Threads of Hope

Threads of Hope:

Counselling and Emotional Support Services for Communities in Crisis

A narrative inquiry reflecting on the Listening Point project in Machynlleth following the murder of April Jones

With Anne Marie, Ceri, Hope, Lisa, Maria, and other volunteers from Listening Point

By

Susan Dale

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This book is dedicated to the people of Machynlleth, and surrounding villages, who have been a beacon of inspiration in a very dark place.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a team of committed people to run a project such as Listening Point, and a team to produce a book such as this one. Although I took the lead on managing the project, and have been the lead author and editor for this publication, it has been a team effort. I could not have done either task without the support, encouragement and input from the volunteers who have given so much of their time, skill and compassion. I am so very glad to have met them, and to call them my friends.

With respect to starting and running the project, so many people from the local community and beyond gave so much support and energy that it would be difficult to include all of them. Some of those whom I particularly want to thank are: the Police Family Liaison Officers Dave and Hayley; Kath Rogers, Priest in Charge of St Peter's Church, and elders from other local churches who offered venues and undertook fundraising; the Welsh Presbyterian Church, who also donated towards the start-up costs; counselling colleagues, including Liz Loyd, based just outside Machynlleth, Jane and Elyan, practitioners based in nearby Twyn, Jan Hillman, my clinical supervisor, and Hugh Fox, who provided a narrative therapy perspective; other community leaders such as Mike Williams, local and district counsellor, and the mayor and town council of Machynlleth, who provided help and support throughout the life of the project; Powys Council, for granting the lease of the building; Andrew, the Bishop of Bangor, who ensured funds were found in respect of the start-up costs; my fellow trustees of the Churches Counselling Service in Wales, who supported and gave an infrastructure to the project; my fellow Iona Community members, who gave funds, support, prayer and practical advice when needed; Paul and Coral, April's parents, who, despite their own terrible loss, encouraged the project to get off the ground; Cruse, who provided the initial training for volunteers; local schools, who distributed flyers and encouraged families to access the services, and companies such as Next, Mid Wales Co-op and local shops, who donated products ranging from cushions and throws to tea bags.

There was also the generosity of people within the local communities who brought cakes, flowers, plants and jigsaws, and visitors from across the world who also brought good wishes and sometimes donations. The level of support from so many was truly humbling.

The writing of the book has also needed the additional skills of a publisher willing to publish, colleagues, including Kim Etherington, Catherine Jackson and Paidraig Ó Tuama, who have given supervision feedback on the text and encouragement when I have been flagging. Finally, I would not have achieved any of this without the patience, love and support of my family, especially John, who have accompanied me through both the project and the writing about it.

PROLOGUE

"Among the darkness of the night a small act of kindness seems like a small silver thread of hope reaching out across the abyss."
—Anon

The last week of September 2012 was nothing out of the ordinary for me: the usual round of appointments with clients in my consulting room in the centre of Machynlleth, followed by the wave of counselling supervisees coming to my garden study at home. This, together with my editing work for a counselling journal, was my normal working life: a mix that I have always enjoyed and felt privileged to do. Sunday had been a day of quiet celebration with my husband John: it was his birthday. Although my physical health had not been brilliant, the year had been a relatively good one, with writing, work and family in balance.

We were preparing for bed when there was a knock at the back door. John answered it:

"A little girl has gone missing off the Bryn-y-Gog; they think she has got into a light-coloured van," a man's voice says. "She's only five. Have you seen anything?"

I have, of course, seen nothing: I am vision impaired and have no night vision. I have seen nothing, but I imagine everything. A little girl of five, out there in the black night, while I am here, in the warm of my home, frozen in bed; useless.

Frozen, I lie there.
No feelings; numb, dumb silence.

I wake to light flashing through the darkness, the silence pierced by the vibrations of the passing helicopter.
"Where are you April?"

Terror creeps through the windows.
This was a safe place;

the unseen hills close in.
I find it difficult to breathe.

