The Children Are Listening: An Autoethnographic Account of the Years Leading up to Familicide in a Quiet, Suburban Neighborhood

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What is This?
The following is a true story, though names and details may have been altered for either the sake of confidentiality or through distortions of time and memory. My decision to relate this story is partially to situate events that occurred nearly two decades ago within my own understanding of domestic abuse but also to communicate that which has up to this time been untended. The tragedy around which this story culminates was never brought to the forefront for investigation into how a community could have let this happen and what it meant. This silence has also been, in another sense, its own tragedy. This product of autoethnographic research has been constructed for myself and my children, for you and your children, and the communities in which we reside, to acknowledge the role we all play in the prevention and perpetuation of domestic violence.

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Every Friday afternoon during the season of Lent, the entire student body of St. Matthew the Apostle Elementary School would gather into the school’s church for reenactment of Christ’s death. It was a grim and morbid retelling—Veronica wiping the blood from Jesus’ face, his mother and the women of Jerusalem reaching out for him—but luckily the fourth-grade students, who populated nearly a half-dozen pews within the church, were mostly preoccupied with other more pressing matters, like picking away hangnails or counting the number of colored panes in the Mary Magdalene stained-glass window. As the priest slowly and solemnly made his way up and down the red-carpeted aisles, flanked by expressionless altar boys, I spent a good portion of this time trying not to black out as I had done, much to my embarrassment, two years earlier during a regular Sunday mass. It was the ritual kneeling and standing up between stations, and the thick spread of incense I could taste in the back of my throat, which made me occasionally need to place my head between my knees, as my mother had advised. To avoid drawing attention to myself, I pretended to tie my shoe.

But, God-willing, not all in this scene was unpleasant—we had a class clown, whose name was, conveniently, Jimmy.
Emmi. His role in the Stations of the Cross, it appeared, was to entertain us. He had the talent of delivering just one side-ways glance, an eye roll, or a subtle hop between the standing and kneeling that was enough to start a ruckus within the row or two of students behind him. We did our best to hold in belly laughs, silently shaking, our faces red and eyes flooding with tears, keeping our pleasure just below audibility. And perhaps no one was as delighted by these antics as I was, for Jimmy had been the object of my quiet attention for some time. I would sometimes plan my place in line to end up sitting directly behind and one over from him, just enough that I could still see the side of his face, his dimples and long lashes. It was perfectly acceptable to stare at the back of a classmate’s head while in church, though sometimes I would forget I was staring, and he would look up and to the side and catch me. Other times, I would look up, and he would be turned slightly to the side and watching me. Those were good days.

In the sixth grade, most of the girls in our class were invited to Johanna Landry’s Halloween sleepover. Johanna’s parents were a little more lenient than most, and this made for a liberating night of R-rated horror movies and sneaking out into the front yard well after all the trick-or-treaters had gone inside, and the dark, cold quiet of the night would seem to suggest we should not be there alone. One girl detected a slight movement from down the street. Is that them? She said she saw a figure near a tree. I shuffled down the driveway in sock feet, the cotton just slightly catching on the asphalt, and craned my neck to look. Are they coming? I saw nothing. But one girl screamed, and the boys were suddenly running at us from all directions, pulling at our hair, grabbing at the blankets we had wrapped around our bodies to protect from the cold, screaming and laughing at the same time. We eventually all regrouped on the asphalt, huddled together, and speaking of things that kindled our natural curiosity.

Jimmy was wearing only a t-shirt and shorts, his skinny legs sticking out from under them. I smiled at him, wrapped my blanket more closely around my shoulders, and listened to the others chat until Johanna’s mother, looking gravely concerned, shuffled outside with the cordless telephone and Jimmy’s stepfather on the line. Jimmy’s face seemed, to me, as white as a ghost. After listening to his stepfather on the phone, he took off on his bike down the silent street without even so much as good-bye. We watched until the dark, cold quiet of the night would seem to suggest we should not be there alone. One girl detected a slight movement from down the street. Is that them? She said she saw a figure near a tree. I shuffled down the driveway in sock feet, the cotton just slightly catching on the asphalt, and craned my neck to look. Are they coming? I saw nothing. But one girl screamed, and the boys were suddenly running at us from all directions, pulling at our hair, grabbing at the blankets we had wrapped around our bodies to protect from the cold, screaming and laughing at the same time. We eventually all regrouped on the asphalt, huddled together, and speaking of things that kindled our natural curiosity.

