Trauma and the Rhetoric of Recovery: A Discourse Analysis of the Virtual Healing Journal of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors

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Traumatic events have the power to change a person’s sense of self and safety in the world. This phenomena has been documented in numerous groups of survivors, including—but not exclusively to—war veterans, holocaust survivors, terrorism survivors, rape survivors, physical and mental abuse survivors, and child sexual abuse survivors, as they attempt to make sense of their experience and pursue recovery from the damage done (Herman). For those who make the decision to heal through the rhetoric of recovery, whether it is through personal counseling, support groups, or self-help literature, the discursive practice of narration becomes a primary mode of telling in order to engage in the discourses of healing.

Child sexual abuse survivors have capitalized on the genre of narrative in order to heal their own emotional wounds as well as to create a public discourse that is aimed at ending the cycle of child sexual abuse through “speaking the unspeakable” in order to break the silence that this crime thrives on. It is clear that many survivors of trauma have come to engage in oral and written discourses of telling in order to heal their emotional wounds as the increase in community support groups, published texts, newsgroups and websites demonstrate. Some turn to the oral tradition of individual counseling or community support groups, both of which value telling as a form of healing. Others turn to writing, utilizing the literate tradition—in the form of journals, stories, and autobiographies—to tell with pen and paper. More recently, individuals have turned to the web, with its newsgroups, websites and chat-rooms to tell, and thus participate in the discourses of healing.

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The discourses of healing consist of numerous discursive and social practices that people utilize in order to find healing from emotional injury. Using the term *discourses of healing* in the plural allows us to consider the various ways of talking that influence ways of thinking, and vice versa. Barbara Johnstone describes discourses as “linked ways of talking and thinking (that) constitute ideologies (sets of interrelated ideas) and serve to circulate power in society. In other words, ‘discourses’ in this sense involves patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of language” (3). With this understanding of *discourse* in the plural, the *discourses of healing* can be defined as the numerous dialogues pertaining to trauma and recovery that are entered into and acted within. These discussions, laden with specialized jargon by community insiders, continue to be (re)constructed as the belief systems shift in response to the discussion. The discourses of healing operate like a container that accommodates the many types of survivor texts and ideologies from the various survivor communities. Survivor texts, such as survivor narratives, operate in this discussion about abuse and healing as a particular “discourse,” allowing survivors to engage in a sort of healing through recounting their trauma via the written or spoken word. Within this community, this belief that telling is healing—the discourse of telling—authorizes survivors to engage in their narratives openly, as it reinforces the claim that to talk about traumatic experiences is therapeutic and healing.

When using survivor narratives as a basis for understanding this discourse community, the issue of access to the discourse must be addressed. Private counseling and self-help books are still most prevalent in white middle-class society and are not necessarily typical or representative of the survivor community as a whole. Therefore, access to the discourse may not be equally available to those who are not privileged. Although child sexual abuse is not limited by ethnic or class lines, the discourses of healing and the *positive thinking movement* draws heavily on the roots of psychotherapy and self-help, bringing up issues of accessibility and representation of social and economic groups.

Along with the issue of access, there is also the issue of silence by survivors not participating in the discourse of telling. This silence represents another discourse among the discourses of healing: the *discourse of silence*. This group’s silence about their trauma influences the discourses of healing, as their participation in related discourses has the ability to shift ideology back to the discourse of silence as a preferred option to the discourse of telling.
As survivors engage in the discourse of telling through writing, they rely on a variety of genres to do this work. Survivor narratives become "typified"—as I will show in this discourse analysis—and can be classifiable using Charles Bazerman's "systems of genre" (79). The healing journal participates in a "genre system" by way of the survivor narrative. The meta-narrative is the discourse of healing, which acts as the ideological framework that all healing discourse participates in. Within the meta-narrative, there are a variety of forums where survivors may go to perform their narratives. Books and websites allow survivors a forum to tell and share through texts, in which they must also choose a particular genre, such as poetry or the personal journal. Survivor narratives, therefore, mediate different literary forms, thereby constructing the discourse of healing. In this paper, I will examine the website (forum) and the personal journal (form). The survivor community gives us an opportunity to examine how multiple genres coexist, inform one another, and mutually constitute one another. The survivor community shares a common language of "recovery" and "healing" that is dispersed throughout texts and word of mouth, fulfilling Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's conditions of community: "a common language, common rules for its use, and norms of social life" (qtd in Miller, "Polis" 212). Along with a common language, survivors also share a common goal of healing from the trauma of their abuse and many are also invested in helping others to heal. The discursive practice that holds this community together is the survivor narrative. Without it, this discourse community would cease to exist, showing us the power of genre to construct community.

Narrating the Life Story
In order to contextualize survivor narratives, I will present a historical overview of survivor texts and the evolution of the healing journal as a tool of healing. Once these texts can be located socially and discursively, I will move to discourse analysis methodologies to examine the most recent forum where survivors are producing their discourse: the Internet. I will discuss the salient metaphors and common sense notions of this community as they appear throughout survivor websites that have surfaced to meet the needs of a community support group existing in cyberspace. This evolution of the survivor narrative from an oral act to a written act to a virtual act creates a space for new ideas about the discourses of healing that have only begun to be considered and discussed. With this relatively new medium, it becomes necessary to include an analysis of survivor websites and their functions before advancing to
the virtual journal. The concept of "intertextuality," reminds us that the virtual journal exists as piece of a larger whole: a narrative posted on a website that exists on the World Wide Web (Berkenkotter 330). After I examine the various survivor websites, I will analyze the virtual journal from a virtual support community for survivors using entries from Healthy Place.com as primary data. I will use journal titles, introductions, and entries to evaluate how language is being used to negotiate individual healing while simultaneously contributing to and molding the discourses of healing.

