

Analysis of the profiles.

Olivia

Olivia is a 52-year-old, African-American who lives with her sister in a suburban condominium complex. In our brief telephone exchange, we agreed to hold the interview at her place of work. Unbeknownst to me, her office was located in a part of the city often associated with drugs and crime, but I summoned the courage to park the car, and walk half a block into a dilapidated house. Her co-worker, Patrick, opened the door and politely informed me that Olivia was not expected in the office. I managed to contact her, and she asked me if I would drive over to the next county and interview her at home. I agreed. Not knowing where I was heading, or what awaited me when I would arrive, I again tapped into my inner strength. As it turned out, the theme of courage is one that predominated the conversation.

Olivia, bereft of courage, mourns her losses: the lost opportunity to fight against her father's sexual abuse; her inability to be out as a lesbian; and her struggle to overcome her cocaine addiction. Early in the interview, Olivia tellingly said,

[11] *There was this thing that Amelia Earhardt said that, "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." Sometimes I lack courage. And I think that's my battle, I guess. You know, that courage to be who you want to be. I settled. I think I feel like I settled.*

Mourning her losses

As I listened to Olivia tell her story, the words of grief wrapped around me like a shroud; the atmosphere was like being at a wake. According to Herman (1992), the failure for a trauma survivor to experience and express painful emotions, results in the perpetual recycling of traumatic reactions. Inhibited grief always involves some form of loss (Linehan, 1993), and in Olivia's case, the losses were threefold: (a) concrete—through death and divorce; (b) psychological—having no parent or adult to nurture her, and; (c) perceptual—feeling rejected and worthless.

After her grandmother died, and her mother left, her father mandated her to function as wife and mother; her childhood evaporated.

[2] *My mother left my father when I was ten. There were four of us, and he raised us. I took my mother's place in the household.*

[21] *When my grandmother died, and she [my mother] left, he would get me up at six o'clock in the morning, I would get to have coffee with him before he left, and he would tell me horrible things about her. Your mother wouldn't do this, and your mother wouldn't do that, and I'm your daddy and maybe you can do some of the things I wanted your mother to do, and that she should have done for me.*

[23] *We slept together. I would cook for him. I would go to the supermarket with him. And I would discuss the bills. We would discuss what we'd get for my brothers and sister, or whatever. You know if they needed clothes or something, then he would give me the money, then I would go get it; or both of us would go get it. But the sexual stuff, he would rub my head...and hair, but the sexual stuff would stop. It stopped when I was about 15. It just moved into like we were like older married people, I guess.*

Cultural influences

According to Thomas (2000), having the sensation of rejection is a large part of what black children normally experience when they grow up in a dominant white culture. For Olivia, the sense of neglect was exacerbated by the way her family perceived and treated her.

[21] *But I look like my mother. My sister looks like my father. And it was always okay to treat me that way. They called me Serena, my mother's name, when I was growing up. You could call me fat ass and it was okay. ... My father was a mulatto. My grandfather was white. My father was very fair: green eyes, wavy hair. My mother was from Barbados, very dark. ... I'm the brownest. The Mason family doesn't like brown people. So again, it would be okay. My sister resembles them more. It's like this self-loathing. It's like I always wanted to be something that I'm not. If I could look like them; look like a Mason. It's all in my head.*

The experience of sexual abuse, for a black child who already has a sense of exclusion, further erodes feelings of self-worth and self-confidence (Thomas, 2000). The experience of consistent sexual abuse, mixed with an invalidating environment, bequeathed a legacy of fear to Olivia's psyche.

[24] *I think what I inherited from my father is fear. Remember I spoke about courage? Because speaking out is more or less courage. I was afraid. If you'd say something, he would slap you. We'd be riding around in the car and I'd say something, and he would put you out.... How do you get home? You walk.*

Lacking courage, and feeling helpless to defend herself from her father's cruelty, she relied first on her grandmother, and then her sister to shelter her from danger.

[14] *And my grandmother would always come to my rescue. My father was afraid of my grandmother. You know, she would come and she was a protector.*

[8] *Renee, my sister, had always fought my battles. And I'm 50 years old, 52. And there's still this need I have, in the sense of protection.*

[6] *I always knew that wherever we would live I could bring my sister with me. Even though she was younger, she was like my protector because she would fight back. And I wouldn't fight back.*

[21] *My sister would fight him [my father] back. When he tried it with Renee, she told my aunt, his sister. And they moved Renee into the house with them.*

[25] *When I was in the kitchen and he was beating me, my sister Renee was hiding, and she hit him from behind. But she would fight him. I just crawled up in a fetal position, and just let him beat me. If he'd do it, just do it.*

Sexual objectification and stereotyping of African-Americans by the dominant white culture, plays a large role in the way the African-American community views LGBTs (Greene, 1998). Once again, Olivia mentioned she did not have enough "courage" to come out as a lesbian. In the next passage, she recalled how difficult it was for her to make a professional presentation on "down low men," when she herself remained almost totally closeted.

[16] *In the African-American community it's not socially acceptable to be gay, even today. I do this thing for National Council of Negro Women. I just finished this thing with BT (Black Television) called "The Naked Truth." I was just a consultant. Part of the thing they are going to air is about down low men. But there are down low women. You know, I'm gay, but I don't tell it. I don't go sleep with men, but I don't tell it. So when I*

had to speak about down low men, it was a hard thing. It's so hard. I don't know what they would think if they knew. When I was younger, I think I had more courage about that. ... So I had a history that some people knew me as not gay, or whatever. And it was always assumed especially that I would get married to somebody, and have a child. ... We would have that particular type of value. And, in one part of my brain, I still think maybe that's the way it's supposed to be.

According to Greene (1998), the strong religious orientation of African-American culture, combined with selective interpretations of the Bible, serve to strengthen homoprejudicial attitudes found among members of that community. Olivia's Southern Baptist beliefs, along with images of hellfire and brimstone, facilitated her husband in convincing her to reunite with him.

[6] *I was going out with this girl Toni, and Franklin showed up after 5 years and he had heard I was living this gay lifestyle. By then, it was pretty much a lifestyle. I was 30. Franklin showed up and again he was nice, but he brought the Bible, and told me I was going to go to hell. I would go into the clubhouse, and I would think like the rapture was going to come, and I was going to be locked up in there, and I was going to hell. And all kinds of things were going to happen to me, and the whole thing was just freaky. Then he told me that he was my only answer. So, the next year we got back together.*

Olivia perceived that, in general, the African-American community tolerates abuse more readily than it does homosexuality.

[30] *I think that abuse in the black community, is more of an accepted issue than homosexuality. I do think abuse is acceptable; so is wife beating, and children beating, they're common.*

Coping strategies

Childhood sexual abuse interferes with the ability of the survivor to self-soothe (Holmes, 2000); Olivia's addiction to cocaine is a maladaptive strategy she used to blunt her intrapsychic pain. Believing that she was helpless to alter her situation, she instead opted to alter her mental state. Her problems vanished into thin air, like the smoke from a crack pipe.

[26] *Franklin introduced me to cocaine. I used to smoke some reefer, but none of that was a problem. Franklin sold cocaine, and that whole thing that he offered. I like cocaine. Cocaine became a problem. It was substance abuse. I think one of the benefits of substance abuse is that nothing else matters, you really don't need. You don't eat, but you don't need. I have an emptiness in my life, but if I smoke coke, I don't worry about it. My work does a lot for me; I can't have courage so I work. And my sister does a lot for me. We built this house, and it's done a lot for me. But I have a need. If I smoke coke, I don't have that need. It supersedes the need for another person. You can honestly live alone.*

Many survivors remember hiding, and they associate their feelings of safety with specific places rather than with people (Herman, 1992). As a child, Olivia hid away in a dark, womb-like space to soothe and comfort herself. As an adult, cocaine became her safe haven, where needs and secrets ceased to exist.

[26] *When I was a child I used to sit in my closet. We had an armoire, and I would go and sit in there, and turn off the light. I would sit there in the dark. And the clothes and the objects in the closet, I would talk to them. They became my friends. Cocaine became that armoire. You know. You have it—you really don't need. And that's the part that I haven't really got past. How do you get past that hole? Right, there is a hole. And the*

courage, and that's what Dr. Marks talks about, like doing things, go here Olivia, go there, take those steps, go past your front door. But to change while there's this hole here, to take those steps—some days I don't have that. With cocaine, I don't need to. I can live very isolated. And you don't need anything at all. You don't feel. You don't feel. And you can be okay. There's no secret because I'm not heterosexual; I'm not homosexual; I'm not any sexual.

Fears about being

Olivia used cocaine to obliterate emptiness, despair and loneliness, but the destruction of such a large part of her, left a profound chasm of grief. A tendency to inhibit grief or avoid emotions may contribute to an absence of a strong sense of identity (Linehan, 1993). She strongly identified with her mother; the mother who was not there, and who never told her that she was herself a lesbian.

[2] I hadn't seen my mother for about 12 years, and when we reconnected with my mother, I found out my mother was a lesbian, and I never knew that. And at that time, I didn't know women could be lesbian. ... As a kid, I idolized my mother, even when she wasn't there, and I internalized her values. But when I saw her, I was angry, and I sort of freaked out. I really had no conversation with her. She never said, "I am gay."

Contrasting her own life to her mother's, Olivia poignantly remarked,

[9] I think a thing that bothers me about my life is, when my mother died, and they read her eulogy, I didn't know her. And that was one of the things I think that disappoints me most. It's that idea to know somebody, and not know them.

She plainly stated that she was afraid to be herself; she didn't have the guts.

[21] It's like you [I] always wanted to be something that I'm not.

[11] Sometimes I lack courage. And I think that's my battle, I guess. You know, that courage to be who you want to be.

When the conversation focused on her daughter, Olivia sat upright, and animatedly told me about her daughter. She bounced out of the couch and ran upstairs to find some pictures to show me. She described her daughter as different; she's feminine, she "knows" her mother, and most importantly, has courage.

[9] My daughter knows I'm gay. I talk to Danielle because I don't want to die, and have no one not know me. You know what I mean, especially not Danielle. Danielle's grown now. She lives in Virginia, and I have a granddaughter. Danielle is real different. She's ultra femme. She's ultra femme, real different. I talk to her every day. She's one of my best friends. And I think Danielle knows me. And Danielle has courage.

The interview began to wind down; we had both run out of steam. She turned up the volume on the television, which had been on (without sound) for the entire interview. I could feel Olivia slipping into her private abyss; I thought about the crack pipe, and the hole that has replaced her courage. I agreed with Olivia about courage; it isn't about what we do; it's about what we are.

Sheree

Sheree is 51 years old, and at one time made a living as a dominatrix. Both power and helplessness were prevailing themes in her life. The interview was held in her work place. She showed consideration about my safety, and physical comfort; yet there were some points during

the interview when I felt I was being chastised for asking impolitic questions. Only after repeated scrutiny of the interview, was I able to comprehend her need to control the interview process; she skillfully managed to let me know, unconsciously, precisely who was in charge. I eventually connected my own feelings during the interview to her essential need to dominate situations.

Power

Sexual relationships:

According to Blume (1990), many survivors of sexual abuse equate sex with a posture of submission or domination.

[22] *I've really enjoyed acting as a dominatrix, and giving pain, especially to men. Making them suffer. And I get incredible arousal out of it, incredible, but no real feelings.*

[28] *Maybe that's one way that I've coped.*

[29] *I also dominate women, which I enjoy. It's much more erotic, much more erotic and much more sexual because I can participate. But I'm always the top, never the bottom: never the bottom.*

Interpersonal relationships:

Sexual play was not the only arena in which Sheree enacted her need to be in control of situations. Her interpersonal relationships reflected a similar condition.

[19] *It's always hard for me to imagine that other people have responsibility. I always go to myself first, **always**.*

[3] *I have a leftover houseboy. That's what I call him. When I was doing domination, there was a boy that used to come around to see me and I sort of adopted him. It's not a sexual relationship. It's more of a mother-son kind of thing. ... He's 20 years younger than me. And he has some psychiatric disabilities where he can't function on his own. I found him literally in the street. He can't take care of himself, so I take care of him. And I would say that our relationship is close, but more of a caretaking role.*

[50] *I decided to try it the traditional way and so the first man that would marry me I married, and then I got pregnant.*

[4] *I did have a son when I was 25. And I gave temporary custody to his father while I went to school and took advantage of a scholarship. And when I tried to get him back, I couldn't because I was a lesbian. So I lost my son, custody of him, which was very painful. ... I got to see him on weekends, but I didn't have any control over the quality of his life, and I just saw a lot of things happening that broke my heart and there was nothing I could do about it.*

Helplessness:

Having limited or no control was very agonizing for her. Her darkest secrets, the behaviors of which she was most ashamed, were the ones she claimed to have no control over.

[21] *[I engage in] hair pulling, scab picking—and it's obsessive-compulsive. I mean it's like I can't control it. And my doctors give me increasing medication to deal with anxiety; I do deep breathing; my sister said "Try an ice cube on the skin to, you know stimulate instead of scratching." But that's my deep secret. I cut myself a lot because it feels so good. It's like a pain that feels good, and that's actually been since I was 15 and I've never stopped, and it's never changed. That's embarrassing for me.*

Dissociation

Feeling in control of one's life is a prerequisite to feeling safe. Some survivors split or take on different roles in order to feel in control.

