

Ritual Abuse-Torture: A Human Rights Violation

Jeanne Sarson RN, BScN, MEd & Linda MacDonald RN, BN, MEd

www.ritualabusetorture.org

Just like the gleaners who are intent on collecting every valuable seed from the fields we too were focussed on gathering every morsel of fact that would help us achieve our goal; which was working to have ritual abuse-torture officially recognized as a violation of the human rights of persons who have been, or who are still, or who will be at risk of being so victimized. We, just like the gleaners in the fields, were focussed. Weaving our way through the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York City, from March 1-12, 2004, moving from conference room to conference room, from the intensity of one caucus meeting to another, learning from the global activist women and men, gathering seeds of knowledge—of facts—during the two weeks we attended the 48th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Facts that came together to help us write a brief submission that was published in the non-governmental organization (NGO) newsletter that detailed the activities of the Commission. Our submission read:

We recommend ritual abuse-torture (RAT) be identified as an emerging human rights violation; that ritual abuse-torture be ... [acknowledged] as a newly recognized form of torture that is inflicted by non-state actors.¹

Squeezing as much education as we could into our submission our recommendation went on to explain that:

Ritual abuse-torture is inflicted upon girls and boys, as young as infancy, and unto women. It involves planned and organized family and group rituals, abuse and torture as well as “off-street” in-home, regional, national and transnational trafficking and sexualized exploitation and modern day slavery. Ritual abuse-torture has the capacity to destroy the personality of the infant, toddler, child, youth or adult victim.



[Jeanne and Linda ... our last day!]

providing a report that included conclusions and recommendations, which would be submitted to the Secretary General of the UN.

Seeing this recommendation printed in the NGO Newsletter, *The World of Women*, made all the work worthwhile. It tasted like a victory. It was a victory! A celebration of the power of the written word—a victory that nurtured our spirits as we sat, on the last day, watching the final process of how all global state delegates came together to negotiate “the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”. This was one of the two thematic issues the CSW was responsible to address by

Why did our statement only make reference to women as adult victims thus excluding men as adult victims? This is a question we have been asked quite frequently. There are two main reasons:

1. When we did our “kitchen table” participatory research project, in 1998, we were unable to connect with men who identified them-Selves as being survivors of ritual abuse-torture. Although the six Nova Scotian women who came forward to share their ordeals of surviving ritual abuse-torture spoke frequently of having male siblings and shared their perspectives on how boy children were harmed by perpetrators of ritual abuse-torture they did not have insights into whether any of their adult male siblings became captive enslaved victims. Any statements we make have to truthfully reflect our research findings and work, thus, men were not included in the statement; and,
2. The work of the CSW is focussed on improving the lives of women and the girl child globally. Attention was also given to the vulnerability of the boy child thus the language and wording used during caucus meetings and side presentations reflected this goal by consistently making reference to “the girl and boy child and women”. Our statement needed to follow this CSW framework.

And, how did we come to join people from many countries at the 48th session of the CSW? Dana Raphael, PhD, Director of the Human Lactation Center, Connecticut, which is a NGO in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, asked us. Dr.



[Flags of many countries at the UN]

Changes Patterns in the Structure of the Brain”; and, our presentation was called, “Ritual Abuse-Torture: A Research Discussion Presentation Identifying Human Rights Violations”.

Raphael was organizing and facilitating a panel side-presentation entitled, “*The Many Faces of Torture*”. Panel participants were: Jeanette Westbrook, MSSW, CSW., KY., who spoke as “A Survivor of Ritual Abuse-Torture”; Helen L. McGonigle, Attorney at Law, CT., discussed “A Legal Quandary: Local and Global”; Randall D. Marshall, MD, Director of Trauma Studies and Services New York Psychiatric Institute, NY., presented, “Torture: A Factor that

So, on March 8th, the day of the side-panel presentation, we had the privilege of celebrating International Women’s Day by sharing our work! We explained: (1) how we became involved, (2) our research and thematic definition of ritual abuse-torture, and (3) our global connections.

