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Childhood interrupted: A story of loss, separation, and reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a story of personal loss and childhood trauma experienced by the author in 1968. Written in auto-ethnographic form, the author narrates a particular time in his life when he lost his hearing and subsequently experienced “disrupted attachment” (Becker, 1997) caused by forced separation from family on the day he began life at a residential school for deaf children. Forty-six years later, the author weaves together a narrative of loss and trauma followed by his own reflections, showing how he used writing conversation as a source of healing that allowed him reconcile with his past.

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Survivors of trauma know that their experience of a traumatic event can be a “catalytic marker in a series of experiences that, together, compose the long, tough road to recovery” (Secklin, 2011). The story I am about to tell is an autoethnographic narrative of hearing loss, trauma caused by “disrupted attachment” (Becker, 1997)—the interruption of a secure base and meaning of family life—and the long, tough road to resilience. I use the term *hearing loss* to describe the sudden loss of hearing as opposed to the sense of being deaf. Losing my hearing in 1968 at the age of four years and subsequently separating from my family was a traumatic experience. I turn to autoethnography because my experiences of trauma “contain complex layers of personal, social and cultural values” (Borawski, 2007, p. 108). Following separation, I spent 14 years of my childhood in a residential school for deaf children where I became immersed in the world of sign language. The aim in telling my story is not to seek sympathy but rather to encourage the reader “to feel the truth” of stories and engage in the “storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 745). One way to recover from the event is to use “painful experiences as a source of learning, growth, or activist survivor mission” Tamas (2009).

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Winter 1967: The sense of loss

Sitting on the carpeted floor, I am captivated by the smattering of plastic toy soldiers and a kaleidoscope of colors emanating from pictures and drawings that lie scattered around me. Many of these playthings take my fancy. One by one, I take toys out from a biscuit tin, place them on the floor, and then arrange them in a straight line. Things that my parents put in front of me make my imagination take off and, in my mind's eye, army fantasies start to play out in full. There is a sense of wonderment that I get from looking at the contours and shapes of the little soldiers. My eyes are drawn to a book filled with pictures of animals with whiskers, long tails, and short stumpy legs. To my mother, I make no secret of my delight, and I hold up a toy soldier to her and exclaim, "Look!" I point my finger to the dazzle in the painted face. Hypnotized by all that is around me, I find my fantasy has no limits. I place the action figures side by side and arrange the rest on opposite sides, setting the stage for an imaginary war. Soon I sense a sudden change in my body; something in my ears is sucked out like air from a balloon. Frightened and disoriented, I look up and search for my mother but see no sign of her. Realizing I'm alone, I find myself rooted to the floor and unable to move. Instinctively I raise my hand and touch my earlobe as the looming silence grows more intense.

Months later, I am surrounded by children inside the Western Lodge, a large-sized early Georgian building on the Western Road in Clonmel. My teacher, a tall buxom lady, talks to the children. I follow a couple of boys around the classroom. Too frightened to leave their side, I tag along and follow them everywhere. One day they tell me to leave them alone. For some time, I wander around the playground, trailing after another boy whose friendly demeanor attracts my attention. I follow him everywhere throughout the day, unable to find courage to mingle with other children. Soon he grows tired of me and moves away, leaving me self-consciously isolated. Later I find small pleasures drawing and painting during class.

At home, my mother reads from a book filled with pictures of birds. She leans over and speaks to my ear. Beside her, I feel a sense of security, as if I were the most important person in her life. One morning, on our way to the Western Lodge, my mother teaches me something about birds, not in words or pictures but through her actions, pointing at the sky where birds are in full flight. "Birds have wings," she says, "They have wings that make them fly." Standing on the pavement, we look up and pay attention to birds sitting perched on wire. My mother points at a flock of birds darting across the sky, their flight strong and direct. "They are starlings," she says. As my eyes follow the direction of her finger, I watch with curious fascination as the feathered creatures swirl and loop about the sky, going different speeds and directions. Every morning we leave for school with my Sachel bag filled

with coloring books and crayons. I strap it over my knitted white cardigan. Every morning the smell of leather wafts inside my nostrils as we walk the long stretch of road to the Western Lodge.

