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## “How Long, O Lord?”

### Exploring the Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

*“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”*

—PSALM 13:1–2

Rough estimates are that one in three girls and one in seven boys will experience at least one episode of molestation by the time they reach age eighteen. One in ten of those will be the victims of ongoing sexual abuse. Between 70 percent and 90 percent of all cases of sexual abuse are perpetrated by family members, trusted friends, youth leaders, or caregivers. Sexual abuse occurs in an atmosphere of secrecy and shame, and the majority of incidents are never reported. This means the real number of victims can never be known, but they are all around us, and they have been wounded in ways few people can imagine. Their abuse has impacted every aspect of their lives.

While the intent of this book is to explore and address the *spiritual* issues of the sexual abuse survivor, it is important to understand how all-encompassing the effects of sexual abuse can be on the entire psyche of a survivor, and how many areas of functioning can be impaired. The purpose of this chapter is to help readers place the wound to a survivor’s spirituality within the context of the totality of their abuse’s impact across their lifespan.

Before moving on, it is important to note that the effects of child sexual abuse on its survivors are not the same for everyone. Some survivors, despite their pain, are able to lead relatively healthy lives. For others, the impact of abuse is long-term and permeates every aspect of their lives. However, even among those who struggle, few will experience all of the following potential effects of abuse. It is hoped that readers will recognize what is true for them and what is not. And it is crucial that survivors not minimize their experience of abuse if it does not fit into every category of injury mentioned here.

Nonetheless, many survivors do experience daily reminders of what they have suffered, and it can feel as though their lives are defined by the abuse. They might wonder if a day will ever come when they do not think about what happened to them. They long for a time when their behavior is not dictated by fear, shame, anguish, and a deep need to protect themselves from further pain. Memories may pummel their minds at unexpected times and inappropriate places, and they are often unable to control these intrusive images and feelings. Even when the perpetrators are dead, in prison, or far removed from them by distance and/or lack of contact, survivors may still feel as though their abusers have triumphed by virtue of the ongoing effect of these memories on their everyday lives.

Other survivors may not even recognize that what happened to them was sexual abuse at all. Sometimes the gradual grooming of a victim and the blurring of boundaries cause the survivor to be unable to name the abuse for what it was. Some perpetrators are so subtle in their behaviors that it is difficult to know when they have crossed the line from inappropriate to abusive. Even something as noninvasive as forcing a child to disrobe, urinate, or bathe in front of the offender when the child is past the age of needing adult supervision can be considered abuse. A good guideline is whether the behavior made a victim feel uneasy or uncomfortable, causing him or her to develop an aversion to the perpetrator. Unfortunately for these survivors, without being able to label what they experienced as sexual abuse, they are all the more confused by the long-term effects of their victimization.

The areas of functioning that are affected by sexual abuse can include self-image, emotions, relationships, occupational functioning, health problems, sexuality, and spirituality. The severity of symptoms can be influenced by the duration and frequency of abuse, the age at onset of abuse, and the type of sexual activity. Use of force or violence, the relationship between

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victim and perpetrator, and the family’s response to reported abuse are additional considerations. The overall atmosphere of a victim’s childhood home may also impact how they respond to the abuse and how they think and feel about themselves and the abuse they suffered. Children raised by dominating parents will be all the more fearful to disclose and more likely to blame themselves, not being able to name the abuse for what it was.

As we explore these different areas, remember that there is no particular way a survivor *should* react to sexual abuse. These are merely many of the typical ways in which survivors may be affected.

### HEALING PRACTICE 1

At times, the ways in which the abuse you suffered infiltrates and infects every area of your life can be overwhelming. Like Job in the Old Testament, it probably feels like you have lost everything—health, happiness, positive relationships, meaningful work, and the ability to be “normal.” In the Bible, one of Job’s friends seeks to reassure him in his suffering with these words: “(God) will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy” (Job 8:21) He could foresee a time when Job’s life would be restored, healing would come, and the sun would shine again.