The morning brings a new day, a parallel universe that has opened up all around me. In the field at the bottom my garden are teams of people searching, rain pouring down their faces. Silence is broken by an anguished, "It's time to come home now, April." The television is on for the breakfast news and I see my own garden. I still feel frozen. "I should, I could," I think, but what I need to do I do not know.

There is dread: knowledge that something is unfolding here that is terrible and world changing beyond belief.

INTRODUCTION

Format and map through the book

This book uses a narrative research methodology to tell the story of one group of people who were involved as volunteers in a project called Listening Point, which was set up to support the community of Machynlleth following the abduction of five-year-old April Jones on 1st October 2012. It aims to capture our experiences of living in and around Machynlleth along a time-line starting from the day that April was abducted through to September 2014 when the Listening Point project came to an end.

This introduction will offer some brief background information about the events in Machynlleth between October 2012 and October 2013, and an introduction to the narrative research methodology used to inform the book.

The book is a collaborative effort. Each chapter begins with an excerpt from my ethnographic journal and quotes from press releases released at that time, and then interweaves theory with the narratives provided by my co-researchers.

It also offers our conclusions and considerations, based on what we learned from our experiences in Machynlleth, for those contemplating setting up services for communities during times of crisis, and an appendix with statistics gathered over the course of the project.

The research seeks to look at the particular moments in our lives. It is, for that reason, deliberately subjective and, because as psychotherapeutic practitioners we are interested in thoughts, feelings and behaviours, it teases out our personal responses to this traumatic event by sharing our thoughts from those times and reflecting on them from where we are today.

The research is dynamic, changing even as we wrote; it will never be a "finished story" but always, for us, a work in progress. Every telling evokes in us a different response, and the narrative gets "thicker and richer" (White 2007a). We tell the emotive stories not to elicit sympathy but because they document an implicit (White 1999) story of hope, human endeavour, and of one group of people for whom children, family and community are deeply precious.

Summary of events

On 1st October 2012 five-year-old April Jones was abducted from the Bryn-y-Gog estate in Machynlleth, where she lived with her parents and two older siblings. Her disappearance triggered Dyfed Powys police force to launch the UK's largest ever search operation of its kind and an investigation that lasted over six months. The search effort covered gardens, fields, farms, outbuildings and septic tanks, and a systematic, fingertip search covering a 15 mile radius around Machynlleth – rugged terrain that included forest, mountain, moor, rivers, a river estuary and coastline. It was anticipated that it would cost between £1.8 and £2.4 million (it is thought the final cost far exceeded this, but final figures have not been released).

Machynlleth is a market town of just 2,000 inhabitants, situated in remote Powys, on the edge of Snowdonia National Park. It is surrounded by rugged mountain terrain, managed forests, rivers, disused slate quarries and hills grazed by sheep. The river Dyfi (Dovey) runs down into the estuary and sea at the nearby coastal village of Aberdovey. The two largest nearest towns are Aberystwyth, a university town with 13,000 inhabitants, 18 miles away, and Newtown, 29 miles distant, with a population of 19,500.

On average, every day for six months 150 professionals were out searching for April. They included police and mountain rescue teams, divers, forensic officers and dog handlers from all over the UK, as well as coastguards, RNLI officers, local police community and family liaison officers, and administration and catering teams, who all had to be accommodated in local coastal hotels. A temporary police command centre was set up, first in the local leisure centre; then, as it became obvious the search effort would take many weeks, in one of the business units on the edge of Machynlleth. Police, search and rescue helicopters regularly landed in the school playing field.

Added to the professionals were the hundreds of civilian volunteers from all over the UK, who also needed hotel accommodation, and the media – film crews and reporters, who descended on the town from all over the world.

It may help readers to follow the rest of the narrative if I list the key dates here.

- 1st October 2012 – Hundreds of local volunteers join the search for April, which goes on through the night.