The doctor gently tilts my head to the other side, and begins to prod and probe inside my ears. I find pleasure in the tingling sensation of cold metal. Leaning back, he stares at me as if I'm some kind of curiosity and the pitiful eyes of the nurse throw mournful looks at me. I find solemn looks from my mother and, sensing her anxiety, my stomach tightens to a knot. I wonder if someone is trying to save me from something inside my ears. A short time later, my head is strapped with headphones and a nun dressed in white monastic dress and black veil smiles and pats my head. As she speaks, her lips stretch like elastic. She shifts around before sitting behind a large machine replete with control keys and gauges. I fidget nervously at the wires on the headphones and feel a sudden jolt in my ears. The nun raises her eyebrows questioningly. After each beeping sound, I raise my hand. Then I keep my hand still for some time until the nun shakes her head at my parents. As she speaks to me, she raises her hand, blocking the view to her lips. Instinctively I push her hand down to see her mouth. The nun's body goes into convulsions and I stare at her, unsure what I had done to make her laugh. Later, a solidified ear piece is inserted in my left ear, but I vehemently protest to my parents. Pleading with my eyes, I tell them the thing is making my skin sore, but the nun puts her finger to her pouting lips, telling me to be quiet. A hearing aid about the size of a deck of cards is pocketed inside a pouch. The pouch is secured in a harness, strapped around my body at chest level, and hidden inside my white cardigan. I stare at the machine, moving my fingers along the microphone. I press against the volume control switch at the top end and open the battery compartment at the rear.

At Sunday mass, the earpiece attracts stares from children and I fidget uncomfortably in my seat, feeling my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I feel the urge to run and hide. When I speak, children shake their heads in bewilderment. I stand and watch them grimace as I speak. My voice is either *too loud* or *too low*.

Autumn, 1968: Separation

When my mother talks to me, she speaks in clear and measured speech, making lip patterns accessible and readable. I manage to capture words on her mouth. "You will be starting in a new school with children who wear hearing aids like yours," she says. I stand and watch her place each item of my clothes in a brown leather suitcase in a neat and orderly fashion. I have a feeling of going away somewhere special and that we are all in for a treat. During shopping trips, people stop to speak to my mother. They stare at

me with pitying eyes, eyes that tell me a different story lies in wait. Something in their demeanor causes me to feel dread, but I say nothing.

The night before we journey to Dublin, I watch curiously as my mother fills my suitcase with more clothes. "Three of everything," she mouths, holding up each item of clothes. "You have three shirts, pants, underwear, socks, jumpers, shoes, and pyjamas." She points at my name tag stitched on the collar of my shirt and embroidered with my name. "I have put your name on each one of your clothes. Everyone will know these clothes are yours." Name tags tell me that I am heading toward a place full of strangers. Anxious to forget the rising sense of dread, I place toy soldiers and picture books with my belongings and my mother closes the suitcase. The following day, dressed in brown slacks with a white knitted cardigan over a beige shirt, I begin to sense my mother's anxiety in trying to find something to say. Fear rises from the pit of my stomach and I become disoriented by the words "promise to write."

We pass through the two pillars at the gateway as my father turns the green Vauxhall Viva into a long stretch of avenue. From the passenger seat, my mother turns around and smiles nervously. "We are here now," she says before quickly turning her back to me. I rest my arms on the front seats and watch in awe as the white convent walls emerge in the distance. As I strain my neck further, white iron railings bordering each side of the drive way appear in full view. Turning around, I lean my face against the side window and feel the filtered September sunlight flicker through passing trees. Closing my eyes, I bask in the warm, soothing glow on my face as my father motors along the avenue.