How We Became Involved

Picking up the phone one evening, in 1993, a woman we did not know stated she planned to kill her-Self in four days. After much time in conversation and connection the woman hung up agreeing to call the next day. We waited ... and waited. Late into the night the phone rang again, the woman had reached out for a second time. We would come to know her as Sara (not her real name). Sara agreed to meet with us. At the time we were working independently with adults who Self-identified being victimized and traumatized by relational violence.

Realizing Sara needed help beyond what we could provide we went seeking knowledgeable support for her. Unable to obtain help for Sara—for instance, phone calls we made requesting

help were not answered and other professionals did not want to be involved when they learned Sara was reporting she had been born into a ritual abuse-torture family and was still a captive enslaved woman—we continued to support her. Unwilling to abandon Sara we informed her we had no experience and little knowledge about how to best support her. Sara stayed and so did we. She learned and so did we. Sara got out.

Our Research and Definition of Ritual Abuse-Torture

Comprehending Sara’s needs and how to best support her meant we had to understand her lived ordeals by staying present with her as she broke the barriers of dissociation over and over again. Terrors, tortures, and horrors unfolded again and again. Sufferings that human language could not put into words; agonies that left Sara wondering if she could go on or whether “the family’s” threat that she would never make it out alive would come true were ever present.

Terrors, tortures, and horrors—fragmented experiential pieces of lived ordeals fell into our awareness without order—much like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Experiential pieces of lived chaos we knew we would have to put together— make sense of—if we were to be successful in helping Sara achieve her goals. For five years we worked at making sense of the experiential

MODEL-MAKING (Capra, 1988) as a Way to Understand RITUAL ABUSE-TORTURE

Broadening the framework of scientific knowledge means involving:

1. systematic observation, and
2. model-making

To understand reality by addressing:

1. values
2. subjective experiences, and
3. the quality of the human experience

ordeals of terror, torture, and horror we were witnessing and eventually came up with a model of ritual abuse-torture that guided our understanding about Sara’s lived atrocities and responses, thus improving our ability to be more effective in our care for her.

Capra (1988) stated that model-making combined with systematic observation is a scientific process which helps one to understand reality by dealing with values, subjective experiences, and the quantity of the human

experience.² In other words, we needed to understand the values associated with persons, families, and like-minded groups, who intentionally inflict acts of human evil—who intentionally commit the crime of ritual abuse-torture—and how these values distorted Sara’s reality and interfered with her exiting and healing. We needed to hear and understand Sara’s subjective or personal experiences of ritual abuse-torture victimization so we could understand her response patterns. So we could read and learn about the similar responses of others who had been subjected to and survived atrocities of human evil. For us, much of this latter learning and information came from the literature that has been written about torture, the universality of the techniques torturers use, and the torturer’s goal to attempt to destroy or fragment the victimized person’s relationship with/to her/his-Self.

Acts of torture whether committed by non-state actors—ritual abuse-torturers, for example—or whether committed by state actors—state-sanctioned military or police torturers, for instance, has the pervasive capacity to destructively humiliate and destroy all aspects of the victimized person’s sense of humanness and wholeness. Torture victimization can distort one’s sense of knowing one is a person. It can destroy one’s personality, dignity, Self-worth, Self-confidence, and free will. Spirituality and sexuality and one’s abilities to experience joy and beauty, to know success, to think

freely, to function socially, and feel and/or be safe and secure can be altered, distorted, and severely compromised.³ This defined the destructive forces that Sara had endured and that we were witnessing.