One of the hardest things for abuse survivors to do is have hope. It is a very scary thing when all you have known is pain and loss. To hope and have those hopes dashed would be devastating. See if you can identify just one area of your life where a small ray of light is already shining, for example, a positive relationship, good health, or an activity that gives you enjoyment.

- Can you allow yourself to acknowledge this light and let it continue to be there? It is not necessary for you to believe it will grow or expand to other areas of your life. It can just be what it is right now.
- Allow yourself to experience the light. What does it feel like? What difference does this make in your daily life?

### Impact on Self-Image

Almost universally, sexual abuse survivors have an extremely poor sense of self. Often, they learn to define themselves by the cues they receive within the context of the abusive relationship. They then spend so much energy

learning to read the cues of the abuser—his facial expressions, his moods, his vocal and body cues, and any signs of arousal—that they become experts in the art of interpreting the body language and nonverbal communication of others.<sup>1, 2</sup> This was a survival strategy developed to anticipate the abuser's wants and needs in order to keep him happy and thus avoid or minimize abuse.<sup>3</sup> As a result, survivors are highly oriented to other people and to their external environment, which they scan constantly for potential danger. Conversely, they have little to no awareness of their own internal world. Many times, survivors will tell me that they don't really know who they are. They are afraid of expressing any kind of opinion or want, lest it cause displeasure or anger in another. This results in them not having opinions or preferences at all. These are people pleasers who try to go with the flow and always acquiesce to the wants and needs of others.

Survivors almost always view themselves with loathing and disgust. They may carry shame around with them as a constant burden and frequently verbalize a sense of their own worthlessness. It is virtually impossible for many of them to view themselves as worthwhile individuals with gifts, traits, and talents that others might value. This comes from an innate belief that the abuse happened because they were bad and deserving of punishment. Perpetrators often reinforce these beliefs with statements to that effect. We will discuss this more in future chapters.

Another area related to self-image is the way in which sexual abuse survivors view their bodies. Many of them felt betrayed by their bodies. It was their body that caused them their deepest pain, and they want nothing to do with it. Some survivors believe they somehow caused their bodies to respond to the abuse with arousal or physical desire and thus hate themselves and their bodies for behaving in what was a strictly instinctual response. In either case, a common aftereffect is for survivors to be completely cut off from any kind of body awareness. In some, this is so extreme that the body may exhibit symptoms of disease or injury long before the survivor actually notices them.<sup>4</sup> Many are overweight, as if to deter any sexual attention at all, and dress in large, loose clothing to cover up the

1. While it is true that both women and men can be perpetrators of child sexual abuse, the vast majority of abusers are men. Therefore, for simplicity's sake, I will hereafter use the male pronoun when referring to a victim's abuser except in specific cases where the abuser was indeed a woman.

2. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 99.

3. Carnes, *The Betrayal Bond*, 125.

4. Courtois, *Incest Wound*, 106.

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physical manifestations of their gender or sexuality. Excess weight and baggy clothing act as a buffer between them and the world. Other survivors may be quite thin. They diet to extremes, exercise to excess, or starve themselves in a seeming attempt to punish their bodies for what happened. Being too thin is another way of desexualizing the body by eliminating the curves that might attract someone’s attention.

HEALING PRACTICE 2

The shame that survivors feel is pervasive and almost universal. This shame makes you feel separate from others and from God. It is hard to imagine that people would want to be with you or that God could possibly love you. Following is a poem by Hafiz, a Sufi mystic of the 14th century, which speaks to the loss others feel when your shame and guilt cause you to draw away from connection with them:

Stay With Us

You  
Leave

Our company when you speak  
Of Shame

And this makes  
Everyone in the Tavern sad.

Stay with us  
As we do the hardest work of rarely  
Laying down  
That pick and  
Shovel

That will keep  
Revealing our deeper kinship  
With  
God,

## HEALING THE RAVAGED SOUL

That will keep revealing  
Our own divine  
Worth.