When we reach the tarmac ground, my father parks the car a few hundred feet from the concrete steps at the front entrance. My eyes are drawn to a large black cross affixed against a wall. Soon a smattering of boys emerges from the side entrance, and a nun dressed in blue slacks and a black veil gives chase, causing the children to scatter around like birds. The children gather together, turning and swooping to a spot where they stand and gaze at us with curious eyes. My gaze is averted to the children's hands darting around their faces at great speed like starlings in full flight, their hands creating rippling and swirling patterns as their fingers gracefully dance in air. With my mother at my side and my father leading the way, we mount the steps to the front porch. I turn my head around and stare, fascinated by the children's hand movements. I watch with interest their fingers flexing into contours and shapes. Instinctively I venture ahead to meet them, but the gentle hand of my mother takes hold of my arm, stopping me in my tracks. She tells me not to run off but, sensing my newfound curiosity, leans down until her face is close to mine. "They are deaf like you. You will meet them later." The nun ushers the boys into the side entrance of the building as I join hands with my mother and continue up the steps, totally oblivious to what lies ahead of me. A man dressed in black shirt and pants and a white collar at the neck stands at the

doorway and greets us with a smile. I stare in nervous silence at the earpiece fitted inside his ear, my stomach muscles tightening at the sight of the white collar.

The priest gesticulates salutations to my parents and they shake hands. As his eyes settle on mine, I recoil in shock and retreat behind my mother. Sick with fear, I clutch her hands tightly. The man places his right hand on my head and moves it upwards, showing the sign that grown-ups don't cry. He pats my head and wags his finger at me. My father tells me to mind my manners and answer the priest, but my mouth simply opens and closes. The priest gestures to my parents to follow him inside the doorway. To my five-year-old mind, the school looms large. An enormous modern sturdy building containing white convent walls, the convent school is surrounded by beautiful well-kept gardens. Wooden and wire fences separate us from the meadows where cows graze grass in the autumn sunshine. A woman dressed in blue slacks with a navy cardigan over a white blouse and a black and white veil on her head appears from the doorway with a smile and shakes hands with my parents. My mother leans down to me. "That lady is Sr. Brigid. She is in charge of the school."

As my mother straightens up, Sr. Brigid's eyes lock into mine, causing the hairs to prickle at the back of my neck. I study her hands as she approaches me and I sense a strange, dry, laundry-like odor emanating from her dress. The way she carries herself has the look of someone of utmost importance and authority. I fidget nervously as Sr. Brigid hovers over me, her face inches from mine. As she takes hold of my hand, her smile vanishes and her eyes glare coldly at me. Clutching tightly at my mother's hand, I become transfixed by the dangling crucifix at her chest, and struggle to hold back tears, unable to express the sudden unpleasant feeling of doom. I search my father's face for clues of distress and find none, but the distress signals on my mother's face are as clear as they are intuitive.

We walk down a long stretch of corridor before turning into an opened door. Inside, we are guided into a furnished room filled with several leather armchairs. Pictures of religious figures hang on yellow walls and a vase stands on a round mahogany table. On a shelf a few feet above me, a large marble statue of the Virgin Mary colored in blue and white towers over me. Immaculately clean light blue walls of corridors convey an aura of coldness. The air is thick with the smell of floor polish, and the dry, barren scent of nuns' clothes wafts to my nostrils as we walk through a maze of corridors and hallways. Nuns appear and disappear and children's faces peer out from the play hall. We continue walking until we reach a lofty hall. Inside, we find several framed portraits of nuns hanging on gray walls.

My mother is deep in conversation with a couple of nuns who appear out of nowhere. The two ladies move swiftly toward me, their dresses brushing against my face. Their bodies shield my eyes from the view of my parents.

I move to the other side and breathe a sigh of relief after I spot my parents standing near me. Within a short time, we pass through dim corridors that seem to stretch on for an eternity. Presently, the whole place darkens, becoming dimmer, shadowy, fainter, and increasingly subdued. Suddenly the whole world stands still and all eyes turn to me. Before I begin to ask why everyone has stopped walking, my mother kneels before me and holds my arm in her hands. Her face is ashen and her lips are firmly closed, in my mind a sure sign of distress. Through watery eyes, I watch her speak. Words like *home soon*, *write*, *parcel*, and *sweets and chocolates* have no meaning for me. When she finishes speaking, she leans forward and kisses my cheek. My father mouths: "See you soon."

