Unlocking the Secrets of the Wounded Psyche:
The miraculous survival system that is also a prison

Jungian analyst Donald Kalsched is interviewed by Daniela Sieff

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Unlocking the Secrets
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Daniela Sieff interviews Jungian analyst Donald Kalsched about the survival system a child develops to protect him or herself from psychological wounding, and discovers how that survival system can cause more damage than the original wound.

Introduction

The last twenty years has seen huge progress in our understanding of the injured psyche. Inner space is opening to us in a way that is helping us heal the deep psychological wounds that many of us carry. Donald Kalsched has been exploring the archetypal dimensions of the trauma process. His interest arose out of his work as a Jungian analyst: many of his clients got stuck in their therapeutic journey, or worse, they tried to sabotage it - Kalsched wanted to understand why. He discovered a common thread amongst these clients in that most had suffered childhood trauma and so he started to ask: ‘What is it about trauma that leads people to sabotage the road to healing? What are the systems that come into play in order to help a child to survive psychological trauma, and how do these systems limit later development?’ His ground-breaking conclusion was that the psyche’s internal response to trauma sets up defences that cause immense pain, but that this very defence system is also a survival system, designed to save the person’s life. This profound discovery has had a huge impact because it changes our understanding of what happens in psychological trauma, and so opens the door to healing.

DS: Can you expand on how this process of psychological dissociation occurs?

DK: Dissociation is an unconscious process that goes on outside awareness. It seems to be a hard-wired capacity in the human psyche….like the circuit breaker installed in the electrical panel of a house. If too much current comes in (trauma) the circuit-breaker trips. The painful experience continues but it is not happening to “me”. We now know that the painful experience does not disappear but is encoded in the body and the unconscious brain.
If a child’s life is sufficiently traumatic to require a lot of dissociation, and if the painful experiences have not been made understandable by the child’s caretakers, the child’s interpretation of its own experience becomes deeply distorted (by the self-care system). Traumatised children strive to understand why they are being neglected, abused or shamed, and nearly every traumatised child ends up believing that s/he is in pain because s/he is fundamentally at fault: “I would not be suffering this if I was an adequate person... There must be something fundamentally wrong with me... Mummy / Daddy is right: I am not loveable... I am not good enough...” The child probably comes to this self-blaming conclusion because (a) this is the explanation given to the child by its parents – either explicitly or implicitly; (b) the child can wrestle an (illusionary) feeling of control to combat his or her helplessness: ‘If only I can become ‘good enough’ then my pain will stop, and if I can’t become ‘good enough’ then maybe I can hide my self well enough to stop the pain’; and (c) it is too risky for the dependent child to blame the parent on whom it depends for its survival and who it needs to idealize as good and loveable.

Given the circumstances, this is the best that the child can do and in its own way this process is a miracle because it does keep the child alive when the alternative would be psychological annihilation. However, the repercussions are tragic. The child’s anger, which in more healthy circumstances would get turned out towards the abusers, gets turned inwards and the energy contained in that anger is used to create a self-blaming system that splits the psyche between a supposedly inadequate inner child and the critical inner protector. This splitting of the psyche is a violent process, just like the splitting of the atom, and the fallout is equally deforming and toxic. The split is cemented into the fabric of the child’s developing life, and a (false) shame-based identity becomes the filter through which the child (and later on the adult) will see his or her entire life. Simone Weil wrote that “the false god turns suffering into violence; the true god turns violence into suffering.” The self-care system of the traumatized child becomes the “false god” that turns suffering into violence.

A client that I worked with remembered that when she was four her family moved to its first real home. She had been promised a room of her own, with a backyard in which to play. On arriving at the new home, my client spontaneously picked a bunch of flowers to give to her mother to show her excitement and joy. However, her mother realised that these flowers had come from the neighbour’s yard and went mad. She asked her bewildered daughter: “What is the matter with you? How could you do that? You must go and apologise to the neighbour now!” The love, excitement and spontaneous joy that the young girl was trying to express got cruelly quashed, and the result inside the
child has no way to process the perceived threat, the child's sense of self is repeatedly threatened, and the unbearable when it cannot be metabolised. When a threat is crucial, it can in itself cause trauma.  

