





# University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

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January 15, 2005

To: Women's History Month Awards Committee  
From: Patti See *patti see*  
RE: Nomination of Diana Goller for Donna Turell Award

I'm pleased to nominate Diana Goller's research paper/narrative "Letting Go the Life Raft: Creating a New Identity" for the Donna Turell award.

Diana does a wonderful job of weaving solid research and personal experience in a powerful narrative about surviving incest. She's a fine writer who handles this difficult topic with candor as she describes her development from the perspective of a victim to that of a survivor. Her feminist evolution is also quite evident in her prose.

*Excellence. Our measure, our motto, our goal.*

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**Donna Turell Award**

**Letting Go the Life Raft: Creating a New Identity**

**WMNS 210: Culture of the Third Wave**

**Diana Lee Goller / Senior, Journalism**

**Patti See, Instructor**

“Whatever happens to a woman’s body also happens to her spirit.”

-- Elizabeth Davis, *Women’s Sexual Passages*

It is difficult to understand how Third Wave Feminism can be touted as focusing inward (as opposed to Second Wave Feminism which focused outward) when all around us this day and age there is so much focus on the body beautiful. Body Image is presented as both an outward manifestation (look perfect and strut your stuff), and as an internal concept of how we see and experience ourselves in our bodies. Oh great...another test I didn’t know I would have to take and didn’t study for! I make light of it only because I have never felt comfortable in or with my body, and I was assuming that as I got older it would be easier or less important. But noooooooo...here I am at 56 years of age realizing my body image still affects my self-perceptions and if I do not get it right once and for all this low self-esteem will plague me to my grave. Can’t I just go to a hypnotist? I am weary, let me rest. After living fifteen years with my physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive father I spent years in therapy—head work, but no body work. Now I think it is time to get the two together. Head meet body, body meet head. What do you mean you don’t like each other! Okay, I surrender...let’s all go to the library together and do some research.

The first thing I notice about all of the books on body image is that they deal at length with its affects on sexuality, and also on how all forms of childhood abuse have dramatic affects on individual body image, sexuality, and ability to create lasting relationships. Given my childhood experiences, I’m hooked on exploring this further. I thought that recovering from sexual abuse just meant acknowledging the ways the abuse had affected me, and that I did not have to see myself as dirty, shameful, and forever tarnished. I thought that being a “survivor”

meant I should feel stronger for having learned to live through it and that I could then go on in life knowing that I was strong enough to face anything. Counselors and therapy groups I met with did discuss the residual affects of abuse that can plague us throughout our lives, but I do not recall any discussion about how to work through those issues.

I remember warm summer nights in Eugene, Oregon, the air filled with the fragrance of every flower that can bloom on earth, while I sat with therapy groups on church lawns or in the basements talking about our traumas. They were deliciously mixed groups, too—young men (gay and straight), lesbians of every age and color, women from such diverse backgrounds that I was shocked to know that the daughters of doctors and lawyers could also be victims of incest. I eventually quit going to the groups because no one had a success story to tell. Yes, we had all survived, but everyone seemed damaged beyond repair, saddened beyond the possibility of laughter, and self-consciously scarred beyond the ability to see the irony of our lives. We were beautiful people, breathing and doing people, people who were not being abused any more—all stranded on the same life raft sharing horror stories. Those nights were fragrant with the expectation of a relief that never happened.

I decided to quit the group and go smell the flowers, laugh at myself a little, and become a less tragic figure. I would put abuse behind me and just live. I resent the fact that it won't stay in the past, and it still interferes with the life I want to live. But now, with nine books and three journal articles in my backpack, I leave the library confident that salvation is just a few pages away.

I start with body image, because that is a recurring theme in my low self-esteem, and wearing lingerie was a scary idea given what I have been taught about my body. In their book *Body Image*, Thomas F. Cash and Thomas Pruzinsky wrote, “Over the course of body image

scholarship, body experience has been viewed as a fundamental construct for understanding human functioning... This vital role of body image means that it has the potential to dramatically influence our quality of life... Perhaps most poignantly, body image influences our relationships—those that are public as well as the most intimate” (6-7). Cash and Pruzinsky point out that the inexhaustible list of human behaviors that have been linked to body-experience have indisputable influence on body attitudes, and that human identity cannot be separated from the body experiences an individual has. With body experience playing such a strong role in body image, what impact does sexual and physical abuse have on a person’s body image and identity?