Janice Haaken reminds us that psychoanalytical approaches to trauma often privilege narrative over memory, stating that "in contradistinction to much of cognitive psychology, which stresses the mechanisms of memory, psychoanalysis asserts a narrative coherence to mental life" (Pillar 86). Maintaining this focus on the role of narrative and the activity of transformative remembering, rather than memory, allows us to understand how language is utilized to create coherence in psychic life. In analyzing narratives of child sexual abuse survivors, I find The Life Story model presented by Charlotte Linde to be useful in understanding the importance of this written form of healing within this community. According to The Oxford Companion to the English Language, narrative comes from the Latin narrativus, meaning suitable for telling, and the verb form narrare/narratum, meaning to tell or to relate (McArthur 680). As Michael Toolan indicates, it is the change in affairs—the personal change in the narrator—that renders survivor narratives “tellable”:

At minimum [a narrative is] a text (or text-like artistic production) in which the reader or addressee perceives a significant change. In a narrative, something happens, such that we sense a state of affairs, and this latter state is, ideally, not merely temporally but causally related to the former state. (136)

Tellability can be attributed to the purpose of the life story as proposed by Linde: “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story” (3). This need for a coherent life story for survivors of trauma to “re-create the flow” of their life and to re-create a stable sense of self is also encouraged in the field of psychiatry (Herman).

In her work on the personal and cultural importance of personal
narratives, Linde states, “Narrative is among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity. Narrative is a significant resource for creating our internal, private sense of self and is all the more a major resource for conveying that self to and negotiating that self with others” (98). In understanding how identity is created through narrative, Linde established “major characteristics of self that are specifically maintained and exchanged through language.” The first characteristic, “continuity of the self through time,” shows there is “a relation, though not a complete identity,” between the narrator in the beginning and the end. The second characteristic, “relation of the self to others” is achieved through linguistically marking the narrator as separate from others, by use of names and pronouns. The final element, “reflexivity of self” is accomplished by the act of telling a story about one’s self in the past, while actively editing and reshaping the tale while in the present (100). Linde’s approach points to the characteristics present in narratives that allow a person to create themselves through the process of telling their tale of self. Through the process of narration, the individual weaves a self, either similar, but slightly evolved, or completely different from, the self that began the telling. This story will continue to evolve and change as the narrator continues to grow and retell the life story.

This evolution of the narrator is the heart of why these narratives are tellable, allowing survivors of child sexual abuse an avenue to express themselves—and affirm for themselves—that they were abused in the past, but the past does not need to continue to haunt their lives forever. Speaking through the personal narrative has become the most useful tool for survivors, as it allows them the ability to find their lost voice, accessing their memories in their journey to healing. Sonia Apgar agrees that (re)living the experience through language is necessary: “One of the major components of the recovery process is the establishment of a coherent personal narrative that not only fits with the survivor’s memories and perceptions, but also fits into the social constructions or cultural norms available to her” (48). The life story approach allows for a deep analysis of the transformation survivors experience through the act of narration. It is the (re)creation of self—one that is no longer a victim—that makes survivor narrators healing and beneficial.

Along with establishing the characteristics of self, Linde defines the life story as “an oral unit of interaction” that “must make some evaluative point about the speaker or about some event framed as relevant specifically because it happened to the speaker” and “extended reportability”
Although Linde defines the life story primarily as an oral form, I find her framework helpful in an analysis of virtual journals. Linde notes that, in its construction of the social self, the genre of written autobiography is the most similar form of the life story. Journals, the genre studied here, represent an even more personal genre than a traditional autobiography, in that they are meant to be a private medium, reserved for the eyes of the writer only or for an intimate audience. In that sense, they are likely closer to the informal life stories studied by Linde. And although the genre is written, it appropriates both oral and written discursive practices simultaneously. Internet users do not follow the traditional norms, such as formal language and syntax that characterizes much language. Instead, rhetors tend to write online as if they were speaking rather than writing to their virtual audience. Applying Linde’s life story framework to virtual journals makes sense despite their written nature.

Another parallel between virtual journals and life stories is the presence of self-evaluation. This is of primary importance with survivor narratives, especially for narrators who feel it is part of their goal to create public awareness. In these narratives, events of the abuse become the reason for telling and sharing personal journal entries. The structure of the virtual journal as an arena to tell and retell—as entries are added at later dates—fills the final requirement for the life story of “extended reportability.” Survivors can revise their feelings about themselves and about healing as they talk around the events of their abuse in multiple and successive entries.

Linde points to an unfortunate lack of historical examinations of raw data from genres such as diaries, letters, journals, and popular journalism. In this study, I intend to respond to this lack of research, beginning with a historical examination of the healing journal and its place within the discourses of healing.

