In December 2008 I presented a paper to my colleagues on the topic, ‘Narcissism, Autobiography and What Happens when the Therapist Writes a Memoir’. My audience consisted mainly of psychoanalytic psychotherapists, and a few non-therapist partners, invited in honour of the fact that this event was the last such professional development meeting for the year. Most audience members belonged to my professional association but the meeting was also opened to other psychotherapy groups. On that evening I talked about narcissism in the context of autobiography, and the degree to which autobiography’s popularity can be considered both as a function of narcissism and also as an attempt to deal with it. Narcissism, I argued, looks inward and avoids acknowledging the gaze of the other. Autobiography, on the other hand, is relational. It requires an interactive audience, an empathic response and non-judgmentalism, if readers are to avoid their own defensive counter-transferential responses. Similarly, I argued that the issue of self-disclosure can evoke powerful responses from both patients and colleagues when the therapist writes autobiographically. I used an example from my own autobiographical work, a section that included details of a history of sexual abuse across two generations within my family of origin. I then considered the work of the memoirist and practising psychoanalyst, Sophia Richman, who writes about her childhood experience as a Holocaust survivor to explore what happens ‘when the therapist writes a memoir’.

When I was a child I sat one day with my brothers and sisters watching television. In those days my greatest pleasure was to sit and watch the television for hours. On holidays this might be possible but never for long. When our parents were both out of
the house, away at work, there was another parent in the form of my older sister who would issue edicts about the amount of television we might watch. Although she liked to limit television to a minimum during the holidays she would at least let us watch the midday movie.

It was on one such day while we were watching the midday movie when the announcer came on during an advertisement break to tell us that there would be a special screening of a family favourite, two hours of Walt Disney cartoons on Saturday night from 6 till 8 pm.

‘We won’t be able to watch,’ I said. It seemed a straightforward statement and one I imagined everyone else in the room could understand. We would not be able to watch television because our father would be at home as he was at home every Saturday night, drinking heavily from a bottle of St Agnes brandy hidden inside a brown paper bag, which he kept beside his chair.

‘What are you talking about?’ one of my brothers asked.

‘You know,’ I said. ‘You know.’

He did not know it seemed, or if he did he wanted me to spell it out. They all did. All my sisters and brothers, with the exception of the two oldest who had left home by then, stared at me, as if daring me to explain myself and at the same time urging me in some unspoken way to remain silent. I had spoken the unspeakable. We had been told without words that we must not speak about these things and I had broken the rules.

I did not understand at the time, why I should not speak the obvious. Why I should not say something that we all knew to be true. Why the conspiracy of silence? Now I recognise it had something to do with the anxiety that comes from putting certain experiences into words. The fear that if we put words to the experience, the
feelings and fantasies associated with that experience will rise to the surface and choke us. Something similar it seems happened at the December meeting when I presented my paper and spoke openly about such unspoken matters.

As children my siblings and I were well versed in the fourth commandment, to honour thy father and thy mother. To speak of our father’s drinking would have been to dishonor him. Besides he was already visiting my older sister in her bed at night by then, and to speak of his drinking might also have hinted at other such transgressions. I learned then to remain silent. Only in adulthood have I dared to speak out. As Freud argues, history repeats itself.

I had already published a short version of my paper in the Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy and when the Chair of the Professional Development Committee suggested I present it at the end of the year meeting, I spent a long time thinking about how I might actually do that. I did not want simply to read the published paper - to my audience. I have been to enough meetings where the presenter reads the pages out loud, head buried, and all the energy slides away from the room down onto the page. I wanted to bring my paper to life and to this end I decided to include two additional sections. I decided to cut some of the theoretical sections on the nature of narcissism. The audience members were in the main psychotherapists and I presumed they would know enough about narcissism already. I added an autobiographical section, as well as a discussion around my vignette that might illustrate and help make sense of the events I had described, with an emphasis on the need for empathy when reading autobiographical material.

