

Recipes for Survival

*Stories of Hope and Healing by Survivors of the
State 'Care' System in Australia*



Edited by Deidre Michell & Priscilla Taylor

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**Dedicated to all Forgotten Australians,
and all those who have suffered as
children**

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Preface

During the 1950s British child psychologists John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott (among others) held enormous sway over child rearing practices. Both authors asserted, albeit with differing degrees of emphasis, that the absence of maternal love in the early years would have a significant bearing on later life. Not surprisingly such thinking influenced a generation of child psychologists, social and welfare workers who made strenuous efforts to keep children with their mothers. But this line of thought changed in later years, even though the natural parent/child relationship continued to be seen as vitally important to a child's development. For example, in *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*, Professor Michael Rutter argued that what mattered most in the developmental process was the quality of care afforded to a child.

The consistent demonstration of love, warmth, affection, care, patience, understanding and guidance were the most vital aspects of parenting, whoever that parent might be. This view is echoed in David Jackson's observation in this volume that: "I know only too well how you don't have to have had a birth or blood or even lifelong relationship with someone to have an experience of family. Family can be whatever it means to you and whatever you need it to be, and a very rich and supportive family relationship can be derived from those who care about us and who we care about". Further, as Deidre Michell adds in her chapter, "we can get our substance and loving support from many people in our lives, not only parents."

Welcome though Rutter's rejoinder was, it had long passed unnoticed among those who presided over the institutional

care of children. For generations, such children found themselves in places of so-called care that treated them with much less care than might reasonably be expected. This came to light most graphically in the 2004 report of the Senate inquiry into the institutional experiences of the Forgotten Australians - that is, children who spent time in out-of-home care up to the early 1970s.

The inquiry drew from over 700 testimonials and extensive documentary evidence. It concluded that children in care institutions run by the state, churches and charitable organisations were frequently subjected to cruel, abusive and negligent treatment which sometimes bordered on the barbaric and sadistic. Additionally, the inquiry found that the psychological, emotional, educational and other needs of children were often ignored, and in many cases, they were forced into virtual slavery in order to bolster the income of institutions. Inspections of such places were invariably oblivious to the manipulations and cover-ups of the authorities. Faced with such vulnerability children learned to survive as best they could. For Frank Golding, “the mind was the only safe shelter, the one space that could not be invaded”, and for Amanda Gargula, “it seemed I lived only to survive the next day.”

The consequences of such experiences have only recently become fully apparent as official inquiries, academic studies and personal memoirs come to public attention. There is little doubt that the legacy of cruel and arbitrary treatment experienced by thousands of children in care institutions resulted in considerable and enduring suffering. Many have found it difficult to cope with the demands of everyday life, or to come to terms with the assault on the human spirit, and have taken refuge in drugs, alcohol or a life of disconnection and isolation in what Ryszard Szablicki refers to as “stray cat” otherness. Some have self-harmed or suicided. Others have ended up homeless, in prisons and psychiatric establishments. Some, however, have also gone on to lead full and productive lives in loving and nurturing families of their own. As Tamsin

Dancer points out, experiences of institutional care vary widely.

But there are few if any Forgotten Australians who can claim to be entirely free of the consequences of their past lives in institutional care. One of the most important contributions made by them has been to record what happened in the past and how they have coped since leaving institutional care. However, as several authors in this volume attest, this is far from easy as rehearsing harrowing memories has its price. Sometimes these stories only emerge later in life when an opportunity presents itself - for instance, it took Pricilla Taylor 54 years to first recount her experiences. Nonetheless, the accounts of the survivors of care have brought to public notice a very dark and secretive history of Australian child welfare. Yet, in effect, their accounts have ensured that the pain and suffering of tens of thousands of beautiful, innocent children will remain on the public record.