**Evolution of the Discourse of Healing**

Prior to 1974, the discourses of healing through telling were not the dominant discourses in American society, nor was the topic of child sexual abuse. I argue that due to an ideological shift—brought about by the government’s enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act that was passed in 1974—a social space was opened for a dialogue about this issue that did not previously exist in American society, followed by a dialogue about telling to heal. This social event created what Carolyn Miller calls “motive” (“Genre” 24). It authorized
people to recognize abuse differently—as something bad and illegal—thereby altering the perceptions as well as the social dialogue.

With this new socially constructed definition of abuse, a community of victims also emerged; even though these victims had always existed, they were not previously recognized as such. Though the concept of a victim was not new, the perception of people as victims of childhood sexual abuse was. In order to make sense of this new category of victims, people applied their previous understanding of what victims were in order to understand the trauma that this newly constructed community spoke of. Schutz and Luckmann remind us that this transferring of the familiar categories (in this case of “victims”) constructs the perception of the genre and how to function within it, by stating that “Whatever is typically relevant for the individual was for the most part already typically relevant for his predecessors and has consequently deposited its semantic equivalent in the language” (234). This connection semantically creates these victims in a new light as society applies its previous understanding of victims to this emerging community. This kind of transferal is relevant also to the self-definition of community members as *survivors* rather than *victims*, further illustrating how the semantic lens filters how we perceive—and thereby define—people and rhetorical situations.

This new community of survivors created a social space in their need for programs to assist them in healing from their trauma. As a result, a space opened up for the emergence of support groups, counselors and self-help books that catered to helping the victim heal. Out of this discourse of healing another ideological shift took place, from which the discourse of telling emerged somewhere between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s. Fairclough shows us that ideology (“ways of seeing”) and the discursive processes (“ways of talking”) are enmeshed in what he calls “ideological-discursive formations.” He states, “In the process of acquiring the ways of talking which are normatively associated with a subject position, one necessarily acquires also its ways of seeing, or ideological norms” (39). Therefore, the increase of survivors telling their stories publicly represents and (re)creates the discourse of telling as accepted and naturalized within American society at this time. With the emergence of the discourse of telling, many survivors turned to journal writing—an already existing genre. In the early 1980s, as part of the greater goal to stop abuse by talking about it rather than allowing it to fester in the silence in which it thrives, survivor journals were moved into the public forum. Florence Rush ends her preface to *I Never Told Anyone* by pointing out the stakes in speaking the unspeakable: “The lesson to be learned from
This previously private medium became one of the vehicles for public discussion about the issues surrounding childhood sexual abuse transporting survivor narratives of trauma and recovery to the public. Many journals were published in anthologies, autobiographies, and other forms such as poetry and vignettes in self-help books. These narratives may be in the form of survivor stories—which are a one-time telling of the traumatic events as remembered by the survivor, or as a healing journal—which functions as an ongoing story, with the traumatic events often woven throughout the journal strand in a number of entries. With the advent of the Internet, the most recent evolution of the journal is to the online format of personal web pages linked to survivor websites.

Cyberspace: A Place for Healing

Websites as a place for healing are an ever increasing trend, as they offer a locatable place for survivors to turn to find help and support during their healing process. There are a variety of sites on the web, complete with survivor stories, poetry, journals, book lists, links to other related websites, an arena for feedback/comments, support groups with chat rooms and/or newsgroups, and resources to find help. I have found three basic types of sites, each providing different degrees of support to the survivors. The most complete type is the virtual community, followed by resource sites and individual pages respectively.

Virtual communities offer the widest array of services and resources to the survivor and create a sense of connection that can only be rivaled by a non-virtual community support group. These sites are often moderated—policing users and content that may have a triggering effect—in order to maintain a safe space for survivors. Virtual community sites often go so far as to offer a weekly e-mailing list reaching out to members on a regular basis, telling them about upcoming events—reminding them they are not alone. The Survivors Forum (TSF) and HealthyPlace (HP) are virtual communities that I will examine here. Even though they are private websites (.com)—not organizationally run non-profit sites (.org)—the web designers chose to name their sites as places of community, rather than using a personal name for the site, which is the case with most individual pages and many resource sites. This naming has the power to create a greater sense of involvement and participation on the part of the visitors to the site. Survivors are welcomed by TSF on the home page to
join the “TSF Family and discover they are not alone.” HP also reinforces the notion of family, although in a more subtle way—placing “WELCOME HOME” in capital letters across the top of the page of their home page. This less explicit approach tells survivors that they have returned—as if going home, rather than going to a new and less familiar place. HP also uses the home page as a bulletin board to keep members informed. It visually resembles a newspaper, with resources and links along the left side of the page and events for that week—complete with a few paragraphs of description—forming two columns in the center. The use of family and community by website designers can be viewed as deterministic in the way it creates survivors as family members in these virtual communities, along with constructing itself as a familial place.