You leave the company of the Beloved's friends  
Whenever you speak of  
Guilt,

And this makes  
Everyone in the Tavern  
Very sad.

Stay with us tonight  
As we weave love

And reveal ourselves,  
Reveal ourselves

As His Precious  
Garments.<sup>5</sup>

- Can you imagine that others might be deeply saddened by the shame that keeps you from getting close to them? Who in your life might feel that way?
- If your shame were a garment, what would it look like? If you were to remove it and reveal the precious garment of the Beloved underneath, what might that look like? Imagine its colors, patterns, and texture. How would it feel?
- If you want, write in your journal about this experience.

### Emotional Impact

The emotional lives of many sexual abuse survivors can be full of turmoil. Conflicting emotions, such as simultaneous love and hate or pain and

5. Ladinsky, *The Gift*, 284–85.

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pleasure, can create a chaotic inner world that is confusing and uncomfortable.<sup>6</sup> Anxiety and fear may be their constant companions. They may have great difficulty falling asleep, and when they do, their sleep can be haunted by nightmares of the abuse. One night, Terri, a young professional in her late twenties, had a dream of her long-dead abuser that was so intense and real, she awoke with her pistol in her hand as if to protect herself from a man who wasn't there. Another client, Nicole, regularly sleeps with every light in her apartment ablaze in order to keep the darkness at bay. Sometimes, she even resorts to sleeping under her dining room table—anywhere but in her bed, a place of horrific memories and hideous nightmares.

Some survivors' fears may cause them to experience panic attacks and phobias that may be hard for others to understand. Nicole is terrified of candles due to being burned and tortured by an older teen with an obsession with the satanic. This makes the Christmas Eve tradition of lighting candles more difficult for her than her fellow parishioners can possibly imagine. Victims of abuse have often been restrained or confined during episodes of molestation or punishment, which leads to claustrophobia when they are adults. These are people who need to know where all the exits are, and make sure that they situate themselves where they can see everything that is going on, especially when they are in strange surroundings. Other phobias I have witnessed in my clients include uniforms, certain types of music, particular smells, and thunderstorms—virtually anything that might trigger a memory of abuse. Sheila was eight years old when her uncle began molesting her. One time, a storm broke out just as he was getting dressed. A sudden clap of thunder startled the young girl, and her abuser said, “God must really be angry at you. If you tell anyone what you did, he's going to get you.” It took much therapy for her to view thunderstorms in a healthier way.

Another emotional artifact of abuse is depression. Most of the abuse survivors I have seen in my practice have needed to be on antidepressant medication, some for a period of a year or so, some indefinitely. This depression can be very deep. According to Christine Courtois, author of the seminal book *Healing the Incest Wound*, incest survivors are much more likely to exhibit suicidal thoughts and behaviors or to engage in acts of self-harm than the general population.<sup>7</sup> Some depressed survivors seem to use suicidal thoughts as a way of gaining control over the internal chaos they

6. Meyer, *Through the Fire*, 34.

7. Courtois, *Incest Wound*, 105.

are experiencing. When life feels out of control, they at least know there is one choice that is within their power to make. Sometimes the thought itself is enough to make them feel more calm and in control. For others, self-mutilation is the means by which they exercise control. This is a pain that *they* can control, a pain that they have the power to stop or start, and it is a distraction from the emotional pain that haunts their days and nights.<sup>8</sup> By virtue of the power that was exerted over the survivor in immensely harmful ways, some feel a great sense of powerlessness or helplessness. Such was Nicole's sense of helplessness that when a would-be burglar rattled her front doorknob, she didn't even bother to call the police. The police had been called many times in the course of her childhood but had done nothing to stop her abuse, so she had become resigned to the fact that her purpose in life was for others to use, harm, or exploit her for their own ends. Calling the police seemed to her to be a pointless activity.

