Exposing Taboos: Seeing What's Right Before Your Eyes

by Barbara L. Howe

Virginia Woolf is almost as famous for the way she died—suicide-by-drowning—as she is for her writings. So, when literary scholar Louise DeSalvo published a biography of Woolf in 1989, it caused quite a stir because for the first time it portrayed the Victorian novelist not as a mad artistic genius but as an incest survivor.

When DeSalvo wrote about the impact of childhood sexual abuse on Virginia Woolf she had not uncovered any new evidence; all the information was already out there. The literary family left scads of documentation in the form of private letters and diaries, as well as published works. Yet countless biographers, including Woolf's own nephew, either glossed over this central aspect of the novelist's life, or overlooked it entirely.

Virginia Woolf was a giant of 20th century English literature, one of the founding members of the Bloomsbury Group, a group of London intellectuals associated with Cambridge University. She helped move English literature out of the 19th and into the 20th century, and yet when she walked into that pond in 1941 at the age of 59, with rocks in her pockets, it was interpreted as the act of a mad woman—irrational and unpredictable.

Even today childhood sexual abuse is much more common than we tend to think. According to the advocacy organization From Darkness to Light, about one in ten children will be sexually abused before their eighteenth birthday. For girls, the number is one in five.

In Woolf's time, the repressive family structures of Victorian England in which men were the ultimate authoritarians both within and outside the home, and women had few rights and resources, this number was almost certainly much higher. Parenting was contracted out to nannies, the lowest paid of all servants. Mothers and fathers often only saw their children during "the children's hour" (the hour before dinner.) Male children were given license to engage in all sorts of "unseemly" behavior in light of the old adage "boys will be boys."

Are we so much more enlightened now?

In 2011, an assistant football coach at Penn State, Jerry Sandusky, was indicted on 52 counts of child molestation from incidents that took place between 1994 and 2009. Three Penn State officials were charged with covering up for him.

In 2016, news broke about USA Gymnastics coach Larry Nassar's sexual abuse of nearly 400 girls over a period of twenty years. USA Gymnastics and Michigan State, where Nassar worked as an osteopathic physician, have been accused of enabling him, and are now defending themselves against several lawsuits.

The scandals involving predatory Catholic priests, and the church officials who covered up for them, are well-known and too numerous to list. Now the Boy Scouts of America now faces similar charges involving the scoutmaster of a troop right here in Gainesville in the 1990s.[1] Boys suffer abuse, too.

Virginia Woolf would not be impressed with the progress we have made in protecting children over the past century.

What does a sexual predator look like? He or she (abusers are not just men) looks just like everyone else. Abusers can be your neighbors and friends, your teachers, co-workers and bosses. "Stranger danger" is a dangerous misperception. About 90% of children who are abused are abused by people they know; people trusted by the family. Also, it is important to understand that adults are not the only perpetrators. Forty percent of children who are sexually abused are abused by an older or more powerful juvenile, and the younger the victim is, the more likely that is to be the case.

Emotional and mental health problems are often the first sign of abuse in children. Post-traumatic stress, depression, and suicide are all too common in survivors who also suffer a fourfold increase in substance abuse disorders.

Direct signs of sexual abuse are not obvious and are hard to distinguish from other signs of abuse. Indeed some children may display no obvious symptoms at all. This does not mean the abuse did not happen. It simply means that the range of normal human responses to abuse is very wide and depends on many factors including a child's natural emotional resiliency, the duration of the abuse, and whether the child reports the abuse, gets listened to, and/or receives treatment.

Parents, teachers, and anyone who cares about children need to not only be aware of the signs of sexual abuse but proactively take steps to encourage children to talk about it when it happens. Taboo subjects only protect perpetrators of abuse when victims are silent or silenced.

The abuse in Virginia Woolf's family was an open secret. That it happened is not in doubt. As mentioned previously, documentation of the abuse abounds.

After their mother died, Virginia's step-sister, Stella, took on the role of caring for and comforting their father, Leslie. It was well understood that this comfort extended into wifely "duties," and when Stella married soon afterwards, her father acted more like a jilted lover than the father of the bride.

For Virginia and her sister, Vanessa, nightly visits from their step-brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth, increased in frequency after their mother died, and they had no recourse to stop this behavior. What could they do? Complain to their father?

It is impossible to overstate how thoroughly detrimental and disempowering sexual abuse is. Virginia Woolf never stopped trying to understand the impact of what happened to her. She was fascinated by the emerging field of psychoanalysis, and like many other upper-class women at the turn of the last century in England, she underwent "auto-analysis" with the *father* of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud himself.

Freud's theories about women's "hysteria" were highly controversial and are largely discredited today. Most of his patients were women, and instances of childhood sexual abuse were so commonly reported he could not believe these things actually happened, especially amongst his upper-class patients (as clear a case as ever there was of a scientist's personal biases impeding scientific inquiry.) Freud decided that the women had to be making these things up. These were not actual events, he declared, but fantasies or unfulfilled desires, and he formed his theory of the "Oedipus complex": that all women were secretly, unconsciously in love with their fathers.

For Freud, like for many people still today, it was easier to believe that women were mendacious rather than to admit that sexual abuse was and is so pervasive. What is unappreciated even today is the amount of courage it takes for a woman to go against everything that her family and the larger society around her are saying about what is real and true, and believe her own experience instead. It takes an enormous amount of emotional work, determination, and even stubbornness to do what Virginia Woolf did—essentially to write one's own story, to say, "This is what I know to be true, whether others believe me or not."

Virginia was exactly the sort of woman who could do such work. Since she was a girl she was denied a formal education. Yet as the child of an eminent literary scholar, she could and did take advantage of her father's extensive library to educate herself. She knew she was one of the lucky ones, and throughout her life she fought tirelessly for equal rights for women. In her essay "A Room of One's Own" she argues that women need financial independence and space from men in order to become fully self-actualized.

Artistic genius is not madness; it is hard work, as is surviving sexual abuse. Virginia Woolf was not mad. She had a mental illness caused by childhood sexual abuse which was unrecognized and untreated. That she died of suicide should have been entirely predictable, if only the world back then believed women. Sexual abuse is so common you almost certainly know someone who has been affected by it. As we can see from Freud's example, people can invent all sorts of wild theories to explain away the ugly or painful truths. Or, they can believe the abused when they report it. Which option will help to quell the abuse? Do *you* have the courage to help?

[1]https://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article238998348.html

Barbara Howe is a Florida-based writer.

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Woman: totally synonymous with EARTH.
Rare, exceptional, talented, magnificent . . .

How frustrating to wonder if we will ever learn
The value and awesomeness of both soon enough
To reap the considerable rewards of cherishing both? *Jeri Baldwin*

<u>One</u> in <u>Five</u> Americans will experience mental illness this year.

Each year we dedicate this month to fighting stigma, providing support, and educating the public about the importance of mental health care.

Why care?

is a campaign by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to raise awareness about mental health. You can participate in a fundraising NAMIWalk in Orlando, Saturday, April 25th at Cranes Roost Park in Altamonte Springs, FL. Check-in time is 9:00 a.m.; walk begins at 10:00 a.m. Contact Eric Welch, Executive Director at 407-965-5729 or email eric.welch@namigo.org