- 2nd October 2012 – Mark Bridger, a local man, whose children attend the same school as April, is arrested, accused of abducting April. The search continues, police working alongside volunteers who have been arriving from all over the UK.

- 5th October 2012 – April has still not been found, but Mark Bridger appears before magistrates charged with her abduction and murder. The professional search effort continues, but local volunteers are stood down.

- 7th October 2012 – Over 700 people walk from the Bryn-y-Gog Estate to St Peter's Church in Machynlleth, where a service is held for April.

- November 2012 – The Listening Point project is launched to support the community in Machynlleth. Twelve volunteer listeners are recruited and trained.

- 20 December 2012 – Listening Point opens a drop-in centre at St Peter's Church office in the centre of Machynlleth.

- 14th January 2013 – Mark Bridger appears in Mold Crown Court and denies all charges, but his barrister states that he "recognised he was probably responsible for her death" (BBC News).

- 25th February 2013 – Mark Bridger appears in Mold Crown Court, and the trial is adjourned.

- 26th September 2013 – Hundreds of people line the streets and attend April's funeral at St Peter's Church in Machynlleth.

- 27th March 2014 – Dyfed Powys Police announce that the search efforts will be scaled back by the end of April.

- 24th April 2014 – Listening Point moves from St Peter's Church office to a new centre on the Bryn-y-Gog estate. The drop-in service is supplemented by the start of a confidential counselling service and creative workshops for families.

- 29th April 2014 – Mark Bridger's trial starts at Mold Crown Court. April's parents attend.

- 30th May 2014 – The jury unanimously finds Mark Bridger guilty of abducting and murdering April and of perverting the course of justice, after just over four hours of deliberation. On sentencing him to a whole life term in prison, the judge calls him a "pathological liar" and "a paedophile" (BBC News).

- 28th September 2014 – the Listening Point project closes, having offered telephone and drop-in support and comfort to nearly 650 people and more formal counselling to another 32.

Narrative Research: Methodological Considerations

"What is the purpose of all these stories? What can they hope to achieve? They cannot change what happened to April?" I am mindful of my inner critic, and also of the academic quest for "truth" and an "evidence base". Narrative inquiry can never hope to find the "truth" about what happened to April, or the "truth" about Machynlleth, or even what Listening Point meant to those involved with it. Narrative inquiry can, however, look for the "talk that sings" (Bird 2004, 61) – the stories that bring to life a world others cannot imagine. It can give a unique glimpse into the lived experience of a particular group of people engaged at a particular moment in time and in a particular place in the shared task of trying to support themselves and their small community through the abduction and murder of a small child, a major police search and investigation, the trial and conviction of a local man for the death, all under the intense scrutiny of the world media.

This research is presented as a collaborative narrative inquiry that explores the experience of setting up and running a project to support the

local community following the abduction and murder of April Jones. It is deliberately and overtly subjective. It takes an "up close and personal" (Bird 2000) look at our (my own and that of my co-researchers) experiences of this unique event. This narrative inquiry embraces many strands of methodological practice. It is ethnographic – in the Oxford English dictionary definition of "the systematic study of people and cultures". As the Association for Quantitative Research points out, ethnography originates from anthropology, which

> … traditionally refers to a practice in which researchers spend long periods living within a culture in order to study it. The term has been adopted within qualitative market research to describe occasions where researchers spend time–hours, days or weeks–observing and/or interacting with participants in areas of their everyday lives (http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/ethnography).

Researching and documenting situations and people's responses to them when those people are in difficult or challenging situations is fraught with ethical challenges. A question I have asked myself is: should we try to document this project within this particular community at a time of tragedy? Behar (1997, 2) answers with another question, one that resonates for the co-researchers and me: "But if you can't stop the horror, shouldn't you at least document it?"

Behar describes the task of anthropology as one of really understanding people within a specific culture and time and as a task that needs to break your heart or it is worth nothing. These words also resonate deeply with me in relation to my own experiences in Machynlleth. She writes:

> The desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something are the stopping places along the way (Behar 1999, 1).

