

# The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 36

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## Meet your inner trauma survivor

Note: If you are recovering, learning self-nurturing, how to stay safe, and in therapy with someone you trust, or recovering with support in a group of some kind, you might want to do inner trauma survivor work.

**Don't do it if it scares you or triggers you into more symptoms of PTSD.**

Over the course of my own recovery, and as I've been writing the Gazette for the last five years, I've realized how traumatic being molested five times on the subway in Brooklyn was for me at age 12. I felt great shame, like there was something wrong with me or molesters wouldn't keep picking me out. I learned to numb myself. I lost my sense of self, as if I didn't count and didn't exist. I didn't develop full-blown PTSD but it was "an emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person," which is the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of traumatic. One of my strengths, I believe, is taking the impact on me of my small traumas and using it to understand how much more of an impact major traumas must have.

What got me in touch with my inner trauma survivor, however, was a visit to the dentist. I also went to a really awful dentist during that period. He was a tall thin cadaverous old man with one tooth in the front of his mouth, the result of not cleaning his teeth, he said. He didn't use novocaine. I had a lot of cavities and most of them took hours of painful drilling, a kind of agonizing burning pain which ground on and on. I felt helpless (nothing I do will help or stop this) and hopeless (no one will listen). I knew there was no point in crying or complaining or screaming. It would not have made them stop. I was powerless, and not in a good way. It never occurred to me to say no and not open my mouth.

I had forgotten all this until I had to have a filling replaced recently.

My current dentist is wonderful but I found myself rigid in the chair, feeling as if there were actually a smaller, 12-year-old body inside mine with every muscle corded with pain and fear. I thought I was going to have a heart attack. My arms were radiating pain and my chest was so tight I couldn't breathe. Part of me was absolutely convinced it would hurt and go on hurting and there was nothing she could do to stop it. This was *before* they even started drilling.

Since I am a recovering person with more skills and resources than I had as a kid, (including the ability to know what I am feeling and the belief that what I feel is important and I have the right to speak up for myself) I said out loud, "I'm scared." The dentist's response was "Are you all right? Do you want to stop?" I said no, but inside, to that scared child I said, Poor dear child, no wonder you are scared [validation]. You did not deserve to be treated that way [compassion]. Today I can speak up and protect us and we are going to a good, painless dentist, and it won't happen again [pointing out new skills and resources I've learned and the fact that I am simply older and have more power].

Such self talk is a good tool for helping your inner trauma survivor heal. I had to acknowledge that what I had been through had affected me even though it seems so minor compared to most traumatic events. I also got validation from my dentist who said "Tell me if it hurts and I'll stop. Grinding out the old filling will make a big noise like drilling used to," which was the right thing to say, rather than "Don't be afraid."

Somewhere inside you the person you were at the moment you were traumatized may also be stuck. Buried inside that inner trauma survivor are all the feelings he or she couldn't process at the time due to the overwhelming nature of the trauma or series of traumas. If you were traumatized more than once, you may also have a series of these inner trauma survivors. They may not know that the trauma is over and that you are older now or that you also have more resources and can protect them. You may not know that they are inside you and that some of your actions and reactions may be based on their experiences and their fear, anger, or helplessness during the trauma.

I also have stuck inner kids, parts of me that were not allowed to progress through the stages of childhood development in the normal way.

We say in *Adult Children of Alcoholics* that we acted like we were forty when we were four, and now, at times, we act like we're four when we are forty (or 57). These stuck children have learned rules like "Don't feel bad," "Don't whine," and others which make it hard to recover.

If either of these may apply to your situation, contacting these inner beings can be helpful. One of my favorite writings on the subject *Returning from Vietnam* by Vietnam veteran William Crapser and is reprinted with his permission in this issue. Crapser's ideas can easily be adapted to any sort of trauma. You could find your inner battered child, help him or her dress in nice clothes, pack his/her stuff and leave his/her childhood home or places of violence to come home and live in your heart. I even buy toys (Raggedy Andy, a Wild Thing) for my inner child. Perhaps you can, too.

