

My Father's Child *by Elizabeth Robles*

I remember going with my mother looking for my father at the bar as the sun went down. I was only seven years old at the time. Carefully, I watched my mother peeking through the door of the bar. As soon as she saw he was there, she held my hand tightly, leaving the place without letting my father know she was present. I knew then that something was wrong. Once at home, she got all of us in bed. Silence hung over us like

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darkness before a storm. A few hours later, my father came home drunk. Today, I cannot remember what happened after he arrived. My memory of that moment is gone like a dense fog disappearing into the ocean.

One summer during school vacation, a man who owned a grocery store and had a farm of *cabulla* (a plant used to make sacks to store dried grains), offered a summer job to the kids in town. He wanted us to collect some beetles in jars to protect the plants the bugs were eating. The job was fun; the beetles were fat and brown with a hard texture. It was like a game, grabbing the little creatures while they tried to escape from my hands. Friday came and I went to collect my money. I planned to get lots of candy, but my father got there first. He had collected my money to spend it on alcohol. I was speechless at my father's action and my feelings were trapped like the beetles in the jars. I left the store without the sweet candy, tasting only a sour memory.

My mother always cooked good healthy meals. We had a vegetable garden in our backyard. Pulling the carrots out of the ground was my favorite thing to do. In addition, every day

we got fresh milk from my aunt's cows. There was no need for my father to break into a grocery store to steal a whole bologna to feed us. As I heard my mother whispering to my father, "Why did you do such a wrong thing? We have food." my little world trembled with fear for I expected the police to knock at the door to arrest my father.

The house in which we lived was government property. My father worked for the government, taking care of the coffee fields. Because of his alcohol addiction, he lost his job and we were evicted. We had to move into the house of my grandmother who lived close by. My father then moved to the city to look for a job, and promised he would return in three months. Instead, he came back a year later to take us to the city. One morning, just as the sun rose, we left town in a pickup truck. The back was full of our belongings, and on top of them were all of us—just like the Beverly Hillbillies when they moved to the city.

We settled down in the new house, which had electricity, more bedrooms, and indoor plumbing. However, my world was changing for the worse. Now I had no more vegetable or flower garden. I was not going to be able to listen to my mother singing while she hung the clothes outside on sunny mornings. And I had no place in nature to play.

In the country, I used to play hide-and-seek at nighttime with other children. The hiding place was on top of the trees near my house. After school, my recreation was taking off to the rainforest with kids from the neighborhood. There we spent hours catching frogs, climbing on trees, and searching for any living creatures. When it rained we would crawl under huge leaves waiting until the rain had stopped. In the meantime, we told ghost stories making our stay in the forest more exciting. After a playful after-

noon, and before the night arrived, I ran home where no one had noticed my absence. In the city, however, I would not have such contact with Mother Nature, the one who had protected and nourished me while I was growing up.

When I was eleven years old, we moved from one house to another several times during a year. The presence of the police with an eviction notice became more familiar as time passed. I discovered my father not only had an alcohol problem, but was an abuser as well. How could I not have noticed his behavior towards my

mother? Perhaps I did not want to know what was happening at home. On the other hand, I have some memories of my mother telling her friends of my father's drunken violence. As time passed, the abuse escalated and our house turned into a nightmare.

There were sleepless nights when he verbally and physically abused my mother. Holidays were like hell. On Christmas Eve, instead of waiting for Santa with excitement about the presents, I went to sleep hoping the night would vanish so I would not hear my father coming home.

My mother started working to give us some economic stability, and as a result, my sister and I needed to take full responsibility for the house chores. Now, I became a mom for my younger siblings. I took them to the hospital when they were sick, and made sure they had food and clean clothes. As a consequence of having many responsibilities, my outside social world was limited. My friends never knew what kind of life I led. I did not do well in school for I was exhausted by the time I got there.

Eventually, my mother divorced my father. For a while, he was in denial; he appeared at home just as if he had never moved. One night I was in bed when I heard a noise. Immediately I got up and opened the door, and there was my father choking my mother. I threatened my fa-

ther by telling him to let my mother go or I would call the police, then started running bare-foot towards the police department. My heart was pounding with fear as I heard my father, his voice like the growling of a bear in the woods. Finally, I got to the police station and told them what happened. The police took me home and my father disappeared for a while.

