

UNDERSTANDING

**SEXUAL
ABUSE**

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**SEXUAL
ABUSE**

A GUIDE FOR
MINISTRY LEADERS
AND
SURVIVORS

T I M H E I N



Published in 2018 by Muddy Pearl.
Muddy Pearl, Edinburgh, Scotland.
www.muddypearl.com | books@muddypearl.com

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First published by InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426 ivpress.com,
email@ivpress.com

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges, and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, visit intervarsity.org.

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ISBN 978-1-910012-47-5 (print) 978-1-910012-48-2 (digital)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Cover design by David Fassett. Cover image: watercolor background: © larisa_zorina/iStockphoto

Typeset by David McNeill www.revocreative.co.uk

Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow

To Priscilla

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FOREWORD

Debra Hirsch

This book is a courageous gift, arriving at just the right time.

Our entire culture, including our churches, is only beginning to come to grips with the vast and insidious topic of sexual abuse. The sheer scale of the issue is hard to fathom.

But we must. No Christian leader can answer the call of ministry today and not be informed about this issue. Despite the complexity, we must engage. Similarly, survivors also deserve answers that go to the heart of their pain, naming the issues, engaging their hard questions, offering full and frank information, and carefully proclaiming the vastness of God's love to empower them for the road towards recovery.

This powerful book meets both these needs. It is a book every survivor deserves, and that every Christian leader needs to read.

Tim Hein has been a friend for over fifteen years, but I don't need to be biased to affirm the power and beauty of this book. Rather, knowing Tim and observing his life and ministry only confirms my confidence in the integrity of this story. It is no surprise that he has written such an eloquent and moving resource, filled with precise explanations and rich insight.

Tim is a person after my own heart, passionate about seeing the church as a radical community of people walking towards wholeness, and welcoming broken people – a place where the radical gospel of Jesus Christ is announced as good news, even in the darkest places and in the face of the most difficult issues in our world. We follow a God who is also a trauma survivor, a God who endured the cross. Tim captures this rugged truth about our God, and offers a genuine, eloquent explanation of what it means to walk unafraid through the storm of trauma.

Drawing courageously from his own experiences as both a survivor and a Christian leader, Tim's careful research is complemented by an empathy drawn from the ache of his own experience. It is deeply sensitive, and yet never gets bogged down in sentiment. It is a constructive book, navigating the issue with clarity. It is a strong book, courageously unpacking the various elements of complex trauma, and then delving into the big questions of suffering. And, despite the difficult subject, it is a safe book – an essential pastoral resource.

I must mention the beautiful Priscilla too, because her experiences of pain and recovery are included – a testimony to her courage. Tim and Priscilla live with a passion for God's redemption of our world, and this book is sure to be a genuine contribution to the recovery of many.

Tim has given us a readable, useful, and passionate guide to this most intimidating of topics. It is a gift of a book, essential reading for survivors, no matter their stage of recovery. It's also essential for every Christian leader, not only to read themselves, but to keep close at hand to give to others when the pastoral moment arrives.

INTRODUCTION

It is said that the true test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.

In our society today, it is estimated that up to one in four girls and one in six boys experience sexual abuse during childhood. Experts also estimate that as many as half of the incidents are not reported. Millions of people, both children and adults, face each day with this hidden, complex pain. Leaders and loved ones struggle to understand their experience.

I have experienced this personally; I was sexually abused as a child. I've written this book to inform fellow victims and to help them become survivors. But I'm also an ordained minister, and I want to inform other leaders about this issue. Therefore, what I share is drawn not only from research, but also from my experience as a survivor of sexual abuse and as a Christian leader who has assisted others on this journey. Christian leaders live on the front line of ministry with hurting people. It is crucial that we are informed and equipped to respond to the complexity of this issue. I hope this book can be a useful guide to the nature and trauma of child sexual abuse for both survivors and ministry leaders.

I also know this journey from the perspective of being the partner of a survivor. My wife, Priscilla, suffered the abuse of her father. She generously shares portions of her story in this book, as well as insights from her knowledge and experience. She is also now an ordained minister.

To be clear, this is not a book about how to prevent abuse or how to deal with perpetrators. I write as a survivor and as a Christian leader, not as a psychologist or a therapist. It's a book geared for church and ministry leaders, to prepare them to support survivors of sexual abuse, and it also includes content specifically geared for

survivors. It can be read by both kinds of readers. You will see that often I write as ‘we’ throughout the book. By that I mean you and me – we the survivors, and we the Christian leaders. Those two perspectives, as well as careful research, have informed the insights that follow.

