

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF LEAVING AN ABUSIVE PARTNER
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to build an understanding of women's experience of ending a relationship with a physically abusive partner. An experiential process of disengagement is emphasized with attention to critical incidents of leave-taking and the context in which these occur.

Data were collected in approximately seven hours of informal and unstructured interviews with each of three women who had been abused by their former partners. Data analysis, aimed at describing and exploring the meaning of critical incidents and emergent themes in each women's experience of leave-taking, is guided by methods established by Collaizi(1978), Spradley(1980) and van Manen(1984).

Each woman's experience of decision-making, of separating and of recovery is described in her own words. Each story is woven around a single dominant theme which best describes the essence of her experience. The meaning each woman attributes to her experience is also explored. Experiences of the three women are compared and contrasted within a framework of decision-making.

Leave-taking is seen to be a complex process with numerous levels. Leaving occurs prior to a woman's ending her relationship and continues long after that event.

Initially, none of the participants claimed to have made a decision to leave their partners. However, each woman had made several decisions about survival. All three women contrast images of life and death: freedom and bondage. Their choices were described in those terms. Future planning was not a part of the decision-process. Participants expressed past difficulty with decision-making, which can be partially attributed to depression.

Central themes in a process of disengagement revolved around the issues of "responsibility", "selfishness" and "hope." A shift was made from selfishness to self-interest, responsibility for her partner's behaviour to responsibility for self and/or children, and from hope for a better future to hopelessness about the present continuing in the same way. All three women spoke of the necessity of living in accordance with their values which they saw to be incompatible with their partner's. Religious beliefs were of significance for two of the participants.

Significant events of decision-making and leaving were seen to have a physical component. Participants

described felt experiences of disengaging from their partners.

There were several critical incidents of leave-taking for each woman. One common critical incident involved having a sexual encounter with someone other than a partner. Another common theme was "fighting back" in a new and significant manner. These women gained a sense of personal power in discovering a capacity for physical aggression.

Implications are discussed for counsellors and for researchers of counselling.

Examiners;

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DEDICATION

To Diane, of whom I have asked, "Why didn't you leave sooner?" in appreciation of her courage in doing so at all.

For every woman breaking chains and the people and events which hasten liberation for men and women alike.

PREFACE

When one is directly confronted by the suffering of another human being, something in one's soul changes forever. From that time laughter and crying take on a different meaning (Thomas Cottle, Private Lives and Public Accounts).

ESTABLISHING THE GROUND FOR THE QUESTION

Introduction

Canadians, who have the image of being keepers of peace, are a nation of wife beaters. ("Moving On", N.F.B., 1986)

In my first year of counselling in a family agency I became aware of the high incidence of physical abuse experienced by women their intimate relationships - one woman in every ten - and how often some degree of abuse is simply taken for granted.

A "typical" battered woman might make her first counselling appointment after a violent incident, sometimes expressing a need to make a decision about whether to leave her partner. Usually, a battered woman's goal is to end her partner's abuse. She may seek more information and strategies for changing that "**something** I'm not doing right." She may want confirmation that she is not "crazy." Even when help-seeking is prompted by a recent violent episode, her partner's abuse is not likely to be presented as her primary concern. Indeed, she may not mention it at all. Initially, this hypothetical client probably does not think of herself as a "battered woman," nor of her partner as a bat-

terer(see Appendix A for definitions). A "typical" Canadian battered woman is beaten, on the average, thirty-five times before she calls the police for help. If she tells anyone about the abuse, it is most likely to be a family member or friend.

According to Walker (1984), one-quarter of women interviewed had temporarily left immediately after each violent incident, although not necessarily the same women each time.

Helping professionals are often puzzled and frequently frustrated by this pattern and have difficulty providing on-going support. A review of the literature indicates that a relationship in which violence has occurred is unlikely to become less violent. Even with counselling intervention when both parties are present, the violence cannot be said to decrease in either frequency or intensity over the long-term (Walker,1984). Separation may be the woman's best strategy for ending the cycle of violence. Ironically, a battered woman may fear that disengaging from her partner will increase the threat of retaliation, regardless of the fact that it might increase her chance of survival.

Very little is known about what enables women to develop the strength to leave an abusive man and to create a life that is satisfying. Theoretically, women who leave and stay away should have the opposite characteristics of those who continue the relationship, ... but it isn't necessarily so. Many women leave **in spite of** continuing feelings of emotional dependency and love, and in spite of poverty, isolation and traditional values (NiCarthy, 1982, p.245).

Impetus for the Study

I made the decision to consider research on the topic of battered women in response to the suggestion of my counselling practicum supervisor, who, in hearing me speak about a number of abused female clients with whom I was working, wondered aloud at why battered women stay with their abusive partners. The swiftness and force of my response led me to believe it merited more exploration: I retorted, "I'm more interested in how they leave."

I chose this topic to enable me to better understand clients' struggles with leaving their partners. I assumed that learning more about experiences of battered women who leave could help me facilitate a decision-making process.

I knew that many of my female clients would likely seek help for symptoms of abuse. Knowing the power of isolation, I wanted these women to leave my office feeling they had found someone to help unburden them of their secret shame.

My next female client could well be a battered woman. I could no longer ask the initial questions in the same way. "How do they leave?" was becoming more important. I believed there was something new to be learned for all of us.

Background

Why Women Stay

Without knowing how oppression occurs we cannot possibly know why it occurs; and without knowing how and why it occurs we cannot find out how to avoid its occurrence, how it is that liberation might be achieved (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p.167).

To date, research on battered women has focused on oppression - how and why it occurs: how and why women remain with abusive partners. It has been assumed that once we, as helping professionals and researchers, have a more complete understanding of barriers to leaving an abusive relationship, we will have a better understanding about how to "get free." Whether or not this is accurate - that liberation is oppression turned upside down - remains to be seen.

Many researchers, like battered women themselves, are inclined to place emphasis on personal deficiencies "causing" women to stay with abusive men. The framework of addiction has gained popularity in the area of abusive relationships. Erin Pizzey's most recent and controversial book (1982) takes the extreme of this perspective. Another book more favoured by helping professionals and popular among a general public, Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll Change (Norwood, 1986), describes dependent love as an addiction and outlines a ten-step "road to recovery." Ironically, the message of the book could foster a

tendency, common among abused women, to attempt "healing" another by changing oneself.

While some researchers focus on a lack in personal, psychological resources of battered women and seek a solution there, others emphasize the importance of developing more tangible resources. For example, battered women are often without money, a means of transportation, and a job - essentially financially dependent. Fear of poverty or a greatly reduced standard of living is one reason women stay with abusive partners. If there are children, women often take custody, adding to their financial burden. Child support, if paid at all, is often insufficient to cover expenses. Even a woman with a well-paying job may suffer substantial loss of income when she leaves her partner.

Painter and Dutton (1985) state that women choose to return to abusive partners in spite of "adequate resources" to leave.

Sometimes although "subjective" or "external" power bases are quite equal, a subjective imbalance in perceived power on the part of the submissive party exists (p.365).

The researchers propose a "social psychological" explanation for a battered woman returning to her abusive partner beginning with the observation of a strong emotional tie. "Traumatic bonding" results from "the development and course of strong emotional ties between two persons when one person

intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other" (Painter and Dutton, 1985, p.364). The two structural features of traumatic bonding are an unequal power relationship and intermittent positive reinforcement.

The subjects of Dutton and Painter's study were twelve women who had left abusive partners and were staying at a shelter. It is not known how many of these women, if any, stayed apart from their partners. No follow-up interviews were conducted. This missed research opportunity is a glaring omission in light of the authors' call to research how women leave and how they deal with the trauma of being beaten. Furthermore, it is stated that women choose to return to abusive partners in spite of "adequate resources" to leave which suggests that their powerlessness is a perceived, rather than actual, barrier. The difference in emphasis has important implications for social policy decisions.

Researchers and helping professionals, sometimes as isolated as the battered women they study, can tend to overlook the context in which the decision is made. An abused woman's exploration of alternatives not only brings her face to face with her hopes and fears about intimate relationships, opens her to others' conditioned beliefs and prejudices, but often brings her into contact with a number of institutions.

Few of these institutions are "user friendly". A battered woman may experience further isolation and abuse in the criminal justice system where there is a tendency to blame the "victim".

Women who complain about men's intimidating, threatening, or violent behaviour report that they feel twice assaulted. It is the police officer, the prosecutor, the judge, the defence attorney, the jury, the social worker, the personnel officer, or the union official, who acts as the second assailant. Those very stereotypes which contribute to women's own silence about men's behaviour are found in the reactions of those to whom women complain, externally imposing silence about the effects of men's behaviour on women's lives. (Stanko, 1985, p.81).

How Women Leave


Literature which deals directly with the subject of battered women leaving abusive partners is primarily of the "how to" variety. Getting Free : A Handbook for Women in Abusive Relationships (NiCarthy, 1982), is the best of these. This guide to decision-making includes practical exercises aimed at clarifying values, establishing pros and cons of leaving, identifying beliefs about love and fears about leaving and exploring personal identity. In addition, there is a chapter of stories and advice from women who "got away."

In order to get first-hand descriptions of what it's like to break away from a violent man, to stay away, and to discover a new of life as a single person, I asked nine women to tell me their stories. They answered my questions about their

feelings and relationships before, during and after their involvement with the man (NiCarthy, 1982, p.245).

The resulting descriptions are short, sketchy and anecdotal. There is more emphasis on advice about leaving than description of decision-making processes, experiences of leaving and meaning for the women involved. NiCarthy does not conduct a thematic analysis of the interviews. In sum, this brief chapter based on nine cases appears to have been written with the aim of offering practical guidelines for problem-solving rather than of exploring experiences of "getting free."

A subsequent guide to running groups for abused women (NiCarthy, Merriam and Coffman, 1984), is informed by, but does not include, the "experiences, wisdom, strength and knowledge" of women who attended mutual support groups lead by the authors. Another informative resource for women deciding whether or not to leave abusive partners is by Triere (1982). Although the author does not deal directly with issues specific to battering, she provides more depth in terms of women's personal experiences of marital separation. Several autobiographical accounts of leaving an unsatisfactory relationship are also available. (See Fibush and Morgan, 1977; Rogers, 1980; Willison, 1980.) Although none of the authors mention physical abuse by partners, some of their



experiences might be familiar to battered women. At present, there are no known published studies which attempt to build an understanding of experiences in leaving an abusive partner.

Deciding to "Quit"

In a society that values action, says Dauten (1980), "quitting" a relationship is seen as a mistake instead of a means of correcting one. Hope for a more satisfying relationship is one common barrier to leaving. Dauten identified several "paradoxes of inaction" based on his research with men and women who "quit" unsatisfying relationships. One of the "surprises" of his research was "how vital a role hopelessness plays in bringing about constructive change."(p.8).

Together, hope and fear combine to deny a vision of a better future. Hope offers some wan possibility of improvement without change; fear denies the possibility of positive action (Dauten, 1980, p.8).

Decision-making and Gender

One feminist therapist suggests that many women, unlike many men, have never made an independent decision based solely on what they think and feel. (Williams, 1976, p.35). Decision-making from a woman's point of view may be different from decision-making depicted in current litera-

ture written largely from a male perspective. (Stanko, 1985). For example, when faced with a moral dilemma, women may be inclined to see their choices in a different light than men by virtue of their concern and caring for others. (Gilligan, 1982). This conditioned "virtue" of placing the welfare of others before one's own can immobilize a woman in crisis.

Decision in an Abusive Relationship

Battered women living with controlling men are often unaccustomed to making key decisions. As well, a woman living under stressful conditions can not be certain of depending on her natural mode of decision-making. Both judgement and perception are likely to be impaired.

What starts out to be a search for an answer becomes a questioning of the very process you are using to get there. The neat and orderly workings of the mind can become a house of distorting mirrors (Triere, 1982, p.25).

Mounting tensions exaggerate emotion and the generally heightened emotional response may undercut trust in experience. As well, the complexity of the situation can seem overwhelming.

Most of my indecision, lack of ability to make a decision, was that everything seemed so insurmountable. I had so many things I was facing, that I couldn't make a decision - I couldn't decide if I wanted to go to the grocery or not. I can remember sitting and pondering that kind of trivial thing and ... well, I didn't know what I wanted. I found myself becoming more and more of a recluse. That

way I didn't have to deal with anything (Triere, 1982 p.26).

For many women who see it as their role to nurture and maintain the relationship, leaving may be seen as an admission of personal failure. (Rogers, 1980).

A fear of being thought 'selfish' is often a considerable barrier to leaving. Often, anger has been diverted into feelings of guilt. Internalizing anger makes one prone to becoming a victim. If frustrations cannot be discharged they may take the form of nervous disorders, depression, ulcers ... (Triere, 1982, p.89).

Rosewater (1982) concluded that it would be easy to misdiagnose battered women as having a serious mental illness if the influence of living and coping with abuse is not accounted for. Naturally, a woman subjected to effective coercion is likely to appear, if not to become, "mentally unstable". The battered woman's seemingly abnormal behaviour is a "normal" response to a life of violence. Violence against women "is so common women would like to take it for granted; instead, we take our fear for granted" (Stanko, 1985, p.70).

Anyone who has been badly knocked about loses all sense of reality and ability to cope. Battered women are almost permanently in a shocked state. The constant fear of another beating leaves them very tense and nervous. Some can't eat, other sleep little. Even the toughest find it hard to fight off depression (Pizzey, 1974, p.41).

A women's depression and resultant immobility might also be related to the unmet expectations of herself, her partner

and the situation. Vacillation - "indecision in action" - is seen by Triere (1982) as a necessary and inevitable part of the process of leaving.

During this time of flux, there is often a strong need to make things right again. If only a few things could be changed, or just patched up, then indecision would give way to conviction. The woman, in her desperate attempt to be free of the quandry, sees the main block as a lack of ingenuity on her part. If she could only hit that magic formula for marriage (Triere, 1982, p.33).

Just as she has given up hope for change, a battered woman may face the "magic" reappearance of her partner on his best behaviour.

In a few sentences he can trigger the woman's addictive love, her guilt, her concern for him, her feeling that she's responsible his life and feelings, her hopefulness, her idea that she should be a trusting, nurturing, forgiving woman, and that it would be wrong not to give him another chance, wrong to turn her back on him just as he's finally really ready to change ... She packs her bags. The cycle begins again (NiCarthy, 1982, p.12).

In The Battered Woman, Walker, 1979, outlined her theory about a cycle of violence. Three distinct phases of the recurring cycle are, (1) tension building, (2) acute battering and (3) loving contrition. In the third phase the batterer may be apologetic, remorseful, even kind and generous. This "honeymoon phase" reinforces her hope for change. Phase three can also be characterized by a lack of tension without loving-contrition, which can be sufficiently reinforcing for

the woman. However, the tensions characteristic of the first phase soon escalate. At this point, a battered woman attempts, sometimes successfully, to placate the man and is reinforced in a belief that she is able to control the abuse. Finally, she may become exhausted with the effort and withdraw from the batterer. The second phase of acute battering can happen in response to this withdrawal. At other times, "she precipitates the inevitable explosion so as to control where and when it occurs, allowing her to take better precautions to minimize her injuries and pain" (Walker, 1984, p.96).

A parallel has been drawn between the methods and effects of coercion and of battering males and the effects on battered women. The following is derived from Biderman's description of coercion. (NiCarthy et al, 1984). From the outset, isolation serves to deprive the "victim" of social support for the ability to resist. In isolation, she becomes dependent upon the abuser. It becomes natural for the woman to fix her attention upon her immediate and unpredictable situation. Her "captor" thereby monopolizes her attention.

Battering effectively disrupts ability to think clearly. The battered woman begins to doubt the validity of her perceptions. She may be too caught up in the daily mechanics of survival to consider alternatives, if she believes herself

to have any. Her abuser's occasional indulgences provide positive motivation for continued compliance, while ongoing threats contribute to her anxiety and despair. When he demonstrates his "omnipotence" she gets the message that to resist would be futile. It might appear that her self-esteem would be damaged more by resistance than capitulation. Such degradation reduces the woman to minimal survival concerns.

Some researchers suggest that a woman "survives" in an abusive relationship by developing a syndrome called "learned helplessness." (Seligman, 1978). A battered woman "learns" that her response to the situation will not affect it. This expectation may, or may not, be accurate. However, it is her expectation of how much power she possesses which is considered to be the crucial element. Once a woman learns of her helplessness to alter her situation (including her partner's behaviour), she gives up attempting to exert control. A battered woman seeing hopelessness in her situation tends not to see or believe that there are any alternatives. She comes to perceive herself as trapped in a relationship from which there is no escape. Likewise, the animal subjects of Seligman's experiments did not leave when the doors of their cages were finally opened. It is hypothesized that the same mechanism may be working with battered women who focus

on surviving the relationship instead of escaping from it. (Morgan, 1982; Walker, 1984).

When researchers consider what stops many women from leaving abusive partners, fear is a common theme. Martin, 1975, states that a battered woman is trapped by her fear of reprisal from her partner, fear of being stigmatized by family and friends, and fear of facing an unknown world. Whereas many of her fears may be based on a realistic assessment of what she faces if she leaves, the battering experience leaves her doubting what personal strength she might muster and reinforces her sense of isolation.

The Questions

Earlier it was suggested that women who decide to separate from and leave abusive partners are likely to be those who cultivate qualities lacking in women who stay. This assumption may prove to be simplistic or wholly inaccurate. An alternative perspective could focus on strengths enabling women to leave abusive partners. Thus, a first research question becomes - what kinds of personal psychological resources and other more tangible resources foster the process of leaving? Secondly - what kinds of events contribute to leave-taking?

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is two-fold. It is, firstly, to develop a description of the process by which each of three women made decisions to end relationships with their abusive partners and how they carried through in "leaving." It is, secondly, to seek an understanding of the structure of the experiences as given and the meaning attributed to them and emergent from them. It is not intended to translate these womens' experiences into specific counselling practices for battered women in general.

Insofar as the cornerstone of counselling practice is the ability to enter into the life world of another, then perhaps this account will make a contribution.

A WAY TO UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCE

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

There are at least two possible directions in which theoretical work can proceed. The first is to **go beyond** the personal, into structural and more abstract work which develops these themes in the more conventionally theoretical forms. ... The second is to **go back into** the personal, back into the **experience** of it. (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p.68).