We needed to know how survivors of torture cope. How effective helpers help. Even learning that, at times, sessions averaging four to seven hours⁴ are required to facilitate recovery and integration by persons who had been tortured helped us because this was, in the early years, often Sara and our norm. However, throughout our relationship with Sara our backgrounds in nursing theories, process, and practice guided our interventions. For example, we had learned that each individual processes and integrates traumatic events at a rate that they can handle. So whenever Sara broke through a dissociative barrier to reveal another horrific ordeal her mind, body, and spirit coped by “forgetting” for awhile. We knew never to discuss “forgotten” ordeals until her mind, body, and spirit started “re-remembering”. Only then did we begin the work of helping Sara integrate the ordeal as she had remembered and told it to us and only at the rate that she re-remembered it. We valued our nursing knowledge because no where in the literature could we find it written how to help a captive enslaved person exit from a ritual abuse-torture family/group into which she/he had been born and at the same time help her/him heal.

A model of ritual abuse-torture victimization can involve:

- all forms of abuse
- family/group organized terrorization
- animal cruelty (bestiality)
- all forms of torture
- pedophilia
- necrophilism
- violent family/group ritualisms
- horrification (cannibalism)
- suicidality
- exploitation
- trafficking, and
- other criminal acts.

Sarson & MacDonald © 2004

Understanding Sara’s torture ordeals was insufficient because we also had to comprehend “ritual abuse”. Which is a common term used in the abuse literature; however, Sara had been more than abused she had endured torture thus the term we use—ritual abuse-torture. By putting together the pieces of Sara’s experiential ordeals we came to understand that Sara’s lived reality meant she had endured: all forms of daily abuse, in-home family/group organized terrorization, animal cruelty including bestiality, all forms of torture, pedophilia, necrophilism, violent family/group ritualisms, horrification, suicidality, exploitation, trafficking, and forced involvement in other criminal acts. Listening to Sara meant we also came to understand that the ritual abuse-torture family/group, into which Sara reported being born, had inter-connections regionally, provincially, internationally, and transnationally to other like-minded families/groups.

By 1998, we were able to begin to ask our-Selves whether our model and definition of ritual abuse-torture fit for other persons who had endured such human rights violations. To answer this question we undertook a participatory research project focussed on comprehending the ritual abuse-torture ordeals of others. For two years we listened to six women define their Nova Scotian ordeals of ritual abuse-torture. They told us the term ritual abuse did not name the truth of their victimization ... they stated they had been tortured, thus we continued to use the term ritual abuse-torture. Although, each of the families/groups had idiosyncrasies on how they ritually abused and tortured infants, toddlers, children, and youth, the major experiential ordeals described by the six women mirrored those voiced by Sara. And, when we asked the women for input of the ritual abuse-torture model their general responses were of endorsement yet

disbelief. They could not believe that we had organized the chaos of their life-threatening ordeals of terror, torture, and horror in a manner that not only explained what they had endured but also identified the human rights atrocities perpetrators of ritual abuse-torture inflict.

It would be three years, 2003, before we braved presenting our experiences, understanding, and model of ritual abuse-torture to a larger audience. We took the risk to submit a request to present at the S.M.A.R.T. conference. Accepted—we mused, “Would we make sense to those in attendance?” What would we do if we did not make sense to others? How could we evaluate “making sense”? We reasoned we could do this by asking questions on a “Feedback & Evaluation” form that every person in attendance could complete. Twenty-five people completed the form which we estimated represented the opinions of 29.5% of attendees given that 85 (+/-) people had attended the conference.

All responses stated the presentation of the model of ritual abuse-torture was helpful. In addition:

1. 24 (96%) indicated the model would be useful as an educational tool, 22 (88%) as a healing tool, and 17 (68%) as an assessment tool
2. 21 (84%) respondents indicated they had consistently considered ritual abuse to be torture (RAT) and 23 (92%) considered it a human rights violation
3. 23 (92%) indicated the model of ritual abuse-torture helped organize their thinking about ritual abuse-torture
4. 24 (96%) respondents indicated the model helped identify the behaviours of the RAT torturer(s) and they also considered the perpetrator’s actions to be expressions of human evil
5. 24 (96%) stated the model helped organize the extensiveness of ritual abuse-torture victimization, and
6. 16 (64%) considered perpetrators of ritual abuse-torture were connected to organized crime. Needless to say we were encouraged by the feedback.