Perhaps you survived years of adult violence with a batterer. You could go back to the young survivor of the first beating and bring her home, telling her she did not deserve it, did not cause it, and doesn't have the power to turn him from batterer into someone who isn't, no matter what he says. You might also look for your inner self in other stages of the relationship. Picture them and comfort them. Tell them what was going on. Tell them it was not their fault. When I looked over my adult life, I found a number of desperate miserable grownups: WifePatty, at 21, didn't understand what was going on when Bob came back from Vietnam with PTSD and thought it was her fault, and PatienceMom, in her 30's and 40's, who was depressed, overwhelmed, and felt she had to do it all with no help.

Picture yourself as you were when traumatized, overwhelmed or when your needs were not met. William Crapser sees a 19-year-old Marine. What do you see? A tiny child who has been beaten or molested? An 18-year-old on a date with someone she doesn't realize is a rapist? A 40-year-old cop who has just been in a shooting? A cop's wife who wants to help, but he won't talk? An EMT with a dead baby in his/her arms? A two-year-old who is not allowed to be two? What ever the situation is, try to see this person clearly.

Seeing yourself at the time of the trauma can give you compassion for yourself. If it doesn't, if you feel shame, anger, contempt or some other negative emotion, perhaps you have taken on the attitudes of your abusers—whether it's violent parents or a sadistic drill sergeant—a self-protective stance at the the time you were in their power, sometimes called trauma

bonding. Today, these attitudes are probably not very helpful and may keep you stuck, beating yourself up for something you didn't cause, couldn't control, and can't cure (PTSD).

Children and young people believe they caused the trauma. This gives them the hope that if they just tried harder, things will get better. Perpetrators are happy to blame them. Believing that changing yourself will make the trauma stop does give you hope, however, and hope keeps you alive. So you can tell your inner trauma survivor that it worked! S/he's alive!

But now you have information that it wasn't your fault, kid. You were beaten because they were beaters and perhaps knew no better. They would have beaten an angel. You were molested because they were molesters. You were ambushed or shot because you were in a war, not because you were a bad soldier. You were battered because your spouse was a batterer. You didn't have the power to change that. You believed what the perpetrators said to stay alive.

Today you have the opportunity to create a new set of beliefs about yourself: that you are a valuable human being (child of God, if you wish) who has been through hell and survived. Today you are finding resources to heal yourself. You deserve to recover.

If you have a therapist, sponsor or friend who can acknowledge that what happened to you was traumatic and validate your feelings, that is also helpful.

If you cry, that is good. Once you see the survivor clearly, tell the survivor that you lived and are safe and have come to take them out of the trauma into a place of safety. If it's another kind of inner person, offer them appropriate help and support. For many years, I visualized my inner kids and worked with them every day. The fun part was imagining our safe places, a teepee in a meadow in the Rockies, a rose-covered stone cottage by a lake. I also checked on their feelings and their needs, and tried to meet them.

Visualizing details may take practice. Sometimes the inner beings take on a life of their own. You can use their actions as evidence of what they have been through.

If you are in therapy and don't seem to be progressing, you might take some quiet time and ask, "Who is so stuck?" Sometimes, if you have abandoned yourself, an inner child/ survivor refuses to come with you

because it doesn't trust you to take care of yourself. That may inspire you to learn self-care, so you are safe and he/she is, too.

It is good to contact your inner trauma survivor deliberately, in a safe setting, and with the support of a therapist or sponsor or group, using something like the Inner Child Meditation on page 29. You can also do it when you start to feel upset if it doesn't upset you more. Scan your body and see if you can identify a part or parts that feel younger, smaller, or tenser. At the dentist, I first noticed I was tense, and then that I felt like someone younger and smaller was knotted up like a rope inside me.

I had been traumatized in a dentist's chair so the connection was clear. You might have to figure out what your connection is. Sometimes it is a couple of stages removed. When did you feel like this before?

If you space out or have overwhelming symptoms or feelings, please stop and get help.

