

ESSAYS AND POEMS BY MARY JEAN MEYER: TROUBLED CHILDREN TEACH US A LOT ABOUT OURSELVES

Some years ago, when I began working as an expressive arts therapist in a residential treatment center for latency age children, I thought of my childhood as safe and protected. A time when life made no difficult demands. However, as the children came to therapy weighed down by conflicts, my carefree early days faded and I was confronted on a new level with unsolved problems from my own childhood which I felt had been left behind or forgotten.

The children gave me a choice. I could stay on the surface or, through artwork and sandplay, enter inner lands where I might view the world from behind their eyes, and feel the pain and sadness they were experiencing. In doing so I would come across similar feelings from my younger years. Although I knew intuitively that I must comprehend my own inner life if I wanted to understand the inner life of children, I put up a struggle, attempting to avoid buried content. It was during these difficult and conflicting times that the children came to my rescue as if they sensed the apprehension I was experiencing.

So with the children leading the way, I stepped into lands where fear, poverty, despair, hunger and sudden anger walked about. Through drawing, painting, puppets, drama, sculpting with clay or playing in the sand, the children found a voice to cry out against the injustices of their painful experiences. They seemed relieved to find someone with whom to share their reality.

There were days of growing, days of pulling back. There was waiting. Sometimes children would tell me they were broken, and ask if I could fix them. I would explain that we could begin to put the pieces back together again. Maybe they would feel better about themselves, hopefully they would smile more. By working hard, anger, mistrust and despair could be replaced with an increasing sense of being able to communicate fears, concerns and hopes.

I came to understand that children who had been victimized wanted me to listen and to hear them with an attentiveness their troubles deserved. They hoped I could accept the reality of physical abuse, sexual abuse and other trauma without being afraid, offended or embarrassed. They longed to trust enough to tell the truth, and needed a safe place and

a safe way to sort out feelings of anger, sadness, hostility and fear. What I attempted to do was to give the children opportunities to uncover repressed conflicts, bringing them to the surface where they could be integrated into their daily lives. By being responded to lovingly, and by being valued, children used their artwork as a bridge to verbalization.

Physical and sexual abuse leave deep scars. Expressive arts therapy served as a tool to allow children to participate directly and actively in the resolution of their conflicts, and find appropriate ways to externalize some of the trauma they had experienced.

Alone at my desk, at work, at home, I found myself engrossed in children's artwork, distressed by the anguish and touched by the courage I saw in drawings and paintings. I wrote about what the children shared in therapy, how they were feeling and how I was feeling about the unspeakable abuse and hard times they had experienced. I also kept a journal of my childhood memories, which came into focus.

Although some time has passed since I listened to the voices of these special children, through my writings they remain with me. My experience with troubled children has shown me ways of opening up in myself feelings of which I had been only dimly aware, and I now understand the vast potential of nonverbal communication.

At the outset of my work with victimized children, I was willing to leave my early conflicts undisturbed. But when the children slowly and sometimes shyly, gave me permission to step into their inner worlds, without knowing it, they gave me a very special gift. A chance to recapture my own childhood from the mists of the past.

Can you mend me?

This morning
with sounds
of children's laughter
moving
across a clear blue sky,
the green-eyed boy
told me about
his father.

A tattooed bully
who rode a motorcycle
through
the living room,
knocking down a wall.

Who threw a live crab
into the bathtub
to pick at
his son's soft skin.

Who hurled a glass
shattering
porcupine slivers
into the boy's forehead
never
to be recovered.

Who penetrated his son,
leaving the child
an open tunnel
for others
to crash through.

Can you mend me?
he asks,
looking at his sneakers.

How
do you tell
a ten-year-old boy
that he's broken,
splintered
into a thousand fragments
of torment?

Who let this happen
to a child
before his first day
of Kindergarten?

Mary Jean Meyer

Alone

I was seven
when they took me
from my mother
because
she drank too much
and stayed out all night
leaving me and my sisters
alone.

They
put me in a foster home
and told me
I would be safer there
than at home.

The father was nice,
he played Uno with me.
The mother slapped me
because
I didn't appreciate
how she took me in.

Their son,
a senior in high school,
lay me
on the floor between beds,
playing doctor, he said
until he tore me.
I cried and cried.

He said if I told,
I would be sent to a place
where big rats run over
little girls like me.