[22] *Sometimes I feel I'm almost like two people. Well, there's one part of me that is very warm, and kind, and compassionate, and caring. There is another part of me that feels like an actor behind a façade. And I feel like really I have no feelings, and really, bottom line, I don't care. Sometimes it worries me, like maybe I'm a bit of a sociopath or something. Somehow I think that my mother and my father's personalities, they're both inside here.*

Sheree's personality has two disparate entities. One is "father"—cruel, narcissistic, dismissive, and she wants nothing to do with him. The other is "mother"—passive, not there, but Sheree loves her nonetheless.

[11] *My dad's like a petty tyrant. He's a little bastard. He's like 74 now, and he's just as weird now as he was, I shouldn't even laugh, he's just an awful man. There was a lot of hitting, punching, kicking, and belt spanking to point where I was in extreme agony. It was also totally unpredictable. It had nothing to do with my behavior, it was just whenever he...I knew he felt pleasure in it. I knew that. I knew he enjoyed doing it, and that was also very upsetting to me. And my mom would just disappear. She just wasn't there.*

[60] *She is the best thing that ever happened to him and I don't even think he knows it. She's a wonderful woman. Yeah, I love that woman.*

Although contact with her father was kept to a minimum, the "inner dad" provoked fear in her and continued to wield power over her.

[22] *I've never done anything terribly wrong or immoral, nothing that I couldn't live with. I mean real wrong. But I've always wondered if I'm capable of it. I just worry about that part of me that's really shut down, and with that is distrust, a little paranoia, I have to really catch myself when I start thinking that there's more than one person who's working against me. My god, it's like "No, people have their own lives to live." See I've got this on a cognitive level. It's the emotional level that's really hard.*

She also separated her emotions and thoughts about love and sex into two discrete parts.

[58] *Most women think about sexuality in terms of expressions of love and intimacy, and spirituality and have difficulty separating out the sensation, the physical, physicality of it and the emotional part of it; they also feel that those feelings have to be legitimized by feelings of love and tenderness, and all that shit. One of the things that I think is special about me or different is that I separate that out, for better or worse. I know when it's about sex, and I know when it's about love, I feel like I've claimed a sexual subjectivity and autonomy and that what I've chosen to do sexually, has to be for me. It's nothing I can do for someone else, nothing I can give to someone else. And there's a part of me that feels very good about that and there's another part of me that wonders, since there are so few women who feel that way, is there something wrong with me that I can do that. Most of the time I feel that, "No this is okay, this is good."*

Sheree recognized the power her inner father had in regulating her emotions,

[28] *There's amorality there. It's my dad. Maybe I inherited some of his narcissism or sadistic stuff. But when I'm in that other space ...when I'm being really, really sadistic,*

the words that come out of my mouth are often my father's words. But it gives me satisfaction.

Nevertheless, she kept the two pieces of her personality detached, in order to preserve feelings of comfort, and avoid anxiety.

[27] I think it's safer to keep the two parts of me separate. I have to be really careful. ... I have to really put a box there. The part of me that's the warmest, and actually that I feel best about is being a grandmother and a mom. ... I feel that's the part of me that's most nurturing. And there's this other part of me that I don't know what the potential is there sometimes.

Connecting childhood sexual abuse and the practice of bondage and discipline (B & D)

Taking power over one's victimization through the practice of B & D is an illusion of control, but does not necessarily equate with being in charge of one's feelings and thoughts. According to Blume (1990), many female survivors have accepted this illusion because they have not yet learned where the true power lies. Although Sheree's dominant-submissive script enabled her to safely explore her feelings about power, there seemed to be little recognition of the fact that, when she dominated others, she reenacted her own abuse. In fact, as stimuli for sexual arousal, the themes of dominance, humiliation, and pain may be interpreted as expressions of posttraumatic stress (Blume).

[23] I won't have sex with men. [24] I put them into a state of submission and powerlessness and I give them pain. [25] It's erotically charged. [26] It's totally consensual. That is very separate. It's like a separate box in my life. I just, it was like I just realized one day that I really enjoyed it. I mean guess why? It's not a hard stretch. I really enjoyed literally having men underneath me begging. And the weirdest thing was that afterwards they adore me you know. I get all this incredibly positive stuff from them, and I was just being a cruel bitch, I really am. It's a safe place to play all this stuff out. I like it.

[28] I also dominate women, which I enjoy. It's much more erotic, much more erotic and much more sexual.

Sheree's fantasy life has continued to be dominated by repetitions of the original trauma.

[11] One of the hardest things for me is that my sexual fantasies always come back there. No matter what, they always come back to that point and I hate it. I hate it. It can be the fantasy of a man doing that to another girl; of me doing it to a girl. I would never actually act on the sexual feelings, but they're very powerful. And anytime I'm having sex, if I want to orgasm, that's where I have to go back to. And I, after a while, I said, you know what, that's the way I am. That's what I fantasize. That's what makes me hot. It makes me really angry at him, but that's what makes me hot. So I learned to accept it, and go with it finally.

Herman (1992) suggested that a survivor might regain ownership of herself, if she separates her fantasies from the feelings. In so doing, the victim persona recedes and self forgiveness grows.

Marina

During one of my iterative readings of this particular analysis, I was suddenly stunned by something I had not noticed about my own narrative. It became obvious to me that much of the discussion was based on my cognitive and intellectual reactions, rather than on the way I felt about Marina's account. Her story was so horrific, and her abuser so abhorrent to me, that I dissociated my feelings about them, in order to keep my affective state separate and safe. This amazingly profound, yet unconscious reaction clearly demonstrated to me the significance of the researcher-researched relationship.

Marina is a 26-year-old woman. She missed our first appointment, but was only a few minutes late for the rescheduled appointment. She walked into the apartment, sat on the couch and curled into a fetal position. She is in therapy and receives Dialectic Behavior Therapy (DBT), used primarily for treating Borderline Personality Disorder. I found her manner business-like; she was well-groomed, and her articulate language reflected education and intelligence.

Inability to trust

The path to cultivating one's identity is a journey, not a destination; this developmental task continues over the lifespan. Trust in one's self is not only at the core of healthy interpersonal relationships, but also in the ability to take risks. Marina's willingness to participate, although diffident, was a clue that her capacity to trust was not entirely eradicated. With the help of her therapist, and hard work on her part, Marina is on a quest to normalize her affective state; but in moments of despair, she feels the absence of the most primary bonds of nurturance and trust.

Trust in others:

[58] *I've always pushed people who were interested in me away. I've been afraid to open up and to be vulnerable. To date I've only had one serious relationship. ...I've always had a difficult time being comfortable being sexual and I've not been able to have really good relationships, or even terribly satisfying relationships. ...I'm incredibly insecure. I need a lot of reassurance; I don't know if that's ever going to change, but that can push some people away.*

According to Courtois (1988), a particularly injurious effect of incest for many children is the wearing down of a positive sense of self, while at the same time developing a negative sense of self.

[27] *... part of his whole thing was to fuck with my mind... I didn't quite believe the bad things he was saying about me when he first moved in but you know, by a few years later—sure.*

[50] *The messages I got from growing up in that environment were that I could not and should not trust my own senses: That they were not accurate. That I did not have feelings: That they didn't exist. That I was not worthy of caretaking or love or kind treatment: that I was horribly, horribly deficient and would always be so. That the only thing I was good for was sex. That I was stupid: that I'd never amount to anything.*

Trust in one's self:

A negative sense of self was also expressed as she reflected on her experience of coming out:

[2] *I just wanted to be normal, whatever that means.*

[12] *... there was something horribly, disgustingly wrong with me.*

Self image as unhuman

Metaphorical concepts allow us to understand a wide variety of human motivations, characteristics and activities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Employing the metaphor of “alien,” something not of this world, not grounded on the earth, conveyed Marina’s state of mind when she was a schoolgirl.

[45] *The teacher just looked at me like I was from another planet.*

She used the same imagery to describe an older self, beginning to explore her lesbianism.

[2] *...and then be in this entirely different neighborhood—WORLD, where the streets don’t make sense and, people... WEIRD.*

[2] *And it was like speaking a foreign language for a while. After a while, you figure out where you are going and I think that helps. Just knowing the layout of the streets. Just to know the lay of the land a little bit. And when you wander up Greenwich Avenue, and suddenly you’re in this maze, I mean emotionally, that was exactly how I felt.*

But when she described the present experience of what it is like to be a lesbian in a heterosexual world, Marina did not use the image of an “alien,” but, rather, that of a fish. She has “come down to earth”; not quite grounded on dry land, but she is swimming, and fighting the current, and displaying anger and frustration at her situation.

[23] *Sometimes I feel like a fish swimming against the current. I feel very frustrated with some of the people I know who are rather religious and say, “Well, I hate the sin and not the sinner.” And it’s like, well you know what? Go jump in a lake. I feel incredibly frustrated that I’m automatically perceived as heterosexual.*

Males = sex

Often, when Marina referred to relationships with males, she alluded to how they relate to her sexually. The following is how she described her only male friend:

[23] *I have one close male friend that I like and respect as a person. I’d love to have more, but 90% of them turn out to be not worth my respect. My friend doesn’t look at my breasts.*

The following descriptions of her relationships with other males contain associated images of sexuality. Her attitude toward them is consistent.

[23] *I resent the way men will aggressively flirt with me and try to get my attention, and the pedestal they put me on, and their utter stupidity and docility. They really bug me. I don’t have relationships with men, period. As far as I’m concerned, they do not exist. I’ve always had a very uncomfortable and awkward relationship with my father. He always went out of his way to make me more aware of his sex life than I would want to be.*

[8] *On the nights when I slept over, I would hear him having sex with some random person.*

[9] *My father always had this thing about being a progressive parent. He had way too much pornography lying around the house.*

[15] *I noticed every male psychiatrist I’ve always had has said, “So what’s your sexual orientation?”*

Frustration and anger

There were several instances during the interview when I felt Marina was angry or frustrated with me, when, for example, I did not know German; was not aware of an inference

she made; and did not know a particular musician she referred to. For the most part, the females she described seemed less threatening than the males, but the contempt for, and annoyance with their naiveté was palpable. Some references to her mother, teachers, and cohorts were cogent examples of her frustration and anger.

Mother:

[7] *With my mother, when I first came out to her, she was a deer in the headlights.*

[38] *My mother was totally out to lunch.*

[31] *She's not always the sharpest knife in the drawer.*

[27] *I would describe her as being a very naïve person for most of her life, very Pollyanna-ish, very easily manipulated.*

Teachers:

[28] *And at the school, the teachers were not perceptive or sympathetic to that in the least. I mean, they thought I was lazy, or absent-minded, or stupid or something.*

And the teachers would always say, "Well if only you would just apply yourself." If I felt physically safe, maybe I could do that. So it was a very unsympathetic environment. The teacher just looked at me like I was from another planet. I mean no concept that, "Hey there's something wrong with that."

Cohorts:

[42] *I mean I was always really, really grown up and the things people my own age were doing seemed so stupid in light of what my life was like.*

[20] *Barnard... was one of the few places where I could flirt with a butch looking woman and she would get it, "Oh, you're queer, you're not a straight chick flirting with me." I was so incredibly frustrated; I don't know what I have to do, tattoo it across my forehead or something?*

Strategies to regain control

Marina's narrative was rife with expressions that referred to power, control, and the absence thereof. Her stepfather, who was a cruel and vicious sexual predator, demanded perfection, and thus, could never be satisfied.

[43] *...in that house alles muss perfekt sein. I say it in German because it has more of a meaning in German – "Everything must be perfect." Alles muss perfekt sein. That was the attitude I grew up with.*

She described her stepfather's attempts at manipulating her food intake, as well as her own attempts to regain control over her own body. Some painful descriptions, as well as the metaphors she chose, were situated around food: mealtime, kitchen, and weight gain.

[38] *My stepfather had this thing about table manners, another way that he made me feel awful. That was just a constant struggle throughout my childhood. And the amount of food was always a big thing for him.*

[28] *I kind of ate at his behest.*

Among the manifestations of childhood sexual abuse is manipulation of body size in order to provide protection from sexually oriented stimuli (Blume, 1990).

[38] *After he started abusing me, I ballooned. I absolutely needed those physical layers of protection, padding. So I was a chubby kid and he was not happy with that. He was always trying to control what I ate.*

[44] *Usually I'm very quite self-sabotaging, such as school, and I allowed myself to be very heavy.*

Marina used a variety of behaviors to keep herself in control: cutting, isolating, self-sabotaging, and drinking.

[9] *I was practically an alcoholic by the time I was 12 and I would say I was fairly dependent on it at that point to get through the day. When I drank, I didn't feel like I had to worry about being different and keeping up a façade.*

The terror of being different

Marina could always count on feeling different from others, as easily as she could rely on being castigated, isolated, and physically and emotionally abused by others. Fear that emanates from consistent childhood sexual abuse operates in a menacing and frightful manner. "Cooperate and you will be safe." "If you do what is expected, all will be well." It is a powerful and threatening message that is endemic in the mind of the survivor; it colors and informs the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of the individual. Marina was repeatedly attacked in school, a venue that should have been a safe harbor for her.

