

Summer 2014



UpDATE

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Resilience Following Trauma:

Stories of Faith, Hope, and Love

By Gary Behrman, Ph.D., Social Work

Childhood sexual abuse is a traumatic event that our society is openly addressing today in helpful and healing ways. Sadly, this was

not always the case. I set out to study the impact of childhood sexual abuse in older adults who had been abused in an era when this trauma was usually kept secret. In my various professional roles, I have had the privilege of walking with older adults when they seek the courage to step out of the dark re-emergence of sexual abuse into the healing light of self-disclosure. Together we have assessed the damage and searched among the ruins of painful memories but also have sought new signs of life and symbols of hope.

I found that often the effects of childhood sexual abuse lie hidden and undetected for many years, like landmines waiting to be detonated and, once exploded, maiming their victims, who are caught completely by surprise. These older adults have shared with me stories of the way life was and is today. They speak of painful memories of relationships that were permanently severed and wounds left unhealed. The impact of early life sexual abuse can be found in adult addictions, poor work histories, and/or mental health crises.

Sexual abuse is generally perceived by both professional and lay communities as an overwhelming, unexpected crisis creating a wide variety and range of unwelcome effects. When sexual abuse occurs, coping strategies and resources are challenged and relationships disrupted; the resulting disconnections with self and others magnify the damage. Suppressing these

memories can cause them to fester. But effective treatment, even many years later, can identify cause and effect, and set in motion a process in which resources and skills are brought to bear so that the person may find the grace and courage to age gracefully and gracefully heal.

In researching the delayed impact of childhood sexual abuse in older adults; I was surprised to find few clinicians and researchers asking this critical question: does early life sexual abuse impact the quality of life in old age? It became critical to raise awareness among researchers, healthcare providers and therapists to be asking if the crises of childhood sexual abuse should be recognized and more effectively treated in older adults.

Building on a study conducted by other Saint Louis University faculty (Chibnall, Wolf, Duckro, 1998), I explored the variety of impacts in later life that resulted from childhood sexual abuse as reported by older Catholic women religious (Behrman, 2007). Specific attention was given to the strengths and spiritual resources these women were using to promote healing so many years after the abuse.

While it is not possible to generalize from the experiences of one group of women to all women, the richness of their descriptions and the intimate sharing of their experiences do shed light on the long-term effects of abuse and the means they used to find resolution and healing. Living with the traumatic stories of sexual abuse

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often lead these women to social exile, alienation, and emotional devastation, but embedded in these stories are proclamations of salvific human transformation.

My life today is blessed in that it is permeated with stories of grace-filled healing following these Catholic sisters' painful experiences. Their stories are testimonies of amazing resiliency and awe-inspiring transformation, which continue to inspire me today and enrich my own spiritual life.

These stories of courageous women challenge our assumptions about this topic. Stereotypes and judgmental attitudes permeate our society's attitudes about sexual abuse, too often blaming the victim and assigning fault for their many years of silence. These stereotypes and judgments make it even more difficult for victims of sexual abuse to reclaim personal authority in the wake of their traumatic experiences.

I will present here some of the more powerful and poignant statements that emerged from my study. With each, I offer reflections as to what I understand to be the deeper implications for our understanding of what it means to heal, psychologically and spiritually, even many years after the wound. I humbly have their permission to pass on to you what they spoke to me.

As one sister stated, I was a teacher for over four decades, this may be my last act of teaching as a gift for others to learn from. In her words, "I say, I am not fighting for myself, I'm fighting for all people. You know, this is an archetypal issue that touches many lives."

This Sister understood that her sexual abuse did not occur in a vacuum. She places her sexual abuse within a cultural context that she believes applies to many women her age. She hopes others can recognize and report abuse however and whenever it occurs. She is framing her abuse as a collective abuse that occurred for many women in her generation, and understands the reason so many women had to tolerate patriarchal abuses and did not have the resources or support to fight for themselves and others.

"I was born into a culture that accepted sexual abuse. The act, here we're talking about sexual abuse, it's not

necessarily my sexual abuse, it's my family's sexual abuse. It's our culture's sexual abuse."

The most striking finding of this study for me was the strength and hope that emerged from not isolating themselves and trying to heal alone.

In her observation, this same Sister focuses our attention on a culture of abuse that goes beyond individual acts of violence against women. She speaks about her family's hesitance to listen to her story of abuse and society's complicity in silencing women's voices who dare speak about abuse. Her individual abuse is located in a culture of abuse and she is determined in her recovery to gently invite women of all ages to respond personally and collectively.

It was really a strong experience when I spoke out and I think it also helped people when they did come together not to feel like they were abandoned or orphaned because we brought other women together to share our stories. And because I am a religious, it has enabled me to be a healing part in a way that I didn't imagine I could be. It's very humbling. It's just, you know, it really does something to me. Most of the time it brings tears to my eyes.

That collective experience, helping each other to heal, is found in this response and many others like hers. The Sisters in this study witnessed that the path to healing is in finding their voices to tell their stories in their own words with strength and forgiveness. Once finding strength in self-disclosure, they are now ready to help other women along the same path.

