

Letters From Prison

Re-Authoring Identity With Men Who Have Perpetrated Sexual Violence

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Joshua is currently in prison for sexually assaulting his daughter over a 3-year period. Joshua is in his early 40s, and his daughter was age 11 when the abuse began. I had conversations with Joshua for 18 months prior to his being sentenced to 4 years in prison.¹ Since he has been in prison, Joshua and I have corresponded through letters. In this chapter, I share Joshua's letters, in which he reflects upon our conversations. The conversations have focused on re-authoring his identity in a manner that allows him to take greater responsibility for his abuse and to foster respectful, caring relationships.

Joshua had lived on a low income and has an eighth-grade education. Previous to his latest conviction, he had a history of imprisonment and counseling related to lighting fires, stealing, alcoholism, and sexually abusing his 14-year-old niece. Partly because of Joshua's work at making amends and taking responsibility (Jenkins, Joy, & Hall, 2003), his wife and their four children, including the daughter he sexually abused (who is now 16), have chosen to reestablish varying degrees of relationships with him. Joshua's family has chosen to reestablish relationships with him not because of feeling pressured or obligated to forgive or forget his actions, of which they have done neither. While expressing their anger, outrage, and disgust, the family continues to love Joshua.

When I first met Joshua, he believed that he was “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty.” He felt ashamed about himself and reported feeling this way for a long time. Furthermore, Joshua believed that his identity was fixed, static, and therefore unchangeable. He felt he had no choice over who he was or how he acted. He reported that he acted in destructive ways simply because this is the way he was: essentially “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty.” These negative identity conclusions supported Joshua’s continuing destructive behavior. White (2004) indicates that our lives are constituted through stories. While we live and construct stories about ourselves, these stories also live and construct us (Bruner, 2002; White, 1995). Change was made more difficult by Joshua’s identity being further totalized by labels such as “abuser” and “sex offender.”

In this chapter, I illustrate some of the processes of inviting Joshua to re-author his identity to help him take responsibility and make amends for sexually abusing his daughter. This process has involved him naming his preferred identity, which has been supported by noticing the various times in his life—the unique outcomes—when he acted according to his preferred values and commitments. Furthermore, re-authoring has involved noticing the traumatic experiences in his life in which he was recruited into a negative story about himself. This negative story has contributed to and reinforced his destructive behavior. The re-authoring process has also involved Joshua facing shame both for perpetrating sexual abuse and for the other self-centered destructive ways he used to avoid shame.

Through Joshua’s letters to me, I also share Joshua’s attempts at making amends that have, in turn, created an audience for his re-authored identity. This process of re-authoring identity has helped create a context in which Joshua can continue the work of making amends to his wife and his children.

Preferred Identity

Re-authoring identity with a postmodern sensibility amplifies the fluid, changeable nature of identity. Through this lens, the process of re-authoring identity focuses on people’s agency, preferences, and values in relationships rather than a fixed, unchangeable essence. In my first conversation with Joshua, we began to create alternative possibilities of who he might be, and can be, by my asking him what was important to him in relationships. I asked him what his values were and what kinds of relationships he would prefer to have with his wife and children. Joshua began to talk about what he wanted for his wife and children in terms of their safety, respect, and being cared for. Like many men, Joshua was surprised to identify what is really important to him, that is, what his values are. Many men I work with have not considered

their preferences for loving, caring, respectful relationships. Often the influences of dominant-gender stories preclude men I talk with from focusing on their relationships in a nurturing manner because to do so is considered “women’s work.”

The re-authoring identity process explored various times in Joshua’s life when he lived these values and preferences (White, 1995). Joshua identified times when he *acted* contrary to the problem-saturated story about himself, times when his preferences for justice and fairness, for example, were evident (Jenkins, 1998a, 2005; White, 1995). These events, or unique outcomes, contradicted the problem-saturated story of his identity, in which he perceived himself as being without agency and unable to change. (Although Joshua and I focused on re-authoring his identity through exploring both “unique outcomes” and painful events in his life that recruited him into negative identity conclusions about himself, this chapter primarily focuses on the latter.)