I never told.
How could I?
Who would believe me?
His father?
His mother?
There was no one.

Thanksgiving,
Christmas,
Easter went by –
before
they gave me back
to my mother.
By then I was dirty
and disgusting.
Not even my mother
could love me.

Mary Jean Meyer

Happy Valentine's Day God

I'm making a Valentine's Day card
for God,
said the curly haired boy
crayons in hand.
Do you think he'll like it?
God will love it
I tell him with a smile.

You know my mother
will be going up there soon
to live with God.
If I send him a valentine
maybe
he'll be even nicer to my mother
treat her special.
Maybe
God will find
a cure for Aids
and she won't have to go to heaven.

The man who gave
my mother Aids
won't be up there
cause he's down below
where it's hot.
You know where I mean?
You bet I do!
If only I could be a baby again
inside my mother
I'd punch that Aids
right out of her.

I think heaven is a nice place
he shares.
My mother told me
she'll be happy there.
No more throwing up.
No more hurting all the time.
She'll be able to see again.
No more bumping into everything,

and best of all
no more wheelchairs.
My mother will be able
to walk again,
run,
even play baseball
He pulls his chair closer.
and reaching
across the table
lightly
touches my face.
Do you think
God can
hear me talking to you?
he asks.
I believe he hears everything.
Good, he says.

With eyes turned upward
holding the card close
to his heart
he sends his greeting.
Happy Valentine's Day God
Take care of my mother
when she comes to live with you.

Then he turns the card over to me
and with a smile says
You'll know where to mail this.
Of course, I answer
holding God's valentine tightly.
All right! he exclaims
with shining eyes
and gives me a high five!

Mary Jean Meyer

What is real?

I told you about my dog
 being run over
 and you were comforting.
 I even told you
 that I took a piece of his skin
 and hung it on my wall.
 You said you could try to
 lay my dog to rest,
 freeing his spirit
 with an old Indian song.
 You were kind,
 understanding.
 But
 there was no dead dog,
 and
 I couldn't lie anymore
 because you believed me.
 So
 I told you what was real.
 There was a wounded dog.
 I cut off his ears,
 slicing so cleanly
 that
 when he shook his head
 blood
 splattered the white walls.
 I was sent away
 a crazy kid.
 But I told you
 because you believed me.
 It was the grownups
 who hurt me, and in turn
 I cut up their dog.
 Do you know what it feels
 like

when your very own mother
 and
 a man you call father
 do those things to you?
 My mother ate pills
 like candy.
 Smiling one minute,
 screaming crazy the next.
 My stepfather
 stuck needles into everything
 but his head.
 Together
 they cut behind my knees
 with a kitchen knife
 because I lied
 about stealing from a store.
 Now I can't wear shorts
 in the summer
 because
 the scars are so deep
 I'm afraid someone will ask
 why?
 They burned my thumb
 because
 I sucked it.
 They made me act
 like someone their age.
 Sexual stuff.
 I can't talk about it,
 but you know, don't you.
 If only it hadn't been
 my very own mother,
 but it was.

Mary Jean Meyer

Andy, who is six, came for his weekly therapy session a few days before Christmas. He was excited by the increased activity at the residential treatment center. At Christmastime, a variety of organizations either come to the center to host festivities, or invite the children to parties held at other locations. By the time Christmas day finally arrives some of the children are worn out from the extra holiday events, but not Andy, who couldn't believe his good fortune.

When I began a therapeutic relationship with Andy a few months earlier, he had already experienced a very traumatic life. He had been in and out of foster care from the age of six months due to abuse and neglect by primary adult caretakers. He had been moved eleven times from one placement to another, often returning to his mother for periods of time before being removed from her care once more. The little boy's mother described him as an aggravating baby who slept all day and cried all night. She admitted attempting to suffocate Andy with a pillow when he was six months old, resulting in his initial removal from the home. According to available records, Andy's mother told a social worker that her husband would beat her, then she would go over to the crib and slap her son because she knew he could not hit her back.

When Andy was around four, he told his mother that his father was sexually abusing him. According to Andy, his mother did not believe him. The little boy's mother divorced and remarried, and when Andy was six, he told his mother that his stepfather and his stepfather's friend were sexually abusing him. This time he was beaten for making up stories.