Our Global Connections

At the S.M.A.R.T. conference presentation we had dared to dream. Sharing with attendees that it was our dream to one day have acts of ritual abuse-torture that are committed by non-state actors officially recognized by the UN as torture. Following our presentation, we met Dana Raphael for the first time when she approached us with the possibility of presenting our work at an event that would take place in New York at the UN Headquarters. Dared we dream further!

Eventually, Dana Raphael’s plan took shape, in the form of a side-panel presentation at the 48th session of the CSW. Reaching out, via our website, into the global community, we invited persons who had endured ritual abuse-torture to submit their testimonial artifacts—poems, stories, photos, paintings, letters, and drawings—to make the “*Voices of Survivors*” visible at the side-panel presentation. Anticipating we might receive seven submissions was an under estimation! By the time we left for the 48th session of the CSW we had received over 400 pages of survivor’s testimonial artifactual submissions from 61 persons from six countries—Canada, Costa Rica, England, Germany, Scotland, and the United States.

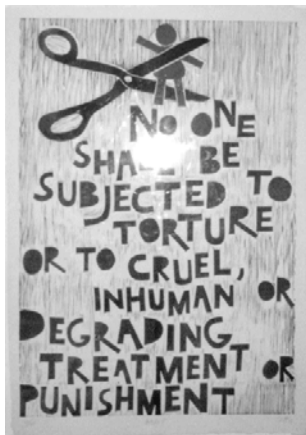
“Voices of Survivors”, spoken through their artifactual submissions, were displayed in ten portfolio books as seen displayed on the table in the picture below. Their presence felt, their ordeals acknowledged by those who attended the side-panel presentation as they looked at the drawings, read the poems, and asked, “What can we do?” Many persons gave us their contact cards so we will pursue making connection with them asking for their help and support.



The “Voices of Survivors” were valued participants in our presentation. Their artifactual presence broke the sound barriers

of denial as over and over again they told the “story” of terror, torture, and horror. Their testimonials mirrored Sara’s ordeals, as well as, the ritual abuse-torture ordeals of the six Nova Scotian women who participated in our participatory research project. Horrification—killing and cannibalism—was one of the most commonly expressed themes expressed in the artifactual testimonials.

So, in our presentation, we spoke for Sara. We spoke for the six Nova Scotian women and for the persons who reached to us from many global communities—and some were young persons and youth—whose victimization included being subjected to acts of torture committed by non-state actors—for instance, mothers, fathers, intergenerational relatives, and other like-minded persons, families, or groups—who organized and intentionally inflicted acts of ritual abuse-torture upon them.



And, we continue to dream:

Each year June 26 is recognized by the United Nations and memorialized around the world by human rights activists as the United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

On June 26, 1987, the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment became international law.

Our dream is to have acts of ritual abuse-torture that are committed by non-state actors recognized by the UN as torture ... to forever break the silence ... to make a better world for children and for all persons who have been so victimized!

Article 5

UN Declaration of Human Rights⁵

¹ NGO Newsletter. (2004, March 12, Issue # 4). *The World of Women*. On-line at <http://www.peacewomen.org>

² Capra, F. (1988). *The Turning Point Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (pp. 375-376). Toronto: Bantam Book.

³ Sarson, J. & MacDonald, L. (2004) . *Acts of Torture (Ritual Abuse-Torture)*. On-line at <http://www.ritualabusetorture.org>

⁴ Shatan, C. F. (1997, Winter). Living in a split time zone: Trauma and therapy of Vietnam combat survivors. *Mind & Human Interaction* , 8(4), 217.

⁵ A picture we took of one of the original linocuts by Brazilian artist Octavio Roth (1952-1993) illustrating Article 5, one of the 30 Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The prints are embossed on paper hand-made by the artist and were produced over a two year period and were created in Mr. Roth's words to promote better understanding of the Declaration so that more people will become aware of their rights and responsibilities as inhabitants of this planet. These are on display at the United Nations Headquarters.