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3,096 Days

Natascha Kampusch. (2010). London: Penguin.

Introduction

3,096 Days is an autobiographical book about Natascha Kampusch's story of abduction and eight year imprisonment in her kidnapper's cellar. Ten year old Natascha was kidnapped on the morning of 2 March 1998 in Vienna by Wolfgang Priklopil while she was on her way to school. Natascha managed to escape from her captivity on 23 August 2006 at the age of eighteen. On the day of her escape her kidnapper committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a moving train. Natascha wrote this book with the collaboration of Heike Gronemeier and Corinna Milborn four years after her escape at the age of twenty two. The book consists of ten chapters and the epilogue. The first chapter introduces the reader to Natascha's experience of difficult childhood and it provides a quite detailed description of her relationships with her parents as well as a description of the relational dynamics between the family members. Along the same lines, it allows the reader to paint a picture regarding the physical environment in which Natascha grew up until the age of ten and gain an understanding of the interplay between her social and family circumstances and dynamics, her individual psychological reactions and struggles and the way in which she viewed herself in relation to other people of her age. The second chapter focuses on Natascha's last day before her abduction and, more specifically, on her memories of the actual moment of her abduction, her initial reactions to what had happened to her and her first night in captivity. The next eight chapters revolve around the experience of her imprisonment until the day of her escape. The author describes in great depth the severe physical, emotional and psychological abuse and humiliation she had been subjected to by her abductor, her way of responding to her abuse and the reality of her captivity and, the manner in which she related to her kidnapper during her long term imprisonment and isolation. The epilogue of the book is dedicated to the aftermath of Natascha's escape and return to the 'outside' world. In this last part of the book, Natascha reflects upon the impact that the media's way of dealing with her case had on her and also she ponders upon her own attitude towards the predicament she went through.

Being-in-the-dungeon

The biggest part of the book is concerned with Natascha's long term experience of isolation and imprisonment in a specially constructed dungeon underneath her abductor's garage. The mere realisation that Natascha was thrown in a dungeon from which escape was not possible primarily signified loss, fear, loneliness and despair. When I attempted to engage with her experience of thrownness in the dungeon, bearing in mind the conditions of her captivity such as: the social isolation, the confined five square meter space, the lack of fresh air, the artificial light and the constant whirring noise of the fan in combination with the realisation that the underground dungeon was completely cut off from the outside world, I very soon experienced a quite intense claustrophobic sensation which accompanied me throughout the book and provided me with a glimpse of how overwhelmingly suffocating and psychologically torturous the reality might have been for Natascha, a ten year old child. Natascha explains that from the beginning of her imprisonment she realised that she had to deal with her feelings of fear and loneliness by relying solely on herself. More specifically, the manner in which she responded to her unbearable situation was by composing letters and stories in her head that mainly concerned her future plans after her rescue. When her future visions did not help her deal with her reality, little Natascha would either take on her mother's role and encourage herself or bring to her mind a memory of a situation in which she felt safe and loved. Later on, she would escape into the world of books and television series and would concentrate her attention on her daily rituals. In other words, Natascha generated strength and courage to endure the deprivation of her physical freedom and her abuse by escaping into a fictitious world of imagination in which she experienced the freedom to have control over her own life. Likewise, she derived a sense of safety and security by visualising previous situations that allowed her to re-experience positive feelings of this nature. Throughout the years of her captivity, Natascha created a private world which produced a sort of normality that protected her from being consumed by the feelings of hopelessness and despair that her actual reality provoked. Evidently, by withdrawing into this world, she managed to preserve both her identity and her willingness to live; pivotal elements that helped her to escape. Importantly, it would be fair to bear in mind that Natascha's ability to respond to her adverse situation in that particular fashion relates to the fact that at the time of her abduction she was a young child. By nature children demonstrate more flexibility and greater capacity to adapt to new lifestyles and circumstances. Her adaptation to her new reality was expressed in the way she related to both her new house which was meticulously cleaned and decorated as well as to the manner in which she related to her abductor. As Natascha unravels her story she talks about how her imprisonment was

psychologically internalised to such an extent that on a number of occasions her feelings of hopelessness and despair overshadowed her desire to survive. However, even at the times, when she was emotionally numb and detached from what was happening to her there was still a part of herself that urged her to escape.