This research is also auto-ethnographic in part, in that it uses my own reflections from that time and from the present day to offer an understanding of life during that time and within that specific culture. It is also partly a collective biography. It draws, to borrow from Speedy,

> … upon the early memory work of Haug (1987) in its form of drawing together a group of 'biographers' to share memories of common experience

> and through talking and writing develop a ‘collective biography‘ which produces a ‘web’ of experiences that are at once individual, connected collective (Speedy and Wyatt, 2014a, 52; also Davies and Gannon 2006).

We have written this to inform other communities who find themselves in similar situations, in the hope that it may help them anticipate some of the challenges and devise their own creative solutions.

Our hope is also that our narratives will be some help to social science researchers who are interested in the effects of trauma on communities, and those using both narrative research and narrative therapy to provide therapeutic interventions.

The process of research itself may be part of the unfolding narrative, and may add another layer to a “multi-layered narrative” (Banks 1998) of the events under scrutiny.

We have experienced the process of writing and constructing the narratives as “the final part” and “ending” of the Listening Point project. It has enabled us to think through what we did well, and what we wished we had done better. It has also, as one of the volunteers commented, “helped us process the trauma we experienced during this time”. We did not set out specifically with a therapeutic goal, but the research and writing has proved therapeutic for us. We have documented it as best we can, using ourselves as both the researchers and the research subjects in order that others in similar situations may learn from our experiences. (Further details of the use of narrative inquiry as a tool for research are given in Chapter four.)

We have tried very hard to only share our own stories, and not to invade the privacy, or to make comment on, what other people (those not involved in the writing) thought or felt at the time. We have written it with the knowledge of April’s family, who have been inspiring and who have supported all we have done through Listening Point, despite their overwhelming personal grief.

Presentation of the Text

It would be wrong to write a multi-layered, dynamic narrative such as this using academic language. You will find here a range of voices and styles of writing, each presented in a different typeface or font to clarify the difference. You will find the narrative text, in this serif type face; my

informal journal entries, in *italic font*; rescued speech poems (Behan, 2003) taken from conversations with the co-researchers and informal writing from contributors, both in a sans serif typeface, and also quotes from other research and academics, which are indented from the main text and in a smaller font, as is traditional in academic publishing. By presenting the text in this way we aim to give the same value and weight to personal accounts that is generally accorded to more academic writing.

We also hope the text presentation will help readers to appreciate the "texture" and "weave" created by of so many different voices contributing to the narrative.

Introducing the Co-researchers and Contributors

Listening Point would not have existed without the expertise, skill and dedication of the team of volunteer listeners, counsellors and others who cheered us on from the sidelines. The writing of the book has been a collaborative effort. I, as author, have acted as editor and had the task of weaving the threads of story together to form a coherent narrative.

All people co-researching and contributing to this book have chosen to do so; some have had the time to contribute much, others just a snippet here and there, but all of these contributions are valuable and make up the whole (which is always greater than the parts alone). Contributors have chosen whether to remain anonymous or to write in their own names, and sometimes to withdraw, or edit material. Some of those who have written under their own names have included a short biography; others have chosen not to. We have tried very hard not to presume we understand how anyone else might feel about the events we describe, and to respect the privacy of those around us.

My work in research, writing and therapeutic work is underpinned by the BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions. You can find a copy of this document at www.bacp.co.uk/ethicalframework. You can find more in chapter 14 about the complex ethical challenges posed by the project.

Named contributors (alphabetical)

Anne Marie Carty

Anne Marie is a film-maker and visual ethnographer specialising in the use of video as a tool for engagement in Welsh rural communities. She has lived in Machynlleth since 1995 and has recently been exploring the use of narrative therapy approaches in participatory film-making and co-research with young people and adults.