**DK:** In terms of the psyche, trauma is any experience that causes unbearable pain or anxiety. Pain is unbearable when it cannot be metabolised. When a child's sense of self is repeatedly threatened, and the child has no way to process the perceived threat, the child enters the domain of trauma. This can happen through sexual or physical abuse, but it can also happen when the child's needs are continually denied, when the child is neglected, when the child is not seen for whom s/he is or when the child is shamed and made to feel inadequate. Anything that leaves the child feeling that the essence of who they are is defective or “bad” or missing in essential value and therefore at risk of annihilation is traumatic.

**DS:** You describe the psychological self-defence system as archetypal; what is an ‘archetypal’ system?

**DK:** Archetypal energy is it is rooted deep in the unconscious and it is ‘archaic’, primitive, and also ‘typical’. Archetypal energies and affects are not easily assimilated by the conscious mind. They can be luminous or dark, angelic or demonic, but because they exist in raw, unmediated form they tend to be over-powering. Volcanic rage is an example. When it pours through, you're possessed. It’s high voltage stuff—let’s say 440 volts, and in order to be integrated into a conscious human ego this high voltage needs to be transformed into a more manageable 220 volts. If archetypal energy is not mediated by human relationship and consciousness, it can’t be integrated into one’s normal identity and then when triggered, it can knock the ego out, so that the person effectively becomes possessed by it.

Because archetypal energy is located deep in our unconscious, the psyche’s way of bringing it into consciousness is to personify and project it: characters in myths, fairy tales, theatre and film portray archetypes; our unconscious imagination projects an archetypal veneer onto real human beings such as celebrities or politicians whom we either idealize or diabolize. Archetypes operate on the basis of polar opposites or extremes; one is good or bad, strong or weak, victim or perpetrator—“fundamentalist categories” we might say. Such figures populate our dreams and fantasies, and are heard through some of our subtle, or not-so-subtle, inner voices.

In the self-defence system the caretaking side is typically personified by an inner figure who swings between being protective and being persecutory. The protector may take the form of an angel, a wise old man, a fairy friend or a great good mother who accompanies the child and gives him strength, but because this inner figure will do whatever it has to do in order to prevent a repeat of the original, unbearable experience it can just as easily morph into an axe-man, an evil angel, a devil, a rigid, cold stone statue, an extra-terrestrial or a terrorist with an AK47. ‘The Phantom of the Opera’ vividly
portrays both sides of this archetype in relationship to an orphaned girl. In the film ‘I, Robot’ the protector/persecutor is personified as the central computer. Alternatively, the personification of this psychological system may exist as a subtle figure that lurks just below conscious awareness. It could be a background voice that leads you to believe that you are not good enough and should not risk exposing yourself in the world. Or it might inflate you with self-importance.

Being an unmediated, unintegrated, magical system, once the archetypal self-defences have been mobilised the system ossifies into a closed, rigid paradigm which is shut off from human influence. The system resists being educated. This leads to tragedy: because the system is stuck at the original trauma it doesn’t take account of the fact that as the child grows, other defences become available, and so the innocent, creative, relational, essence of the child is locked away in a prison for safe-keeping for ever. The energy that should be propelling the child to grow into who he or she really is, is diverted into the process of survival, and living with a ‘Survival Self’ at your core is like living in a prison. Paradoxically, in the name of survival, the archetypal self-care system says “NO!” to life.

DS: For me, a verse of ‘The Rose’, a song sung by Bette Midler, depicts this dynamic in a very poignant way:

It’s the heart, afraid of breaking,  
that never learns to dance.  
It’s the dream, afraid of waking,  
that never takes a chance.  
It’s the one who won’t be taken,  
who cannot seem to give,  
And the soul, afraid of dying,  
that never learns to live.

