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

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.

Daniela Sieff: Your work focuses on the psychological defence system that gets set up when a child undergoes some kind of unbearable trauma. What is the essence of the system?

Donald Kalsched: If a child’s social and emotional environment is good enough then the child will develop as an integrated whole. The child’s creativity, confidence and sense of self will unfold organically, and as the child grows up s/he will learn how to protect his emotional self in a healthy way. However, when a child is abused, when his or her genuine needs are consistently unmet, or when the child is shamed, this healthy developmental process is compromised. A psychological survival system kicks in and the problem is that because the child is so young this survival system has only a very limited number of options available to it. After all, a normal reaction to trauma is to withdraw from scene of injury, i.e. to get out of there! However, a child, who is highly dependent, can’t withdraw so a part of the self withdraws instead, and for this to happen the psyche splits. One part regresses and one part “progresses”, i.e., develops very fast.

The essence of the child – the creative, relational, authentic innocent spark of life which is at the very core – goes into hiding, deep in the unconscious. At the same time, another part of the child’s psyche grows up prematurely and becomes a rigid psychological defence system that will use whatever means it can to protect that innocent essence and keep it hidden out of harm’s way.

The initial moment of psychological dissociation is a miraculous moment in that this defensive splitting saves the child’s psychological essence in an encapsulated state, but it is also a tragic moment because with this splitting the child steps out of the reality and vivacity of his or her life. It is a moment when the child separates from experience, goes into trance, and when the child’s capacity for genuine and trusting human relationships starts to disintegrate.

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

DK: 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 like 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 a (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.”

Given the circumstances, this is the best that the child can do and it 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 it’s 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 joy that the young girl was trying to express got cruelly quashed, and what is more her mother implied that there was something fundamentally wrong with her daughter for picking those flowers. Episodes like this don’t matter too much if they are occasional occurrences or if the mother’s empathy intervenes, but this client was frequently shamed when expressing her emotions, and in time she learnt to dissociate. She buried the vibrant, spontaneous feeling child – believing that there was something wrong with this part of her, and she learned to separate from the vulnerable part of herself who responded to being shamed by
sobbing. A part of her grew up prematurely, developing a self-sufficient armour. However, alongside this split my client began to hate both her body, with its emotional feelings, and the expressive little girl who lived in that body and who seemed to cause all her trouble. By the time she was in her mid-30s she had become a very successful journalist, but by then she had developed bulimia, and her secret world of binging and vomiting proved to her that deep down she really was an inadequate failure. By this point she was living in a world that was severely compromised by her self-care system. It was a pathological, dissociated and split world that caused her immense pain, but it was a world that her psyche had had to create in order to survive her childhood.

DS: You talk about the traumatised psyche becoming self-traumatising – can you elaborate on this?

Once the inner psychological protector has been constellated it will fight for its life, and it will do all it can to prevent possible re-traumatisation. In doing so, it becomes an unwitting and violent inner persecutor; inflicting more pain, trauma and abuse upon oneself than the original trauma, and external world, ever did. It’s rather like auto-immune disease. The killer T-cells “think” they’re attacking destructive intruders but they’re really attacking healthy tissue. This makes the pain carried by the trauma survivor much worse.

In short, the traumatised psyche becomes self-traumatising. The self-defence system ends by turning against the very person it is supposed to be protecting.

DS: What do you mean by trauma?

DK: In terms of the psyche, trauma is any experience that causes unbearable pain or anxiety. When a child’s sense of self is repeatedly threatened the child is traumatised. 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 typical of all human psychologies; it is rooted deep in the unconscious and it is ‘archaic’, primitive, and not easily assimilated by the conscious mind. It can be luminous or dark, angelic or demonic, but because it exists in a raw, unmediated form it tends to be over-powering. It is as though archetypal systems are charged with 440 volts, and in order to be integrated into a conscious human ego the 440 volts needs to be transformed into a more manageable 220 volts. If archetypal energy is not mediated it can’t be integrated into ordinary day-to-day life and then when this unconscious energy is activated, 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 it: characters in myths and fairy stories portray archetypes; our unconscious imagination projects an archetypal veneer onto real human beings like royalty and sporting legends, and archetypes frequently reveal themselves in the figures that populate our dreams and fantasies, and through some of our subtle, or not-so-subtle, inner voices.

**In the self-defence system the archetypal self-protective energy 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 spiritual guide 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/protector 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 that leads you to believe that you are not good enough and should not risk exposing yourself in the world.

Being an unmediated, unmediated, 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, essential core 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 the 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.

**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 are too fat to attract a man (i.e. You are not going to risk the pain that your mother went through)! You have nothing of real interest to say (You can’t give that lecture because you could be exposed as stupid)! You are crap at communicating (Don’t try to relate to others – who may shame you)! 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)!

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/protector, 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 Dickenson described this in a powerful way:

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.

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 creates an inner fantasy life which can provide a vibrant private world, 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. 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 7 years old. Barrie’s mother went into depression. In the fictionalised version of James Barrie’s life, 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.