Identifying his preferences and values, his preferred identity, has allowed Joshua to confront his own abusive behavior on the basis of his own values and ethics. As a result, the process of taking responsibility for his sexual abuse of his daughter, ending it, and making amends can be a journey of self-respect and integrity (Jenkins, 1998b, 2006). Rather than continuing to perform his former identity story about himself, now Joshua increasingly performs his preferred, alternative-identity story. The process of Joshua’s naming his preferences allows me to join with him against his perpetration of violence and the ideas that support it, rather than adopting a position of being against him.

An important part of the re-authoring process involves moving away from dichotomous thinking. Previously, I believed men wanted either power and control in their relationships or respectful relationships (Augusta-Scott, 2003). I thought men either perpetrated abuse or acted respectfully. By moving away from dichotomous thinking, I have been able to notice that men often want both power and control and loving, nurturing relationships. While men perpetrate abuse in their families, they often also want to be caring, respectful fathers. By moving away from dichotomous thinking and acknowledging the contractions in people’s lives, I now notice how people’s practices often contradict their preferred values and preferences.²

Recruitment Into Negative Identity Conclusions

Joshua’s choices to sexually abuse his daughter were influenced by his acting out negative identity conclusions and his preoccupation with avoiding, numbing, or soothing his own shame and pain. The following narrative of Joshua’s life focuses on those experiences in which he was recruited into

negative identity conclusions about himself (i.e., that he is “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty”). These identity conclusions support his sexual abuse of his daughter. By identifying the experiences in Joshua’s life in which he *learned* these negative identity conclusions about himself, he has been able to recognize that his identity is not innate, natural, and static but, rather, fluid and changeable. As a result, Joshua has been able to challenge these identity conclusions and move closer to his preferences for fairness and justice.

Talking about Joshua’s past experiences of victimization and injustice does not create excuses, justify, or mitigate Joshua’s responsibility for choosing to sexually abuse his daughter. Joshua’s own childhood abuse did not *cause* him to sexually abuse others. Most people who are sexually abused do not abuse others. The meaning Joshua made of his having been abused, however, informed his choices to sexually abuse. Through being sexually abused, Joshua was recruited into believing that he was “dirty,” “bad,” and “disgusting,” and, therefore, he acted accordingly. As a result, investigating this meaning he made about himself for having been sexually abused is important to interrupting Joshua’s perpetration of sexual abuse.

Previously, dichotomous thinking led me to believe I needed to work with a man as either a perpetrator or a victim. Furthermore, to acknowledge he was a victim in any way meant that somehow he was no longer responsible for his actions. By moving away from dichotomous thinking, I have been able to work with Joshua as someone who is both powerful and powerless, who has both perpetrated abuse and been abused, and who is still responsible for his actions (Augusta-Scott, 2003).

Initially, when I invited Joshua to talk about his past, he resisted, reporting that other counselors had also asked him about his history. He was reluctant to talk about his abusive experiences because he did not want to make excuses for his abuse and he did not see any connection between his own abuse and his abuse of his daughter. Joshua also avoided talking about being abused because he thought these experiences reinforced negative identity conclusions about himself (i.e., that he is “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty”). Conversations about Joshua’s past started only after he began to study the effects of sexual abuse on his daughter.³ As he studied his daughter’s experience, he began to remember his own experiences of childhood sexual abuse. For the first 10 years of his life, Joshua was regularly sexually assaulted and terrorized by his older brothers and their friends. Each day, he would run to and from school, hiding along the way in an effort to avoid his brothers and their friends. He blamed himself for the abuse and concluded that he was “bad,” “dirty,” and “disgusting” and that there was something wrong with him. Joshua felt guilty and ashamed. He reported feeling alone, hurt, scared, and isolated throughout this time period. He also stated much of his childhood was spent “pretending” that he was all right.

As we continued to study the effects abuse had had on him, Joshua was mortified as he began to acknowledge that perhaps his daughter might also feel responsible, bad, dirty, and disgusting because of his sexual abuse of her. In studying the effects of his abuse on his daughter, Joshua firmly believed that it was he, not his daughter, who was completely to blame and responsible for the abuse. By remembering his past, he began to wonder if perhaps he also had not been responsible for the abuse that had happened to him. Rather than continuing to blame himself, he started to think that perhaps those who abused him in childhood had been completely responsible for abusing him, just as he had been for abusing his daughter.