Defining Sexual Abuse

The term *sexual abuse* can cover a range of things, but it most specifically refers to undesired sexual behaviour of one person upon another. In this book, we’re exploring the subject of *child sexual abuse*, and in that case there is really no need for the word *undesired* in the definition. Any sexual behaviour by a person towards a child, that is, a person under the legal age of consent, is abusive. *Paedophilia* is an abnormal or perverted attraction to children. The legal term is *molestation*, which technically means ‘to disturb or interfere with’. It is the use of a child, directly or indirectly, as a sexual object. None of the terms quite feel adequate, and of course unwanted sexual behaviour is traumatic at any age. So while this book focuses specifically on child sexual abuse, many of the principles in these pages may apply to a variety of sexual assaults.

But let me be clear: if you have experienced abuse, I can’t pretend to completely know you. People respond to abuse and trauma in different ways. You may resonate with some things in this book, and not others. That’s okay.

I know *my* experience, and I know it was hell. I also know something of Priscilla’s experience from the perspective of our close relationship. On the occasions when I have shared my insight with others, they have resonated with it. But I don’t want to pretend to know yours. I say this to respect that you may be experiencing deep pain even as you read this, and I want you to know that you’re not alone. I hope that what you find in the pages that follow speaks truth and helps you. There is a way forward.

If you are a Christian leader, this issue may seem baffling, ugly and frightening. I hope sharing my story here and these key

principles will also give you confidence to walk unafraid into the mess of ministry in a safe and informed manner.

This is not a therapeutic book, because I am not a psychologist or trauma expert. It's designed to give you knowledge, because knowledge is power, and recovery begins with empowerment. And that's why I believe my story, with glimpses of Priscilla's story as well, may be helpful. Our perspectives as survivors and ministry leaders have given us insights that I think are truthful and useful. In the pages that follow, I explore the questions that I wanted answered, both as a survivor and as a Christian leader. I try to carefully and clearly unpack this dark and mysterious subject and offer you a map.

Before I Share My Story

I'm aware of how difficult it can be to hear about someone else's story of abuse. But I also know how helpful it is to learn about someone else's experience. It's a fine line, so I want to dispel one fear and one myth right from the start.

Firstly, I'm not going to go into the specific details of our actual abuse experiences. You don't have to be afraid that you'll turn a page and suddenly be confronted by vivid details. The purpose of this book is to empower and inform, not to shock you. I share about my feelings and the facts of my life journey, but nothing more. You are safe in that regard.

Secondly, I want to dispel a myth that many victims of abuse spin constantly around in our minds: namely, that 'What happened to me probably wasn't as bad as what happened to them.' Sometimes we feel that we are not worthy of the attention and care that our pain desperately requires, compared to the horrible things we hear from other victims. That's another reason I'm not sharing the specific details of our experiences. Trying to compare painful experiences is a profound mistake. We rarely really understand other people's experiences, and we can never make a true comparison. Pain is not a measurable quantity, and child sexual abuse is traumatic for complex reasons. Most importantly, when we compare ourselves

with others in this area, we have a tendency to dangerously downplay our experience before we fully comprehend it. We are guided by the myth that ignoring, downplaying, or denying our memories will minimize them and help us control them.

Survivors and Christian leaders both need to hear this clearly: every incident of abuse is traumatic. Downplaying our abuse almost always adds to our trauma. Priscilla and I offer our stories here not as special examples, or for any comparison: indeed, the sad reality is that they are not unique. We share our stories to show why abuse is so deeply destructive, and to explain how recovery can be possible. Child sexual abuse happens. It happened to me, it happened to Priscilla, it may have happened to you, and it is horrific every single time.

The Church and Abuse by Clergy

It's important to name up front the failures of many churches in this area. Child abuse occurs right across society, including in churches and Christian organizations. Perpetrators have at times been Christian leaders, including ordained clergy. It is hard to find the words to sufficiently condemn this horrific behaviour. That church denominations have not been further ahead of the procedural curve in systemically mitigating against this is deeply regrettable. But in those instances where it has been ignored, minimized, or even covered up, they have demonstrated a complicity that is difficult to imagine. It is hard to think of a more antithetical activity to the gospel of Jesus Christ than child abuse.