Deep hopelessness is another method that the protector/persecutor uses to keep the traumatised person ‘safe’ from re-traumatisation. It propagates beliefs such as “You will never find love...” or “the more others know you the less they will trust you...” to keep the traumatised person from reaching out into the world (where s/he might be retraumatised).

Finally, the self-care system may take the traumatised person into the substitute world of addiction. 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 – a world of pure fantasy substituting for reality. But plants are supposed to grow in soil. You can’t take a plant, grow it in that ambrosial substitute, and then expect it to be able to live and grow in the 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, but you lose the ability to root in real life. 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 laid awake the night before my last talk listening to a bedtime story from the inner protector/persecutor… about how I didn’t have anything to say and how my talk was disorganised so everybody was going to have a terrible time with it. That is a minor form
of it and I think this is a universal system. Not all of us have unbearable trauma, but we are all maimed to some degree. We all grow up in a home, or society, where only parts of ourselves have been allowed to blossom, while other parts that were unacceptable have been 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 are all somewhat injured, and we will all have constellated some kind of protector/persecutor system. 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 becoming ever-more important to me. The way that I now see it 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. That divine spark is humanised and it illuminates and animates our life. 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 the moment of life-threatening childhood crisis, 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 accompanied, 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 remembered, re-membered, recollected 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.
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 unlived 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

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 their genuine pain from the trauma-
story they come with. We live in a very
“therapeutic culture” and these days 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
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 worse than the genuine, but
split-off and hidden pain that surrounds the
original childhood suffering.

Consequently, crying the tears that spring from
the superficial pain of the patient’s victim story
about their trauma is an important first stage in
healing, but it is not enough because the self-
care system is actually designed to prevent the
deeper, original pain from surfacing. In the
words of Emily Dickenson, the self-care system
“covers the abyss with trance” and feelings of
badness, or the victim story, are central to that
trance. Hidden deeply behind the feeling of
badness, or the conviction of being a 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 is
feeling the pain of the innocent parts of who we
are, that we ourselves banished long ago, and
when we open to that deeper pain with self-
compassion, we begin to cry the tears that bring
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, 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: Absolutely! But it is 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 or to the external world, we are stuck in false grief. 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. If we can fall on our knees and suffer that deeper pain then an unexpected dimension of the psyche opens to us. Almost all mythology shows that the embracing of true suffering brings a revelation of the divine. Non-ordinary reality enters awareness and we glimpse the help and life that is buried deep in our unconscious.

DS: In order to do that 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.

In fact, every time you challenge protector/persecutor, 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. This woman was imprisoned by a protective system which had become (self) persecutory and which was now obsolete, but which was fighting as hard as it could to retain control.

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.

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

DK: Grimm’s fairy story of The Woman Without Hands illustrates the stages of this process: it is as though a person who has survived childhood trauma has had his/her hands cut off, and that s/he has grown up by learning to get by as a Handless Maiden. But without hands the person can have no authentic agency and creativity is limited. Without hands, potential is curtailed and the person is unable to live his or her life as fully as s/he could otherwise. Without hands, the person exists in a cut off and dismembered state.

In the fairy story, the King falls in love with the Handless Maiden and because he sees her as ‘whole’, despite her dismembered condition, healing begins. In the analogous situation of psychotherapy, the therapist sees the trauma-survivor’s wholeness, despite her dismembered state, and this can have a profound effect, initiating healing.

In the fairy story, the King then makes the Handless Maiden a pair of silver hands – substitutes for what she has lost. Thus, she is half-way healed. 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.

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 hen 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!
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: 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. Others can surrender the self-care system, but they cannot live without the silver hands provided by an external support system because they are unable to grow their own healthy hands. Yet others make the full journey into their own unique lives.

It is hard to know what makes the difference. It is hard to know who will be able to move into the fullness of their own life. There is something about will… something innate… a different kind of capacity. There are also environmental factors: has there been anybody on the side of life? You don’t need many people to keep that possibility alive: 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 an animal, sports, music, art, woodland or the mountains. 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.

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 I think that we all need happy endings. The happy ending is like the vanishing point in the painting which gives it perspective. We may never get there, but it is the goal and that is 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.

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 as a happy ending to all therapy or the happy ending of life – 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

Donald Kalsched, PhD

is a senior faculty member with the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian analysts, and Dean of a Jungian Studies Speciality at the Westchester Institute for Training in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in Bedford Hills, N.Y. He is also a Clinical Psychologist and Jungian analyst with a private practice in Katonah, New York. His book, The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal defences of the Personal Spirit, was published in 1996 and has been reprinted four times.

Daniela Sieff, PhD

has a Masters in psychology and anthropology from Ann Arbor and PhD in Anthropology from Oxford. She has made documentaries, and has just completed a training program with the Marion Woodman Foundation.

E-mail: Daniela@aladine.co.uk

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Awakening Slave by Michelangelo 1532?