All victims of sexual abuse are defenseless against their perpetrators' will to abuse them. Sexual abuse is an act of power. When abusers aggress powerfully against their victims, it takes away any power that an innocent child might have had to determine the course of their own lives. Survivors have learned time after time that they are helpless, and this belief can carry over into adulthood. They may develop an external locus of control, a view of the world as a place in which things happen *to* them rather than one in which they have the power to effect change.

Emotional detachment or deadening may also be experienced. Many survivors learned very early on to suppress their painful feelings. Unfortunately, it is not possible to suppress selectively, so it is not only the painful emotions that get frozen, but also any fleeting happiness or enjoyment. Survivors are often aware of a seething cauldron of anger inside them, and they are terrified of what might happen if they dare to express even a little of this rage. They fear that if the anger were to be released they would lose all control and possibly become violent. They may associate anger with their abusers and do not want to be like them in any way. In addition, survivors often come from dysfunctional family systems where feelings get denied, minimized, or invalidated. They learn to shut down those emotions and allow others to dictate to them how they should feel. Their perpetrators compound matters when they punish expressions of fear or pain. Typically, tears are absolutely forbidden. By the time they get to adulthood, survivors may have great difficulty in allowing themselves to cry for fear of

8. Clark, with Henslin, *Cutter's Mind*, 175.

punishment or loss of control. They have not let themselves cry for so long, they think that if they begin, they will never be able to stop.

### Interpersonal Impact

The primary issue in most abuse survivor's relationships is trust. Some survivors find it very difficult to trust, while others trust people indiscriminately. Sometimes the distrust is specific to the gender of their abusers, and sometimes not.<sup>9</sup> Those who have difficulty trusting are usually isolated, aloof, and emotionally cut off from people. They are very sensitive to slights and regularly test the commitment of their friends and loved ones, which can ultimately drive people who would be close away, bringing about a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, those who are too trusting can be readily manipulated or exploited, thus leaving the door open to re-victimization. Their naiveté and desire to please make them easy prey for those who would take advantage of them.

Many survivors have great difficulty with intimacy. The emotional deadening mentioned previously can function as a protective device that keeps others from getting too close to them. They maintain distance in part because of their fear of being hurt again and partially due to the anxiety that if people get to know them, they will discover the awful secret—that he or she is a horrible person, shameful, flawed, and unworthy of love. This fear of intimacy extends even to casual physical contact. Terri does not like anyone to hug her. Everyone on her staff knows this, but occasionally someone new will inadvertently give her a hug in greeting, and a collective gasp goes up from her co-workers as they wait to see how Terri will respond.

Other survivors enter into relationships quite compulsively and cling to the people in their lives ferociously. They have a deep fear of abandonment. Their learned helplessness makes them quite needy, and they often assume a victim role in their interactions with others in order to be taken care of. Another alternative is for them to take on a rescuer role, which allows them to be in control of the relationship. They believe that if they are needed enough, the other person won't leave them.

While much of what we have already discussed holds true in both social interactions and romantic partnerships, there are some issues that are specific to a survivor's intimate relationships. Sex abuse survivors often enter into committed relationships with great hesitancy, although the

9. Courtois, *Incest Wound*, 111.

opposite is also true. A greater proportion of survivors remain unmarried than the general population, but some of those who do marry do so in desperation.<sup>10</sup> Ginger is a 42-year-old physician's assistant who has been married four times. Each time a marriage ended, she was already in a relationship with another man. Being on her own was too frightening to contemplate, so whenever her marriages became troubled, she began unconsciously looking for the next "white knight" to rescue her from an intolerable situation. These marriages reflected the common patterns of other survivors—they were either abusive or neglectful, sometimes both, but almost always reflecting the dynamics of the survivor's family of origin. Partners may be either dominating—further victimizing the survivor—or weak and ineffectual, giving the survivor control of the relationship but meeting few of her needs.