Clinical psychologists Diann M. Ackard and Patricia Fallon have written extensively on sexual abuse and body image. In their chapter in *Body Image*, “Sexual Abuse and Body Image,” they wrote that if sexual abuse occurs during childhood or early adolescence, “surviving the event with an integrated body image and a healthy sense of self is improbable” (119). A sexual abuse survivor, they have observed, is often uncomfortable in her body and has difficulty expressing needs and opinions confidently because “she may believe that her needs will not be respected, or will not matter—beliefs that mirror the helplessness experienced during the abusive event(s)” (120). A woman’s healthy sexual functioning and capacity for intimacy is compromised because the survivor has a deflated sense of power and esteem. Everywhere I read it is bad news as the litany of my lacking-self goes on.

Now social learning theorists are even studying the differences between the traumatic experiences of being sexually abused as a child as opposed to being raped as an adult. In their book, *Sexual Abuse and Consensual Sex, Women’s Developmental Patterns and Outcomes*, Wyatt, Newcomb, and Riederle wrote that the secrecy surrounding sexual abuse teaches a young girl that she has done something shameful for which she deserves to be blamed. “Furthermore”

they say, “she learns that she cannot trust other people or exert control over them...the survivor frequently begins to feel stigmatized and develops negatively distorted perceptions and feelings about herself. The experience of being powerless to control an aversive event can result in fear and anxiety, an impaired sense of self-efficacy, and an inability to cope with the world” (7-8). This 250-page book dedicated one page only to conclusions that called for more research that supports education for healthy family environments.

I just want to get off this survivor life-raft and get on with my life. Won't someone help me? I turn to books on female sexuality hoping I will find words of wisdom there to help me establish a relationship with myself and others.

This one sounded promising. Judith Daniluk's book *Women's Sexuality Across the Life Span, Challenging Myths, Creating Meanings*. Maybe this one will teach me how to experience my sexuality into even older age. While Daniluk had some handy little exercises for getting in touch with your body and seeing your body in new and more affirmative ways, she turned me aside after she encouraged women to face current bodily self-perceptions by going back to examine the past and explore messages they had received about their body in childhood. This advice sounded promising, but was quickly followed by, “Impaired body image is often a long-term consequence of sexual and physical violation. Body hatred and feelings of estrangement are common experiences for adult survivors of child sexual abuse; the specific needs of these women are beyond the scope of this book” (195-196). Well, I'm as stubborn as plastic, I refuse to go away. Next!

A 2003 article from the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* by Jennie Noll, Penelope Trickett, and Frank Putnam entitled “A Prospective Investigation of the Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on the Development of Sexuality” sounded enlightening (A Prospective

Investigation <http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an-ccp713575&db=pdh>). Perhaps someone has gone beyond identifying the problem and has suggestions for recovery. Instead it was like reading the possible side effects on the back of a medicine bottle (. . . *may include drowsiness or insomnia, diarrhea or constipation, increased heart rate or decreased heart rate*). From this article I learned that childhood sexual abuse could lead to heightened sexuality or sexual preoccupation such as excessive masturbation, sexual promiscuity, and sexual obsession, or it could lead to sexual aversion and avoidance, sexual dysfunction, or sexual ambivalence. Oh sure, they gave some helpful hints on how to treat the above disorders on page 15 just above the footnotes, “Effective interventions might include treatment of anxiety and disassociative symptoms, a reversal of potential sexual stigmatizations, and the rebuilding of trust and empowerment. Treatment should either continue into and through adolescence or be revisited when issues of sexuality are developmentally salient.” Can a person reverse sexual stigmatizations, and if so, how? Do not just tell me what to do, tell me how to do it! You always find what you’re looking for in the last place you look.

I finally hit pay dirt with a 2004 article in the *Journal of Counseling & Development* entitled “Beyond ‘Survivor’: How Childhood Sexual Abuse Informs the Identity of Adult Women at the End of the Therapeutic Process” <<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=13405876&db=afh>>. I was hesitant at first because the authors are Alexis Phillips and Judith Daniluk. Remember “the specific needs of these women are beyond the scope of this book” Daniluk? This time I was rewarded because the article specifically addressed how many incestuously abused women had moved beyond the “survivor” identity to find new and more affirming ways of defining themselves.