There were other occasions when I sheltered my mother in the bedroom while my father was cursing and threatening to destroy the door. Above all, I remember vividly my mother and I waiting for the bus and my father suddenly appearing, begging her to take him back or he would get himself run over by a car. He then went into the middle of the road. I held my mom's hand and closed my eyes when I saw a truck approaching my father. I did not want to open my eyes and see him lying dead on the ground. After the truck passed, my mother's sweet voice comforted me saying that he had not died. When I opened my eyes, I saw him on the other side of the road laughing. My father was not killed on that day, but he had just killed a feeling inside of me. Time passed, and I became more detached from the feelings I had for my father.

In order to survive at home, I learned how to lie and to create a world of denial. I became a caretaker for everyone but me. School did not seem important because, as my father used to say, "A woman does not need to study—you will get married and have a family to take care of." Eventually, I married a much older man, who did not abuse me physically but knew how to control my life, absorbing my identity through emotional abuse as a sponge absorbs the water. I got di-

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vorced years later, feeling as if I were divorcing my father.

After my divorce, I worked for ten years in a shelter for battered women and children, and my life experiences made it easier for me to understand their situation. I saw my mother in each of them, and myself in each child who came to the shelter with fear in her eyes. I was able to empower women to take control of their lives, leaving me with a rewarding feeling of making a difference in someone's life.

Three years ago, my father passed away. I cried when I heard the news, but not because I was going to miss him. I cried because I was angry that I did not have the feeling I had when my

mother died, the pain of losing a parent whom I admired and loved. Still, my father with his addiction taught me the hardest lessons of life. Many of my dreams were shattered. However, through courage, time, and determination, I am now taking the first steps towards becoming a psychologist. The person I am today I owe to Mother Nature, who taught me the value of beauty and balance, to my mother, who taught me the importance of love and honesty, and to my father, who taught me endurance.

Elizabeth Robles lives in Massachusetts. She works at Logan Airport for a major airline company, which makes it possible for her to fly and explore the world.



Image courtesy of *Picturing Change*, ProLiteracy Worldwide, NY.

Look at the picture above.

What is happening?

Why do you think it is happening?

What do you think can be done to prevent this from happening again?

Adult Education & Domestic Trauma

by Andres Muro

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline (www.ndvh.org), an estimated one third of all women report domestic abuse by a spouse or boyfriend at some point in their lives. The American Institute on Domestic Violence (www.aidv-usa.com), reports that:

- ◆ every nine seconds a woman is beaten in the United States;
- ◆ between three and four million women are battered each year; and
- ◆ domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women.

These statistics raised the question for the staff at the El Paso Community College's Community Education Program, "What is the extent to which women attending adult education programs are victims of domestic trauma?"

We enlisted the support of Mexican immigrant women learners in our program, having

those who agreed to participate fill out a questionnaire in Spanish designed to discover experiences and attitudes toward domestic violence and how these affected their learning experience. While the study is small and focused on one program, it does provide a window into the ways that women learners experience abuse in relation to their pursuit of education.

The table on the next page summarizes the results of the questionnaires returned by the 113 participants who reported that they lived with someone. The percentage totals reflect women who had these experiences anywhere from "at least rarely" to "frequently."

Andres Muro is the manager of the Community Education Program at El Paso Community College. He has worked in the area of adult education, with women, for the past 15 years. For more information about the study, contact him at AndresM@cpcc.edu.

Additional Resources

Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education. Jenny Horsman. Available in Canada and the U.S. Check www.jennyhorsman.com for publishers and distributors who carry the book.

Take on the Challenge: A Sourcebook from the Women, Violence and Adult Education Project. Elizabeth Morrish, Jenny Horsman, and Judy Hofer, eds. Available from World Education or on the Internet in pdf format: www.worlded.org/docs/TakeOnTheChallenge.pdf.

Learning to Live without Violence: A Handbook for Men (Updated 1997), Daniel Jay Sonkin and Michael Durphy. Spanish version: ***Aprender a Vivir Sin Violencia: Manual Para Hombres***, Daniel Jay Sonkin, Michael Durphy and translated by Jorge Corsi. Both are available from Volcano Press.

