

## Marilize Slabber

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Dear Catherine

I am a clinical psychologist who works primarily in the field of trauma. Most of my clients have experienced some significant childhood trauma. I am fortunate to work around the corner from Square Edge, where *The Secret Keeper* opened in March 2021. Over the weeks that the exhibition was open, I had the privilege of not only viewing it myself but also of going through it with several of my clients. I would like to take this opportunity to give you some feedback on my experience as a clinician, both for myself and in what I observed from clients.

This subject matter of the exhibition is not trauma per se, but the impact of it - the way in which the artist survived at the time and coped over the years following. The difficulties and challenges portrayed in her work are unfortunately all too common, and immensely difficult to find words for. They leave people feeling that they are crazy, that they are abnormal, that there is something wrong with them that sets them apart from the rest of the world in some way that they cannot define and cannot even try to express without being locked up and labelled as mad. *The Secret Keeper* is one of those exceedingly rare instances where someone manages to, in a public space, express and portray that internal experience in a way that is intensely real, raw, and profoundly moving.

This exhibition has been deeply impactful for my clients. Nearly everyone who saw it commented on how relatable it was – “it could have been me in those pictures, I could have written those words”, “I felt like she just saw me”, “I walked in and I saw myself in every piece”, “she is just like us”. Clients were astounded by how open she was, how much of herself she revealed in her art and how readily she shared in conversation. This secretive nature of abuse, and the shame that comes with it, is nearly universal. The exhibition invited conversation around that; and about that deep secret fear that bad things will happen because they have told. Seeing someone go public in such an authentic, raw way was almost shocking, and deeply empowering for clients. I took as many of my clients as I could and I would strongly urge every other clinician who ever has the opportunity, to do the same. As a therapeutic intervention it has given my clients something unique and powerful that they could never get from therapy, or any other context.

The Secret Keeper did not only hold value for clients. For me as a clinician the exhibition provided a deeper understanding of the lived experience of complex trauma. It has given me a glimpse into what childhood would have been like for some of my clients, and how those experiences would have impacted everything that came after. Trauma in general and dissociation in particular is something that is so often disregarded in those systems that deal with our most vulnerable. I have encouraged every one of my colleagues and supervisees to go see this exhibition. I wish every mental health clinician, every DHB, every Sensitive Claims case manager at ACC, every GP, every women’s health nurse, and every religious/spiritual leader could see this. We would be better clinicians and better humans for it.

With deepest gratitude and appreciation



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