But child sexual abuse occurs right across society, in families and among trusted family friends, as well as in schools and other community organizations. I was abused by a male babysitter; Priscilla was abused by her father. As a society, we are just coming to grips with the proximity and prevalence of this issue.

I hope and pray this book not only helps empower survivors in their journey of recovery and healing, but also gives Christian leaders confidence to face the reality of the issue and to enable recovery in any way they can.

My Story Begins

Growing up in Traralgon, a city in the Victoria region of Australia, was not unlike growing up in Springfield, the fictitious home of *The Simpsons*. It's a medium-sized regional town surrounded by that strange combination of dairy farms and power stations.

I had a reasonably normal 1980s childhood: apart from school and organ lessons, I spent my time riding my BMX, watching *Knight Rider*, playing Australian Rules football, collecting *Star Wars* figures, and listening to Petra and Bon Jovi. My family attended a Pentecostal church that met in a high school hall in the next town.

Both of my parents were always around, and busy and productive in the community. Our home was full of church friends, hospitality and laughter. It was my parents' natural hospitality that led them to open our home to Greg, the son of friends some distance out of town. Greg had obtained a job at a local store and needed a place to board during the week. Our caravan in the backyard was an ideal option.

It was exciting to have Greg live with us. He liked to joke around and rode a motorbike. It was also a blessing for my parents, who now had a live-in babysitter. Every second Wednesday evening was our church's prayer meeting, which previously meant I had to spend many hours sleeping on the floor at church. Now, with Greg there to babysit, a normal bedtime was possible.

I was nine years old, and 7.00 p.m. was my bedtime, with some leeway time for reading. But as is typical for a child, after the lights go out, time slows down. This defining time, before I fell asleep, was a time of serious and varied thinking. I digested the events of the day, let my imagination run loose, and turned future hopes into plans and wishes into longings.

As every child knows, with so much time staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep, any interruption is welcome. So it was initially a pleasant surprise when Greg started popping into my bedroom to visit.

But in those visits, Greg would abuse me.

Where My Story Leads

I didn't disclose my abuse to anyone until I was in my early twenties. I carried the dark secret alone all those years before I told anyone at all, and did not finally tell my parents until a decade after that, when I was in my thirties. Over those years, what appeared to be normal life on the surface was marked for me by flashbacks, nightmares and lonely anguish.

What made this process more complex was a deep personal sense that I was obligated to immediately forgive Greg for what he had done. This became a private mountain for me to conquer. In my young mind I thought that to be a good Christian I had to forgive him, and this burden set up a trajectory of stress and intense pressure, the effects of which I still sometimes experience today. It also led me to seek out and meet Greg in person. I promised him I wouldn't tell the police, preferring to keep the weight of my experience to myself. I thought I was doing the righteous thing.

Several years later, through counselling and the pastoral skill of a Christian leader named Bob, I was finally freed to unlock the traumatic door, release the truth, and begin to discover the experience of walking unafraid. This led to the filing of charges, Greg's conviction, and a strange encounter with the judge in court I did not expect. It also led to more searching, counselling and therapy, questions, anger, fear, reading, tears and prayer. It led me farther along a difficult journey that I can only describe in hindsight as a slow, deep, unwinding release.

ONE

A SAFE PLACE

*The truth does not change according to our
ability to stomach it emotionally.*

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

JOHN 8:32 (NIV)

Tim's Story

The exact moment I realized I'd been sexually abused as a child, my family and I were waiting at an intersection in our car. We were on our way to lunch after church. I was fourteen years old.

I wasn't trying to think about it, and no one had mentioned it. It just came to me. I remember looking out the side window, zoning in on the raindrops dribbling down the window just in front of my face. This long moment remains like a still photo in my memory. My mind scanned my memory back and forth, recognizing, confirming. That happened to me. I've been abused.

As the car began to move forward, I tried to come to grips with this new information. I felt nervous and overwhelmed in my seat. A huge weight seemed to press into my chest, close to my throat. I undid my seatbelt and looked around the backseat.

My parents were talking to each other in the front seats, oblivious. To say anything to them was unthinkable. My nervousness shifted to fear, to an almost guilty feeling. As the car drove on, I watched the passing houses and shops, sitting with this new truth, so suddenly and unavoidably present.

