

❧ INFORMATION FOR THE READER ❧

This excerpt is from the book
Little Madhouse on the Prairie
by Marion Witte.

You can purchase the book and obtain further information
at www.littlemadhouseontheprairie.com

The author's website is www.marionwitte.com.

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Your support of Ms. Witte in this matter is appreciated.

large items, was stored at the foot of the stairs. It was covered with a plastic table cloth to keep it free from dirt and dust. The wheels on its legs allowed it to be rolled into the kitchen on laundry day. After the machine was plugged in, it took about fifteen minutes for the two large rollers on the top of the machine to become intensely hot enough to use to press laundry. I am two years old and I am holding a metal toy merry-go-round as I stand at the top of this staircase. A push against my back causes me to roll down the stairs and fall all the way down to the first floor, next to the mangle. One of the metal flaps on my toy pierces my skull, and I lay in a pool of blood. The shadowy image at the top of the stairs made its appearance the second time I underwent hypnosis. The figure appeared in the form of a moving shape, much like a wisp of cigarette smoke. I cannot remember who pushed me, or perhaps I do not want to.

I was not able to recall this event until my mid-forties, probably because until that time I was not ready to handle it emotionally. As an adult, and with years of therapy behind me, I was able to process this experience without experiencing the original terror or trauma.

It always sounded odd to me when my mother said that the clothes needed to be “mangled.” It seemed a harsh word for a household activity. Through the surfacing of this memory, I learned what it was like for the same thing to happen to a little girl when she is pushed down the stairs and mangled by an iron toy.

∞ THE HEALING CENTER ∞

The healing techniques I employed all helped to one degree or another. The most intensive of these was a residential treatment program near Los Angeles for adult survivors of severe childhood abuse. It was also the most traumatic. One of my friends, a nurse, had gone through it and felt it had helped her tremendously.

The program at the Healing Center began with an orientation session Tuesday evening at 6:00 p.m. I had driven the 120 miles between my home and the Los Angeles area many times before, and in the worst of traffic it was a three-hour drive. This time it took me seven hours, as I kept “getting lost.” My inner child already knew what was in store for us, and the childlike fear I felt was constantly causing me to misread the directions. I was three hours late for the opening meeting, and I hoped the therapist would tell me I had missed too many instructions to be able to start with the group. I was disappointed. I got to stay.

I had to fill out a questionnaire, detailing the abuse I had experienced as a child. After completing the information, the three others attending the program (a woman and two men) and I were asked to talk about why we were there and what we hoped to accomplish. I felt many strong feelings during this discussion. I felt ashamed and afraid as I spoke about some of the pain I had experienced as a child. Although I had talked about it in therapy and with the friend who had recommended the Healing Center to me, I had never talked about my childhood with other people before, and certainly not with strangers. As the discussion progressed, I sensed that the other participants understood my experience and pain, and that provided a comforting energy.

At the end of the evening, the therapist asked us to sign a “contract” with ourselves, whereby we would agree that once the program had started, we would not leave until it finished five days later. As I signed that document, my inner child started to turn into an inner brat. Despite the temporary comfort I had felt earlier in the evening, that childlike aspect of me started to think that I had been tricked and then abandoned. On the drive to the Center, I had assured her that attending this program would be a good idea, but now I was in this unfamiliar facility with three total strangers, facing five days of talking about the past. My child within sensed long before I realized it that reliving a painful childhood,

even through adult eyes, was going to be as traumatic as the original experience. So through her eyes, I was being abused one more time.

I was the only participant who resided at the Healing Center, as the other attendees lived within driving distance. The first night, immediately before lights out, I was allowed to make one phone call. I dialed my nurse friend who had recommended the program and told her to “fuck off” and that I never wanted to see her again. That night I needed someone to blame for being in that place and she was very handy. I did not know at the time that it was my soul that had chosen this place for me to be.

One of the participants going through the program was a 30-year-old married mother with two small children. She seemed like a woman you would find in any suburban home in America. One of the men was a stockbroker in his late twenties, and he seemed self-assured and was friendly and outgoing. The other man was a young artist and musician in his mid-twenties. He had a bit of a hippie look about him, and his dark skin and black hair and eyes gave him a handsome, exotic appearance.

When I first met the other attendees, they seemed so normal that it made me feel even more damaged. As we progressed through the program, I came to understand that these people had their own internal wounds, no matter how “normal” they appeared on the outside.

Two therapists and an assistant facilitated the five-day intensive. The schedule for the first two days included twice-a-day group therapy sessions for all attendees. Individual counseling sessions were scheduled as requested by the facilitator or by a participant. A portion of the day was dedicated to journaling and writing exercises, and we discussed the material we wrote about in individual sessions or in group. Time was also set aside for breathing exercises, meditation, outdoor walks, and group meals.