In addition, by identifying how he had been recruited into thinking of himself as “bad” and “disgusting,” Joshua was able to challenge the idea that his identity was fixed and static. He began to realize that he had learned these negative identity conclusions about himself; they were not natural or innate. He began to realize he had choices about how he acted and who he wanted to be. He could choose to live according to his preferred values and practices rather than believing his participation in destructive behavior was inevitable. Joshua expressed relief that he was not fated to live his life repeating the destructive behaviors that confirmed the painful negative identity conclusions about himself.

Joshua’s negative identity conclusions had been reinforced as he continued to experience traumatic experiences and to use destructive behavior to cope with these experiences. For example, at the age of 10, Joshua’s father moved himself and his family to another community but did not include Joshua’s older brother. Joshua described his father as the only person with whom he was close. He reported that his life got better in the absence of his brother and he did not have to pretend and lie to himself that everything was okay. By this time, Joshua was 16, and his father had been suffering from diabetes for a number of years. One day, Joshua’s father requested that he help bring buckets of water to the neighbors. After Joshua refused, his father began to lift the buckets of water himself and had a heart attack in the driveway. Joshua went to the driveway and held his father in his arms as he died. He blamed himself for not helping his father, reporting, “I killed my father.” From this experience, Joshua concluded he was bad, and he felt ashamed and guilty. The meaning Joshua made of his father’s death supported the narrative about himself that he was “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty.”

Having lost his father, the only person with whom he was close, Joshua’s feelings of “overwhelming loneliness, fear, and desperation” returned. He was then sent back to live with the older brother who had previously sexually assaulted him. At this point, centered on his own pain, Joshua began to make himself feel better by drinking, stealing, lighting fires, and sexually assaulting his niece. Joshua performed the negative identity conclusions

through acting out these destructive, self-centered behaviors. These behaviors, in turn, confirmed the negative identity.

Upon leaving prison at age 28 for stealing and lighting fires, Joshua reported feeling better for the next 10 years, no longer “pretending” and instead being honest with himself and others. He then experienced another traumatic event when working with a close friend on a road construction crew. Joshua was responsible for safety on the work site and was advised of the dangers of the steamroller to the work crew. Shortly after, Joshua witnessed his friend being crushed by the steamroller. As with his father, Joshua remembers holding his friend’s dead body in his arms. Joshua blamed himself for his friend’s death, which reinforced the negative identity conclusions he held about himself. He interpreted this event as more evidence that he was “bad” and was again flooded with feelings of guilt, shame, and overwhelming loneliness, as he had experienced in childhood. He began to have nightmares of his experiences of childhood sexual abuse and began thinking of suicide. To avoid his shame over his identity, which he felt he could not change, Joshua again began to abuse drugs and alcohol.

Shortly after his friend’s tragic death, Joshua’s daughter was diagnosed with diabetes. Because he assumed his daughter had genetically inherited her diabetes from him, Joshua also blamed himself for her diabetes. The meaning Joshua attached to this experience reinforced his negative identity conclusions about himself. His feelings of overwhelming loneliness, isolation, and fear were further intensified because he thought his daughter was going to die and leave him, as his father had. Joshua continued “pretending” everything was okay, lying to himself and others. At this time, he increased his misuse of alcohol and drugs to make himself feel better; eventually, he began to sexually abuse his daughter.

Preoccupation With Self: Studying Justifications and Excuses

Part of Joshua taking responsibility for sexually abusing his daughter has involved acknowledging how he was preoccupied with his own pain and the irresponsible manner he used to cope with his painful feelings. This process has involved studying and confronting the ideas and excuses Joshua had used to justify abusing his daughter. Through clearly identifying these justifications and excuses, he has been better able to interrupt and challenge them. Joshua had told himself he was comforting his daughter so that she would not feel empty and alone as he did. In the moments leading up to the abuse, along with telling himself he was doing it for her benefit, he had also told himself

that she liked it. He had chosen to interpret the positive attention his daughter sought from him or gave him as evidence that she liked his sexual attention. Joshua has realized he had taught his daughter that she had to be sexual in order to get her father’s attention. In our conversations, he has also spent many sessions exploring how he had ignored his daughter’s resistance to the abuse (e.g., she would not look at him, etc.) and how he had pressured her not to tell anyone. Joshua identified the ways he had tricked, manipulated, and silenced his daughter and how he justified these actions to himself.