*Resource sites* are personal websites that put information out, but also take a limited amount of information in. Resource sites generally have a mix of the same things offered by the virtual community, although they do not interact with members to the degree that the virtual community sites do. Resource sites allow survivors a place to go to find help and know they are not alone, while maintaining some type of interactive medium such as a chat room or newsgroup. *Susan Smiles: Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse* and *I Have Survived* are two sites that fall into this category of resource sites. Susan Smiles: Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse resembles an individual page in her offerings and site naming, although she goes beyond the individual pages genre by situating her site as a safe place, stating on the home page: “My goal remains the same: to provide a safe and comforting place where survivors may know they are not alone in their fight to survive the trauma of childhood sexual abuse.” This site resembles a virtual community site in its goal of “offering a safe place” as well as being a comprehensive sight with most of the features offered by virtual community sites. Where this site differs is in its ability to participate with the survivor, allowing users to interact with the website—via bulletin boards, newsgroups, and/or chat rooms—as opposed to merely reading from the website. Also important to the differentiation between the virtual community and the resource site is the naming of the site as a personal site as opposed to a place, such as Susan Smiles site versus Healthy Place. *I Have Survived* is another resource site that has not been named as a place and subtly announces the agency of the web designer. This page does not claim the name of the page as does Susan, but as I, guiding the reader to the experience of the designer of the page. Though this site acts mostly as an individual page, providing survivor stories and poems and links to other survivor pages and support,
it moves beyond giving out information to involvement through its newsgroup forum, which is headed I Have Survived: A place for survivors of abuse to talk, share and heal.

Individual pages are the most basic in services offered, in that their sole purpose is to put information out. They do not seem to interact in the same way as the previous two groups.\textsuperscript{23} These sites display and link survivor texts, such as narratives, poetry, and resources in an attempt to give survivors another place to see that they are not alone. The home pages seem to be operating as the bulletin board in which the web designers hang their mission statement for users to read. Teddy Bear’s Secret states, “Our purpose is to expose some of the harsh realities which continue everyday. We share our stories of abuse to create a better understanding of the pain caused and create an outlet for any of you who have not yet been able to tell. We are not here to judge, but to heal.”\textsuperscript{24} This mission to expose realities and share experiences, to create understanding and advocate healing through telling, is a common dialogic of “breaking the silence to break the cycle” that can be seen on numerous survivor sites.\textsuperscript{25} This Child’s Journey stays in this conversation with her preface, which states, “There is still something in me that yearns to tell all. But to tell it quietly. And to help others if only by sharing. I want it to be known that childhood sexual abuse still exists. . . . Perhaps this will be my journal in cyberspace. If it helps others, that would be wonderful. If not, well, at least I tried.”\textsuperscript{26}

Regardless of whether the effects of their attempts are known, survivors feel a sense that their efforts in telling and sharing in this social space—cyberspace—will somehow help others. Individual page designers do not generally name their sites as a communal place for others, but instead use names that metaphorically represent their own experience, as these sites closely resemble a personal journal with links to other sites and resources to help others. The individual pages—Emergence, This Child’s Journey and Teddy Bear’s Secret—follow the patterns found for virtual journal titles and use common metaphors of abuse and healing, as will be discussed later.\textsuperscript{27}

**Threads of Common Sense in the Virtual Healing Journal**

Through a textual analysis of survivor virtual journals, we gain an understanding of how ideologies—ways of thinking and ways of talking—are both constructing community members, as well as being constructed by them. These ways of talking are so embedded within this community’s discourse of healing that they are used without explanation
to readers, as readers are expected to share in this belief system. These concepts function within this discourse community as what Foucault would call their “regime of truth”: the types of discourse that it accepts and makes function as true (*Power*). Linde refers to these truths as “common sense” notions within discourse communities (198). The move from one common sense belief system is seen to be an abrupt change, as one system remains in play for “fairly long stable periods” until that system is either “entirely reversed or abandoned in favor of a new formulation” (213). Prevalent common sense notions that circulate in the survivor discourse community include the belief in the wrongfulness of child sexual abuse as perpetuated against the survivor and the importance of telling about the trauma in order to find emotional healing. Following this thread of fault and blame is the common sense notion that child sexual abuse is wrong and that it is not the survivor’s fault, despite the fact that she may feel that it is. In one of her entries, Kristina makes the claim that she is not at fault: “I have done nothing wrong. And until we break the taboo of AMAC’s (adults molested as children) speaking out, many will suffer in silence and not be able to get the help that they need” (*Healthy* 9/8/01).28 This notion that the abuse was not the survivor’s fault is actually believed by many people outside of the community, although because self-blame is rampant among survivors, the need to verbalize this notion is quite common among survivors to counteract the self-blame. This verbal display of a common sense notion is an empowering speech act for survivors.

Another notion that is evident in survivor texts is the concept of accessing the little girl inside survivors as an integral part of recovery work for survivors in this community. The theory is that until the survivor recognizes the part of themselves that was hurt—which is a piece of themselves that was stunted at the age of abuse and is still in pain—they will be unable to heal. Survivors, such as Kristina refer to their little girl when participating in the discourses of healing. She says, “I am sure in the end that little girl inside of me will survive and we will both be better for it” (12/14/01).

Another thread found throughout narratives is the idea that survivors are fragmented and must work through recovery to become whole. Amy’s journal introduction talks about “the struggles to become whole.” Judy writes, “I write so that others might regain a life of wholeness long before I was able to.” This fragmentation is linked to the psychological concept of disassociation, which most survivors report experiencing at some point during their lives.29 The process of narration allows survivors to (re)connect
the fragmented pieces of themselves, and it has been encouraged by recovery advocates for this reason.