On the third day, we got into the Center's van and were driven to a cabin on a lake, where we spent the next three days and nights.

The cabin had a very rustic feel, yet it was modern and comfortable, and the lake on which it was located was beautiful. We sat outside for some of the sessions but we spent most of our time indoors in therapy. I shared a room with the other woman attendee, and the two male participants also shared a room. There was a complete kitchen, where the assistant prepared the meals. For the participants' protection, one of the rules was that a participant was never to be alone in a room (except the bathroom). Another person was to be present at all times in case we became distressed or despondent. In addition, during the program we could not engage in any sexual activities or alcohol or drug use.

While at the lake house, the psychologists continued individual and group therapy sessions. They also introduced the technique of hypnotic therapy in a group setting, with a psychologist hypnotizing one participant at a time, the other three bearing witness and providing a support system. This process was different from the hypnotic regression therapy I had experienced prior to coming to the Healing Center. Those sessions had centered on recalling a specific event that had occurred in the past, with the goal of releasing the trapped emotions related to that one situation.

This new technique was based on the concept of addressing a broader base of unresolved childhood issues, so it was common for several past events to be brought up during the session. We were each instructed to choose a time in our childhood when negative circumstances or situations took place that we felt were never satisfactorily resolved. We also had to choose people from that time that we wanted to speak to about those circumstances or situations. Then, while in a hypnotic state, each of us was regressed to the time that we had chosen, and we were given the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with those individuals.

After the therapist ended our individual session and brought us out of hypnosis, we would discuss what we had experienced while in the hypnotic state. This provided an opportunity for the person hypnotized to describe what occurred during their process and to talk about the feelings associated with their experience. Each of the other participants also had the chance to express what he or she observed as a witness.

I was the last of the four patients to undergo this therapy. With eyes closed, I was regressed back to the time when I was four years old. I saw the living room of the farmhouse in which I had grown up, once again as if I was watching a black-and-white movie. The therapist asked me to bring my little four-year-old self into the room. It took several minutes of coaxing from me, and finally I could see this beautiful little girl peek her head out from behind the sofa. I saw her clearly in my mind's eye, even though I was hypnotized and my eyes were closed. She was dressed in clothes from the 1950s, she was barefoot, and she looked scared to death. I could barely make out her face peeking from behind the couch, although as I looked at those big brown eyes there was no doubting who she was. No amount of coaxing from me could get to her to come into the room.

The therapist asked that little girl if it would be all right to bring her parents into the room. The little girl did not answer. She remained silent, almost completely hidden behind the sofa. Then the therapist addressed the same question to me, and I said yes, it would be all right. The next thing that happened was that my father walked into the living room, in his work overalls, and sat in a chair in front of me. I proceeded to challenge him, over and over again, about why he did not protect that little girl that was me when I was little. He would not answer; instead he sat looking down at the ground, just as he had when we had sat on the furnace grate together. I told him that if he was not going to talk, he might as well leave, because that is what he always did anyway. He got up silently and walked out. As he walked away, I looked over to

the couch, and all I could see of the little girl was a shock of her disheveled brown hair sticking out from behind the sofa.

The therapist then asked if I wanted to speak to my mother, and I said that I did. I looked over at the couch, and by now even the brown hair had disappeared. My mother strolled into the room and took the same chair in which my father had sat. She was cool, reserved, distant. I started the conversation, asking her to tell me why she had treated me as she had when I was a child. Like my father, she sat silently, staring at me, and did not respond. I tried to speak calmly to her but soon my voice escalated into screaming as she continued to ignore me. I felt myself getting angrier and angrier, and I stood up to grab her throat. My knees buckled and I fell to the ground, and I felt myself slipping into a dark hole and losing all sense of where I was and what was actually happening. Today, the closest analogy I can draw is that I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, being terrified that if my freefall did not end I would turn into the Mad Hatter. The next thing I remember was the therapist gently shaking me and holding me in her arms, telling me that she had sent my parents away and it was safe for me to come back. I thank God she had the clinical experience to bring me back from wherever I was.

Although this was incredibly frightening, it was one of the most magnificent experiences I have ever had. I got in touch with the childlike part of me more tangibly than I ever had before, only to discover how scared that little girl still was and how important it was for me to learn to take care of her needs. Although I had stood up for my inner child in front of my parents, I knew that I had tremendous work ahead of me to fully earn the trust of that inner child part of me that was still so wounded.

The day after the hypnotic regression session, I was asked to write letters to my parents as though I were still a young child. The therapist advised me to include statements that I

wanted to express to my parents and that I had not been allowed to make back then. She instructed me to write with my less-dominant hand, and, following this instruction, I found my thoughts flowing onto the paper as I concentrated on the act of moving my pencil in this unfamiliar and uncomfortable way. I share the letters with you.