

Remembering and Hope in the Aftermath of Childhood Trauma

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Remember not the former things (Is. 43: 18-19)

As a child, I would look down at our house and tell myself that when I grew up I would remember nothing of the sexual abuse I experienced from my step-father, or of the emotional abuse and trauma experienced from my narcissistic mother, shrouded as both were by the denial or complicity of the class I grew up in and the mores of the time. The people would become detached from the events, and from the words and moments that caused me such pain. I reinforced this promise by telling myself that it was pain that I ought not to be feeling and surely would not remember once I moved into the adult world.

I now find I must write about it, as a priest and as a theologian, because I believe that trauma and abuse experienced in childhood and early youth does not simply end, as I thought it might one day do, or get resolved. We are obliged, whether we like it or not, to witness to the *ongoing experience* of trauma in what remains of our life, irrespective of how or when the event occurred, or the words were spoken, to the point that ‘the boundaries and parameters of life and death no longer seem to hold, to provide meaning’.¹ A survivor’s permanent state of denial about the trauma they have experienced places them in a kind of emotional limbo, where they are forever trying, unsuccessfully, to become the person who never experienced these things, to deny the wounded self and so become ‘normal’. In this presentation, I begin by dwelling on the primacy of emotional abuse. I use my own experiences as a basic template on which to base the discussion.

Trauma experienced in childhood shapes itself to our very being. It has the effect of occluding the real self, leaving only that self which the survivor of abuse has been taught to adopt, the *persona* we hide behind in order to protect our grief from being denied.

‘Gaslighting’, as it is termed, causes both increased shame and, with the denial of the truth of

¹ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma – A Theology of Remaining*, John Knox Press (2010), Introduction p. 3.

what happened to us, a corresponding decrease in our ability to trust our own remembering. Childhood trauma also shapes itself to the survivor's faith journey, insofar as that involves dealing with a God who seemed to be absent or indifferent to the emotional abuse experienced either as part of the sexual, or as the means whereby a narcissistic parent got 'pay back' for their own loss of self during their childhood. Denial and unconscious (or even conscious) payback become the basis on which sin and its consequences are felt 'unto the third and fourth generation' (Deut. 5:9).

Abuse, whether it is sexual, emotional, moral or spiritual, binds itself to the victim in every present moment of that person's life, in the conscious and in the unconscious, even as she is obliged to deny it in equal measure in order to become a 'survivor'. For her, survival amounts to getting through to mid-adult life without having caused herself or anyone else terminal damage. It follows that if survivors are to thrive, and not merely survive, they must remember truthfully in order to become more fully who they are and thereby understand how and why these experiences occurred. They must know how to remember coherently in order to arrive at a coherent sense of self, a self that has not been imposed on them by others or by the need to deny the suffering of the past, a self that is 'grounded', despite the fragmented memories and fractured associations experienced as triggers or as inexplicable associations.² To remember coherently is to stay with an association or trigger long enough to re-connect it with its memory, view it without blaming oneself either for having let it happen, or for not speaking out about it at the time and, finally, dare to call it out as a sin whose context we may come to understand and even to forgive.

This is not to suggest any obligation to forgive. To understand does not necessarily involve, or even require, forgiveness; the obligation to forgive often only adds to the survivor's sense of shame and inadequacy. Understanding is essential because it helps us to be more truthful to ourselves and thus perhaps begin the process of forgiving ourselves for carrying whatever measure of blame or guilt fell to us as a result of the abuse itself. For the survivor, personhood, our very humanity, depends on how trauma and abuse are remembered and processed to a point that we reach a plateau of understanding in regard to the abuser or the event and in regard to the part we may have played in it, especially if we were in any measure complicit. Our humanity depends on the extent to which denial (our own and other people's)

² Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger *Bearing the Unbearable – Trauma, Gospel, and Personal Care*, William B. Eerdmans (2015) p.7

is owned, so that the picture we have of our selves in later life can be focused accurately onto the backdrop of whatever pain we have experienced.

Emotional abuse is both the cause and the effect of all other kinds of abuse experienced in early life. It is usually felt as the projection of the emotional needs of a parent or close family member. The narcissistic mother cannot give unconditional love because she has either never received it herself, or because she lacks the emotional resources to give it to a child whose emotional wellbeing depends on her. The child may try to give her all the love she craves for, but the parent will be incapable of either receiving it, or reciprocating in a way that is normal for an emotionally responsive parent. For the narcissistic mother, it is easier to love and reward other people's children than it is to give a word of unconditional loving affirmation to her own daughter.³

This kind of emotional priming will help the family member who may be sexually abusing that same survivor. Repeated sexual assaults from a close relative require that the victim be groomed with either flattery or diminishment, or possibly both. These disarm a person and make them easier to dominate, as well as allowing the abuser to justify his actions to himself later. "She was asking for it, really" is what the abuser will tell himself and insinuate to others, thereby doubling the intensity of the shame experienced by the victim in the actual moment of abuse or rape. As with all violent abuse (any form of sexual abuse is intrinsically violent) such experiences reduce that individual to being a non-person.⁴