Phenomenological inquiry is concerned with going back into the subjective in order to explicate exactly what this experience is. According to Colaizzi (1978), phenomenology involves such an "objective and respectful listening to what the phenomena speaks of itself.(p.52). It is the study of experience of the life-world - the world as we immediately experience it rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it. (van Manen, 1984). The personal, the unique and the individual is pursued against the background of the whole. It is not considered enough to simply recall experiences of others with respect to a particular phenomenon. The goal remains oriented toward constructing a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience. In other words, the goal of phenomenology is to come

to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience. (van Manen, 1984, p.24). This focus is vital in terms of developing an understanding of the complexities and contradictions of experience.

We gather other people's experiences because it allows us, in a vicarious sort of way, to become more experienced ourselves ... it allows us to become 'informed,' shaped or enriched by this experience so as to better be able to render the full significance of its meaning (van Manen, 1984, p.26).

Van Manen describes phenomenology as a "caring attunement" which enables us to act responsively toward others.(p.2).

Method and Subject of Inquiry

Phenomenological inquiry is congruent with the practice of counselling in which it is crucial to be able to listen without imposing meaning and to facilitate the client in revealing the meaning of his/her experience. For women working with other women and "assisting in women's survival, by far the most important and perhaps the most difficult task is for us to learn the art of listening, and listening from women's experiential base." (Stanko, p.162). Stanley and Wise, 1983, would have researchers listen particularly to women's experiences of being oppressed. "This is research to which a more phenomenologically based approach is ideally

suites." (p.172). The subject of women's experiences in ending relationships with abusing partners deals with an extreme form of oppression. However, commonalities in experiences of "liberating" oneself may be found regardless of the degree of violence experienced.

A phenomenological description of leaving an abusive partner was compiled from a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with three formerly battered women.

Researching the Meaning of Experience

Determining the Focus of the Study

The focus of this study was revised and elaborated several times in the process of writing the research proposal. Initially, the title referred to leaving an abusive relationship and was revised to abusive partner. This change reflected a shift in theoretical perspective. I wanted to place the onus for violent behaviour on the male and to clarify that the relationship, not simply the abusive aspect of it, had ended. "Leaving", which might suggest a purely physical act, must encompass the emotional and cognitive components and thus could more accurately be referred to as "leave-taking". Experiences of leaving needed to be considered in the context of the relationship with the batterer as well as in the more general cultural and societal contexts.

It was considered that an accumulation of experience results in the final leave-taking. Knowing that battered women have a pattern of leaving several times before making a final break I wanted to focus on how the final leave-taking differed (I assumed it would) from previous attempts (if any). For this purpose, a method including a critical incident technique was an appropriate choice. (Peavy, 1985; Woolsey, 1986).

The critical incident methodology is highly flexible. It can be used to study a wide range of phenomena, for example, relationships, decision-making, self-actualization, vocational choice, and group process (Woolsey, 1986, p.251).

Interview questions focused on concrete and specific incidents which contributed significantly to a woman's leave-taking. A number or progression of such events was anticipated. The intent was not to categorize events but rather to explore the domain of experience in depth and detail.

The Research Journal

The researcher is always and inevitably present in the research. Thus, a first important step in data collection involves the researcher in exploration of her assumptions, expectations and personal biases about the phenomenon under study. The task of the the researcher is to be aware of, describe and suggest the part these play in assembling a

description of experience. (Plummer, 1983). Assumptions can then be brought to the researcher's attention and, to some extent, put aside to make room for the phenomenon as it presents itself. A personal research journal was kept for the purpose of exploring and monitoring my involvement in the research project.

For many, listening to tales of abuse, violence and terror are very difficult. These tales unlock our own fears, remind us of our own potentially violent or violent experiences, and at times make us feel as vulnerable as the woman herself. Becoming a good listener means that we must not block out what has happened to us. It means being empathetic, putting oneself in women's place as **women**. For many of us that also means seeing our experiences in a different light (Stanko, 1985, p.162).

The journal served as an outlet for my emotional reactions to the stories I was reading and hearing. It was a place for brainstorming ideas. In addition, I was able to document steps in researching and shifts in my thinking over the course of the study.

The Women

Five women were contacted about participating in this study. Three women were interviewed. Two women, who agreed to be interviewed, were not available for the required time. One woman lived out of province and the second was not able to schedule interviews in advance or for more than one hour in length. She was engaged in a child custody lawsuit with

her former partner. This woman, who was under mounting stress as the trial approached, did not intend to include information about physical abuse in her testimony and feared retaliation if she divulged their "secret." I did not pursue a first interview when her reluctance became clear to me. Two participants consented to being introduced through mutual contacts - a counsellor and a transition house worker. A third, formerly a participant in a women's support group which I co-facilitated, was contacted direct. All three fit the criteria described below.

One criterion for participation was that each woman have been separated from her former partner (not necessarily a husband), for a minimal period of approximately one year. This time period was chosen on the basis of informal discussion with several separated women who identified one year as a significant time post-separation and because I wanted to decrease the likelihood of interviewing women who would return to their former partners. It had also become evident that "leaving" an abusive partner involves a lengthy psychological process following physical leaving. I excluded women who might be in crisis, such as the woman mentioned above, because of the potential risk to the woman herself and because I didn't want to focus on experience as recalled in a state of acute grieving.

Another criterion for involvement was articulateness in expressing thoughts and feelings about the experience of leave-taking. Collaizzi (1978), in speaking of criteria for selecting participants, states; "Experience with the investigated topic and articulateness will suffice." Some ability to be reflective, that is, "insightful" was also assumed necessary. (Schwartz and Jacobs,1979).

Initially, I had hoped to interview women who had kept a journal or some other form of personal document at the time of decision-making, leaving and for some time following separation. I assumed that this information could provide a trigger for further elaboration and a check on information given. One of the two women who did not participant in the study had kept a journal and was willing to share it; however, I considered that other journal-keeping participants would be difficult to find. Women who are in abusive relationships, even journal-keepers, often stop this activity finding their lives too unpredictable, their thoughts too disordered, and their privacy diminished. It was considered that without a prior trusting relationship, women would be uncomfortable about having their writings subjected to the scrutiny of a researcher.

Elizabeth, known through a woman's support group, was approached about participating in this study. Elizabeth,

born in Montreal, is now in her late thirties. As a child she was physically and emotionally abused by her father. She does not remember seeing her mother beaten but recalls emotional battering. Elizabeth met Ralph when she was fifteen, her first boyfriend, and married him when she was twenty-one. They were married for fifteen years and have two teen-aged children. She has been separated from him for almost three years. A high school graduate, Elizabeth is employed as a secretary. She is not satisfied with her work and expresses a desire to take courses toward another degree when her children are grown. Elizabeth values her family life highly, taking pride in her home and her ability to support her children, particularly in emotional ways. Although she describes herself as shy and somewhat timid, she did not need to be prompted to speak about her experience with Ralph.

Gabrielle was introduced to me by a friend working in the transition house where Gabrielle sought refuge upon leaving Stan. Gabrielle, who expresses herself verbally with ease and evident pleasure, has been involved in training of volunteers for the shelter. Born in Ireland and now in her early thirties, Gabrielle has two children - one an infant, and the other almost a teen-ager. She had been living with Stan for five years prior to their separation two years ago. She

is currently an art student at a community college. She has begun to write for publication after a long silence and values this part of her life highly. Gabrielle describes herself as content with the life she has created for herself and her children, a marked contrast to the life of her childhood.

Dorothy walked into my house one day as the guest of a mutual friend with whom she had spoken about her relationship with George. Our first meeting was close to the one year anniversary of her separation from George and her 30th birthday. Dorothy's relationship with George lasted approximately a year. Dorothy's sense of herself is most deeply connected to being a lawyer. Born in the Prairies, she recalls her childhood goal as having been to leave the small town in which she was born. Her father, who died when Dorothy was a child, is reputed to have abused her mother although Dorothy has no recollection of this. One of her dreams is to become a writer and Dorothy clearly enjoys verbal communication.

The Conversations

Three informal and unstructured interviews were conducted with each woman in the spirit of collaboration. (Oakley, 1981; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). Participants were requested to make a time commitment of eight to ten hours over a

period of approximately two months. As it happened, interview hours totalled seven to eight for each woman and involved three or four interviews. Dorothy requested the fourth interview to describe a dream she considered vital to an understanding of her experience.

An initial meeting, for the purpose of determining the appropriateness of the participant, answering any questions each woman might have, and for signing a consent form, was followed by the interviews. The place of an initial meeting was different from the location of subsequent interviews for two of the women. Each interview lasting approximately two hours, was taped with the interviewee's consent and later transcribed. A final meeting was conducted after the participant had been given an opportunity to read interview transcripts and determine what information, if any, she chose to modify, add or delete.

Conducting Thematic Analysis

The aim of data analysis was to develop an in-depth, detailed, full and reliable description of women's experience of disengaging from abusing partners. Analyzing the thematic content proved to be, as Woolsey states (1986,p.248), "the most difficult and frustrating part of the method." Analysis moreover, arrived at through inductive reasoning, is necessarily subjective. It involves an

element of interpretation which may go beyond what is immediately evident to the person telling the story.

In analyzing the data, I used several frames of reference, guided always by the experiences themselves. As Guba and Lincoln have suggested, the resulting categories of the first sorting are not likely to be the most valid ones. I found myself conducting data analysis by several procedures and several times before reaching a point of certainty about the fit of data with framework used and certainty about having included all relevant information. This latter goal involved a succession of decisions about the specificity and detail of information to be included. I did not want to lose the overview to detail, nor the richness and evocative quality of detail to generality. It was of considerable importance that the context of experience not be lost. I wanted to leave the reader with some room for mental thematic analysis in the recognition that some information would have a different shade of meaning for another person. Nonetheless, I am certain I have identified the succession of incidents considered most significant to the participants themselves.

The following is a description of steps in the thematic analysis conducted.

I was guided by instruction in Spradley(1980) and Guba and Lincoln (in workshop).

Briefly, this includes the following steps:

(1) extracting significant statements, marking central themes, and delimiting meaning units;

(2) clustering themes for individual participants and categorizing them on the basis of the person's emphasis;

(3) developing a general structure of experience for each participant with an emphasis on a single dominant theme.

(4) organizing meaning into clusters of themes for all participants as common themes emerged.

Phenomenological themes are like the knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus experienced as meaningful wholes (van Manen, 1984, p.29).

Writing an Account

In answering the overall research question; "What is the lived experience of leaving an abusive partner really like?" - the words of the women interviewed are highlighted. Phenomenological writing uses language to speak experience rather than speak of it (Van Manen, 1984).

The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language when the description reawakens or shows us the lived meaning or significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner (van Manen, 1984, p.1).

Toward this aim, the researcher and participant collaborated in a final conversation with both reflecting on the significance of preliminary themes which had been identified by the researcher.

Initially, I was adamant about using the participants' words almost exclusively and my own only as necessary bridges. Headings and subheadings are usually in the women's own words and reflect the meaning expressed.

Later, I realized my thesis was true to a qualitative research method (combining case study and critical incident techniques) but was not actually phenomenological. I needed to take the leap of interpreting meaning. Toward this end, several meetings with van Manen proved invaluable. In these same meetings, I became aware of the primary facets of experience which led me to revise the framework for analyzing and reporting experience. The resulting report is existential in orientation - a natural choice for my own counselling philosophy but also most fitting for the perspectives of the women themselves. Leaving was, after all, an experience of existential crisis.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide the interviews. These were at no time asked verbatim.

(1)What was your experience of making a decision to separate and your experience of leaving? (This question was extended to include the process of recovery.)

(2)What meaning did your experience have for you? (Avoid causal explanations or interpretative generalizations.)

(3)What were the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and intentions which accompanied this process? (Focus on particular situations or events.)

(4)Describe your experience of any critical incidents in decision-making and separation.

GABRIELLE: LEAVING AS LIVING THE SECRET LIFE

Meaning of a Secret Life

Secret Life as Essential Identity

Gabrielle's secret life is the core of her being. It is her separate and complete identity. She is "not just the half of somebody else." Who she is as a unique being has to do with her own ideas, dreams, memories and values.

Secret Life is ... my self and all the things that went into the making of it, like the time I spent with two people when I was a child. It's everything that I was made of; my feelings toward other people - my essence.

This (secret life) was a forbidden thing because to have essence identifies you as a separate person. If you are married to a controlling man you only live in reference to his needs. If he finds evidence that you have an essence he's frightened. You have to hide these things so you they won't get destroyed.

Gabrielle's secret life was secret primarily in relation to Stan. She began to hide almost from the beginning of their time together.

When I was first with him I used to share things from my other life (the secret one) and he was so critical I stopped sharing my woman life with him. He thought it was frivolity and stupidity because it wasn't manspeak.

The Language of a Secret Life

Gabrielle distinguishes between "Manspeak" and "Womanspeak", each language depicting a distinct world view. "Manspeak" is the "warlike language of one up, one down and one over." "Womanspeak" is the language of nurturance, particularly in human relationships.

Gabrielle's Secret Life has it's own language expressed most readily in visual art and writing. In conversation Gabrielle often referred to her writing and told her story in relation to it.

I used to write poetry. I had all this poetry in a book that I'd been writing since I was about twenty years old and Stan destroyed it all. He was always on about (how) the insanity of my poetry reflected on what sort of person I was. He thought it was time I changed. After I left I became aware that I had thrown away a part of myself. I realized why he didn't want me to have the poems. That was my identity.

Before meeting Stan, some of Gabrielle's writing had been published. After she began living with him she stopped writing. Finally, she could not even trust herself to speak coherently. Thus, an essential part of her "life" went underground. Her voice was silenced to the point that she sometimes questioned whether her "life" had become a secret, even to herself, or simply been extinguished.

Gabrielle's writing was her way of sustaining, connecting with and taking a reading on her secret life. In making a

decision to leave Stan, she found a written review and a "balance sheet" of the relationship to be helpful. A single remaining poem reminded her of her "lost" identity. In leaving, she "promised" herself to write again. Gabrielle describes the process of recovery as one of finding her voice. During the course of interviews, Gabrielle published a piece of prose. Her secret life was "not so secret anymore." And so, Gabrielle was celebrating recovery as she began retracing steps in leaving Stan.

In the following pages of reconstructed narrative, Gabrielle's story is woven around her dominant theme of living her secret life. This is told, as much as possible, in chronological fashion and almost entirely in her words. Gabrielle's leave-taking involved reclaiming her established and "secret" identity and constructing a new life accordingly. Like the mythical phoenix, her search began "among the embers."

Decision-Making

Carrying the Secret Life: Something Old

Portrait of a Dying Smile

When I first met Gabrielle she showed me a photograph of herself taken while with Stan. She drew attention to the eyes. "Look," she said in other words, "I was hardly alive behind that smile. I keep that picture to remind myself of how I was then and how I've changed."

I'd look at myself and see that my eyes had died. There was nothing left in them, no expression ... A lot of women wear the mask of deadness because it's a protection. They are afraid to be alive, afraid to show it because there are heavy consequences for being a thinking person. All your life has been leading up to wearing the mask of deadness - so many incidences, times that you were harrassed.

Feelings become furrowed in faces. I would think, this is really horrifying to see, to be a witness to - everybody aging and dying ... This is what I'm doing too. I'd look at my face and I'd look desperate, like a mad woman. I wore a lot of make-up to hide the madness, the desperation.

Gabrielle's secret life was alive behind the "dying smile" and the "mask of deadness" yet she believes while living with Stan she was losing both her sanity and a solid sense of self. Gabrielle stated her difficulty in leaving was uncertainty about who she was.

Time Worn Paths

Gabrielle saw herself to be walking an inevitable and time-worn path shared with her mother and her mother before her.

For me, the time worn path is the way your mother was: the way your grandmother was. They always seemed to be bent over from the trouble. Sometimes when I was a kid I used to say to my grandmother, 'What is worrying you?' She would say, 'I'm not going to tell you now cause you'll find out in time enough.' The time worn path is in one way accepting and (in another way) not accepting and having a terrible sadness.

The worst part is seeing yourself turning into something that maybe your mother was or you remember other women looking like.

Gabrielle's secret life was not visible from this time worn path. To the contrary, it concealed rather than revealed her separate identity. Her urgency about moving forward in the search was in sharp contrast to a still picture she painted - generations of unmoving women leaning on their brooms.

Unless you find something new, unless you get some news very fast, then you can't go on. You'll be a destroyed person. The whole system will destroy you (if) you don't find anything to replace it.

Sharing a Secret: Something New

Gabrielle met someone new, "the hippy", who provided companionship. Their sharing begot another aspect of her secret life.

Through times I was moving out and on the run I knew this really strange guy. He was the sort of guy whose appearance frightened people. I wasn't frightened because I was thinking that in all my travels I couldn't meet worse than myself. I started telling him about my poetry and how bad I felt having it all destroyed. He then started telling me about his poetry. We had a lot in common. He was very comforting to me and he was

always on my side. He said, 'You're a very sane person, a very good person, an attractive woman.'

I started going to bed with him. This was really strange for me because I'd been living with a sexually abusive man. I used to call it 'making hate.' (When) I went to bed with this guy it wasn't like that at all. It meant that everybody wasn't the same. It wasn't the normal way to be and I was opposing it.

With the aid of "the hippy", Gabrielle was reclaiming her beliefs, values, hopes and dreams as well as her body. Going to bed with him was a rewarding act of defiance. As well, it seeded new life for Gabrielle.

Creating a Secret Life: Something Borrowed

Gabrielle became pregnant shortly after resuming a sexual relationship with Stan. The baby quickly became her primary concern - the embodiment of her secret life.

I thought to myself, 'I should have a baby because then I'll have a separate belief and a secret life. If I'm pregnant I have a secret life. I have something of my own. I can do what I consider to be best and I can't be questioned. I'm safe.' I thought I would be safe (being) in a vulnerable position with him feeling better.

I had a secret life. I was making a baby by myself, completely by myself. I became obsessed with, 'I want to have a baby right now.' Up until (after) the baby there was nothing else. That was the main thing I had to deal with. Nothing else existed beyond because to do it, just to survive, I had to get through unsurmountable odds.

Gabrielle was not certain who was the father of her child. She was primarily concerned with having support through her pregnancy.

(The hippy) was very unreliable in a lot of ways. He couldn't be depended on - a real space case. He was very emotional, dependent and clung to me. I had nothing to give and the thought of someone clinging to me was more than I could stand so I shut him out.