The trauma of sexual abuse is always with the survivor and permeates her life always; regardless of her attempts at healing and recovery (Bass and Davis; Bass, Thornton and Brister; Brison; Herman). Support group facilitator Ann Gauling tells survivors at their first meeting, "You will never be the same. But you can be better" (Brison 20). Brison emphasizes the fact that survivors have the ability to be better through recovery work, despite the lifelong effects of trauma. This notion is reflected by the changing discursivity from survivor stories to survivor journals. The structure of survivor stories as a onetime telling reflects an ideology that is representative of the early discourse of healing, which valued the mere act of telling in order to heal. The current shift in ideology has built upon the earlier while adding an element of continuous engagement in the discourse, as the genre of the continuous journal reflects. We see this ideal reflected by both survivors and psychiatrist.

Where many people on the outside of the community do not subscribe to the same common sense notions as survivors is the idea that speaking out is necessary for social change. Due to the difficult nature of the topic, many would rather not speak of such atrocities; therefore, they do not engage in the discourse of telling, but rather prefer the discourse of silence. That this common sense notion is not inversely shared indicates that within the survivor community it is what Linde refers to as a "coherence system":

a discursive practice that represents a system of beliefs and relations between beliefs . . . a system of beliefs that occupies a position midway between common sense—the beliefs and relations between beliefs that any person in the culture may be assumed to know (if not share) and that anyone may use—and expert systems, which are beliefs and relations between beliefs held, understood, and properly used by experts in a particular domain. (163)

With this distinction delineated between common sense and coherence systems, the question can be raised as to whether many of the threads of common sense in fact comprise a coherence system being used by non-experts. In fact, the case can be made that recovering survivors are in fact experts within this community discourse and therefore are applying expert systems to their discourse as opposed to using common sense. However, due to the fact that survivors are not viewed as experts and are
not discursively participating in a professional arena—but rather a social one—this theory must be stricken. A more logical conclusion would be to think of notions that are foreign to community outsiders as common sense within the survivor community only, or possibly as coherence systems that will soon evolve into common sense notions to a large social community as the discourses of healing permeates a greater community and become more pervasive in non-survivor communities.

**Metaphors and Ideologies in the Discourse of Healing**

The metaphors that fill virtual journals and survivor sites revolve around ideas of “healing as a journey” and “a transformational process,” as well as metaphors of “bodily injury as a representation of emotional injury.” *The Healing Journey* is full of movement and progress—and moments of regression. If one were to graph the healing journey of a survivor through following their journals for an extended period of time, the journey would not resemble a direct linear progression up the hill—with injury being at the bottom and wellness being the destination at the top of the hill—but rather a trek through rugged mountainous terrain. The trek would be filled with long strenuous hikes up hill (filled with difficult lessons of learning and growth), moments of plateaus (signaled by moments of insights and calmness), short descents (signaled by moments of falling back into old patterns of thinking or remembering pain), and a continued striving back up the hill toward the destination of wellness. This metaphoric representation of healing as a journey is visible throughout virtual journals within both the titles and texts.

Of the five titles on the HP site, as shown in Figure 1, four of them use the journey metaphor in their title or subtitle. The one writer who does not utilize the journey metaphor turns to injury, another common metaphor.

The metaphors of journey and the movement that it entails are visible in the titles and subtitles of Kristina, Judy, Amy, and Jane's virtual journals. Judy is the only journaler to prioritize “The Healing Journey” as her main title, whereas the others use the subtitle for this metaphorical representation. In addition to placing the healing journey in the first position, Judy also makes the rhetorical move of not using a subtitle that is lengthy and elaborative, hence possibly relying on power from the title. Instead, she chooses to use one word under her title—“support”—as if to reappropriate the use of the subtitle to describe the goal of her journal. Kristina moves to the subtitle to tell the reader that she is beginning her “journey through recovery.” She not only relies on healing as a journey, but chooses to go “through” recovery, as if recovery is a containable place
to be passed through. Jane also embarks on a “healing journey” in her subtitle, just as Kristina does. Her main title says that she is “getting over” it, again representing a sense of movement in a positive direction. Continuing with the progression concept of the healing journey, Jane says she is “moving away from abuse” and “towards herself,” both of which are highly valued as progress within survivor discourse. Marisa is the only journaler in this sample not to use the metaphor of the journey in her title, but instead uses the language of bodily injury, titling her journal *Scars of Emotional Abuse*. In her subtitle, she claims it is the “voice of the inner child” that is “expressing her feelings after years of abuse,” painting an image of bodily injury to this once child in the mind of the reader.

Survivors clearly use the introduction page as a place to introduce themselves and explain why they are using the virtual journal. The page displays a picture of the survivor, the title of her journal, her reason for telling, and links to this week’s journal, earlier entries, and a place to post comments to the survivor. The introduction page can be seen as its own genre—the virtual journal introduction page—as it performs a particular task, separate from the telling, yet *intertextually* participating in the
discourse. These pages seem to be appropriating a variety of genres to create a formulaic new genre. One genre being reconstructed is a personal website, complete with title, picture, texts, and links. Placed in the center of this individual page is an introduction that resembles yet another genre: the corporate mission statement. Marisa states her mission after she introduces herself and her history. She writes, “I am writing this journal because it will help me to express my feelings that I have held in for a long time. It will help me deal with the pain. I have been keeping the pain bottled up inside and it is affecting my life. This journal will set me free from the pain.”