Child sexual abuse can have a significant impact on the families of its victims. Even in the healthiest of families, abuse is difficult to respond to appropriately, but for families that were already dysfunctional, the dynamics of sexual abuse can create an even more toxic effect. Sometimes the abuser is a member of the dysfunctional family system, which usually brings with it greater levels of pain and suffering for the victim. Even when that is not the case, many parents have utterly failed to protect their child from the abuse he or she suffered. They ignored, denied, or minimized the abuse, and sometimes even blamed the victim for what was happening. Seldom do these dysfunctional families in which abuse has occurred exhibit healthy patterns of behavior. Instead, they are often verbally and/or physically abusive, rigid and controlling, and lacking in love and affection. As a result, many of the survivor's family relationships remain troubled into adulthood. Family members rarely support a survivor's efforts at healing and growth, often turning him or her into the family scapegoat.<sup>11</sup> The family mantra is often, "You just need to get over it!" When survivors have been raised with these painful family dynamics, they can have extreme difficulty detaching themselves from family ties or setting clear boundaries that protect them from further emotional wounding. Nicole and Terri both have families that are exploitative and manipulative, and despite years of therapy, they find themselves sucked back into the trap time and time again.

10. *Ibid.*, 112.

11. Davis, *Allies in Healing*, 23.

### Vocational Impact

The replication of unhealthy family dynamics often carries over into the workplace as well.<sup>12</sup> Jill, whose father often told graphically sexual jokes, worked with several colleagues whose sense of humor was equally raunchy. They continued in this vein despite Jill’s obvious discomfort. Survivors frequently experience difficulties with their co-workers and supervisors, and are prone to being exploited and sometimes even abused. They seem to have particular difficulty with authority figures. Nicole is a teacher whose principal would regularly call her into her office and berate her for hours over minor deviations from policy. These abuses are rarely reported, since survivors are unaware that this is inappropriate and unacceptable.

A survivor’s career path may be erratic at best. Post-traumatic stress symptoms have usually made it difficult for them to succeed in the classroom, making higher education challenging and, for some, impossible. Even when they do complete a degree program, their lack of identity and low self-esteem make choosing a vocation problematic. Major decisions do not come easily to them. Some survivors are unprepared for a “real world” environment and may have unrealistic ideas about what might be expected of them or what they are able to accomplish.

Trauma can also impact the survivor’s ability to function well at job tasks that others perform without difficulty. The abuse disrupted normal developmental stages and tasks, leaving them floundering and incapable of keeping up with the demands of their job.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, there are some who have used achievement as a way of escaping their feelings about the abuse and about themselves.<sup>14</sup> Hard work is their means of controlling their lives, avoiding a social life, and receiving the affirmation they so desperately need. They are top performers, and their sense of well-being depends on it.

### Physical Impact

Traumatic sexual abuse leaves a powerful physical mark on the bodies of its victims. Many survivors suffer intense flashbacks in which the body re-experiences trauma. They quite literally feel as if the abuser was performing sexual acts that occurred years before. In my office, with their perpetrator

12. *Ibid.*, 24.

13. Courtois, *Incest Wound*, 114.

14. Davis, *Allies in Healing*, 24.

nowhere near, these survivors choke, grimace, writhe, jerk, and otherwise respond in the present to something that happened to them when they were helpless children. Alice, upon reliving an act of fellatio, was so nauseated by the taste in her mouth that I had to give her a piece of gum to relieve the sensation. This kind of experience often causes survivors to question their sanity, because they know what they are feeling is not real.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of other symptoms that are most definitely real. Survivors often experience chronic pain, especially of the genitals, as well as other genital, urinary, and gastrointestinal disorders.<sup>15</sup> Anxiety can lead to stress-related problems such as headaches, TMJ, insomnia, and high blood pressure. All these medical problems present a significant obstacle for patients with a history of abuse. Many survivors have a deep fear of doctors and medical procedures, particularly in the gynecological field. This is in part related to their shame as well as their reluctance to remove clothing or be touched in any way. Sometimes, a doctor's examination, while entirely appropriate in the medical context, replicates their abuse. Terri hated going to the dentist, because holding her mouth open for long periods of time reminded her of the oral sex forced upon her by her perpetrator. There is another issue at work here as well. At least three of my clients have experienced abuse at the hands of doctors, and another was forced to participate in a role-play scenario in which her perpetrator was dressed as a doctor.