Joshua reported that part of his sexual abuse of his daughter was related to his inability to maintain a sexual relationship with an adult, that is, his wife. He felt inadequate about himself and believed he was unable to emotionally negotiate an adult sexual relationship with his wife and turned to his daughter instead. At times, when he was abusing his daughter, Joshua called her “Sue” rather than “Susan” as he usually did. Upon studying this distinction, Joshua identified that when he called her “Sue,” he was able to pretend he was having sex with an adult rather than his daughter “Susan.” Joshua reported that this pretending made the sexual abuse seem momentarily okay.

Reflecting back on our conversations, Joshua wrote a letter about the painful effects others’ violence had had on him and the destructive ways he used to soothe, numb, and avoid his own pain:

But the biggest problem I had was that deep sense of loneliness, guilt, shame, feeling lost, hurting inside all the time, and I didn’t know why I was hurting. And I would drink and do other things I shouldn’t, to make myself feel good. But was I ever fooling myself. Those so-called good feelings were for short times only, and I always felt worse after. It’s the same as the sexual abuse on Susan. It made me feel good because I thought she felt good by me doing that to her. But after I abused her I felt worse. I believe the drinking, setting of fires (for my own selfish need for attention), and the sexual abuse I did was all a phony way to make me feel good.

In this letter, Joshua identified his preoccupation with his own pain and his attempts to make himself feel better. In another letter, Joshua reflected on the process of studying the “triggers” and self-centered justifications that led to sexually assaulting his daughter. By identifying the “warning signs” and excuses, Joshua began to interrupt and challenge the ideas and not escalate toward abuse. Joshua wrote,

I am the person I want to be now. But the trick is to stay that person. I know there’s a lot of different triggers that might send me back into that bad person way. But I know what those triggers are now, so hopefully I can see it coming. I know that I take traumatic events in my life way too hard and see them

different and worse than other people do. But the biggest thing that is helping me change is that fact that I have and am dealing with my childhood with you. Tod. I have never told anyone about my childhood. Only you know and now [my wife] Mary. But I won't keep it a secret anymore. I have been and will continue to look at my whole life and sort through all the painful things in my life. Because I believe that's a key to getting better.

Joshua named the importance of studying his childhood to notice how he was recruited into the negative identity conclusions that influenced his choices to enact sexual abuse and other irresponsible behavior. Rather than running from the pain and trauma, Joshua was facing it and finding responsible ways to attend to the effects of the abuse on himself. He also identified the importance of continuing to study and monitor his thoughts, feelings, and the possible "triggers" that may lead to abuse, so that he could interrupt his escalation toward abuse.

Re-Authoring Identity Through Facing Shame

In the context of work with violence, re-authoring identity often involves exploring the meaning men make of the shame they experience for perpetrating abuse. Often men see their shame as evidence of negative identity conclusions they hold about themselves. Alternatively, in the process of re-authoring identity, men are invited to consider how shame over their actions may be considered evidence of their values and preferences in relationships. Men can see their shame as evidence that they prefer to stand against abuse and build respectful, caring relationships. Rather than associating his shame with a fixed identity, a self that he thinks cannot be changed, through the process of re-authoring identity, a man associates the shame with his behavior. He considers how his actions may have been a mistake rather than defining himself as a mistake. The shame he feels about his behavior is defined as evidence of his values and preferences not to participate in such irresponsible behavior.⁴

In this work, the process of re-authoring identity involves asking a man what his experience of shame might say about his values or what is important to him. Alan Jenkins (1998a, 2005) developed lines of inquiry to help facilitate this process:

- What would it say about you if you could tell me about the abuse and not feel low and ashamed?
- What does it say about you that you do feel low and ashamed?