DK: Yes, indeed. Those last lines are especially relevant because “dying” means surrender to the body—to one’s affects and this means a certain amount of voluntary suffering—something the self-care system is designed to prevent.

D.S. How does the self-care system keep the terrified soul away from the supposedly overwhelming dangers of life? What are the methods used to achieve this end?

DK: The primary method used by the inner caretaker is the self-traumatising inner voice that I have already mentioned. This inner voice is determined to prevent the hidden essential self from venturing into a world where it may be re-traumatised so it
sits at the edges of consciousness and says things like: “You are not lovable (i.e. Drop the hope of being loved because it is too risky)! You have nothing of real interest to say (You can’t give that lecture because you could be exposed as stupid)! The more somebody gets to know you the less they will trust you (Don’t let anybody close to you, because then you can’t be abandoned again)! The result of these inner attacks is often a deep sense of hopelessness and despair that takes over the person—a sense that life is for others and not for oneself.

However, this negative inner voice is not the only method of ‘self-defence’ used by the archetypal system, and although other strategies are less immediately obvious, they are equally powerful, life-denying, self-destructive and self-traumatising.

One key self-defence strategy is to create additional layers of psychological splitting and dissociation. Not only does the child split into a hidden inner child and a protector/persecutor, but the actual traumatic experiences are dismembered so that the experience is not felt. When a jigsaw puzzle is lying in 500 pieces you do not see the big picture. The secondary dissociation caused by the self-care system operates on similar lines. Many abused and traumatised children report a feeling of ‘not being there’ during their ordeals. They learn how to move out of their bodies so that they don’t feel the pain of what is happening to them. They become a disembodied observer; cut off from their experience, from their feelings and from their life in order to survive. They become zombie-like: dissociated from their experience, numbed and entranced. In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson described this powerfully:

There is a pain — so utter —  
It swallows substance up —  
Then covers the Abyss with Trance —  
So Memory can step  
Around — across — upon it —  
As one within a Swoon —  
Goes safely — where an open eye —  
Would drop Him — Bone by Bone.

The self-care system is the “trance” covering the unbearable abyss of the child’s unmediated trauma experience. And the trance comes up whenever the earlier trauma is “triggered.”

Another method commonly used by the protector/persecutor is to encapsulate the person in fantasy. It is too risky to live a ‘real’ life and so the psychological self-defence system recruits the inner imaginal world which can provide a vibrant private space, where the spirit can live safe from the onslaughts of reality. In the fairy story of Rapunzel, the tower in which Rapunzel is imprisoned represents the fantasy world, and the witch personifies the archetypal protector / persecutor who is determined to keep Rapunzel (safely) out of real life. She is known as a sorceress, i.e., a spell-caster—an expert in trance states. Peter Pan’s Neverland may have been created to serve a similar role. David, the favoured elder brother of James Barrie, died when James was seven. Barrie’s mother became depressed and David was portrayed in the film ‘Finding Neverland’, Barrie is describing this episode and he poignantly says: “… that was the end of the boy James. I used to say to myself that he had gone to Neverland.” In other words the film portrays Neverland and Peter Pan as the fantastical creation of the young James Barrie, who needed a safe, magical world into which he could retreat, following overwhelming trauma. Stories about fairies stealing children are another way that this archetypal dynamic has come to light, and ‘away with the fairies’ means literally that for a traumatised child! S/he has taken refuge in the world of fantasy, imagination and dreams. The final few lines of Yeats’s poem, tellingly entitled “The Stolen Child”, beautifully expresses this:

For he comes, the human child  
To the waters of the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.

There is something miraculous in psyche’s capacity to invent fantastical worlds which give a threatened spirit a meaningful, albeit magical, place in life and therefore some hope — but a high price has to be paid in terms of a person’s adaptation to reality. When a temporary world of fantasy becomes a permanent inner state of being, it takes over a person’s life. At this point fantasy has become a hypnotic spell that creates a ‘comfortable’ prison, which encapsulates the person in limbo-land; neither dead, nor alive.

