

This Trauma is Not Vicarious

ERIN GRAHAM

L'auteure raconte son expérience de travail dans les services sociaux de première ligne et questionne les motivations et l'éthique devant la médicalisation des femmes étiquetées en psychiatrie.

I work in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Canada's poorest neighbourhood, as a Mental Health Advocate in the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre. The big "p" Professionals—doctors and therapists and such—talk about "vicarious traumatization." That's what they say happens when you hear about terrible things happening to people, when you witness people living in difficult circumstances. I'm trying to figure out if there is such a thing as vicarious traumatization. I'm also wondering about "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." This is another label the big "p" professionals have come up with which has snuck into the lexicon. Everyone who has been sexually abused as a child or beaten or raped or variously oppressed has it. PTSD is the short hand. "She's got FAS and PTSD and ADHD and BPD and OCD." I find all these acronyms disturbing. They are labels which further victimize and pathologize women (it is mostly women) for living under an oppressive patriarchal rule.

All the women I work with downtown have all those acronyms and I have vicarious traumatization. It's not vicarious at all. It is happening to all of us, all the time, all at once. And we are fighting it. I don't have to live like that, like the women I work with, like the women who live downtown. Of course, what I hear and see affects me, but if I moved away, if I quit my job and lived on a farm somewhere, what happens to the women I now work with would still affect me. If I buy into the idea of vicarious traumatization, I buy the idea that if I move away I will no longer be affected by it, that it will no longer be about me. I think that is the lie of that label. It is used, as many psychiatric labels are used, to separate us from one another. I am a woman in the world. I am a woman in a world where men still rape and beat women. I am a woman in a

world where women are prostituted every night to pay the dealer so they can take the drug that will help them forget that they are no more really than a bunch of letters strung together which describe them as, well, pretty messed up, to be frank. If the circumstances of my life had been just a little different, if I had been a bit less lucky, I might be one of them.

"I suck cock for a living. I spread my legs for a living..." Women do this every day. They don't see the cock they suck as being attached to a person. Which makes them sort of even, on account of the guy to whom the cock is attached does not see her as being a person, either. Those young women sashaying down the dark streets there by the tracks, there by the longshoremen's hall, those with the abscesses on their legs and hands; their faces scarred from beatings and worry and fear and inward rage—and bugs. Mostly the bugs. When you inject cocaine, when you smoke crack, you feel the bugs under your skin, crawling there. It's unbearable. You pick and scratch and scratch until you bleed, you pick down to the bone and still the bugs are there.

"I said I'd never be a five-dollar-crack-whore," she told me. I had never met her before. She looked at me with watery eyes and said, "I took a ride in a van yesterday and I took five dollars for sucking this guy's cock and I told him that. Just that, 'I said I'd never be a five dollar crack whore.'" She looked down and picked at something on her jeans, "He said when I got out, 'Take care, eh?' and I wanted to kick his door in and scream fuck you!" She went and scored instead. She bought a rock for five bucks. The five-buck cock rock. She smoked it through a glass pipe and got high for a few minutes. Then she came to see me. I don't know what she wanted; I don't remember.

I listen mostly. Every once in a while I help someone. J. today. Genuinely happy to see me, she came and gave me a hug. She said she only used twice all month, and the month is half over now. That makes about once a week she's using. She's beautiful and hopeful, and she gave me

a hug. This woman has lived through finding her son hanging from the ceiling of his basement suite. He had been there for some time, his body was black and bloated. He was long gone. She left, too, then. Came to the street, to the crack pipe. “Even a year ago,” she said, “the obsession was so bad, I couldn’t think of anything but the pipe.” She gets so close and then she just leaves. She’s deteriorated in the last year. She was being pimped by a man younger than she is. She has grown children in another province whom she loves and who love her, and grandchildren, too. She deserves so much better. That

true. Not alone, you can’t. Not without an analysis of the politic. Not while you believe that the tramua you are suffering from women being prostituted and drug addicted is vicarious. I know I won’t be able to save all of them. But I can damn well save some of them.