Andy came to residential treatment from a foster home where the family was unable to cope with his tantruming and sexual acting out with neighborhood children. Andy's mother had placed him with the Department of Social Services on a voluntary basis, but showed little interest in maintaining a consistent relationship with her son. She had not been in touch with the center or with Andy for several months.

The diminutive freckled face which smiled most of the time trusted me and had allowed me into his inner world—a lonely, frightening place peopled with abusive adults and ravaged by hunger, abuse and neglect. We had been working for some weeks on a lifeline—a long strip of paper representing Andy's life. I had asked Andy to walk on the paper, so I could draw around his footprints. He was filling in the footprints with drawings of memories as far back as he could remember.

Andy's first drawing was of himself at about age three or four. He was lying on a bed in a locked room. The only other object in the room was a bucket with a handle. When asked why the bucket was there, he explained embarrassingly that he "peed and shit" in the bucket because he was often locked up for days, and was not allowed to leave the room to use the toilet. After he drew his picture, Andy stepped back, closely scrutinized his drawing, then quickly added something close to the lonely boy on the bed. It was a furry teddy bear. Andy looked at his drawing again, then drew food and water and a big key to get out of the room. He leaned back and exclaimed assuredly, "There, I helped him. He feels a lot better now!"

In the second footprint, Andy was lying on the floor, his eyes bleeding from a beating inflicted by his father. In the drawing, his father had grossly unproportionate sex organs and was, as Andy described it, "peeing in my mouth." Once more Andy stepped back, looked at his drawing, then added a policeman to arrest his father. "There", he said firmly, "he's gone to jail for what he did to me."

A third footprint showed Andy again lying on the floor, his face colored brown, with his stepfather and his stepfather's friend both naked and with distended sex organs, standing over him. Andy tearfully described how the friend had "shit" on his face, and "peed" in his mouth. Then his stepfather did the same. Andy sat on my lap, convinced, that I would not believe him. He looked up at me and sobbed, "Why would anyone shit on a kid's face?"

I assured Andy that I believed him and he went on with his story. When he vomited, they banged his head against the wall. He was sent to the bathroom to clean up. When his mother came home she beat him for getting feces on her towels. Andy drew separate pictures of his stepfather and his friend, and I allowed him to smear brown clay on their faces so, as Andy put it, "They can know what it feels like to have shit on their faces!" He went back to his footprint pictures and drew a jail with thick bars on the windows, and put the two men in prison for life. In the next picture Andy's mother was beating him across the back with a studded belt. He swiftly changed the belt into a blanket and said, "It's hard to hurt a kid with a soft blanket."

He sat beside me on the red bean bag in my office, his head resting on my shoulder, wondering why his mother hit him so much.

In the last picture of the series, his mother was taking money from his stepfather in return for being allowed to sexually abuse Andy. He wasted no time, and quickly turned the money into rocks which he said they were throwing at each other.

I was amazed at the gift Andy possessed at age six. The ability to go

back to painful times and take some control. At the close of each therapy session he would make some comment like, "Boy, I really fixed them," or "Look how I helped myself feel better." We were working with clay, kneading and pounding, when the bright green eyes looked up and asked me if I believed in Santa Claus. I responded by asking Andy how he felt about the existence of jolly old St. Nicholas. What I had intended to say was that of course there was a Santa, but a small voice from a long time ago pounded at me, causing my head to ache suddenly. "No! No!" she reminded me. "You hate Santa!"

There was a long silence—the silence of a six year old who wants desperately to believe in something good. Then Andy replied, "Before I came here, I didn't believe in Santa Claus because sometimes he came and sometimes he didn't. But he sure seems to come around here, so I do believe in him."

When it was time for Andy to leave, he grinned, gave me a long hug and said he hoped Santa would bring me lots of nice presents. I smiled my adult smile, said goodbye, closed the door and the child I had left behind so long ago unleashed into the room.

* * * * *

An icy cold wind with the sea and the hills in it, whips around and about the chimney tops on the High Street, in the town of Ayr, on the southwest coast of Scotland. The town of my childhood. I stand shivering in thin slanting rain, gazing at a Christmas stocking bigger than me, which hangs in the window of the only department store in town. The red mesh stocking is stuffed with chocolate snowmen, marzipan reindeer, and candy canes. There is a small fire engine, a wooden train, stuffed animals, some books, crayons, and in the toe of the stocking there is a beautiful china doll with jet black hair.