Finally, the self-care system may take the traumatised person into the substitute world of addiction. Instead of real-life nourishment, the system says ‘have another drink’ or ‘one more chocolate brownie.’ I often use the image of a hydroponic garden I once saw that was growing the most incredible strawberries. Those plants had their roots in circulating water that was highly mineralised – it was like the ambrosia of the gods – analogous to the mythic world of pure fantasy. The only problem was that these plants were slowly losing their capacity to root in real soil…in real life. Addiction is similar: you are fed on the mind-altering substitutes of pure “spirit” and so you have the most magnificent experiences, or so you think. But meanwhile you become weaker and weaker. And the more you are fed by your addiction, the less able you become to take root in the world.
DS: Is this defence system limited to those who suffered trauma? Have you met anybody who doesn’t have this system?

DK: No – myself included! I lay awake the night before my last lecture listening to a bedtime story from the inner protector/persecutor… about how I didn’t have anything to say and how my talk was so disorganised that nobody would be able to follow it. That is a minor form of this system and I think that it is universal. Not all of us have unbearable trauma, but we are all injured to some degree. We all grow up in a home, or society, where only parts of ourselves are allowed to blossom, while other unacceptable parts are locked away in a hidden recess of our being. Few of us move into the second half of life having lived the first half in an environment where we were fully seen, mirrored, validated and allowed to live. So we all have some kind of protector/persecutor system, – what psychoanalysts call a “sadistic superego.” If you haven’t suffered ‘trauma’ as a child the system will not be so extreme, primitive or rigid, but it will still limit your potential and prevent you from being fully alive.

DS: How important is it to you to put this psychological system into a spiritual framework?

DK: The spiritual dimension of the archetypal self-care system is increasingly important to me because I’ve become very interested in the process of what we might call “ensoulment” or the way the essence of a person takes up residence. D.W. Winnicott called it “indwelling” by which he meant a gradual inhabiting of the infant’s body by the spirit. In theological language we speak of the “incarnation.” The way that I now see the process is best told through a Gnostic myth: at birth, a spark of the divine comes into each of us. If our childhood is well enough mediated the divinity incarnates. Archetypal energies are humanised and the central archetype which Jung called the Self, sets up residence inwardly and both animates our life and begins to guide the individuation process. But if the child’s pain is too great then archetypal defences make sure that feelings are not experienced in the body in an integrated way. The mediation of divine energies is curtailed. That spark of divinity never makes the journey to ensoulment, and instead it becomes cloistered in an autistic enclave: it is split off into the psyche’s deepest recesses. It is kept safe until such time as the person can find mediation for the pain that could not be suffered at the time that it was experienced.

This way of seeing the process has become more important to me because I’ve been impressed that people who have been driven into an inner world often have privileged access to “spiritual” realities. To borrow a phrase from Rilke, trauma-sufferers come of age in masks, their true face never speaks, and yet all life is being lived – often through the flowering of a rich inner life. Trauma-sufferers frequently have mystical experiences. The benevolent side of the defence system commonly constellates as a helpful spiritual figure. One client, in a moment of life-threatening childhood illness, had a vision of an angel who said: “You can leave (i.e. die) or you can stay in life. If you stay it will be hard and painful.” She chose to live, and it has been
hard, but since then she has had a sense that she is
companioned, knowing that there is something in her
psyche that holds a larger picture of her whole self.
That is very reassuring to her.

It is my experience that the divine often comes to us
through the broken places, through those split off
and shameful places which are almost always
traumatic. When the exiled parts of us are re-
membered, and re-collected, and we can welcome
them into our lives, there is profound healing.
When the banished parts of us return and we can
hold them with compassion, a sense of the divine
often enters our lives as a sense of wholeness.