The people in the back of the room were shuffling chairs to make room for latecomers. I was more anxious than usual before presenting and I qualified the
papern by telling my audience about my nervousness and likening it to how I imagined I would feel were I presenting to my siblings. There was a polite titter. Things seemed to be going well and I continued the paper till the end without feeling that it had been too difficult for my audience to absorb. Occasionally I noticed the furrowed brow of one of my colleagues who seemed to be struggling over my words but otherwise all seemed to be going well enough. Even during question time, the questions were innocuous, mostly impossible to answer questions about how my siblings might feel or my patients were they to read my autobiographical material. I talked about my recognition of the difficulties. I did not feel satisfied with my responses but these questions needed more time for discussion, I said. There could be no definitive answer to any of them.

These things come back to me now as I scan my memory for signs of what was to follow. Even one of my detractors from long ago, asked questions in what I heard as a benign tone of voice. She asked two questions that left me believing she was genuinely interested in what I had had to say. Apart from the woman of the furrowed brow, I could not detect any other specific response. Afterwards some people came up to me. They were neither congratulatory nor full of praise but they seemed to appreciate what I had presented and I went home after supper happy enough. I did not know then that during suppertime after my talk there was a small group of colleagues who had gathered together in the kitchen to share their concerns.

The next evening the first of the criticisms arrived in the form of an email. One colleague complained that I had re-enacted something of my experience as a child with the audience. I had in essence, he argued, abused my audience by my self-disclosure and that my audience was powerless to avoid it, just as I had been powerless as a child to avoid my father. In my presenting in this manner, my
colleague believed that I had behaved not as a therapist but as a patient, looking for empathy.

One difficulty is that I straddle two worlds, that of the writer and that of the psychotherapist. The writer seeks to open up experience and events for consideration. The psychotherapist aims to do likewise, and she does so in the privacy of the therapy room, where traditionally the focus has been on opening up the patient’s world, not the therapist’s.

It is assumed that the therapist within her own personal therapy has opened up her own world with another therapist/analyst and therefore her own subjectivity need not impinge too much on her patient. It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the history of the many schools of thought that have developed from and elaborated on Freud’s structural theory. But I will say that Freud’s initial emphasis on the objective nature of the work and his attempts to eradicate the subjective still influence therapists’ efforts to practise in a way that fits in with traditional models of scientific investigation, so that therapeutic encounters can be duplicated and verified.ii Today however, more emphasis tends to be placed on the relational nature of psychoanalysis, the patient and therapist in a mutually engaged process of self-discovery. This applies especially in relation to the widespread recognition of countertransference as an inevitable component of psychoanalytic practice.

The day after my presentation I had wanted to dismiss this first email as the ranting of particular colleague, who has a reputation for anger. I heard nothing more until the next day when the woman who chaired my paper told me that she had decided to send the matter on to the Ethics Committee.
I suppose my ears should have been burning. They were not. At the time I imagined the flurry of emails between committees that followed had emerged over the poorly expressed email from the enraged colleague and I believed it would all die down soon – a storm in a teacup. It was not until the weekend, six days after the event that I realised the full extent of some people’s reaction to my talk. They were indignant and full of rage. I had breached the rules of non self-disclosure, abstinence and the need for anonymity. Although the ethics committee met and discussed my presentation at length and in the end decided there had been no breach in the code of ethics, the president and chair of the ethics committee later advised me to take a leave of absence indefinitely from my official positions within the association – I act as treasurer – to allow time for the dust to settle.

As a group, psychotherapists have savage superegos. The term superego derives from Freud’s topographical model of the human mind as consisting of an id, an ego and a superego. The id, the impulses and desires of the primitive and uncontrolled infant mind must be harnessed through the developing superego and modulated by the ego to get some sense of control over our lives. The term superego applies to the area of functioning broadly under the category of conscience. Although the concrete imagery of Freud’s model has long since been developed into a more metaphysical set of ideas, we still tend to think in these terms. They are useful as a way of describing states of mind that develop in all of us in our attempts to deal with the world. When I write that psychoanalytic psychotherapists have particularly savage superegos therefore I refer to the extent to which they have a strict set of rules of conduct encoded throughout their training regarding their clinical behavior. Any deviations from these rules, overt deviations call forth extreme responses of censure,
while it is still recognised that in day-to-day practice, technique requires flexibility
in practice.