Often in response to these questions men begin to identify their experiences of shame as evidence of their values and preferences for love and respect over violence. Constructing their shame as evidence of their desire for loving

relationships gives men permission to feel shame and, in turn, creates the opportunity to study and stop the abuse.

This inquiry constructs the path of stopping the abuse as one of integrity that will lead to self-respect. When men face their violence through facing their shame, they are able to build self-respect (Jenkins, 1998b, 2006). Some lines of inquiry that help facilitate this process are as follows (Jenkins, 1998a):

- Does it take more courage to face up to the abuse (as you are doing here) or to run from it, make excuses for it, and blame others?
- Do you think facing up to your abuse makes you stronger or weaker over time?
- Would you respect yourself more for facing up or for avoiding the abuse and just leaving it to others to think about?

The process of Joshua facing his violence and shame has helped re-author an identity he prefers. Other lines of inquiry that serve to amplify Joshua's sense of integrity for taking the path of facing and stopping the abuse are as follows:

- What might your willingness to stop the abuse mean to your children?
- What difference will it make to be taking the time to stop and think about what you have put them through?
- What difference would it have made if your father would have done for you what you are now doing for your children?
- What difference will facing the abuse make to your partner (Jenkins, 1998a)?

Through these questions, men often feel shame and grief about having perpetrated abuse, and, at the same time, they feel a sense of integrity for acknowledging these feelings and their commitment to stopping the abuse.

In one of his letters to me, Joshua wrote about his shame over sexually abusing his daughter as being evidence of his preference to be a caring, respectful father:

That makes me feel even more guilty. But those feelings are what tell me where my true values are. So feeling guilty and ashamed for the pain I caused my daughter and wife and others is what I would call healthy guilt and shame. It's not at all like the guilt and shame I felt as a kid when I was going through different kinds of abuse. Those feelings as a child were misplaced or phony. I think they were meant for my brothers and their friends, and other people in the community.

SOURCE: Quotes from Jenkins, 1998, from "Facing the shame with shaming: The therapeutic engagement of men who have enacted violence" in *Therapeutic Conversations*, 4 May. Reprinted with permission from Alan Jenkins.

He explained that the shame and guilt he felt as a kid needed to be accepted by those who abused him, "my brothers and their friends, and other people in the community." Men are invited to attribute responsibility for the abuse to the person who perpetrated the abuse rather than the person who is victimized by it. As mentioned earlier, Joshua realized that in the same way his daughter was not responsible for the sexual violence he had done to her, he had not been responsible for the sexual violence done to him. Through this process, Joshua was also able to identify that he had not been responsible for his father's or his friend's death or his daughter's diabetes, as the problem-saturated story about himself had led him to believe. At the same time, Joshua identified the importance of his accepting the shame for abusing his daughter. He has been better able to take responsibility and face his shame when it is defined as evidence of his preferred identity (Jenkins, 1998a, 2005).

Encouraging men to take responsibility and face their shame about their abusive behavior without changing the meaning they make of this shame is unhelpful. Again, initially, men often define their shame as evidence of negative identity conclusions about themselves (i.e., that they are "bad"). The negative fixed identity conclusions support men's choices to perpetrate sexual abuse. Without changing the meaning of the shame, the process of acknowledging their violence and shame can inadvertently reinforce the negative identity conclusions, which subsequently support the continuation of the sexual abuse.

The shame Joshua feels and accepts now reflects his taking responsibility for sexually assaulting his daughter. Through the process of re-authoring his identity, he now associates his shame with his actions as opposed to a fixed negative identity. The meaning he makes of his shame no longer supports the negative identity conclusions that render invisible his ability to change. Joshua also defines his shame as evidence of his preferences for actions that support caring, respectful relationships.

More recently, Joshua has begun to have conversations with others who are in prison for perpetrating sexual abuse. He has begun helping them define their shame in reference to their behavior and as a reflection of their preferences for fair and respectful relationships. Joshua wrote,

One guy said there is no hope for him because he has hurt so many people and done so many bad things. He said when he looks back he hurts so bad for what he has done. I tell him *that* is his hope, having those hurting feelings. That's where the changes can really take place. And I explain to him that is his conscience and empathy.