[41] *When I was in middle school...I pleaded with my mother to put me in a different school because I was so tortured there; it was just awful. I could expect to be physically abused on a regular basis, and to be called all sorts of names.*

[45] *And the teacher was an absolute horror the way she laid into me. I was just frustrated one day and I started slamming myself in the head with the palm of my hand, which is exactly how he hit me.*

It made sense that, when she felt different about her sexual identity, she felt terrorized again.

[2] *I just wanted to be normal, whatever that means. I was used to playing the part of the good daughter, and doing what I had to do, and I wasn't going to step out of that. So it wasn't until I was 22, that I really said, "You know I'm a lesbian."*

[1] *I had homoerotic feelings, and it just scared the hell out of me.*

[17] *I was afraid she would think of me as a deviant.*

"Deep" emotion

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999) the most fundamental way human beings understand the world is through basic metaphorical concepts that are, for the most part, embodied. In the following phrases, one can sense Marina's effort to convey the experience of abuse, the attempts to cope, and the extent of discomfort of feeling so unlike her peers. She often used the word "deeply" as an adjective, but the image of this metaphor tells us this very deep place was the ultimate target of the abuser.

[27] *I mean he's ex-military so part of his whole thing was to fuck with my mind. And that was **deeply** important to him, for obvious reasons.*

[48] *I haven't done it [cut myself] in several months. I wouldn't say never again, but I haven't done it in quite some time. It made me feel relieved -- **deeply** relieved.*

[29] *My therapist was the first person I told, and my friends in school. They were incredibly supportive, **deeply, deeply** supportive.*

She also felt deeply uncomfortable about not fitting in, and about her same-sex attractions.

[28] *So I just got yelled at a lot. And I was just **deeply** uncomfortable, and I did not have friends at school, obviously.*

[54] *I'd come home from high school, at 15 or 16; take off my combat boots, put on Indigo Girls and say, "Gee, where do I fit in the world? I know I'm not a lesbian, can't be."*

Throughout the interview, Marina articulated images of discomfort, as well as attempts at achieving some relief from the pain.

[58] *I've always had a difficult time being comfortable being sexual.*

[8] *I've always had a very uncomfortable and awkward relationship with my father.*

[11] *I could just put on some loud music and drink and be comfortable for an hour, before I had to go home to my mother and my stepfather.*

[17] *So by the time I was 19, even if I wasn't ready to say I'm a lesbian yet, I was comfortable with it, and comfortable with the idea of experimenting.*

[15] *I'll come out when I get comfortable, it'll be of my choosing, at my moment, and with who I want and when I want.*

[7] *There was this gradual easing into not so much a definition, but a shorthand label, and getting comfortable with that.*

[23] *But I will go to the bars, just to be out, and to be some place I'm comfortable.*

Connecting coming out and abuse

In situations of childhood sexual abuse, some people enter a state of numbness and detachment, in which they are disconnected from their own emotions, sensations, and awareness of their surroundings (Herman, 2000). Although the response is adaptive while the abuse is occurring, over time dissociative mental processes may develop.

[28] *And I never remembered what happened in the morning when I woke up. I was just completely numb from the waist down. ... I had this horrible secret though, and I had to go on with my life, and my life depended on it, as far as I knew. So I just went through school completely numb, completely dissociated. ... I just paid as little attention to my body as possible. ... To this day if I'm in a reclined position and I'm uncomfortable about something, I will instinctively put my, pin my hands above my head, without even realizing it.*

[32] *But at that point in time, I wound up, although not in the same intense way that I was as a kid, but in that same desert. And how comfortable that was for me, and comforting.*

Childhood sexual abuse sometimes makes it difficult for the child to ascertain if emotions and mental states are internal or external (Masterson, 1988). Marina's massive denial of reality, both about her abuse and her lesbianism allowed her to closet her true feelings until she was ready to accept them.

[5] *I was in complete denial.*

[1] *I grew up in complete denial of what was going on. I had an editor in my head, and I just said, "NOPE, I didn't think that." Then pushed it out of my head. ... It was always in the back of my mind and at the same time, it was always something I would push away. I would say no, no, no, I don't think that.*

[2] *[I had my first same-sex experiences] around 18, 19, even though I was still in denial. "I'm not a lesbian, I just sleep with my friends. You know, it happens." Granted, I've never even touched a boy, but you know, "I'm straight."*

In Marina's case, awareness of the abuse and acceptance of her sexual orientation occurred when she was 22 years old. She credited her abuse history with the difficulties she experienced in coming out.

[63] *Not having been able to trust my own impressions, I would have been out very much sooner, probably 14 or 15, because I understood I was attracted to women. And I understood there were other women in the world like that. So it was a matter of not being able to trust what my body was telling me.*

But she was adamantly opposed to the notion that her sexual orientation is in any way the result of her abuse history.

[62] *I refuse to believe that who I am is a product of my experience. I am who I am. This is how I was born. If sexual abuse created lesbians, the human race would have died out a very long time ago. So I refuse to even listen to that kind of hypothesis. I think it's junk. People ask me that question, and I give them the same answer, that there would be no straight women. I mean I know some lesbians who aren't survivors, well then, how do you explain them.*

Learning to hope

Presently, Marina is making an effort to distinguish between the external world and the experience of her own internal realities. She verbalized the severity of the task, but also outlined what the alternative consequences will be if she fails to make progress.

[51] *I am in the process of learning how to cope with normal stress in healthy ways, as opposed to dissociating or cutting, or slamming my head into the wall and it's difficult.*

She hopes to achieve a number of life goals that might never have been an issue for her, had she not been abused, or was not gay.

[59] *I'd like very much to finish school and to have a career. I'd like to be financially independent at some point. I very much want to move out of the city. I would like to get married, which as of today I can legally do. I'm so excited about that. I wanted to get my MSW. I think I might like to work with other survivors. I'd also be interested in working at a college setting, because I love that atmosphere, and I really like working with teenagers.*

Finally, she looks forward to the time when she will be the pivotal support of her own mental health. Until that time, she uses her trust in the therapeutic alliance to keep that hope a viable future reality.

[19] *I was just feeling really suicidal and hopeless, and in the beginning of August, I found a really good trauma specialist. If not for her, I don't think I'd be here. I didn't trust anybody, but I trusted that I could trust her and that she would be able to help me get to some place better, because she said she could. I didn't believe it, but I believed she believed it.*

Kitt

The interview with Kitt took place in her home office. She earns a living as a financial advisor, but has a variety of outside interests, such as singing in the church choir, motorcycles, and caring for her pets. She is 46 years old, and has been in a monogamous relationship with her partner for 11 years. During most of our conversation, Kitt looked down at the floor, detaching her eyes from my gaze. My intuition was that the avoidance of eye contact harbored deeper

unconscious meanings of experience. Kitt herself recognized that rather than confront problematic issues, her tendency was to circumvent them. It was also a strategy she used to evade contact with her abusive stepfather; she still utilizes it to manage anxiety.

[26] *I remember consciously trying to sort of avoid him, to cut it off some way, but my way was to sort of avoid being alone with him. I wasn't the kind of person, and I still have a problem today. I still have to work on this, saying no to people.*

According to Siegelman (1990), since “the body is equated with the self more than any other object is” (p. 28), specific body parts can easily become symbols and metaphors. Kitt has worn thick lenses since the fourth grade (around the time her abuse started), and more recently, has undergone several operations for a detached retina. As we talked, Kitt’s eyes continually disengaged from my gaze, and I felt some anxiety in asking her very intimate questions. My unconscious “third eye” had grasped her feelings of embarrassment and discomfort, not only through her mannerisms, but also in the textual context. There were instances during the interview, when I felt she was apologizing to me for what she had experienced, and other times I had the sense she was not quite in the room with me. She would zone out, grind her teeth, and pick at her skin, as though she were alone. I was uncomfortable witnessing her behavior, and I remember wondering if she thought I didn’t see her. I came to understand that this was the way Kitt communicates her feelings to others; bringing them to consciousness is too painful. She often views the world as distorted, confusing and disorienting, both literally, and figuratively. In fact, the body-based metaphor, or symptom, is a critical element in both the physical and psychological life of an individual (Seligman, 1990). Wright (1976) noted that while a symptom is the wordless presentation of a problem, the verbal metaphor is an attempt to apprehend it. Put differently, Kitt’s physical problems concealed and constricted her feelings, whereas her verbal metaphors were an attempt to reveal them.

Things look strange

As I re-read the interview transcription, I looked for metaphors that fall under the rubric of “seeing,” that is, perceiving, interpreting, and knowing. When I pondered the concept of impaired vision, I conjured up blurred or distorted images, and funhouse mirror reflections that cause us to see the world as weird or strange. In my search, I found that Kitt used these very words to narrate portions of her background, describe aspects of coming out, and reflect on her sexual abuse experience.

Background:

[33] *I'll go over the whole story [of my family] because it is kind of a **weird situation**, and I think that will bring it [the family dynamics] out.*

Sexual abuse:

She used the word *funny* to describe the relationship with her stepfather, the second man who abused her, not to express humor, but rather, to convey absurdity or surrealism; akin to seeing distorted reality reflected from a funhouse mirror.

[45] *You know **it was funny**. There was never a lot of conversation between us to begin with. I mean, we could sometimes sit ... and we would usually have a glass of wine, or something, some kind of alcohol. We wouldn't get drunk or anything, but we would have a couple of drink, and just mellow out.*

Seeing a distorted reality was a way to deny her same-sex attractions.

[32] *It was kind of strange, because sometimes I would think, well, since I'm participating in this [sex with her abuser] maybe I'm not gay...*

Coming out:

Kitt perceived some of her coming out experiences as very out of the ordinary.

[13] *The story of when I actually started to come out is really strange.*

[9] *At the time that happened I was actually involved with my CIT director; it's kind of a weird thing that happened. ... When I came down to visit my CIT director and her partner...this is the weirdest thing that ever happened in my life...but we just got attracted to each other's partners.*

Perhaps the easiest way to obscure reality is to keep it hidden. Kitt kept her homophilic desires to herself, but her mother purposely entrapped her, and literally punctured the mantle of secrecy. The reality of Kitt's same sex-attractions were at the same moment revealed and reviled by her mother.

[8] *While we were sitting on the bed doing this, my mother had a scissors or knife or something, and was cutting a hole into the contact paper, and I guess she saw us. At that point we weren't doing anything that was inappropriate, but I guess since she had read that and everything, she knew what was going on. She started yelling and blah, blah, blah, so we ran out of the house.*

The descriptive betrayal by her own mother was painful for me to hear; her mother used a sharp, potentially dangerous object to assault Kitt's personal boundaries. Yet, in pointed contrast to the narrative, Kitt's flat tone of voice sounded disengaged, and devoid of feeling. In order to cope with her extraordinary circumstances, Kitt drew on the strategies of detachment, disengagement, and abandonment of dilemmas, to regulate her emotions.

Abandonment

The most primal and important moment in a person's life is their birth. As an infant, Kitt was abandoned by her birth parents, and spent the first year and a half of her life in an institution. A family friend (the first man to sexually abuse Kitt) revealed to her that her adoptive father was her biological father; however, she never attempted to confirm this claim, but rather, opted to remain in the dark.

[33] *He told me that my first father, my adopted father was actually my biological father. I've never looked this up so I don't know if it's true or not, but it can be. My mother couldn't have children. She had a stillborn. And then basically, she couldn't have children. So I was adopted for whatever reason.*

Her father left home for long periods of time, and one day, never returned. When her father deserted her, perhaps for the second time, life, as she had known it, drastically changed.

[33] *My father was a real estate developer. He traveled a lot; went away a lot, and was gone a week or two at a time. I had just started second grade. A week or two into it, he went on a business trip, he was always on a business trip. I was out in the driveway, when he was pulling out, and he said, "Love you, I'll see you Friday," or something about Friday. Well, when Friday came, they repossessed the house, and half the furniture.*

Not long after this occurred, her mother was hospitalized, in a way leaving her "orphaned" once again.

[33] *Somewhere, after that happened, in that time, she had a nervous breakdown, and spent some time in the mental section of a regular hospital. It wasn't like a special mental hospital. My mother had other mental breakdowns when I was a child.*

Enactment of being forsaken reoccurred rather dramatically several years later, when Kitt's second adoptive father vanished, and her mother was once again hospitalized.

[33] *We finally found out that he married this woman, and he was a bigamist. The story goes that the woman told him she was pregnant by him and so he married her. There was a divorce, needless to say, and another mental breakdown. That one was the one where she took some pills, drank a lot of alcohol, she put on all her jewelry, and the rescue squad came and got her. Then she came back.*

In her second year of college, Kitt became pregnant; the circle of abandonment closed when Kitt put her own infant up for adoption.

[58] *And then the baby was born and she went up for adoption.*

Many years later, Kitt herself experienced deep depression, when, in another reenactment of abandonment, her partner of 11 years abruptly ended the relationship.

