“People do not lose their voices, they lose the desire, the courage, the will, the ability to tell their stories.” (Gilligan, 2002, p.223)

When I was a little girl, I’d sometimes find myself tongue-tied.

“Cat got your tongue?” Grandma would ask, and there I’d stand, enduring the agony of being unable to speak. Meanwhile, the grown-ups looked on expectantly, sometimes impatiently. I’d desperately want to say something, but couldn’t.

Nowadays it’s not too often that I find myself lost for words. But the cat got my tongue after I had defended my doctoral dissertation.

“How did it go?” friends would ask.
Then I’d endure that painful stretch of silence – just a second or two – before murmuring, “My dissertation has been embargoed. I’m not allowed to talk about it.” I didn’t really want to talk about it either. Shame is like that.

So what got me into such big trouble? It was one chapter, an essay that explores normative family and educational practices and the ways in which they function as powerful silencing pedagogies (Pryer, 2003). In this essay, I asked how we as educators could begin to question and resist normative discourses that foster violence against women and children, envisioning the classroom as a place in which to work toward social justice. Millions of children in North America are growing up in families where they witness violence against women (most commonly their mothers), and where they themselves experience the violence of physical and sexual abuse. They bear the burden of trauma, shame, secrecy, and emotional pain long into adulthood. I wanted my work to open up a space of curricular possibility, of meaningful conversation and hope.

My supervisor and doctoral committee seemed to have no problem with this, and happily signed off on the papers so I could proceed to the oral exam. But for my external examiner there was a very clear problem. I had written the piece not only from the standpoint of educator and curriculum theorist, but also from the standpoint of adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and witness to family violence. Paradoxically, in this chapter I acknowledged that in claiming my right to theorize my own experience I invited stigma and risked my credibility as a scholar. I wrote, “The problem for survivors of childhood sexual abuse is how to speak up and yet still belong.” My external examiner – a scholar for whom I have great respect – made many supportive and insightful remarks, but she also made clear that, for ethical reasons, this chapter, and hence this dissertation, would not be awarded a passing grade at her institution. At the end of the oral exam, I was awarded the highest grade possible, and was also informed that the dissertation was embargoed. This meant I was to remain in a state of examination limbo indefinitely. The worst-case scenario was that my doctoral dissertation would eventually be awarded a failing grade.

It was a day or two before Christmas when the Chair of UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board – a lovely, kind man – examined the offending chapter as well as my methodology chapter.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “We’d need a change of policy to allow it through. Our committee can’t do that. We can’t make policy. We only enforce it. It’s ironic, I know.” I had written explicitly in the paper about how the curricular rituals of public educational institutions work to suppress any acknowledgement of survivors’ experience, knowledge, and history. Of how, for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, silence and secrecy were the best means of navigating most educational contexts. Of the ways in which survivors are clearly signalled to keep their embodied knowledge, which has so fundamentally shaped their lives and sense of being, to themselves. I wrote about how unequal power is exercised upon students, of coercive pedagogical procedures, of how members of educational institutions are trained to be bystanders.

The Chair of the Ethics Board recognised the care with which I had discussed ethical issues and concerns. He praised the strength of my writing, the rigor of my argument. In the end though, he too was a powerless participant.

The days and weeks crept by. When I had defended I was in the final trimester of
my first pregnancy. My belly grew riper, rounder. My case went up, up – to the Dean of
the Faculty of Graduate Studies, the Vice President of Legal Affairs, and on to the
President. In the meantime, I was told that I was not allowed to talk about my case to
members of the examining committee, or to anyone else for that matter, including friends. I
had to wait in silence. Eventually the verdict was passed all the way down to me. It was
already past my baby’s due date when I heard that the dissertation would be able to stand as
it was, with just a few minor changes.

It should have felt like a victory. There were faculty and administrators who saw the
value in my research, and who worked to prevent my narrative erasure, realizing what was
at stake ethically and politically, not just for me, but also for their own institution. But it
didn’t feel like a victory, and the shame lingered. I later published this chapter as two
separate papers, creating a neat – but false – dualistic splitting of voice and self in my
work. One paper bears the neutral, dispassionate voice of the social scientist (Pryer, 2005a);
the other is a creative non-fiction piece in the voice of the survivor (Pryer, 2005b).
Ironically, the focus of my doctoral research is nondualistic pedagogy.