Ceri Edwards

Ceridwen Edwards is a retired homoeopath, counsellor and alternative health therapist, and the mother of five sons.

Hope Marshall

Hope is a counsellor working in the Machynlleth area with a background in mental health nursing. She was born in Shropshire but has enjoyed living in Wales for many years. She is happily married with grown-up children and one grandchild, who lives in America.

June

Lisa Lovatt-Sutton

Lisa lives with her husband and two dogs in beautiful Mid Wales. Originally from Leicestershire, she moved to Wales in 2012. She is blessed with an amazing family and will become a Grandma for the first time this year.

Her background is in the health sector, combining hypnotherapy and counselling and, since coming to Wales, she has enjoyed voluntary work in the community.

Liz

Mark

Maria Morris

Melanie Fraser

Melanie has lived in Mid Wales for nearly 30 years, with her husband and their son (who has now flown the nest). Recently training as a

counsellor, she now works in what she considers her “dream job” as a Children's Counsellor.

Melody

Sue Winchurch

Sue is an experienced counsellor living and working in and around Machynlleth. She specialises in working with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and clients with drug and alcohol issues. In addition, Sue takes on a number of Private Clients from Powys and Ceredigion.

Other contributors include Powys Cruse and other volunteers and visitors to Listening Point

CHAPTER ONE

SEARCHING FOR APRIL

Sue's journal: 2nd October 2012

A knock on the door yesterday evening brought an end to peace, and brought with it a night of dread. A story of a child missing from the Bryn-y-Gog estate; seen getting into a grey van/car. People out searching all night, calling April's name in the vast black wilderness and woodland that surrounds our town.

08:00 BBC Breakfast News is relayed from the end of our drive. The rain is relentless, the searchers drenched, weeping, calling for April as they comb gardens, sheds and farmers' fields. An elderly man shouts at them, "What are you doing?" He has not heard the news. It is hard to believe. I hand a young woman a mug of tea as she comes into the garden. She sobs: "If we just keep looking we will find her."

09:00 I am due to meet with clients in my consulting rooms in the middle of town. Not knowing what else to do, I walk there. Above I can hear the sound of helicopters; a sound I will get to know very well over the months ahead. There are numerous police; people handing out flyers to anyone passing: "Have you seen this child?" – enormous energy, doing something; anything is better than doing nothing. An elderly woman weeps in the bus queue: "I am too old to be useful," she says.

My clients arrive, traumatised; most unable to bring themselves to speak of themselves. All thoughts are of the young girl missing, out there in the wild wet hillside, somewhere.

12:00 The weather (still torrential rain) and a news update give no further relief. More police arrive, including mountain rescue and dog teams. The volunteers are being organised into teams. More

arrive, some with food and drink for those going out. The rain still falls like razors to the ground. The press start to talk about "unprecedented community support". I wonder what will happen when we have to stop "doing". Then I feel guilty: this thought feels like a betrayal of hope.

Reverend Kathleen Rogers is interviewed, along with members of the local council. The message is clear: "We will not give up hope: we will not give up looking for April."

18:00 A local man has been arrested on grounds of abduction, but still the police search continues. The river is full of divers. April's parents make an appeal to "let our beautiful little girl come home". The shock of the arrest, together with the ongoing search, leaves me feeling bewildered. What are the police saying? April has been murdered, or April is lost?

Volunteers are still involved, but in my heart I know that they will soon be stood down. I cannot even voice my deepest fear; I know that this is turning into an investigation for those with forensic skills, but to say so would be like giving up on the hope that keeps everyone going.

22:00 Still the helicopters fly overhead, their searchlights brightening the sky.

Waking later in the night, there is a new silence. This feels even more ominous and I find myself drenched in sweat.