Recipes for Survival: Stories of Hope and Healing by Survivors of the State 'Care' System in Australia is a remarkable contribution to a growing body of literature on the experiences of the Forgotten Australians. The editors and contributors are to be commended for the strength, honesty and clarity they have brought to this book which speaks important truths about past harms and current struggles. It also gives others courage to tell their own stories or to know that they are not alone and that what they experienced was not their fault. Through the mediums of poetry, memory work and self-reflection we learn about the privations of care and the long road to healing and recovery. The impulse to explore the past in order to make sense of the present is what unites all the contributors to this book. As Deidre Michell comments on her own process of reflection: "A feature of my life in recent years has been the need to reopen suppurating psychic wounds in order to cleanse and heal them, even though poking around in these memories makes me feel sick."

Because of such fortitude, many survivors of institutional harm have been able to break the intergenerational cycle of

abuse to which they were subjected. As Karen Laura-Lee Wilson remarks: “the harsh lessons I learned ensured that while my children were growing up I embraced them with as much love as I was capable of showing: never resentment and always support.”

Dr Richard Hil
Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies
University of Sydney
January 2010

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Introduction

There were an estimated 500,000 Australians during the 20th century who experienced out-of-home 'care'. That is, as children they were raised in orphanages, foster care and other types of institutional care. Known collectively as Forgotten Australians, many of their stories have now been told - through a number of State and Federal Inquiries, by individuals writing books and posting stories on the internet, by others writing to the Care Leavers Australia Network (CLAN) and having their stories published in the CLAN newsletter, or by participating in the Forgotten Australians Oral History Project.

This volume, which makes a contribution to these growing numbers of stories, tells stories through the lenses of survival and healing. Our collection begins with the front cover where Marjorie Malkog's beautiful needlework is a testament to her finding a way to create beauty no matter what the circumstances of her life.

The first three pieces of writing are protests. J's poem is a protest against the way she was treated in 'care'. The intensity of J's pain pulsates through her poem, and yet so too does her determination to disrupt the cycle of abuse rather than harm her child as she was harmed. Christina Riley's poem, which acknowledges past pain, is also a protest against giving up on life and giving in to this pain. Priscilla Taylor's first contribution is a protest against continuing to be chained to past events.

Three stories and a poem which feature mothers follow. First is David O'Brien's poignant poem about the stabs of pain left

behind with the exit of his mother. Karen Wilson's recently published book, *Gaining a Sense of Self*, is a tribute to her survival skills. In her contribution to this book we see some of the reasons why these were needed in the first place – time spent in an orphanage from which she emerged much worse for wear, and childhood years lived with a mother who was neglectful and violent. Deidre Michell's first contribution is also a story about mothers – a birth mother who abandoned all her six children, and a foster mother who was verbally and emotionally abusive. To help her heal from this experience Deidre explores the meaning of 'mother' and decides that nurturing qualities were evident in her childhood even if not forthcoming from her mothers. David Jackson's story is a demonstration of how good foster care could look. His foster mum had a policy of 'open house;' she not only took in many children to foster, she also nurtured the connections children had with their families of origin.

Survival strategies are the feature of the next few stories. Frank Golding's *Good and Bad Cards* is a delightful story of childhood resilience and resourcefulness. Friends in the Ballarat Orphanage became determined footballers, earned money in creative ways and learned to keep their thoughts to themselves. Amanda's story makes explicit a number of strategies she used to cope with immense difficulties. Drinking alcohol at a young age to assuage the pain which couldn't be expressed was one such coping mechanism. Escaping South Australia and her tortured memories was another. Pam's survival strategy, having learned to be silent in the orphanage, was to pretend ignorance. She found she was left alone then. To round out this section, David O'Brien's poem, *I work*, explores the idea of working to bind up still bleeding wounds.

Al Smith's poem about a quiet life in the bush is then followed by three stories of older women told by Priscilla Taylor and David Jackson. These women are all survivors. Priscilla's recounting of Joy's story describes how Joy, now in her 60's, is finally able to enjoy her life after taking control of it. David's stories of friends Violet and Daphne are delightful vignettes of

women who survived and became colourful characters around town.