Addiction to alcohol and other substances is another common concern. Substances are used to numb a survivor's psychic pain at great cost to their physical health. Even highly functioning survivors may rely on alcohol or drugs at the end of a workday to relax, so great is the energy required to maintain the illusion of someone who has it all together. Sometimes, addictive substances were given to victims by their perpetrators. Offenders often use alcohol to "loosen up" their potential victims. Joe, a young man whose grandfather anally raped him for years, suffers from a cocaine addiction. Although he hasn't used for quite some time, he often experiences flashbacks of the many times his abuser gave him cocaine in order to enhance his sexual response. When life starts to feel out of control, it takes everything Joe has to fight his powerful cravings for cocaine.

15. Courtois, *Incest Wound*, 106.

## Sexual Impact

It should come as no surprise that the sexual functioning of the vast majority of abuse survivors is especially troubled. Sexual abuse disrupts normal psychosexual development and short-circuits the dating and courtship patterns of adolescents and young adults. They end up having no idea how to have a normal and healthy sexual relationship. Consequently, survivors gravitate to either of the two ends of the sexual spectrum—they are either promiscuous or asexual, sometimes vacillating between the two.<sup>16</sup> Bonnie, who suffered almost constant episodes of incest for over seventeen years, developed dissociative identity disorder (also known as multiple personality disorder) in order to cope with the enormity of her abuse. Her host personality, who had repressed all memory of the abuse, was a virgin. She went on her first date at the age of nineteen and had such a strong startle response when the boy tried to hold her hand that he never called her again. Nearly twenty years later, she still has not been on another date. Unbeknownst to her, one of her alter personalities spent her college years having sex with any young man who showed the slightest interest in her. She had learned what men wanted and thought sex was the only way to get their attention or affection.

For some women, their heightened sexuality leads them into prostitution. Many studies have determined that the percentage of prostitutes who have been sexually abused is quite high. Glenda Hope, a Presbyterian pastor who works with prostitutes in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, claims that at least 70 percent of prostitutes endured long-term sexual abuse.<sup>17</sup> These women may feel that providing sex for money is all they're good for, the only thing they know how to do well. Unfortunately, prostitution puts them at grave risk for sexually transmitted diseases and criminal violence. Almost all of them turn to drugs in an attempt to forget about what they are doing to themselves. It is a soul-destroying life.

The sexualization of their bodies from a very young age has a profound effect even on the survivors who avoid any kind of sexual activity with another person. Some of the female survivors I know who are most afraid of intimate relationships masturbate on a frequent basis. For some, this is a self-soothing behavior that reduces anxiety and emotional upset. Others experience almost constant arousal from remembered abuse and

16. *Ibid.*, 107

17. Hope, “Bearing Witness.”

masturbate in order to get relief from their sexual feelings. Often, their flashbacks actually lead to spontaneous orgasms which can occur without any sexual touch at all. This is usually a source of great shame.

Survivors of sexual abuse are also often confused as to their sexual orientation. This is particularly true of boys who have been molested by a male perpetrator. Because they have had sexual relations with another male, they often wonder if that means they are homosexual. If they experienced arousal despite their aversion to what was happening, this complicates the issue even further. In female survivors, there is a significant percentage who might otherwise be heterosexual but who choose a lesbian lifestyle, just because they feel safer and less likely to be hurt by a woman.<sup>18</sup> It also helps them avoid the many gender-related visual triggers that could cause flashbacks.

