

Janette Kodaih


Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Commissioners Neave, Falkner and Nicholson,

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my personal story about Family Violence.

Of the 7 types of abuse referenced in White Ribbon's fact sheet¹, I suffered all of them other than sexual and spiritual abuse. Verbal abuse was the mainstay in my family home. I was born and raised in a home filled with conflict, hatred and anger. Verbal machine-gun fire was a daily ritual from both parents but dominated by my late father. My childhood, adolescence and early adulthood until I finally escaped was a life of fear and silence, while fighting to secretly do things that normal children take for granted.

My home was a world war. I've never known two people to despise each other as much as my parents. They yelled and screamed at each other every day. My father was a sad, angry, bitter, resentful, nasty and bad-tempered man who despised his family. We were so despised that we knew nothing about him. He never spoke to me other than to yell abuse or complain about something. My memories of him are dominated by unkindness, foul temper, fear and the stench of decay.

School was something of a refuge but I didn't form close friendships and I was often alone. Bringing friends home was out of the question because I feared dying from embarrassment at what he would say to any friend I brought home. I was never allowed to go on school excursions. I remember the look on my Grade 6 teacher's face when I handed her an excursion note written by my father explaining why I wouldn't be attending. It was a look of disgust. I don't know what he wrote but he must have offended her because it appeared she was blaming me for my father's note. My father excelled at offending people and loved starting fights especially over political and religious themes. He was a revolting sadist.

I couldn't escape because I had nowhere to go. I didn't think to tell anyone and I was too scared to. Who would believe me? My parents would have denied everything and afterwards, when the doors shut again, I would have been in serious trouble with more verbal abuse, being told how useless I was and that I wouldn't amount to anything.

I took all the abuse because I didn't want to be homeless. Besides I had school to think about and I wanted to pass. How was I going to pass if I was homeless? Education was mocked by my father, seen as nothing but a waste of money because paying my school fees enraged him.

¹ White Ribbon Australia: Fact Sheet 6 - Family and domestic violence

Financial abuse was rife with my father. I never knew what he spent money on and if it wasn't for my mother working while we were growing up, I don't know how we would have survived. My mother paid for everything. My older sister, who used marriage to escape at the age of 19, paid for her own wedding reception. I remember every month, I would take a week to psyche myself up to overcome my fear of asking my father for money to pay my monthly orthodontist visit. I used to write him notes after he retired for the evening just to avoid having to speak to him. This tactic sometimes worked, sometimes didn't.

The emotional abuse was perpetuated perfectly by my mother. Her stealth and manipulative charm was not lost on my older sister. I went on a hiking trip one year to Tasmania and I decided to call home just to let them know I was safe. I was met on the other end not with a "how are you? Are you having a good time" but with a flood of screams about where was I and when was I coming home. I was left feeling so bereft. Because I was used to so much unkindness, any act of kindness from anyone drove me to tears. My mother often used to tell me that if I left home before getting married, I would have my throat slit.

I was labelled a prostitute when I'd come home late from university so I could study there in peace because I couldn't study at home. I didn't have my own room and I wasn't allowed to buy anything that would aid my studies, such as a lamp so I could study at night. While we lived in a three bedroom house, the parents had to have their own room, the children had to share. While I had a desk to work on, I wasn't allowed to put it in mine and my sister's bedroom. It belonged in my father's room. He liked to go to bed early so I always had to sneak away into some other corner of the house to study, often uncomfortably. Why? Because it was all about the parents' warfare and never about the children. As a child, I often used to wonder why I was born?

My father was a chain smoker inside the house and he stank to high heaven. Nothing was tolerated by him. I wasn't allowed to make any noise. Especially when he was asleep (which was most of the time) and when he was watching TV. If I coughed, I was in trouble and the yelling and screaming erupted. If I sneezed, I was in trouble. If I breathed, I was in trouble but yet, I had to greet him when he came home from work. I had to do this because he was my father. The effort to greet someone so vile, so nasty and unkind was too much for me to bear but I bore it stoically because to me there was no alternative; the consequences were too dire for me. To me, this man was a monster.

I remember one year my father left to go overseas for an unspecified period of time. In the first few weeks we felt overjoyed at our new found freedom as if we had been released from prison. Daily we'd chant at each other and wish for the departure to be permanent all the while knowing too well that his return will be unexpected and at any moment so we had to be prepared.

I was disowned after I cut my hair short and up until three years ago, when I thought the abuse had stopped, the cunningness and premeditated rage was unleashed at me with the full force of a cyclone outside on a street. Words were hurled at me to the effect of how

can someone make themselves so ugly, that I was useless, worthless and I would never amount to anything, that I was never to come to the house again and I was never to show my face again. All because my mother didn't like my haircut. The look in her eyes was the look of a tiger ready to rip my throat out. Since the age of 19 when I cut my hair short and I've worn it short ever since, I've had this verbal abused hurled at me.