[14] *I started to come out after she left me for a man. At that point in my life I was still a very shy, self-conscious person. She was older than me, and was the more dominant one. She made more money, and I was a very backward person, and was not really expecting it. I thought my life was over. I was very depressed.*

Self-shame and blame

Childhood issues:

As a young girl, Kitt felt out of place and isolated from her peers. According to Courtois (1988), developing peer group identification may be thwarted because intense feelings of embarrassment, shame, unworthiness, and feeling different, surfaced.

[33] *I just remember always being like very lonely, and I didn't have a lot of friends.*

[56] *I guess I was always an awkward, backward person. People said I was ugly. I wore glasses since about fourth grade so that was a reason to pick on people. I didn't have shabby clothes, but I probably didn't have a lot of designer things, so maybe that was a thing. I never really had a hygiene problem, but people would make fun of me. My last name was Shelley and they used to call me Smelly Shelley. I wasn't smelly; they just called me that.*

[56] *Hardly anybody ever called me Charlotte. It was mostly Kitt. As I developed, and got into high school, it became Big Tit Kitt. So I went from Smelly Shelley to Big Tit Kitt.*

A positive sense of self was eroded to the extent that a negative identity began to develop.

[53] *I can't say like someone called me this, but somewhere in my head, I got the idea that I'm not smart, I mean I have a low IQ or something, so I never even tried to work hard.*

Coming out issues:

As an adult, Kitt retreated into the defensive intrapsychic patterns of her childhood, replaying the well-learned message – it is not okay to be a special and unique individual, unlike anyone. This was also the underlying message she told herself as she started to recognize her same sex-attractions.

[19] *First of all I started to think well maybe I'm not supposed to be gay.*

[63] *Even when I was starting to acknowledge that I think this is where I was, what my nature was, I was still always terrified that somebody would find out. Would I get arrested or sent away?*

[7] *Even while I was in that year in college when I went home on the weekend, I was still sort of seeing this guy. I was thinking that that might be the way to go.*

[8] *Oh and my mother called the Girl Scout office and told them, so I couldn't get a job at camp anymore. Somebody said she blamed them for making me gay or whatever.*

[8] *Before I came out to my family, I was worried...that I would get kicked out.*

Childhood sexual abuse issues:

Victims often blame themselves for the abuse, as a way to block awareness of their victimization (Blume, 1990). She cognitively understood the power exchange between herself and the perpetrator, yet felt guilty about not knowing it was wrong "to participate."

[24] *I was torn because [25] he paid attention to me. And I was an only child. I didn't have a lot of friends. I was very self-conscious. I was ridiculed in school all the time. I was ugly; I was stupid, and on and on and on. He was nice to me. He paid attention to me. He talked to me. So I felt this was something I had to do in exchange. And then I got old enough to realize that this is not right for me to be doing.*

She remains unconvinced that her stepfather was wholly responsible for the abuse that took place.

[30] *The reason why, in my head, I discount [the second time is] because it started when I was 17, and it went on for a year, or a year and a half. I feel as though I was old enough and that I should have just never let it happen. I should have somehow screamed my head off or something. It was my mother's third husband. And the same thing, it sort of started with the attention, the buying stuff, and then all of a sudden, I find myself in this situation and I didn't know how to get out of it. So I just went along with it.*

Tess

Tess is a 43-year-old African-American woman, brought up as a Southern Baptist in New Orleans. She now lives in an anarchist commune with people of color, and makes a meager living as a musician. At the interview, her mood was very upbeat; she was thoughtful as she reconstructed the story of her experiences. I felt as though she was seeking affirmation from me concerning her childhood abuse experience, and was looking for insights and solutions to enigmatic issues that still plagued her.

Life is a mystery

An overarching theme that emerged in Tess' interview was *mystery*; in the way she perceived her family members, sexual abuse, and sexual identity. Elements of a mystery comprise hidden clues that must be uncovered and quilted together in order to reveal the patterns. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999), we conceptualize knowing as seeing (e.g., I see your point). Conversely, metaphors that impede vision, express restrictive knowledge, for example, clouding the issue, being in the dark, covering-up, and hiding. In describing various aspects of her life, including childhood sexual abuse, sex, sexual orientation, words such as mystery, secret, hidden, were consistently incorporated into her language.

During the interview, she attempted to recall various mental and emotional states she experienced during her early childhood. At these moments, my own feeling was one of being

drawn into a maze, and then left to my own devices in order to find the exit. I was ultimately able “to see” the experience of her frustration and anger at her parents; the following convoluted statement, communicated these emotions in the accusation that her parents separated her from the truth.

[14] *My family, my father was very abusive to kids, to children. Physical and sexual abuse were just like rampant and the fact of seeing, at the age of 4 or 5, seeing my friend’s mother beat up, beaten up, and my parents’ attitude. I think they kind of cordoned us off, cordoned my brother and I off, because we were really young in witnessing that. So I didn’t hear how a man can do this to a woman and what happens to this man, and then he’s back, and all that interplay is just a whole **mystery**.*

She depended on body memories and flashbacks for clues to decipher the unknown, but incessantly searched other aspects of her life to discover clues that will add texture and substance to her perceptions.

[24] *So I remember, my body remembers. I’ll have these body remembrances and occasionally I’ve gotten some flashbacks. ... My feeling is something happened there and I know that my father was in it.*

Tess was terrorized into secrecy by her father, who himself kept parts of his own life shrouded.

[27] *There have been memories that have come up... like the need to be silent. One of the things he did was put his fingers on his lips and then gesture as if he was slitting his throat. I understood what that meant.*

[24] *He was out of control and he also did things to hide. He would hide his level of his abuse from her [my mother]. And we were sort of keeping it secret along with him. ...he had other relationships outside of the marriage, had other children outside of the marriage that he kept secret and my mother allowed this; it was sanctioned.*

Solve the mystery—end the abuse

Tess learned that her brother had repeatedly raped her niece, causing the wall of secrecy of childhood sexual abuse in her family to be breached; a reappraisal of self ensued.

[24] *It was like **this whole mystery** was uncovered because my mother did not see it or perceive it. I see now that she would block it. **I see now** my reality, my emotional spaces, and my emotional states weren’t validated.*

While she held her mother culpable for obscuring her vision of reality, she also recognized the deleterious effects of sustained secrecy.

[26] *She’s [my mother] on lock-down dude. She is so on lock-down about her stuff. And that’s how all of this madness could perpetuate.*

Obscured feelings

She unconsciously masked her feelings of anger about her own abuse, but they were expressed through projected memories of her friend’s abuse. Tess exclaimed that the girl had anger “behind” it, using a metaphor that indicated the inaccessibility of that particular emotion.

[1] *And I remember this girl Clarissa had a lot, a lot of **anger behind** it, a lot of anger. And we never hung out or talked after that so I don’t know what happened to her. So that’s sort of like this whole **mystery** kind of thing.*

She could not allow her emotions to come to light, much in the same way that she avoided being in the spotlight as a musician. The lyrics to her own songs evoke intense emotions in her, but she eliminated the pronouns, perhaps as a way to distance herself from those extreme feelings.

[23] *I am actually [out] in my lyrics. But right now, and I think this has a lot to do with my with being a survivor and the abuse stuff, is I've tended to be support—like bassist—so that means I'm not performing my own stuff or I haven't performed my stuff. I'm working on recording...songs without pronouns. I understand those, it's just like all this intensity and yes it's like a painting and you fill in the blanks.*

She also used the “mystery” metaphor to describe the experience of having sex with a man for the first time. This sexual exploration did not resolve uncertainties about her sexuality; to the contrary, she was deeply pained and upset by her actions.

[5] *So I had sex with this guy who I wasn't particularly attracted to and it was like so disrespectful and dishonoring of my sexual being, my sexual nature. It was just like wow. I had to look at that like as a traumatic thing, that was a choice that I made just to get-this-over-with. That kind of concept you know. And it was like some initiation or something. I don't know; it was really bizarre; I just wanted it over. **I didn't want to have that mystery** or whatever. It wasn't sacred or sacrament, or you know it was really fucked up and weird.*

Concealing same-sex attractions

Even after she started to date women, she put her same-sex feelings out of consciousness.

[6] *I always felt like I was always **hiding**, in some form or fashion. I remember the first time I made love to a woman, and it was like that.*

[3] *The women scene there [at a bar] was sort of circular, I mean it was really **hidden** to me.*

[6] *Then the people I was attracted to, they were unattainable to me. I didn't out myself as being attracted to them. ... I tried to stick with the safe kind of platonic sharing kinds of things because I think I was afraid that if I told them I was sexually attracted to them they would run off.*

She was very aware of how she behaved with her partner in family settings.

[45] *Queer community spaces are ... where my sexuality is sanctioned. ... but not necessarily with my family, not formally. ... My nephew commented ... about how I was with my partner. He couldn't tell I was with her because it wasn't in front of his face. And so my reaction to that was damn, next time I will have to make-out in front of him. Because it's like no, no, that's just not right.*

Being in public with a lover was also a source of anxiety.

[46] *I just remembered ... how this woman looked at us. ... I remember how that made me feel: not wanting to be despised like that, or not wanting to be looked at like that.*

African-American cultural influences

Historically, African-American families have received a great deal of social support from the Black church (Richardson, 1991). The African-American community, however, shows little tolerance towards homosexuality in general, although on a private level, same-gender relationships are sometimes viewed more charitably (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Tess recalled that members of her church were accepting of gay men, but did not tolerate lesbian women.

[18] *The gay guys were accepted, but the lesbians were most definitely not. I mean the guys seemed to be a lot more open and much more out. I could tell what was going on. But the lesbians though, the lesbians though in the church were sort of ... I want to say were pariahs almost.*

She considered the possibility that homoprejudice against lesbians has its roots in the male-dominated black culture.

[19] *Maybe it's a black thing, the whole thought of strong black women. ... Because I identified as a lesbian, I threatened some kind of male order that he [my brother] needed for his own stability or something. As though I lived in relation to who he was. That's what my family was, is about. The stuff that's going on with my family now, that's out, that's become apparent, it's very much about the male order being maintained.*

[24] *It was real, real, real oppressive. ... my brother and I were not allowed to overshadow him [my father], because children weren't allowed to overshadow him. It was as if he was consciously doing this stuff to undermine us, or our sense of confidence. I wasn't allowed to overwhelm my brother, even though I was the oldest. I mean to overshadow him was unacceptable in the family culture.*

And as she began to acknowledge that her own attitudes about her lesbianism had also been informed by the broader culture, she became visibly and vocally upset.

[13] *But on the other hand, being from the South, it's like don't ask don't tell. I mean like that's a Southern kind of mentality, man. I mean again like looking retrospectively, that's so not honoring, or being authentic actually which I'm totally seeing that being the problem. But for a long time I've lived with it being either one or the other. I can sort of hide like that, and thinking about it, it seems like a lot of internalized homophobia. You know this is like a total survival mechanism. It's about I'm here, I'm queer, fuck you motherfuckers! It's all about like hide and be safe. I mean there's such a level of violence, especially in New Orleans. You hear about people getting shot and killed, beat up for whatever reasons. And this is like that whole level, that whole thing of being in fear. It's very palpable to me even now.*

When Tess' feelings began to leak into her consciousness, she used words that evoked war-like imagery. She attempted to express her feelings about a situation in a Harlem restaurant that made her very uncomfortable. A fellow patron looked at her with contempt, and so great was her anger, that nothing less than a total destruction of "the order" would calm her ire.

[46] *But just to get hit with that disdain. [47] Intellectually I know that [it threatens their cultural ideas of role gender], and actually when I was walking the streets with my lover, holding her hand, wherever we were, it feels with her that we are being revolutionaries. We are being warriors. But we're just lovers, damn it. But then there's that whole component that's about tearing apart the order.*

Tess also expressed the belief that the practice of austere child discipline that is practiced in some black families can become excessive.

[24] *We got hit a lot, and a lot of it was about squelching the spirit. A lot of it was the whole discipline thing. A lot of it was sanctioned because it's a black family. There's this joke, people turned it into a joke. You get your ass kicked, you get a spanking, and that's supposed to be good rearing. It shows love and all that other stuff. ... It's sick that my mother allowed this abuse to happen and that she sanctioned it. It was as though she would sic my father on us if we were out of control with her, or challenged her. It's kind of extreme because she's such a nice lady, a nice southern woman, so refined. But it was just like madness.*

Anger towards male privilege – gay and straight

The premise of male domination over female also resonated in her reflections on being sexually abused and being a lesbian.

[50] A friend ... had this vision of me working through this sexual abuse stuff, and imagined me hooking up with a man. And the reason I'm a lesbian is because I was sexually abused. Why has my sexuality got to be in relation to a man's? It's like that overarching patriarchalism. It's a belittling thing I think, and again, the need to control. That's something people have asked me, do I think I'm a lesbian because of sexual abuse. I can't even answer. My answer has been I don't know enough; I can't answer that: maybe, or maybe not.

She pursued the sexist debate once again by comparing gay male privilege to lesbian disempowerment. The vision she had was one where lesbian identity diminishes in importance, whilst gay men benefit as a direct consequence of their maleness.