Even when a survivor has been able to surmount their fear of intimate relationships and enter into a committed romantic partnership, their sex life is usually fraught with conflict. Survivors often try to avoid sex entirely. There are often arguments with their partner about frequency and the conditions under which they are willing to engage in sexual intimacy. Certain positions or sexual acts are to be avoided. There are rules about specific types of touch, levels of nudity, and the amount of light in the room. Brenda was molested by her older sister as a child, and oral sex was the primary activity that was forced upon her. Now married with three children, Brenda cannot tolerate oral sex, despite her husband's reasonable desire for this common sex act. She is able to be sexual with him in every other way but that. Sometimes sexual intimacy triggers flashbacks. When that happens, the partner must put their own feelings on hold and give comfort to the survivor who is emotionally distressed. In order to avoid this, some survivors learn to dissociate from the sex act, inducing a sort of "out-of-body" experience. This leaves their partner feeling as though they are making love to an automaton, and the marriage suffers from a lack of emotional intimacy.

### Spiritual Impact

Margaret Scharf, a Dominican nun, writes, "The soul is the seat of emotion, intuition, and receptivity to God, as well as to others, deep within

18. Courtois, *Incest Wound*, 108–9.

us.”<sup>19</sup> The experience of sexual abuse has a profound impact on the soul. For some people, the question of how a loving God can allow suffering in the world is merely a philosophical exercise. For abuse survivors who have endured horrible trauma, it is a question that is all too personal. They struggle daily with deep theological questions about a suffering humanity and the nature of God. Those survivors who were raised in the church often fall away from religion when they reach adulthood. According to one study, sexual abuse survivors are significantly more likely to describe themselves as “non-practitioners” of religion than those without an abuse history.<sup>20</sup> They feel alienated from God and from church members who seem to be the beneficiaries of God’s blessings while survivors would be hard-pressed to name any blessings in their lives. Some feel quite uncomfortable inside a church building. Their shame makes them feel that they don’t belong in this holy place. A friend of mine who experienced cult abuse as a child once told me there was a period of several years during which it took every ounce of his effort to walk through the door of a church. Unfortunately, he happened to be the pastor of that church at the time! Other survivors do attend church regularly but find no comfort or meaning in the rituals of worship. They go through the motions and maintain a façade of faithfulness, while keeping their distance from anything that might penetrate their carefully constructed defenses.

As mentioned previously, survivors have very little sense of self, which causes them to have difficulty in knowing or articulating what they believe. Low self-esteem undercuts their best efforts to find a meaningful faith. Terri expressed this very well in an e-mail once when I asked her what Christmas meant to her: “I have been thinking about what Christmas means to me, and I’m not really sure. I really don’t know a lot about what I truly believe. I want to believe in the miracle of Christmas, but I often think I am not deserving, and it is hard to imagine a love that is unconditional. I pray to God every night, and I believe in Jesus, but it is scary.”

Because of the rigidity often found in the survivor’s family of origin, they rarely consider exploring other faiths or denominations in order to find a spirituality that is more loving, more accepting, and more healing. Mampta, a former client of East Indian descent, was raised in a controlling and highly overprotective household. Her father treated her like a fragile princess and isolated her from typical real-world experiences. During her

19. Scharf, “Stages of Faith.”

20. Finkelhor et al., “Sexual abuse,” 395.

many years of schooling, she was not allowed to drive or hold a job. If her father was challenged in any way, he would fly into frightening rages. He also crept into her room in the dark of night and molested her on a regular basis. This man held absolute sway over her. In my therapy work, I occasionally use a technique called sand tray in which clients choose from a wide variety of miniature objects and place them in a shallow tray of sand. This is a projective technique that elicits previously non-verbalized issues, memories, and emotions. At one point in Mampta's therapy, I asked her to do a sand tray in my office. In one part of the tray, she placed a statuette of the Hindu god Shiva in front of a treasure chest holding a number of brightly colored stones. Mampta's explanation for this was that Shiva was blocking her from getting to the chest. As we explored this, she became aware that her father's Hindu faith, coupled with her fear of him, was preventing her from probing the riches of her own deep spirituality. She had rejected Hinduism, but was afraid to look beyond it to other ways of believing and expressing her faith. This insight freed her to become more aware of what was already inside her and to find a new path for living this spirituality in tangible and meaningful ways.