Community update

2nd October 2012
08:00 "The breaking news this morning comes live from the small Mid Wales market town of Machynlleth where hundreds of local people and police teams have been out all night searching for the missing schoolgirl, April Jones. April, aged five, who is thought to have been abducted, went missing whilst playing with friends close to her home in Machynlleth yesterday evening. The search operation is being co-ordinated from the local leisure centre by Dyfed Powys Police." (BBC Breakfast)

Trauma

All of us at some time during our lives will experience situations that we find traumatic – situations that shock us or challenge everything we thought we knew to be true. We need the resilience (Skodol 2010), and opportunity, to find the internal resources and strategies to continue to live our lives and integrate this new knowledge. Most of the time we adapt very well and the events that proved traumatic become stepping stones along our life journey, sometimes even enabling our development. An example of this was given by Mark, who attended a "trauma" workshop that I recently facilitated. He spoke about arriving at university for first time:

> My parents brought my cases in and then they left me there in my little cell. I was surrounded by a hoard of people I didn't know and, as a shy boy, this felt like the end of the world. I remember shaking and crying. However, it was, I think, the making of me. I had to re-think who I was. I could choose to stay in my room and speak to no one, or I could go out there and act in a different way. I did, and I found I really enjoyed it.
>
> Although it felt very traumatic at the time, and I had anxiety attacks and could not sleep, it helped me become who I am now. Without it, I would probably have lived at home with Mum forever. It has become like a piece of my history now; I remember the pain, but it is no longer painful.

However, some experiences are so traumatic that we cannot transform the memory into a format that fits in with our view of the world, our belief systems and our other relationships and experiences. These traumatic memories are not filed away as historic memories with context; they remain isolated pockets of emotional pain and fear, and physical and sensory response. When we are triggered by particular circumstances or sensory stimuli, we may experience pain and/or distress, not in relation to a memory of a historical event long past, but as something horrific happening in the here and now. For example, the smell of honeysuckle reminds me of being a child in rural Suffolk, where I played in the garden as a small child. The memory runs in my mind, a bit like an old film, fitting neatly between other events. If, however, I had experienced a traumatic event that linked with the smell of honeysuckle (for example, childhood abuse) then that smell might instead evoke the pain and anguish

that accompanied the original event. I might experience vivid flashbacks of the event, or even relive the terror. Or I might experience extreme physical or emotional pain and not know what has caused it. As the symptoms I experience are not embedded in a historic past, or even linked with what is going on around me, these feelings could be experienced as more painful than the event itself.

For example, Liz tells me of her experience of flashbacks:

> I was standing in the queue at Tesco. There was a man in front of me; I could smell his aftershave, a spicy, quite pleasant smell. I suddenly felt really hot and panicky. My breath started coming in short bursts; I felt unreasonably terrified. I thought I might wet myself… I just pushed the trolley back into supermarket and went outside. I thought I was going to die, or go mad.

Later Liz realised that the aftershave smelled like the one her father used; he had sexually abused her for many years.

Other people have described post-traumatic symptoms in terms of "being haunted", "torture" or even "a never-ending hell of replaying the event".

We have a tendency to think that "trauma" is a new condition but it has been described in many different ways and given many different names over our history. Fussell quotes Siegfried Sassoon describing the return of soldiers from World War I:

> Shell shock. How many a brief bombardment had its long-delayed after-effect in the minds of these survivors. Not then was their evil hour, but now; now, in the sweating suffocation of nightmare, in paralysis of limbs, in the stammering of dislocated speech. In the name of civilisation these soldiers had been martyred, and it remained for civilisation to prove that their martyrdom wasn't a dirty swindle (Fussell 1983, 141).

Not everyone who is exposed to trauma goes on to develop permanent trauma symptoms or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bonanno 2004), or have the same responses to a traumatic event (Terr 1991). Certainly there are many in Machynlleth who would not consider that they have been traumatised or that they have any trauma symptoms. This may be because their prior life experiences, resilience or any number of factors

mean that they have been able to process the memory of April's abduction as a historic event, albeit a sad one.