One day I was walking and there was a cab parking and it was the hippy. I thought, 'He's going to see me' so I left but he chased. He said, 'You're pregnant, aren't you?' I said, 'Don't worry about it.'

Gabrielle saw Stan as more capable of providing needed security. She returned prior to announcing her pregnancy. Later, Stan suggested they marry. Gabrielle relented.

Getting married meant I was saving my ass a little longer. I was covering myself, making believe to him that everything was fine. It was an ordeal I'd have to go through in order that I'd get through the next year.

Gabrielle borrowed status from marriage to Stan.

I could be what tradition expects. I could be Mrs. Wifey. Everything would look normal. I would be playing my part on the stage the absurd perfectly.

Hiding a Secret: Something Blue

The Baby

Stan was able to shape the baby's birth and the emergence of Gabrielle's "secret life". Stan insisted Gabrielle be admitted to the hospital for a caesarian and threatened her doctor until he complied. Gabrielle's "hysteria" and inability to care for herself were given as reasons for taking over. The doctor suggested her tubes be tied. Gabrielle was

exhausted and inclined to agree she would not survive another such pregnancy. At no time did the doctor explore the possibility of battering in spite of having been threatened by Stan directly. "He started talking about **my** baby, **my** child and I started thinking maybe I've made a mistake." Gabrielle considered leaving Stan and "his" baby. He was also threatening to take the baby from her. When she finally certain Stan was not the father of her child, she would not be parted from the baby. Gabrielle's concern for the baby's welfare contributed to her leaving.

One of the things that contributed to my wanting to leave was (wondering) (what was) going to happen when (my son) got a little older. He was hearing Stan say to me, 'That's not the way to do it.' What was that child going to think of me? Was he going to figure the same way?

I remember once Stan was playing (with the baby), grabbing him by the shirt in a rather menacing way and shaking him up and down. I was just terrified. It was one of the worst things I have seen in my life. I didn't know what he was going to make out of this child. He'd say, 'I certainly hope this child doesn't take after you. This child will carry on where I left off.' I thought, 'No way.'

We Might as Well Die Here

Gabrielle's final leaving was anticipated by a dream she had during one of their temporary separations. It told her that her secret life was in danger.

I was driving along this highway and I didn't know where I was going (when) I heard a young man (say), 'I have to leave there because they're all

dying,' I knew that was my cue. (I knew) that's where I was going. (When I got there), everyone was packing up and leaving and my husband was there with my little boy. I said, 'Why aren't you leaving too?' He said, 'Well, there's no point in my leaving because if we're going to die we might as well die here.' I decided that I should leave and take the baby. If I took the baby then he wouldn't die. I left and was trying to rent a car across the street and succeeded. Then I went back across the street to get the baby and Stan went with me. We were both going across the street when the door of the hotel was opened by some reverend-type, like Jones, and he blew Stan away - just blasted him to pieces. I wasn't perturbed but I decided I'd better go and get the baby. I was crossing the street (with) the reverend shooting at me. All the bullets were passing off me and I was laughing at him. I told him, 'You can't kill me because I have fairy sight.' I went inside (the hotel) and I took the baby.

The conclusion I came to from putting the dream together was that I was in a relationship (in which there were no) positive feelings. Everything was destructive ... just killing, dying, sickness and running.

Making Room for a Secret Life

Losing Hope

(At first) I thought that I would be able to (change him). And then I didn't care anymore and then finally the realization came to me that he's going to have to do that himself if he wants. That's his project. I was saying, 'I can't change him. It's a big enough problem to change me.' I saw that even for his recovery I was an obstacle. He was scapegoating me. I was carrying the responsibility for things being wrong.

(I was thinking), 'I better get out because what's ahead of me couldn't be any worse than what's behind.'

Fighting Back

(When I was feeling stronger) I would fight back. Many times Stan would come after me in a menacing way to hit me and I would stand my ground. He would back off because he was a bully and bullies only beat people they think are not going to fight back. I used to tell him, 'If you ever do that I'll wait till maybe you're asleep and then maybe I'll cut your throat.' He'd threaten me and I would threaten him right back. I wouldn't be scared for some reason. I'm more scared of emotional abuse than physical abuse because (with) physical abuse I can defend myself (with) a weapon but with psychological abuse it's so insidious that you become ill before you even know it.

I went crying and upset to the doctor and he gave me valium. I put it in Stan's tea for about a month. I gave it to him so he would be (calm). It was great.

Time to Think

My sister-in-law said, 'Take the keys to my apartment so you have a place to go to be by yourself.' I left a note at home which said, 'I'm clearing out for a couple of days. I need some time to be by myself. I need a rest.' I just wanted to get out of there for a couple of days. I just wanted to be somewhere that I could think.

I hadn't made up my mind about the relationship or what was going to happen or what I was going to do. Going away for a few days was making a stand. I was saying, 'Stop walking on me cause I'm not going to stand for it.'

Sometimes it becomes necessary return to times past, plotting the course taken. During her few days, Gabrielle reflected on how she had lived for the five years since beginning her relationship with Stan.

I'd spent a great many years in life trying to get away from being controlled to the extent that I was prepared to live on my own many times just so that I could be myself. The struggling that I did to know myself was all for nothing. The years I'd spent on my own were a waste of time. I'd come full circle (and) was in a worse situation than I'd ever been in my life.

In a letter to herself, Gabrielle took account of;

How many times I had moved. Stories I had told to save myself. Jobs I had lost on account of the relationship. How my appearance had changed drastically and how worn down and terrible I looked. Mostly I was concentrating on little lies that I had told, made out to be true and had started to believe. By doing this writing it seemed that I got a clearer and a realistic picture. It was kind of sordid. It was very underworld. There was so much running. Everything that I was good at, or had aspired to, was gone. I wasn't able to do anything any more. I wasn't even able to talk. It was painful to look at a piece of paper and see exactly how your life is especially if you are living in somebody else's house, have an infant and you don't even have a home.

Reaching Out For Help

Gabrielle called ALANON during her few days away from Stan and she attended a first meeting. Consequently, she returned to Stan with revived spirits.

I phoned someone from Alanon. I told him I'd been (writing). He said, 'Good. That's an important part of the program.' Then I started to work on it harder.

I've always been considering myself very lucky. Maybe I got an opportunity to get out. Maybe it was the fact that I started reach out for help. The ALANON groups really helped because they they give you back yourself. Without that I don't know if I would have been able to do anything. I was starting to feel close to other people. I (had)

never told anybody except my friends. I was starting to tell people how I felt without telling them what he was doing to me. How I felt was more important than how he was making me feel. The first spark of independence was to hear, 'Nobody has to make you feel.' This was news to me. I came home feeling a lot better about things.

A Non-status Person

The next day I phoned Stan. (I was) feeling better about things. I hadn't made any decisions. I knew I had (a decision to make) but at this point I was still very far away from knowing myself. I was still groping about in the dark.

He told me he had cut off my life insurance, car insurance and my bank account because I'd (gone) to his sister's. I felt like a non-status person. Any privileges I had on account of being married (had) all been taken away. I didn't even have the right to drive the car. I said, 'That's the same as taking divorce proceedings.' (But) I was at his sister's and my diaper service was looking for me. I knew I had to go somewhere so I loaded my stuff in the car and went home.

What he intended to do was isolate me even more. It kind of backfired on him because I thought to myself, 'I'm a non status person. I don't even have any benefits. What am I even doing here?' I had to take steps to protect myself so it contributed to my leaving. If I had been the kind of person that was really intimidated I would never have done anything.

Reclaiming Things

I noticed Stan was always making references to taking the baby away from me and I started thinking, 'This is my baby and he can't take him. I'm going to make a run for it.' I was thinking, 'If I leave (I'll) go to a lawyer and get interim custody.' (Otherwise) he could take the baby away if there was some thing I had forgotten from ignorance.

I got my job back and I went to the bank and opened myself a checking account with money my mother had sent me. That was another step forward.

One night I thought, 'I'm going to take the car.' He'd hidden my car keys. I'd found them. So I went and started up the car and went off to work and the next morning the same thing. I used to do it every time I was going to work. I started to reclaim things.

The Ultimate Statement

Just before I moved out I went to bed with the hippy again. This was such an act of rebellion. This was the ultimate statement (meaning), 'I have some control over my own life. I haven't got to the point in life where men totally disgust me. My war is not with men it's with Stan. If life and sex can be an awful lot different what the hell am I doing here?'

If I hadn't gone out and done anything different, if I had been too frightened or never had the opportunity to meet anybody else, would have been stuck there. Knowing that it doesn't have to be that way was proof of the things that I believed in. I believe that men and women can be lovers (without) that big power trip.

Leaving

Declaring an End

The Start of the Whole Snizzle

Stan decided he was going to move downtown to run this building. He said, 'If I have to move you in a moving van you're going to go with me because women have to do that.' I said, 'Why don't I stay here and you go?' I (had been) thinking, 'If I say that he's going to suspect I'm not happy and don't want to live with him right now.' Then it just came out. I knew after I said it that it was going

to create a crisis but for some reason I did it. (It was) the start of the whole snizzle. I was regretting I had started something I was going to have to see through.

I would have settled for him staying downtown and still being married. Anyway he had a fit. And I was sniggering a bit to myself 'cause I had opened a can of worms. Sniggering cause for a minute the shoe was on the other foot. (I had been) run ragged for so long and finally I'd made a small stand.

I had visions of going out and renting a place and then I thought, 'How am I going to do that with a baby? How am I going to walk around? Where am I going to get the money from? How am I going to move? What am I going to live on? How can I do it?'

Then after an argument one evening I said, 'I'm going to move out at the end of the month.' This came after Stan saying his cronies in AA were saying he was in a terrible relationship. I got so sick of slander all the time. After I said it I thought, 'I'm going to have to do it.' I hadn't thought about everything that I'd have to go through and I'd only just gone back to work. But I knew at the end of the month I'd have a pay check.

Everyday day when he came home he'd say, 'Did you find an apartment yet? When you find an apartment I'm going to go over it and check the place out to see if it's a fit place for my kid to live in.' I thought, 'I'll never get away from him. I'll need his help to move and then he'll know where I am. He'll be over every day giving me orders. He'll still have a grip on me. I might as well stay as move and have more worries and responsibilities.' My courage was obviously faltering. He started really putting the pressure on so I would crack and say 'I'm going to stay here.' Then, (I knew), he'd walk all over me.

So Angry I Could Taste It

(One day) he took the car and later I thought, 'How am I going to get home?' I certainly didn't have the money for the cab. I thought of the hippy and I phoned and said, 'Would you mind coming to pick me up?' I was getting out of the cab. I had the baby in my arms. I had the stroller. I had a bag and was trying to open the back door with my keys and the hippy pulled me back in the car and said, 'I need you.' I was thinking, 'Where does this end? Where does a person have to be to survive in this world?' I thought Stan was going to come out and catch me. Finally I got inside and into the apartment. Stan was marching around in his leather pants. He was strutting, eating tuna out of a can and talking with his mouth full. I was so nervous because of all the things that had happened that day but I didn't really want to get into a fight with him. And then (Stan wanted to have sex). This was completely out of character. It had nothing to do with affection. It had nothing to do with love. It was simply a power trip. I thought I could lock myself in the bathroom but I (would) have to take the consequences. I didn't have the energy to take the consequences so I just did it. I was so furious. I was so angry I could taste it. That was on Saturday night.

Finding Shelter

On Monday I phoned the shelter and told them, 'I want to move out at the end of the month but I can't get up and I wonder what's wrong with me.' So they said, 'Why don't you come down here and look for an apartment from here? We know movers who move for alot cheaper than regular movers.' And I said, 'I can't. What am I going to (do about my diaper service)?' (They said), 'We have diapers down here.' It was about five in the evening and I said I couldn't do it right then because I'd get caught in the middle of leaving. That evening he came home. We didn't fight. There was nothing said. My mind was just racing - take my passport, my birth certificate, the baby's birth certificate, my letters - and things like that.

(On the day I left) I kept saying to myself, 'Am I going to do it now or in five years (when) I'm old, deprepid and really lost?' I was thinking, 'I'm going to die if I don't get out of here.'

I always thought courage was having no fear. I started finding out that courage is being scared to death and not letting it stop you.

Recovery

I think the hardest part was leaving everything that's familiar behind. (You've taken) a boat towards freedom (and when you) got there nobody was home. I had to let go of all the guidelines I had lived by. I was kind of adrift. The problem (is) you can't go back to ignorance. I did a tremendous amount of reading. I did a little bit of writing. I phoned radio stations and laced a couple of people because I didn't like what they said. I was doing this for a while.

Sharing a Secret

A Piece of My Mind

I went back to my doctor (about six months after leaving) and said, 'Did you know I was a battered woman?' He said, 'We have no way of knowing these things. I told him, 'There are courses for doctors to go to so that they can understand when a woman is in that situation.' I said, 'You put me through hell. You put me on drugs. I had a caesarian. You believed that idiot when he phoned you up and told lies about me.' It felt really good to tell him he needed help too.

Being an Advocate

(A fellow student) had been in two battering relationships and was completely nuts. Everything the other women did she thought they were doing against her. I understood she was like that because she'd been chastized, criticized and vivisectioned in everything she did for so long that she thought everybody was pulling her apart all the time. I was getting mad at the other women and saying, 'Leave her alone. Why get upset just because she's upset?' They were saying (battered women) should leave, otherwise, they deserve all they get. This was making me really angry and I was voicing my opinions on the subject.

Casting Pearls

Yesterday (a woman) phoned from the shelter asking, 'Would you like to do a radio interview?' I said, 'No.' It's like I'm almost like I'm talked out.

I've never really sat down and described everything in an outside way. Since we've been talking (doing interviews) I'm feeling differently. Now I almost don't have to talk about it because all the things I never said I was able to say. That's probably a more important step - being able to put a name on things that you felt because if you can name what you feel you know yourself.

(Now) I want to have my new identity. (If) I went (on the radio) I would have to be anonymous. I'd be another faceless abused woman who knows how to talk. I don't want to be identified as an abused woman any more or feel like one.

A year ago I would have done it. Maybe (then) I would have felt I was doing something important. Now I don't care or I haven't as much to prove that way.

We're doing (research interviews) together and five million people aren't listening. If I was doing a radio interview the questions would be cliché because the public likes to hear certain things about battered women. I'd be asked, 'Why

didn't you leave?' (I) would be asked all kinds of insensitive stuff so (people) could have a good listen to somebody's misfortune. (They) would say, 'It couldn't have been that bad if she's talking on the radio,' and, 'if she's so bloody smart (how come she was) in that position anyway?'

Now I keep quiet for a different reason. I keep quiet because I don't want to cast my pearls. I have more important things to do.

Peace of Mind

(Recovery) doesn't happen in a short time. It's a long time of positive and encouraging things happening to you. What helped me tremendously was my Bible studies.

I had this close friend, a Christian lady, who got me interested in Bible study. I was finding out the (same) thing I was learning in the shelter - the way things are. I (learned) protest is like putting a bandaid on an amputation. I don't get into useless arguments about people's ideologies. You can waste all your creative energy fighting a system that can't be changed. The only thing you can do is make whatever changes you can to yourself.

Sometimes we're not able to draw the line too clearly between what's right and what's wrong. There's all kind of different things happening that are contradictory. People don't have any guidelines. In the Bible it's the same advise for everybody. There's certain things you are not to do if you want to enjoy good mental health, physical health and not to be fighting with people. Firstly that you have to look after your physical body. I've been staying in a healthy frame of mind, not taking any mind altering drugs. Secondly if you fight against people it's going to destroy you. And you have to believe you can look to a higher intelligence than you. We're in a constant state of war but you can't fight for peace. To stop fighting (is) a great relief.

Finally I think I have enough freedom to be a woman without using my femininity or my sexuality

in order to survive. Now I'm starting to take some pride in my house, things I do with my children and the things I make.

That's great freedom (when) I don't feel like a person that has one life to one person and a secret life to another. My secret life and my real life are the same now.

ELIZABETH: LEAVING AS COMING OUT OF HIDING

The Meaning of Hiding

(When abused as a child), I spent an awful lot of time in hiding. I used to hide under the bed, in the cupboards, in the attic. I spent a lot of time under the shed and it was full of spiders. I was terrified. I'd just go there and cry.

(When abused as an adult), I'd go to the bathroom, turn the light off and cry all night. Sometimes I would (hide) in the closet. It made me feel secure or protected. It goes back to when I was a kid and used to go hide in the shed.

(When living in a new city and having been battered), I didn't know where to go. I didn't know anybody around there. His sister lived the next street over and I didn't want them to find out about it. I hid in the car and cried. I could hear him smashing stuff outside and I thought, 'Oh my God, the kids are in there.' I was petrified. I thought he might kill them so I went back in the house.

Ralph took the lead in defining the parameters of his relationship with Elizabeth. He had lured her out of her childhood hiding places (in cupboards and under the shed), with his attention and his humour. Elizabeth was later to say, "He swore black-and-blue that he loved me." However, soon after their marriage, she began seeking shelter from his abuse. Elizabeth once again shut herself in cupboards and the bathroom. She also sought refuge in the religion of

her childhood and found no comfort there. She went to a church for shelter and found the door locked. Going to a transition house seemed too extreme for her circumstance.

Meanwhile, considerable effort went into maintaining the appearance of the home-life that Elizabeth craved. She covered up for Ralph's inadequacy in providing it. She filled the freezer with empty cartons and covered the holes he made in the walls. It was important that others think well of him and Elizabeth worked toward this end. Elizabeth thought if she waited long enough, loved him well enough and discovered what she was doing to displease him, he would stop abusing her.

Finally, Elizabeth gave up hoping Ralph would change and become the person she remembered. She began to come out of hiding when the hope died. She "gave up" when Ralph battered her within earshot of his parents. Elizabeth fought back for the first time. This was a turning point - the "secret" of the battering was out. Now, "it could only get worse."

Elizabeth asked Ralph to leave. Then, just as her resolve to remain apart began to waver, she discovered he had moved in with "the other woman." Even now, two years later, Elizabeth sometimes forgets she told Ralph to leave. She had seen no other choice. There was no place else to hide.

Elizabeth proceeded with a divorce. When she told her story for the first time, she was shocked to see how dangerous her situation had been. Elizabeth had hidden the facts from herself just as effectively as she had hidden them from others. In time, she divulged her "secret" to some family members, friends and professionals. Elizabeth's recovery continues as she comes out of hiding her experience of having been abused and her particular difficulties in coping with the aftermath.