Things you can do for your inner trauma survivor:

1. Acknowledge what he/she's been through.
- 2-. Tell him or her that he/she did not deserve it or cause it, even if the perpetrator said he or she deserved it or caused it. People are not molested, battered, raped or shot because they wore tight clothing, or are sexy, beautiful, bad, stupid or foolish or for any other action they took. They are molested, battered or raped or shot because they have the misfortune to meet a molester, a batterer, a rapist or a shooter.
3. Tell your inner trauma survivor that he or she survived. She/he may not have noticed.
4. Tell your inner trauma survivor that you are taking him/her someplace safe and will be helping him/her heal. .
5. Tell her or him that you have more power now. You are no longer a child or a 19-year-old grunt or a naive college girl. You have more power to avoid traumatic situations, more power to keep out of harm's way, more power to defend yourself. You have more power to choose and more choices than when you were a child, a battered wife, a Private E-1, etc.
6. Because you are older you can see, and therefore have, more choices today.
7. You have more resources: books, therapies, 12-step meetings, other recovering people, web resources, etc. You can find resources if you don't

have them right now. Part of recovery is having an open mind and looking for things that help you.

8. You have more skills today than when you were traumatized. Perhaps you have learned to speak up for yourself, to sit with painful feelings, how to ask for what you want in a nice way, how to find a good therapist or group, how to stay sober, how to say no. These are skills all trauma survivors need. You can learn them, and other skills, if you don't have them yet. The back issues of the Gazette are a good resource as is *Recovering from the War*. Two books I have reviewed, *Growing Beyond Survival: A Self-Help Toolkit for Managing Traumatic Stress*, by Elizabeth Vermilyea, MA and *Life After Trauma* by Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams, are full of healing suggestions and skill building which do not involve dealing directly with the trauma.

9. If your inner trauma survivor is in pain, sit with the pain, feel it and let it pass, (if you have learned or are learning that skill). Tell him or her that processing painful emotions takes time, and it is kind of like an inoculation. Say that it is possible to feel a painful emotion without believing it, like guilt or shame. You can say to yourself, "I feel guilty for being traumatized, but it is only a feeling. I did not cause nor could I control what happened to me. I don't have to believe that I am guilty whatever anyone said or says."

*What decisions did your Inner Trauma Survivor make at the time?*

This is an important part of healing because some of these unconscious decisions can influence your life, as they did mine, in ways that make you unhappy and ineffective in getting what you want. Mine were, "I am helpless and its hopeless. I have to please people whatever is asked. I am not safe anywhere. No one will help me. I can't affect what happens to me. Give up. Don't try. Maybe if I'm good, they won't hurt me more. No one will protect me." These beliefs tied in with looking for Prince Charming to rescue me and then turning my will and my life over to him in a very helpless and overly-dependent way. When Bob came home from Vietnam with PTSD, my over-dependence became a liability. I couldn't cope. I had abandoned myself, but today I can be there for myself and also for that little girl by speaking up for her in the dentist's chair and elsewhere. I also speak up for the young girl who was molested. I don't let people whom I

don't like grab me, kiss me, or make suggestive remarks, which I once would have endured.

Look for patterns in your life which might give you a clue as to decisions you might have made. Hopelessness, mistrust, or creating chaos can often be traced to traumatic experiences. Perhaps you felt you caused the trauma and have tried to be perfect ever since. This may have extended to trying to perfect your family, too. Maybe you lost someone you loved and have never gotten close to anyone since. Compulsions, from sex or relationships to work, drugs or alcohol, often arise from the thought 'I can't bear to feel or think about this,' which can be realistic when you are unsupported and have been traumatized. Denial, compulsive behavior, and obsessing about others can help a traumatized person survive in situations where there is no help. But if you are reading this, you are on the road to recovery, and you will find ways to heal from your trauma.

Look for strengths: What kind of strengths can you see in yourself when you look back? Acknowledge them! The fact that you survived is evidence of strength, resourcefulness, and determination. Give yourself credit if you were brave. If you cried and screamed, give yourself credit for knowing what was happening wasn't right and vocalizing it. If you froze, give yourself credit for enduring. If you spaced out or dissociated, that is a creative solution. Whatever you did to survive was the right thing because you did survive. It is easy to forget that.