One elderly lady visiting the drop-in tells me:

> These things happen. They are terrible things, but you just have to get on with living and clinging on to all that is good. Other bad things have happened here, and they have passed. So will this.

For others, however, the events have left invisible scars. For example, one of the volunteers reported feelings of panic and extreme anxiety while away on holiday when she encountered a television crew filming a routine event in London. Local children seemed to become unusually (for children) unwilling to be photographed with visiting celebrities at carnival events, and tended to disappear from view at the sight of reporters or TV cameras.

In hindsight I realise that I too was traumatised and "frozen" by the unfolding events. As an experienced therapist, I was surprised by this. My journal captures something of this dual role: I was supporting clients and supervisees, and yet I was also a member of our community.

Therapeutic approaches to community trauma

There are many ways of responding to individuals or groups of people affected by trauma; not all are necessarily a professional intervention. When what the police describe as a "critical incident" occurs, we are often able, during or soon after the event, to process our thoughts and feelings about it, so that we can engage again with normal life.

Talking to our friends and families can be sufficient; sometimes, if it is an event that affects a whole community, coming together with others also affected can help "normalise" and "put into perspective" our thoughts and fears. For example, in 2011 the threat of a dam bursting meant a small neighbouring village had to be evacuated. Some residents described having to flee their homes as "traumatic". They met in the local leisure centre. Talking and encouraging one another turned an alarming experience into one that they could encounter together. The trauma had engendered "a war-time spirit", as one man said. Later that night, when the crisis had been averted, they were allowed home. A few reported having nightmares about "what *might* have happened", but the majority

considered it “just another saga in the life of a Welsh village” (elderly resident).

The same leisure centre was used on the night that April went missing. People gathered together, supporting and encouraging another as they searched for her through the night. The next day they searched again, handed out flyers, talked to each other, and made tea and sandwiches for the many visiting police teams.

What happens if the traumatic event continues over a long period of time or escalates and people are unable to meet together for support? Or if the traumatic events trigger overwhelming emotional responses relating to people’s own unprocessed feelings, memories and relationships? For example, in the months following April’s murder I received many calls on the telephone helpline from people who reported that the news had triggered memories of their own childhood abuse, or the death of a loved one; some reported suicidal thoughts and one described vivid memories of another child who went missing some 60 years previously.

In Machynlleth we seemed to be under continual assault from new and shocking facts as they emerged through the media and police reports. The intense media attention meant we felt under constant scrutiny. Each new factor added another layer of tension and trauma in a location that is geographically cut off from the outside world – the nearest large town, Aberystwyth, is more than 18 miles away. One resident told me he was taking the train to Birmingham once a week “just so I can be anonymous”.

Sometimes a traumatic event that happens within a community coincides with a trauma in our own lives, and the two traumas, which individually we might have been able to take in our stride, become jumbled together. Ceri writes to me:

> I will always remember that day, that week. I have a slow motion recollection of it, with heightened senses around the memory because of the extremes of emotion. I had been so happy, celebrating a special birthday, and had been away for the weekend then back to Machynlleth and the rain – wondering, would we be able to get across the bridge to drive to the restaurant that we were supposed to be meeting friends at for a quiet meal?

> The river was very high but we made it, and I had the added surprise of not just a few friends but a big surprise party, all organised for me in total secrecy. The next day I was relaxed and happy and didn't see or hear the news, and I don't do social media, so it was the day after when I had a doctor's appointment that I first heard from the local GP, who told me that April had been abducted: "Such a terrible thing to happen here, I don't know how could such a thing happen in a place like this." Of course nobody knew at that time that April was dead.
>
> My lodgers came home at mid-day saying everyone up at CAT [the Centre for Alternative Technology] had decided to join the search as they couldn't concentrate on work. I still felt optimistic and thought there must be some sort of mistake and it would all turn out well. Of course we soon knew that it really wasn't going to turn out well.
>
> By the following weekend the town was full of people searching and there was a police presence everywhere, with the search concentrated on the bridge and the river, which is very close to my house. We went out but my partner was taken ill suddenly and we came home and rang the hospital for guidance. They said we must call an ambulance – he had had a heart attack.
>
> Everything seemed totally surreal.