Amy uses the same structure to introduce herself and her mission, although she incorporates helping others as well as herself by this public telling, stating, “I am sharing this journal because I believe that life does not have to end because one was hurt. I believe that as people talk about their abuse, and speak about the emotions, darkness, and struggles to become whole, we will help one another along the journey.”

Kristina moves to complete social action as her mission, while maintaining the formula of the previous introductions. She writes, “I hope that by making my journal public, I can inspire others who have yet to start down the long road they call recovery.” Judy is the only survivor who does not introduce herself in the introduction, using it solely as a bulletin board for her mission statement. She writes,

I write with the hope that others, by reading my story, will find another stepping stone on the journey of healing. I write so that others might regain a life of wholeness long before I was able to. I write [in order] to join the many thousands of voices now speaking out, a voice so strong that society cannot help but hear.

The introduction pages for these journals share common themes and format, as if they have been given a template to work from. Though there are few variations in these elements, the most salient features are an opening to introduce the survivor and their experience, along with a survivor mission of advocacy and transformation.

According to Judith Herman, the survivor tells the story of the trauma in the second stage of recovery: “She tells it completely, in depth and detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). Bass and Davis also point to the act of telling as an important step in recovery, whether it be through speaking or writing (92–103). This need
to tell in order to be transformed is consistently seen in survivor narratives.

This "transformation of self" is a common model enacted in various genres of storytelling. The idea of the hero who embarks on a journey—such as the healing journey—and is forever changed by its trials and tribulations can be applied to the discourse of healing. However—using Bakhtin’s concept of the author and the hero—survivors as authors are "unconsummated (still working through the unfolding events of life in progress)" and are therefore unable to be compared to a hero who is "consummated (a character who is fated, in a sense to act the events of a completed narrative)" (Jensen 72). The use of journaling—an open-ended narrative—as a medium to heal and transform the self does not offer survivors a discursive avenue to reach this absolute completion of their life events, but rather a continuum in their recovery process. Yet, like the hero, survivors are transformed by their experience, and those engaged in the discourses of healing are triumphant over their situation by giving voice the once unspeakable on their discursive journey away from the trauma. This new found strength is most visible in the introductions to virtual journals, as survivors use the genre as a place of personal reflection.

Kristina illustrates this transformation of self from silenced to vocal, stating, "For many years I suffered the effects of my abuse in silence. I denied that it mattered. Then I hit the brick wall and instead of turning and running, I decided to make the effort to climb the wall." Judy also uses this metaphor in her introduction, focusing on the binary of silence and voice that no longer holds her down: "I write to join the many thousands of voices now speaking out, a voice so strong that society cannot help but hear." Her coming to voice is also a social transformation, as she reminds us that the survivor community as a whole has also begun to speak out. She claims membership in this community and feels an increased strength on account of it. This need to help other survivors and participate in the larger society is common in many of the introductions.

Though most survivors engage in recovery work privately, there is a "significant minority" who feel compelled to use their traumatic experience to improve the world around them, in what Herman calls the survivor mission: "These survivors recognize a political and religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action" (207). Another important aspect to public telling as a form of social action is the importance of telling from a place of power. According to Herman, "The
survivor draws power from her ability to stand up in public and speak the truth without fear of consequences. She knows that truth is what the perpetrator fears most” (210). This ability to feel power in the face of events that were once disempowering is key to understanding the reasons why survivors chose to go public with their stories, as well as post their pictures on the World Wide Web.

Virtual Journals: The Evolving Life Story

Within the virtual journals entries I studied, the journey metaphor is the most prominent, followed by injury and transformation metaphors respectively. The metaphor of the healing journey can be seen in Kristina’s journal, as she paints healing as a long and difficult road, but well worth the trip by stating, “I know that this is a long road. I know it won’t be easy but I am working it the best I can and I am sure in the end that the little girl inside of me will survive and we will both be better for it” (12/14/01). While relying on the metaphor of journey, Judy talks about regression in recovery as part of the natural process, “for no matter how advanced we are on our journey of healing, how much we have learned, there will be many times one will slip back into those times” (1/25/02). This conceptualization of healing as an indirect progression—marred by unexpected hills and valleys along the trail—is heard throughout the texts. Kristina says that “the healing process comes in baby steps” (9/10/01) and Amy calls it “a series of falling down and getting up” (4/17/01). The need to quantify the type of progress people make in their healing journey is very common. Amy follows with “progress for me has been slow” (4/17/01). This progress is generally focused in a direction toward something, the destination of wellness, despite how elusive a complete sense of healing may be. Marisa talks about this sense of movement forward, telling the reader, “I started to walk on the journey towards healing” (5/17/01). Ironically, this form of telling—through a continuous journal—emphasizes the open-ended feeling for the reader, rather than allowing for a sense of completion that is offered by a survivor narrative that is written as a short story. The continuous journal format, which has no end, seems symbolic of the current ideology of the community—that healing is actually a lifelong process, in which absolute wellness is never achieved. Herman claims, “Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete” (211). Kristina best exemplifies this belief, stating, “I just keep plugging along hoping one day I can find the middle of the road and learn to be at least in some sense emotionally stable” (11/1/01).
Along with metaphors of healing as a journey, the metaphor of bodily injury as a representation of emotional injury is common in virtual journals. Marisa fills her narratives with this terminology, referring to her trauma as the "wounds created in childhood" (5/3/01) and her pain over her mother's lack of love for her as "the deepest wound of all" (6/10/01). She continues this discourse of injury, stating that "the emotional abuse left no visible scars, but the scars that were left are deep where only I can see them" (6/10/01). This metaphorical representation of emotional injury, as a wound and a scar, describes the non-visible injuries so that outsiders can relate to a type of pain that may seem intangible to them. Amy uses the term "hurt" regularly in her narratives—referring to the invisible scars and talks about her frustration with not knowing how "to fight this" (3/31/01)—as if her emotional pain is a disease to overcome. This language of "overcoming" often overlaps with the metaphors of body injury that survivors express in their journey of healing.