My young brain had somehow realized, comprehended, this uninvited truth. It would be a long time before I could find the proper words to describe the strange feeling of the painful memories. The closest I can come is that it felt like a shocking, overwhelming sadness. But it was more than sadness. I was unsettled, uncomfortable and anxious.

As the car drove on, I didn't move in my seat, and I didn't speak a word about it. I wouldn't for another eight years.

Your church is not an exception. There are victims of sexual abuse in every community and institution in society, including churches. There are certainly victims of sexual abuse in your congregation. One of the serious dilemmas of the subject of child sexual abuse is that while it is incredibly widespread, it is also shrouded in secrecy and even denial. It is often invisible in our congregations because of the silence of the victims themselves. Powerful forces can keep it so, and the shame that victims feel can perpetuate the idea that 'good' families are exempt from its reach.

But the now significant body of research agrees that sexual abuse spans races, socio-economic classes, and religious and ethnic groups. Investigations clearly indicate that churches are no exception. Much media attention has focused on the Catholic Church, because of the significant number of clergy who have been found to be perpetrators. I believe we may yet see the full extent of the disclosures elsewhere.

The specific issue of guarding against paedophilia in churches is outside the scope of this book. Even aside from the specific topic of abuse by clergy, we must not be blind to the fact that all church communities can be targets for paedophiles. It is absolutely essential

that stringent policies and procedures be implemented in every ministry context, in line with standards set by state authorities and denominational bodies.

Our focus is on cultivating a safe church, where victims can become survivors. For this to occur, we must grasp clearly the fact that many in our congregations suffer in silence. Sadly, I am no longer surprised by who turns out to be a survivor. They are our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues, and certainly our congregation members.

This may seem a rather pedantic point to make to someone who has already decided to read this book. But I risk sounding pedantic for the purpose of clarity: too many people have ignored the issue of sexual abuse. We are beholden to look honestly at this uncomfortable reality, to accept the responsibility that comes with serving a community in a world where this evil occurs, and to be ready and able to respond to that reality. This begins with the clear decision that our church will be a safe place, well informed on the issue of sexual abuse.

Sermons can be Triggers

There's a powerful dynamic at work when a speaker stands before a group of people, particularly when that speaker is sharing the Word of God. But consider that in any congregation, a number of people will have experienced sexual abuse in childhood. Just acknowledging that fact helps us recognize the profound responsibility we have. The words we use in sermons can trigger unwanted images, feelings and memories for these people.

Triggers are words and actions that prompt memories we would not have otherwise. We all experience triggers every day. Consider how hearing an old song, or a certain smell, can immediately take us back to a situation from years before. We may recall a long-buried memory that suddenly becomes vivid. Most of the time these moments are enjoyably nostalgic.

For abuse survivors, however, triggers can prompt flashbacks of the abuse experience or the feelings associated with the trauma.

These experiences may continue throughout survivors' entire lives: I myself experience triggers to this day. Whenever I hear the name of the man who abused me, it has an effect on me unlike any other name. It is directly associated with the abuse. Whenever the topic of sexual abuse comes up on the radio or television, it not only captures my ear, but also my mind's eye and my emotions. I'm also triggered when I see a certain type of pleated pants that Greg wore.

We cannot control these instances – they occur inevitably. I can't control it if someone named Greg stands before me wearing pleated pants. But I do know that this experience would have a strong emotional effect on me. The first thing on my mind would not be what they were talking about. We'll discuss how survivors can have strategies to manage triggers in a later chapter, but my point here is that Christian leaders should be conscious that at all times we are potentially speaking to some deeply vulnerable people.

Many people have been abused but have not disclosed their abuse to anyone. So we need to be aware that there may be a sizeable number of individuals in our churches with unprocessed trauma. We must be careful how we speak, especially during a worship service. This is a place where people are willingly open and vulnerable, singing profound declarations of worship and seeking to receive teaching about matters related to their core values. It's a precious place.

Christian leaders should avoid making spontaneous comments about abuse. If we are going to address the topic of sexual abuse from the pulpit, through preaching, testimony, or teaching on the subject by an expert or a survivor, be sure to let people know beforehand. Remember, it's not our role to try and trigger memories to evoke a response from people. A public worship gathering is not a safe context for this kind of deep personal ministry. It requires private, professional focus and care.

