

## Reflective Article

# The Cold Kiss

## My journey with relational and developmental trauma

By John Dunlea



*This essay explores my journey with relational and developmental trauma presented and explored visually. I do this knowing that my personal work serves me well in my empathy and ability to meet my clients where they are at on their own journey. I use mixed media, to share my life experience with you, my reader, when no words will express it adequately. I have learnt personally that haptic and artistic expression help hugely in healing trauma. Thankfully my training to become a counsellor facilitated this.*

### Introduction

A traumatic experience is something that happens to you, a horrible, overwhelming, and psychological event that leaves you traumatised,” (Hedges, 2015, pp. 23-24). “The effects of trauma are about loss of connection to oneself, to one’s body, to one’s family, to others, and to the world around”, according to Levine (2008, p. 9). Freud was one of the first to identify that trauma often originated in these relationships, and postulated that “given a favourable relational situation, a person could gain access – through inter-personal mirroring processes – to the ways that her internal world of experience had become structured and to the ways she could free herself from her developmentally structured bondage.” (Hedges, 2015, p. 22). I have used my therapist, my trainer and my fellow students for this inter-personal mirroring.

### Vulnerability

I think that allowing myself to be vulnerable was my first step towards healing trauma as it called for an amount of courage to take the leap of faith. I am so proud of myself for having the courage to listen to my soul and my body that knew the benefits that would come from it. I acknowledged the importance of it for me by having the words of a song which epitomise the benefit of vulnerability tattooed on my back.



### Birth

Let me tell you first that I felt lost and speechless for much of my early and later life. I had a difficult birth and my mother was forty-five with five children under seven, and she was unhappy. She was pre-disposed to post-natal depression. Here is a representation in clay of how I felt.



Bowlby's definition of attachment as "a deep, affectionate, close and enduring relationship" (Bernstein, Clarke-Stewart, Roy, Sruell and Wickens, 1994, p. 61) is one I never experienced. According to Fisher, (2020) my attachment style was established within the first year. This finding frightens me in that it possibly took so little time for me to become aware that I was emotionally abandoned. I have a felt sense of lying in a bed on my own, my mother distant and emotionally neglectful of me as a child.



### Connection

On the other hand, my first memory of a meaningful relational connection was with a young neighbour, Miriam. The same age and always together, it gave my first feeling of being liked, valued, cared for and having worth.



I needed a Dad to hold me too, to cherish me, to play with me, to miss me when I wasn't there. But I needed what was impossible to receive. My father, a factory labourer, was poor but I knew something more important than money was missing – human connection. I did not have a name for it then. My father for a period did engage with me. My fondest memory was when he would sit me in his lap, playfully dropping me through his knees, for which he had a song. "Who's the daddy's baba?, Who's the daddy's pet? Who's the daddy's baba and we are not downhearted yet".





## Terror

He changed however, and I was lost. It seemed so immediate, and I remember vividly and somatically my first experience of being terrified by him. While teaching my older sister and me to tell the time, I was struggling. His face turned to fury. I can recall my body sense of disconnecting from him and what was happening. I had never experienced this before and felt so terrified. Towering above me he did not strike but I felt he wanted to. Standing there, a terrified child not knowing what I had done wrong, I did not recognise him as he had become a monster. From then, I knew that I had to avoid him AND my mother. I had no one to flee towards, was too little to fight and was numb with fear.

Here's a representation of my fear at his anger. In doing the creative work for this assignment I sat with my son and we created this clay piece. He said: even monsters can have families."



## Healing

My son, went on to create another figure and he made a comment that touched my heart."

"My Dad is sturdy; he doesn't get knocked over easy. My personal development work might be having an effect.



*I turned sixteen when my father died suddenly. It filled me full of rage and not until later in life did I realise I had been traumatised by his death*

I strive today to create a home environment that is without trauma for my family, maintaining connection with my siblings and in-laws. There is healing in this for me. This is my family today in our little nest.



## School

School for me was days of anxiety, fear and violence. I was a child being beaten and terrorised by adults within the home and at school and I had no-one to turn to for safety.



School was a continuation of my experience of trauma. 'Can you not see me Mam? I said one day in the school shed' "Shut up and eat the food I bought you" was her reply.



My experience of physical and psychological abuse at home and at school contributed to my constant hyper vigilance. I was a beaten child. I remember my father telling the Religious Brothers to beat me as often as they felt necessary.”



### Death

I turned sixteen when my father died suddenly. It filled me full of rage and not until later in life did I realise I had been traumatised by his death, which contributed to my own predisposition to addiction.

“I was expected and encouraged to kiss my father when he was laid out in the morgue despite the fractured nature of our relationship.” I created this piece which I call “The Cold Kiss”.



My father’s death was an introduction to my relationship with alcohol. Schore (2001, p. 1) reminds us that early abuse negatively impacts the developmental trajectory of the right brain. This can result in a compromised development of the ‘brain’s self-soothing centre’ in the right brain leading to later difficulty in tolerating stress and strong emotion (Fisher, 2010, p. 2). Alcohol helped me sooth my difficult emotions. I medicated my hurt and for the next twenty years I subjected myself to self-harm through alcohol, prescription drug abuse and two suicide attempts. I was so full of shame, unresolved anger and hurt.