Historically self-disclosure has not been considered psychoanalytic. In the past to self disclose was to work as a maverick in non-psychoanalytic ways. Self-disclosure was once tantamount to heresy. Freud ‘while personally quite open and spontaneous with patients…forcefully and decisively established the rules of psychoanalytic anonymity and abstinence.’iii According to Freud, ‘the doctor should be opaque to his patients and like a mirror, show them nothing but what is shown to him.’iv Freud initially developed these rules in response to his analysand, Sandor Ferenzi’s insistence on greater mutuality in treatment. However, over time others have explored the possibility of technical self-disclosure, but little had been written that ‘systematically explored technical considerations of the principles of self-disclosure.’v Therefore it is difficult for analysts today to suspend their adherence to Freud’s strict rules about the analyst as mirror and to consider other perspectives.

Most of the literature about self-disclosure focuses on self-disclosure within the consulting room, and whether or not it can be considered therapeutic. Apart from the analyst, Sophia Richman’s work on what happens when the analyst writes a memoir, which I discuss in the third section of my paper, there has been little written on the topic of self-disclosure outside of the consulting room. At the same time there have been several psychoanalysts who have written autobiographically while still in practice about their own traumatic experiences. As yet I have not found such memoir writing to include details of childhood incest, which has proved a significant dimension in the debate over my so-called therapist self-disclosure. Not only had I self-disclosed but the nature of my self-disclosure, namely the fact of a history of sexual abuse across generations within my family, aroused such intense feelings.
Either I was considered very brave to raise the subject much in need of discussion or I showed a serious defect in character. I must have been insufficiently analysed and still in need of therapy. As one colleague wrote in her letter of ‘concern’, my paper could be seen as ‘a cry for help’.

There have been significant shifts over the last century in relation to ‘Telling Incest’ particularly from the late 1970s when feminists proclaimed that ‘incest is not a taboo, speaking about it is’. In the present, there are concerns about the activities of television presenters like Oprah Winfrey and celebrity literature that suggest ‘maybe incest is talked about too much’. In talking about incest too much, there is the danger that its significance is downplayed. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges argue that incest narratives are formed under conditions of uncertainty not only about ‘what happened’ but also in the light of ‘who will listen’. Thereby incest narratives ‘inspire particular forms of resistance or acknowledgement’.

Doane and Hodges suggest that it may well derive from ‘the persistence of the belief that incest is something that happens to other people – them’. Traditionally the pervasive belief has been that only the poor, racial minorities, the disenfranchised suffer under the weight of incest. Not ‘us’. It seems that a similar unspoken view might exist within the professional psychoanalytic psychotherapy community as well. The ones who suffer incest are our patients, not the therapists. As Doane and Hodges observe, ‘Fantasized moral havens provide a sense of order and safety for their inhabitants, that is, for most of us.’ Therapists who hide behind a façade of normalcy may be particularly prone to such wishful thinking.
In relation to incest stories, Doane and Hodges reflect on the difficulties of ‘finding a workable framework for telling’, in order that those who report their experience of incest might ‘gain the attention of a sympathetic audience’. Also that they might ‘avoid retaliation’, and as well might find a way around the ‘debasing persona associated with the tellers: the liar, the seducer, the hysteric, the victim.’ix In my case as witness to sexual, abuse I add the descriptor, ‘whistle blower’.

As Eviatar Zerubavel who writes about the nature of conspiracies of silence, argues, whistle blowers ‘disturb our cognitive tranquillity’ by bringing to light matters we would prefer remain hidden.x There is a significant gap between what Doane and Hodges describe as ‘thoughtful and carefully crafted memoirs and their representation by certain critics as self pitying and naïve victim stories’.xi Similarly, my colleague who wrote the first critical email about my presentation spoke about my writing as merely asking for empathy.

The history of psychoanalysis is riddled with incestuous events. To talk about incest in my own family seems to have stirred up anxiety about the taboo. The same anxieties as David Marr considers in relation to the recent furore in Australia over the Henson photographs of children. Do they constitute pornography or art?