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And so that summer, while so many things around me stayed the same but some things, it seemed, were just beginning to change, I decided to get out the phonebook and call Jimmy to ask how his summer had been, and though he told me all was well, he also said he wouldn’t be coming back to St. Matthew’s but would be living with an aunt in Florida that year. Why? He didn’t really answer, and I didn’t press for it because maybe, I assumed, if I had an aunt in Florida, I might go live there as well. And maybe it was perfectly logical for parents to send their mild-mannered 12-year-old son to start a new life with a distant family member over 400 miles away while leaving his little brother and sister and burgeoning preteen love life behind.

On the day before Jimmy left, Johanna invited him over to her house, and we surprised him with a farewell card made from a scavenged piece of poster board the color of yellow beach sand. We imagined he must be setting off on something like an adventure, and it said, “We’ll miss you, Jimmy.” As he was leaving to go back home, I asked him to pose in the middle of the street for a photo. It was hot and muggy outside, and the sun was shining in his face, so just before taking the picture, I handed him my sunglasses. That night, I opened my bedroom window and thought about the year to come, thinking and waiting and listening to the strident frequency of crickets, a vibration that was somewhat unsettling but not altogether unwelcome. By the time Jimmy Emmi would permanently return home from Florida, the elementary students had grown taller, and more disparaging, and had disbanded into separate male and female high schools.

On March 29, 1991, my first year in high school, Jimmy, his mother, and his stepfather were removed from their inconspicuous home on tree-lined Melrose Lane in body bags. Some time before 8 a.m. that morning, Jimmy’s stepfather shot his wife and stepson, then himself. Friends and neighbors were incredulous, but reported that Jimmy’s stepfather had often seemed upset with him. One neighbor said Jimmy’s mother and stepfather had been fighting a lot lately, that he had been worried about losing his job. News reporters took photographs of the body bags and posted a school photo of Jimmy, round-faced and dimply, next to his obituary. A bustling pack of friends, neighbors, and media gathered on the street that day, then quickly dispersed when the cameras were gone and respects had been paid.

I learned of Jimmy’s death during lunch period that day from a friend who had also gone to St. Matthew’s. I entered into Spanish class that afternoon with thick tears. The teacher never asked what was wrong, why I was in an obvious state of falling to pieces, but waited until the test was over to send me to the principal’s office. The principal heard my story, said nothing, and suggested I go home. At home, more silence. Nothing would be said of the incident. Not at school. Not at home. Not a month later or a year or five years or even twenty years later. No one would explain it to me or ask me to explain it to them or ask me to describe my feelings, if perhaps I had wondered why a father would kill his family.

It’s been so long now that I don’t remember who was at school with me that day, who told me the news, or whom I might like to talk with about it now. A few days later, my mother dropped me off at Jimmy’s funeral, to stand in the back of a crowded room in quiet observation. Looking back, no one named the event; no one ever said the words child abuse, domestic violence, or homicide, and for this reason, maybe, it didn’t stick in my mind as such. I forgot about the violence until I remembered it nearly 20 years later while participating in an academic conference on domestic violence, of all things. I had been studying domestic violence for nearly a year while under the impression that I had no personal connection to the topic. It’s not that I’d forgotten about Jimmy Emmi—I still thought about him—but his story had never been properly framed within that larger context. My mother had picked me up from in front of the funeral home, and we quietly went on with our lives.

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Although communities have traditionally been capable of identifying and remedying threats to their well-being, Putnam (2000, 2007) has observed the disintegration of community under the shadow of individualism, rapid change, and increased mobility. The result, he argues, is that many individuals have begun to live in isolation, and these individuals lack the social capital to address their needs as they once did. Nimmo (2008)
has argued that children are even less integrated into their communities than adults, as they are typically kept under surveillance within institutionalized spaces, such as home, school, and recreational facilities. Though children may be safe within these spaces, they are at risk of missing opportunities to engage in their communities and become citizens within them. Furthermore, adults are at risk of missing opportunities to learn from children.

Perceptions of risk have, no doubt, influenced the possibilities afforded to young people (Madge, 2009). Whereas children were once free to explore their environments and were aware of, and possibly subjected to, the existence of all types of social ill (Nimmo, 2008), parents are more likely now to shield their children from exploration and news of adverse events. Compared with previous generations, children are less likely to be granted permission to play outside without supervision or to cross the street on their own. Extensive media coverage of rare but tragic events has led to the perception that today’s society is acutely more dangerous than it once was, and though it is difficult to gauge whether this perception is true, it has nonetheless led to incidents of public panic over playground injuries and child abductions. Yet children are significantly less likely to be abducted and killed by a stranger than murdered by a member of their own family inside their very own home (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2008).

