

Introduction

Survivors of child sexual abuse are victims of a silent holocaust, a holocaust of the soul. Unfortunately, the spiritual wounding of sexual abuse is often overlooked in discussions about the impact it has on the lives of survivors. Many books have been written to address the horror of sexual abuse for its victims, some of which offer help within a religious context and give tools to those who wish to use their faith as a resource for healing. Fewer address the issues of those whose faith is a stumbling block rather than a resource. While some survivors have experienced God and church as their refuge from the abuse,¹ others experience God as one who has rejected and abandoned them. This may render them unable to trust in the religious principles by which they were taught or the people or institutions who taught them. For these survivors, their spiritual struggles and questions must be addressed before they can find a positive spirituality that leads to hope and wholeness. That is the purpose of this book.

The material presented in these pages arises from my fourteen years as a mental health professional, primarily as a pastoral counselor, and five years as a spiritual director. I have had numerous clients who were survivors of child sexual abuse, and many of their stories appear in this book. I am indebted to them for their willingness to share their struggles and for their incredible courage in choosing to face their abuse head-on and travel the difficult journey toward healing.

I will be addressing several difficult issues in these pages: the nature of God, heaven and hell, forgiveness, and how one reconciles a loving God with the reality of a suffering world. These are questions with which humanity has wrestled for thousands of years, and the best theological minds have attempted to answer them for centuries with only a modicum of success. I do not have a degree in theology; however, it is said that anyone who

1. Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 133.

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attempts to discover the nature of God is a theologian. That means that you, the reader, and I are all theologians. The answers I have come to after many years of walking with people through the darkest times of their lives are the only truth I have to offer. I hope that most readers will find in these pages a new way of perceiving God, believing God, and receiving the love and grace I believe God gives freely to all God's children.

It is important to note here that while I write from a primarily Judeo-Christian perspective, I do believe there are many paths to the one Divine Being. It is not my intent to exclude any reader who identifies with another of the world's major religions. An attempt has been made to include examples from Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism where applicable.

As a side note, I have chosen not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to God. While this may result in awkward phrasing at times, I feel it important to be sensitive to survivors of abuse who struggle with the concept of a male God. Feminine pronouns may prove difficult for those from more traditional denominations, so I made the decision to eliminate pronouns altogether. The only exception will be when I am referring to Jesus.

A word of warning to those survivors of sexual abuse who open this book—it will not be easy to read. It contains real stories about real people. All their names have been changed, and some characters are actually composites of several survivors, but the events are representations of things that happen daily all over the world. The material may trigger memories and emotions thought long buried. In any process of healing, there is a period of upheaval as old beliefs and perceptions are questioned, and nothing seems certain anymore. This is actually a sign that growth and progress are just around the corner, but it is painful to go through nonetheless, particularly without support. Being in therapy or spiritual direction is highly recommended. Having someone who knows you well and can offer a healthy objectivity will be helpful as you explore the issues that may come up as you read. Read slowly, taking time to process the thoughts and feelings that are stirred by the material. Pay attention to how you are doing, and take a break if you need to. If you find yourself resistant to any of the healing practices offered throughout the book, process that with your therapist or spiritual director to see if it is merely resistance to facing something difficult or if you are truly not ready to go there yet. Not every exercise will be helpful for every reader.

It is hoped that therapists and spiritual directors will be some of the readers who delve into these pages. Perhaps this book will impress upon

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therapists the importance of addressing spiritual issues with their clients who have been victims of abuse. Too often this is an area that is ignored or avoided. There is so much fear that talking about spiritual things will step on someone's toes or violate professional codes of ethics. Many therapists have had virtually no training in this area and feel very uncomfortable talking about matters of faith. However, there has been in recent years a growing trend toward more holistic therapies that acknowledge the spiritual life of the client. There are many workshops and seminars available for those who are interested in learning how to address religious issues competently and with caring sensitivity. For those who still feel uncomfortable with this topic, referral to a spiritual director to aid the client in addressing the spiritual aspect of their healing is recommended.

Spiritual direction is an ancient practice of companionship. A spiritual director is someone who has been trained and feels called to journey with those who are on a spiritual path. They help their directees to see the ways in which the Divine is working in their lives, to find more healthy images of God, and incorporate meaningful spiritual practices into daily life. In the case of sexual abuse, they can also help survivors work through the distorted and damaging beliefs that interfere with healing and move toward a more loving relationship with the Divine.

For spiritual directors, awareness of the importance of addressing abuse issues in the spiritual direction session is essential. A directee's sexual violation should be neither avoided nor minimized. Certainly, there may be some discomfort about discussing such a painful subject. Society as a whole displays a remarkable avoidance in this area. People don't want to think about child sexual abuse. They don't want to acknowledge that abuse is happening under a cloak of secrecy in homes, schools, and churches all over America. They don't want to believe that their own children are at grave risk of such insidious violation. So it is understandable that spiritual directors may be somewhat reluctant to enter into such overwhelming territory. The other difficulty for the spiritual director is often a lack of knowledge about the impact of sexual abuse and what the director can do to help and not to harm. Certainly, the psychological implications can leave one feeling in over one's head. If a directee is not currently in therapy, they should be referred to a trusted, competent, and sensitive counselor or psychologist. A team of professionals that together address all aspects of a holistic approach is optimal. Even then, education about sexual abuse is vital. This book may be a start, but it is not enough. Many books on spiritual direction have

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chapters devoted to this issue and can be invaluable in helping professionals walk with those who have been victimized. A list of these can be found at the back of this book.

Hopefully, the families, spouses, and friends of survivors will also find this book helpful as they seek to understand what their loved ones are going through. Perhaps these words will make sense in a way that the victim's halting attempts to explain their spiritual struggles have not. Perhaps they will learn ways to accept, encourage, and support the survivor in their search for a healthier, more vital faith. Perhaps it will even propel them into a closer examination of their own beliefs, resulting in a deeper, more fulfilling relationship with God and with the survivor whose experience caused them to read this book.

Each chapter of this book represents the significant issues my clients have raised throughout many years of working with them in therapy or spiritual direction. In chapter 1, I present a broad overview of the long-term effects of sexual abuse on all aspects of the survivor's life. Chapter 2 addresses the belief by many victims that God hates them and allowed or actively willed their abuse. Developmental deficits that interfere with faith development are explored in chapter 3, and other roadblocks to faith are discussed in chapter 4. A victim's conviction about being sent to hell for the abuse and its aftermath is presented in chapters 5 and 6. Closely connected are the survivor's doubts about the perpetrator's eternal punishment, which are addressed in chapter 7. Chapter 8 includes a deeper look at survivors' images of God and some possible healing alternatives. Chapter 9 explores the why of human suffering, and finally, chapter 10 offers hope for transformation and meaning in the context of the suffering of child sexual abuse.

All these issues are addressed through a combination of story, Scripture, theological discourse, psychological knowledge, and spiritual guidance. Embedded within each chapter are some suggested exercises that may be helpful in the healing process. Again, I encourage the reader to listen to their inner voice about his or her readiness for a particular practice. Take your time. Feel free to only do the practices that fit you and your needs. This book is meant to support your journey, not be a rigid prescription of what you should do to "get better." Healing comes from many sources, and this book is only one.