### Counselling

While in AA I went into counselling and I distinctly remember a sense of connection. I vividly recall the first time I felt my armour soften, my body relaxed, then crumpled and the tears of my inner child flowed. It was a combination I believe, of being listened to without judgement and having, unknown at the time, a protective factor that Holmes (2001, p. 28) calls a ‘reflexive function’, the ability to talk about past pain which he believes will lead to secure attachment irrespective of trauma.

In those moments of connection, I was welcomed, accepted, understood, and felt seen as a wounded human being. It helped assure me that everything I had learned regarding relationship from my parents was ill founded. Thankfully I also received the message that as a person I was valued. Nothing was expected from me, I was not being judged and that the therapist wanted a mutual open and honest relationship. I was so raw I feel had I been missed and unwelcomed, I would have left. Only my God knows where I would have finished up.



With my counsellor it was such a relief to acknowledge the part of me that was a wounded, weary, traumatised, lost child. I was lots of parts, which Schore (2001, P.4) notes are a psychological consequence of trauma.

Over time through counselling, I changed but not before I accepted who I was. I felt I no longer wanted to drift, or die, but I needed to find my purpose in life. I started to trust more in my organismic value as Rogers termed it (Mearns, Thorne and McLeod, 2013). I knew what was good for me. I recognised that unknowingly as a child, even as a foetus, I had been subject to negative conditions of worth. I introjected that I was worthless.

### Purpose

Rogers said in relation to personal change that finding commitment to purpose and to meaning in life is one of the significant elements of change. It is only when the person decides I am someone worth being, committed to being myself that change becomes possible (Farlex Inc, 2017). My desire was to be the best version of myself, described by Maslow (2013, p. 7) as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.” I believe now that despite all the damage that was inflicted on me by parents and perpetuated by educators etc. they never fully extinguished the internal flame that was the desire to be the best version of myself.

My wife who is my best friend has walked this journey of recovery with me. Her love and support and that of my immediate family have made the struggle bearable and rewarding. Our relationship has been an enormous aspect in my healing as a person. She saw something in me that I could not see and even when I begged her to abandon me, she refused. And so it started with two.



We weathered good times and bad times together.



Then came a little girl to share all the firsts.



Then along came a fourth and made our house a home.



### Spirituality

As well as my family, my spirituality is a source of strength. The God of my childhood was the Higher Power I found in Alcoholics Anonymous. When I could not carry the

burden, rather than revert to alcohol and drugs, I learned to turn it over to the God of my understanding until I felt strong enough to carry it alone. I realise that this may not be everybody's way, it is mine. "The God of my childhood; the God of my understanding; A true Father, forgiving, loving, welcoming, caring, defending, understanding."



### Education

Following a redundancy at forty-eight I returned to education to study Social Care. I started learning theories of personality and development. I put my learning into practice, and it felt right but was often challenging. My father had said I was stupid. And then I received "Student Of The Year". At the time however, I only told about three people.



I found it difficult to throw off the dark cloak of trauma and shame thrown on me. Today I am very proud of myself because of on-going personal process. For many years I could not bear my own reflection. I used to shave without a mirror unable to look upon the human being they found unbearable. This is me today.



I now work with vulnerable youth and it does not surprise me to find myself doing so as I had no good adult in my life and neither do they.

### Realisation

In writing this piece I came to the hurtful realisation that I was not welcome by both my parents. My Mother would have put me in a facility as easily as she had done my first-born sisters. Circumstances were all that separated me from that. I believe I was in denial all those years because the truth would have been unbearable. No amount of alcohol could have drowned that hurt. Life's a rollercoaster as a result of trauma. "Being with someone recovering from trauma is like riding a rollercoaster" says my wife.



Bryant Frank (2010) encourages the client and counsellor to become more alive, aware, and sensitive. This is very important in working with trauma as the work being done is not centred on the actual traumatic experience but on the residual effects of it, held physiologically. The work of inviting a client to become more alive to themselves, more aware of what their body is holding and the invitation to sense into their experience in the "here and now" rather than remembering, must be done in a gentle way. The invitation must be to dip their toe into it, in the knowledge that they are in a safe place, with a counsellor who they can trust, to not abandon them should it become distressing that they are in "a relationship that heals."



## Shame

Working with shame, a counsellor must recognise “that one of the difficulties is that it does not seem to be expressed and released in the same way as other feelings (Rothschild, 2000, p. 62). feels that it is within the therapeutic relationship where the client experiences the non-judgement, acceptance and contact of another human being that the feeling will not discharge but dissipate. I so remember My Father shaming me. Mother failed me by not interceding and protecting me.



This brought me to a place where I am now a qualified counsellor, sitting present in my chair. I hope I can help clients to do for themselves what my therapists helped me do for myself.



Yalom (2003, p. 226) describes the humanistic tradition, in which I am a counsellor, as the “intimate (unscripted) therapist-patient relationship forged in genuineness and focusing on the here-and-now as it spontaneously evolves”. I know in my bones what this tradition describes because I have lived it. When it comes to trauma, it is the relationship that heals. ☾

## John Dunlea

John Dunlea is 60 years old, and qualified in counselling with Cork Counselling Services Training Institute and in Social Care with MTU. He is married to Martina with a daughter Jessica and a son Matthew, whose collective support makes everything possible and meaningful. He works as a Youth Project

Coordinator with Cloyne Diocesan Youth Services in Mallow, work he loves dearly. His biggest achievement is receiving student of the year over two years in MTU. His plan for the future is to move to child and adolescent psychotherapy. John is contactable at [dunleamallow@gmail.com](mailto:dunleamallow@gmail.com).

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