The idea is not to lessen men's feelings of shame. Rather, the re-authoring of identity both amplifies and honors men's experiences of shame. The process is not one of "forgive and forget"; rather, it is one of remembering

and living with the shame of having sexually abused one's daughter. Joshua recognizes that re-authoring his identity does not serve to mitigate his responsibility for, or the seriousness of, the pain and suffering he has caused others through sexually assaulting his daughter. He remains connected to the shame of sexually abusing his daughter. The re-authoring of his identity has made it possible for him to confront the story of himself that supported his abusive behavior. Joshua wrote,

Tod, do you remember when I used to say to myself, "I'm bad," "I am evil," "I am no good for anyone or anything"? Well I realized I was right, but only at certain times. There's no denying I was all those things. But I also realize I was a real Dad to my children at times too and I was a good person at times toward other people. And I was a good husband to my wife at times too. So I asked myself which of the two different types of personality do I want. . . . Well, of course, I want to be the good person. But to really be a true good person, I believe I have to deal with that bad person that was in me. I know our talks have helped me see that I wasn't always bad and that I can change my bad ways into good ways. I have been doing a lot of thinking about who I am and who I want to be.

Joshua demonstrates that while he is constructing a preferred identity story about himself, his life remains multistoried. His preferred story of himself does not negate or dismiss his history of destructive behavior and the traumatic effects it has had and continues to have on others.⁵ Rather than distancing him from the seriousness of his abusive behavior, Joshua demonstrates how connecting with his preferred values and identity increases his capacity to take responsibility. He now draws on his own ethics and values to tolerate his experience of shame and confront his irresponsible behavior. Joshua is able to move away from a problem-saturated narrative about himself and entertain other possibilities of who he can be.

Restitution

Through establishing his preferred identity and his ability to face his violence and shame, Joshua is able to both stop the abuse and work on addressing the effects the abuse has had and may have on others. Joshua is able to study himself and hear directly from his partner and children about the effects of his choices on them.

Over the last 2 ½ years, Joshua has worked to address the effects of perpetrating sexual abuse on his family. Rather than focus only on his own experience, *restitution* involves Joshua investing in understanding his daughter and others' experiences of his perpetration of sexual abuse. This process of making amends involves accepting the shame and responsibility for such

actions. He has committed to studying others' experiences of his sexual abuse of his daughter. He has engaged in numerous conversations with his family in which they express their pain, anger, and disappointment. Through these conversations, Joshua listens and works to take full responsibility for the effects of his actions on all of them.

Restitution shifts the focus from Joshua's own pain or from making hollow promises and apologies, such as those that he has previously made. Restitution does not require a response of forgiveness from those who have been victimized. There is also no expectation that engaging in restitution carries any sense of entitlement for reconciliation. If the abused person wants to have contact, he or she is entitled to determine the level of reconnection (Jenkins et al., 2003). Joshua is extending himself without expecting any form of acceptance or pardon in return. He invests in making amends with the knowledge that his behavior can never be undone or forgotten (Jenkins et al., 2003).

Joshua eventually decided that he wanted to make restitution to the larger community. As a result, he initiated a conversation with myself and the sexual assault worker at the local sexual assault center. Joshua's intention was to give back to the community by helping those who work with people hurt by abuse. He wanted to give people trying to help a greater understanding of those who are perpetrating sexual abuse. Furthermore, toward this end, Joshua recently acted as a consultant for three university students conducting research on clinical interventions for those who have perpetrated sexual abuse. In addition, Joshua was willing to be interviewed by men in front of a local transition house worker. The sexual assault worker, transition house worker, and the students reported being struck by the honesty and courage Joshua demonstrated in confronting what he had done to his daughter. They also spoke of finding the conversations very hopeful.

Along with working to make restitution with his family and professionals in his immediate community, Joshua has continued to repair the effects of what he has done to the community in other ways. Joshua is now listening to many other men who are in prison for their sexually abusive behavior. In an effort to stop abuse, he now devotes many hours of his day trying to be helpful to others who have perpetrated sexual abuse. Joshua shared his conversations with a man who is also in prison for sexual assault:

He said in group that he didn't like what he saw in his past actions. In fact, he became very depressed about them. So I asked him today about them and why he felt so bad. He said he couldn't believe the things he did and he hated himself. He said he felt so guilty and ashamed. So much so that he wanted to die. So I told him I felt the same way last summer. Then I said, "You should feel good about feeling so bad."