One of the most empowering elements in survivor narratives, both for the writer and the reader, is the language of overcoming and the newfound strength that the survivor has experienced on the road to recovery: the healing journey. Kristina describes a situation with another survivor friend who was worried about her choice to go public with her journal. Kristina tells her friend, "I will no longer suffer in silence and so what if someone sees my journal. I have done nothing wrong. And until we break the taboo of AMACs (adults molested as children) speaking out many will suffer in silence and not be able to get the help they need" (9/8/01). These statements point to the importance of speaking out for survivors: empowering those who have not (to encourage them to speak out) and to those who do (to affirm the necessity in the act). Like Kristina, Amy also experienced opposition from others about her virtual journal but made the decision to continue, honoring her own feelings as most important. She writes,

I needed to start writing in here again. I stopped because some of the information in the journal upset my sister. Basically, I am still afraid of offending someone or of someone finding out who I don't want to, but I need to speak. That is what this journal and this community are about. I write in a regular journal that only I read at home but it does not have the same cathartic value. (3/22/01)

This need to speak, after being silenced for so long, can be extremely empowering as the discovery of voice by survivors can be very emotionally fulfilling.
Foucault points to the confession as a vehicle of power negotiations between those involved in the exchange, with priests traditionally in a position of power over the confessors divulging their sins (History). Paradoxically, survivors—in the position of the contemporary confessor—actually yield power through the act of publicly telling. In the case of child sexual abuse, silence—as well as voice—wields power, as the abuser who is able to silence his victim maintains the power and secrecy to continue the abuse. Therefore, the act of confession on the part of the survivor constitutes telling from a position of power, as she confesses the sins of the abuser, to place him in the position of the powerless while claiming power through her speech acts.

**Listening to Departure**

In the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement concerned itself with violence against women and children and as a consequence motivated integration of conceptualizations of sexual abuse as consistent with the trauma described by posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The changing conceptions of trauma and who suffered from it continued as psychotherapists broadened their understanding of the definition of PTSD that would inevitably include other types of traumas to the mind and body that were not limited to war experiences. Also a consequence of the feminist movement was the emergence of the sexual abuse recovery movement in the 1980s, as women were encouraged to find their own voice and refuse to remain silent about the abuses and oppression they experience—particularly in relation to men. Circulation of testimonies of rape, incest, and child sexual abuse emerged in American popular culture as a consequence. The increased commodification and consumption of survivor narratives in the past twenty years reflects the interest that the public has with the issue of human suffering and the effects of trauma. Cathy Caruth points to an increase in violence in our own country as the catalyst to this interest, claiming that "many people have recognized the urgency of learning more about the traumatic reaction to violent events and about the means of helping to alleviate suffering" (vii). As the public has become socially invested in healing the wounds of psychic trauma, representations of trauma have continued to increase in their marketability and acceptability: what was once uninteresting has become popular and what was once unspeakable has become speakable. The popular perception of recovery and healing continues to be normalized as survivor stories are mediated and commercialized for mass markets, thereby becoming
complicit in maintaining or producing common sense notions about trauma.

In consuming trauma stories, it is necessary not to look solely at the traumatic events of the story but at the message that the author is trying to convey in the act of writing. Haaken presents the idea that "trauma stories—whether accounts of actual tragic events or symbolic tales of human suffering—demand a departure from ordinary modes of listening" (Pillar 67). This emphasis on different modes of listening has also been suggested by Caruth, who suggests that we do not listen only from the site of trauma but rather "listen to departure": Listening to departure is "to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it" (10–11). It is in this departure that healing is undertaken. In other words, healing and recovery can be found in the virtual journal as survivors depart from their trauma of abuse through the act of writing about the traumatic events. To read virtual journals from a place of departure, rather than as a text about traumatic events, we are able to gain a better understanding of the power of storytelling to promote healing and contribute to the rhetoric of recovery.

The rhetoric of recovery and discourses of healing are a direct reflection of how the American ideology about trauma and abuse has shifted over the last twenty-five years. Recent national and world events such as child abuse allegations in the Catholic Church, the events of September 11th, and the war in Iraq remind us that trauma is inevitable. As survivors of these traumatic events engage in healing—possibly through the "writing cure"—we are given an opportunity to examine and critique the rhetoric of recovery, thereby making visible notions that are being constructed and circulated as common sense notions.

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Notes

1. For the purpose of this paper the term "survivor" will refer to women who were sexually abused as children. Statistics show that one in seven boys is sexually abused, yet due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of victims are girls, at the hands of men, I have chosen to focus primarily on women survivors of child sexual abuse. Male survivors also experience many of the same problems, as well as others, due to the nature of this crime, and deserve to have their issues addressed in their own forum as well.