When you use your inner trauma survivor or inner children/adults to understand yourself and make your life better, you gain a very healing kind of strength. Then you can use them to help you understand others and to make the world a better place.

I look back and see a helpless kid in that dentist's chair, hopeless but brave. She didn't go berserk and scream and cry. She also didn't think to say no or even realize she could have refused to open her mouth. She sat there and took it! In comparison, writing the Gazette is a piece of cake, and so is most of my life today.

Mine are minor traumas, but seeing how it affected me may give you some idea of why your traumas affected you.

As always, you deserve to recover!

# 12 Steps To Recovery from War Related PTSD

Carmen L.

AA's 12 Steps served as a powerful healing tool in my recovery from war related PTSD.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable:

Thirteen years ago, I went to Al-Anon to help my brother stay sober. I stayed because I realized that alcoholism had seriously impacted my life. As I worked through those issues, I started to remember what it was like to live in a war-torn country. The memories came gushing out uncontrollably like spewing lava out of an active volcano.

I turned to private counseling and found out I was having intrusive thoughts and flashbacks which were symptoms of war-related PTSD. The counselor was very joyous as she felt I was on the road to recovery and good things would come out of it. I felt scared, out of control and very confused.

I also turned to the 12 Steps to help me recover from the damages from living in a war-torn country.

Step 2: Came to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity:

I knew I could not handle all my newfound memories by myself. I needed to go to people and places to help me integrate my experience. I went to the Vet Center in Miami and two of the counselors (Ed Calvo and Steve Fletcher) gave me literature on PTSD, listened to my stories and told me that I was on the way to great transformations and healing. I trusted them because they seemed to understand me, the process and the outcome even though I did not understand what they were saying.

I educated myself on PTSD. I read a lot. I read *Recovering from the War* by Patience Mason. I could really relate to the soldiers' stories. I understood their intense fear, guilt, being dead inside, rage, confusion, isolation and hyper vigilance. I also read [Aphrodite Matsakis'] *Vietnam Wives*. It helped me see how other people perceived me, how PTSD got in the way of living. The education helped me feel a sense of sanity and hope.

*I came to believe that I was great at surviving but did not have a clue on how to live.*

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him:

I wish I could say that I did this step as stated, but I didn't. I realized I had no sense of trust in others. So, I was not going to turn anything over to anyone. I did come in contact with a religious professional who said that it was OK to take baby steps. She taught me to meditate every night and ask my Higher Power to guide me through each and every memory, to examine it, share it and let it go. I started to do it every night and the process was a powerful healing experience. I learned that I was not going to die or go crazy every time my body would shake uncontrollably from fear. I was not going to hurt anyone when I felt frozen by rage. I would stop crying just before going to work. Eventually I learned to trust the recovery process.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves:

This step made me realize that PTSD symptoms had ossified into character defects. I also learned that fear can be turned into courage by action. Hurt feelings can turn into strength, rage into annoyance, judgment into compassion, isolation into feeling connected. It was the first time in my life that I had looked for good qualities in myself.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs:

I did not feel great when I took Step 5. It required a lot of energy to tell my story. I felt as if I was betraying someone or something. It is a curious feeling when you let go of memories and behaviors that have been with you forever. In their own way, they are lifetime companions. I really started to recover a few months later.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character:

Well I wasn't. So I had to pray for the willingness to do Step 6. I was very scared that I was going to remain naked and defenseless. Vulnerability was not a word in my vocabulary. My sponsor told me that I could release one at a time. What would happen when I released anger? Was I going to be attacked? Would I start crying and never stop? Would the pain ever end? Could I let my shield down? Would my highly honed hypervigilant radar shut down? Do I have to actually go out there and socialize?

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings:

I quickly found out that these shortcomings would be lifted if I asked. Some have been lifted forever. Most are lifted one day at a time. It is nice to not be hypervigilant. I feel safe and warm and relaxed inside when the radar is off. I also know the radar turns on when the slightest thing is amiss. Rage protected me. It also kept people away. Now, I can choose the shade of anger I want to project. I came to see my character defects as heavy-duty armor which insulated me from a hostile environment. It helped me survive. It also kept me from loving, playing and enjoying life. Armor is heavy. It restricts range of motion. Step 7 lets me take off my armor, enjoy playing, loving and lets me feel the cool gentle breeze and warm sunshine.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all:

The list contained people I had isolated with my anger, soldiers that had scared me, government officials that let it happen or sold out. I had to also add myself to the list. I came to realize that I had done the most damage to myself.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.