Community, religion and trauma

Van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth comment that:

> … people have always gathered in communities and organisations for aid in dealing with outside challenges. They seek close emotional relationships with others in order to help them anticipate, meet, and integrate difficult experiences (van der Kolk, Mc Farlane, and Weisaeth 1996, 24).

They go on to argue that, in western European culture, traditions and value systems have been historically provided by Christian communities, with the Church "often providing a sense of purpose in the face of terrifying realities" (ibid, 24).

In the UK, however, the Church no longer plays a large part in many people's lives. Some are even distrustful of and avoid formal religions. Many areas of the UK are now multicultural, embracing many religions and secularism. In Machynlleth the population is predominantly white with a mixture of Welsh-speaking Welsh, English-speaking Welsh, and English, and a small number of people from other ethnic groups. There are no mosques, synagogues or temples, but there are five churches: St Peter's (Church in Wales), Machynlleth Community Church, St Mair (Catholic Church) and two Welsh Chapels. These mainly have small older congregations, as do the churches in the surrounding villages. Although the churches in Machynlleth try to support one another, historically throughout Wales there have often been divisions between the different denominations – divisions of language (Welsh versus English) and differences in style of worship.

Yet on the Sunday following April's abduction hundreds of people walked to St Peter's and joined in the service of worship. The same happened at April's funeral the following September.

Throughout this time St Peter's remained open in daylight hours and many local people and searchers sought its quiet space and lit candles there in memory of April. A memorial book in the side chapel contains thousands of entries written by people from across the world:

> God Bless you little April, I cry for you every night. I hope and pray you rest in peace. (Melody, a visitor from US)

However attendance at regular services has not changed and still remains low.

Listening Point was originally based in a building that also houses the church office and meeting room. Some visitors reported feeling uncomfortable about coming there; one man firmly told me, "I don't want to talk to church do-gooders." When we moved to the Bryn-y-Gog Estate people seemed to find it easier to drop in, even though we were the same group of people – some regular church goers, others of different faiths or none at all.

Secondary trauma

The trauma of the unfolding story affected not just April's family and the inhabitants of Machynlleth. Other people across the world and the media who covered the story were witnessing the events through the television, radio, camera lens or newspaper.

Symptoms of trauma are not just experienced by those who are immediately involved in tragedy or abuse; they can also affect those who support them or are witness to the horror of the story. Berthold describes this as "trauma [which] involves a transformation of the helper's inner experience, resulting from empathic engagement with client's trauma material" (Berthold 2014).

A young reporter, herself in tears, asked me: "Why are so many people so devastated by the murder of this young girl. Yes, it is sad, but it is as if they have lost their own children."

I could not answer her then, or explain the paradox of her question, accompanied as it was by her tears. I am not sure I can answer it now, but for many of us April seemed like our child too. It wasn't that we imagined ourselves to feel as April's parents did, but perhaps we felt we were standing alongside them, empathising with and attuned to their loss, and this combined with our own fear of losing our loved ones and even, perhaps, our own histories of parenthood and loss.

The growing press coverage and the reporting of the story as it unfolded provoked reactions even in those who lived hundreds of miles away. Van der Kolk and colleagues suggest:

> The personal meaning of traumatic experience for individuals is influenced by the social context in which it occurs. Victims and the significant people in their surroundings may have different and fluctuating assessments of both the reality of what has happened and of the extent of the victims' suffering. As a result, victims and bystanders may have strongly conflicting agendas to repair, create, forget or take revenge. These conflicts between the victims' and the bystanders' assessment of the meaning of the trauma may set the stage for the trauma to be perpetuated in a larger social setting; soon the allocation of blame and responsibility, not the trauma itself, may become the central issue (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth 1996, 27).