When panic arrives, facts don’t count. Complexity disappears. All slopes are slippery. The only scenario is the worst-case scenario. And everyone has a high old time except the victims.xii

My American colleague Sophia Richman suggests that I examine my conscience as regards my responsibility in this affair. In a recent email she writes:

*What may be more relevant than the autobiographical material and the act of self-disclosure is the subtle interaction between you and the audience at the presentation.*
In the spirit of relationality is it possible that knowing your audience, you anticipated a potentially critical response and communicated it? Your plea for empathy may have actually stirred up the opposite in some of those members of the audience who had been detractors of yours. I'm reminded of a mother at her daughter's birthday party who warned "please don't make trouble today of all days" and of course the daughter took her cue and became what the mother expected of her. Given the fact that this group and its ethos is something that you must be familiar with after so many years of affiliation, it's hard to imagine that you were so surprised by the response of at least some of the more rigid in the group. What some perceived as courage others probably interpreted as defiance of convention. Then group-think took over and the witch-hunt began.xiii

The sociologist, Avery Gordon, is interested in ‘the things behind the things…the things that haunt us’.xiv I cannot ponder too long on the belief that my simple exercise of writing autobiographically, my self-exposure, or my exposure of the incestuous nature of my family of origin are the only elements at work here. Given that the history of psychoanalysis is studded with countless examples of boundary violations – at the extreme end, violations that constitute incest, the therapist in loco parentis – then likewise my professional association, metaphorically-speaking my ‘professional family’, might harbour such conspiracies of silence as a protective manoeuvre. I bear witness to both personal and professional abuse and as such I have spoken the unspeakable and must be punished. Richman’s thoughts bear consideration. At one level I brought it on myself.

When I suggest that the incest that occurred in my family of origin is akin to the incest that occurred within my professional family and explore with some degree
of uncertainty what these things might mean, I unsettle my audience. The haunting here has much to do with my personal history, the history of incest within my family, of secrets and of unresolved trauma.

According to Gordon ‘The layers of institutional memory and amnesia run deep in psychoanalysis.’xv Here she alludes to Freud’s difficulties for instance in dealing with ??? ???. Gustav Jung’s affair with his patient who later became a psychoanalyst, Sabina Spielrein.xvi Gordon argues that Freud was afraid of what he saw, hence his change of heart about the degree to which incest had occurred, rather than as a function of internal fantasy and desires.xvii

‘Psychoanalysis needs a way of grappling with what it represses’.xviii My presentation has stirred up one such haunting. And as Gordon argues we ‘need to reckon with haunting as a prerequisite for sensuous knowledge and to ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts out of a concern for justice.’xix

The colleague who wrote the first email complaining of my presentation used the word, ‘stealth’. He believed that I had snuck up on my audience. ‘It is one thing,’ he wrote, ‘to go out and buy an autobiographical book, looking at the cover and bb [sic] before buying , .... and quite another to go a professional seminar with no forewarning to hear a therapist describe [sic] in detail her own highly dysfunctional [sic] incestuous family of origin and wanting our empathy. It is supposed to be a PD event not a therapy session for the presenter.’

Academic presentations are performative. Performances can upset people. People feel tricked.xx I had written in my abstract that I would use autobiographical material to make certain points about narcissism and autobiography and the difficulties for a therapist who writes autobiographically, but I did not clarify the nature of the autobiographical vignette. And although I had foreshadowed a
discussion of incest within the text, it is only in retrospect that an average reader might notice this. In this sense I defied the usual academic conventions, the convention of saying up front what I will speak about and then saying it. It seems that some people want to know in advance, so that they can nod off, perhaps. There should be no surprises. The unwary listener can then listen only half attentively without disturbance. Whereas my paper may have kept my audience awake, kept them on edge. It made the audience pay attention and some have resented this; especially as my presentation took place at the last ‘celebratory’ meeting for the year.

‘It was untimely,’ one colleague said later. ‘You should have forewarned people, the way they do on the radio when bad language is used. It was meant to be light hearted and people were overwhelmed. They felt attacked.’

It occurred to me immediately before my presentation, as I watched people fill their glasses with champagne that they seemed a jolly lot, convivial and cheerful, ready for fun, and I had worried then that the seriousness of my paper might dampen their spirits. As my first detractor wrote, my presentation at the end of the year was meant to be a ‘family friendly ‘ event. Members were invited to bring along their spouses. People may also have felt twice deceived in so far as within my short autobiographical vignette I spoke first about my grandfather’s imprisonment on charges of sexual abuse. Then I theorised about the nature of conspiracies of silence and finally introduced the topic of the incest that occurred within my own family of origin. Thereby I brought the experience into the room.