Daniluk and Phillips' research identified five common themes that characterized the self-constructions of sexually abused women in the early stages of treatment, and their study allowed women to speak for themselves, as opposed to being observed. The five common themes going into treatment were: Feelings of invisibility, inherent badness, guilt, shame, and victimization. Their research documented how the sexual abuse experience dominated these women's identities and significantly affected how they experienced and perceived of themselves in the world because for them "the world and the self are viewed through the lens of the victimized child." As these women remained in treatment they began to "externalize the abuse and disown responsibility for what had been done to her" and they began to acknowledge their personal strengths required for coping with and surviving the trauma. This is where identify as a "survivor" replaces victim identity. One woman in the study group said "It (the survivor identity) was like a hundred percent of my identify. It just felt like that was everything and I had to hang onto it. It was like a little life raft in a way, that I had made it and if I hung on to that identity I'd be okay." But a life raft is a device intended for temporarily sustaining a person until rescue takes place, or you drift in to shore, right? Who wants to drift aimlessly on a raft for the rest of her life? Daniluk and Phillips specifically addressed this issue:

Although it is much more adaptive than the victim identity characteristic of the early stages of healing, many writers in the field suggest that as healing progresses the survivor identity may well become too constricting and should be abandoned. Because it is closely associated with the abuse, this survivor identity is in effect a stigmatized identity—one that no longer accurately reflects the breadth and depth of the woman's evolving sense of self. In the later stages of healing, the woman's identification with the abuse and its effects is greatly diminished. There is increased integration of the consequences of the abuse into her identity and recognition that it is only a part, not all, of how she defines and understands herself.

Daniluk and Phillips raised the question "If not as a survivor, what is a more appropriate and respectful way to refer to women who have endured, and no doubt been shaped by, their

abusive history?” There is no clear literature on how women define themselves once their survivor identity is abandoned or the degree to which they feel their abusive history continues to affect their self-perceptions once the healing process is finished. The aim of their study focused more on how identity is experienced and constructed by women at the end of their recovery therapy. Before therapy the women shared five common themes in their self-perceptions stemming from their abusive histories. After recovery therapy those five themes resurfaced, but from a more positive and self-determined perspective. All participants reported the following:

- An increasing sense of visibility, congruence, and connection
- An emerging sense of self-definition and self-acceptance
- A shift in worldview
- A sense of regret over what has been lost
- A sense of resiliency and growth

While the women reflected on their current life, they reported being “particularly proud of the depth and integrity of their relationships with friends and loved one and saw these relationships as one of the significant rewards of their healing. However, the women also expressed “a sense of sadness about aspects of who they are that continue to be negatively affected by their childhood experiences of incest, such as their sexuality and their relationships with their body.” The women talked about continuing to struggle with sexual intimacy and reflected on their belief that the loss of their capacity for sexual spontaneity and joy might well be one of the permanent legacies of their sexual abuse experience....The loss that was felt and expressed most keenly by the women in this study was the loss of relationships, both their intimate and romantic relationships.” Overall, though, the women expressed much greater satisfaction about themselves, increased confidence and joy in life, and had learned to widen the

expanse of their identity. They were also able to see that abuse was an experience that had happened to them and not who they are. As one participant said, “I used to think of myself as a survivor and I don’t any more. I think of myself as a woman, an artist.”

I found this article freeing and liberating despite the ongoing legacy the women felt of not feeling truly comfortable in their bodies and not being as connected with their sexuality as they might have been if they had not been violated in childhood. At least now I understand the brick wall I run up against repeatedly in my intimate relationships. Now I recognize the substance of the wall—it is not made of brick and deadly-electrified barbed wire, it is not a prison I cannot get out of--it is the faulty smoke and mirror images I learned to internalize about myself as a child.

Even before reading this article I had taken my first step toward passing through that wall. After four years with the same man, I still feel like Allen and I are “going steady” in our 50’s. I thought it would be liberating to wear lingerie at fifty-six years old and for the first time in my life. I’ve always wanted to feel like a more feminine woman, and I was desperate to feel like a sexy girly-girl at least once before I resign myself to the postmenopausal Crone years. Somehow I felt safer risking looking foolish in lingerie with cellulite on my thighs than with the idea of speaking up for what I wanted. A little thing like lingerie taught me that I wanted, and had a right, to be seen and heard. That gave me the courage to ask Allen if he saw us together in the future, and to let him know that I want to be with a man who has two feet firmly planted in our relationship. For me, that was spontaneous, confident, and self-affirming. It was the first time in my life I had taken an active role in expressing what I need and want in a relationship. What Allen decides he wants is important to me, but it will not alter my life if he decides to stay or go. I’m not huddling before an imaginarily impenetrable wall any longer, nor drifting idly on

the “survivor” life raft waiting to be rescued. Surviving the past is not the same as creating a future. I hope Allen decides to stay because I love him, and he is a man I would like to spend my future with; the problems we’ve had communicating are as much mine as his. But whether we work it out together or not, I have still let go of the life raft. Now I can see the shore I want to reach and I’m swimming like hell!

## Works Cited

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