I lived a life as a fighter inwardly in order to try to have a normal childhood and do the things that made me happy. For example, I was a fast runner in secondary school and every Tuesdays and Thursdays I stayed back late from school for training. I did it and continued doing it for my 7 years despite my mother's complaint every time she picked me up. I was discouraged from everything and anything. I was discouraged from living. I was figuratively suffocated. But I continued and fought any injustice I perceived against my right to do what I thought was normal. Because I fought I was considered a trouble-maker, a difficult child and the older I got, the stronger the abuse. I realise now that one of the reasons why I have strong self esteem must have been because I fought. Not being allowed to do something was unreasonable to me so I found ways to do it anyway.

I don't remember a kind word from my parents. Everything was expletives galore, screaming madness and the hurtling of the most acidic insults that a sting from a box jellyfish would have been a welcome relief.

I couldn't tell anyone because who was there to tell? Who was going to corroborate me? My family life is dominated by memories of a regime of oppression, suppression, hypocrisy, humiliation and deception. My mother, after years of unhappiness, anger, hatred and constant fighting throughout her marriage, now after my father's death, keeps photos of him on display, as if he was a good man. To this day, she will say to me "Whatever did he do to you?" as if nothing ever happened. She chooses to forget. She chooses deception, delusion and destruction over truth. There was never any truth. We were always told to keep our mouths shut outside the home. No one knows what goes on behind closed doors.

The treatment of strangers was civilised, cordial and even friendly whereas I was treated with disgust and disdain. This insidious behaviour of treating family members with contempt, while treating others with respect exploded like a mushroom cloud upon the arrival of my brother-in-law. For reasons I will never know he decided to seize the opportunity to contribute to the verbal onslaught, never missing an opportunity to rub salt into every one of my very open wounds. My sister, understandably enough, married an abuser. I was 12 years old at the time.

To my parents, I was a trouble maker who was nothing but an inconvenient and difficult child who was never satisfied. I felt horribly unloved. It was such a desultory, dank, fetid and oppressive atmosphere that I came to the conclusion that my sisters and I must have been products of rape.

Many years later after I'd escaped, I remember cowering when I saw my father on a bus. After his death, I cowered again because I saw someone who looked like him.

I grew up with no love, no affection and no support in an environment infused with ice and fear. I was on my own and I somehow automatically nurtured myself and continue to do so. Naturally, this manifested itself in enough dysfunctional relationships that it wasn't until the age of 45 that I finally learned my lessons. The many years of turbulence has finally subsided. I may not know what love is but at least I have achieved a state where my mind is calm.

A genuine concern for a reduction in the incidence of family violence lies in education.

We have a number of social services who mean well and provide temporary respite to victims of abuse, but are any of them having conversations about root cause analysis? Is anyone asking the question: what is the psychology behind abuse?

For 30 plus years, I was exposed to daily verbal abuse of the highest magnitude. The conflict inside the home was monumental. I was subjected to verbal warfare that somehow didn't crush me. I don't know how, but my self esteem and self respect somehow survived. I had no positive role models growing up and I don't know how to choose wisely when it comes to intimate relationships so I've decided to stop in the interest of my emotional well-being.

Some years ago I did some research in this field. There are at least 7 types of abuse: financial, physical, social, sexual, emotional, verbal, and psychological. Why do men abuse over and over again? Because they can.

I believe very strongly that women are the ones who will ultimately break the cycle of abuse because they have to start taking responsibility for their own actions and decisions. By and large, women are contributors to their own oppression. I believe the answer lies in education. Knowledge is power and ultimately, prevention is key. Education will allow girls from a very early age recognise the signs and symptoms of abuse.

I read a book called *Why does he do that?* by Lundy Bancroft. This book describes the types of personalities that make up the abusive spectrum and goes into clear detail about the tell tale signs. If we can educate girls from a young age to recognise these signs, we are acting in ways to prevent family violence from happening in the first place.

I urge you to consider addressing prevention on two educational fronts: Physical education and theory. Girls need a high degree of self esteem and self respect to avoid being treated badly. If you made it compulsory in primary and secondary school for girls to study martial arts, what difference do you think that would make physically and mentally?

Secondly, if you added to the school curriculum a subject on relationship studies where you could teach the psychology behind abuse, you are arming girls with information to make better choices. This is important for boys too. Abusive men come from a value system in the home that encourages the maltreatment of women. Boys see their abusive

dads berating their mother or hitting and boys grow up believing this is the correct way to treat women. So exposing boys to this education is just as important as exposing it to girls. Girls learn what to look for and boys start rethinking what is right and wrong.

To conclude, if you really want the statistics to drop, education is crucial. Males abuse because they can; not too many victims can say “no” or truly believe that once is enough. Being treated with respect is the basic fundamental human right of us all. So why do men abuse? And why do women get involved with abusive men in the first place? Why does it take so long for the cycle of abuse to end? Why does a woman go back after the first slap in the face? Why does it get so bad that some women die? You might think this is unfair but I think the answer lies with women. The female race is the group that can start turning the tide. All they have to do is get educated.

Sincerely,
Janette Kodaih