Decision-Making

I never made a decision about anything. He made all the decisions. He had the final word and he'd make it look like I had a choice and in reality I wouldn't. I always had to pick what he wanted.

I thought about him leaving me. Somehow there was something I wasn't doing right. I wasn't pleasing him. I stayed because I loved him. I'd think if he couldn't love me I must be unlovable.

Sometimes I would wonder at what point you call it quits. I'd made an agreement and married for better or worse and how much worse would it have to get to end it? (I'd have left) if he beat the kids. He did just about everything he possibly could to me.

I wasn't working. I didn't have any money. I had two kids. I didn't feel I was capable of getting a job.

Hiding From the Facts: Shock and the Sin of Gullibility

I believed whatever he told me. I found it hard to believe somebody could lie so easily. It just didn't seem possible to me. I should have been more on my guard and not (have) accept(ed) his stories. I was too gullible. Gullibility is a sin (according to) the Catholic Church. (If I hadn't believed him) maybe he wouldn't have taken me for granted so much.

When Ralph revealed he was having an affair, Elizabeth was at her sister-in-law's house. Ralph taunted her by saying Elizabeth did not "have the guts" to leave him. She spent the next three days alone in a dark bedroom in the same house.

I was in a state of shock. It's like I died. My blood just went cold. I wanted to die. They should have brought me to a doctor. He would have sent me for counselling. Maybe then I would have had the strength to leave.

(Later, his mistress) came to the house. It was almost unreal. It was as if I was outside looking at it happening to somebody else. I was very calm. I had trouble believing it.

All his friends knew, I found out later, that he was seeing other women all the time.

Hiding the Facts: Filling Boxes and Holes

Elizabeth worked hard at creating the impression of an ordinary life. She kept empty boxes in the freezer so his friends would think they had enough money for food.

I was covering up for him because I wanted everybody to think he was a good provider. I don't think it did him good but I wanted people to like him. I didn't think anyone was aware of what he was like.

When he smashed the house there were holes everywhere. If somebody wanted to come over I'd tell them not to (but) if somebody was coming I'd cover all the holes in the walls with souvenir towels and posters.

Hoping for Change

Elizabeth spoke about how she derived the strength to continue living with Ralph. She described it as;

A dream that eventually things would work out. That he would come to his senses and realize what he was doing was bad. I was hoping he would buckle down and grown up. When I went out with him he was really nice. I figured he'd turn back to the way he was. I kept hoping. Everytime I'd blow out a birthday candle that's what I wished for - to have a happy marriage.

I was sure of my love for him. I figured he was going through a bad time, probably didn't like himself, and somebody had to help him through it.

As things got worse I realized he would end up being old and bitter. (He would) beat himself because he hadn't taken the right opportunities and he'd be taking it out on me.

I guess I stopped thinking he was right and I was wrong. I had to think about what the future would look like if we stayed together.

I figured he would drink more, get more miserable and have a heart attack. I'd have no friends because of this man. I also thought the kids wouldn't come to visit because they couldn't stand to be around him. I could see myself waiting on him hand and foot - waiting for crumbs and they'd never come. I was sure that year by year I'd become more terrified, not just of him, but of everything around. I figured I'd end up like my mother. She won't go out of the house. I thought maybe I'd become an alcoholic (like my mother).

I tried to do everything. I was feeling I'd failed. I figured, when things didn't work out his way, there would always be someone else.

I think, (as) someone said, it's like the dream went dead.

Leaving

Elizabeth described several incidents which told her she had "no alternative" but to separate from Ralph. Each incident was characterized by some new shade of understanding her current situation and a probable future. The following description is marked by a promise made in the face of possible death.

If He Doesn't Kill Me...

He was really drunk and I had to drive. He told me he hated me, wanted a divorce and I was to drop him off. I got there and he wouldn't get out of the car. He started hitting me, punching me in the head. I tried to get out of the car and he told me if I got out he'd run me down. I stayed in. I remember when he was punching me I prayed to my (dead) sister, 'Don't let him kill me. If he doesn't kill me I promise I'll never see him again.' He started changing and said, 'I'm not going to hurt you. I love you.' I dropped him off and that's when I thought, 'That's it. I'm getting a divorce. I never want to see him again.'

The next day the doorbell rang. I opened the door and there was Ralph with a Christmas tree. He wasn't supposed to come back. I couldn't get rid of him 'cause I was too afraid. So, he said, 'Are we still going to the dance?' I put make-up on my bruises and went to get my hair done.

Looking for a Place to Hide

A subsequent battering incident occurred in the presence of Ralph's friends. None of them interceded. When Ralph left the apartment she hid in the laundry room. Later, when Ralph returned, Elizabeth went looking for a church and shelter there. This is the event Elizabeth identifies as the time she gave up hope of Ralph changing.

It was four o'clock in the morning and I didn't know the city. I knew there was a church. I walked along a busy street 'cause I was afraid of dogs. Everytime a car came by I would hide 'cause I was afraid there were drunks. When I was looking for that church I felt totally isolated and (without) hope. The church was locked when I got there. I didn't know where to hide anymore.

I thought of going to a crisis center but I didn't think it was bad enough. I would be bothering them for a minor thing. It didn't rate going to a shelter. (I might have gone to a shelter) if he had done anything to the kids or hospitalized me. Maybe if I were stabbed or had broken bones.

Fighting Back

Elizabeth said there were two events which finally ended her marriage. The first of these was a battering incident which occurred when Ralph's parents were in the house.

I was really disgusted with him. He invited his parents to dinner and (then he) didn't show up. (When he finally came), he was drunk and rude to his father and mother. I told him I didn't appreciate that. He wasn't going to get away with this. I couldn't let him treat them like that. He showed them he didn't care about them. If he wouldn't have done that I probably would still be there today.

When he beat me up that night it was different 'cause I got angry. It's probably because other people were in the house and deep inside I knew he couldn't go too far. There were people (to) stop it. I remember he had me pinned down (with) his knee on my chest and was punching my face. I thought, 'There is no way this man is going to do this to me anymore.' I got so angry I just reached out and scratched his face. Of course he got worse and started beating me harder. Then I thought, 'I'm going to stop him right now,' and grabbed him by the testicles. He started bending my fingers back and I thought of (another woman's bruised fingers). I couldn't handle it anymore. That's when I screamed and (my daughter and his mother) screamed. That stopped it.

I tried to figure out what made me so mad that hadn't made me mad before. It had to be other people (being) there because usually I was so isolated (when he beat me). I think it gave me strength. There was no keeping it a secret when his parents were there.

The next day nobody said anything. It was like nothing happened. It was almost as if they didn't think it was bad.

I thought once I had crossed that boundary - had tried to defend myself - it could only get worse. I knew he was going to get wilder, crueller and would eventually kill me or do something really horrible to me.

There was no going back from that point. I knew it was finished. I told him he would have to leave. We never talked about it. There was no point in talking. I didn't want him back. I was defeated. I had given up.

I think I still had a little of that spark to protect myself. I felt strong about it. I was sad he was leaving and the marriage had broken up. I was hurt but I felt good that I had gotten rid of this horrible person.

The Other Woman

The final event of leave-taking occurred after their separation. Elizabeth discovered that Ralph had begun living with another woman immediately upon leaving her. Elizabeth called "the other woman" to confirm her suspicion.

I was proud of myself (for making the call). I was ninety-nine percent sure of what I would be going to find out and I had to know. I think I was really angry. I don't know what happened after (the call). Things went downhill from there.

I don't think it would have been the same (if there hadn't been another woman). The logical part of me says that (it) shows his weakness. He had to have somebody taking care of him. I failed. He got somebody else. I worked so hard - every single minute, every single day, (for) so many years - putting a hundred percent into this thing and somebody takes my place like I was a nothing. Like nothing I did ever mattered. That's why I hate her so much.

Recovery

It would have been easier if he would have died.

Sometimes I'd think, 'Why didn't he just kill me and make it so much easier?' I didn't figure I was living for anything.

Elizabeth often forgot she had asked Ralph to leave. Instead, she felt abandoned.

As time wore by the beating became secondary. (I thought about the) fact that he had left me and I wasn't good enough. I was starting to get lonely and sad. I knew I couldn't let him back because I was too afraid of him. I didn't know what would happen.

Coming Out of Hiding

Elizabeth's resolve to remain apart from Ralph was reinforced by others' reactions to the telling of her story. In her brother's presence, she described some battering incidents to a female lawyer. The "secret" was told and in the telling Elizabeth was reminded of her vulnerability to Ralph. Paradoxically, this strengthened her decision to divorce him.

(When) I went to the lawyer, talking about the things Ralph had done suddenly brought them into reality. It seemed like I was watching it happen to somebody else. Verbalizing it made it real. The more I talked the more I realized how horrible this man was and I really became frightened. I started to think I was lucky to have got out with my life. It's so odd I could get through it and not realize how bad it was.

I had to convince the lawyer how volatile his temper was and how irrational he was when he was angry. It frightened me. I was sitting in the lawyer's office seeing their reactions. (It was even more frightening to hear her say he was insane). By the time I left I was terrified. My brother said he would get me a gun. I didn't want it. I didn't realize just how little a restraining order does.

Undercover in Grief

He was gone and I was very depressed, just kind of making it from day to day. I would drag myself out of bed, get myself to work and could hardly wait to get home so I would be safe. My home was my little place protecting me from the world. I couldn't wait to get back and shut that door. I would go to bed and curl myself up in the blanket.

Putting up a front at work would take so much out of me I couldn't get my head off the pillow

some days. I'd stay in bed and wrap myself really tight in blankets and feel safe. Actually, I wished I could stay there like a cocoon.

I did a lot of crying, usually when I went to bed at night (trying not to cry in front of the kids).

Depression

There was nothing inside. I felt I was part of a person. I wasn't a whole person. I was sure people could look at me and see the blood oozing out. I was in such pain.

I was going through life like a zombie at first. I had no physical strength at all. (I had) no energy at all. It's like a force came over me and there was no way I could control it. Everything you do takes effort you couldn't conceive of when you're all right.

I couldn't concentrate. When I tried to read, I'd read the same sentence over and over. I would look at somebody (and) forget their name. I would forget what I was asking from one moment to the next. I still have trouble concentrating. Is my memory ever going to come back?

I would never know what would be in my head. My thoughts were racing like they were on high speed. It was always about me and Ralph. It always made me sad.

When I found out he was going to be married, it's like a rock hit me. He was gone, living with somebody, but I never really gave up hoping he'd come to his senses and come back (a different man). I cried like I never cried before. It didn't make any sense but that's the way it was.

Anger

During the period of interviewing, Elizabeth initiated seeing a counsellor to deal with her overwhelming anger. Her anger continued to be focused more strongly on the "other woman" than Ralph or his behaviour.

I don't like being angry. I'm sure that's why I'm having these dreams. I think it's interfering with my life. I saw a book and it was about how beneficial anger can be and it appalled me. When I think of anger I don't see any benefits at all. I just think of things smashed.

I've had a lot of dreams. I would always beat (the other woman) in my dreams. I was always being super nice to Ralph - holding his hand, being so happy. It would usually be (something) like him showing me his house or where he worked and I would see her. As soon as Ralph would leave I would beat her up. I think it was a lot of anger I couldn't vent to the right person. I never harmed Ralph in my dreams. I was always delighted he was there.

When I found out she was pregnant I started dreaming about babies - dead babies, really ugly, grotesque babies.

(In my waking time), I would want to get a gun and shoot them - kill them both.

The kids would talk about them and I would get angry and and say, 'I hope your father punches her in the nose.' He wouldn't change for me and he wouldn't change for the kids. Actually, I hope he hasn't changed. I want her to see what she's got and not have what I couldn't get. I know it's terrible and it doesn't sit very good but I can't help what I think.

I remember the anger I felt watching programs, even ads, showing the woman happy. What a bunch of lies. I'd get so enraged I would feel like smashing the T.V. There were trying to make us believe this is how things are supposed to be and they

just aren't like that at all. There is love between sisters and brothers, parents and children, but not between men and women. I didn't want to watch any love stories. I hated love.

Coming Out With a Little Help

Children

Of course when you have kids it's really hard to stay in that state (of being a zombie).

Medical Treatment

Elizabeth sought help from two general practitioners and a psychiatrist.

I went to see this jerk, our family doctor, and told him I had been crying for three months, every day, and couldn't stop. He said, 'Wait a few more weeks. You'll be OK.'

I had met (the next doctor) on several occasions. The first time was at a pub (where) Ralph used to hang around. She was drunk and passed out on the table. But as I got to know her, I liked her because she was so kind to the kids. I didn't know anybody else to go to. I didn't want to have anything to do with men. I definitely didn't want to go to a man doctor. I told her we'd split up and how I was crying every day. Right away she got me into the hospital as an outpatient. I went once a week to see a psychiatrist and I was also seeing her once a week. She put me on anti-depressants. I told her (a little about the abuse) and she said, 'This guy is psychopathic.' Coming from her (a friend of his) it was an affirmation. A couple of times I went to her and she mentioned Ralph. I don't want to hear anything about him. (She told me) he planned to have another child. I found out she went to his wedding and she's stayed (at his house) on holidays. (But) I didn't want to go into this again with another doctor. I just figured I would see her occasionally and when I was off anti-depressants that (would be it).

The doctor thinks I'm taking too long in the anger stage. She says she doesn't know how to help me get out of it. She wanted me to increase my anti-depressants. I was down to two and she wanted me to go (up) to five (but) I'm down to one now.

Women's Support Group

When I visited Elizabeth's apartment for our first research meeting, I noticed a photograph of the women's support group she joined within the first year of separation. One of these women, now a close friend of Elizabeth's, arrived at the end of our meeting. I had known of Elizabeth's difficulty in coming to the weekly support group. I had seen her visibly shaking while she sat quietly listening to other women speak. She had chosen not to speak publicly about her experience of being battered yet had spoken about it privately with several of the women. Clearly, the group had been important in her recovery, regardless of her silence. At the time of our interviews, Elizabeth was considering whether or not to re-join the current support group.

Companionship

I find it hard when I'm around (my boyfriend). When we went for a drive I was waiting for him to swear and slam on the brakes. It doesn't happen. He doesn't get in a bad mood. It's so odd. I'm anticipating it's going to happen and wondering what I'm going to do when it does.

When I make up my mind to ask him something I rehearse it (but) can't come out with it. I can't talk when he asks what it is. I can't look at him. It takes the longest time to get a few words out.

Recovery as an On-going Process

People think I should be better. They have no idea the things that are going through my head and how frightened I was. The worst thing is the fear. I'm terrified of Ralph. Unless they've experienced that kind of fear they don't know. It doesn't stop. It has a long effect on you. All the things he says and all the times he belittles you, ridicules you. It just doesn't go away.

I don't think I'll ever lose that fear because I think he's capable of killing somebody. His physical violence is very real and easy to trigger. He wouldn't think of the consequences if he wanted to get at me.

I'm really quite afraid of men. I'm always going to distrust men and be afraid of them if I even get to know them. And I'm always going to be timid.

Maybe I'm not getting better as fast as I should (but) I'm not getting worse. I think of what I lived through for a lot of years. What happened to me, didn't happen one day and it's not going to heal in one day. It might be a long time. I might never be the way I was before but I can really work at it. It seems to take so long.

Other people don't understand. My sister says, 'You should be getting married now. Put the past behind you and get on.' (My daughter asked), 'Do you think you could ever talk about him just normal? Do you think you could ever forgive him?' No. Never.

People don't have any idea what went on.

Ralph has got off scott-free. He's happy. He's got a wife. They're going to have a baby. He makes good money. His friends love him. The kids still love him. What gets me angry is the kids enjoy being with him. There's no justice.

Why can't I be happy? Why can't things go my way?

DOROTHY: LEAVING AS PERCEIVING DIFFERENCE

The Meaning of Difference

Dorothy's path of decision-making, of leaving (or staying away), and of recovery is woven around her theme of perceiving differences between herself and George. In the beginning, she noted their similarities and in the end, their irreconcilable differences.

Individual Differences

Dorothy began our initial interview expressing doubt about how helpful her experience would be for this study. She saw herself as different from the "typical" battered woman in having established a strong sense of independent identity prior to meeting George. In fact, she prided herself on her ability to live without a partner.

When you find yourself in a situation society deems a lower form of life, to wit, being abused, you make excuses and say, 'I don't fit in that category.' I've always thought of myself as a professional person (who) had it together (and) was strong. To admit I'm capable of being in a relationship (with) someone taking advantage of me, is difficult. I thought, 'It can't happen to me.'

(I'm) lucky in having some self-respect. I hadn't married from high school. I didn't have children and I wasn't dependent on another person for my daily living expenses. It was easier for me

(to leave) because I had a career. I had the degree, education and status. I notice that women in long-term (abusive) relationships were not working outside the home, did not have skills other than homemaker.

I'm in the top ten percent of the population in terms of intelligence, so the field for a potential mate is considerably narrower. If I don't want to lead a sexless life I make certain compromises. I had a horrible sense of insecurity when I met George. I would have done almost anything (for) affection.

When I was growing up I was always the ugly duckling. I always figured that men don't like me. And in the last years (when) I became educated (I've) felt (both) unattractive and threatening.

I don't want to fit in. I want to be exceptional, outstanding, not necessarily the best but definitely up there. If one is happy and comfortable, one loses the edge that makes the truly great. I want my (life) to be weird, exciting, fulfilling and always on the edge - with one caveat - I don't want to be dead or in a mental ward.

Sharing Differences

When she first met George, Dorothy was delighted with their similarities. Both saw themselves as unique, often feeling isolated from others. They shared special and private pleasures, which even now Dorothy sees as setting their relationship apart.

Some of their differences were also a source of interest. Dorothy valued George's artistic ability and his unique perspective. She was certain he had been drawn to her independent ways.

Creating a Balance

When they began to speak about marriage, differences appeared - some problematic. Dorothy sees herself first and foremost, as a lawyer specializing in criminal law. When she learned that George had a criminal record for a minor drug charge, she realized that marriage could jeopardize her future career. In a sense, in marrying George she would take on his criminal record. Certain positions would be closed to her. This became an issue between them.

But as Dorothy became more vulnerable to George she participated in dismantling her own defences. She let George know she was prepared to limit her career goals in the interest of their relationship. She became George's partner first, a lawyer second. Her fledgling practice was increasingly set aside.

When differences became apparent, Dorothy attempted to diminish them; she often remained silent, and reminded herself his perspective was equally viable.