[52] I think that with women, with lesbians especially, there's such a disappearing of, and I'm just becoming aware of it, there's such a disappearing of experience and validity. Gay men can be like the stereotype queenish, effeminate kind of thing, and there is not necessarily such a difference in power, and what is societally sanctioned and not sanctioned.

She felt out of harm's way in a totally female environment, to the extent that she could completely expose herself. Her anger, however, immediately resurfaced when she visualized a battle between genders.

[52] With women though there's this intensity and the comfort of being in women-only spaces and having that respect and feeling really safe and secure and all of a sudden you can walk around. I was at a woman's festival and you can walk around topless and it's no big deal. And people can walk around completely nude and it's no big deal. It's that sense of freedom. And how you always have to hide. It's going to be hot here in the summer and we're going to be stuck with wearing tee shirts because some men might attack us, all of that stuff. I think for me the whole thing of somebody defining, trying to define why I have a visceral attraction to another human being—male or female—is fucked up. And that makes a lot of sense.

Laura

Several weeks before we met for the interview, Laura and I communicated by telephone, and email. At 24 years old, she was the youngest participant in the study; she showed deference and accommodation towards me during the entire researcher-participant relationship. When we met at the Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center in Manhattan, there was a mix-up about the space I rented. She was quiet, offered to hold my equipment, and was genuinely concerned about the situation. As I observed her robot-like gait, hand gestures, and speech, my thoughts were drawn to a client I worked with who had similar physical characteristics. I pulled myself back to the present, and refocused on the issues at hand; but when Laura described some of her compulsive behaviors and the rigid rules of her household, the image of my former client reappeared. I recalled how the client's rigid and heavy body movements seemed to illuminate the weight of her emotional burdens.

When I began intentionally reflecting on Laura's interview transcription, I could only picture her as a teenager, not as a woman; the image never changed. I came to two realizations. The first was that I understood that she perceived herself as a teenager. She lived with her parents, spoke about her father in terms of an active caretaker and, had not moved through the emotional (and physical) separation that most teens experience in the family lifecycle. Much of her narrative centered on her high school chums. The second understanding, which emanated from the first, was that she perceived me as an adult authority figure. Iterative examination of the text revealed the extent to which she relied on adults in authority for cues as to how she should feel and behave. The following excerpt is the therapist's reaction to Laura's childhood sexual abuse; one can see the ease with which a position of primacy can be assumed.

[12] *Joan told me that it was okay, that it wasn't my fault. That I didn't ask for it to happen, it's something that just happened, that the person who did it was a very sick person. Everybody still loves me. It doesn't change who you are.*

Although her therapist exhibited care and love, her reaction was more characteristic of a mother than a therapist. I believe the therapist was not aware of the transference of feelings, which was much easier for a third eye to observe; I did, however, disregard my own affective involvement in the reflexive process.

I felt connected and close to the narrative that I was examining, to the extent that I comprehended well, the experience of Laura's family. But in this case, the consequence of "being in the experience" was that the final written analysis represented knowledge that was more cognitively conceived, than it was affectively experienced. That being said, the emotional process for me closely mirrored the characteristics of the interactions Laura experienced within her family.

Rigid rules and roles

Laura's family was the lens through which she saw her childhood sexual abuse, sexual identity, and images of herself and others. Her life revolved around her family, and the family around her. Fossum and Mason (1986) identified a pattern in dysfunctional families that often have problems linked with control and regulation. They ascertained that the rigid rules in many of these families demand control, perfection, blame, and denial. This type of family system promotes secrets, restricts the development of genuine intimate relationships, and effects shame in subsequent generations. The family rules are evident in the following excerpts:

[43] *I had to maintain everything. And if I didn't maintain it, my butt was grounded for two weeks. So if I ever did anything wrong, I was in trouble for it. That was it.*

[42] *My room was never dirty. They could walk in there at any time, find the bed neat, stuff was all dusted; my room was immaculate.*

[3] *I went straight by the books.*

Family rules regarding order became part of her intrapsychic patterns and was ego-syntonic.

[44] *I know I have to do these things; or else I know I won't have any clean laundry come Monday morning when I have to go to work. Or I know that at midnight I'll probably be starving, if I didn't eat at seven. These are normal things now. It's not because someone is telling me; it's because I know I have to do them. But it doesn't feel like work to me.*

Laura described her father as an authoritarian figure and the enforcer of the rules.

[52] *My father was very strict and if things were not done properly, you heard about it. I remember one day there was one dish that came out of the dishwasher, and I was*

supposed to clean it and that's it. I was whipped and totally grounded. He was really strict that way. He will punish you. ... He is the one that carries the heavy stick in the house. He's the one you don't want to screw with. 'Cause he will punish you.

But she was sympathetic towards him, and excused his past behavior.

[20] *I'm pretty close to my dad now, even though he wasn't there for me when I needed him. ... I'm with him pretty much night and day. I still go out to the stores with him like I did when I was little. So we're pretty close.*

Secrecy

Secrecy is the basis of sex abuse (Davies & Frawley, 1994); one common response to childhood sexual trauma is for the child not to tell. Laura disclosed the abuse to her parents in her adolescence, and was met with minimization and rationalization. Courtois (1988) suggested that such invalidating responses lead to increasing secrecy, isolation, and self-blame.

[12] *No one showed me any support or concern. They just said it happened. Like what do you want me to do about it now? It's 3 years later, what do you want me to do about it now?*

[22] *My friends don't know about what happened when I was younger. Only one does. And she's been my best friend for years. ... I don't tell any of my friends more than they need to know. I tell them what they need to know, that I'm happy and healthy, and that's all they need to know.*

Laura did not come out to anybody, not even her therapist.

[40] *I didn't want to tell anybody what was going on with my life, because then they'd figure everything was my fault. So I kept it real quiet.*

Shame connected to childhood sexual abuse

With support from her therapist, Laura told her parents about her abuse experience 3 years after it had ended. That was the first and last time it was ever mentioned in her family, heightening her sense of shame and blame.

[12] *And then in the car on the way home that night, it was very quiet, and nobody said a word to me and they just let me be.*

[40] *I think that by their not acknowledging it, I thought it was all my fault ... I thought that I had done something wrong. And so, despite everyone telling me it wasn't my fault, I really believed it was my fault, because I didn't have enough courage to speak up when it was happening. So I really did feel it was my fault. And that's pretty how much I felt.*

As a strategy to regulate emotion, some individuals avoid situations that generate particular feelings (Linehan, 1993). This particular strategy was observed in the way Laura kept herself isolated, and avoided discussing particular topics.

[21] *Now my father and I talk about everything else but the abuse.*

[45] *Always kept myself isolated. I always kept people pretty far away. I'm pretty much the same way. I tell people what they need to know, and when they need to know it. Not too many people know things.*

She used the same strategy to regulate her feelings of shame about her same-sex attractions.

[1] *I tried to push it away. I didn't want to act like it. ... I had one [friend] that I thought was gay so I sheered away from it.*

[70] *But we're [she and her lover] very affectionate. ... Unless we're out in public, then we just walk side by side. And on the train, we don't hold hands; we just sit next to each other and we talk the whole way.*

[37] *I don't sit down and hug my girlfriend in front of the kids. [38] Sometimes yes, [I'd like to] and sometimes no.... I don't flaunt it in front of anybody.*

Shame connected to coming out

The following excerpt revealed feelings of shame that she experienced as she began to acknowledge her same-sex attractions. Laura insightfully pointed out why she might harbor negative messages about her sexual orientation.

[57] *In the beginning, I was denying it all over the place. I was thinking this is not what a person should be. It's wrong for another woman to kiss another woman or for a guy to kiss another guy. I thought that was very wrong. That's the way I grew up. It's the way mom and dad taught you. And that's the way the church said to be. So I really believed it was wrong.*

Nevertheless, she continued to label her same-sex attractions as “problems.”

[57] *But I kept having these feelings and these problems. I know for the longest time I didn't even tell Joan [her therapist] that I had these problems.*

When she finally told her family, the unsupportive, invalidating responses were the same she received when she divulged her sexual trauma experience.

[29] *When I told my father, he didn't know how to deal with it. So his way of not dealing with it is not talking to you. And not going to places with you, and not doing things, and that's exactly what all of them did. ... Everyone just really pushed you away. That was my worst fear, and it came true. ... And my mother went around and saying, ... “No one is going to disown you.” But that was the first thing they did. Everyone pushed me aside.*

The values and beliefs of her family were reflected in her own feelings towards her lesbianism.

[37] *It doesn't bother me too much, being a lesbian woman in a heterosexual world. Everyone knows. But it's not something I can go around and you know, brag about or get involved with.*

She projected internalized homophobic feelings onto the concerns about her siblings' sexuality.

[61] *I worry about my brother and sister. ... Are they going to be gay, or are they going to be straight? ... I'm more concerned about my brother ... I see it in him. ... Every time I see a gay man, it resembles my brother in some way. I really feel that my brother could be. I'm not so sure he would be, but I worry about him. ... I am very worried about my brother. Because I just see the way he is, he's very, very wimpy. ... he's into all the things that I feel he shouldn't. He plays with dolls.*

Laura described her married life in terms of how it works; words or phrases alluding to emotional connections were absent.

[68] *Donna and I have a nice working relationship. I come home, we cook dinner together; we do laundry together; either she'll wash and I'll fold, or vice versa. We alternate making the bed. So, it's a nice working relationship.*

[68] *We have a very quiet relationship. We go out, we walk to the movies, come back, and go out to dinner.*

Compulsive activities

Fossum and Mason (1986) pointed out that individuals in shame-bound families often use various types of compulsive behaviors and addictions, to cope with their shame. Laura, as well as other members of the family used a number of such strategies.

Alcohol:

[66] *Everyone in the family drinks a little too much. I think everyone's an alcoholic. ... If you give them a case of beer, everything will be polished off in an hour.*

[46] *When no one was around, I would fill up a sports water with bottle and put vodka, or something like it. And keep the bottle around. No one ever knew I was drunk because I could tolerate the liquor so well.*

Overworking:

[41] *I used to cook, I used to clean, do the laundry, help take care of the children, maintain my studies, and did my after-school activities. I was never late; I was always on time.*

[52] *I just pushed and worked. That was where I was. I was at work more than I was at home. I used to work when people were on vacation.*

Overexercising:

[6] *I'd always been into sports but after it happened ... I threw myself into it. I like totally went into it full out and it kind of worked out some of the anxiousness that I had.*

[52] *I did sports until I couldn't do them no more. I eventually killed my knee ...*

Anorexia:

[15] *I would starve myself for some time. I would eat and throw up ...*

Self-injury:

[15] *I used to take a knife and just kind of dig it into my arm.*

[51] *I was running a knife up and down my arm one day, and it hurt. And I began to do it a little harder and it still didn't hurt and I pushed it in until it started bleeding. Every day I would do the same thing over and over again until I could feel it; I couldn't stop.*

Other compulsive behaviors:

[56] *I always watch the clock. I always watch the clock.*

[15] *I used to do damage to the house. Take a knife and cut furniture up.*

Always feeling different

When a child expresses feelings that her own family is unable to acknowledge, she often comes to believe that she is not like other people, and ultimately, the child can neither know nor accept herself (Blume, 1990).

[6] *After I was abused, I never felt normal after it had happened. I always felt like I was different. It felt like it changed everything.*

Looking back, Laura wondered if her sexual orientation could have been a consequence of the sexual abuse, then changed her mind about the plausibility of it.

[58] *I really think that the abuse really made me not want to be with a guy. It was just so painful, and hurt so bad, I didn't want to be touched by another guy. Then I was touched by another woman; and that's when it felt great, not bad or dirty, that's when it felt right.*

Leaving the door open for alternate possibilities, she first acknowledged that her lesbian lifestyle was something she had chosen, but then added that she could change her mind.

[59] *I used to think if I wasn't abused, I wouldn't be gay. For a long, long time. Now I'm coming to understand that I chose, I'm choosing to be this way. I could be with a guy and I would probably be very unhappy, and live my life the way everyone thinks it should be. It doesn't have to be that way. I'm living the life I want to live right now. If I change my mind in 10 years, and want to go be with someone else, I have that choice.*

She expressed a third insight, that the abuse had opened her up to considering alternative possibilities, and that it actually enabled her to accept her same-sex feelings.

[60] *I really feel that if I wasn't abused, I probably would have been with a guy forever. But because I was, I think that changed my view on it, and made me open to the possibility of being with another woman. That opened it up. Now it's like, I want to be with another woman. It's not the abuse, but I want to be with another woman. I kind of went through an evolution process. I thought it was this and now really it's because I really want to. Not because I was abused.*

Phia

Individuals develop and grow over the lifespan, and search for ways to express their inner selves through their relationships and their work (Masterson, 1988). Phia chose the theater as the vehicle to express her inner self; acting is an essential part of her identity. I came to understand Phia's inner experiences through metaphors of the theater, that themselves reflect dichotomies, such as character-actor, audience-players, and the curtain, with its two sides. No doubt, my awareness of her profession, unconsciously predisposed the reflexive process in this analysis, but I hasten to add, these particular metaphors also opened the doorway to the paths that eventually led to my understanding of her experience.