Lack of support	
<i>If students don't feel supported, they will feel uncomfortable sharing school experiences with family or spending time preparing for school and doing homework.</i>	
Women who reported that they were not supported by their spouses/partners, or felt that their spouses/partners were critical of them for attending school while neglecting their chores.	28%
Women who felt guilty about neglecting chores, their children, or felt like dropping out of school.	36%
Women who reported lack of family support.	30%
Women who wished that their spouses/partners helped more at home so that they could focus more on school.	50%
Women who felt sad about going home from school or felt like leaving their spouses.	30%
Women who were told by their spouses/partners to attend to them or their children before focusing on school, or gave them reasons not to finish their homework or go to school.	30%

Direct interference	
<i>Sometimes, spouses/partners engage in behaviors that subvert the women's ability to focus on school, go to school, or do school work.</i>	
Women who reported that their spouses/partners hid their books or school materials.	4%
Women who reported that their spouses/partners destroyed their books or homework, or spied on them to see whom they sat with in school.	3%
Women who reported that their spouses/partners accused them of talking to other men or of being unfaithful, or followed them to school to see whom they talked to.	23%
Women who reported that their spouses/partners screamed, or insulted them, put them down, or made verbal threats.	24%
Women who reported that their spouses/partners get jealous.	33%

Physical abuse	
<i>In addition to being a criminal offense, physical abuse is a threat to a woman's survival, self-esteem, and ability to learn.</i>	
Women who reported that their spouses/partners grabbed their breasts, buttocks, genitals, or forced them to have sex.	11%
Women who reported that their spouses/partners had abused them either physically, emotionally, or both prior to their starting school.	4%

The need for additional support	
Women who felt that counseling would help them to do better in school.	49%
Women who felt that their spouses should talk to a counselor.	39%
Women who felt that school should offer counseling.	43%

Daisy's Ambition *Anonymous*

The day I met Daisy, she marched into the learning center, flipped back her long dark hair, and plopped a Pepsi and a big green paperback GED review book on the table.

"I want to get my GED," she said. "I've got this book."

I hated using the catalogue-sized GED review books because they seemed overwhelming and intimidating. But Daisy was determined and so intimidating herself that I didn't argue with

her. I tried to guide her patiently through the material, but most of what I said irritated her.

We suffered through three tense tutoring sessions before I discovered that I could make Daisy

laugh. Though her frustration went deep and she would often swear and look at me with disgust, there were times when just the hint of a sweet smile would shine through. I noticed that she would get crabby in exactly the way a close friend of mine would—all out of proportion to the immediate situation. One day, when this happened, I couldn't help laughing. Daisy looked up, surprised. In an instant I could see that she wasn't offended. She heard herself and laughed, too.

Daisy was short-tempered and tolerated no nonsense, which sometimes got her into trouble at her job as a server, but her determination served her well in her learning. She had learned some phonics in school and was good at using and building on this knowledge but, her vocabulary was limited and her school experience was

interrupted and insufficient. We began to use more accessible materials. She began to channel her irritation into breaking down the barriers of the words she didn't understand. She would often figure out a word or phrase after she got mad at it.

Writing aggravated her even more than reading. She would dutifully complete short writing exercises, but she didn't hide the fact that she hated them. Gradually, however, Daisy began to show an interest in writing what *she* wanted to write. As she talked about her life, I suggested that she write about her thoughts and feelings. She began writing regularly in a journal that she shared with me. I knew that she was beginning to appreciate expressing herself in writing, but I was surprised when she arrived one day with a five-page letter she had composed.

I didn't have to "introduce the writing process." Daisy wanted to know how her thoughts were coming across and exactly how to correct her sentences and paragraphs. In fact, she wanted to communicate as clearly as possible to the person she was writing to: a victim of the same perpetrator who had sexually abused her.

Daisy's older sister's husband had repeatedly sexually abused Daisy when she was a young teenager. She kept the secret until her best friend confided that she had been raped. Daisy told the friend her own story. She then told her sister, but not the married one. She found out that the same man had abused this sister. They told their mother and then had to tell their father because, Daisy said, "We were all crying. But my father didn't know what to do."