How he dealt with differences (was to say), 'We're obviously not suited. The relationship is over.' I'd end up begging him to come back.

(After a fight), I'd have to apologize and suggest there was something wrong with me and I couldn't live without him.

There was no room for discussion. He'd say, 'You're trying to dominate me,' if I challenged him on a point.

I would have to repress whatever I thought. I couldn't say what I really believed. I could do that for two weeks but the pressure built up to the point where I would explode and say what I thought.

She was more articulate. George was stronger. "They hit you because they can't talk to you. They can't talk to you because they want to dominate you."

When Dorothy insisted on talking to work out their differences, George demanded she leave. Dorothy refused and was thrown out. Her experience of George's difference was framed by the windows and doors through which he pushed her. Dorothy kept coming back, "crawling over broken glass."

Dorothy wondered what woman, in her right mind, would stay around for this kind of abuse. When George, with his history of emotional breakdowns, told her she was crazy, she began to believe him.

When somebody says, 'You need treatment,' you can think of six different explanations for their saying it. One of the six is, 'Maybe I do need help.'

Gradually, Dorothy began to view George as less intelligent, more opinionated and insecure. A growing dislike contributed more to her leaving than any single incident. However, one incident was literally a "breakthrough". Dorothy's arm went through the window. As it was happening she saw this as the end of their relationship.

George charged her with willful damage under fifty dollars, claiming she had broken the window. He also attempted to get a restraining order against her. At the trial, she claimed she had been pushed through the window. The difference was very important. Her career rested upon the distinction. She couldn't afford a conviction on her record. Had he won the case, George could have engineered the end of Dorothy's professional life, and balance would have been created if Dorothy too had a criminal record.

Dorothy won her case and so continued her shakey way to recovery.

Decision-Making

Initially, George had invited Dorothy to stay with him in his apartment and even suggested they find an apartment together. Later he insisted on more of his own space. Throughout their relationship, he took leadership in defining the spatial boundaries. After the first violence, which occurred when she refused to leave his apartment, she did give him space - within a week he was inviting her back.

Time-Out

At Christmas, Dorothy visited her sick sister whose need for company she perceived as greater than George's. Her sister had earlier urged her to leave George and embarrassed to be with him still, Dorothy did not confide her dilemma. Instead, she sat down and wrote a list of pros and cons for staying with George.

I (was) much more able to objectively weigh things. I was weighing having a relationship - the rotten things about it versus the bad things. The rotten things were far outweighing the good things. The good things basically boiled down to sex and some kind of companionship. The bad things were that: I didn't respect the person; I didn't like his thoughts feelings or opinions; I found him very oppressive; I found that I was cutting myself off from all my friends; I couldn't indulge in any activities that were interesting to me without his seal of approval; I felt very closed in; I couldn't concentrate; and I wasn't doing well at the office. It was time to go.

A thing I said to myself was, 'I managed to get along in life before I met this guy so I'll manage without him.'

Dorothy and her sister had an argument. In her loneliness, she turned to George for comfort. Their relationship was comfortable for several months until the following incident.

A Night in Jail

I got charged (by George), with the criminal offence (of trespassing in his apartment) and had to spend the night in jail. It should have been him (who was charged) and that's what made me so angry. I was being physically and mentally abused. Is there justice?

(The night in jail) became a metaphor for what I felt about the relationship. I had no freedom.

Then, Dorothy began to realize that George not only controlled her time but he was able to engineer the space of "time-out" - a jail cell. In Dorothy's view, he was also attempting to equalize their main difference by threatening to charge for a criminal offence.

Moving in Together

Dorothy was uncertain about moving in with George which she saw to be a first step toward an questionable marriage. Consequently, their discussions about moving in together were tense. Typically, their fights occurred after they had spoken of living together and shortly before the date arranged.

We lived together - in separate houses. Throughout the course of the ten-month relationship we spent almost every night together either at his place or at my place.

I was getting very terrorized financially. George was always the guy I was going to move in with and share rent and food. Had I been more secure I think it would have been a hell of a lot easier for me to say, 'Good-bye buddy.'

We talked about moving in three or four times. We set a date. The first few times as the date approached, that I was to move my stuff into his house, an argument would develop.

We were set to go to counselling and he said, 'I love you madly. Let's live with each other.'

George decided on a date and returned one night to say he had rented a place. Dorothy was infuriated by his failure to include her in the choice.

I said, 'Can I see it? Do I have any input?' Inwardly I seethed and resented that unilateral action. I had three or four days to think about it. We had an argument. I said, 'This relationship is like being in jail with no parole. There's no relief. I don't want to move in with you cause I'd feel like I was doing a life sentence without the eligibility of parole. I don't want it. You control me. You want to run everything in my life and I'm not prepared to deal with that. I don't want to live with you.'

He said, 'This relationship is over.' I sort of said, 'Well, wait a minute. Let me rethink what I just said. It was the truth and I couldn't get away from it. It had been building since the (time of the first violent incident) - just getting stronger.'

One Night Stand

Dorothy valued her sexual relationship with George. As a lover, George had no equal.

After our fights he'd forgive me and it would be wonderful. We'd fight for six hours and then we would go to bed.

Dorothy is certain that having sex with another man was one of the most significant incidents in terms of leave-taking.

The day after I'd been arrested I'd run into an old boyfriend who wanted to have dinner and I thought, 'What the hell, I'd better find myself a new relationship to get into.' I knew that George would know that I'd been screwing somebody else if I came in afterwards so I didn't. We did everything short of actual intercourse.

That was the break - because we had this whole thing about fidelity. You're doing something to set yourself up to get out, because you're doing something that the other partner will find totally unacceptable. I was saying 'My loyalties aren't with you anymore and I want to find a replacement.'

I knew that there were going to be other people out there for me.

Perceiving Difference

(He said), on more than one occasion, 'It scares me that I need you and you don't need me.' It was true. I didn't need him. For my sense of myself, I didn't depend on him.

Her dislike for him grew as she focused on their dissimilarities. When asked what incidents had been critical in terms of her decision to leave she responded, "Just day-to-day shit. I couldn't stand talking to him. I hated his paintings. I didn't like his children."

She had become disdainful of those things George himself valued. She began to see how he was not her equal in spite of an initial sense of being matched. In his chosen work, she thinks him mediocre.

Friends

I (had) talked to some of my closer friends about (the first incidence of violence), and they all said, 'He's a wife beater, beat it.' My ex business associate handed me a sheet that said, "Profile of a Wife Batterer" and she said, 'Look kid, smarten up.' And my sister told me that, and a few other people told me and, as a matter of fact, I was even told that by a psychologist. The advice given was, 'Leave now because if you hang around it'll only get worse and be much harder to leave.'

(Friends) were significant in telling me that I was a decent person they liked and enjoyed being with and I didn't need to do that kind of stuff.

(If not for one particular friend), I'd still be in the situation. She was constantly there for me - never made any judgements about what a jerk I was. I'd talk about it and through talking to her I'd sort of clarify. There was a person who cared about me.

In returning to George, Dorothy became isolated from some persons whose opinions she'd sought and failed to act upon.

Counselling

(I went to a counsellor wondering), 'Can I understand this guy?' I went with a hopeful optimism that (we) could work things out. The advice (was) to forget it. I don't think I wanted to believe what people were telling me.

George, with a history of emotional breakdowns, told Dorothy she was crazy.

I didn't think I needed (counselling) but I suggested (relationship counselling). We actually went once and he flipped out into a paranoid state and wouldn't go to the second one. Then we had the big fight where I got punched and I called up the counsellor and said, 'It's not going to be couple's counselling. It's going to be individual counselling because I (don't want to have anything more to do) with this man.'

The psychiatrist said to me I hadn't made up my mind to leave and that was true. She suggested I go into the separation group. These people were worse off than I was (but) we had common problems and could talk about common things. I saw that all of us were in the relationships because of lacking self-confidence.

Ironically, for a woman who prides herself on the ways in which she is different from others, an essential part of leave-taking was in seeing how much she was like other abused women.

George's Contribution

Every incidence of violence was important (in terms of making the decision) because I have this attitude that you don't beat on people unless there's something really wrong with that person.

We never had a conversation in the whole relationship about any mutual issues. We never had a meeting of the minds. I'd try to talk to him. Things would degenerate and that's when we would get into a fight. He just couldn't communicate with me on any level. I also ran rings around him in terms of my verbal abilities and intellectual skills.

I think I really tried to understand George and I don't think he ever really tried in the slightest to understand me. It wasn't important.

There was no recognition of me as an individual. My claim to fame, as far as he was concerned, was that I inspired him in his art.

I was not the kind of person he was comfortable with. I challenged his sense of superiority. I was very independent, educated, outspoken, had a career ahead of me, and didn't want to have children. He really appreciated that I was independent and at the same time did absolutely everything (to) cut that down. I don't fit into his idea of a perfect mate.

Leaving

(Leaving is) like smoking or any other obsessive habit. Most people try (to quit) more than once before they're successful.

I was afraid of leaving him. It was so weird. To this day I don't know how I managed to do it. I lost my sense of myself. I felt like there would be nobody else. I was beginning to feel that I was such an irrational and gross person that nobody else would want me and he encouraged me in that.

He was telling me, 'I don't want you here,' some of the time and other times, 'I want you here.'

(For several months before the end) it was continually awful. There was none of the support that he'd given to me and none of the I-love-you shit after that. I realize that made it easier.

Through the Window

The end started in slow motion, when George threw Dorothy out of the apartment and her arm went through the window.

If that incident hadn't happened (the relationship) probably would have dragged on for years. I think I was extremely fortunate it happened.

I was aware as the thing was going on that this was so bad that nobody could forgive anybody else. This was something that was so beyond the bound of acceptability that I knew he couldn't accept me back. (As it turned out), I couldn't continue because I got the summons. I never made the choice on my own. I ended up getting charged and had to remain separate. I had no choice if I wanted to retain my respect in my profession.

Restrained By a Date

Dorothy was often to say that she never made a decision to leave George.

The day after the final fight, he consulted a lawyer about taking out a restraining order against her. Later, he charged her for breaking the window.

The restraining order and the trial date marked the end of the relationship, to her.

Dorothy agreed not to attempt seeing George. By this point, she could not approach him without further jeopardizing her career. The "decision" to separate was made by George and enforced by the court - an external agent she would respect.

When I absolutely made the decision was after the final incident (when I was called) to appear in court. This was pretty serious.

It Was Either Him or Me

Dorothy's decision was not to leave George but to leave him alone.

Somehow, some sort of aspect of self-preservation came in there.

He was trying to jepardize my profession, to equalize the difference.

When I felt strongly that I wanted to go and patch things up the only thing that prevented me from doing so (was) I was a lawyer had given my word and if I had gone back there I would have been royally embarrassed . My profession would have been down the tubes. (I said to myself), 'If I go over there I'm sunk.'

However, she violated the agreement made with his lawyer.

I actually did go over to his house one night (intending to) inflict major damage. I think I was going to go in and destroy every painting he had made. I thought, 'I'm already up for damaging property we may as well make it a good one.' I was a bit drunk and very angry. Fortunately, he happened to answer the door and I took off. I guess I was terrified after that.

Perhaps Dorothy intended to right the balance. George had struck out at the core of her identity - what was a lawyer without a clear criminal record or, for that matter, an artist without paintings? George reacted by making an application for a criminal peace bond which was not granted. The trial was coming up in November.

I clocked myself. I thought, 'After November rolls around that's the end of it. It's finally over.'

The longer I stayed away the more the fog cleared and the more I was able to see. Consequently, three weeks before the trial (we met him by accident) he said, 'Did you hear the good news? They're going to drop the charges'. I read that as an invitation to get back together again and I chose to disregard it. I couldn't be seen to influence the decision (by attempting to settle out of court).

(In my mind, I was telling him), 'You are not going to make me do this. Get out of my life. Go away and leave me alone.'

(If I attempted to see him before the trial), I'd sacrifice myself. My career is me and me is my career. That's one of my reasons for living.

It was either him or me and I voted for me (by ignoring his invitation to reconcile).

A Physical Experience of Disengagement

One of the most important incidences in her leaving occurred for Dorothy while in the company of women from her support group. They went to a restaurant where she saw George with another woman. It was like watching her past self through other people's eyes. When one woman said George didn't look her type, it seemed obvious. For the first time Dorothy was at least neutral if not actually repulsed by him. This was a significant felt experience of leaving. Dorothy knew she would not be returning to George.

It was during the course of my separation counselling when myself and about five women were in the restaurant and by accident George appeared in the restaurant. (He made) a considered effort to sit at a table near our table. He made a point of saying hello to me and I made a point of turning my back on him. I took a look at him and I thought, 'Now I know why I don't want to be in the relationship.' I observed a little bit of his interaction with this girl. She was doing exactly what I was doing which was sitting in awe and admiration and being worshipful. He was encouraging it. I thought, 'How old he looks, how awful he looks, how unkempt, and how glad I am that I'm not with him.' It was really nice because I was with my entire support group so I had a bit of back-up. Now, had they not been there, things might have been different.

The sexual attraction had disappeared. I realized that I wasn't attracted to him in any way. Someone said, 'He doesn't look like kind of guy that you would be interested in.' And I said, 'Yea, you're right.'

Recovery

Standing Trial

I asked Dorothy to respond to a comment that battered women are twice abused - by their partners and by the criminal justice system (Stanko, 1985).

They aren't necessarily abused by it. It just doesn't seem to have the capabilities to assist them. For example, by the time you a peace bond, you could be dead, and enforcement is sometimes lackadaisical.

Dorothy, unlike most battered women, was officially on trial. Ironically, the trial took place in familiar territory, albeit on the other side of the stand. For Dorothy, her profession was at stake. When George lost the case Dorothy regained her primary identity.

The trial was a bit scary until I got into my story and told it. I got asked questions like, 'Did George ever hit you before?' I got to say, 'Yes.' So, I finally got to tell my side of the relationship. I'd felt it was his side that was expressed to the police and the community for so long. I was quite emotional in the witness stand. It was rather neat for him to have to sit there and listen to me without being able to do a darn thing about it. I felt that I'd regained some of the control that he had wrested from me in putting me in this position in the first place.

The funny thing about it was that he said he was out on a day pass from a hospital mental ward. My peers thought, 'Here she is be charged by an ex-boyfriend who's a complete looney-tune, poor girl.' As a matter of fact, the case was a bit of a joke. I always thought I'd be a bit embarrassed about it and it turned out in my favour.

I taught him you don't play in other people's ball parks. We're the experts and he doesn't know the first goddamned thing about the legal system. He thinks he knows everything. He got his come-uppance that day.

I never did (press charges or countercharge) because it would have been extremely embarrassing for me to wash my dirty linen in the very same courtroom that I earn my living in. At one point I almost did (but) I thought, 'If I do this, I'll have to see this guy more times and I don't want to do that. I want this to be over.'

Can't Do it Alone

I had to take some time off right after the trial. I took two weeks off. (The next month), I got back to work. (The following month, I fell to pieces.

I had to go back (to counselling) because I was so scattered, unable to concentrate.

Dorothy's counsellor outlined some steps to recovery, which she looked at from time to time. It helped, she says, to normalize her otherwise bizarre behaviour.

I learned that in the process of a relationship breaking up, certain emotions are normal. In fact, they even had a flow chart and I had gone through all of the stages. It was really suprising for me to realize that what I thought were mindless wanderings would be a normal response to a given situation - a rational, irrational response.

I feel much better now that I've started counselling. It's a focus and I feel a little less scattered. I feel safer too. It's sort of like having a parachute when you're going to jump out of an airplane. Counselling is the safety valve. It doesn't cure your problem but it prevents you from doing something that you shouldn't, like killing yourself. I've felt suicidal throughout the course of my life. It is amazing I don't feel that way anymore. I feel more in control.

Counselling does work. I think you come out of it with a really strong sense of yourself and a pretty good sense of your own worth.

Anger is normal. It has to be dealt with in order to move on to the next stage. I'd say, 'I can allow myself to be as angry as I want. If I want to hurl my china against the wall I can do that. That's an acceptable way to deal with it. I used to verbalize it (anger) to myself and to my friends. (Throwing china against the wall) was very cathartic. I felt very good about it. Some people thought I was in the middle of a domestic fight, and the police showed up at the door. I was in a very disturbed state so I said, ' I'm just on my way to the hospital.' I happened to be drunk at the time. I was feeling a lot of rage and anger. I thought I was losing control of myself. I just needed to talk with somebody. The police drove me (to the hospital). Then, one of the officers came in (with me), and (we) talked for quite a while. I knew his sister. He didn't think I was crazy. When I was finished talking to the cop I didn't need to talk to the psychiatrist.

At night I used to dream of popping over one night with a gun and just blowing him away after I'd tortured him for a few hours first.

I'm just so mad. I'm mad at two people. Him and me. Me for being such a sap. It wasn't really intentional on his part but I'm still angry. I thought I'd gotten over it. I always will be angry. I'll be angry at him, angry at myself and angry at society that breeds this kind of thing.

Dorothy bided her time. She drank that time away. She forgot about time and she wants to forget about the time immediately after separation. Her telling of events is disjointed. Dorothy is not sure what happened when. How can she be expected express clarity about a time so lacking in it?

All I can say is that it was the worst period I ever had in my life. I wasn't eating right. I wasn't sleeping right. I couldn't work, I couldn't think, I couldn't do anything. I was crying all over the place and feeling really miserable all the time.

It never let up and I wanted some relief. I dealt with things by abusing alcohol to a great extent. I remember that I spent a lot time alone in my apartment drinking, freaking out, and feeling off center. When I didn't want to feel the pain, I used to drink to the point of gross intoxication.

It's a black period that I can't really think about. I can't tell you exactly how I felt because I've forgotten. My brain just refuses to recall it. To tell you the truth I don't even want to.

I get lonely a lot of the time but I've got work and friends, male and female, that are really close, and the occasional little fling. That's not so bad. It's a hell of a lot better than living in pergatory.

I've always had male friends so I know that all men aren't like that. I know that there are some men, misguided though they are, are pretty nice human beings.

The Exit Door

One afternoon Dorothy called and arranged an immediate, additional interview about a dream. This dream was an indication of recovery and a reminder of how long the process takes. It occurred almost a year after the separation and marked another important step along a zig-zag path of recovery.

I had a dream which showed me how far I had advanced. My subconscious mind resolved the issue before my conscious mind was aware of it.