DS: How do we move beyond the prison of the self-
care system? What is the way through this?

DK: It takes great patience, great perseverance,
and a willingness to suffer the unknown in
ourselves and in the world….in short it takes great
tolerance for feelings and feelings are what the
self-care system is least tolerant of. For the trauma
survivor connecting to feelings is a very
frightening process. So we need compassionate
containers to do this work—therapy containers,
friendship containers, religious containers.

Everyone who has suffered trauma has a story of
their own suffering. The problem is that the
original story—as told by the child to itself—is a
false, self-blaming, shameful victim/persecutor
story. Remember that the child who is looking for
meaning to explain his or her pain creates an
almost universal story: “It hurts because I am not
good enough, or have failed, or am bad.” Such a
partial and distorted story prevents the now grown
child from experiencing the unbearable pain that is
part of the real story. It also prevents the grown
child from taking any personal responsibility for
the healing of trauma’s wounds. Thus the story
has to be examined and re-assessed, most
commonly in the context of psychotherapy.

In the development of protector/persecutor system
the unbearable and unmediated suffering of the
child got turned to violence, directed inwards. The
process of moving beyond the prison walls depends
on transforming that violence back into its rightful
suffering. To do that requires a lot of grief work in
relationship with a trusted other, and this is tricky
because the self-care system has a whole story
about the “grievances” you have suffered and how
real people are not trustable etc. Mind you, these
grievances make a person quite miserable, but it’s a
comfortable, familiar misery—neurotic suffering as
contrasted to everyday misery, as Freud would say.
So in order to free one self of the prison of the self-
care system one has to distinguish between true
grief and false, or superficial, grief.

DS: What is the difference between true and
false grief?

DK: In therapy, when you start working with a
traumatised person, you have to help the person
separate the chronic pain of the trauma-story they
come with from the often acute pain that follows
when the innocent part of themselves is allowed
back into relationship. We live in a very
“therapeutic culture” these days and almost
everyone has a story about how they have been
victimized. The person is a survivor of incest, or
the child of an alcoholic, or a victim of physical
abuse. Sometimes the person doesn’t have a
trauma-story at all; instead he has an overriding

RS: No one lives his life.
Disguised since childhood,
haphazardly assembled from voices and fears
and little pleasures,
we come of age as masks.

Our true face never speaks.

Somewhere there must be storehouses
where all these lives are laid away
like suits of armour or old carriages
or clothes hanging limply on the walls.

Maybe all the paths lead there to the
repository of un-lived things.

And yet, though you and I struggle against
this deathly clutch of daily necessity,
I sense there is this mystery
All life is being lived.
Who is living it then?

Is it the things themselves, or something
waiting inside them, like an unplayed
melody in a flute?

Is it the winds blowing over the waters?
Is it the branches that signal to each other?
Is it the flowers interweaving their fragrances
or streets, as they wind through time?

Is it the animals, moving, or the birds, that
suddenly rise up?

Who lives it then?
God, are you the one who is living life?

Rainer Maria Rilke; from Rilke’s
Book of Hours: Love Poems to God
Translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna
Macy, Riverhead Books 2005
conviction of his own inadequacy—his own badness. In other words at some level the person feels a victim to him/her self. The conviction of badness, or the externally focused trauma-story, supposedly explains the person’s pain, and as such it constitutes the “meaning” s/he (or others) has made out of the suffering. The pain that surrounds this “meaning” is what I call ‘false grief’. It is often endless and chronic, therefore worse than the genuine, but split-off and hidden pain that surrounds the original childhood suffering.