What did she tell me? About her mom being a fall-down drunk, and her dad dying when she was young, or was that someone else? Then there was a stepfather, the wicked stepfather. What’s worse, the wicked stepfather or the wicked father? There is no worse. Every one of them was beaten down by some man or other. I hear so many

Vicarious traumatization is a lie. The label pathologizes compassion and political struggle. It divides us from one another. There is nothing vicarious about the traumatization of hearing another woman tell the truth about her life. I am not a voyeur, I am a revolutionary and I am trying to be human.

fucking neighbourhood. Those fucking men. Beating and pimping and killing women, the acrid smell of crack smoked through slender glass tubes, god help me. Dear god, make it go away. Dear god, why can’t we be humane to one another? Dear god, what is humanity that we can allow people to live such cruel lives?

I hate that neighbourhood. And I love it, too. I love how much women laugh in the women’s centre, even though they live in grinding poverty and their kids aren’t with them (either the state or the street has taken them), and they just live for beer and pool or the crack pipe or the needle. Many of them have the label of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Just as there is nothing vicarious about my trauma, so there is nothing “post” about theirs. And the “disorder” they suffer is not theirs; the world we all live in is disordered, and we are responding to it. I am not disordered because I started to drink beyond the point of blackout four out of seven nights of the week. I am oppressed, and I, like the women I work with, have had my heart broken.

“I ain’t stuck a needle in my arm for eleven days now, and I don’t want to, either.” I haven’t had a drink for nearly a year. I haven’t had a cigarette for six months. My sister— who hasn’t stuck a needle in her arm for two weeks—and I, we’re not gonna be where The Man wants us to be. Now we have to struggle out of the fog that settled over us while we were using our drugs of choice. But we are struggling together. We have our arms around one another. She’s had a harder life than I have. I have lots to offer her and she to me. These women all do, all have much to offer one another. Strength and hope and rage. These brave women with broken hearts and scars on their arms from slashing with razors and knives and needles. The big “p’s,” they say often that no one can do this kind of work for more than about two years before they burn out. That’s

stories, it’s hard to keep them straight. And they are the same. Every one of these women have been sexually assaulted by a man upon whom they depended for care. A father, an uncle, a big brother, a lover, a husband, a friend.

There was that odd woman who came to us looking to find out about “safety tips” for prostitutes. She wanted to know if she might have made mistakes already and when to use a condom and where to “work.” She said, “I’m a working girl. I was told to say that.” And she giggled a little.

“You mean you’re prostituted,” I said. She was romanticizing it. She had been doing that for three days when I met her. She was in her late 20s but she kept her eyes downcast and she giggled nervously with every answer to my questions. She was from Surrey. She was married

“Is your husband abusive? Are you not safe with him?”

“No nothing like that. We hadn’t had sex for a long time, and I didn’t want to be with him anymore.”

She didn’t want to answer any questions about who she was, where she was from, why she was doing this (other than “it’s good money”). I told her it’s blood money. It’s indentured slavery; she deserves better. She looked at me with the same kind of disapproving stare as I am sure I looked at her with. I sounded self-righteous even to myself. I’m sure she didn’t like me. But how dare she trivialize the lives of prostituted women like that? As if this is some kind of skid-row Club Med. I wanted to ask her, “do you think this is like the movies? Like *Pretty Woman*?” And that you’ll find Richard Gere to save you from your boring Surrey life?” I didn’t like her not one bit.

I don’t know if they hear me, but I say to these women, “I need you beside me, do you understand? Don’t be where The Man wants you to be.”

I’m not burned out, and I’ve done this kind of work for many years now. I *am* pissed off. I’m tired sometimes. I

make mistakes, of course, but these women, the grandmother I admire, my friend whose arms are a hash of scars, the woman from Surrey whom I didn't like, they're all part of me. I belong to all of them. I need them, and they bloody well need me too.

And they say, "yeah, yeah, I know."