He said, "What are you crazy!"

I said, "No, but think about it—if you have those feelings, then that means you care, that means that you are human, that means you have started to heal."

So after a while he came back to me and said, "I thought about what you said, and I see what you mean." He said, "I feel pretty good. I'm not a monster. I *can* be a good person."

I said, "Yes you can." And he opened up and told me everything about his case and stopped a few times to cry. It was so emotional, Tod. I wish you were there. We talked for about 3 hours—I should say, he talked. It was the best thing ever to see. And I just got done talking to him this afternoon, and he is real happy, and he feels real good about himself. It is the most amazing thing to see someone take such deep negative feelings and emotions and turn them into good ones. He keeps thanking me and says he sees things so different now. He wants me to go walking with him tonight and meet some other guys that are in for the same thing we are.

Having the opportunity to help others move away from abuse resonates with Joshua's preference to stand against injustice. Joshua provides these men with a platform with which they can begin the process of taking responsibility and making amends. Joshua continued,

I must say, Tod, I feel great about myself, and I think I am doing good things, helping kids read, getting more education, and being a friend to these guys and helping them see what they are capable of. And that all comes from you passing it on to me. And I feel great to pass it on to others. You showed me the good in me, and now I have a chance to show other guys the good in them. And I know for a fact these guys can do good things and maybe have no more victims.

There are other guys I talk to also, and two of these guys want me to move into their [prison] house. They said I understand them better than they do themselves. When I talk to these guys, we talk about everything, they tell me things they can't tell other people. I have built a trust with each and every one of these guys. They cry, they even hug me. I love being there for them, they need someone who has been there and understands them. I am so amazed how many of them open up to me, and only me. I know they feel so comfortable with me and they know I truly care (and I do care, Tod). . . . I thought that was great. I feel I am doing some very important things here, Tod and it is helping me in return. Well I must go for now Tod, take care. Joshua.

Through helping other men in prison take responsibility for their sexual abuse, Joshua is practicing a different way of being in the world. Rather than "pretending," he practices being honest with himself and others, taking

responsibility, and facing his shame and embarrassment. Joshua is not overconfident about the changes he is making. He is humble about these changes. It is not surprising that Joshua may be the “only” person some men have initially talked with, given these are sexual offenses being disclosed in the context of prison. He has not lost sight of his personal journey by becoming overzealous or evangelistic toward others as though he has it “all figured out.” As the effects of Joshua’s behavior will not be forgotten, he does not forget or cast off his shame for perpetrating sexual abuse. Joshua manages his shame through a reclaiming of his integrity through respectful and responsible actions over time (Jenkins et al., 2003).

Joshua remains vigilant in taking responsibility for monitoring his thoughts and feelings every day. Previously, to cope with the stress and shame of going to prison for 4 years, he would have “pretended” everything was okay, lying to himself and others and escaping his feelings through abusing alcohol and sexual abuse. Today, he respects himself for facing his stress and shame rather than avoiding and running from these feelings. He accepts his prison term as part of his larger project to take responsibility and accepts the consequences for his actions.

Audience

Through the process of creating possibilities for restitution, Joshua has been able to perform and circulate his preferred identity with others. The sexual assault worker, the students, the transition house worker, and those in prison with Joshua have all become part of an audience for the changes he is making. The feedback from this audience supports and strengthens Joshua’s commitment to his re-authored identity, which continues the life-long journey of accepting the shame and responsibility for having sexually abused his daughter (White, 1995). The audience’s circulation of this re-authored story about Joshua and the audience’s belief and trust in his re-authored identity help Joshua sustain the changes he is making over time.

Unexpectedly, I recently received a letter from a man in prison whom I do not know. The person is part of Joshua’s audience, a witness to Joshua’s attempts at restitution. The letter was written by Kirk, one of the men Joshua is talking with in prison who also sexually abused one of his children. He wrote,

I know that Joshua has told you about our conversations. You are very correct in assuming that they are unique. With any other person, I’d be beaten by now. Joshua has helped me understand how wrong I’ve been in what I did. . . .