Of course, we can't constantly walk on eggshells, afraid of how everything we say might play out in each and every life. We can and will inevitably trigger memories for people through our ministry. Chapter three will deal with how to respond when someone does actually disclose their experience of sexual abuse to us. But we

must always be prudent and pastorally sensitive to the fragility of some members of our congregations.

Of course sermons can also be empowering and transformative, as the good news of the gospel is proclaimed to our hearts. Too many times to count I have been encouraged and equipped by faithful preaching. Often the sermon will be the only Christian word a suffering person receives, and it can be a defining moment in their life.

I suggest that we regularly say towards the end of our services, 'If anything that's been said has touched on or triggered something for which you'd like prayer or counsel, be aware we have these people available to speak with.' I know one church that not only has people available after the service, but also includes a contact number in their bulletin that people can call and request to speak with someone during the week. This may seem obvious, but part of being a safe church is making the obvious explicit.

Understand the Subtle Power of Leaders

If we want a safe and informed church, then as Christian leaders we must also come to appreciate the subtle power we hold in our church community due to our position. Because personal behaviour so strongly influences the culture of the church community, people intuitively look to the church's leaders as a barometer of expected behaviour. Our words and actions signal what our community's standard is. If we want a safe church, we must be safe leaders. Do we model the personality traits of a community conducive to helping people feel safe and welcome? Or are we trying to impress, and thus increasing the distance to others?

Leaders can demonstrate this principle through small details. For example, rather than being the hero of our own sermon illustrations, we can use examples when we were the student in a situation, rather than the teacher. We can demonstrate humility by honestly confessing our faults and owning our mistakes, and praising those who corrected us. For example, consider how we respond and speak to children. Do we just glance down at them, or

do we take the time to squat down to their level? What about the volume of our voice, or the language we use?

We should also be careful to avoid even slightly sexist jokes, and always respect people's personal space, taking the time to ask someone's permission before shutting the door of our office. These small habits send messages, and I'd encourage us all to consider how we can identify and modify these small details so that our lives engender the trust required for a vulnerable person to feel safe in our presence.

Let me give you another example. In meetings, many male leaders instinctively slump low in their chairs, with their legs slightly apart, and pushed forward. Despite the fact that it's poor posture, I know this can be a temptingly comfortable way to sit. But as a female leader once pointed out to me, this posture means we are prominently displaying our groin to the group. We don't think about it consciously, but women can notice it. It sends a subtle and impolite message of carelessness regarding personal boundaries. The same is true when we lean too closely over someone, or step in too close when we speak with them. This is not just an issue for male leaders, but for female leaders too. We should take thoughtful care with our speech, manner, and dress to communicate that this is a community that respects and cares for everyone. Rather than dressing to impress, dress to appear approachable.

Someone once told me that I had a habit of walking quickly, looking down, through the foyer of the church I was a pastor in at the time. I am an introvert, and I generally have several matters brewing in my mind simultaneously. But I was told it conveyed that I was in a rush, with important things to do – more important than relating to everyday people. What an indictment! That's the opposite of how I feel. I could protest my innocence, but my actions had communicated a particular attitude to my congregation.

A pastor friend of mine was so determined to understand the gender dynamics of his ministry that he invited a female leader from the denomination to teach him the history of women's experience in that church. We cannot brush over these matters as we explore the weightier issues in future chapters. As leaders, our cues can be the defining difference in creating a safe culture in our church.

Train and Communicate

We need to take the time to train our leaders not only in leadership or evangelism, but also on the topic of sexual abuse. I believe we should include teaching and training on sexual abuse for all our leaders, including volunteers. It's important that they have some basic knowledge and clear understanding of the principles of child protection and expected procedures of response. When the church conducts this kind of training, it communicates that they are unafraid to tackle this topic, and sends a powerful message that the church takes seriously its responsibility to create a safe environment for those who are broken and hurting.

We can reinforce this value by making sure there's information on our church website or in newsletters and posters about available counselling services. In as many ways as possible, cultivate a culture of safety. Remember, a church is a community where people come not only with particular brokenness, but also *to be vulnerable*. The mysterious dynamics of singing, worship, prayer, preaching and fellowship creates an atmosphere where people's innermost feelings and values are opened, challenged, healed, and nurtured. There really is nothing quite like being a part of a safe and informed local church.

Don't Go Hunting for Trauma

It's not our role to try and coax the disclosure of a survivor. We must be very careful about this. These matters touch survivors' deepest wounds. Being in control of the moment of disclosure is actually an important part of a survivor's ultimate healing. When people are ready, they will share.

