

The Truth Will Set You Free: Overcoming Emotional Blindness and Finding Your True Adult Self

by Alice Miller. Basic Books, NY, 2001

Review by Carol Redding



ISBN 0-465-04584-7
\$24. 203 p

In this eminently readable work, prominent Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller once again reveals the direct and damaging impact that violence and early neglect of children have on *every* life—not only those subjected directly to such trauma during childhood.

Miller draws a metaphorical parallel between the experiences of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the experiences of children who are taught that neglect and corporal, emotional, or psychological punishment are “for [their] own good.” She argues, “Like Adam and Eve, the price they have paid for the love given them by their parents is unconditional obedience, blind faith, the voluntary renunciation of knowledge and personal convictions—in short, the abandonment of their own true selves.”^{1:p89}

Recent neurobiologic research, such as the work of Marian Diamond and Janet Hopson, *Magic Trees of the Mind*,² supports the contention that our earliest childhood experiences are literally embedded in our atomic memory in such a way as to alter not only our emotional and psychosocial development but also development of our bodies. This concept supports Miller’s statement that “The consensus is that early emotions leave indelible traces in the body and are encoded as information that will have a serious impact on the way we feel and think as adults, although those effects normally remain beyond the reach of the conscious mind and logical thought.”^{1:p118}

Miller recognizes that although we form mental barriers to protect ourselves in the present from pain experienced in the past, these barriers can cause “emotional blindness and urge us to do harm to ourselves and others.”^{1:p125} Using concrete examples taken from historical biographies and associated events, such as World War II, Miller describes the process by which innocence can be twisted into evil as a child internalizes the brutality perpetrated upon him by often well-intentioned parents only to later outwardly expel that violence upon his or her own children—and sometimes upon humanity as a whole.

Miller also describes the inadvertent perpetuation of

this phenomenon “... in six fields where we should expect precisely the opposite: medicine, psychotherapy, politics, the penal system, religion, and biography,”^{1:p18} explaining that “Probably the single most important factor militating against success is doctors’ fear of reviving their own childhood traumas. Unfortunately, doctors frequently ward off such fears by diverting them onto their patients and instilling fear in them.”^{1:p26}

Miller believes that patients can find the courage to express their internalized fears, pain, disappointment, rage, and needs—but only through the encouragement of “someone who does not share those fears or who has already experienced them and recognized them for what they are. There can be no doubt that successful therapeutic activity hinges on the therapist’s own emotional development. The help provided by therapists, doctors, and social workers would take on a new dimension if knowledge of this childhood factor were widespread. So far, however, it appears to be taboo for the medical world.”^{1:p23-4}

Fortunately, hope lies in the potential presence of two key roles in a person’s life: that of the “helping witness,” a person who stands beside the endangered child while offering positive emotional support to the child; and that of the “enlightened witness,” who offers unconditional support to the adult suffering the long-term after effects of a traumatic childhood. These people do not have to be professionals; however, compared with other professionals, people in the medical and teaching fields have greater opportunity to engage in these roles.

Without the support of these “witnesses,” Miller argues, the abused person’s conscious or subconscious refusal to recognize his or her own origins has a destructive effect. “Although scientific medicine no longer denies that our bodies store information about what we have experienced in our lives, it is frequently at a loss to decipher those experiences. Yet we know of instances in which severe physical symptoms vanish when one succeeds in surmounting such experiences.”^{1:p4}

Carol Redding is an Information Technology Consultant and Customer Service Manager at San Diego State University, a California-licensed Private Investigator, a Grant Writer for the California Institutes of Preventive Medicine, a contest-winning essayist, and a survivor of cancer and child abuse.

According to Miller, the focus of modern psychotherapy must include not only the emotional *and* cognitive recognition of a person's historical truth; to be successful, this process must include presence of an "enlightened witness" who has already successfully confronted his or her own history and is thus able to supportively guide another person through that process.

Dr Miller maintains that with the aid of such "enlightened witnesses," patients can better understand their childhood experience of being a helpless victim—an experience which, in turn, leads to the patient assuming the emotional posture of a victim when responding to difficult situations in adulthood. "The denied truth will be with us wherever we flee. ... But if we face up to it, we have a chance of finally recognizing what happened, what didn't happen, and what has forced us to end up living our lives in opposition to our most profound needs."¹p50

As a person who has herself suffered a brutal childhood and a somewhat traumatized adulthood, I am happy to report that Kaiser Permanente is not without its own supply of "enlightened witnesses." I encountered my first such person in the form of Robert W

Hogan, MD, who was my family physician at a time when I was battling cancer and was near death. He recognized not only the physical pain that I was in but also encouraged me to explore the history underlying the disease.

Although this connection may not have been overtly clear to either of us at the time, now, 19 years later, renewed exploration—motivated by Dr Hogan's insightful intervention—has led me to the work of another Permanente physician (who wishes anonymity) who has led me to greater insight into both my own repressed history and the impact it has had on my adult life.

Thanks to these two "enlightened witnesses," I can, in Alice Miller's words, "... give up even very old projections and finally find peace."¹p185 ❖

References

1. Miller A. *The truth will set you free: overcoming emotional blindness and finding your true adult self*. New York: Basic Books; 2001.
2. Diamond M, Hopson J. *Magic trees of the mind: how to nurture your child's intelligence, creativity, and healthy emotions from birth through adolescence*. New York: Dutton; 1998.

Dukedome

My library was dukedom large enough.

— *The Tempest*, Act I, Sc 2, William Shakespeare, 1564-1616,
poet and dramatist