In the second reference to familial incest in my paper I had quoted from a letter I once wrote to an aunt in Switzerland in which I had asked her to tell me something of her story as my father’s sister. My aunt wrote in her reply that she did not want to speak about her experience and instead urged me to forget about the past.
She asked in German why I insisted on poking around in the past, using the word *wuhlen*.

German speakers would most likely be aware that the word *wuhlen* holds connotations not only of seeking, searching, or digging up, it also suggests some sort of mess making in the process. It is akin to rifling through a suitcase in search of something, pulling everything out and leaving nothing in its original order. The *wuhl* mouse is one that digs multiple tunnels below the surface, for other animals to use. Unlike the English mole, its actions although clearly purposeful to itself, are not so clear to others. To others, to people, the *wuhl* mouse is simply a pest.

Hence my paper may have aroused the type of indignation some people feel when their world has been upset and unsettled. As Don Watson writes in his book *On Indignation*, indignation derives from God. ‘God being first in everything is fundamental…how dare you…One is to obey his comments, the whole ten of them, seven of which begin with thou shalt not’\(^{xxi}\).

I have broken rules. Paul John Eakin cites three of them in relation to the autobiographical act, the rules for self-narration as ‘Telling the truth, respecting privacy, and displaying normalcy’\(^{xxii}\). Eakin approaches autobiography ‘not as a literary genre but instead as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation’\(^{xxiii}\). To his list of rules I therefore add a fourth, that of respect for context and audience. Richman wrote to me that the criticisms that had been levelled against her following the publication of her memoir were never so harsh; (except those from one psychoanalytic group in Britain) perhaps, she writes, because her memoir deals with about her experience of the holocaust. It is not politically correct to criticise holocaust survivors, she wrote. Incest is a different matter. It is too close to home, too ‘raw and unprocessed’.
When I was still a child, some thirteen years of age, I sat at the kitchen table in the dining section of our living room in Cheltenham. My back was to the body of the kitchen. When I turned my head I could see into the lounge room, and the bend of my father’s leg as he sat smoking and drinking in front of the television. Smoke curled around the room from his cigarettes. My father’s voice was a drone against the voices on the television as if everyone were talking at once. Although I could not see her, I imagined my mother sitting in the chair opposite my father doing her best to screen him out.

My mother’s voice sounded as though she were trying to ignore his impossible questions and rhetorical demands, namely that she was a good woman and would go to heaven along with her glorious children. Instead she asked whether my father might like a cup of tea.

‘A cup of tea, a cup of slops,’ my father said. It is understandable that my mother’s comments to my father fell far from the mark. It was best to skirt around my father, to avoid all direct statements and behave as though nothing were wrong.

I hid my pink note pad between the pages of textbook, and took it out only to write down my father’s words verbatim. I wrote fast like a Hansard reporter. I was recording this moment for posterity. One day I would show my father’s words to others and they would see that he was mad. His thoughts were mad. The words he used popped up from nowhere, from the depths of his deranged mind, sodden with alcohol and grief. They had no beginning or middle or end but we were forced to listen to them night after night. My mother did not intervene. She was even more terrified than we, her children. And so like her, we tried to go on with our lives as if
my father were not there, despite knowing that the more we ignored him the more enraged he became.

These days when I write I do so with the same intensity as if I am taking notes on my father’s madness and I must record it all for posterity. I do not need to transcribe the meaning. I hope readers will discern this for themselves. The ravings of a mad man are the words of someone whose words are not to be trusted. The difficulty then as I write emerges in the degree to which I identify myself not only as the one who transcribes the madman’s words, but at the same time as the one who identifies with this madman whose words I transcribe. My father/myself.

I am the mad scribe, the one who insists on taking down the words verbatim and then passing them on to my audience. Is this true? Is this what happened when I presented my work to my colleagues in December 2008, as some complained later, that I had abused them with my presentation, that I had dropped this ‘shocking’ information on my audience unbidden. They had not asked to hear these things. They had not chosen to read my words as if they were the words from a book they had selected in a bookstore. I had foisted my words upon them like so many missiles and they could not help but feel helpless at the strength of my words.

