

“First of All, Do No Harm”

A Recovered Memory Therapist Recants

In my book, *Victims of Memory*, I included four chapters of verbatim interviews with recovered memory therapists, self-described incest survivors who retrieved memories, accused parents, and retractors who once believed they had recovered memories and have now taken back the allegations. In the final chapter, I offered advice to therapists who specialize in unearthing incest memories: “It will take enormous courage for you to admit what you have done to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of clients, validating their belief in horrible events that never took place.” I called for such therapists to develop a new specialty—helping to reunite the families torn asunder by these false incest charges. “After all,” I wrote, “who better understands the Survivor Syndrome than you?”

Recently, I met just such a “retractor therapist,” a woman who once conducted guided imagery to help clients unlock the horrible secrets from their subconscious and who now realizes that rather than contributing to healing, she was causing untold harm. A Christian therapist who is active in her evangelical church, Robin Newsome (not her real name), 49, is particularly concerned that so much evil has been done in the name of God, she is doing everything in her power to stop this form of therapy from ruining more lives. One by one, she is finding former clients, seeking to undo the damage.

The following interview follows the same format as those in *Victims of Memory* and can be considered that book’s “missing interview.”

Texan Robin Newsome is a soft-spoken, gentle woman. In her junior year in college, she became a devout Christian and joined a Christian campus organization. After graduating with a degree in early childhood education, she married and had two children. In 1982, she returned to school to obtain a masters in counseling, where she embraced Gestalt therapy and encountered her first case of recovered memory.

An Interview With Robin Newsome by Mark Pendergrast

One of my first courses was called “Anger Therapy.” It met every day for three weeks. After a short lecture, we’d meet in small groups with a therapist. This was a very intense, emotional experience. After a round of checking in, each group member was asked whether they wanted to “work” or not on any particular day. That meant doing a two-chair visualization, where you imagined the person you were angry at to be in the chair across from you, and you vented your anger, using a bataaka [foam filled] bat to hit a foam pad. This was supposed to get out your unresolved anger. This was a whole new world to me. I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole with this stuff. Here I was in my placid little world, and this was like entering a subterranean world I never knew existed. It turned me sideways and upside down. I had always been the nice Christian girl, and I wasn’t aware of my great storehouse of anger.

(Newsome explained that she was angry at her husband, who was having an affair. When she figuratively put her

husband in the chair, “I nearly took the head of the instructor off using the bataaka bat.”)

One Friday, a woman in the group told us she had had an image of herself being sexually abused when she was two years old. She said, “I know I was abused by someone, but I can’t see who it is.” On Monday, she told us with tremendous sorrow that she had realized that it was her older brother. The therapist had her “put him in the chair,” but instead of using the bat, she said she wanted to rip his head off. The therapist handed her some magazines and told her to have at it. She started screaming at the top of her lungs at her brother, crying and ripping magazines. Everything was going well until she grabbed one of the therapist’s favorite *Smithsonians*, and the therapist yelled for her to stop and not rip that one. This woman completely shifted gears. She very politely said, “Oh, I’m sorry,” and put it down. Then, with a vengeance, she grabbed another magazine and went back to ripping and tearing.

At the time, I interpreted this to mean that she had control over her anger. I had wondered if people would get so angry during these exercises that they might just lose it completely. This woman’s ability to stop herself so quickly showed me that people weren’t really losing total control. In fact, this incident made the therapy feel more like a play with a therapist/director who had just yelled, “Cut!”

Still, I had no reason to doubt that she had been abused—her tears, her sorrow, her anguish, her rage, her sense of betrayal were painful to witness. I remember being so angry at the thought that anyone could do such a thing to a small, helpless child. The fact that she had remembered her relationship with her brother as being happy prior to this memory seemed irrelevant. Obviously, her mind had shielded her from the awful truth. No one even remotely thought to question the memory of a two-year-old. Also, the idea was that young children had trouble giving words to their abuse, because they were in a prever-