What is it? They have so much to grieve. They tell me the stories of their lives in monotone voices, speaking fast while they are in my office, digging through their purses for this piece of ID or that phone number. They keep themselves bottled up and busy so the truth they are telling doesn't hurt them again. They give their stories to me to hold. What will happen to them when they finally stop for a moment? When they decide to clean up, sober up, stand up? I'm worried that all that bottled-up grief will wipe them out. That's why they tell me. I didn't live it. I can carry it a little ways for them. They can give me some of it so they don't have to hold it all by themselves. I know they did horrendous shit in the service of their need—for love, for human contact, for community, for drugs, for meaning.... Sucking cock, jacking off, getting fucked, stealing, lying, killing sometimes, giving up their kids, cutting themselves, sticking needles into the veins in their arms, their necks, their eyeballs for chrissake, anywhere they can find a vein—anything to get the drug to forget about the lying and the cheating and the having their kids stolen or murdered; anything to forget about sucking cock for five bucks to buy a rock to forget about having to suck cock.... You know how that is? Big circle.

Men profit from this traffic of women. Men profit in material terms. No one profits in human terms. When you pay someone to perform an act which should be tender and loving and intimate, the act becomes none of those things. A woman is reduced to her cunt and her tits and her mouth. A man is reduced to his cock and his wallet. He *must* decide something else. His humanity (and mine, and yours, gentle reader) depends upon it. He must decide that this woman's dignity is worth more than the momentary relief of orgasm. He's not after orgasm, anyhow. He probably doesn't even like sex. (I heard that most men don't, really. Is there a study somewhere to cite?) If he did he would have sex with someone he knew and loved. He would take his time and enjoy himself and his partner.

I am angry with men. Dangerously angry; enraged, I am. The reason I am so angry is not just because I love women and I know we deserve way way better. I am also angry because I love men, and I can't believe this wholesale betrayal is still going on, that men are still picking damaged, distressed, tired women from the streets and giving them five bucks to suck their cocks. That men are doing this to women who are grandmothers and aunts and mothers and just women. Folks. I am connected to the men who are doing this to the women to whom I am also connected. I do not approve. I want power, too for sure I do, some kind of power, but not that kind and not at the cost of my humanity or that of my people.

So, when women come to me and tell me that they haven't stuck a needle in their arm for ten days or that they turned down a trick because they had a *feeling*, I know they're catching a small whiff of freedom, and I breathe a little easier. I don't have to live like they do. But I have to give them some of what I have. I have always been loved. I owe these women that. Just that. I try to be patient.

There are many who would disagree with me. Even women who call themselves feminist would disagree with me. But I am not vicariously traumatized, I am a woman with a boot on my neck and I have my hands wrapped around that jackboot ankle and with every woman who is addicted to drugs the boot comes down harder on my neck and hers. With every woman who joins me in struggle, The Man loses his balance a little bit. Get off the drugs. I'll hold you up. There are women holding me up. Grieve. Rage and cry and hurl plates against the wall. I'll wait. Freedom takes a long time to achieve.

Vicarious traumatization is a lie. The label pathologizes compassion and political struggle. It divides us from one another. There is nothing vicarious about the traumatization of hearing another woman tell the truth about her life. I am not a voyeur, I am a revolutionary and I am trying to be human. I hear the truth and I try to speak it and I fail often, but sometimes I succeed. Sometimes I see the light of recognition in a woman's eyes. She'll use again. She'll suck cock again. But she'll know that I'm right there with her. And she'll turn to me one day and ask for what I have.

What I have is a whole movement of strong, angry, grieving, joyous women to be part of. It's a hard life and we're difficult women, for sure. But we're trying to imagine freedom and that's so much more fun than sucking cock for five bucks to get a rock to smoke so we can forget about sucking cock for five bucks to get a rock to smoke so we can forget about....

Remember. Now is the time to remember. Don't flinch. You'll be alright. We're in this together.

We have all the time in the world and we cannot wait another moment.

After nearly 15 years of frontline work in various social service and activist organizations, Erin Graham has returned to university to get an MA in Educational Studies. She doesn't go downtown much anymore. She is still troubled, interested, committed to women's liberation—the old-fashioned kind. Sometimes she does stand-up comedy. Not as often as she'd like, though.