —Butler, 1999:204

Performing “Life is a Masquerade” was a confrontation, a performance of repair. Living with a secret had shaped my being in strange and uncomfortable ways. Performing my sister’s story of incest was masking my own story of incest. The masquerade was the means by which my story was revealed. Phallus and Two-Lips in the play gave me the opportunity to confront my monsters and memories, to deconstruct the meaning of heresy that plagued women in the past.

I was not crazy after all. It all made sense. Both of my parents, as abuser or silencer, were never confronted for the abuse in the family. By viewing my story, you are complicit in my recovery.

It is difficult to disclose that I had been violated by those who were supposed to care for me. Such information is so unacceptable that very few people are able to hear it. Yet repair is impossible without sharing with others the privacy of such testimony: thus a paradox of healing. Is it best to keep a secret or to share in order to heal? Boris Cyrulnik (1999) says that when a secret is revealed in public it is freeing as long as witnesses are able to receive it. Healing takes place if listeners are empathic. I felt supported and listened to in the performative psychological context in which I studied at UBC.

We are mistaken about who is sick. We need to work within and with the community, cultural and social environment and those who are listening more than attending to the
wounded. Between the restraining cultural environment of family and peers enforcing silence and the inner vital force needing to reveal, creativity grows in the interplay. Creativity, rêverie, the ability to imagine a different world and performing a head taller is resilience. When the real is crazy and unfathomable, escape into the unreal is a survival tool.

Il faut des symboles, des images et des récits pour que la représentation qu'on invente réchauffe en nous un sentiment de beauté, et même de bonheur.

—Cyrulnik, 1999, 200


With the death by suicide of my sister Louise in 1994, died my dancing inner child. It has been a long journey to recover my spirit dancer. It was when I was preparing a lecture for the Suicide Prevention Annual Conference in 2004 that a glimpse of my inner child dancer showed up. Bonny Ball, leader of the Survivors of Suicide Coalition, contacted me and asked me if I would be willing to perform “the loss of a loved one through suicide.” And I said yes.

I created “Dancing Wings” as a way to illustrate my recovery and healing following my sister’s suicide. This choreography is my testimony that healing through dance and performance after the death of a loved one is possible. I am not my past—I am love, freedom, and forgiveness.

Dancing gave me a sense of freedom and control over my life instead of having my story control me. Performative inquiry allowed me to reflect upon and heal my past, from trauma to strength. Performing repair allowed creativity as a voice for the unspoken, unbearable truth.
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Today, I have a choice between looking at my family from the perspective of a survivor or from the perspective of honouring everyone. I choose to honour everyone in my family, as well as honour all my friends. My healing journey led me to seek happiness that means living in a continuous state of love and compassion. Reverence is to accept what is and respond with love and only love.

From repair to reverence is the letting go of a longing to be taken care of or rescued. I am love, I am loved. I have now reached a level of serenity and peace, which was noticed by my older brother in a recent phone conversation that we had. I now nurture compassion for myself for the choices I made in the past. I acknowledge that I am responsible for loving myself, and taking care of myself completely and deeply.

This journey led me to become a counsellor for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I perform repair on a daily basis with love, compassion, and a deep understanding of the impact of incest and childhood sexual abuse. For women coming to my office I listen emphatically and perform compassion, welcoming sadness, numbness, grief, hurt, rage, pain or any other way they coped with their abuse. I sit, listen, and together we re-enact and repair stories of abuse. Women survivors of childhood sexual abuse heal through performance and enactment. There is hope and healing.

The hole I once felt in my being is now filled with love and compassion. Forgiveness shines in my heart with a deep understanding of the roots of pain for those who cross my path.

I dance to let my body speak of love and light.

*Mitakuye Oyas ‘in*
All My Relations in Lakota
References


[1] “Fantasy is the most precious internal resource of resilience” translated by Monique.


[3] “Losing the word changes the representation of the world.”

[4] I am grateful for my teachers at the Vancouver College of Counsellor Training and my professors at the University of British Columbia. I completed a diploma thinking of becoming a school counsellor, did a Masters degree with a focus on Performative Inquiry with Lynn Fels and completed a Doctoral degree with a focus on healing trauma. My sincere gratitude for the members of my doctoral committee: Carl Leggo, Lynn Fels, Rod McCormick, and Marla Arvey, who supported my healing journey and vision through performative inquiry.


[6] “We need symbols, images and stories in order for the representation of the world we invent to warm up within a feeling of beauty and even happiness.” Translated by Monique Giard.


About the Author

Monique Giard received her doctoral degree in 2005 at the University of British Columbia with a focus on healing trauma. She is a member of the Canadian Counselling Association.
since 1998, and the BC Clinical Counselling Association since 2007. An experienced therapist and public speaker, she gives lectures and workshops on the use of EMDR in healing Childhood Sexual Abuse and on building healthy relationships and families. Her approach combines EMDR, social therapy and psychodrama for effectively healing childhood trauma. Dr. Giard is available in her private practice. mgiard@shaw.ca