He has convinced me that he actually cares about what happens to me. He says I have also helped him with his guilt and that makes me feel useful for the first time in years. . . . He has also given me an important goal. And that is to ensure I never ever have another victim. I wish Joshua was on staff here. I believe he could help many others, people like me who know in their hearts, who are sure they are wrong in what they’ve done.

With Kirk’s permission, I shared this letter with Joshua, and he reported that he felt supported and amplified in his commitment to living his values. Joshua stated feeling that this re-authored identity gets stronger as more people recognize and appreciate it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated the importance to Joshua of re-authoring his identity and taking responsibility for having sexually abused his daughter. The process of re-authoring has involved Joshua naming his preferred identity and identifying the history of events that might support such identity conclusions about himself. Joshua also identified how he was recruited into a negative identity story about himself. Furthermore, he noticed the way he had acted out this negative story about himself and had attempted to sooth his hame and guilt through self-centered, destructive behavior. For Joshua, re-authoring his identity also involved facing shame and taking responsibility for perpetrating sexual abuse. As a result of re-authoring his identity and studying the effects of violence, Joshua has created a platform for hearing his partner’s and his children’s experiences of his actions. He is in a position where he can begin the process of making amends to his family and the larger community. In turn, as reflected in Joshua’s letters from prison, an audience is developing that supports his efforts to live according to his preferred identity.

Notes

1. The name “Joshua” is a pseudonym, as are all the case names used in the chapter. The stories and letters used in this chapter are all used with the informed consent of those involved.

2. Re-authoring does not simply create new positive identity conclusions, which rely upon essentialist, humanist notions such as a person’s “fundamental goodness” or “true self” (White, 2004).

3. For various reasons, men often deny and minimize the seriousness of the effects of their violence on others. Men’s motivation for stopping their violence is

significantly increased when they are invited to *acknowledge the effects* of their violence on what and who is important to them. Along with abusing others, most men I work with have been abused themselves. Many men who deny and minimize the seriousness of the effects their violence on others also deny and minimize the effects of others' violence on themselves. Working to interrupt the violence involves encouraging men to appreciate the experience of being victimized by violence through studying the effects of violence upon both themselves and others. In the context of studying men's values and preferences, inviting men to study the effects of violence on themselves and others increases their motivation and capacity to take responsibility for responding to these effects.

Inviting men to take responsibility for responding to the effects of their violence on others involves men considering unhelpful and helpful responses to the effects of violence. Many men respond to the violence inflicted on them by denying and avoiding it. Rather than face these traumatic experiences, many men respond to the effects by trying to soothe, numb, and comfort themselves through drugs, alcohol, gambling, and sexual abuse. (In the beginning of my conversations with Joshua, he was aware of trying to avoid and soothe his painful feelings but was unclear about the traumatic experiences that the feelings were associated with. In one conversation, Joshua reported that he had recently confided in his sister that he thought he had been sexually abused as a child. His sister confirmed that he had been). When men become self-absorbed with their own pain, they remain unaware of others' experiences. Men are invited to face rather than avoid their traumatic experiences. As men find more helpful ways of responding to their own pain, they also find helpful ways of responding to the pain they have caused others.

Previously, in accordance with the dominant domestic violence approach (Pence & Paymar, 1993), I restricted the study of the effects of abuse to include only the effects on those whom men had hurt. The process of studying the effects of men's violence on others became much more profound when I also invited men to study the effects of violence on themselves. When men study others' experiences of violence, they often gain insight into their own experiences of violence. Conversely, as men study their own experiences of violence, they gain a greater understanding of others' experiences. Men's experiences are often both similar to and different from experiences of those they have hurt. The process of studying the effects eventually involves hearing directly from those they have hurt.

4. Many have contributed to these distinctions about shame. Some popular authors are Bradshaw (1988), Brown (2004), Gilligan (1997), and Luskin (2003).

5. Again, re-authoring does not simply create new positive identity conclusions that rely upon essentialist, humanist notions such as a person's "fundamental goodness" or "true self" (White, 2004).

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NARRATIVE THERAPY

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Making Lives

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