2. Texts may be either oral or written, as both contribute significantly to the practices of speech communities. Deborah Tannen describes this mutual impor-
tance of the oral versus the written as a continuum in which “people use devices associated with both traditions in various settings” (3). This oral/literate debate becomes counterproductive when doing ethnographic research of discourse communities and their practices, as it leads us away from our goal of social understanding.

3. This is not to say that all survivors have turned to telling about their trauma in order to find healing, nor that it is certain that telling is healing for everyone.

4. The tradition of telling can also be seen in 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. See Haaken, “From” and Jensen.

5. The discourses of healing are not engaged solely by this survivor community. Survivors of various abuses, both physical and emotional, such as war veterans and holocaust survivors, may also participate in the discourses of healing when they begin the process of healing in some form (see Blatt).

6. Though this group exists, they do not exist as a community, and they are un-identifiable due to their silence, making their discourse practices unexaminable.

7. The use of the personal journal in the survivor community has created a particular type of genre that I refer to as the healing journal, regardless of the forum in which it is produced.

8. I analyzed the journals of five survivors: Kristina, Marisa, Judy, Amy, and Jane. There was one journal written by the husband of a survivor on this page that I omitted from my data in order to focus primarily on the language being used by survivors themselves.

9. “Breaking the Silence” is the fifth step in the recovery process, according to Bass and Davis. Telling is one of the most difficult stages for many, yet it is one of the most essential, in that survivors are unable to move forward in the healing process until they make their experience real for themselves, through telling the truth.

10. With child sexual abuse, language is one of the primary tools used by the abuser to dominate, intimidate, threaten and maintain control over his victim. Girls are “told” to keep the abuse secret, as “our little secret,” rendering them silent against the abuse they are forced to endure. This taking of voice must be countered by a taking back of voice and a breaking of silence that continues to imprison the survivor.

11. Though the genre of the autobiography has its roots in memoirs and the confession, the demands of this genre may warrant further investigation as to the similarities it shares with the virtual journal (Linde).

12. The issue of audience and private versus public medium is an interesting discussion that requires further academic discussion.

13. Chat rooms and instant messaging services have increased this phenomenon as internet users engage in real-time written conversations. The time demand forces users to cast-off genre conventions that may restrict them in their communicative goals.

14. Poetry is also used as a form of narrative, with survivors utilizing a more artistic literacy practice than the prose format.
15. This concept of locatable space is rather ironic in that no one truly knows where a place exists in cyberspace, yet web designers use language in order to create a tangible space when in fact it is merely virtual.

16. “Lurkers” are equated to voyeurs on the web, who often just watch the discourse without participating. However, there is an even greater danger for the survivor community, and that is the “imposter” who may be an abuser posing as a survivor, so that he may gain entrance to the community.

17. Triggering is what happens when a survivor is confronted with sensory experiences that bring up memories of past abuse, often causing intense feelings such as panic, fear and helplessness.

18. The abstract concept of safe space has become very important in the survivor community as a place where the survivor may feel safe to heal, without the additional stress of being vigilant about protecting emotional, physical and sexual boundaries from people who may violate them. The virtual communities are moving closer to making cyber space an actual safe space with moderators acting as gatekeepers and members being required to use passwords to access different areas of the site. Though I find Healthy Place to be the most comprehensive site at this point, I find The Survivors Forum to be the safest space in that it is the most heavily moderated; it has a page of guidelines about how to maintain the “safety of all members of TSF,” as well as being the only site that requires a password to read survivors stories.

19. See Starlight, and Healthy Place.
20. See Smiles and I Have.
21. Emphasis is mine on bolded items throughout this analysis.
22. As many websites are constantly under construction, it would not be surprising if this website were to eventually add a newsgroup or chat room, as it currently seems to be moving in that direction of offering all the resources of a Virtual Community.

23. It is problematic to say that individual pages are not “interactive” because they do utilize formats that offer a more virtual reality for community members.

25. “Breaking the silence” to break the cycle of child abuse has become a common-sense notion in the survivor community, with advocates leaning on it to encourage more survivors to speak up about their abuse.

26. See Browning.
27. See Emergence, for example.
28. For the remainder of this paper, survivor quotes will be taken from HealthyPlace.com. See Healthy.

29. Disassociation is the process of the mind and body separating. It is considered to be a defense mechanism that allows people to endure extreme trauma (Bass and Davis; Herman).

30. The names used here are the names used on the website. Writers have the
option of using a pseudonym on their journal link; therefore, the choice to be anonymous has already been made by the writer.

31. See Bakhtin.

32. It can be argued that those who use autobiography can find this sense of completion if they feel that they have "reached" healing through the completion of this narrative genre. Herman writes, "Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete" (211).

33. Initially, the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized PTSD as the result of the exposure to the trauma of war. This legitimization of PTSD to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IIIR) in 1980 opened the door to other forms of trauma to be conceived of under this rubric.

34. According to the definition of PTSD, as defined by the DSM-IIIR, "The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of experiences" (Brown 100).

35. Feminists are still engaged in this work to expand the definition of trauma to access entitlements (see Brown).

Works Cited


