

# ***Baffled by Love***

*Stories of the impact of childhood trauma inflicted by  
loved ones*

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(excerpt)

Lily knew little about love. When she was nine, she went to her first sleepover party, and something astonishing happened. After she romped freely with her friend in the back yard; after they got dirty and nobody minded; after they ate dinner with her friend's parents and there was laughter at the table; after all that, something even more remarkable happened. After Lily climbed in to the twin bed next to her friend's bed, and pulled up the bright green comforter painted with daisies, she watched her friend's mother kiss her daughter goodnight. Then, the mom came to Lily's bedside. With a soft, gentle voice, she said, "Lily." Lily remembers the sweetness when she heard her name. Then the mom kissed her on the forehead and said, "Sleep well."

The next day, Lily was excited to share her discovery with her mother.

"Mom, guess what I learned?" she asked, knowing her mother would never be able to guess. "Parents can kiss their children goodnight."

The sting of her mother's slap doused her excitement.

I ask Lily if she remembers what she felt when her mother slapped her.

"Nothing, I felt nothing. I just never mentioned it again."

For decades people have told me about things that were once unthinkable yet I am still stunned when I hear about children like Diana and Lily, who were abused and neglected in their own homes for years and no one – not a mother, not a sibling, not a neighbor – suspected a crime is occurring. At times, I think my heart will break

when I hear about how a child's yearning for love has been exploited and their innocence destroyed.

I scan the indexes of my 25 most read and cherished trauma books, searching for the words "attachment" and "love." There is plenty of discussion of attachment issues, both inside and outside of the therapeutic relationship. But for "love," I find four references. Some are warnings to therapists about the dangers of love in the therapeutic relationship. writes, Although some caretaking is inevitable and respect is essential, "these patients cannot be loved into health." Pearlman and Saakvitne write "A therapist may explicitly express caring and respect for her client; however, the power and valence of words must be considered. The term 'love' is often sexualized and may imply possessiveness or eroticism."

Is love a secret taboo that is outside the honored discourse of traumatologists, I wonder? Do we see love as something that corrupts, something so potentially dangerous that we dare not mention it? Have we become inured to love from hearing too many accounts of childhoods where love goes terribly wrong? Did we decide that love is beyond our reach and better left to the poets?

And yet, the centrality of love has always appeared relentlessly in my work, like an animal scratching at the door, insisting on being let in.

In 2006, I wrote an article for the *Journal of Trauma Practice* in which I offered a different perspective. "Child abuse, in addition to its pervasive impact on children's development, is a traumatic experience of love," I wrote. This occurs, "when a child's experience of love, caring, and affection collides with an ongoing experience of abuse and betrayal. The union of love, trust, and safety becomes

fractured, while notions of love and betrayal become linked in tragic partnership.”

When children are abused by someone who should love them – for Diana, a toxic combination of investment and abuse; for Lily, the absence of love and attention – the result is a traumatic experience of love.

When I first met Diana, the only feeling she expressed was anger with a hearty dash of contempt. Her vulnerability and her longings were securely locked away, hidden from her and from everyone. To this day, her flawless face is devoid of laugh lines, like a porcelain sculpture of a young maiden. She is smart and feisty, and in the rare moments when she lets down her guard, her beauty is almost startling.

One day, Diana mentions the red-and-blue patchwork quilt on her bed, which her grandmother made for her. My ears perk up. I wonder, I hope, that maybe her grandmother had been a source of tenderness or comfort when Diana was a child. I want to understand what helped sustain through the years of abuse.

I ask Diana if she could tell me something about her grandmother.

“I can’t, really,” she says. “I was five when she died.”

Then, Diana then tells me a secret that she has never told anyone before. “I never prayed or anything like that, but at night, the nights when my stepfather was in my bedroom and some nights when he wasn’t, I talked to my grandmother. I don’t know why I felt so close to her, but I always have. Somehow, I just knew she loved me, that she was listening and that she understood.”

“You have found a way to keep her with you,” I say.

Many abused children survive on morsels of love. The resilient ones find a kind neighbor, a coach, an imaginary friend or, in Diana’s case, a beloved grandmother who died several years earlier. When there is even one person they can turn to or confide in, or even the idea of such a person, much is possible.

Diana is able to imagine love; she has the concept of being cherished and understood by someone. This changes everything. Beneath her impassive exterior is a resilient soul who never gave up on love. This is where hope resides.

Children need to know love. They need someone who is passionately committed to their well-being. Those who know nothing of love, those who cannot fathom it, often lack the capacity to feel empathy and or compassion for others. They are at a greater risk.

Lily, now in her late forties, is on the verge of leaving her relationship of six years. I ask what she will miss about her partner and the life they built together.

Lily thinks hard about my question. Then she says, “The cat. I will miss the cat. I just couldn’t take Brandy because it would devastate my girlfriend.”

Lily does not seem to feel conflicted about breaking up with her girlfriend. At first, it is not clear to me why she has come to therapy.

Lily continues. “I know if I leave my girlfriend, she will be really hurt. I feel guilty. I am seeing another woman and she doesn’t know about it.”

Of course you feel guilty, I think. You are cheating on your partner.

“Do you want to work on your relationship with your partner?” I ask.

“No, not really. We have a good relationship. We get along well. I just lost interest.”

I am struck by how little feeling Lily can muster and how little curiosity she has about the “good relationship” she is apparently about to end.

“I feel nothing about leaving. I wish I felt something other than guilt, but I don’t.”

“What do you make of this lack of feeling?” I ask.

“I have left other long-term relationships. Maybe it’s some kind of pattern. When I left those other relationships, I didn’t feel any regret or any sense of loss, either. I just moved on. “

Lily’s ability to detach, to sever relationships and feel nothing, is a survival strategy abused and neglected children master to cope with severe hurt and cruelty.

“I feel bad when I hurt people. Even with my aging parents,” Lily adds. “I know I should visit them, but I honestly have no desire to see them. I wish I felt more, but I don’t.” Lily is numb inside; her feelings are a mystery.

We are both quiet for a long minute. Lily looks up. It is the first time her eyes meet mine. “Is there something very wrong with me?” she asks. “I don’t think I really know what it feels like to love someone.”

What Lily is describing is a serious consequence of early experiences when nurturing and love are absent. Lily has no

memories of her mother inquiring about her day, her homework or her friendships. Her mother showed no pleasure in being her mom. She did not light up when Lily took her first steps, or show delight when Lily got the lead in her grade school play. Her father was busy with a demanding career and spent little time with his family. No one in her family ever uttered the words, "I love you."

This failure to know love can prove debilitating. Psychiatrist James Gilligan, who worked with death row inmates, expresses this eloquently: "The soul needs love as vitally and urgently as the lungs need oxygen; without it the soul dies, just as the body does without oxygen." Love is the pathway to connections with others; it is the key to our humanity. Love breeds compassion, and it sustains us in the face of adversity. Love creates meaning in our lives. Without empathy or compassion for others, you can harm others and feel little or no regret. Children who are deprived of love have two difficult choices: yearn for love or succumb to numbing indifference and contempt for others.

Lovelessness is excruciating in its banality. It robs a child of her vitality. It leaves no welts or scars from being struck, just a devastating, enduring emptiness. Lovelessness has no language, poetry or music. It is unnamed, hidden from view and disabling. Lily, who was deprived of love when she needed it as a child, is crippled as she attempts to forge loving relationships. Many assume that the capacity to love is intuitive, but it is not.