In psychotherapy, sharing and processing the pain of that self-care story is always the first step. Necessary trust is often established in this way— an important first stage in healing. But often the therapy gets bogged down at this stage because it’s not the whole story and, it turns out, is actually designed (by the self-care system) to prevent the deeper, original pain from surfacing. In the words of Emily Dickinson, the defensive system “covers the abyss with trance” and the trauma story of this first stage in healing is central to that trance. Hidden deeply behind the feeling of badness, or the conviction of being an innocent victim, is the more profound original pain; the pain of the threatened part of the child’s psyche that had to go into hiding for fear of annihilation. It is the pain of the “lost heart of the self” that was innocent and yet suffered terribly. True grief really doesn’t come up until that innocent walled off part of us is able to come back into consciousness. Remember that the self-care system’s whole reason for being is to isolate that innocent regressed part of the self from the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” When we open to that deeper pain with self-compassion, we begin to cry the tears that bring real healing.

**DS: As I understand it, the trance created by seeing ourselves as a victim to either our own innate badness or to an external source, also prevents healing because it shields the inner protector/persecutor from our awareness. Thus obscured, the protector/persecutor can hide in the shadows, only to return as soon as some supposed threat is detected. My understanding is that any kind of victim or blame story allows us to avoid the disturbing fact that it is our own traumatised psyche which has become self-traumatising, and that change will only become possible when we can begin to see our own inner protector/persecutor, appreciate the survival value of that system, but accept that it is outdated and take the risk of letting it go. Healing only becomes possible once we take responsibility for the life-denying, limiting and self-destructive system that we have constructed, and when we grieve for the trauma that our self-created defences have inflicted upon ourselves.**

**DK: That’s very well expressed and original. And there’s something else that hides in the shadows of the system, and that’s an authentic experience of one’s own innocence. The trauma survivor may tell a story about their suffering that includes “innocence” but it’s a kind of righteous or malignant innocence and often they don’t really believe it. Underneath they feel convinced of their own innate badness. Often they can see goodness and innocent suffering in others but not in themselves. If they become therapists they are often passionate advocates for the injustice and innocence in others but can’t get to it in themselves.**

So to come back to your point, it’s hard to move away from blaming either others, or from blaming our supposed ‘innate’ badness, and to find the courage and strength to move towards a place where we take responsibility for our own pain instead. Moreover, this vital shift is only possible if we are able to look at ourselves with deep compassion and forgiveness, realising that our collusion with the self-traumatising system was the only way that we could ensure our psychological survival and the only way that we could protect the animating spark of life at our core.

In other words, if we remain focused on our badness, or on how we have been a victim to others meanness in the external world, we remain stuck in a false grief that goes nowhere. Then we don’t get to our more profound wounds: both the wounds that were unbearable to us because we were so little, and the wounds that our own self-care system inflicted upon us to secure psychological survival. Without opening to these depths we remain in the prison erected by the self-care system. However, when we are strong enough to open to the original pain of our innocent self, and when we can take responsibility for how we have participated in the cover-up of the original pain (how we have colluded with the self-care system, as it were), we can open the doors to the lost spark of life that is imprisoned within us. Then we feel true grief and we set out on the path of real healing. And here’s the best part. If we can suffer that deeper pain—really allow it in, and share it with another, then an unexpected dimension of the psyche opens to us. A powerful healing presence makes itself felt…a sense of real love and gratitude. Almost all mythology shows that the embracing of true suffering brings a revelation of the divine. This is why (mythologically) the Christ child, the child of light, is always born at the darkest time of the year in the least likely place, a stable. And why this same Christ figure finds a resurrected life in the Spirit after volunteering to suffer real pain—even death—in the service of truth.
DS: In order to reach that place of new life or healing, the whole story on which the person has built his or her life, and the system that enabled the child to survive, has to be dismantled. That is terrifying. It does not change without enormous resistance, pain, fear and a huge fight.

DK: Yes, and it happens one step at a time; there is no quick way through. A person comes into therapy because something has happened that makes her /him realise that s/he cannot continue as s/he is – something needs to change. But understandably, s/he is very ambivalent about giving up the defensive belief system that has ensured survival.

