

The Journey Home

A Story of Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse



Pat Swinger

INTRODUCTION

I have been writing this book for more than five years now and I've struggled to figure out what it is I want to say to you. Over the last thirty years, as I've worked to understand how my childhood experience impacted how I lived, I've come to see all the various aspects as a large spider web, spokes going in all directions, intertwined and shooting off each other. Putting all the spokes of the web in a logical sequence has, at times, been a daunting task.

Years ago, when I first started speaking about my experience as a victim of childhood sexual abuse, I made a promise to myself that I would never focus on the story of the abuse itself and I still believe my reasons were right and valid. For one thing, at the time there were very few books on incest, most of which detailed the sexual abuse itself. They were necessary; the stories needed to be told as a first step in revealing this insidious practice. Victims of childhood sexual abuse needed the world to know what we'd experienced without having to say the words ourselves. We needed someone to break the barrier of silence. Thankfully, a few women were brave enough to say what the rest of us couldn't.

As grateful as I was that some have been able and willing to tell their stories, I wanted to focus on what, to me, was even more important. I wanted people to understand the lasting emotional damage done by the perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse. I wanted them to know about stolen lives, about lives half-lived. I wanted them to know about fear, gut-wrenching fear, about confusion and how it feels to try and make your 8-year-old self invisible and then find your 35-year-old self still doing it. I wanted them to know how it feels to go through life apologizing for taking up space and what it's like, when tragedy hits, to shrug your shoulders and ask yourself how you could have expected anything else.

Tempted as I might have been to try, I knew I wasn't capable of writing a book that would give everyone who had been a victim of childhood sexual abuse a step-by-step guide for healing. I'm not a trained psychiatrist or psychologist or therapist of any kind, nor do I care to be. In fact, I have absolutely no credentials on

paper. I have only the credentials of having lived through something no one should have to go through and then coming out on the other side. I've read every self-help book that looked even remotely interesting and I'll make recommendations to you along the way. I've studied and facilitated change processes; I'll let you know what worked for me, what didn't and why so you can explore some concepts and methods for yourself. I've worked hard; I work hard still to throw off the shadows of the abuse and not let it guide what I do or how I do it. I don't mean to over-dramatize this. While I do believe that there are some unique challenges to the process of healing from childhood sexual abuse, I've come to understand that some aspects of

Victims of childhood sexual abuse long to know two things: that they are not alone, and it was not their fault.

the healing process are universal, regardless of the nature of the wound.

I have heard stories of horrendous physical abuse, both separate from and as part of the sexual abuse, yet still I believe the scars that linger the longest are those that

fall on the mind and the spirit. I have left the job of dealing with the various disorders that arise from childhood sexual abuse to the physicians and therapists; eating disorders, sexual dysfunction and disassociation are way out of my scope. While I know they require a different kind of expertise, I can't help but believe that the body's healing will never be complete until the head, heart and spirit are healed as well. If I can contribute to that part of the healing process I will feel as if I've done my part.

I believe that victims of childhood sexual abuse long to know two things: 1) that they are not alone, and 2) it wasn't their fault. Statistics that show the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in our society are not enough to alleviate that feeling of being alone. What we all need is someone to sit with us, to tell us they know how we feel and do it in such a way that we believe it. We need someone to tell us, however many times we need to hear it, that nothing we did or didn't do made the abuse happen.

I have always shied away from conversations that attempt to put a yardstick on suffering as if there is a sort of Richter Scale for abuse. As I wrote this book, even though I knew I would focus on the healing process, I wanted to be sure I told you

enough about my own hurt and heartache so you could believe that I would understand yours. At the same time, I wanted you to know how distant that hurt and heartache is to me now so that you, too, could envision a time when the pain you are now feeling could diminish and, in time, disappear. I'm sure there are thousands of women who suffered abuse much worse than mine and thousands who suffered less. It doesn't matter. In abuse there are no contests; in healing there are no races.

Truth is, I think most of us, at one time in our lives or another, experience something that crushes our spirits, either a little or a lot, and it's left to each of us to decide whether to allow the shadows of those events to hang over us like an umbrella or pack the umbrella away where it belongs and take in the sunshine.

What I can do, and hope I've done with this book, is to tell the story of my own healing process. I can tell you about the moments and events in my life that pushed me into therapy. I can tell you what I've learned about how the abuse shaped how I thought, what I believed to be true and how I felt about my life and myself. I can explain how the survival tactics and habits I developed as a child turned into self-victimization as an adult. And I can tell you how incredibly glorious it feels in those moments when you know you've shed your last tear, when you take the abuse that hangs on you like a heavy wool cape and shrug it off for the last time. I can tell you how I've come to honor my past in hopes that you, too, will be able to honor yours. I can tell you how it feels to forgive, yourself and the one who abused you, and finally live with more joy than you ever imagined possible.

I hope that as you read about my own journey of healing, you'll find bits of yourself in my story and maybe feel a bit less alone. I have chosen to present my own healing process to you in chronological order so that you might see how one step led to another. Your own process may be very different from mine just as your wounds may be very different from mine. I'm hopeful that something I've experienced or come to understand will spark your own process of self-discovery and help you move on to the next level of healing. Maybe, just maybe, you'll find something that will help you see yourself and your life in a whole new way; full of possibilities, full of hope, full of joy. If that happens, and your own journey of

healing is begun, or jump-started; if your own process is shortened just a bit, then I will have accomplished what I set out to do. If you no longer feel quite so alone and know, in your head and your heart, that what happened to you was not your fault, then the gift will have been given.

Please feel free to share this Introduction with others. If you would like more information about the author or how to order the entire book, go to <http://www.the-journey-home.com>