Being-in-relation-with-her-abductor

From very early on after her abduction, Natascha describes how her feelings of disorientation, confusion, uncertainty and loneliness urged her to develop an attachment with her kidnapper; the figure that was entirely responsible for her physical, psychological and emotional survival. Natascha explains that as her kidnapper became the only reference point in her new life she learned to read his moods swings and respond to his reactions by blocking her anger and negative feelings towards him in a way that would ensure her survival and protect herself from further abuse. As she also mentions, her focusing on her kidnapper's positive aspects played a crucial role in helping her managing her experience and not getting destroyed by it. Importantly, Natascha's relationship with her kidnapper and, more specifically, the fact that despite the prolonged and intense suffering she was subjected to by him, she could compassionately see him as a human being who was also a prisoner of his own paranoia, is a matter that has provoked a lot of arguments and discussions by as to whether Natascha is suffering from '*Stockholm Syndrome*' according to which captives have positive feelings towards their perpetrator. Natascha not only rejects the pathologizing of her experience but she argues that by being classified as a person suffering from a syndrome she is being victimised again and her subjective experience and her interpretation of it is being reduced into a diagnosis. As Natascha emphasises situations are not always black and white but tend to constantly move within a spectrum and, hence, might appear as having different nuances. In relation to this, she recognises that even though her abductor committed a serious crime that had detrimental repercussions on her life, he also had other different parts as person that she came in touch with during her imprisonment. In a nutshell, it is the very paradoxical nature of her relationship with this individual that was based on deep mutual dependency in combination with her urge to survive that gave birth to the paradoxical and contradictory feelings she experienced towards her abductor.

Conclusion

Reading Natascha's account of long imprisonment has been an intense experience for me that made me wonder about how readily people tend to perceive complicated situations in terms of black and white. I believe that Natascha has managed to paint a spherical picture of her experience of imprisonment and, at the same time, she touched upon the manner in which

society and particularly the media responded to her story and interpreted it. Her straightforward writing style and the clear structure of the book make it accessible to a general audience. It is a book that can offer a great insight to people who are in the field of psychotherapy, psychology and psychiatry and that can provide the ground for further thought of how classifying one's experience under the construct of a diagnosis might exclude meaning and subjectivity and therefore, personal agency. Clearly, from an existential perspective the book can be interesting to read as it constantly revolves around a number of fundamentally existential concepts and explicitly touches upon the notions of freedom, responsibility and meaning. It also encourages the reader to ponder upon how the concept of trauma can be a part of human development. Lastly, the book can remind one that the complexity of human nature lies precisely in the fact that there is no objective truth regarding the way we make sense of our experiences.

Zoe Apostolidou

Awakening to Awe: Personal Stories of Profound Transformation

Kirk J. Schneider (2009). Lanham, MD (USA): Jason Aronson.

Kirk Schneider's book, *Awakening to Awe*, moved me by its celebration of life. Too often, cynical outlooks dominate conversations about what it means to be human. This book revitalizes the dialogue because it is so open to the wonder of being alive.

Dr. Schneider is a pioneer in the application of awe-based consciousness to existential-humanistic psychotherapy. In this book, he explores the nature and power of awe through his theoretical and therapeutic stance as well as through interviews of people transformed by their experience of awe.

He emphasizes the importance of living life with reverence, respect, humility, wonder, inclusiveness, and uncertainty, yet also with faith and trust. This is a very bold way to live as his stance advocates living one's life by being open to its mystery and magnificence while simultaneously taking responsibility to live the life that is authentically your own.

The people Dr. Schneider interviewed represent a range of stories demonstrating qualities and experiences of awe. Three examples are:

A woman who grew up with a schizophrenic father in the 1950s and coped with her maelstrom of feelings by opening to the grandeur and danger of nature and by cultivating a strong sense of compassion. She used the realizations gleaned from her experience to become an avid sailor and to develop a thriving career as a professor of psychology who values the importance of the full range of human nature.

An ex-gang member who listened to a stirring from his soul after witnessing the assassination of his younger brother. This stirring