Some amends were direct. I invoked courage to do them only to find out that my friends were well aware of them, but gave me enough room and dignity come to terms with them in my own time. Indirect amends were made in form of masses on Memorial Day, lit candles and prayers to release them to their highest good. My amends to self is to continue going to meetings and working on continuous self-improvement.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

This step reminds me that recovery is a process rather than perfection. My anger still gets the best of me, but now I am quickly more aware of it and apologize. I still isolate when I hurt or get scared but not for as long. Feeling dead is now a sign that something is wrong. I now look for solutions more quickly.

Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

I no longer use this step to help me recover my memories. I use it to help me understand how to live, how to enjoy and enrich my life. I am always asking for guidance and getting it. This step has helped me use my highly-honed radar to search for answers. Usually, all the answers are available instantly if I use my strong sense of awareness.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles into all our affairs.

Can't keep it until you give it away.

In summary, the 12 Steps have helped me grow tremendously on a practical and spiritual level.

They have turned PTSD symptoms into attributes such as self-confidence, patience, honesty and compassion. They give me the strength to live life on life's terms. I am going to really need these attributes as my husband now works on his "coming home" process from Vietnam.

## *Returning from Vietnam*

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I had been trying to come home from Vietnam since 1969; more than eighteen years. Over the years it seemed I had been condemned to death in Vietnam, and that I was slowly dying with the nineteen-year-old marine I was when I fought there. Over the years the young marine I was kept a tight hold on me and lived in anguish inside me. He took tighter and tighter control of my life until, toward the end of my refusing him, of my guilt over him, of my refusal to recognize him, his full anger exploded. The doctors told me it was a flashback. But I saw only him.

Still refusing to accept his existence inside me, I took vast amounts of drugs to suppress him, subjected myself to being strapped down and injected with Thorazine. "This will keep him in check!" I thought. But he did not go away.

His anguished screams rose up inside and became mine. My mouth would open and the sound I made was not a grown man's. The way I conducted my life—living on the edges of society, looking and dressing like an angry nineteen-year-old, acting out my crisis like an adolescent—only

strengthened his grip. I became numb with my own anger, doubled with his anger, the two of us facing down each other inside me, resembling a father and son who don't like each other but are stuck together in their blood.

The first decision I made which led to my recovery was to recognize him as me. That, yes, I was the nineteen-year-old point-man lying flat on my face in terror and fear as enemy rounds impacted around me. That, yes, I was the nineteen-year-old marine who had killed and, at times, killed without remorse. I realized I could not fight him anymore or deny him. I realized I would have to make peace with him and bring him home.

So I began to meditate on him, think about him—the “me” who was a nineteen-year-old in Vietnam —until I could see him very clearly in my mind. He looked sad and he was very tired. When I really focused on him, I too felt sad for what he had gone through and I realized how badly I wanted him out of the war. Then an idea dawned in me.

I decided to bring him home. I began by picturing the nineteen-year-old “me” stopping, then dropping his rucksack, his suspender straps and web-belt, his gas mask and K-bar knife. Then I watched him (in my mind) throw his rifle on top of the pile. Then I watched him take off his camouflage utilities and wipe the camouflage grease- paint off his face. When he was finished, I placed a men's clothing store in front of him (I realized, too, I could really think anything I wanted) and had him go in and pick out some nice civilian clothes. I watched him dress in jeans and a sports shirt and a light jacket (he also picked out a suit). As I watched him dress I could see some of the pain and exhaustion lift from his face. When he was done, I told him he was going home, that he didn't have to fight anymore, that he was being discharged. He burst into laughter and tears and ran toward me, his arms wide as if to embrace me. And inside me we embraced. Then I put him on a plane and sent him to someone I knew would love and care for him, someone who would listen to his stories and calm him through his frights. Someone who would always be there for him.