The dream goes like this. There is an accidental meeting between me and George (who comes) up to me saying, 'I want to have another relationship with you. Things went really wrong. I want us to be together again.' And the response on my part, - instead of being unswerving devotion was, 'Oh god, can I get out of this restaurant quick?' He's following and I'm busy trying to disappear. He is saying what I would have wanted. Here's this guy offering me another chance to be Miss Perfect. And I have come far enough to realize that nightmares are made out of these people. (I'm thinking), 'No, I want to get away.' and saying, 'That's nice but I don't think it's reasonable.' I finally turned around and said, 'No, get away from me.' There's an exit door I go through it and I wake up.

The door is the absolute positive of the whole dream. I finally escape through the exit door and that to me is a supreme accomplishment. I woke up (with) a great sense of relief and a great sense of everything I'd built up. That was really important. That to me was the final seal of approval on my mental development.

It gave me a sense of power. It was great. I ended up the winner and that's unusual for nightmares. (The dream was saying), you've overcome this. To me that was a milestone. It was a confirmation of the feeling that I have left.

That was a really clear signal (that) the anguish, all the false hopes, had ended. That's why the dream is so important because dream tells you you've won. You've found your way to the exit door and the exit door is the way to life. It's on the road to self-fulfillment.

Still Leaving

Our final interview occurred days before her departure from the province for a new job. She was still grappling with whether or not to say good-bye to George in spite of knowing that trying to leave on good terms really meant say-

ing hello again. Her desire to return was described as a physically felt experience.

I'm planning on leaving and taking a position elsewhere and darn it if in the last couple of days I've seriously thought of looking him up and saying good-bye. I'm having this battle with myself not to do so. My fingers are itching to dial information and find out where George lives.

I'm obviously still in the process of leaving 'cause I'm thinking about phoning him. I'm allowing myself to think about it but I'm not going to allow myself to do it. To me that's the final strength just to be able to walk away. I'm not going to deny myself the satisfaction of doing that. It's interesting that I still feel the emotion. It would just upset me and I don't want to go off to a new job in a state of emotional upset. So I'm thinking about me right now.

A Different Perspective

Oh No, Let's Go!

Another abusive relationship? I'm much more able to recognize the signs. I'm very aware of certain danger signs.

Abuse is pretty far spread and a lot more prevalent than we think, or are willing to accept. The traditional relationship is, in a sense, a very abusive one. It's very much a power struggle.

I can't think of anything else to say except in the final analysis I think we all want to be loved. Somebody comes along and offers you true love and commitment and you'll do almost anything to maintain that, even though it's destroying you.

You find that your acceptance level gets higher and higher until you're willing to accept almost anything.

I think the way we achieve the ability to not get caught up is by becoming independent individu-

als in our own right. If you have a strong sense of yourself you're going to say, 'Hey, no.'

A Separate Identity

When asked about having a stronger sense of self now, this was Dorothy's response;

I'm still open to entering into a relationship, wearing rose coloured glasses and thinking things are going to be wonderful but more inclined to look out for danger signals.

Now if I'm in a relationship and somebody says something that means him versus me I get really cold feet. I'm not prepared to sacrifice any part of my life or what I enjoy.

Once you get through it, I think you learn something about yourself. You've had the strength to get out and rebuild your life. Now you've got this inner strength of character.

Once you've walked through that, (you think, Hey,) they can drop me off in the middle of the Arctic Circle with some dried pemmican and I'll probably catch the next ice flow out.

(I won the battle because) I'm moving. I've got a great career ahead of me. I'm not emotionally crippled by it. I've transcended the whole experience.

I won that round. It was a battle of will. There was somebody that was going to win and somebody that was going to lose. I won my self-respect, my desire to live as I want and my ability to be the person I am without somebody telling me what I should be. I won big in that battle.

I won the ability to be a normal human, as much as I may or may not be normal, the ability to do what I wanted, to take the helm, if you will, of the ship of my destiny.

UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF LEAVE-TAKING:

CHOOSING

Meaning of Choice

I began this study with the assumption each woman would have chosen to end the relationship with her partner. I saw choice as an essential part of decision-making. Instead, I was told, "There was no choice. I had no alternative. I never made a decision to leave."

I can't think of one time that I sat down and weighed out the whole situation and decided that I was going to do a certain thing.

Each of the three women described decision-making as a process involving sitting down and thinking. A linear thought process is commonly assumed to be central, if not essential, to problem-solving.

Viewed narrowly, ... decision theory tends to concentrate upon those cognitive processes that operate in the mind of a detached speaker to guide him in a well-formed performance. ... The process of reaching a decision among those involved is more like a conversation than like the rational calculus (Bruner, 1979, p.102-103).

The experience of "conversation" in decision-making was described, by Rogers, as one between the "logical, linear, masculine side me and the intuitive, receptive, female

side."(1980, p.47). Her decision to make a major life change emerged from the "constant inner struggle" and eventual "meshing" of these two sides.

It is not surprising that the three women interviewed did not immediately identify with a process they had learned to call decision-making. As we continued to explore each woman's experiences, a form emerged, more closely akin to the one described above.

Human beings, in their preferences, judgements, decisions and actions, appear to be rather more psychological than mathematical; rather more 'subjective' than 'objective'; and rather more of the world inside their head than in the 'real' world outside (Bell, 1979, p.16).

Alan Watts, the philosopher, once said that the most revolutionary question anyone can ask is, "What do I want?" The question is the essential mind-opener. It implies that there is a choice and that you can make a choice, rather than passively accept the way things are.(Goodman, 1979, p.26).

When asked what they want out of life, many abused women have difficulty answering in terms of hopes and dreams apart from the relationship with their partners. Sometimes, they are simply unaccustomed to thinking in this "selfish" or self-centered manner - "I always had to choose what he wanted" or have become accustomed to hiding their particular desires and loves - "You have to hide these things in order to survive."

(Elizabeth) I never made a decision about anything. He made all the decisions. He made it look like I had a choice and in reality I wouldn't.

(G) I'd lost control of everything - money, groceries, ... He took over everything. Towards the end of my pregnancy I was very tired and it was a relief. Then everything stayed like that.

(D) He would make (decisions) unilaterally - what we had to eat, where we went, what we did in our spare time, when we made love, when we got up. (His controlling behaviour) was cloaked in protectionism and true love. People who love you do not want to make all your decisions for you.

The following question, providing a framework for participants' statements, is particularly fitting for Elizabeth, Gabrielle and Dorothy.

Who am I?

If you want to identify me, ... ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any person (Merton, In Rice, 1970, p.31)

Identity

Dorothy sees herself as having established a strong sense of identity prior to meeting George. "I've always thought of myself as a professional person. I had the degree, education and status. That's really important. My career is me and me is my career. That's one of my reasons for living." This was also expressed as her primary identity. Dorothy states

her career is a necessary but not sufficient reason for living. One of her dreams is to write. George, the artist, appealed to Dorothy's sense of an unfulfilled identity.

Gabrielle's sense of identity, her "essence", is centered around her "secret life." It is tied to particular ideas, memories, dreams and values. Many of these have been expressed in her writing, especially poetry, painting and drawing. Expressing herself in this way is integral to Gabrielle's well-being.

Elizabeth has never wanted to be a secretary.

I probably belonged a hundred years ago (when) such a thing as a family existed. Everytime I'd blow out a birthday candle I wished to have a happy marriage. I thought we'd have a family and Ralph would have a really good job. I'd take care of the house, sew and take care of the kids. I really did my job good I think. I'm really proud of the way I took care of the house and myself. (But I wanted to) do things as a family - picnics and going for walks. I wanted some stability, (to) have him settle into one job, get some money in the bank and have a little house with a garden.

Goodman describes identity in terms of confidence in the self, a knowledge that there exists an inner continuity recognizable to others, and taken for granted. (Goodman, 1979, p.56).

Some women have a tremendous capacity to change themselves in response to their surroundings. This chameleon-like quality, common among battered women, serves them well as a survival strategy. However, many women may become self-

conscious and uncertain about their identities if accustomed to seeing themselves in relation to their partner or their partner's image of them.

(D) There was no recognition of me as an individual.

(G) If you are married to a controlling man you only live in reference to his needs. To have essence identifies you as a separate person. You have to be very creative to stay alive and hold onto some part of yourself. I knew if I lost (my ideals), I lost everything. I lost so much of my identity.

Never being sure of your identity to begin with makes it very hard to make a concrete decision.

Trust In Experience

(Through a process of social learning), women come to question whether what they have seen exists and whether what they know from their experience is true. These questions are raised ... as personal doubts that invade women's sense of themselves, compromising their ability to act on their own perceptions and thus their willingness to take responsibility for what they do (Gilligan, 1982, p.49).

Gabrielle did not trust herself to accurately convey her experience (she kept quiet with her doctor), or even to see it clearly for herself.

(G) I couldn't believe myself anymore because if I had any credibility I wouldn't be in this mess.

Dorothy wondered what woman in her right mind would stay around for this kind of abuse.

(D) I began to doubt I was sane. If you're in an abusive relationship, things are pretty crazy. I was mentally unstable in that situation.

Self-esteem

Butler (1985) states, "None of us choose partners far from our sense of self-esteem." It might also be said, none of us choose to leave abusive partners until a foundation of self-esteem is built.

(D) (I was in the relationship) out of a basic sense of insecurity.

(D) I was beginning to feel I was such an irrational and gross person that nobody else would want me.

(D) I always figure men don't like me.

(E) I'd think if he couldn't love me I must be quite unlovable.

(G) I always has a scornful side to my personality which got me into trouble but I never want to give (it) up. If you can scorn, you have a certain amount of safety for your mental health. You don't have an awful lot of hope for yourself when you've lost that (ability) or it's been kicked out of you.

How Do I Live?

The disparity between what she believed and how she lived would have created enormous stress - the stress that comes from conflict (Goodman, 1979, p.26)

(G) I felt I was in some sort of terrible battle of wills, a battle of the spirit. (It was) not really with him but (with) what I wanted and expected my world to be like.

Fears

(G) I always thought courage was having no fear and laughing at death. I started finding out courage is being scared to death butt stopping. You keep saying to yourself, 'I can't stop just because I'm afraid.' (It took courage) to step out.

(G) What stops you from doing anything is (fear) that you might be wrong.

(E) I thought, 'How am I ever going to succeed in this world? I'm not going to go anywhere. I'm afraid.'

Cycle of Abuse

(G) If you're reacting, it's like they have you on a string. You're the puppet.

(G) Sometimes you like to think somebody is doing this to me and if they would stop doing it I'd feel fine. But you have responded - put up defences, found ways to fight, ways to ignore it. You're a total mess too. So It's not just a question of one person laying off and you're going to be fine. You have to start all over again.

(D) We were set to go to counselling and he said, 'I love you madly. Let's live with each other.'

(D) (For several months before the end) it was continually awful. There was none of the support he'd given and none of the I-love-you shit after that. I realize that made it easier (to leave).

Depression

A firm decision is best made in a healthy body. Battered women suffering the long-term effects of their situation are not firm in either mind or body. Drugs are prescribed by doctors whose primary concern is to "calm" the depressed

woman. Gabrielle refused her doctor's offers of valium. She chose not to become "a walking pill box." The one time she filled the prescription she fed the valium to Stan without his knowledge. He became very calm, easier to be with.

(G) I went to the doctor and he gave me valium. I put them in Stan's tea. I gave them to him so he'd be out of it. It was great about a month.

Sometimes women abuse drugs and alcohol to punish themselves. (Triere and Peacock, 1982). Elizabeth's experience supports this observation.

(E) I drank to punish myself (for) whatever I was doing wrong (which) was making him go out and drink.

Two of the women visited their doctors without voicing their specific concerns.

(G) I'd been to my doctor's office in tears so many times, unable to speak, not trusting myself to open my mouth in case I would break down.

(G) Anytime I started thinking I'd go on a crying jag, not be able to stop and end up at the doctor's office.

Responsibility

(E) I figured that he was going through a bad time and probably didn't like himself and somebody had to help him through it.

(G) You know they're ill, almost like being chased by a host of demons, and you think, 'I'd rather not see him get caught. I'll save him.'

(G) I always felt leaving him was deserting a sick person. He said, 'If I had cancer, would you leave me?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'It's like I'm going around with a wooden leg and the noise I'm making

is bothering you.' I said, 'It's like you're beating me with your wooden leg. You're hurting me with it.'

Gabrielle and Elizabeth shifted a sense of responsibility from their partners to their children.

(G) He was angry 'cause I didn't have time to listen. I had a small baby to care for. I just had to forget about him and everything he was doing.

(E) Sometimes I would wonder at what point do you call it quits? Well, if he beat the kids.

Finally, Gabrielle was able to foresake all sense of responsibility for her partner's behaviour.

(G) I didn't feel responsible for his alcoholism anymore. It was his problem.

(G) I was an obstacle for his recovery. I was carrying the responsibility for things being wrong. He could make it appear that way. When I was gone, he was totally responsible for his behaviour.

Material Resources

Lack of financial resources was a concern for all three women.

(E) I wasn't working. I didn't have any money. I had two kids. I didn't feel I was capable of getting a job.

(D) I was getting very terrorized financially. Had I been secure, it would have been a hell of a lot easier for me to say, 'Good- buddy.'

Gabrielle was primarily concerned with having support throughout her pregnancy. It was for this reason that she married. It didn't work for her.

(G) He cut off my life insurance, car insurance and my bank account. I felt like a real non-status person. Any privileges I had on account of being married (had) all been taken away. I didn't even have the right to drive the car.

UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF LEAVE-TAKING:

PLANNING

How Do I Understand the Problem?

I think at some point you say either there's something wrong with me or there's something wrong with this. Which you say can depend on the message you're receiving. For a long, long time I thought it was me. (Goodman, 1979, p.25).

Dorothy echoes this perspective in saying, "You don't beat on a person unless there's something wrong with them. For a while I thought it was really my fault." Like Dorothy, Elizabeth "stopped thinking that he was right and that I was wrong."

Failure

Finally, it became clear to each woman that there was nothing she could do to change her partner's behaviour. With this knowledge, came a sense of futility.

(E) There was no alternative (to ending the relationship). I think as someone said, it's like the dream went dead. I tried to do everything. I was feeling like I'd failed.

(G) I'd think how hard it is to change. I thought I would be able to change him and then I didn't care anymore. Finally the realization came to me that he's going to have to do that himself if he wants. I was saying, 'I can't change him. It's a big enough problem to change me.'

Do I See Alternatives?

When speaking of alternatives to staying with their partners, all women spoke in terms of making a "life" and "death" choice. On the morning she finally left, Gabrielle remembers, "The only thing I was thinking of was, 'if I don't get out of here I'm going to die and I don't want to die.'"

(D) What I mean by the choice between living and dying is - if you continue on there isn't any point. You might as well put a gun to your head. I could see loss of career and possibly ending up in the mental hospital.

Futuring

"Futuring" is a term developed by Dauten (1980) in reference to the activity of imagining a future based on a realistic perception of the present. Each woman was asked about images of a future recollected from the time prior the leaving.

(G) Your life is too much of a mess to be able to see out of it. You can't see past the situation you're in. You can't imagine what you're going to be doing. You're leaving the only life you know for something you don't know.

(G) The last time I left I kept saying to myself, 'Am I going to do it now or am I going to do it in five years (when) I'm old and decrepid.'

(G) (I thought), 'I better get out because what's ahead of me couldn't be any worse than what's behind.'

(E) I had to think about what the future would be like if we stayed together. I realized he would

just end up being old and bitter. (He would) beat himself because he hadn't taken the right opportunities in life and he'd be taking it out on me. The children wouldn't come to visit because he'd be too crabby. We wouldn't have anything. I could see myself as waiting on him hand and foot, waiting for crumbs and they'd never come.

(E) I was sure that year by year I'd become more and more terrified, not just of him, but of everything around. I figured I'd end like my mother... maybe I'd become an alcoholic.

(D) (I imagined a future with) no stability, never being (sure) where I was at with the relationship (and) worrying about it all the time.

(D) I knew all I'd have to look forward to was maybe a couple of moments of joy and pleasure but mostly a hell of a lot of pain and anguish.

(D) (I thought of) never being able to say, 'O.K., I've got this relationship with this guy and I can carry on with my life.'

Giving Up Hope

Elizabeth identifies one incident as the time she gave up hope of Ralph changing. "I felt so totally isolated and I felt there was absolutely no hope. Nothing to do."

(D) I felt like there was no hope anywhere and it was not going to get any better.

Fights of Fantasy

My emotional pain found vent in constant fantasies of flight, of packing my bags and leaving ... My other fantasy was the peace of total oblivion or nonexistence. This eventually worked its way into many specific fantasies of death, ...(Rogers, 1980, p.23).

A woman's first thoughts (about leaving) may be about her partner's death - a fantasy about a kind of death which leaves her blameless. Gabrielle dreamed about leaving Stan with the baby. In the dream, she was certain her baby's life depended upon her leaving. Stan was shot and killed by a Reverend; the baby was saved. As a result of this dream, Gabrielle "came to the conclusion that (she) was in a relationship (in which there were) no positive feelings. Everything was destructive - killing, dying, sickness and running." Elizabeth stated, "It would have been easier if he had died."

Suicide might have provided another imaginable "out" for each woman at some point in her relationship. On the night Dorothy spent in jail, she was "so ashamed" she contemplated "killing" herself. Gabrielle considered suicide "loads of times. It was a solution the same way that you take an aspirin or tranquilizers, (that is), not to destroy myself (but) to have some relief from the harrassment."

Fighting Back

Later, all three women became more active in defending themselves.

(G) (When I was feeling stronger), I would fight back. Many times Stan would come after me and I would stand my ground. He'd threaten me and I'd threaten him right back. I used to tell him, 'If you ever do that I'll wait till you're asleep and maybe I'll cut your throat.' He would back off.

I'm more scared of emotional abuse than physical abuse because (with) physical abuse I can (at least) defend myself with a weapon.

(D) One night I was so angry that I went to the kitchen and whipped out a butcher knife. He was asleep. I sat on the edge of the bed (with) the knife in my hand. It was close enough to scare me. I understand the burning bed syndrome.

(E) When he beat me up that night (of the last incident) it was really different case I got angry. I thought, 'There is no way that this man is going to do this to me anymore. I'm going to stop him right now,' and grabbed him by the testicles. I thought once I had tried to defend myself - it would only get worse. I knew he would eventually kill me.