Bringing us back to reflect on the opening poetry of J, Christina, and Priscilla are stories which recount the journey from denial to confrontation with and movement through pain toward healing. First is Priscilla Taylor's account of the merry-go-round that was her childhood, and her reflection on the experience of pain being just as difficult as an adult as it was during childhood. This is followed by Deidre Michell's story about a faith crisis – and resolution – while confronting painful memories. Continuing the theme of spirituality, David O'Brien's poem, *Atomic Surrender*, examines the devastating impact of religion on his family. However, the poem also looks toward the divine mother for healing of this at the dawn of a more gentle era.

In *A Personal Journey Towards Healing and Redress* Ryszard Szablick then tells how it was the birth of his son in 1988 which set him on a path towards making others accountable for the suffering he experienced as a child. In the process he was able to move past denial and into a realisation of all that he had lost. He was also able to reach out to others and offer a helping hand.

Margo O'Byrne benefited from life in an orphanage, although her brother suffered from being abused. Later in life, though, Margo found she needed to go back and revisit her past in order to make peace with it. From this came her book, *Left Unsaid*, and she details some of the process of writing it here.

For anyone inspired by Ryszard's and Margo's stories to write their own, Frank Golding follows with practical advice on how to get started and how to structure the story as well as tips on publishing.

The next collection of work offer suggestions about how to move beyond survival and into flourishing. Al Smith's poem, *Today*, is a celebration of life no matter how that life looks. Priscilla Taylor talks about the benefits of Rock 'n Roll, Frank

Golding replaces feelings of shame and guilt with regret, and Josephine Kunde coaxes herself to look at the positives in her life. Then Al Smith has suggestions about dealing with persistent and unwanted thoughts and Priscilla Taylor offers reasons as to why laughter is the best medicine. Finally, Al Smith's poem, *Love*, reminds us that Love is everywhere.

Two accounts of apologies, and the benefits that can flow from them, have been contributed by Thérèse Williams and Priscilla Taylor. Thérèse attended the Federal Government Apology in Canberra on November 16 2009 and felt impelled afterwards to write a poem to honour a little friend who died in care. Priscilla recounts the work involved in establishing a Memorial to Forgotten Australians in Adelaide and relives the day of celebration on 17 June 2010.

To complete the volume is Tamsin Dancer's perspective from the outside. Not a Forgotten Australia, but a social worker who has worked with young people about to leave 'care,' she reflects on the practical support needed, and on the learning from them that can be done if only those in authority take the time to listen.

Deidre Michell & Priscilla Taylor
Adelaide
January 2011

Were you trying to kill me?

J

You said you'd protect me
So why did you place me with known abusers?

You said he would go to jail
So why is it that after
Abusing countless young children he is still not in jail?

You said I was getting a new family
So why did they reject me?

You said I could ask you anything
So why didn't you answer my questions?

You made decisions about my life
So why didn't you ever ask me what I wanted?

You watched my every move
So why did you give me so many labels?

You said you understand my disability
So why did you leave me to fight for my life alone in a
hospital bed?

You said I was smart
So why didn't you provide me with a decent education?

You said time heals all wounds
So what about the ones you can't see?

You told me I was ok just the way I was
So why did you buy me drugs

Were you trying to kill me?
The courts ordered you to provide me with food and shelter
So why did you send me to live on the streets without food and
water?

You were responsible for showing me how to live
independently
So why did you place me in a home without knowing how to
cook or how to wash my clothes?

You were entrusted with my safety
So why didn't you save me from further abuse?

Why didn't you come when I screamed for help?

Suddenly after years of abuse and neglect you abandoned me
Your parting gift was a jigsaw that was my childhood
Only with several pieces missing

Searching for cure
But services cannot help me because I am no longer a child...
But not yet a woman trying to find light at the end at the
darkness
But the pain proved too much

Finding a place to help me
Piece my life back together
Supporting me through my journey through life into
parenthood
Enabling me to break the cycle of abuse
Understanding my needs and also my child's needs
Kindness and compassion
Were for all

Only to rip it all away again just because of my biological age
Once again I was lost and alone only this time I had a
toddler to raise alone

Nowhere to turn to
Pain festering just below the surface
My story silenced by shame
My shattered soul searching for the strength to keep
Fighting
Drops of blood have replaced my tears

Finally after years of abuse of thousands of children
You say, "Sorry you suffered..."
But your words are too late
For the very services we need to heal
Are often overworked and often underequipped to help

Encased in guilt and deep shame
Hate hurting like this...
But I am hurt beyond repair
Still carrying my scars from childhood...
Trying not to pass on
The legacy of abuse

The Child Within

Christina Riley

In the mist of all my anguish, I hold my head up high.
I know deep in my heart the truth will never die.
The pain and sorry of a little girl in limbo standing on her own.