An experience such as this forces the writer and presenter to question her motives. I did not see it coming. I had anticipated a strong response, but I did not expect the tidal wave that has since threatened to engulf us.

In a discussion at the New York Philoctetes Center entitled, Opening Pandora’s Box: From Ancient Sacrifice to Family Secrets, the writer Kathryn Harrison talked about the repercussions of her revelation of a family secret: her incestuous involvement with her father when she was in her early twenties. Harrison’s memoir, *The Kiss* was first published in 1997, and elicited a polarized and
extreme response. There were those who admired its beauty, clarity and honesty, while there were other reviewers, like James Wolcott, who were vitriolic in their reception of the book. Wolcott’s review ‘Dating your Dad’ ends with the words, ‘shut up’.

Harrison’s memoir details among other things a heartbreaking story of parental disaffection; an absent mother and a father who only came onto the scene when Harrison was in her late teens and promptly fell in love with her. Harrison could not resist his affections then and the two had an affair. Wolcott is unsympathetic to her plight but more than this he is appalled that Harrison has elected years later to write about the experience, in full view of the public, Harrison is a respected and well known novelist in America; her beautifully written memoir reflects her ability as a writer. Wolcott’s review is acerbic and in some ways says more about Wolcott than Harrison. But he is not alone. For many it is safer to keep things at a distance. Harrison also was surprised by the amount of anger called down on her and now agrees with the feminists of the 1970s that ‘the taboo against incest is really much more of speaking about incest.’

I am not alone in finding Wolcott bigoted and cruel, though there are clearly many who enjoy his writing, his irony bordering on cynicism, full of American idiom and slang. It is almost another language, thin, one dimensional and negative. The bad publicity may well have promoted Harrison’s book, but the attacks on her integrity as a mother who it was argued should have protected her children from the knowledge of her ‘affair’ with her father is reminiscent of the way my integrity as a therapist has been questioned within my own association.

Why did I not anticipate the strength of my audience’s response? In the paper, I talk about the possibility of judgmental countertransference responses to the
reading of autobiography in my paper. I talk about the pressure from people who
might wish that certain things remained unspoken. I talk about the public’s and
certain critic’s responses to Harrison’s memoir – that she was told ‘to shut up’ about
the incest that had occurred between her adult self and her father. I talk about the
need for empathy while reading autobiography, the need to consider our
countertransference responses and not to become judgmental. I talk about the
dangers of conspiracies of silence. None of this deterred certain members of my
audience from doing the very thing I had warned against. But as the literary critic,
Kay Torney Souter, writes, we all are ‘helpless bit players in a toxic cultural
emotional mix’ xxv

In retrospect, as a writer and presenter of autobiography, as a psychotherapist
and one who bears witness to incest, this polarisation of response from my
professional association may well have been(anticipated?) inevitable. (I’m not sure
inevitable is what you’re wanting to say . . .???? It can serve as a reflection of a
broader societal response to those events in the world that alarm us. When our
writing breaches that which is taboo, we bring together the sacred and the forbidden,
the ‘fascinating and the repellent’, an emotional conflation that is often met with
indignation and disgust. xxvi The impulse then is to shoot the messenger, while
everyone else ducks for cover.


iii Aron, 1996, p. 221.


vii Doane and Hodges, 2001, p. 2.

viii Doane and Hodges, 2001, p. 2.

ix Doane and Hodges, 2001, p. 2.


xi Doane and Hodges, 2001, p. 2.


xiii Sophia Richman, personal correspondence, January 2009


xv Gordon, p. 55.

xvi Gordon, 2008, p. 56.

xvii Gordon, 2008, p. 56.

xviii Gordon, 2008, p. 56.

xix Gordon, 2008, p. 60.

xx I owe these reflections to lengthy discussions with Klaus Neumann, historian, Institute for social development, Swinburne University.


xxiv ‘Opening Pandora’s Box: From ancient sacrifice to family secrets’.

The Philoctetes Center, New York.