Gauging Consequences

Weighing Relative Loss and Gain

(D) I sat down (and said to myself), 'I have to end this. (It) isn't right for me.' I was weighing having a relationship - the rotten versus the good things about it. The rotten far outweighed the good. I was able to objectively weigh things.

In making a decision to leave Stan, Gabrielle found a written review and a "balance sheet" of the relationship helpful. She wrote a letter to herself taking stock.

It was painful to look at a piece of paper and see my life. The struggling that I did was all for nothing. The years I'd spent on my own were a waste of time. I'd come full circle (and) was in a worse situation than I'd ever been in my life.

Selecting a Course of Action

(E) I thought of going to a crisis center but I didn't think it was bad enough - that I would be bothering them and just for a minor thing. It didn't rate going to a shelter.

Gabrielle called a transition house and made arrangements to move there the next day. Dorothy was more reactive in the course of action she took. She was involved in fighting George's legal actions.

Motivation for Action

Some people ... are converted (to changing their lives) by the fait accompli and others are motivated ... by a new perspective or ideology. But often the immediate reason they make a move is because they feel uncomfortable standing in place. What was once an easy, familiar status quo becomes a place of internal battles. Eventually, people may change to resolve that conflict, to make a peace in that battleground. (Goodman, 1979, p.26).

Self-Interest and Self-Preservation

A fictional character speaks to the lives of many battered women when she says, "If I stay, I will go mad. ... But I can't leave ... because if I do he will follow me and kill me. ... It looks as if I have to choose between madness or death" (Weldon, 1971, p.174).

A sense of self-preservation developed slowly for Elizabeth. Many times, such as the following, she experienced her life as a living death.

(E) (When) he told me that he had a mistress and said, 'If she doesn't like it she can leave,' it's like I died. My blood just went cold. I wanted to die.

For Dorothy, continuation of the relationship would have meant death of her identity as a lawyer.

(D) When I felt very strongly that I wanted to go and patch things up the only thing that prevented me from doing so (was) I was a lawyer and I had given my word and if I had gone back there I would have been royally embarrassed. I had no choice because if I wanted to retain my respect in my profession I had to stay away. I was suddenly acting in my own self-interest.

With a Little Help

(D) I don't know how people go about it when they have to do it by themselves.

All three participants were involved with a number of persons throughout the course of their leaving. Each woman was involved in counselling at least once. During the process of recovery, all participants sought professional help with varying degrees of satisfaction. Each became involved in a support group with other women - not necessarily battered women. All found this experience to be valuable. Friends and family members were sometimes impatient and unhelpful. However, Gabrielle appreciated a friend with whom she could laugh and share spontaneous activities. Her sister-in-law was most supportive when she offered use of her apartment. Dorothy spoke freely with friends and associ-

ates and sometimes "polled" for opinions. Her sister provided a place of rest and time for thinking. Elizabeth was less inclined to speak of her experiences with either friends or family.

(G) I remember I spoke to a lady on the phone (who) sounded really confident. She sounded so wonderful I thought her situation (of battering) couldn't have been like mine because she wouldn't sound that good. She said, 'Phone me anytime,' and I never called her back. I knew she would be asking if I had made any plans and I would have to say, 'No.'

Both Dorothy and Gabrielle spoke of their relationships as having been addictive. Not suprisingly, Gabrielle appreciated the content and format of ALANON.

(G) ALANON groups helped because they give you back yourself. I don't know if I would have been able to do anything without them. I was starting to feel close to other people. I (had) never told anybody except my friends. I was starting to tell people how I felt.

Both Dorothy and Gabrielle discovered sex with another man to be a liberator.

(G) I went to bed with the hippy. It was the ultimate act of rebellion. It meant, I have some control over my own life.

(G) If sex can be different what am I doing here?

For Elizabeth, her partner's sexual relationship with another woman marked the end of her marriage.

(E) I figured that there would always be somebody else.

For the Children

(G) One of the things that contributed to my wanting to leave was wondering what would happen to my son when he got older and was hearing Stan (put me down). 'What's that child going to think of me?'

Stan said, 'This child will carry on where I left off,' and I thought, 'No way.'

Gabrielle called her elder son from the shelter and told him she had left Stan. Thinking about his pain in watching his mother "go straight downhill," gave Gabrielle the resolve to stay on her own.

UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF LEAVE-TAKING:

IMPLEMENTING

Critical Incidents of Leave-Taking

Intentional Change?

(G) I hadn't made up my mind about what what was going to happen with the relationship. I just wanted to be somewhere I could think.

(D) The day just before the (final) incident I said what was really on my mind which was, 'I'm not going to be in this open position where you're able to destroy me.'

It wouldn't have ended if that (final) incident hadn't happened. It probably would have dragged on for years and years. I think I was extremely fortunate that it happened.

When I absolutely made the decision (to leave) was (when his lawyer called). I didn't leave until I was forced by circumstance. I never actively made the choice on my own and followed it up.

Elizabeth often forgot that ending the relationship had been her decision.

(E) It was really hard to keep that in mind. I would forget about that part. As time wore by the beating up became secondary. (I thought about the) fact that he had left me and I wasn't good enough.

A Clean Break

(E) (The night after his parents left) I told him he would have to leave. There was no going back from that point. I knew it was finished. We never talked about it. There was no point in talking.

I never want to see him (again).

(D) (When I'd accidentally see George), it would set me back a good two weeks to a month (in recovery). After I saw him, I'd withdraw from the world.

A Felt Experience of Disengagement

(D) (I accidentally met George) at the restaurant. I thought (about) how glad I am that I'm not with him. The sexual attraction had disappeared. I realized that I wasn't attracted to him in any way.

(About the dream of an exit door) That was a milestone. It was a confirmation of the feeling that I had left.

Support For Change

(G) I was furious that first week in the shelter. I was so angry that I had an unbelievable amount of energy. I was angry because I was safe to think. I was around people that agreed with me. This was a completely new experience for me.

Coping With Loss

Identity

(G) I was hearing so many stories that I used to go to my room and come out of my body completely. It was like being a spirit suspended in mid-air (without) an identity. I had no connection to my body. I didn't have a name.

It would be so awful to listen (to the stories of abuse), that all of a sudden I'd see myself from a distance. It didn't matter if I'd been lying dead or alive. It had nothing to do with me.

It happened about four or five times at the shelter and very shortly after I came out of there.

It's like, in the few seconds of being removed from your body, your spirit has a chance to rejuvenate itself. For a couple of seconds, you don't have this tearing apart and weight pulling at you. I would come back with so much energy that I'd be hopping off my chair. It was like I had a power source. I would then be able to sit down and listen to more horror stories.

A Void

(G) You feel like an addict. After you've left, it's like you go into withdrawal. There's a void in your life. If you don't start doing something right away - making changes and making your life complete - you're going to be in serious trouble.

(E) Sometimes I'd think to myself, 'Why didn't he just kill me (and) make it so much easier?' I didn't figure I was living for anything. I had the kids but the kids would leave and I would be by myself.

There was nothing inside. I felt I was just part of a person. I wasn't a whole person. I was sure people could look at me and see the blood oozing out. I was in so much pain.

Rebuilding

A New View of the Same Man

(G) I broke off contact with Stan for a while and later went out for coffee with him. I looked at him and I couldn't visualize (having) had anything to do with him. I was thinking, 'My life is much more colourful than his. Now there's no emotional tie. I see him as a child.

I'd get a mental picture of him as a little boy. I'm sure he was a beautiful child. I'd try to visualize the things that happened to him. Looking at him that way defused my resentment and I would feel compassion instead.

I think half the time he didn't know what he was doing.

Perspective on Intimate Relationships

(G) You've lost your innocence and you're never the same again. You can never believe in romance. You find out that there really isn't any love at all. Then what is being fobbed off on us? Is it violence disguised as passion?

(D) The traditional relationship is, in a sense, a very abusive one - very much a power struggle.

(G) Being in love is like taking a pill. In the addicted society you take a pill for your symptoms. The pill can be a person. As long as that person is supplying the fix, everything's fine.

My idea of a relationship is completely changed. It's (now) knowing somebody for a long time, not having any physical involvement until I am certain. I don't want the emotional responsibility of another person.

If you want to sleep with a person you have to relearn a lot of things. You have to learn that (sex) doesn't make (him) liable to you. You have to know him very well first so you're not going to make mistakes.

The only place you can find love is in your very, very personal life. People in love don't exist.

(E) I remember the anger I felt watching programs, even ads, showing women happy. What a bunch of lies. I thought they were trying to make us believe this is how things are supposed to be and they just aren't like that at all. There is love between sisters and brothers, parents and (children but) not (between) men and women.

With a Little Help

(G) You just have to make sure that you stay around some very positive people if you want to be in good mental health.

(D) Surround yourself with people who are outgoing, friendly, good-natured, enthusiastic and seem to enjoy life. It wears off on you. I got more energized 'cause I was amongst people with positive attitudes.

(G) I'm starting to have men friends I'm not sexually or emotionally involved with, but who I can talk to.

(D) I've always had men friends, so I know that all men aren't (abusive).

(G) I was extremely fortunate I had women friends to have talks with.

I got into a career counselling course. It was really a start because I had to stop lying to myself. You have to know where you are in your life before you can go anywhere else. You don't want to admit your life has gone downhill to (such an) extent.

(D) I feel much better now that I've started counselling.

(G) Getting post-partum counselling turned me onto a lot of different things. I started to find out that I wasn't the only person this was (abuse) was happening to.

I went to get social assistance and the counsellor from the shelter came with me. I had no idea what to say. I didn't want to speak up, to

let these women know know my life was in such a mess. I was really embarrassed and she said, 'It's not your fault. You don't have to feel badly about anything.'

The social worker visited. Social workers want you to tell them your plans for life. I was very truthful, trying not to be despondent because I knew if I was despondent I would be walked on further. I had to sound motivated.

I'd meet the (shelter) volunteer and we'd set a goal for the month. We'd talk about how we were going to do it and she would get information. I wanted to go to school (for highschool completion) and I didn't know where to start. She suggested I go to the Women's Resource Center.

A Visible Sign of Recovery

(G) I just got a thing published. I was pleased because it seemed like one of the things I was holding onto was actually in front of me. It meant so much.

Before I met Stan, I had a couple of things published in different magazines. For the longest time, I couldn't gather my thoughts enough to write a letter to my mother. Sometimes I couldn't talk on the phone. I couldn't get out what I wanted to say. Then, all of a sudden, I get this little magazine in the mail (with my piece) written coherently.

I had forgotten how to laugh. The other day I laughed out loud and then thought, 'This is uncharacteristic.' It felt so good. It gets rid of the weight that you carry around.

UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF LEAVING: EVALUATING

Who am I Now?

Dorothy and Gabrielle evaluate their recovery in terms of identity. For Dorothy, it means re-establishing herself as a lawyer and learning to like herself as the person who "gets up in the morning, (and who) relates to people."

(D) You've got to rebuild your sense of yourself.

Reasserting her identity as a writer was a primary way in which Gabrielle marked her recovery. Regaining her sense of confidence in her values and ideals was also vital - "something I held onto with such strength 'cause if I'd lost it I'd have lost myself."

(G) Now I'm sure of what I know because I've had two years on my own without ever being told there's something I can't do or shouldn't do or am forbidden to do.

Elizabeth had wanted only to have a "happy marriage and a family". She identifies herself primarily in terms of these roles. Elizabeth considers herself to have failed in her marriage and to be struggling with being a single mother.

Dorothy is saying "yes" to her independent self and "no" to others who would threaten that.

(D) I think the way not to get caught up (with abusive partners) is by becoming independent individuals in our own right.

Dorothy has high hopes for her new position as a lawyer. She is not going to let George, or her feelings for George, get in the way this time.

(D) You learn (that) you have the strength to get out and rebuild your life.

(G) (Now) I want to have my new identity. I don't want to be identified as an abused woman any more or feel like one.

(G) I don't feel like a person that has one life to one person and a secret life to another. I could come out. I always knew I was in hiding.

Elizabeth describes herself as still in hiding.

(E) I haven't done anything in a long time. I haven't written since things started going bad. I haven't drawn either. I know there's stuff I should be undertaking. I would like to change my career (but) I won't go for another job. I don't have any confidence to take risks. You can't do anything if you don't have confidence.

About Being a Victim

In our final interview, Gabrielle spoke about women as victims. In her view, battered women who are victimized by their experience are consequently stripped of their power.

(G) I think it's a very clever plot to keep women thinking they're victims. Making women (into) victims gives others power to use them.

(G) I don't think women are (naturally) victims - women are only victims in accordance with men's value system. I think most of the time they are much braver and more advanced in their thinking than the men they're with. It seems they're evolv-

ing because they care about other people. Women want to be free of men's value system. That makes women dangerous subversives rather than victims.

(G) I have more courage than Stan. (A lot more courage) in living and in wanting to live. But as long as I am seen as a victim, all that is negated. That takes all my power away - the power I have earned, I might add.

(G) Yesterday (a woman) phoned from the shelter asking, 'Would you like to do a radio interview (about) battered women?' I said, 'No.'

(G) (If) I went (on the radio) I would have to be anonymous. I'd be just another faceless abused woman who knows how to talk.

(G) We're doing (research interviews) together and five million people aren't listening. If I was doing a radio interview the questions would be things about battered women. I'd be asked, 'Why didn't you leave?' (I) would be asked all kinds of insensitive stuff so (people) could have a good listen to somebody's misfortune. They would say, 'It couldn't have been that bad if she's talking on the radio,' and, 'If she's so bloody smart (how come she was) in that position anyway?'

(G) A year ago I would have done it. Maybe (then) I would have felt I was doing something important. Now I don't care or I haven't as much to prove that way. Now I keep quiet for a different reason. I keep quiet because I don't want to cast my pearls. I have more important things to do.

About Being a Survivor

(G) I had to hold on desperately to what I believed in even through brainwashing. If you can survive that it turns your failures into successes.

About Being a Warrior

Both Dorothy and Gabrielle used the language of warfare and spoke about victory. Gabrielle was of mixed feelings about using this language. She hastened to preface her words with caution about speaking the language of a man's world. Elizabeth was uncomfortable with her aroused anger and spoke about feeling defeated. All three used language appropriate to survivors of coercion and torture. Not all were comfortable expressing themselves in this manner.

(G) I can't imagine that I had to fight so hard when all I was doing was living. Most of the battered women I saw were trying to live everyday. None of them had committed any terrible crime or been displeasing their husbands in a terrible way. They were just trying to live.

(D) I've gone through al this shit and I'm not being a great war hero or anything 'cause I didn't think I was going to get through it. All I'm really saying is you do get through.

(D) (I won the battle because) I'm moving. I've got a great career ahead of me. I'm not emotionally crippled. I won that round. It was a battle of wills and there was somebody that was going to win and somebody that was going to lose. I don't think this guy really knows how much I won that battle and what I won - my self-respect, my desire to live as I wanted without someone telling me what I should be. I won big in that battle. I thought I'd lost for the longest time. I thought I'd lost that person.

How Do I Live?

(G) (Recovery) doesn't happen in a short time. It's a long time of positive and encouraging things happening to you. What helped me tremendously was my Bible study. I was finding out the (same) thing I was learning in the shelter - the way things are. I (learned) protest is like putting a bandaid on an amputation. I don't get inot useless arguments about people's ideologies. You can waste all your creative energy fighting a system that can't be changed. The only thing you can do is make whatever changes you can to yourself.

(G) Sometimes we're not able to draw the line too clearly between what's right and what's wrong. There are all kinds of different things happening that are contradictory. People don't have any guidelines. In the Bible it's the same advice for everybody. There are certain things you are not to do if you want to enjoy good mental and physical health and not to be fighting with people. First, that you have to look after your physical body. I've been staying in a healthy frame of mind, not taking any mind-altering drugs. Second, if you fight against people it's going to destroy you. We're in a constant state of war but you can't fight for peace. To stop fighting (is) a great relief.

(G) Now I'm starting to take some pride in my house, things I do with my children and the things I make. Finally I think I have enough freedom to be a woman without using my femininity or my sexuality in order to survive.

(E) Mornings are very hard. It's hard getting out of bed. I used to love mornings. I used to love getting up.

(G) I find now making decisions is easy. If your life is fairly normal then you can deal with it and you can look into the future. You know what you're capable of doing and you know how much money you're going to be making. Your life has some kind of stability so you're able to sit down and make some plans.

(E) I don't have any confidence. You can't do anything if you don't have any confidence to take risks. (I'm) a single parent, very responsible. One thing for sure is I won't go for another job. I wouldn't know if I could go back to school, for instance, since the depression. I'm better now, but my memory really went 'cause I tried to forget a lot of the things that happened. I certainly wouldn't go for (other) jobs. They ask you in your application if you're on any medication. I'm on anti-depressants.

Regrets?

Our final interview occurred days before Dorothy's departure from the province for a new job. She was still grappling with whether or not to say good-bye to George.

(D) I'm obviously still in the process of leaving 'cause I'm thinking about phoning him. I'm allowing myself to think about it but I'm not going to allow myself to do it 'cause to me that's the final strength, just to be able to walk away.

(E) He seems to be getting it all out of life. He has a nice house, a good job, all the support of his friends. He hasn't paid any consequences. He sees his kids when he wants to see them. Why can't I be happy? Why can't things go my way?

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

Leaving as a Complex Process

In conducting this research I gained an appreciation for the complexity of decision-making in general and of leave-taking in the context of an abusive relationship in particular. There is no single step-by-step process of ending a relationship with an abusive partner. Of the many ways of leaving, physical separation is only a part. In fact, leave-taking occurs prior to a woman's ending her relationship and continues long after that event. As anticipated, two levels of leave-taking were evident - inner and outer. Leaving starts as a seed within and grows outward finding expression in acts which mirror the inner shifts. Battered women may "leave" their bodies, in fantasies and sometimes in dreams. Women often break a "promise" in an act of leaving; sometimes it is an agreement about monogamy. There are many forms of leaving; there is a multitude of methods for bringing it about.

Leaving as a Life/Death Choice

Initially, none of the participants claimed to have made a final decision about leaving. On further exploration it became apparent that, while each woman had made several decisions about survival, planning for an independent and distant future was not a part of the decision-making process. For Gabrielle, leaving was simply a matter of choosing to live rather than to stay with her partner and die. At root of the "decisions" to leave are other more primary decisions. All three women contrast images of life and death: freedom and bondage. Their choices were described in these terms.

Leaving and Intention

One of the main surprises of the study involved the issue of intention. I found the participants to have been either without clear directions, or possibly unable to reflect on past intention. This fit with their common observation that a decision to leave had not been made.

