FRAGMENTS FROM AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

Thriving on Adversity

Estela V. Welldon

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I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my son Dan, without whom this book would never have seen the light of day. His incredible hard work, talent, and toil over months succeeded in turning my rambling and sometimes barely comprehensible thoughts into the book that you see now.
I am forever grateful.

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About the author

Estela V. Welldon is a psychiatrist, group analyst, and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, as well as a founding figure in forensic psychotherapy. Born in Argentina, she built her career in London, where she worked for many years as a consultant psychiatrist at the Portman Clinic, treating patients whose destructive and, at times, criminal behaviour grew out of their early histories and consequent inner lives. She is the author of the landmark *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* (1988), which challenged the long-held assumption that perversion and violence were exclusively male. She was the founder of the International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy, now in its thirty-fifth year. Her work has influenced clinicians, researchers, and readers well beyond the consulting room and all over the world. In this book, she turns her attention to her own story, offering a candid and deeply personal account of a rich and extraordinary life.

Foreword

Professor Brett Kahr

Back in 1988, as a young psychologist, I began to work with patients who had committed significant acts of violence. One of my old tutors from the University of Oxford had strongly recommended that I should consider applying to study at the esteemed Portman Clinic in North West London, under the tutelage of the Argentinian-born Consultant Psychiatrist, Dr Estela Valentina Welldon. To my great delight, I happily received a place on Dr Welldon's newly launched "Introductory Course on the Understanding of Sexual and Social Deviance"—the precursor to her soon-to-be established formal training programmes in the burgeoning field of forensic psychotherapy.

I shall never forget my very first lecture with Dr Welldon.

Whereas most of my previous teachers at university had grown up in Great Britain and, hence, would always communicate in a typically quiet, even shy, vocal manner, Dr Welldon had no difficulty speaking in a very audible, "non-English" fashion. Indeed, she would not only talk fully and passionately and bluntly, but she forced all of her trainees to do so as well.

Surprisingly, whenever Dr Welldon asked a question, she insisted that *every* single student must offer his or her own views!

As a rather youthful and somewhat inexperienced budding clinician—probably the youngest trainee on the course—I did not rush to respond to questions, as I simply did not have much knowledge to share at that point in time. But whenever I sat in silence, Estela Welldon would single me out and would often shout, "And you, Brett Kahr, what do *you* think about this matter?"

In many respects, I owe Estela a lifetime of gratitude, because she really helped me to find my voice and to begin to articulate my growing body of knowledge. Indeed, I very much doubt that I would have become a lecturer, a writer, and a broadcaster in years to come had Estela not encouraged me to participate in a far less "British" manner!

Upon completion of the one-year introductory course at the Portman Clinic on sexual and social violence, I became one of the very first trainees on Dr Welldon's newly inaugurated "Certificate in Forensic Psychotherapy", co-sponsored by both the Portman Clinic, part of the Hampstead Health Authority, and, also, by the British Postgraduate Medical Federation in the University of London. After the receipt of my certificate in 1992, I then became an inaugural trainee in the clinic's "Diploma in Forensic Psychotherapy", delivered by the British Postgraduate Medical Federation and by the Faculty of Clinical Sciences at University College London, part of the University of London, and co-sponsored by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust. In 1996, I felt extremely privileged to have received my diploma, with Estela having very kindly served as the academic and clinical supervisor of my dissertation on juvenile paedophilia.

Thus, over eight years, I enjoyed the deep honour of studying with Dr Estela Welldon—one of the most brilliant teachers of my entire training and, indeed, of my entire career. Although Dr Welldon served as my "official" teacher and supervisor from 1988 until my graduation from the Portman Clinic in 1996, she would, in fact, remain a true teacher and a profound role model over the next thirty years—one of the deepest sources of inspiration, not only to me, but to literally hundreds, if not thousands, of fellow mental health colleagues.

A veritable pioneer in the field of forensic psychology, Estela Welldon has, in my estimation, contributed more to the advancement of humane care towards violent offenders than almost any other psychiatric or psychotherapeutic professional. Whereas most

psychiatrists would, throughout the twentieth century, endeavour to sentence criminals to prisons or to psychiatric hospitals, offering no treatment whatsoever, Welldon championed the field of forensic psychotherapy, discovering that if one could offer "talking therapy" to offender patients, one might readily reduce the likelihood that such patients would commit further crimes.

Over time, Welldon became the true founder of the branch of the mental health profession now known as "forensic psychotherapy". And, in my estimation, she accomplished more than anyone else in educating new generations of colleagues, all of whom have since contributed to the reduction of global violence through traditional psychoanalytically orientated treatment.

After having trained in medicine in Argentina, and then, after having worked in the United States of America for the iconic psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Professor Karl Menninger, Dr Estela D'Accurzio emigrated to Great Britain and married a fellow psychiatrist, Dr Ronald Welldon. Known subsequently as Estela Welldon, this newly based Londoner became increasingly creative and, after her appointment at the noted Portman Clinic—the first psychoanalytically orientated institution that specialised in the treatment of sexual deviances and sexual offences—she undertook immense work in establishing a formal profession of forensic psychotherapy. Across the 1990s, and thereafter, she created the International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy and, in due course, she also kindly funded and sponsored the inauguration of *The International Journal of Forensic Psychotherapy*.

Across her rich career, she authored many now-iconic books, including, most notably, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*, in which she drew upon her extensive work at the Portman Clinic and dared to explain that women, as well as men, can, in fact, become violent offenders, especially towards their own children. Thus, she boldly re-genderised the field of violence studies and thankfully helped us to appreciate that violence must be treated and prevented not only in male patients but in female patients as well.