And this system is most often challenged when the patient actually starts to care about the therapist….or shall we say that the little girl/boy inside the patient, hidden from view, starts to make a new attachment to a real person beyond the survival system. When this happens, the protector/persecutor is challenged, and the self-defence system goes into over-drive. It will try to sabotage the therapy and the relationship with the therapist – anything to regain control. For example, I was about to go on holiday and a client, who I had worked with for a year, finally let down her self-sufficient, fortress-like defences. With tears in her eyes she said that she would miss me, and her therapy, while I was away. In voicing this the client moved beyond the clutches of her self-sufficient but isolating protector/persecutor. She took the risk of allowing her wounded, vulnerable and previously hidden child to come to the surface.
and to express its feelings for another person. We then discussed ways that she could keep connected to me during my holiday, but that night her protector/persecutor returned with a vengeance: she wrote me a long letter explaining that she could not continue therapy because she had become “too dependent” on me. Through that letter a panicking protector/persecutor tried to backtrack by slamming the door shut on our relationship. The self-care system went all out to prevent this woman from living her need to engage in meaningful relationships, because as a child the only way that she could survive was to bury that need.

In this case we were able to work through the attempted sabotage, but this kind of dynamic runs though the lives of almost everybody who has suffered trauma, and in some cases the protector/persecutor system does manage to sabotage the journey into a fuller life – whatever that fuller life might be. Then the person is caught in a tragic and repetitive, self-traumatising cycle. Even with those who do successfully challenge the system, every step of the journey involves a huge inner struggle, and enormous fear, requiring tremendous courage.

DS: You describe the process of healing as one that happens in stages. Can you describe these stages?

DK: Let me try to illustrate the broad outline of these stages through the Grimm’s fairy story The Woman Without Hands. This story is a graphic illustration of how suffering is turned into violence. The central image is a young woman whose father chops off her hands in order to escape possession by the devil. The young woman is thus traumatically dismembered, cut off from her own wholeness, her own creativity—her own agency—dissociated we might say.

In the fairy story, the King then makes the handleless maiden a pair of silver hands – substitutes for what she has lost. Thus, she is half-way healed. She and the king live together and a child (representing the true potential in this situation) is born. Similarly, when a client risks letting down her defensive guard and begins to hand over her self-defence system to the therapist, she is accepting the equivalent of silver hands. These silver hands, given by the therapist, help to show the client that there is a healthier way to protect herself; one which will also allow her to live a more feeling, full and vibrant life.
However, because these silver hands come from the therapist they are only of use for a limited period of time and eventually the client has to risk giving up the silver hands in order to grow her own human hands. This transition is fraught with difficulties. The silver hands given to the client by the therapist are not easily surrendered and they are prone to being hijacked by the self-care system in order to keep the client ‘safely’ away from her own unique life.

The self-care system is often powerful enough to seduce the therapist into its fantasy world. When you work with somebody and you see the life-denying system in which they are entangled, you want to help them, but it is all too easy to be pulled into an illusionary world and to keep feeding the silver hands.

For example, I had a client who would bring me a nugget of gold every session; either an archetypal dream, or a profound piece of poetry. I was so excited by the material that I became bewitched. I was unwittingly entranced by a symbolic feast which was full of apparent meaning and growth, but which was actually a system that had been ‘designed’ to keep her out of her life. When I noticed that nothing was changing in my client’s outer life, and began to confront her, all hell broke loose. She frequently flew into a rage; threw my books off shelves and hurled coffee cups against the walls of my office. Eventually, on MY invitation, she called me at home at 3am one night, after a terrifying dream and in a suicidal state. We talked about her dream, but every time I helped her get to a calmer place she would revert back and threaten to kill herself. Eventually something in me snapped. I said: ‘Your life is a sacred gift as far as I am concerned, but what you do with it is your choice. I am not here to try to talk you into living!’ Then I hung up. Needless to say I had a sleepless night wondering whether to call her back or whether to call the police or an ambulance. I waited anxiously the next morning to see if she would be there for her appointment. But when she arrived she was much calmer and she thanked me for giving her power back. I had finally seen the illusion that her self-care system had woven around both of us to keep her (safely) out of life, and I had refused to participate in it. That had then opened the door for her to start to grow her own hands, but it was not an easy or pleasant process to be part of!