Nearly three quarters of a million children living in the United States are subjected to physical or sexual abuse each year (DHHS, 2008). Much of the responsibility of detection falls on adults, as children are often unlikely to reveal the abuse, whether out of loyalty to their abuser, fear of retaliation, shame, or lack of communication skills. Though in some states any adult who knows of child abuse is legally mandated to report it, most states place the bulk of this responsibility on the professionals who most frequently interact with children—health care providers, daycare workers, school staff, social workers, and clergy. But even key professionals who should be able to help with child protection have struggled with how to identify and respond to child abuse (Mullender et al., 2002), and even in cases where authorities are contacted, there may be no meaningful consequences.

Several studies have reported a link between interparental domestic violence and child abuse (Edleson, 1999; Jones, Gross, & Becker, 2002; Lundy & Grossman, 2005). Abuse often spills over from the parents to the children, creating a pervasive culture of family violence. Rather than being passive observers of intraparental violence, children are involved on any number of levels and experience a significant degree of distress (Goldblatt, 2003; Mullender et al., 2003). Secrecy about family violence can be pervasive among all ages of children (Alexander, Macdonald, & Paton, 2005), but there is evidence that children are aware of domestic violence from an early age, either as an “eye witness” or an “ear witness” (Mullender et al., 2003), and will take protective measures to avoid abuse (Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2007).

Early detection of family violence is crucial because violence in the home tends to escalate without intervention. In the worst of cases, unchecked violence, especially when partnered with situational stressors, can result in homicide. An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 women are victims of intimate partner homicide each year (Lewandowski et al., 2004), and in approximately 14% of these cases, the women’s children are also murdered (Bossarte, Simon, & Barker, 2006). In some cases, the perpetrator of the lethal violence has no past criminal history (Websdale, 1999), yet some warning signs often exist. Recent escalation of violence, the woman’s attempt to terminate the relationship, financial difficulties, an abusive partner’s suicidal ideation or need for control, and the presence of stepchildren in the home are all highly correlated with lethal violence (Adams, 2007; Campbell et al., 2003). Buckley et al. (2007) have made the compelling argument that “responsibility for identification and recognition [of family violence] lies with the whole community, both parochial and professional” (p. 306).

Buckley et al. (2007) have described children of domestic violence as “invisible.” Child abuse and domestic violence are often seen as separate issues, with separate victims and interventions (Fleck-Henderson, 2000; Jaffe & Juodis, 2006). Fatality Review Boards have made great strides in understanding warning signs for domestic homicide and fatal child abuse from an interdisciplinary point of view—professionals working in the fields of medicine, criminal justice, policy, social services, and education formally work together to reconstruct events leading up to the tragedy, to determine how it might have been prevented—but these efforts are retrospective (Wilson & Websdale, 2006). Prevention of family violence requires the coordination of agency professionals, family members, and the community before the fatal violence has occurred, and this response should also include children, who may have access to information that adults do not.

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In the process of recalling these events as a thirty-five-year-old, married mother of two, and emerging scholar of intimate partner violence, I encountered a painful realization that my younger self had not had the maturity or knowledge to understand: Jimmy’s mother was likely aware that she and her children were in danger and took measures to protect her family. As a teenager, what little processing of the event did occur centered around the death of my friend. His parents’ relationship, and what was going on between them, was none of my concern. But now, my capacity for empathy covers a much broader range. I consider the dynamics of their relationship, wonder how many people truly knew the extent of their troubles, if the family themselves, Jimmy’s stepfather included, knew what he was capable of.
I imagine Jimmy’s mother scared, alone in her realizations, crying silently at night, praying for a path to safety, walking a fine line between keeping her family together and keeping them safe. I try to remember what Jimmy’s mother and stepfather looked like. I wonder whether there was still love.

The study of domestic violence, as we know it today, is the product of decades of research. Popular opinion in the late 1970s was that women who continued to live with abusive partners had learned to be helpless, something known as Battered Woman Syndrome, and could do little to protect themselves or their children from their partners (Walker, 1979). A decade later, emerging research (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988) challenged this theory with observations that women in abusive relationships were actively engaged in the process of keeping themselves and their children safe, with documented safety behaviors that have spanned the range from placating to resisting a violent partner (Goodkind, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2004; Goodman, Dutton, Vankos, & Weinfurt, 2005). Many women are keenly aware that any attempt to leave their abuser will cause the violence to escalate (Weisz, Tolman, & Saunders, 2000). For this reason, some women may choose to stay.

In a study by Glass et al. (2010), women living with abusive partners cited safety for their children as their number one priority. This concern was chosen over safety for themselves, access to resources, confidentiality, or love for their partner. The women in this study also reported sharing their concerns about safety to a friend (64%), family member (49%), spiritual advisor/clergy member (34%), school staff (28%), or healthcare professional (26%), and more than half had created a plan for safety, such as putting aside extra resources or sending children to stay with family members or friends. Most women in violent relationships do eventually leave their partners, but this process requires time and the courage to address complex issues, such as child custody, housing, financial support, and continued safety (Goodman et al., 2005).