Mampta discovered what some other survivors also have, that when one has been deeply wounded in the context of their childhood religion, spiritual healing may not be possible in that same environment. This means that moving beyond the denomination or religion of one's childhood might be a possibility for the seeking person to consider. In general, there are many similarities and points of agreement among the teachings of the major religions of the world, and I believe there is much to value in most of them. There are many paths that lead to the one God.

While many survivors are agnostic, I have rarely met any who are atheists. When this does happen, it usually occurs among those who have not had any religious upbringing at all. Some would like to reject the idea of God but cannot. This often causes them great anguish, because they believe they fall so short of God's will that they will be absolutely rejected by God. Sometimes their images of the divine are more reflective of their abuser than of a loving God. For example, Carla was sexually abused throughout childhood by her older brother and some of his friends. While she was able to sustain her faith in God, she floundered when it came to the person of Jesus. In Christian doctrine, all men and women are the children of God, and if Jesus is the son of God, then in Carla's eyes that made him her brother as well. Since her earthly brother was abusive, she thought Jesus must be

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abusive, too. These and many other issues pertaining to the spiritual lives of survivors will be addressed in the following chapters.

### HEALING PRACTICE 3

While many survivors of abuse do have a belief in God, however shaky that might be, what about those among you who do consider yourselves to be atheists? Consider this passage from *Earth and Altar*, by Eugene Peterson:

The atheist is not always the enemy. Atheists can be among a Christian's best friends. Atheists, for instance, whose atheism develops out of protest: angry about what is wrong with the world, they are roused to passionate defiance. That a good God permits the birth of crippled children, that a loving God allows rape and torture, that a sovereign God stands aside while the murderous regime of a Genghis Khan or an Adolf Hitler runs its course—such outrageous paradoxes simply cannot be countenanced. So God is eliminated. The removal of God does not reduce the suffering, but it does wipe out the paradox. Such atheism is not the result of logical (or illogical) thought; it is sheer protest. Anger over the suffering and unfairness in the world becomes anger against the God who permits it. Defiance is expressed by denial. Such atheism is commonly full of compassion. It suffers and rages. It is deeply spiritual, in touch with the human condition and eternal values.<sup>21</sup>

Belief in God, then, is not a prerequisite for spirituality. Your spirituality may be a spirituality of nature, or of compassion for a suffering humanity, or of special moments with loved ones. You might find that encounters with the animals in your life fill you with a sense of wonder, connection, and peace that borders on the spiritual.

- If you consider yourself an atheist, what is your “religion?” What gives your life meaning? What do you believe in? What are your values? What takes you beyond yourself and allows you to have a positive impact on the world? Perhaps you have never thought of yourself in this way before.

21. Peterson, cited in Job and Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer*, 322–23.

## HEALING THE RAVAGED SOUL

- How does it feel to think of yourself as spiritual even though you do not believe in God? Write your answers to these questions in your journal if you wish. What are some practices you might engage in that express your own personal spirituality? Find ways to fit these practices into your life more often.

### HEALING PRACTICE 4

Humans throughout the centuries have endured great suffering. Many of the psalms are written by people who are crying out to God in the midst of their deepest pain. This type of psalm is called a lament. Read Psalm 31:9–16. I'm sure you can relate to the feelings and experiences of the psalmist David in this passage. Another lament of David is found in Psalm 6.

- Try writing your own lament. Sometimes it helps to write about your wounds and brokenness in a way that validates the depth of what you have experienced. Try putting some words on paper that express your anguish over your abuse.
- What you do with this writing is up to you. You might pray with it, share it with a trusted friend, pastor, counselor, or spiritual director, keep it in a special place, or choose instead to destroy it.