Well, for me, it is wonderful to be a Catholic religious Sister today. I have been a Catholic religious Sister for almost 50 years. I have always found that the women's religious life, community life, and the vowed life have many, many graces and many freedoms that I think a lot of people probably do not appreciate.

Their Catholic formation and Christian faith gave these sisters the tools and wisdom not only to forgive but also to help others find their voices. Their prayer life and careers took many turns and unexpected resting places in the shade of other's stories.

The most striking finding of this study for me was the strength and hope that emerged from not isolating themselves and trying to heal alone. Disclosure with a



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skilled therapist or spiritual director in a safe setting opened doors of self-understanding and interpersonal healing; which lead to disclosure with select sisters who mobilized understanding and support that that they are not alone in this abuse.

A series of tree metaphors that the Sisters used to describe their transformation: from darkness into the light captures their hope and prayers for others who suffer in silence with their histories of sexual abuse.

The only thing that I can come up with is a fruit tree because, you know, the seasons of a tree, at times a tree is bare but there's still life in it and then it blossoms and things begin to happen and then pretty soon the tree bears fruit. This is my story in old age. I am grateful to be bearing fruit so that others may be nourished.

I am an oak tree now. I used to be a weeping willow. I can talk now. Before I couldn't talk. Today I am strong and sturdy. You hang in there and work. The wind can blow, you can have storms, but you stand strong and sturdy.

Maybe I am a maple tree, for many reasons. First of all, its variety. It is a tree that changes colors that loses its leaves and then starts over anew. Like many trees, a maple tree spreads out its branches and accepts all kinds of animals, small creatures and birds to find a home in its arms.

I think I am a pine tree, because it keeps its green no matter what, even in the darkest winter time. And, it's grows slowly and I love the shape of its branches. And when the new needles arrive the old ones drop off. There is always something waiting for me to let go of, always something new waiting for me.

I would have to say I am a tree with deep roots, a sturdy tree with deep roots, having been in hurricanes, probably a banyan tree. Of course it's very convoluted. So if I didn't have deep roots I would never have made it this far. And you know, I've had so many things happen to me and I'm still here and I'm healthy.

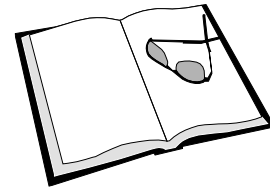
My hope is that the words spoken in this research will emerge as testimonies of healing in old age following sexual abuse. Their stories continue to transform my life I understand more clearly the role of finding a trusted spiritual companion who provides hope that no matter how traumatic life's events may be, the possibility of transformation, with its wisdom and strength, awaits each of us.

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Chibnall, J., Wolf, A., & Duckro, P. (1998). A national survey of the sexual trauma experiences of Catholic nuns. *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 40, 2.



BOOK REVIEW

Tender Fires

"The Spiritual Promise of Sexuality"

FRAN FERDER AND JOHN HEAGLE

*"As a deer longs for flowing streams,
So my soul longs for you, O Lord". (Ps 42:1)*

Even though this book was published in 2002, it resonates with the emerging understanding of the universe story.

ENERGY is the conceptual image these authors use to express sexuality as a spiritual gift. In their model, sexual energy is born of the energy that is part of the very formation of the universe in which God has shared God's very self with all creation.

This sharing of God's self in creation means that relationship of God with all created things is at the heart of everything we know.

So it is, then, that sexuality, born of the divine self-expression, must be understood as gift for self and others, extending the relationship of God with creation, and allowing all elements of creation to participate in an unfolding web of relationship. Relationship is the expanding expression of the divine energy, and so part of the constant unfolding of the universe.

This theology is a welcome and needed antidote to the very narrow view of sexuality as only physical/genital in nature, a view that is so characteristic of popular culture.

The model is widely applicable, touching not only the married life, but also the life of the consecrated religious. As such, this book could be equally useful as a resource for marriage preparation, formation of candidates to religious vocations, or support of vowed religious.

Published by:

The Crossroad Publishing Company. \$16.95

Reviewed by S. Therese Anne Kiefer, ASC

From the Director's Desk

From the Director's Desk

Dear Friends,

Peace and warm Summer greetings to you!

We are pleased to present to you, in this edition of UpDATE, an article on the important and sensitive topic of childhood sexual abuse from the perspective. Dr. Behrman's writes of what he has gleaned from his research with adult women religious who suffered sexual abuse as a child. The stories he collected make clear the enduring impact of childhood abuse and the arduous process of recovery.

Dr. Behrman's powerful image—"bombs exploding at night"—evokes the experience of long suppressed trauma that lay like hidden landmines just beneath the surface; suddenly they are triggered, often by what seems to be an innocuous event. The resulting explosion of emotion and behavior impairs victim and innocent bystanders alike, interfering with interpersonal relationships and ministry performance.

The good news in this painful article is that survivors of childhood trauma do not have to walk the minefield alone. We have had the privilege of walking with many individuals who have histories of trauma, helping them identify and heal old wounds, develop healthier coping resources, and enhance resilience.

If you have questions about how a wellness sabbatical in the Program for Psychology and Religion might assist you or someone you know in their continued process of recovery, please call or write. We will discuss how we can best help.

Warm regards!



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