This transition from the artificial silver hands, to one’s own human hands is a “moment of urgency” and in this fairy story it begins when the King must go away on a long journey. Through a series of betrayals and misunderstandings, the handless maiden is now exiled to the forest where she and her son (named Sorrowful) live in genuine misery and poverty, cared for by angelic beings—again, support from the imaginal psyche. All the while, the King is longing for her but cannot find her and all the while, she is slowly growing her own hands.

In many cases, in the work with trauma survivors, there is a series of crises like the one I’ve just described in which the patient feels deeply betrayed by the therapist. Feelings of betrayal can result from the therapist saying something that the patient does not want to hear, or they can be constellated when the apparent “promise” of endless love and togetherness is ruptured. Perhaps the therapist leaves town like the King did. Perhaps the therapist is inattentive or does, or says, something that reveals the professional aspect of the relationship. Often this “truth” about the relationship—that it is both loving and professional—is too much for the child in the patient to bear. Whatever the trigger the patient then withdraws. This withdrawal is engineered by the self care system, the caretaking part of which now fills the patient with “I told you so’s” and “how could you be so stupid” etc. If the bond between the therapeutic partners is strong enough these ruptures can be repaired and each time, an increment of the previously unbearable pain is experienced and becomes part of the patient’s relational life. With each such rupture and repair, the patient, now with a deeper connection to her child “Sorrowful”, grows her own hands back. In others words, the previous dissociation is being bridged.

**DS:** You have said that not everybody who has suffered trauma can make this tortuous journey into life. What is the difference between those who can and those who can’t?

**DK:** I’ve often wondered that myself. Some people will never be able to surrender the world created by the self-care system. Giving up what has saved them in trauma, and reconnecting with the underlying pain, is too much for them to bear. They are happy with a partial healing and with the silver hands provided by an external support system and who can blame them. Still others make the full journey into their own unique lives. Certainly one of the important factors is whether a therapist is present who can see through a relational process with them. It’s not easy and we are only just beginning to know how to do this.
As far as internal factors, there is something about will… something innate… a creative passion for life and desire to live all of it. There are also environmental factors in early development. Has there been anybody on the side of life who could offer the child the love that was needed? You don’t need many people to keep that possibility alive for a child: an uncle, or a good teacher who saw the child who wanted to live. And that spark of life doesn’t need a human being to keep it alive; it can find a safe haven through a special loved animal, through music, art, nature. However, in order to make the tortuous journey into life a person does need to have had some experience where that spark has been seen by another person.

DS: You use fairy stories to illuminate the creation and dissolution of the self-care system, however, fairy stories have ‘happy-ever-after’ endings. Aren’t they misleading? My experience is that even if you go through one crisis where you successfully take on the protector/persecutor, you are very lucky if you get through six months without coming face-to-face with it again!

DK: Fairy stories are a wonderful vehicle for talking about the struggle of the soul through life, and even though they may not be “realistic” I think that we all need stories with happy endings. The happy ending is like the vanishing point in a painting which gives it perspective. We may never get there, but it is the goal and it helps to know where we are heading. The happy ending is peace where there was war… freedom where there was imprisonment… wakefulness where there was trance… love where there was hate… wholeness where there was fragmentation, suffering where there was violence.

Sure, the protector/persecutor does keep returning if you are on a journey of growth, and the happy ending is misleading if it is understood in a superficial way or as a by-pass of the struggle with darkness and evil. But every time you are successful in challenging the self-care system your world expands, you take one more step towards wholeness, your experience becomes a little fuller, and another glimmer of the divine spark returns to animate your life.

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Reference

1 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* Translated by Friedhelm Kemp, Munich 1952, p104

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Awakening Slave by Michelangelo 1532?