Phia, 49 years old, is a Shakespearean stage actor with an impressive resume, and lives in a suburb of a large city. I pulled into the driveway of a restored house from the Colonial period, which was surrounded by well-tended gardens, populated by a goodly number of cats. It seemed as though I was entering the set of a scene from a British play. I was soon to discover that these serene surroundings were indeed, the backdrop in a real-life drama of two individuals experiencing life-altering transitions.

I found my way into the kitchen, where Phia greeted me warmly, and asked if I would care for a cool drink. As I settled in, she told me about her assortment of cats; she was concerned that I might be allergic to them. We sat on hard wooden chairs at a sturdy, pine table that looked out on nature's showy profusion of early summer colors.

One house—two worlds

Dichotomies abound in the narrative of Phia's life experiences: acting straight but feeling gay; being abused without acknowledging it; classy parents who were also psychotic drunks; and her present household circumstances. Phia lives in a story book house with Arthur, her husband of 14 years; she decided to come out as a lesbian about 2 years ago, in a rather dramatic fashion, just after her first lover spurned her.

[6] *...she was very upset because she wanted a friend and I wanted to have my first lesbian experience. I had a very, very, very bad reaction, and I really plummeted. I have some history of self-injury and I did that, so I decided it was time to tell Arthur; but I didn't tell him who it was because I was still in this particular show. I went to a diner with him and I told him and I was crying and I said that I love you but I have these other feelings, and he just looked at me and he said, "I've always known that."*

Phia painted vivid pictures with her language, both in her poetry, and conversational dialogue. She communicated, with great clarity, specific scenes that depicted experiences of her family life, sexual abuse, and coming out. The following brief, but stunning sketch of the characters that so informed her inner life, laid the foundation for the story line.

[25] *My parents ran with the WASPY country club crowd and they were all a bunch of drunks for the most part. But you know covered up, and with class until you get behind closed doors. My mother drank gin from 11 in the morning on. I never knew that was odd. I just knew that she had a couple of personalities, and I knew which time of day to stay away, and which time of day to poke my head out. I was the youngest of three girls and we all had different fathers, but my father basically raised all of us, or didn't raise all of us. He was mostly gone, traveling. I just found out that he was in the CIA my whole life; he died in November and I found out he was a spy. My mother was just somewhere between Mommie Dearest and Sibyl's mother, horrible, miserable, and she would get very violent.*

The image of her mother was so frightening, that Phia placed her on a movie screen, along with the other two monstrous characters she mentioned. She used the word “scene” to describe the following account of her mother’s behavior.

[57] *It was a really bad scene, my mother would cook, she actually liked to do that, but she would make really horrible things and make us eat them.*

The poem, *Waiting* [70], not only stirred up feelings of watchfulness and caution in me, but Phia’s attention to detail created, in my mind’s eye, a movie-like image; the camera pans the vigilant, helpless child, and then zooms in to show the mother, menacing even as she sleeps.

The landing
 at the top of the stairs,
 familiar, but cold.
 She is perched
 like a little bird
 waiting
 on the dark olive rug
 freshly vacuumed, but wearing thin.
 She holds fast to the black wrought iron bars
 of the railing that spiral cold in her hands.
 She peers through them
 down
 into their bedroom
 where she sees her mother’s face propped up
 on the pillow, silent, but not calm.

Dissociation

Sexual Abuse:

According to Seligman (1990), spatial metaphors can illuminate the individual’s inner space. The two basic elements of theater are the actors—behind the curtain, and the audience—on the other side. Symbolically and literally, a curtain can be used to conceal, but it also creates an isolating kind of protection from frightening thoughts and feelings. Phia’s mother consistently invaded her daughter’s physical and emotional boundaries, placing her in the spotlight of public scrutiny.

[29] *She was big on leaving the doors open everywhere; there was no sense of privacy for me. We would go to a clothes store to try clothes on and she would leave the dressing*

room door open. I would cry for her to please close it and she would say, it doesn't matter, nobody cares.

Phia remembered the physical pain she felt when her mother forced her to take enemas; but the degradation and shame she felt as others looked on, is a significant component of that memory.

[29] *I remember being completely humiliated through the process, and she would leave door the open. I remember being on my father's bed and she'd make me get on my hands and knees and she would give me an enema and it would really, really hurt. And I would be crying and my sisters would be on the stairs, on the landing, looking down into the bedroom and laughing, and she didn't stop that. I would cry and she would make me stay there, and then she would leave and tell me I couldn't move until she came back, and I was in agony. I felt so ashamed and embarrassed. I don't know how many times it happened. And it felt like—it felt like rape.*

A child, who is repeatedly sexually abused, often employs dissociation to cope with the ongoing trauma (Davies & Frawley, 1994); in fact, Ross (1989) characterizes dissociation as an inevitable outcome of trauma. The concept of living in two discrete realities was an accepted way of life in Phia's household: one outside, the other inside.

[27] [Outside the house, mother] *would be playing golf and socializing with her friends; [inside] ...my mother was just like a, you know, Mommy Dearest. Horrible, miserable, and she would get very violent; when my father was home, he would just drink until he kind of passed out. ...But it was a horror.*

[31] *So I had a great dual life—at home and then at school - where kids tormented me until about fifth, or sixth grade.*

Phia found life more tolerable if she avoided the opportunity to express herself about her mother's abuse, and in so doing, kept herself separated from feelings of pain and suffering. But projecting problems outward, in an effort to avoid internal conflict, results in "acting out" behavior (Masterson, 1988). According to Masterson, acting out can be applied to self-destructive behavior.

[50] *When I was abusing alcohol, it just numbed me. It would also give me permission to hurt myself. I would drink and then I would cut myself, my wrist, with a piece of glass usually or a knife, and I was just having so many feelings at the time, I was in my thirties. It was terrible. I felt terrible. I mean part of me felt relief from the pain. The emotional pain became physical pain. I remember I would like the physical pain better than the emotional pain. I just couldn't stand it anymore inside.*

When Phia began to feel some of the emotions connected with her abuse, somatic symptoms began to emerge.

[37] *Things just all started piling up in therapy and I started having symptoms of being sexually abused. My hands started breaking out, and for a couple of years they were covered in blisters that would itch. It finally calmed down as I was dealing with it. I have a lot of confusion as to whether that was sexual abuse or what.*

According to Davies and Frawley (1994), "specific abuse memories are often encoded in specific somatic states...particularly at times of acute stress;" (p. 50). Phia described an earlier time, when she told her mother she felt "itchy"; her mother proceeded to sexually abuse and terrorize her using her hand as a weapon.

[37] *I was all of 11 years old. I probably told her I was itchy. So she had me lay on my father's bed—again my father's bed—and she put her hand up in me, her fingers, and a flashlight and I still remember laying there. I was frozen and I wanted to scream and I was mortified. And I didn't know there was anything wrong with it. I still need to be convinced that that's not appropriate behavior.*

Until the present, Phia is unconvinced that her mother's behavior should be labeled as sexual abuse. However, the dynamics of an incestuous family function “in such a way that its reality is distorted, the distortion treated as the reality” (Courtois, 1988, p. 46).

[38] *I don't know if what she did was sex abuse. It wasn't like she was having sex with me. It wasn't quite overt and I am still not 100% convinced, but I want to be. She told me she did it for health reasons and I felt there were worse moments in my life.*

Lesbian identity:

An actor must train to dissociate her real self from the role of the character she performs. A child, particularly one whose sexual abuse is coupled with an unsupportive environment, will, over time, resort to dissociation when faced with repugnant realities (Davies & Frawley, 1994). An adult incest survivor, however, may lose control of this technique and dissociate when experiencing considerable stress (Blume, 1990). Phia contemplated coming out as a lesbian in her early twenties, but after brief deliberation, decided against it. She then isolated from her consciousness, any thoughts of same-sex attraction for two decades. Instead, and at great cost to her mental health, she brought down a curtain that cut herself off from this fundamental part of her identity.

[65] *Homophobia really didn't really affect me. Maybe it did. Maybe that night when I was in my twenties when I thought, “I can't be gay because I've already just come out of a mental hospital, and my family would totally freak.” I don't know. I just couldn't deal with any more shit from them. And yeah, maybe I would have come out then. I know I wanted to sleep with that woman and then it all went away. The curtain totally came down.*

Phia described a dissociative moment that she experienced, at a time when she was beginning to accept her same-sex attractions.

[19] *Suddenly I was sitting in the chair and these people were talking to me and it reminded me of me, being in a chair, having dinner with my lesbian friends and totally accepting them and their being different. But suddenly it was me being different and it was like—what?—this is really weird.*

She is in the process of integrating this new aspect of her identity with her authentic self.

[22] *I'm just so newly out, I'm just trying on my lesbian shoes and I'm having fun with it. And as she claims her lesbian identity, she feels less and less dissociated.*

[8] *Only recently does it feel like it's happening to me; that I could let it in. Before it felt like it was happening to this person right next to me over here, and you can't intellectualize yourself into it; it just suddenly all of a sudden it feels like it's me and not some other part of me.*

Leonie

Leonie learned of this study through an advertisement running in an Internet newsletter. She contacted me immediately, but it was not until months later that we were able to set up a time that was mutually agreeable. We met in her apartment, located in the theater district of New York City; the City leases small flats to struggling artists at reasonable rates. As we rode the elevator to her floor, she asked me how long the interview would last; she was, understandably so, anxious about the impending conversation. The muscles in her face were constricted, and I sensed the apprehension in her voice. When we arrived in her apartment, a few minutes later, the tension dissipated as we settled into our chairs. She showed a great deal of interest in my recording equipment, and as she focused the dialogue on the technology, her facial muscles relaxed. I recognized the resistance she showed to the impending interview, and I consciously waited for the moment when I could gently segue into the interview. Although she was frightened at the prospect of sharing painful intimacies with a stranger, she ultimately addressed the questions with temerity and strength.

During the course of the interview, Leonie became quite emotional, crying several times, and then regained her composure, and went on with the interview. These alternating themes of helplessness and control were also present in her poetry and subsequent descriptions regarding other life experiences.

Helplessness

Often, when a child faces danger from those on whom she is most dependent for safety and support, a response of helplessness may emerge (Summit, 1983). In such cases, these feelings persist “like a gloomy backdrop to life, casting a pall over most activities and life situations” (Masterson, 1988, p. 70). Leonie’s poem about childhood sexual abuse [61] unveils this enduring sense of vulnerability; she draws an image of a defenseless, frail child, who persistently remains at the mercy of lascivious predators.

*Little lace girl
Never stop to let the dirty men
Touch you where you don't want*

In another segment of the same poem, the vivid image of suffocating evokes feelings of panic, hopelessness, loss of control, and the desire to feel safe.

*Yes the shadows came in
and the ceiling came down
like a body pressing down
Oh my baby baby*

As a child, Leonie had a close relationship with her brother; his maltreatment, at the hands of their mutual caregivers, affected her own feelings of safety and trust, and continues to be a vivid memory.

[10] *My brother stole something when he was 12, and all my parents got together, they all went in a room and whipped him with a belt as punishment. And he wanted to kill himself right afterward.*

The relationship with her mother is conflicted; she loves her, but is wary of being too open.

[29] *In some ways my mom and I are remarkably close; ... and in some ways I hold back a lot, to protect myself from her denial and judging.*

She also recognized that her mother has an abrasive side, which she uses to wear down the convictions Leonie holds, concerning her brother's inappropriate behavior.

[11] *My mom has a very harsh edge.*

Leonie estranged herself from both her father and brother.

[29] *My father and my brother are still inappropriate, so it's a matter of safety.*

The issue of safety to which Leonie referred is not fear of physical harm that might be incurred by others; she is fearful of triggering her own thoughts, feelings, and behavior that would be harmful to her, and that she would not be able to control.

[33] *There are some things I told myself about my abuse. I still struggle with that all the time, especially with my mom telling me that it's my fault, that I have responsibility, however she would word it. It makes me feel that I'm exaggerating it, and what happened really wasn't abusive, that's what my mom would tell me. It makes me get obsessed with images of me hurting myself, I've never done it, and I don't think I ever will, but I get completely obsessed like a broken record or a movie of slitting my wrists. And that's why I stopped seeing my brother because just being with him made me completely overwhelmed with feelings of wanting to hurt myself, because his boundaries are still not good. And so I couldn't take it. And then to have the whole denial part in it just made me feel like I was crazy, so I might as well hurt myself.*

The following excerpts from the poem, *How Can I Sleep* [63], evoke graphic images of her feelings of helplessness:

*My wrists my limbs detached.
He taught me terror and doom.
Waiting for nuclear skies.
My breath is shallow fast,
Threatening collapse.*

Leonie managed her emotions by carefully balancing submission and control. It was also characteristic of the way she managed the stigma of her lesbian sexual orientation. She believed that because she is a lesbian, her safety is continually threatened; yet she made no attempt to modify her appearance, or walk in the shadows. In fact, she gets up on a stage and opens her innermost self to her audience.