I stare at my parents, my mouth open. Bewildered and immobile, I wonder about this sudden display of affection. Once more, nausea takes hold of my stomach, and that awful sick feeling of dread rises from the pit of my stomach like bile. Gripped with profound anxiety, I search for something to say, unable to find the will to cry or protest. The crucifix continues to dangle before my eyes. Sensing that my fate is now sealed, I sob my heart out and sputter words of protest: "Please don't leave me!" I plead with my eyes but nothing seems to move my parents to change their minds. As my chest tightens, my breathing quickens. I shake my head vigorously, feeling utterly terrified at the thought of being left with strangers. My mother takes hold of my outstretched hand and offers words of comfort. Her moving lips swim before my soggy eyes. Taking my hand in hers, she guides me down the corridor and we continue walking in semidarkness. The tension in my body begins to dissipate and I relax a little.

Suddenly, two nuns emerge from a shadowy corner and stand on each side of me, their hands firmly gripping mine. A large, heavy-set lady moves to my left and a tall and slender woman with deep-set piercing eyes shifts to the other side. The same arid scent from the nuns' clothes is now stronger than ever. Suddenly the gait and gesture of the nuns begin to change. In one sudden, sweeping, determined movement, their strong arms hoist me upwards. I flail my legs with all my power, fighting to break free as the nuns carry me up the stairs with the ease of a man carrying a sack of potatoes. Turning my head around, I stare in shock at the empty corridor. Where have my parents gone? What is happening? Panic-stricken and frightened, I struggle to break free, but powerful hands hold tightly to my legs and arms.

Soon I am transported inside a large room filled with 12 cast-iron beds, all lined up in neat rows against a wall on each side. Hallway light filters through the opened doorway onto the concrete floor. In the semidarkness, children stir and rise from their beds. They watch in curious fascination as the nuns toss me onto the nearest empty bed. They pin my arms and legs against the mattress. One of them proceeds to undress me as I struggle to get off the bed, feeling helpless and violated. In my rage I manage to break free my right

arm, grab hold of a nun's veil, and rip it off. The shock and horror on her face turns to rage and suddenly I feel the sting on my legs, the violence stunning me into silence, the eyes of the nun glaring at me with venom. Once more, strong arms forcibly hold me down. I lie motionless as the nuns undress me, starting with my shoes and socks and working their way to my pants, jumper, and shirt. I lie on my back, limp, naked, and defeated, knowing only pain and humiliation. Turning my head, I stare at the boys sitting up in their beds in their pajamas. They watch me with curious indifference, their hair neatly combed and shining from wash. The dormitory is color-coordinated in pink, lilac, and gray. Within a few minutes, I am in pajamas for the first time.

Inside my new bed, I cover myself while the sisters leave the room closing the dormitory door behind them and shutting out light. I turn over to my right and stare into the darkness. A ray of skylight filters through a gap in the curtains. Soon the sky changes colors, going from orange to red. Some of the boys roll back and forth in their beds, thumb in mouth. I wait for sleep, wanting to blunt the deepening sense of loneliness. Shadows dart around the curtains like phantoms as the sky closes in on me. Soon I am enveloped in darkness and wonder if I will ever wake up again and see my family. Frightened at the thought of dying, I pull my covers over my head and peer out from under the blanket. I am utterly lost in another world, away from my family for the first time in my life. I stare into the dark and weep. No crying, just lonely, sorrowful tears rolling down my cheeks. Tears drip down toward my mouth, and as teardrops flow and flow, I shiver with longing for home.

On writing about loss and separation

Writing this story was like walking out of home and going straight into residential school because that is exactly how it felt for me. Everything I have written is how I remembered it. There isn't much dialogue to report in the stories because I have described events through the eyes of a five-year-old boy who could not hear conversation in spoken language. However, I have taken the liberty of reconstructing dialogue to the best of my recollection. As I was writing the piece, several questions kept running through my mind: How did I feel at the time of the event? How do I feel about it now? What did my parents make of the choices they made? What other choices were possible for them? How has it shaped who I am today?