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Five years passed before the case went to court. The sisters testified, but the defense discredited their testimony. The brother-in-law went free. He and Daisy's sister moved to another state. The day Daisy brought me the letter, she had learned that the couple had moved back and were staying with her parents. She had also discovered that her brother-in-law was sexually abusing another female relative. Daisy had plenty to say to this woman, but could not meet her face to face.

For weeks, Daisy worked on the letter,

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wrestling with her feelings and revising her writing. She sometimes shouted and cried. I recommended counseling, but she refused. She said she had seen counselors four different times,

starting when she had "opened up," but she felt it hadn't helped her. She didn't want to go through the pain of building trust again.

We talked about what to write and how to write it. I asked her a lot of questions: What did she want and need from this communication? What was safe to write? What might happen if she sent the letter? How would she respond to whatever happened? We worked at clarifying, changing, restoring, and rearranging words and sentences.

Finally, Daisy decided that the letter was as perfect as she could make it. She sent it, hoping the woman would become an ally who would help her protect other people from the unpunished attacker. After the woman read the letter, she thanked Daisy. In the end, however, she did not accept what Daisy had come to accept: that the abuse was serious, that it was not her fault, and that she could help protect other people from abuse. Unlike Daisy, she wanted to maintain a relationship with the abuser, even at great

cost.

Daisy told her family how she felt about them harboring her sister and brother-in-law. She rearranged her son's care during her work and study hours so that he would not be in her mother's home when his uncle was present. She limited her participation in family events to those times when she could keep visits brief and free of contact with the abuser. Daisy's husband supported her decisions and actions.

Daisy not only used her writing to express her emotions and clarify her thoughts, she began to see that she could *do* it: she could write. She has since used letters to communicate with family members when other situations have become difficult.

Soon after this breakthrough, Daisy joined a small group of women working on math. Everyone in the group was agonizing over algebra. Daisy looked at a set of problems, quickly solved them, and put down her pencil. I was standing at a whiteboard, writing examples and attempting to explain them. Daisy moved next to a woman who was particularly frustrated and explained a problem. The woman instantly understood. Daisy discovered that she liked math calculations far better than reading and that she could teach someone else how to do them.

But her life took two significant detours. The first led her to another successful effort. The other delayed her studies for a year.

She had to change jobs, so I referred her to a career center. We started using materials from the center's workshops in our tutoring sessions. Independently, Daisy applied for a job as a personal care attendant and was hired. The agency manager who hired her helped her study for the certification test. After a few weeks of practice, Daisy passed it. "I passed the test," she told me, "on my own."

Several weeks later, on a snowy morning, I saw an accident. A wrecker was loading a smashed red car. When Daisy didn't come to her appointment, I learned that the car was hers. She called me at the learning center, repeating again

and again how relieved she was that her son wasn't with her. But her injuries were serious and painful. After she had recovered to some degree, she could return to work. But several months passed before she was able to add studying to her other responsibilities.

Daisy has returned to the learning center with energetic commitment. She is retrieving the emotional strength and ability to learn that she discovered through confronting the effects of abuse. On her way to a GED, she is boldly expressing herself on paper and exhibiting skills she did not know she possessed. By dismantling

some of the emotional barriers that had restricted her, she is acting to change the course of her own and her family's lives. Significantly, she *knows* she is succeeding in this. Her troubles are not over, but she smiles more often anyway.

One evening recently we were studying vocabulary and I asked her about the word "ambitious." "It's what I'm doing," she said. "Being ambitious."

To protect confidentiality, the author remains anonymous and the student's name has been changed, as well as some of the identifying factors in the story.

Taking Up the Impact of Violence in Literacy

Does **NOT** mean we have to focus the curriculum directly on violence, though you may choose to if

- students are interested in looking at issues of violence, and
- the supports for students and instructor are in place.

Does **NOT** mean we have to say this is the place for students to talk in detail about the violence they have experienced, though you may choose to invite these stories if

- it is appropriate for this particular group,
- it is a safe setting, and
- the supports for students and instructors are in place.

DOES mean we have to create appropriate conditions for learning. These include:

- acknowledging that many people experience violence and that violence can affect learning;
- working together to create safety and trust;
- creating a comfortable place to nurture the whole self—e.g., music, moments of silence, flowers, snacks, easy chair/s, beautiful pictures, inspirational quotes; and
- using curriculum that engages and nurtures the whole person—body, mind, emotions, and spirit.

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