The church leader's task is to cultivate an environment where people feel safe. Especially in regard to sexual abuse, we want people to know that this is a place that will support and empower them, whatever they decide to do. We should never try to take that step for them, whether through altar calls, prophecies, sermons or counselling. We should never try to manipulate or push someone to disclose.

In the following chapters we'll deal specifically with how to understand and help people who disclose childhood experiences of sexual abuse. Responding appropriately requires a determination to cultivate a church community that is trustworthy, safe and informed. And this begins in the heart of the Christian leader.

Finding the Safety to Reveal Abuse

Realizing that you were sexually abused as a child is a profoundly scary experience. While many survivors have always been aware, for some it is a gradual realization that becomes clearer as they grow older. Then, either as they reach an age of understanding, or through a particular triggering event, one day it clicks.

That was Priscilla's experience. I did not see Greg for several years after my abuse, but she saw her father every single day. She recalls having a constant fear and sick feeling around him as she grew older, but it never added up to a cognitive realization of what was happening to her until she was watching a television show one day. The storyline involved a child disclosing abuse. She immediately realized what had been happening to her over the years, and it prompted her to disclose to her boyfriend, and soon after to her mother.

But experiences are varied. Many can hardly recall a day when they've not had to face these memories. This may be because the abuse occurred at (or continued into) a later age. But if the experience occurred in pre-teen childhood, flashes of memory accompanied by ugly feelings can make the horrible truth increasingly more vivid until they reach an age where they cross a line into conscious comprehension. Generally this occurs once they're old enough to understand more about what sexual abuse actually is. They learn about it on television, at school, or from their parents. It may take some time as their minds link the new-found knowledge with their unconscious memories, until suddenly the past pushes to the front of their mind. For both Priscilla and I, this happened in our teens. Others, however, don't realize what has happened to them until they are well into adulthood.

I have no idea what triggered my thoughts that day in my parents' car. My thoughts just suddenly turned to the topic of sexual abuse, and I realized that I had experienced it. But does that mean I had *forgotten* about it? Well, yes, you could put it that way. For a time the abuse had not been at the front of my mind. I had blocked it out, buried it – waiting for the time when something would uncover or trigger it. It was waiting for me to grow old enough to understand. I was discovering a fact about myself, and that fact had a name: child sexual abuse.

Some survivors feel guilty about not realizing sooner, as if they've minimized the act. But this is beyond our control. I was a young teenager when I understood what had happened, and at that stage childhood memories come in moments, like photos, not like a film. I'd not thought about it prior to that morning. It had been filed with so many other childhood memories, present but unrecognized. When my mind put the pieces together that day, it suddenly made sense. I knew it was true.

Some survivors never forget at all, and live with vivid images and painful memories throughout their childhood. Others have unpleasant inklings, but try to ignore them, and never allow their minds to stop and reflect deeply on them. For still others, this takes many years, and they don't face the past until well into adulthood. It may seem quite a strange example, but I resonate with that scene in *Return of the Jedi* when Luke Skywalker reveals to Princess Leia that she is actually his sister. She is shocked, and yet she replies, 'Somehow, I've always known.'

Many survivors experience something akin to shock when they realize that something so traumatic has happened to them. This is called delayed recall, or post-traumatic amnesia. It is common in cases of sexual abuse, especially when the abuse occurred for a defined period of time and then stopped while the survivor was still a child. We rarely recall memories before the age of three, and have very limited memory up to the age of ten. My earliest memory is of the fish markets in Enschede, Holland, where we stayed for several months when I was four. The images are fleeting but present in my mind's eye, as are the smells.

So while we carry a huge array of memories from childhood, we forget an incredible amount, too. Consider all the data our senses receive every day. Over the years we can't possibly consciously hold on to all of it, and yet our brains seem to organize it somehow, identifying patterns and holding on to data reinforced through repetition. The experience of delayed recall, or post-traumatic amnesia, is a kind of protective mechanism our brains use because we are unable to comprehend the reality and extent of the trauma, especially when we're young. As children, we may not have had the mental or emotional capacity to recognize that what was happening to us was abusive. That does not mean that we were indifferent to it; indeed, it may have involved physical pain, or we may have wanted it to stop, or even hated it.