There have been mixed results about whether parenting skills are diminished by the presence of interparental domestic violence (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Despite a mother’s efforts to protect her children from the harmful effects of an abusive home, the presence of abuse itself undermines a mother’s authority and trustworthiness. Moreover, children may learn, from their mother’s abuser, that she is unworthy of respect, and they may feel ashamed for both their father’s aggression and their mother’s perceived weakness (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Studies have shown that children from violent families may begin to look outside of the home for support, depending more on friends than family (Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 1999). Though many of these children may desire to distance themselves from their mother and their victim status as a coping mechanism, this act might also deprive a child of his or her primary source of support (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Today, when I comb the newspaper clippings for details of the murders, to try to piece together the events of the day, I am no closer to finding answers to questions that emerged over two decades ago, but the wounds described in the clippings seem to indicate that Jimmy was killed first, while protecting his mother.

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When Jimmy’s stepfather murdered his stepson and wife then took his own life, Jimmy’s little brother and sister were in the home, but they were not injured. Where are they now? Approximately 4,000 children lose their parents to domestic violence each year in the United States (Steeves & Parker, 2007), and large-scale intervention for these children is difficult to find, though recent efforts have been made. The Purple Ribbon Council in Arizona, for example, is developing Camp Butterfly (www.purpleribboncouncil.org), a place where school-aged children orphaned by domestic violence, and their caregivers, can meet to share stories, discover new skills, and celebrate their resilience, and where they will no longer be invisible.

Interview research with children orphaned by parental homicide have found that many have suffered adverse consequences as a result of the tragedy—symptoms related to posttraumatic stress syndrome, substance abuse, and difficulty in love relationships (Steeves, Laughon, Parker, & Weierbach, 2007; Steeves & Parker, 2007). Besides the loss of their families, they have reported that the greatest sources of suffering are feelings of anger and guilt, stigma, and lack of confidentiality as a result of police investigation and media coverage. As adults, many survivors of parental homicide attempt to make meaning of their experiences by reinvestigating the events of the tragedy from an adult point of view. Up until this time, many report that surviving family members did not want to speak with them about the violence, and their silence only further solidified feelings of shame. But there is a need to be heard. There is a need for education, for elucidation and intervention. There is a need for adults to take away the shame. You have permission to speak.

The children are listening.

Epilogue

The methods used to implement and deliver this research in autoethnographic form are unconventional by traditional standards. I am the participant observer of my own life—my more educated, supposedly more reliable adult self-extracting, often painfully, subjective data from a younger, more distant self. In conventional research, methods are defined, in part, to ensure that any
trace of the personal has been thoroughly bracketed, yet I am both the researcher and the subject of this inquiry, and I toil in knowledge that is unavoidably both academic and personal. By far the greatest challenge in constructing this article has been accessing dormant memories and relating them in a way that is faithful to events leading up to the tragedy. Several times in the writing, I was conscious of an inclination to romanticize my childhood and the relationships within it—I felt the pull of nostalgia, “a longing for something that never happened” (Anijar, 1996, p. 166). In the story I want to tell, this act of violence was an isolated case in our community, a freak accident brought on by family dysfunction or, perhaps, mental illness. But I know now of the epidemic of family violence, though its prevalence is often masked by shame. I work with women who tell me I am the only person they have ever told about their abuse. They breathe a long sigh of relief and then refuse to return my calls.

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While scrolling through old photographs for this study, I found one where Jimmy had a noticeable black eye and, though smiling, was turning his head so as to hide the large mark from the camera. I could remember the day this picture was taken for a class photo. I could remember that exact hallway where we were asked to stand, the way it smelled, and I could remember what my teacher that year looked like, the shape of her fingernail beds and the way her dark hair fell around her ears. And though my memory of these details is strong, I also know that this memory is selective. When I had first pulled the photo aside and begun to construct a narrative around it, I regarded the mark on Jimmy’s face as if it were of little consequence, and it took me longer than I’d like to admit to make the connection between his purple flesh and the reality of what I now know of his situation. Even after months of reflection that went into the creation of this manuscript, I still wanted to believe, when reviving the memories in this photograph, that Jimmy had fallen from his bike or gotten into an innocent scrimmage with his younger brother. This moment, of course, highlights the difficulty of meaningfully connecting the local with the aggregate, and it speaks to the necessity of continually forging this connection in my own inquiry practices and writing.

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Bio

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