I wrote the first part of my story to showcase the embodied experience of losing my hearing. The loss of hearing implied that my body had shifted to a state of "abnormality" (Davis, 1999) and consequently I was attributed a "spoiled identity," an identity discredited as a "failing, a shortcoming, [or] a handicap" (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). When I lost my hearing and later had "a solidified ear piece...inserted in my left ear," I became stigmatized,

someone “not quite human” (Goffman, 1963, p. 15), whose social status was reduced to inferiority. The second part of the story presents a heart-wrenching episode of family separation. I interlinked two trauma events as “turning point moments” (Denzin, 2014). The first moment might be described as “primary loss” and the second “secondary loss” (Rando, 1993). Secondary loss may occur “as part of the primary loss package” (Harvey, 2000, p. 9) because, for this author, a consequence of hearing loss is secondary loss—secondary to the loss of a secure base of familial attachment. The key to writing about these events is to learn and gain insight from them and “to impart to others something positive based on the experience” (Harvey, 2000, p. 5).

Childhood interrupted revisited

In the late 1990s, almost 30 years after I started residential school, I received an invitation to attend a reunion at my former school. The event was an opportunity for many of the former residents to return to the scene of childhood and become reunited with each other. The day was to be the first and last get-together for the school, which was moving toward closure due to reduced pupil enrollment and was making way for a convent. I accepted the invitation, perhaps naïvely thinking that, in revisiting the past and leaving the place for the last time, I could consign the school to a distant memory.

I arrived at the schoolgrounds remembering how my childhood had been spent hidden behind high walls. Within the enclave of the residential school, I had become immersed in sign language, learning it through interaction with other deaf children. The familiar sights, taste, touch, and smell of the surrounding area brought back the old world I once knew. More significantly, it brought up painful memories of my first day as a boarder. The stairs where the nuns had lifted and held me as my parents slipped out the door had the power to evoke the experience of anguish and terror. The dormitory was full of the ghosts of children sitting in their beds and the young boy pinned down on the mattress. Walking from room to room, I was transported back in time, remembering the events of the first day. At the same time, I hovered between resentment and anger, fully aware that my umbrage was directed toward my parents. I believed my parents were the only ones who could provide me with answers and, on my way home, vowed to go on a personal investigation.

Years before my father died in September 2005, the events, which I had described to my parents, were a highly contentious issue, as neither they nor I wanted to acknowledge each other's pain. Although the distress that occurred in childhood was short-lived and had dissolved with time, questions about parental choices remained with me. In July 2010, I wrote the story in order to subjectively name and understand the experience of loss and separation. In doing so, I got the sense of “emotional recall” (Ellis, 2004), feeling the

muscles in my body tense with fear and dread, the tension rising as I continued writing. The benefit of writing was not obvious to me at the time, as I continued to wrestle with emotional issues. Shortly after I finished writing, I noticed my perceptions of the past had changed. In late September 2014, I engaged in a writing conversation with my mother. With some trepidation, she read my story and our conversations became littered with anecdotes based on writing, reading, speaking, listening, and lip-reading. Later I compiled the writing conversations and constructed them into a narrative from which I learned why my parents were forced to send me to residential school. Three schools specializing in the education of deaf children were established in the country and all of them were located in Dublin (Crean, 1997). The option of uprooting the entire family to Dublin could not be contemplated as my father could not consider leaving his job.

Although I still bear the scars of traumatic events, the experience of engaging in writing conversations has moved me to a place where I am able to put distance between myself and the past, even though the word “interrupted” kept surfacing in my mind. The word has now found its way into the title of this paper to address the rupture I experienced in my identity. Perhaps “losses are necessary because we grow by losing and leaving and letting go” (Viorst, 1986, p. 3). Indeed, I lost my hearing but I gained a beautiful language. In my memory, I have a vision of the movement of the children’s hands, swift and purposeful, rising and falling and rising again like wings. To my mind, there is no other language quite like sign language; it remains imprinted in my mind like a birthright. I have a deep appreciation of the language and all the sign languages around the world. I know that writing has changed me for the better. I write as a person who has found his way out of a difficult and painful journey. I am not a teacher of the deaf. I am not an audiologist or speech therapist. Nor am I an expert in the education of deaf children. If there is one qualification I have to write this story, it is this: I am *deaf*.

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