The months passed. I was a mother now, concerned with the minutiae of my
daughter’s daily existence. Then, unexpectedly, poetry came. At first, I thought it was
because I couldn’t sustain the long periods of concentration necessary for scholarly writing.
I thought writing poetry was akin to knitting – something I could pick up and put down
while my daughter napped, something I could do in the odd, sleep-deprived few minutes I
could grab here and there over the course of a week. I thought that the material
circumstances of my everyday life as mother of an infant rendered the creation of new
scholarly work impossible. I had “fallen into poetry” (Prendergast, 2007).

Here are a few of the poems that came to me in that period.

**little red suitcase (for Mum)**

**faded to deep peony from the original rose,**

but ever small and elegant
as would become any young lady
who travelled in the cool days of Frank and Ella,
wearing white gloves like Grace and
a knotted silk square like Audrey.

once a vessel of my mother’s dreams,
now even the sun-dusted snaps of holidays
in Italy and Spain are gone.
my mother too.
the case is packed, but it’s not going anywhere –
all done with running, a keeper of memories.

inside, slender ribbons embrace
a nest of white treasure: handmade lace and drawn threadwork
pillowcases scented with lavender water for sleeping beauties;
Grandma’s round Christmas tablecloth,
reindeer cross-stitched in cranberry wool,
forever running in circles;

the great-great-aunts’ full-length evening gloves, calfskin all shrunk like Mum’s girlhood hopes of learning French and going to the opera; my sister’s flyaway fairy costume, gauze wings hanging limp, long bereft of the twirling toddler who granted three wishes with mere wave of dimpled hand.

diesel fumes and raindrops clung to its skin the morning my mother and sister fled on a train with doors that opened outward

all the way south and into another country. Mum wrapped her dead dreams in petals, abandoning the sand-washed cottage and – temple of her heart – the June garden. silent refugee of his rages, she lived for a time like a hermit crab out of this tearstained shell.

(Pryer, 2006, 144)

urchin

when I was a girl northern summers were enchanted, each pale dusk dissolving into a white dawn, endless days of luminosity and grace stretching before me. i played wild at the shore in low tide rock pools, my womb as pristine as a sea urchin, til a man’s invading hand tore open my vulnerable core, leaving only a fragile shell in its place. the tide came in and soon washed the husk away.

(Pryer, 2005d, 74)

on high seas (for the Catherines)
i seek my identity
on seas of choppy narrative,
clinging to bloodlines
as if they were lifelines,
i speak ancestors’ names
as if incanting a protective spell –
Catherine, Catherine, Catherine –
and I name my daughter
Catherine
to increase the magic,
careful not to break
our fragile line.

i repeat stories of my foremothers,
yearning for their closeness,
waiting
for the power of their spirit
to touch me.
yet with every telling
the stories become more
threadbare.
i discover broken places
and wonder
how they can ever
be mended.

the family story
is not a tale
of love
flowing
steadily
from one
generation
to the next,
unfurling
gently
like a
sail.

it is a story of interrupted
love and unknown love,
early death and tragic death,
abandoned hope and abandoned children.
i seek my ancestors
so must travel new waters,
changing my idea of what it is to know –
not an act of seizing, fixing, pinning or lashing down,
but a slow casting of a net,
a tender opening,
a drifting towards
that which is foreign.
“Oh, it’s being a new mother, all those hormones raging inside you, that’s what’s given you this surge in creativity,” said friends. But I don’t think this poetic impulse was a quirk of pure biology. It was in Carol Gilligan’s (2002) work, *The birth of pleasure*, that I found a clue. Gilligan describes the ways in which patriarchy drains pleasure, the ways in which it leads us to cover our vulnerability. We experience this as a loss of “voice” with symptoms similar to dissociation – the separation of intellect and emotion, a feeling of alienation from life. For girls, this traumatic loss of voice, which is also a loss of innocence, commonly occurs at adolescence. Throughout our lives however, patriarchy, which has set up this initial trauma, works in such a way as to maintain it. The institutional silencing I experienced after my doctoral defence presented a real loss of “voice.” I can now see, looking back over the last few years, that the experience of writing poetry was a conduit to pleasure, and this experience of pleasure is intimately connected to the feelings of shame I had after my doctoral defence.

All of us have at some time or another keenly felt the intense burn of shame – the horrible recognition of our deficiency, inadequacy, and unworthiness, that feeling of exposure and social alienation (Kaufman, 1980). Shame is the obliteration of vulnerability and trust in relationship. Thus, shame is only possible when we make or find ourselves vulnerable, as I was in this particular pedagogical situation as a doctoral student being publicly examined at my doctoral defence, where I had chosen to talk about my explorations of a subject matter that was taboo. Clearly, I had been naively trusting, blind to the power of academe to uphold its unspoken culture of silence, even though I had so accurately described it in my work.