If only some kind person would notice me and offer to buy the stocking so I could take it home to my family. I stare at the faces of passersby. Laughing eyes, glossy red lips, thick mustaches and ruddy cheeks. A man stops beside me, old and feeble but with fine leather gloves and a brass topped cane. My heart beats faster. He is the one! The man lifts his cane and, pointing to the Christmas stocking, rebukes me for being out so late. "You better get home lass," he lectures, "Or Santa won't bring you anything."

It's Christmas eve and my brother Billy is in the hospital. He was a year old only a few weeks ago and now he has pneumonia. Some Christmas present. I hate Christmas! I wish it would forget to come, but it

shows up each year bringing the same hopes and leaving the same disappointments.

This will be my ninth Christmas, and each year I've been good, singing in the church choir, working hard in school and helping my mother, yet he always lets me down on Christmas morning. He brings new books and toys to other children on the street, but not to my family. I don't know why he doesn't like us.

Last year I got a doll with a missing arm. My mother said she was wounded in the war. The year before I was left a copy of my favorite book, "The Water Babies" only to discover that the last four pages were missing. One year there was a jigsaw puzzle which we worked on for hours. It was a picture of a thatched cottage surrounded by wildflowers, but when we got to the bottom left hand corner, several pieces of the flower garden were nowhere to be found. My brother's gift of the book "Kidnapped" was inscribed, "To my darling daughter, December 25th, 1898." "Who," asked my brother, "was this darling daughter?" We sat on the floor in front of the coal fire imagining a little girl sitting in a sunny window seat of a big drawing room, receiving this book from her beloved mother and father who lived in a castle on the moors.

If only Santa would bring us something new. A surprise. Just so we wouldn't be so disappointed on Christmas morning. My mother tried to cheer me up; reminding me that Santa didn't have as much as he used to because of the war. We went to church to try to understand the real meaning of Christmas, but that didn't help me. I still hated him because he didn't care about us and I wished he would die.

The rain has changed to snow and a few flakes blow past me from a deepening sky. Clouds hang so low that if I stood on a chair I could touch them with a stick. December night. Jack Frost designs on the outside of the windows give the shops a white filtered light. I wave at Mr. Pickens, the butcher, who is taking in the geese and chickens which were hanging on hooks outside his shop, and he calls out, "Merry Christmas." I've never eaten either and wonder what they taste like. Slow as treacle, I make my way up the winding street. As I pass "The Buck's Head" a man stumbles out, brushing past me and for a moment I catch a glimpse of my father hunched over the counter. His face is flushed from too much whiskey. I hate him and wish he would die too.

When I reach home the grey stone house, built flush to the street, sits clutched in winter's grasp. The street lamp stands like a one-eyed giant and under it the snow swirls in never ending circles. When I hear children's laughter from inside the house I tell myself that maybe this year Christmas will be different.

My mother welcomes me, glad that I'm home safe and sound. She

asks me to help the younger children with decorations. Orange paper chains draped from the gas lights give the room an eerie glow. There is no Christmas tree. We huddle in front of the fire while my mother makes oatcakes and black pudding. I watch the thickly rolled mixture of oats and lard drippings being placed on the black iron griddle over the fire, while black pudding sizzles in a cast iron pan. In another pot potatoes boil, causing the windows to steam up. Christmas eve supper, like most other nights, is oatcakes, black pudding, boiled potatoes and for a special treat, some cream soda.

After supper we pull Christmas crackers and small prizes spring from the brightly colored paper. We scramble for the trinkets filling the air with sounds of delight. Suddenly there is a loud knock on the door, so loud that stillness falls on the merriment within. It can't be my father, because it's too early for him to come home from the pub. My mother tells us to stay put and she hurries down the hall to answer the door. I can hear muffled voices and tiptoe over the cold stone floor to a hiding place behind the coat rack. My mother is talking to a policeman who is apologizing for bringing bad news on Christmas eve. I hold my breath.

"Your son Billy died about an hour ago," he says in a faltering voice, "I'm sorry you lost your son."

My mother thanks him for coming out on such a stormy night and quietly closes the door. I can see the line of her cheek and tears brim over and spill onto her apron as she wearily leans her head against the little window by the door. I crouch now, my head between my knees. Billy dead, how can that be? He was only a year old. I took him for a walk by the river Ayr on his birthday and he gurgled and smiled when I sang "Up the river and over the lea, that's the way for Billy and me." No more smiling face. No more Billy.