I look inside myself and realize the twisted turmoil of events
were beyond my control.
I now lay down my head and let my soul and heart to mend.

I'm all worn out and who cares to understand.
Only I can fathom the full extent of my existence.
I need to ponder and let go of all that pain and fear inside.

So I can become who I really am, a strong and free being.
One who stands tall on the threshold of a new beginning?

Watch-out I'm coming back and I'm going to thrive
In the land of the living.

No More

Priscilla Taylor

As a toddler I had no say...
Now I'm an adult with a voice & I say...

No more will my present be guided by my past,
The future will hold & surround me,
Optimism, strength and wisdom will guide me.

Gaining a Sense of Self

Karen Laura-Lee Wilson

Many years later when I asked how she felt when the doll was accidentally smashed she replied "I could have killed you". She meant it. Six decades on she still had not forgiven me.

After our parents' violent break-up on Christmas Eve 1948 we moved to Spring Hill, Brisbane in August the following year. It was just as well my brother and I had formed a bond to support each other in times of difficulty because, with our father gone, we were neglected in our mother's care. She managed a guesthouse and was obsessively busy and preoccupied. My brother and I rarely saw her – even at breakfast. Perpetually hungry, we children scoured the kitchen for food. Even though I was seven years old I learned to cut bread for our standby bread and milk breakfast and make sandwiches for school. Unaccompanied, we walked to the local primary state school. Sometimes we wagged it and spent the time skinny-dipping at a nearby waterhole. We joined a gang of children and roamed the streets after school and at night. My brother was the lieutenant and I his little corporal. (God only knows what our mother was doing all that time). *When* she was around, she was grumpy and fierce.

In the evening just before closing time at the pubs we stood outside and begged for pennies. Sometimes my brother sneaked into the bar room and collected coins left on the windowsills. When caught, he was sworn at. We always split the takings and soon became regular customers at the local fish shop where we purchased potato cakes, two for a penny, and a packet of Throaties for my persistent cough. If we were still hungry we stole fruit from the local grocer. Apples were our main targets. Eventually, fed up with our regular

shoplifting, the owner contacted the local policeman who paid a visit to our mother. She was shocked to hear about our activities.

Shortly after the visit, our mother took us to see His Grace, the Most Reverend J. Duhig. Our mother was brought up Catholic so she thought it was appropriate to see him about her dilemma. We children were christened Anglican; we had no knowledge of the catholic faith. Nonetheless, the archbishop arranged for my brother to attend Nudgee Junior College and I was placed at Nazareth House, Wynnum. My mother told me I was going on a holiday. I would make lots of friends and have fun. My mother said she had to go away for a spell because she was "on the verge of a nervous breakdown". I didn't know what a nervous breakdown was, but I knew it was something to do with our parent's separation.

On 3 January 1950 my mother and I set off for Nazareth House. I thought she would come and collect me in a couple of weeks. Early into my stay, my mother visited me on my birthday before she embarked on a long holiday up north to recuperate. I remained there until late August. Things became easier for me when I became a Catholic. My brother was placed in the designated boarding school and completed the school year there.

I don't know the reasons why my mother faced up to her responsibilities and eventually rescued me from the orphanage in August of that year. My mother inadvertently emitted a gasp of horror when she first saw me on my release. My head was shaved and I had weeping ulcers on my scalp. I had also lost weight.

I don't know why she had not contacted her relatives in Sydney to apprise them of her situation and send us to stay with them until she recovered. She never spoke about her relatives. Our mother's kindness to us lasted for a year. Then she reverted to her cruel, nasty self; she bashed us regularly, belittled our father and us constantly and kept us hungry. My best strategy to remain in that environment was to give her