She felt at risk walking in New York City:

[26] *There is harassment just walking down the street, in this neighborhood especially, people calling out and commenting on my hair and things like that. I get that daily.*

Working with fellow actors:

[22] *I think I experienced a lot of harassment being a lesbian...in a theater company...I really think it had something to do with being a lesbian. It's not something you can pinpoint or prove. But I think the fact that I'm a lesbian made them want to target me.*

Interacting with teaching colleagues:

[22] *This one teaching job I did, I went and did a great job, and the parents, everyone loved me there, and it was a perfect placement. There were no problems, and in the end they wouldn't rehire me ... Well I think that's because I'm gay and have spiky hair and I feel different. ... And that kind of thing really happens all the time.*

Performing some music gigs:

[24] *I've been kicked out of sports bars in the middle of my set. The owner told me to leave because my lyrics have swear words in them, and we talk about 9/11, we talk about abuse, we talk about other things, and I've been literally kicked out. In one place, there was a wedding party, and I was too dark even though I have a lot of humor in my material, a lot of silliness. And in another place, they just kicked me out. I don't know why. So I've had that. I guess it's on the edge of safety. It's sort of on the edge.*

Finding one's self at a precipitous edge of safety is both frightening and dangerous; Leonie kept herself from further harm by controlling her emotions.

Control

The fear of losing control is often the focus of the emotional and mental states of survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Blume, 1990). In order to make the world more predictable and safe, Leonie utilized the strategy of staying busy to regulate her emotions. As a musician, she spends much of her time on the road performing; when she is at home in New York City, she manages her own bookings, maintains her professional website, plays local clubs in the evening, and teaches in the public school system to supplement her income. Siegelman (1990) is of the opinion that highly obsessional people often think in metaphors of mechanical objects. In the poem, *Merry Go Round Up and Down* [61], so long as the child remains on the mechanized carousel, she will be safe from the men who would do her harm. In the poem, Leonie wields her power; she is her own white knight, carrying herself to safety. But the horse inexorably revolves, and continually arrives at the place of departure.

*I'm thanking the sun
and I'm thanking the earth
and I'm riding on a horse
that goes up and down
On the Merry Go Up
and Down and Up and
Down and Up and Down*

The ability to feel in control of one's emotions may be a key element in feeling safe in the world (Blume, 1990). As an adolescent, Leonie used her ability to control her behavior, as a way to regulate her emotions. She became sexually active, began using drugs, and purposely did not apply herself in one subject in school, in order to find out what might happen.

[5] *I became sexually active right around that time, very quickly. I was making out with boys when I was twelve. I mean I was really into boys. I was very boy crazy. I had a boyfriend when I was 13, and I started having sex when I was 13.*

[39] *I was really good. I got good grades—ultra—except for as an experiment when I was doing drugs, I decided to get bad grades as an experiment; just in one class. I decided to not do well. I got a D, and I thought that was fun, and then I started doing well again.*

Most lesbian women rarely disclose their sexual identity to their cohorts at work (Bohan, 1996). Leonie maintained tight control over this knowledge so as to avoid any negative consequences that such a disclosure might provoke.

[20] *I really wish I could come out there, but I can't. I don't feel like I can.*

In *Ballad of Chicken Shower* [62] Leonie fervently wishes she could let go of the reins of control and loudly declare her identity.

*I'd hold you tight
in naked light
I'd never hide
I'd shout with pride
This is who I am
you are who I love
Any snicker or stare
We can rise above*

Her decisions about disclosure reflected Leonie's particular life circumstances, as well as her unique responses to them.

Confusion

One of the long-term affective sequelae of childhood sexual abuse is confusion (Courtois, 1988). Extremes of emotions, such as powerlessness and control, are not current, conscious choices made by a survivor; they were created in the past, through a combination of the abuse and early life responses in order to cope with an untenable situation (Blume, 1990). The unexpected and automatic responses to stress that Leonie experienced in her daily life, often confused and mystified her.

[19] Sometimes ... if I think about it, I'm turned on by S&M ... It just reminds me about being abused. I don't quite understand it. Sometimes I understand it as a fantasy, but then to even actually do it ... like it would be very confusing and it would bring up all these feelings.

The following lines from *Ballad of Chicken Shower* [62] revealed ambivalent attitudes she observed (or felt) about same-sex attractions; being lesbian prohibits public displays of love.

*Strangers brush by in blurs
It's time to part my dear
I lean in, in a daze, to kiss you deep
Your face contorts in desperate fear
"Not here! Not in public!"
Your mouth twists with disgust
"This kind of love's for the bedroom only,
Besides it's only childish lust."*

Statements regarding her comfort levels in being with women (straight and gay), and men were ambiguous, to the extent that I experienced confusion hearing it, and reading it.

[48] [I feel most comfortable], and most relaxed, and at ease, and most myself with women. And I'm very comfortable with straight women, as long as they're comfortable with me being a lesbian. Except, except sometimes I feel like they can flirt and it's confusing. Whereas a lesbian who is your friend, if you're just friends, and she knows how to have boundaries, maybe, although still it gets confusing at times. It's very confusing. It depends, some straight women sometimes don't know. They just want to treat you like another straight woman, but it's confusing when they're taking their shirt off in front of you and I'm like okay don't do that to me, it's really confusing. I know you're straight so I keep telling myself that, but my eyes see your naked breasts and I don't want to see that because it's just like I thought we were supposed to be friends; it's hard. But at the same time it can be hard to be friends with lesbians because you're both

lesbians and so you kind of think is this person interested in me? And sexuality can run into any relationship. Straight guys, too. So I guess it's like that everywhere. But I'm most comfortable around women. That's not true. Sometimes I really enjoy hanging out with guys for like one night. It's totally different and sometimes its fun to be the only lesbian in a group of guys, or straight people, women, too. Sometimes I find that refreshing.

Harriet

As a result of traffic, accidents, and vague directions, the initial drive to Harriet's housing complex lasted three and one-half hours. I felt particularly frustrated and lost when, upon arriving, I had to search an additional thirty minutes before I found the correct apartment. When I finally reached my goal, Harriet cracked open the door and told me that she was in a meeting with her social worker. I spent the next hour wandering around a Wal-Mart, where I was unconsciously drawn to a display of road atlases, and after some consideration, bought one. After the interview concluded and I was on the road towards home, I realized the purchase of a road map reflected the extent to which I felt off course, and disoriented. The brief excursion that I had anticipated expanded into an expedition; in a parallel manner, at the onset of Harriet's depression, she assumed she was going for therapy, but instead was hospitalized repeatedly over a period of 10 years.

[60] *I had no idea when I started, how time consuming it is; I had no idea what it was about, or that I would get involved in a system. I thought I was going to go to therapy.*

Harriet is 33 years old, and for the first time lives alone in a small, sparsely furnished garden apartment complex. My observations were: Her energy was low, she had difficulty moving about, and her speech and mannerisms were labored. Her weight was disproportional to her height, and the way she communicated through her body, mannerisms, and speech gave me the sensation that she was in slow motion. The sluggishness, flat affect, and short, choppy narrative I observed might, to an extent, have been a side effect of medication she was taking for bipolar disorder. Although the hesitancy she displayed in addressing sensitive questions was understandable, I could not shake the notion that the measured pace of the interview mirrored Harriet's protracted journey toward mental stability and well-being.

[61] *I was hospitalized sixteen times. I was hospitalized sixteen times for depression and suicidal ideation, and one time for an attempt. I feel like I'm leaving the system now. I'm going back to life, as most people know it.*

As a consequence of hospitalizations and medications, Harriet has been physically and emotionally restricted for a third of her life. A confined space has the allusion of duality in its significance (Siegelman, 1990). On the one hand, a delineated area connotes control, proscribed movement, and limited vision. The other referent of a constricted space is one of safety; a place where one can restrain undesirable urges, as well as block the access of others who can inflict harm. The themes of safety and control were consistent throughout the interview.

Safety

Survivors of childhood abuse must find a way to develop a sense of trust and safety in a household whose caretakers are untrustworthy and unsafe (Herman, 1992). Each of the siblings in Harriet's household found ways to avoid the perception that there was something terribly wrong with their parents, as well as to continue the duplicity and deceit that occurred among the

family members. Harriet used dissociation and became depressed; her sister used drugs; and her brother used detachment and denial:

[16] *My brother has always been kind of detached in a way. I don't know how you'd say this, extremely independent; he stayed to himself a lot. ... his whole sort of philosophy of life was just ignore it, don't worry.*

When she told her brother about having feelings of abandonment, he suggested she use his method of managing anxiety.

[17] *When I was 13, my mother told me she was definitely going to divorce, and that she wasn't even going to try to get custody of me ... I was extremely upset; ... and my brother's reaction was basically to ignore her.*

At the point in time where Harriet was beginning to recognize her same-sex attractions, her brother advised her not to reveal the information to her parents.

[12] *My brother told me not to tell my parents. ... coming from my brother, I was not surprised. He's very, almost protective of my parents.*

Incest survivors have a sense that they are bad, and often conceal their feelings by achieving excellence (Herman, 1992). Harriet believed that her sister was also a victim of incest, and described how infallible she appeared from the outside.

[17] *She became like the ultimate perfectionistic student. Straight As, everything, all the activities, she was just like the golden child.*

[26] *I mean here was a girl who supposedly had it all on the ball. Had it all going for her. She had a prestigious degree from a university. She'd done very well in everything she had tried. She was pretty. She had all this going on for her.*

But because the ideal of perfection cannot possibly be attained, survivors who are obsessional about being flawless are prone to other addictions (Blume, 1990).

[27] *My sister had a drug problem. Everybody knew because she outed it. She was classic in her cry for help. She was in college, but she was the one sitting there saying I'm an alcoholic, I have a drug problem, I'm in trouble. She, this is really lovely, was a garbage head. A drug counselor told me this term called garbage head. It basically means that the person does anything and everything, and whatever they can get their hands on.*

Harriet's lassitude and bland affect made me realize how disconnected and vulnerable she felt. As a schoolgirl, her classmates noticed her dissociated states and used them to intimidate her.

[41] *Kids on the school bus used to call me Mars because I would space out like if I was intimidated, and I developed stomach problems. I was the kid, that if you were a bully, I was an aha-bully-her kind of kid.*

During times of stress, dissociation may manifest as "spacing out," amnesia for painful memories (Briere & Runtz, 1993), nightmares, perceptual distortions, and depression (Courtois, 1988). Throughout Harriet's narrative, she repeatedly described having these symptoms.

[24] *It all happened really quickly. I was in school; I had been suffering from depression for years, and it wasn't a secret; I had been going to see a counselor. I don't know what triggered it, but I started having these really intense nightmares. They weren't about sexual abuse. The problem I was having initially was that I thought I was seeing ghosts.*

For child sexual abuse survivors, the death of a significant person can trigger dormant memories and feelings; if they feel safe, defenses may begin to decrease; otherwise, feelings of anxiety and

guilt may emerge (Courtois, 1988). The suicide of Harriet's sister permanently altered her mental state, as some feelings and recognition of her sexual abuse began to emerge.

[28] *I think part of me then said there's something here that's really not right. I guess it says it to everybody. But a lot of people hear of young people dying all the time and it doesn't make sense to anybody, so they don't try to make sense of it. But to me, I knew there was something. It said to me, there's something about it; I know that there's something behind it.*

After the suicide, the family moved back to North Carolina, but the crisis had created a numbing response, and precipitated a negative affect.

[23] *I couldn't decide what I wanted, or who I wanted to be, what I liked anymore, or what influenced me anymore.*

She spent the next five years trying to fit in, and play the role that was proscribed by her family and culture.

[47] *It was all just assumed, this whole life was assumed for you.*

Unable to contain her own feelings and urges, she ultimately was only able to feel safe within the confines of a hospital. She credited her parents for knowing only that she could never be truly incorporated into the family unit.

[47] *The only thing my parents knew was I never fit into that mold. I never fit into anybody's mold.*

Harriet recognized that her self identity as a lesbian, and her ability to disclose this identity to others, was profoundly influenced by feelings of confusion, fear, and restricted options that were characteristic of her family.

[59] *I think it would have been a lot easier for me to come out if things in my family had not been so confusing. It would have been like safer, to just be who I was and not feel like I have to like fight everything off or worry...worry about how I'd be perceived.*

Control

Members of incestuous families often demonstrate similar traits which, when used in concert, maintain the homeostasis of the family dynamics (Courtois, 1988). All the members of Harriet's family used collective denial and shared secrets to cover problems of mental illness, drug addiction, and suicide, as well as the incest itself. Harriet was able to identify her sister's grave situation, but her mother denied the dire state of her addiction.

[28] *My mother sent her to a clinical social worker, and asked the clinical social worker, "Should we put her in rehab?" He said, "That's up to you." It never happened and you know she ended up dying.*

Just prior to her first hospitalization, Harriet pleaded for help, without success; not only did her mother demand she wait for a more convenient time, but also became infuriated when she failed to do so.

[24] *I called my mother from school and I said, you know, I've got to come home. My parents had just moved houses, and she asked if I would hold on for a couple of weeks, then she'll be there, and we'll sort it out. Well, I said no, I can't hold on. I came home and when I went into hospital, the psychiatrist called her and told her I had to be in the hospital; my mother was furious with me.*

During her decade-long battle with mental illness, her parents repeatedly refused to allow her to live at home.