The children are calling for my mother. She wipes her face with her apron and, taking a deep breath, goes back to the living room. I step softly behind her. She asks us to sit in a circle holding hands. "Billy won't be coming back," she says in a voice soft as down. "He's gone to sit at the right hand of God. If you don't cry, I won't cry."

We can't bear the thought of seeing our mother cry so, as tears well up, we swallow them. I hate God too! He takes Billy and lets my father stay.

Later that night, when the house moans and sighs with sleep, I put on my rubber boots and my mother's coat and go outside. The snow reels wildly, propelled by the wind. Looking up, I make a last plea to Santa Claus. Please bring some presents to make my family feel better, just this once. I'll never ask again.

On Christmas morning I was the first one out of bed, hopeful that he had heard me. But when I saw the few old things he had left, I hated him even more.

* * * * *

Abruptly, a phone rings down the hall and I'm back in my office sitting on the bean bag, my head resting on the wall behind me. It's dark outside. Time to go home. I think of Andy going back to his painful young life and helping the lonely child he was. A small sad voice whispers, "Come back and give us presents, let us cry. That's why Christmas is such a depressing time for you—carrying all that hate around in your heart for so many years. Let it go."

I cry and cry. With each sob I seem to experience more of the feelings of the little girl I left behind so long ago. I have a sense of shrinking down and around, around and down. My hair is thin and straggly, my face peaked and my legs and feet are tingling from the icy cold wind. I am overcome by a sense of being small and vulnerable, but I stay with the little girl and feel her sadness.

I'm back on the High Street on Christmas eve, but things are different. The same old man stops, but instead of telling me to go home, he takes me into the store and buys the Christmas stocking for my family. He asks that it be delivered right away. I watch the children gazing in awe as the clerk carries the stocking into the living room. I walk briskly to "The Buck's Head" and approach my father, who looks tired now. I grasp his big warm hand and tell him that it's Christmas eve and we're going home. He comes willingly. As we walk past the shops Mr. Pickens gives us a stuffed goose for dinner. My father, grasping the bird with both hands, laughs out loud. I've never heard him laugh.

When we arrive home, the children are bursting with excitement. "Who sent this, who sent this?", they call out. "It's the one in the window of Alexanders store."

My mother, sitting in the chair with one of the little ones in her lap, rocks back and forth in front of the fire. "My," she says wistfully, "Santa is early this year." And she smiles a deep smile.

When news of Billy's death comes, my mother and father gather us around them. We weep openly. We ask God to look after him, and I make a special request, that God sings my song to Billy.

And on Christmas morning there are new presents; toys, books, jigsaw puzzles and a china doll with jet black hair. My brother gets a new

copy of "Kidnapped", and my father gets a new kilt, replacing the old one damaged at Dunkirk. A soft shawl is draped over my mother's shoulders and on the table there is fine food.

I lean forward on the bean bag and rock myself, clinging to the happy feelings of the little girl from the mists of the past.

All of the children I have worked with have helped me better understand myself. But it was from Andy, and the trust he placed in my hands, that I was able to embark on this journey to the land of my childhood. Without knowing it, Andy taught me a lot about myself and there is no doubt that my life will be richer from his gift.

A Wish for Abused Children

When you were little
and sadness was your only friend

I wish I had been a star
twinkling
in a timeless sky.

When dark lonely nights
stretched out before you
I would ask the moon
to shine in your window
so you would not be afraid.

When they made you cry
and there was no one
to dry your tears
I would stir a cool breeze
to soothe your flushed face.

When they hurt you
and fear pounded in your heart
I would ask the lightning to flash
changing their thick belt
into a soft blanket to keep you
warm.

When they forgot to feed you
and you were so hungry
I would ask the shooting star
to grant your wish
for good things to eat and drink.

When you were so tired
and sleep would not touch you
I would ask the rain
to patter a lullaby
softly on the leaves.

When bad dreams
made you toss and turn
I would ask the mist
to listen by your bed until
your breath was soft as your smile.

When the first strands of light
stole across the morning sky
I would send a cloud
to bring you to a long summer day
where we could play together.

Mary Jean Meyer