I sent him home to me.

William Crapser is a veteran of the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3d Marine Division in Vietnam. He was diagnosed as suffering from PTSD in 1981. This essay was one important step he took in coming home.

He is also the author of *Remains: Stories of Vietnam*, Sachem Press, 1988. William Crapser gives permission for anyone to distribute this essay to those it will help.

## Meditation on the Child Within

*We used this in Gainesville Women's Adult Children of Alcoholics.*

*Please adapt as needed. I may have written some of it—PM*

Let the ideas expressed in this exercise guide a waking dream. Settle back in your chair or on the bed. Become aware of how your body is touching the chair or bed or floor. Feel where your shoulders and your back and your arms and your hips and your legs are touching the chair or bed or floor, letting your body relax and letting the chair or bed or floor do the work of holding you up.

Become aware of your face. Feel the air as it touches your face; the coolness and the movement of the air as it touches the warmth and the stillness of your skin. Follow the air as it goes in your nose and your mouth, down the back of your throat and into your lungs. Feel your lungs open to receive the air and close to push it back out again. Feel the coolness of the air as it slides down the back of your throat.

Allow yourself to center, calmly, quietly, comfortably, inside yourself, with yourself, by yourself, taking from this exercise what is useful to you to help you lead the kind of life you want to lead. Let the words keep you safe as you become more and more in touch with your own center.

Visualize a safe place where you can sit in peace and quiet. Picture yourself as a little child as you breathe in and breathe out. Picture yourself as a little child: your hair, your eyes, your face, your clothes, as you breathe in and breathe out. Go over to that little child as you breathe in and breathe out, kneel down, and ask her if she would like a hug, as you breathe in and breathe out.

If she would like a hug, take her gently in your arms as you breathe in and breathe out. Hold her in your arms as you breathe in and breathe out. Stroke her hair as you breathe in and breathe out. Pat her gently as you breathe in and breathe out. Rock her in your arms and tell her you love her as you breathe in and breathe out. Tell her you love her and you will always

be there for her. Hold her and tell her it is going to be okay as you breathe in and breathe out. Together you will make it through the pain. Breathe in and breathe out. Breathe in and breathe out.

And when it is time, when you feel safe letting go, release your inner child, let her go with a hug and a kiss, as you breathe in and breathe out. Picture her shrinking down to a convenient size and put her in your heart or in your pocket, to keep with you always, as you breathe in and breathe out. You can keep her safe with you always, as you breathe in and breathe out, and come back to this room.

## Survivor Psalm

by Frank Ochberg, MD and Gift From Within

I have been victimized.

I was in a fight that was not a fair fight.

I did not ask for the fight.

I lost.

There is no shame in losing such fights, only in winning.

I have reached the stage of survivor and am no longer a slave of victim status.

I look back with sadness rather than hate.

I look forward with hope rather than despair.

I may never forget, but I need not constantly remember.

I was a victim.

I am a survivor.

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The website [www.giftfromwithin.org](http://www.giftfromwithin.org) is a wonderful resource for all trauma survivors. It includes Dr. Ochberg's wonderful articles on PTSD among many other treasures. Focused on healing.

# Reflections Between the Lines: The Healing of the Vietnam Generation

Janice Goff-LaFontaine,

Jan Goff-Lafontaine has produced a wonderful, remarkable, healing book. Photographs of 50 plus people who were there—from combat veterans to Red Cross workers and everything in between—are accompanied by reflections about the costs of war in the words of each person.

Jan's Vietnam veteran husband got PTSD after the Loma Prieta earthquake. Subsequent trauma often triggers PTSD.

She didn't understand so she started talking to other vets, and to quote her, "My heart opened, and I knew these were stories that had to be heard by others. I wanted these experiences to be in a book so that everyone could know the struggles, the courage, and the triumphs of Vietnam vets, and realize the personal toll of war."

Me, too.

It's a great book. *Reflections Between the Lines* moved me to tears in a lot of places, something that I consider a healing quality. It also made me laugh out loud. I had trouble putting the book down.

Jan's web site: [janlafontaine.com](http://janlafontaine.com)