Estela certainly devoted her career to the advancement of the mental health field and to the training of many grateful students but, above all, she always worked first and foremost, across well over sixty years, caring for innumerable patients. A woman of great professional compassion

and impressive ethicality, she always prioritised her clinical commitments and thus helped to save many, many lives indeed.

Estela Welldon often enjoyed a very rich life of her own, full of love and devotion to her family, her friends, her colleagues, and to the advancement of our profession. She also had to endure immense struggles with cancer. But thankfully, she became a veritable role model to us all on how one can actually survive medical trauma and continue to enjoy being human. This great woman truly survived and continued to thrive for so many decades!

Several years ago, Dr Welldon received a South American professorship, so we now have the opportunity to address her formally as Profesora Welldon.

With great generosity, Profesora Welldon devoted many years during her eighties, crafting a most revealing, most engaging, and most insightful autobiography, available in two volumes. I recommend this book with deep passion and with true affection.

I extend my deepest thanks and my warmest affection to this amazing woman who remains my teacher for life and, moreover, a source of true admiration and true inspiration.

Likewise, I wish to convey my fond appreciation to Estela's wonderful son, Daniel Welldon—a man of tremendous talent and profound kindness—for having kindly prepared this book in honour of his very special mother.

I hope that those colleagues who indulge in the reading of this memorable book will learn as much as I have done from this extraordinarily unique and tremendously loveable human being.

Professor Brett Kahr is Senior Fellow at the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology in London and, also, Visiting Professor of Psychoanalysis and Mental Health at Regent's University London, as well as the Honorary Director of Research at the Freud Museum London. Trained and mentored across many years by Profesora Estela Valentina Welldon, he has devoted much of his work to the advancement of the field of forensic psychotherapy. In 1997, Brett Kahr became the founding Series Editor of the "Forensic Psychotherapy Monograph Series", designed to promote the work of Welldon and her colleagues. This book series remains in print to this day and has included such volumes as Kahr's collected papers on *Forensic Psychoanalysis: From Sub-Clinical Psychopaths to Serial Killers*, as well as the Festschrift that he commissioned in honour of Welldon's eightieth birthday, namely, *New Horizons in Forensic Psychotherapy: Exploring the Work of Estela V. Welldon*. Kahr has also enjoyed the privilege of having served as the Consulting Editor to *The International Journal of Forensic Psychotherapy* and, also, as a long-standing member of the Board of Trustees of the International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy, as well as the Adviser-in-Chief to the Forensic Psychotherapy Society. Professor Kahr would not have undertaken any of this work without the unique inspiration of Profesora Welldon.

Foreword

EVW

I am not sure as to whether I did or didn't want to write my life history. Though I am still unsure, I feel I am being pushed from inside to this, not only as a chronological history of my adventurous and simultaneously rich life achieved, despite all external dreadful events, either despite them or they may be the outcome of extremely difficult life.

After all, I am certainly not the first one to acknowledge that suffering and its mastering is the source of all creation.

> "My illness has been my greatest boom; it unblocked me; it gave me the courage to be myself."
>
> —Nietzsche (at age thirty-four)

> "I never know happiness to help."
>
> —Colm Tóibín

> "I only count the happy hours."
>
> —Latin inscription from Hilary Mantel

The more I read from creative persons the more aware I become of the importance those sufferings have had as triggers of creations in the landmarks of crucial discoveries of themselves.

> "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."
>
> —Nietzsche (at age forty-four)

I am now aware, in writing this, that my life has, at times, been extremely difficult; some of that has been out of my own making and I do not regret a bit about this.

Some years ago, I wrote this paragraph, which I've just found now: "Why Why has my life been so incredibly difficult, I often wonder. I feel I don't want to indulge into self-pity or to make myself a victim, but I just wonder WHY? Do I inflict all those terrible hurts onto myself , or do they just happen to come my way?"

Do I call for the constant repetition of being afflicted by sudden separations, deaths of beloved people around me? Why is it that nothing has come the easy, effortless way; is it because I fight all the time, even when I do not need to, or is it that I'm fascinated by people who are on "the edge" and therefore I place myself constantly at risk?

What to do? My professional, personal memoirs? My life? A diary of remembered events? A journey literally speaking of geographical places I have gone. Lived in? Conflicts and disappointments and joyful encounters, occurring during my long journey into my life?

Well, as the song says: "Que sera sera".

So, it doesn't matter if it's written badly, or great, in prose or even in uneven prose or poetry. The main objective is for my family to keep this record. Although I must confess that I hope it will also be read by others who at times have felt during their lives that predicaments were too many or too difficult.

I've decided to write a factional journey of my life, since I believe that my life has been for whatever reasons a fascinating and eventful one, very often surrounded by near-death cataclysmic situations to which often just by chance I was able to escape. This was often associated to my acquired/or innate capacities not only to survive them but even to *thrive on adversity*.

I'm not sure I'll write a straightforward bio of my life as it just happened, or I may perhaps be more inclined to write free associations and just let thoughts and reminiscences emerge. I have also decided to include some letters, mine and from others, as well as some poems

I despair at this terrible preoccupation of parents to train their children to be "nice", which for me it is NOT interchangeable with being kind or polite. Because you can disagree and use your own voice being polite. (Just remember Oscar Wilde's writings.)

Not at all, being "nice" means to stop your real feelings to be shown, unless they are "nice"; to be at all times smiling, in good mood and utterly senseless. That means not only not using your own voice but also giving up your self-assertion. You are then no longer capable to distinguish what is real for you; your only aim is to accommodate to other people's desires, commands and to forget completely about your own purposes in YOUR life.

But, most importantly, for those who have been "trained" to be "good" and well behaved, so much of their true selves has been lost in that senseless "quest" of "being nice".

What a terrible waste!

If anyone is to take away just even one thing from this book it should be this:

Don't Be "Nice"!