Unfortunately, further factors compounded my shame. According to Elspeth Probyn (2005), shame “always attends the writer” (p. xvii). Also, those who have experienced shame early on in their lives have “a greater capacity to re-experience the feeling” (Probyn, 83). To make matters worse, according to Gershel Kaufman (1980), shame is “always particularly amplified in a culture which values achievement and success” (xiv). By the end of my doctoral examination I was teetering on the brink of failure.

Perhaps western culture goes too far in its almost complete pathologization of shame. So much so that it is shameful to even talk of shame. Yes, shame is always unwelcome, always uncomfortable, painful even. Shame “marks the break” (Probyn, 2005, 13) in relationship, in connection, in community, in trust. We feel shame not because we don’t care, or because we have no interest in a given situation, but because our interest, our love, our care, our desire for mutuality in relationship is not returned. We are spurned. We yearn to repair “the break” so that our interest, love, desire, and care might in some measure be reciprocated. Shame, writes Probyn, “illuminates our intense attachment to the world, our desire to be connected,” (63) and is always deeply embedded in contexts, politics, and bodies.

As I have since discovered, it is how we respond to an experience of shame that matters the most (Kaufman, 1980; Probyn, 2005). Shame can be a highly generative emotion, a catalyst for self-transformation. Probyn puts it this way:

Shame is not unlike being in love. The blush resonates with the first flush of desire. It carries the uncertainty about oneself and about the object of love;

(Pryer, 2007).
the world is revealed anew and the skin feels raw. Shame makes us quiver.
(2)

This keen appreciation of our longing for connection and community is in itself deeply transformative. Shame, shot through with desire, may embolden us to tell new stories (Probyn, 2005), or to tell old stories in new ways.

Poetry may be the ideal medium of inquiry for someone (like me) who’s longing for connection and community has been heightened through an experience of shame. The making of poetry is deeply concerned with building relationships and seeing affinities (Simic, in Zwicky, 2003, 47). It is also about finding community, coming home as it were, to our own lives and the life of the wider world. Thus, it is a medium that affords an ecology of both knowing and expression. Jane Hirschfield (in Zwicky, 2003) expresses this more poetically:

Every metaphor, every description that moves its reader, every hymn-shout of praise, points to the shared existence of beings and things. The mind of poetry makes visible how permeable we are to the winds and moonlight with which we share our house. (16)

Poetry is also an ideal medium of inquiry for someone (like me) who has experienced trauma. The poet, Charles Simic (in Zwicky, 2003), writes:

My hunch has always been that our deepest experiences are wordless. There may be images, but there are no words to describe the gap between seeing and saying, for example. The labour of poetry is finding a way through language to point to what cannot be put into words. (85)

Much of the pleasure of making poetry lies in the wait for and then the chase after that which is elusive, and which will always ultimately evade us. Like pleasure itself, poetry is somewhat unruly and feral. It can’t be controlled or scheduled. You have to take what comes. Thus, the poet must remain in a state of alertness, must attend lovingly to the world, in order to experience and represent wonder and possibility.

Simone Weil (in Zwicky, 2003) says, “The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love” (102). Adam Zagajewski (in Zwicky, 2003) insists that in poetry we exercise our capacity “to experience astonishment and stop still in that astonishment for an extended moment or two” (p. 108). Thus, the creation of poetry calls for a nondualistic appraisal and understanding of the world, one that privileges neither thought nor feeling, intellect nor emotion.

Earlier I quoted Probyn’s (2005) claim that “shame always attends the writer” (p. xvii). However, the quality and clarity of a poet’s perception helps to dissolve feelings of writerly shame by rekindling profound connections to the world. Simic (in Zwicky, 2003) proclaims only half in jest:

The ambition of each image and metaphor is to redescribe the world, or more accurately, to blaspheme. . . . The truth of poetry is a scandal. A thousand fornicating couples with their moans and contortions are nothing compared to a good metaphor. (46)

So the poetic impulse – that generative, loving state where whole worlds are birthed with
mere words – is of necessity quite shameless.

References


About the Author

Alison Pryer was born in London, England, and grew up in the southwest of Scotland. She has taught in Germany, Japan, and Egypt, and more recently at the University of British Columbia where she completed her doctoral studies. Her poems have appeared in numerous scholarly and literary journals.