But psychologists affirm that in cases of extreme emotional trauma in children, our ability to consciously consider what has occurred may be delayed until we have the ability to understand it or put our feeling into words. In my experience, I suddenly became consciously aware that *abuse* was something I had experienced. I reached a moment when my mind turned itself to the subject. It came into the front of my thoughts. I suddenly *knew* it.

For some people this moment of realization occurs in therapy. They may have gone for reasons related to the effects of abuse, and the safe context in which they carefully processed their thoughts and memories led to recalling the traumatic or abusive event from years before. We all tend to remember more when we're prompted or 'triggered' by something familiar, such as an old photo or a memento from school. Suddenly images flood back: people, names, peculiar details, even smells. Watching a home movie or browsing through a family photo album can do it. Stories can do it, too, when we hear anecdotes from friends that suddenly remind us of other situations, people and events. Some feelings of nostalgia are very strong, almost like reliving snapshots of the past.

But sometimes the lapse of time and the distance in age and maturity give us a new perspective on an old memory. Thinking back as an adult, we suddenly realize a truth that we didn't see as a child, even though it is so familiar. Suddenly we see what we never

saw before, and it all makes sense. For many of us, a similar process occurs at the moment we became aware of past abuse. Sometimes we never forget at all, sometimes the knowledge arrives with a growing awareness – and sometimes it explodes like a bomb.

Facing the Truth

At this point, some survivors begin to wonder if it would have been better if they'd never remembered anything. That same part of us will be tempted to brush the memories aside, or try to forget them, pushing them down and covering them over. But not being consciously aware of abuse doesn't mean we're immune from its effects. It doesn't mean the experience hasn't been traumatic. We will explore this dynamic later on, but for now I urge you, as someone who has walked this path myself, not to try to deny the difficult truth when it appears. This is a frustrating, dangerous and ultimately impossible feat.

Many thoughts will rush around our minds at this time: questions, fears and even some doubts. One significant doubt we often have is whether it really happened at all. I have sat with several people who confessed their fear that they may have just invented it somehow. *What kind of horrible person would I be if I were making all this up?* they wonder.

We worry that no one will believe us. In a sense it feels like the entire story exists only in our memory – in our head – so how do we know it's true? Our mind wanders into this kind of doubt because we are struggling to comprehend the enormity of the experience. It seems too enormous to be true. Doubting is a perfectly normal way of coming to grips with shocking news.

We might also think about how the person often seems such an unlikely perpetrator. How could he or she have committed these horrible acts? Most people picture sexual predators as strangers, anonymous people preying on playgrounds or abducting children off the street. But this image of sexual abuse is by far the less frequent, even if those are the stories that get broadcast on the news.

The truth is that eight out of ten survivors know their abuser. For both Priscilla and me, the perpetrator was actually living in our house. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators are trusted friends, family members, or neighbours. They are the people no one suspects. It's important to know this so that you do not feel like your experience is somehow unlikely or doubtful just because it happened somewhere familiar, or was perpetrated by someone familiar.

You may think about how friendly, loved, or popular the person is who committed the act. Or how powerful they are, as figures of authority in your family or community. They don't seem like the kind of person who would do this, and you are the only one who knows what they've done.

Somehow it can feel more likely that we've imagined something than that this person really committed a true, verifiable act. This is an especially likely thought if the abuse occurred a long time ago. *Is it just a fragment of my imagination?*

We are not going to be able to cope with our realization by ourselves. We need help and support even to comprehend the enormity of what we are realizing. Studies suggest that more than half of sexual abuse incidents are not disclosed. There are too many people who don't get past the point of their private realizations, and struggle alone.

A Defining Moment

Sexual abuse shapes our feelings, fears, instincts and even our personalities throughout childhood. In this most vulnerable of life stages, our inner world is undermined. This is why the moment when we realize and acknowledge to ourselves that we've been abused is a profoundly important one. And though it is a horrible experience to remember, it's also a defining moment, and it contains a strange element of hope.

Why? Because it marks the point when we begin to take back our life. In that moment, then and there, it is devastating news. It is almost too horrible to comprehend. But it brings to light something

that has long been pulling the strings in the recesses of our mind for some time. Now we see at least that there is a situation, a problem – a reason for our struggles all along. Ultimately, the words of Princess Leia will resonate: somehow, we have always known. The pain from our memory now shouts its presence. This is just the beginning of the journey – but remember, we are only in chapter one. This moment is about recognizing the truth: the moment I can say to myself, *this happened*.



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