Thoughts, Feelings and Sensations

Many battered women are depressed and consequently have difficulty making decisions. This was true for all three participants. Gabrielle, for example, spoke of having neither the time nor the ability to think. Thinking is likely

to be distorted for any woman suffering the effects of abuse. In addition, battered women become accustomed to having their partners make decisions. This was congruent with each participant's report. In terms of leaving and particularly the preparation involved, small steps were seen to be great victories for these women.

Central themes in a process of disengagement revolved around the issues of "responsibility", "selfishness", and "hope." These values were re-evaluated by each women. A shift was made from selfishness to self-interest, from responsibility for her partner's behaviour to responsibility for self and/or children, and from hope for a better future to hopelessness about the present continuing in the same way. All participants made spontaneous use of personal affirmations.

All three women spoke of the necessity of living in accordance with their values, which they described as being incompatible with their partner's. Religious beliefs played a part in one woman's decision to leave and another woman's process of recovery. A third woman had been suprised to see Christian images in a poem she had written post-separation.

Significant events of decision-making and leaving were seen to have a physical component. Participants described felt experiences disengaging from their partners.

Critical Incidents

Contrary to expectation, there were a number of critical incidents of leave-taking for each woman. One common critical incident involved having a sexual encounter with someone other than a partner. Another common theme was "fighting back" in a new and significant manner.

Meaning of Leaving for Participants

Research interviews appeared to be a part of the process of clarifying and creating meaning for the participants. Consequently, research participation was seen to have a therapeutic component for the women interviewed.

Implications for Counsellors

Validating the Life Choice

Psychotherapy should make one feel that he (or she) has come alive (Kelly, 1967, p.252).

When a battered woman considers alternatives to staying with her abusive partner she may contemplate suicide, killing him or being killed by him. As a counsellor, I am reminded to speak directly about life and death - suicide and murder.

A counsellor may not be able to hasten the process of disengagement but can certainly point out ways in which a woman is already leaving. It is not necessarily helpful to

stand with an open door (to borrow Dorothy's metaphor). A woman must open it for herself.

A woman who lives with a man who beats her has chosen a living death. As a counsellor you can validate what life remains. Sometimes this involves talking about death. Gabrielle found it helpful to see that her "eyes had died." This observation alarmed her sufficiently to mobilize her life-force. The urge to write and the apparent loss of that ability gave Gabrielle some impetus for leaving. There is at least one thing, unique to each person, which gives her a reason for living, e.g., an unfinished project. A person engaged with interest in any undertaking is in touch with a positive life-force.

Space for Evaluating Experience

Attend to the physical and psychological boundaries in your relationship with a battered woman. Respect her need for "space." A battering male tends to monopolize space and time and repeatedly violates the woman's physical boundaries. Gabrielle appreciated her sister-in-law's offer of her apartment for several uninterrupted days of contemplation. Gendlin's method of focusing as a way of clearing and creating space within, might be helpful for battered women and anyone else taking stock of a current situation.

The Many Times of Leaving

A personal conversation reported in my research journal suggests one possible explanation for the many times battered women "leave" before a final leave-taking. It was suggested that a woman who leaves her abusive partner often feels a need to return to this dangerous situation in order to recover some of her investment of self. Preparation for final leaving might involve taking back those "eggs" placed in the partner's "basket". A woman may be aware of the danger to her and risks doing what she sees as essential to carrying on with her life. That the way forward often includes a journey back is supported by Dorothy's and Gabrielle's experiences of "reclaiming". As a counsellor, I wonder about how a woman can more safely retrieve what she must - assuming that she may return to her partner at least once. Focus on her safety in a frank discussion of the risks involved. Above all, respect the woman's process of leaving and the time, or many times, it takes.

Expressive Data and Expressive Therapy

The three women who participated in this study were interested in writing and/or drawing. Two of them read their poetry to illustrate past experience. Dorothy's poem drew attention to an area of her life I had not addressed, i.e., her religious beliefs.

All three women reported dreams and daytime fantasies. One of Dorothy's dreams reminded us both that disengaging is a lengthy process. Elizabeth's dreams expressed a violence not immediately evident in our conversations.

Understanding was deepened, on both sides, as we explored the images and feelings expressed in poems, dreams and fantasies. An exploration of personal and cultural myths and symbols might have been a welcome counselling focus for at least two of these three women, particularly in combination with art therapy. More attention to these rich resources in future research of decision-making and in counselling for decision-making could prove valuable.

Aggression and Self-preservation

Battered women gain a sense of personal power in discovering a capacity for physical aggression. Often, a woman overcomes a sense helplessness when she experiences her ability to defend herself and/or her children. Encourage a battered woman to give voice to her violent dreams and fantasies. As a researcher this was one of my most difficult tasks. I was unprepared for the degree of anger and violence expressed. When I discussed the observation of women finding power in their aggression, I heard the following supporting account.

It was only after, when I felt the power of the decision, of having something to balance out the

relationship, that I felt I happened on a liberator - my twelve-gauge shotgun. One night he literally "triggered" me - he pushed me over the line. I got out the gun, filled the clip and told him I'd shoot him if he hit (one of the children) again. It was a decision so pure and so clear; I refused to say anything, - just stood there with a full clip and the safety off. Later I took out the clip and hid the gun. But the gun wasn't important anymore - in retrospect, it was like I'd gotten some clarity about the problems with (my husband). It didn't matter a damn who was at fault. No more talking, no more excuses, no more thinking and agonizing - just - you do **this** and I'm gonna do that. That gun was the pivot point. From then on, I felt I had some power because I'd seen his abject fear.

The process of leaving or disengaging is violent in its own way. Coping with loss requires courage. Accompany your client, as much as possible, into the heart of her grief. A separating woman experiences loss of a dream, of the man she might have loved, and who, even if she hated him, was an integral part of her being.

Williams, 1976, addresses a pitfall of "overidentification" with the client. This occurs when the therapist "buys" into the client's fear and awe of the batterer.

As long as she exaggerates her oppressor's potency and minimizes her own, a (battered) woman is stuck in her unhappy circumstances and with an unnecessarily frustrating image of herself(p.168).

A counsellor may avoid becoming "victimized" by a "victim" client by focusing instead on the woman's "warrior" qualities. The client's language can provide a key.

Telling the Story

Telling the "secret" of being abused was vital for all three participants in terms of disengaging. Denial is a consuming activity. Hearing oneself speak about the experience of battering brings it more clearly into focus. Each of the research participants appreciated this opportunity of being heard. Listening to oneself speak can also be informative for a woman. For example, Dorothy was impressed by the force of her words.

I sound like a tough broad. language deteriorates into basic terminology when you're relating your story, into very basic syllables. You find yourself using basic language when something really reaches you. What if people don't think I'm a lawyer?

Over the course of the interviews, each of the three women made comments about how being interviewed, being a research participant and an instructor in her life-world, changed her view of the past. For Gabrielle, telling her story allowed her to leave her identity as a battered woman. An essential element of therapy is stepping back and seeing one's experience from another perspective. Telling one's story allows for, and even necessitates this.

This research method creates a possibility for a counselling method. We shape our lives around a few dominant themes. Authors are in the habit of creating characters around single themes, autobiographers condense a life to a

telling phrase. It may be helpful for the counsellor and client to identify and explore a single dominant theme (or perhaps several), around which the client appears to organize her life. Counselling is, after all, a joint research enterprise, a collaborative exploration of a life. Such a counselling approach could serve several purposes. Initially, it would be helpful in clarifying how a person perceives her world. It serves to remind the client that she is seen to have a unique identity. This may be especially important for the woman whose identity has been submerged in response to her partner's abuse. Dominant themes can be used as focusing devices in counselling sessions. Effort can be made to discuss themes in such a way as to highlight a woman's personal strengths. These might be expressed as verbal affirmations or non-verbal reminders. Such an approach can be helpful in demonstrating an appreciation and understanding of the person's experience.

Couple Counselling

Participants' experiences lent support for individual and group counselling as opposed to couple counselling. Two of the men had agreed to joint counselling sessions as a condition for continuing their relationships and subsequently violated the agreement. In this way, counselling can be used as manipulation, whether or not a counsellor is seen.

Many feminists critique family systems approaches to abusive relationships saying that couples therapy is inappropriate and even dangerous for women who have been battered. ... Systems therapy with emphasis on interaction rather than on individual responsibility for behaviour lends itself to a tendency to blame the victim. An important principle is that the man change his behaviour first and then the system can be fruitfully addressed (NiCarthy, Merriam, Coffman, 1984,p.25).

With a Little Help

All participants had been involved with a number of social service agencies at various points in leave-taking.

Although Elizabeth did not see a transition house as a viable alternative, Gabrielle emphasized the importance of using a shelter to provide time and space for decision-making.

Dorothy found support in a group for women considering leaving their partners, whereas Elizabeth joined a women's support group sometime after separation. Gabrielle was involved in training of transition house volunteers. Groups "can provide an atmosphere of acceptance, of community and, occasionally, even of laughter and fun that no individual counselor can duplicate."(NiCarthy, Merriam, Coffman, 1984, p.27). Group experience underscores a woman's uniqueness as well as her similarity to others. It provides a social context for discussion about violence against women and becomes a place where women can share concerns and mobilize their strengths.

Women are the best experts on their own lives; women are often safer in relying on others who are like themselves than in placing their fate in the hands of authority figures; in speaking honestly to each other, women teach each other that their problems aren't merely individual, but are social, political and shared by many others. ... The best place for women to look for emotional support and practical help is often from other women (NiCarthy, Merriam, Coffman, 1984, p.25-26)

Implications for Researchers

We are always recounting life experiences in process. The world changes and changes us, even as we make our observations and recordings (Cottle, 1977, p.20).

Research Interviews

Oakley, 1981, describes interviewing as a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives in which the interviewer is the data collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched. In keeping with this view, Oakley emphasizes the importance of having women research women's experience and interview other women. Even if a particular female researcher does not have a better understanding of a woman's experience than a particular male researcher, the interviewee might expect it and consequently offer a fuller description of her experience. In addition, rapport can be more quickly and completely established with another person assumed to be vulnerable to the same oppressions. This effect is likely to be enhanced when the inter-

viewee has been repeatedly violated by a once-trusted male partner.

All three research participants spoke about their wariness of men and also spoke as if I could be assumed to share a perspective common to women. Gabrielle considered me to share a common language which she distinguished from "man-speak." Elizabeth had, to this point, carefully avoided contact with male professionals wherever possible. I believe she would not have agreed to being interviewed by a man. Dorothy, more often in the company of men in her personal and professional lives, spoke, nonetheless, as if my being a woman meant we shared a common understanding about intimate relationships with men.

Interviewing is seen to be a collaborative process - involving interviewer and interviewee in a joint enterprise. "Finding out about other peoples' lives is much readily done on a basis of friendship than in a formal interview." (Oakley, 1981, p.52). Maslow, in the following words, depicts the intimacy evoked for me in these in-depth and informal conversation;

For the best learning, perceiving, understanding, and remembering of a person, it is desirable to be interested, involved, to have a little bit of love, to be at least a little fascinated (Maslow, In Roszak, 1972, p.84).

Cottle tempers the element of friendship with a knowledge of intrusion.

I refer to myself not only as a friend of those who share their lives with me, but also as an intruder. This perception is also shared by psychotherapist and counselors, for the feelings of intrusion exist in the therapeutic alliance even though the patient or client seeks out the therapist precisely because the therapist's role allows for a degree of symbolic invasion (Cottle, 1977, p.36).

From my research journal comes a caution especially relevant to work with battered women.

I continue to question what is reasonable to share with a research participant. Dorothy has become a friend through the course of our association. I had not anticipated this degree of involvement but have no regrets - only some questions about personal and professional boundaries.

I am aware that being a woman helped me in gaining participants' trust. I believe that sharing some of the same understandings and concerns is an asset for research. However, I also know that some of our blind spots are likely to overlap.

Blind spots will appear in our conversations, sometimes because we are victimized by the political and social realities of our culture, sometimes because we believe that we are immune to the pressures of these realities. This is particularly true when we do nothing more than speak with another person and record bits of this experiential history (Cottle, 1977, p.23)

In my research journal I wrote about my frustrations with the process of interviewing.

I tire of hearing myself attempt to return Gabrielle to the singular from the general, the concrete from the symbolic. I am caught in the tension of not wanting to miss the richness of her panoramic vision nor the wealth that comes from depth of focus.

I battle with the four simple questions I have to guide this session because she has her own notion of what she wants or needs to say. I am doing something which doesn't fit with my notion of research, that is, I am inviting her to answer the questions **she thinks** I should be asking.

An additional interview was required to provide an opportunity for each woman to tell her story of abuse. This seemed to fulfill a need for each and to be a necessity for entry into her experiential world.

I am both researcher and advocate. We laugh together. I express concern about something she has told me. When she offers some gem of experience, I pounce and make mental notes for the manuscript. I collect and treasure the bits and pieces of her pain - uncomfortably aware of my greed (Author).

What we know about another person, what he or she gives to us in conversation and friendship, is in great measure that person's response to us. We ourselves are the agents of information; people give us what they believe we want or assume we are willing to accept. ... Even when I claim that I have done little, said little, allowed the other person to speak freely about whatever it is he or she wanted to speak about, my presence can be detected in the utterances of that person, just as their utterances will be found in my writing (Cottle, 1977, p.16-17)

In interviewing a battered woman, bear in mind that she is likely to be skilled in determining exactly what is wanted from her and inclined to please. This tendency might be

more pronounced than in other research participants who might reasonably be expected to do the same.

Reading Research

Brand (1979), suggests that a therapeutic experience of reading literature (and perhaps also research), parallels a process of traditional psychotherapy that moves from identification with the material, to a cathartic experience and finally to insight about the nature of experience. As with any vicarious experience, the reader is simultaneously involved and detached. This process is similar to one proposed by van Manen to describe any learning experience. What appears to be essential to both is the movement from being involved, interested and immersed, to being removed to a peripheral position of reflection.

A different point of entry may exist for each reader whose life meshes with the material in a distinct and unique manner. Another's words can unlock parts of oneself not accessible in normal waking consciousness. We enter another world. This is precisely what a counsellor is called upon to do in her work with each client.

From these accounts we will learn a bit ... for we will become 'acquainted' with the lives of a few more people. That is, we will elaborate on our existing knowledge. We also will feel this new knowledge, (which) will evoke in us unpredictable reflections and emotions. ... No one can listen to the accounts of another person's life and remain indifferent or objective. ... Inevitably, something is evoked in us (Cottle, 1977, p.15)

Stanley and Wise (1978) suggest that the reader constructs meaning in the activity of reading a research account.

A Final Research Question

Cottle (1977) poses the following questions for doing research and practicing therapy.

Is (what we are doing) respectful of the truths of the single human life as it evolves within a culture, within psychological and sociological spheres, and according to the constraints of history? ... Is it mindful of the fact that we cannot know directly the life of anyone but ourselves? (p.38).

APPENDIX A
DEFINITION OF TERMS

Battered Woman

The terms "battering" and "abuse" are used interchangeably.

A battered or abused woman is one "who is or has been in an intimate relationship with a man who repeatedly subjects her to force physical and/or psychological abuse"(Walker, 1984, p.203).

An intimate relationship is a relationship having a romantic, affectionate or sexual component. "Repeatedly" means more than a single assault. Walker (1984) gathered information from women who reported four or more incidents of physical abuse. This research will use the same criteria.

A Battering Cycle

Walker (1979) proposed that abuse occurs in a cyclical pattern - "that battering is neither random nor constant, but occurs in repeated cycles, each having three phases. The first phase is a period of tension-building which leads up to phase two, or the acute battering incident. The third phase consists of kind, loving, contrite behaviour displayed by the batterer towards the woman, which provides the reinforcement for the cycle." (Walker,1984,p.2). Women are considered most likely to leave their partners when "the ratio between the tension-building and loving contrition phases sharply diverges."(p.84).

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

I,..... consent to being part of this study about the process of leaving an abusive partner.

I understand that my involvement in this study is completely voluntary and that I may decide to withdraw at any point without negative consequence.

I am aware that I will be given the opportunity to read the summarized transcript of the interviews and to delete and/or modify anything I wish. Names of persons, places or any other identifying information will be changed in the transcript and the original tape erased upon completion of this study.

I further understand that if I experience any negative effects as a result of my involvement in this project, the researcher will assist me in seeking professional counselling or other appropriate support.

I am aware that my involvement in this project will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher and that the

audio-tape and transcripts will be accessible only to the researcher.

Name

APPENDIX C
RESEARCH STUDY FOR WOMEN: THE PROCESS OF
LEAVING AN ABUSIVE PARTNER

I am a Master's student working toward completion of a degree in Counselling at the University of Victoria and am planning a study on how women leave abusive partners.

I am looking for women who have left a physically abusive partner and are willing to be interviewed about their experience.

If you are interested in assisting me with this study, please read on.

Purpose and Value of the Study

With this study, an attempt will be made to develop some accurate statements that reflect the experience of women in making the decision to leave an abusive partner and carrying through with the decision. It is hoped that women's experiences of leaving, as told by themselves, can further counsellors' understanding and ability to help as needed.

Method of the Study

I propose to spend an initial one to two hours talking with each participant. This will be an opportunity to get to know one another better, for answering questions, signing a consent form and scheduling a first interview.

Two interviews of approximately two hours will be audio-taped. Portions of these interviews will be transcribed.

A third interview is for the participant's feedback about experience described in the previous interviews. At this time, the interviewee will be asked to modify, delete or add anything she considers essential to an understanding of her experience.

It is the participant's right to refuse to answer questions or explore suggested topics.

I expect the total time commitment for a participant to be approximately eight to ten hours.

Confidentiality

Any person inquiring about this study - whether or not she becomes a participant - is assured of anonymity. Only the researcher will know the names of participants. Names and any other identifying information will be changed in the transcripts and the completed research report. Tapes will be returned or erased upon completion of the study. Only the researcher will have access to interview material.

If you can clearly recollect and describe your inner experience and the events associated with leaving an abusive partner, please consider contributing to what might become a beneficial project.

If you would like to become involved or obtain more information before deciding to participate, please contact me by leaving a message weekdays between 9:00am and 5:00pm at Calgary Family Service Bureau (233-2370). You can also reach me at home, at 281-2704.

Thank-you for your attention to this request. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Morgan Armstrong

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