[24] *In between hospitalizations, I lived in a residential program, because when I would go home, my parents would say we can't deal with this, you have to go live somewhere else. So they put me in a residential program, or I would go in hospital, which I did regularly, to the local hospital. My mother would come to hospital and she would say to the social worker, that I can't come home and you have to find somewhere else for her to be.*

Another characteristic of incestuous families is that they have little forbearance for differences from the family norm, as well as for rage and disagreements (Courtois, 1988). The comments made by her mother illustrated intolerance, and denial of her daughter's same-sex desires.

[48] *My mom, she's made all kinds of comments. She's been all over the map with it. "It's not normal," she's said that. "It's not normal, gay people aren't normal." My favorite one was, "We don't care if you sleep with her or not." That was my favorite one. It was like, "Sleep with her if you want to, we don't care, but we're not going to pay attention to it either..."*

She received harsh criticism and judgment from her brother.

[13] *I had been trying to come out. I had told my brother when I was 20 that I had these feelings ... He's told me that I've done terrible things to my parents by the way I've lived my life. I think I took it as though he didn't want to deal with it. And there was always this sort of overhanging feeling of "Oh God, what's she doing now? Maybe this is something that'll pass."*

Harriet also had scant tolerance towards her own homophilic desires. She conformed to family expectations, because she did not feel safe enough to confront her own feelings.

[13] *I wanted to sort of get on this path of just being normal, being 14 and growing up, and it just seemed like I kept having these things coming in the way. And then I think that's what made me sort of succumb more to the role of being them. It was kind of a way of fitting in, because that's what you were supposed to do.*

Jasmine

In our first email conversation, Jasmine said that she was a lesbian and was sexually abused when she was a child. She was, however, uncertain as to whether or not she fit the criteria of the study; the tergiversation of this comment piqued my curiosity. Through reflection, I eventually came to understand that equivocation and confusion were woven into the fabric of Jasmine's life.

She sent me driving directions that were totally off the mark, and which put me into a quagmire of local traffic. I felt terribly frustrated, and I had thoughts of canceling the interview, but with the help of a few kind pedestrians, I arrived, collected myself, and relaxed. When the interview was over, and as soon as she closed the door behind me, I felt relieved to be out of her presence. I was immediately struck with the notion, that there was a connection between Jasmine's inability to communicate directions to her house, and her inability to map her own emotional and mental loci. Before the formal interview began, Jasmine brought a pot filled with her lunch into the living room, and curled her legs on the couch. I settled myself on the floor (because there was no other place to sit), and wrestled with her cat Izzy, who was certain that my equipment was his new toy. But for me, the most striking element in this scene was on the wall behind the couch; a small, empty, cloth tote bag suspended from a large nail.

Boundaries

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) referred to the way we schematize our own bodies and the interaction with things in our environment, as phenomenological embodiment. The container schema expresses the concept of a bounded inner space, clearly differentiated from the outside (Siegelman, 1990). Each individual is bounded and set apart from the rest of the world by our skins; because of our physical nature, “we project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 29).

I interpreted the “bag above” the couch as a metaphorical extension that expressed Jasmine’s desire to safely contain her internal feelings and mental states; but it was plain for all to see, that the bag was empty, and hung out of reach. I also saw the bag as a symbol of hope, that one day she will be able to be comfortable with feelings and thoughts that are, at present, so difficult for her hold inside. Her words articulated the desire to have a holding environment so she can feel secure in her identity.

[21] *Maybe I just want to put myself in a box so I belong somewhere.*

She consistently used metaphors (i.e., in and out) that strictly segregated her affective, cognitive, and behavioral states from one another. I was able to get closer to Jasmine’s experience by examining what she said, through the lens of her metaphorical expressions; they revealed the dichotomous thinking that kept her in a zone of safety.

[41] *I go into fantasy a lot and dissociate and be in my own little world.*

[8] *But I was in and out of the closet for years, for years and years and years it seems like, you know, my 20s and my 30s.*

[51] *And so thinking ... whether I’m in reality or fantasy in my life. Am I fantasizing still about that white knight in shining armor coming, whether it be a man or a woman, but is that a fantasy for me still, am I still 3 years old? ... So I’m still really you know disjointed in a lot of different years that I’ve worked on integrating for myself, but I don’t have a helpful therapy. I think I’ve integrated on an adult level, but 3-, 4-, 5-, 6-, 7-, 8 year old is still, they’re still in me and they’re still acting out inside.*

She also used the in-out theme to describe her experience as a lesbian. Jasmine is “out” as a lesbian when she is “in” the city; but when she is “outside” the city she is closeted as a lesbian.

[20] *So I have been out, but inside what goes on is that ... and also living here I’m outside of the city and I still can play it straight. But I’m in the city everyday, and then when I’m in the city I’m myself.*

I asked Jasmine to tell me what she did to avoid thinking about her same-sex attractions. As I reflected on her convoluted answer, the image of the empty purse nailed above the couch filled my inner visual field:

[9] *I’m in a dilemma now in therapy because I do want to conjugate [congregate] with men. I do want to have healthy relationships with men. I like men a lot. And I feel like that they fill a void in me.*

Her use of the phrase “fill a void” led me to her feelings of barrenness and emptiness; it also accentuated her feelings of ambivalence about her lesbianism.

Confusion about sexual orientation

Jasmine managed the stigma of being lesbian by keeping her lesbian persona distinctly separate from other parts of her identity. According to de Monteflores (1986), conflicts can be avoided by using the strategy of ghettoization, where the individual segregates her lesbian

identity from the rest of her life; this strategy also includes isolating one's self. Jasmine told her brother and sister that she was undecided about her choice of a gay, straight, or bi lifestyle.

[15] *But I give him what he wants, too, and so I tell him that I'm not sure, I'm not really gay, and maybe if I found the right guy. I'm still am in denial about it. I still have homophobia. And my sister, I give her the same spiel too.*

Jasmine also told herself the same story, and sometimes she believed it. The confusion she continued to experience about her sexuality was a consistently repeated theme. According to Troiden (1989), denial is an early strategy that individuals use when they first engage in same-sex activity, or become aware of their feelings. Jasmine has used this strategy for more than two decades.

[11] *I came out as a bisexual ... but I was still feeling like that man is there for me.*

[7] *I started ... sort of dating women; I say sort of because I didn't really commit to it, I was just going to clubs and bars and picking up women and just being promiscuous.*

[12] *Even though I basically have been with women only, for ... like 10 years ... I still think a man's going to come. Like sort of knock on my door and just be there for me.*

Although Jasmine identifies herself as a lesbian, has women lovers exclusively, and is active in the community, she continued to question her sexual orientation.

[18] *I still have those questions all the time. There's still that dilemma and confusion. I go back and forth. One day I'm gay, and another day I'm doubting it.*

Undoubtedly, the statement that most compellingly illustrated her feelings of confusion about her sexuality was:

[20] *I want to be just gay. I want to just be straight. I want to be bi.*

Confusion about sexual abuse

According to Blume (1990), the incest survivor adapts an array of behaviors that keep her from remembering the abuse, in order to keep her secret. In fact, maintaining secrecy is so vital that she keeps the secret from herself. "Repression in some form is virtually universal among survivors" (Blume, p. 67). Jasmine began to have body memories and flashbacks of her sexual abuse, after her father committed suicide. The death of the perpetrator can trigger dormant memories and feelings (Blume, 1990).

[23] *Well I found out in 1991, so that was only 13 years ago. But I've been in a hellish kind of life for 13 years, trying to figure out and trying to put the pieces together.*

Linehan (1993) suggested that a number of responses to severe trauma include feelings of confusion and disorganization. Through Jasmine's vocalized reflections on her sexual abuse experiences, she revealed these particular characteristics in her descriptions.

[23] *What I have found and pretty much, pretty much believe in, not a hundred percent believe in, but pretty much believe in, that it happened when I was about 3 or 4. ... And I'm not sure, but this is what I was feeling when I was in bed, with these body memories and couldn't get out of bed. I was helpless.*

[34] *... so I don't know if they raped me or not.*

[35] *But this [the rape] definitely happened. ... It's more concrete, whereas the body memories its like you know. I don't know.*

[37] *I don't think of it [the rape] as child sexual abuse because I was trying to be older and I didn't think I was a child at that age, I did not look like a child.*

She also portrayed her mother as hesitantly accepting the reality of her father's abuse.

[24] *But also she [mother] goes back and forth, saying "He could have done it ... he couldn't have done it."*

Jasmine was also uncertain about the sexual abuse experiences of both her sister and mother.

[44] *And my sister dealt into prostitution as well, so we think something probably happened to her as well, but she hasn't owned it.*

[42] *I think she [her mother] was abused by a boarder that they had in the house.*

And, according to Jasmine, some of her therapists were also confused:

[35] *And then therapists also say, well that maybe it's fantasy that this happened; there's a special relationship. I've heard therapists say that to me.*

Magical thinking related to incest

According to Masterson (1988), fantasy protects the individual from painful feelings, but at the cost of mastering reality. Jasmine imagined alternatives to the unacceptable and dodgy world she inhabited.

[41] *I don't know how I survived it but I think, because I was able to go into fantasy a lot, and dissociate, and be in my own little world, that that's what allowed me to survive.*

She also had psychotic-like experiences imbued with fantasy.

[30] *I wrote a play, and I worked on it for 4 years, day and night ... I burned it ... it was all about my resurrection ... It came to me, it came through me; it just came through me and I threw it out. I threw all my writing out.*

According to Davies and Frawley (1994), an individual's inability to integrate intrapsychic images of the self with external phenomena, such as pain and danger, often results in magical thinking.

[31] *It felt like hallucinations a lot ... I also felt my father's spirit pushing me always to acknowledge the incest.*

[30] *I kept on saying all I need is the minimal stuff and I will turn into this phoenix from letting go all of my all my old stuff. I felt like I had this Jesus Christ thing, like I was Christ. I still feel we are all of us God. But I really felt the grandiosity of it and that I would be the savior of the world.*

Magical thinking related to coming out

Linehan (1993) suggested that one of the conceptual attributes that victims of trauma display during the denial phase of abuse is a major use of fantasies, to counterbalance the reality of the situation. Jasmine displayed these same conceptual characteristics as she reviewed her coming out experience.

[51] *Am I fantasizing still about that white knight in shining armor coming, whether it be a man or a woman, but is that a fantasy for me still, am I still 3 years old?*

[11] *There is going to be a man for me that's going to just take me off on his horse.*

Connecting coming out and abuse

Jasmine frequently related her childhood sexual abuse with her sexuality; and she consistently earmarked both experiences with expressions that evoked uncertainty and confusion.

[51] *Until this day I'm not confused about the incest so much, but more about not owning my sexuality or sexualness...*

[49] *The thing is that [if I was not abused] I don't believe I would be gay, probably. Well I have this fantasy, if I had a good daddy, I wouldn't be.*

[50] ... *If I think about ... how I did feel attraction at a very early age ... and appreciate women's bodies so much, I don't think that has to do with my father. But I think I've connected it so inside that I almost blame him for it. Like something's wrong with being gay, again that homophobia and he did it to me.*

[18] *I still have those questions all the time. There's still that dilemma and confusion. I go back and forth. One day I'm gay, and another day I'm doubting it. But it goes hand in hand with the incest.*

[19] *It's stressful, I don't feel like I need ... I feel I should know who I am, especially at my age.*

[17] *So I get it here and there, and it's like oh, no, do you think it's because you got raped. Because I'm also a rape survivor, and that's probably the reason. And you're probably really not gay, which goes on in my head, and the reason I'm gay is 'cause I got raped. And my father raped me, and my brother used to emotionally abuse me, blah, blah, blah. So I'm still not grounded in it at 40.*

As I reflected on Jasmine's experiences of abuse and sexual orientation, a picture emerged of her inability to think dialectically, and also to accept ambiguities in her life.

[51] *I've either been celibate or promiscuous; there hasn't been any in-between.*

* *...me still wanting to seduce, being the aggressor on some level, and then feeling like I'm getting abused during sex; not being healed for me, and wondering if it will ever be healed for me.*

* *Not being able to have sex without a joint, without smoking or feeling comfortable with it and that it's two extremes.*

* *Feeling that I am the whore, or I am the nun.*

* *So the incest and the gayness being totally black and white for me.*

* *And maybe that is why perhaps I'm bi, because there is that black and white there.*

There is that middle ground.

* *And thinking whether I'm in reality or fantasy in my life.*

She summarized succinctly and elegantly the intrapsychic image of herself:

[20] *I'm myself, and myself is I don't know.*

Summary.

This section, *Analysis of the profiles*, presented my interpretation of the accounts of each woman's experience. In contrast to the previous section, which contained first person profiles, in this aspect of the analysis I incorporated metaphors, journal notes, recollections, and poetry written by the participants. While my critical consciousness was revealed, relevant literature was also used as a way to keep my observations, thoughts, and responses grounded and on point. The analytic process of identifying categories and themes that emerged from interpretive iteration is discussed in the subsection that follows.