In the context of family relationships, the depersonalising of the abuse victim is often reinforced, and given licence, through the emotional abuse inflicted by another family member. It gives that member, possibly the other parent figure, permission to emotionally violate an already fragile sense of self through diminishments and power games mixed with abandonment. Over time, that person's sense of self will become blurred, so making them all the more prey to sexual or violent abuse. Having lost sight of who they really are, they have no means to defend themselves. They also have little with which to re-construct the truth of their story.⁵ Abandonment consists in the refusal to take practical or emotional responsibility for the son or daughter in question. The emotional neglect and abandonment of Freddy

³ Karyl McBride *Will I Ever Be Good Enough? Healing the Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers*, Simon and Schuster [Atria paperbacks], (2008) p.47

⁴ Sexual violence and its aftermath raise numerous philosophical issues in a variety of areas. The disintegration of the self, experienced by victims of violence, challenges our notions of personal identity over time. See Susan J. Brison *Aftermath – Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton University Press (2002)

⁵ Brison p.50

Trump, in favour of his younger brother, Donald, serves as an example of what this kind of abuse can ultimately lead to.⁶

It is possible that all abuse, whether sexual or emotional, is rooted in the needs of the abuser. The abuser may himself have felt diminished, so that the exercise of power and physical strength matter to him, or they may stem from a deep-seated loneliness and lack of love in early childhood, giving the narcissist ‘permission’ to demand ‘payback’ from her daughters.

Those who grew up when incest and its emotional accompaniments were taboo subjects learned to deal with our own incomprehension of what was happening to us by simply denying it to ourselves. We connived with the ‘gaslighting’ process of others. We told ourselves that what happened did not matter, or that it did not really happen at all. We stopped remembering aright. If we grew up with any kind of religious influence, we told ourselves that somehow this is what God wanted of us, that God did not want us drawing attention to ourselves, that suffering was to be endured silently and ‘offered up’, or that when we dwelled on the pain we were hiding, we were in fact lying. The person who experiences abuse alongside any kind of religious formation experiences shame on two levels; the shame endured as a result of the abuse itself and the shame for being the unlovely person one had been led to believe in, as well as a liar, before God. It would take years for these ideas to change. The vulnerable person may even have them reinforced through the perversion of religion itself, and of the power it can give to those who crave control over others. John Smyth’s abuse of vulnerable young men in a church context is an extreme example of the abuse of such power.⁷ It can also be experienced more obliquely in other church-related contexts where the abuse of religious power is sanctioned, such as in schools, monasteries and within the clerical hierarchical system.

None of these states of mind takes account of the kind of God the survivor may eventually encounter in the person of Jesus Christ. They may be asking themselves if it is in fact possible for God to be the trusted ‘other’ every survivor needs to help them process and heal their painful memories. I believe it is, but it takes time. The survivor may have been failed by individuals who they thought of as that ‘trusted other’, possibly because the person concerned was torn between conflicting loyalties or knew that, were they to break their silence over the abuse, they would very quickly find themselves excluded from the family circle or out of a

⁶ Fred became an alcoholic, suffered from severe depression and died almost penniless, Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Simon & Schuster (2020)

⁷ Andrew Graystone, *Bleeding For Jesus – John Smyth and the cult of Iwerne Camps*, DLT (2021)

job. Faithful retainers in wealthy families, or a close relative, or a teacher, are all people who can be put in this position. They must choose between remaining silent and able to continue to be there for the child, or speaking out and being removed from that child's orbit. The child may not appreciate their dilemma, and so blame them for not having stood by her, so she learns not to trust anyone, including God who she may, either consciously or unconsciously, have identified with the trusted other. If God has proved untrustworthy, he must be compressed into a conceptual space that will prevent him from further impinging on her life, or else dismissed altogether.

For those who grow up in a religious context God may, for a while, be kept within the safe boundaries of formal religion, as someone to whom homage is paid in the way it is paid to a distant or abusive parent. The survivor may flatter God with words but she dares not approach him further, so God becomes in that sense 'gaslighted', diminished, made only semi-real. Faith is reduced to belief on the level of legend. God becomes a 'Father Christmas' figure who deals only in life's good moments, but when the 'gaslighting' is allowed to cease, when we begin, as survivors, to understand the nature of God's grief and the reality of his presence in the moment of our worst suffering, we also begin to learn hope.

Gaslighting God is a way of 'framing' him as a kind of *persona* who essentially denies us and thereby denies the truth of our pain. Hope is learned from within doubt itself and from within all the contradictory feelings that come with the sense that someone has betrayed us, whether it is God or a parent. It is hard for a young person to make sense of this seeming denial on the part of God because they cannot reach God in the person or self they have been conditioned to believe in. So they wait in a kind of spiritual limbo, trying to be the person they assume God would approve of and falling back into guilt and shame whenever they fail. They are also stuck between remembering and not remembering, afraid of both and needing the oxygen of loving acceptance in order to make sense of the truth of their memories and so incorporate them in a healthy way into their spiritual life. They will experience a further layer of guilt in those rare and brief moments when they believe that somehow they have succeeded and that God must now be looking on them favourably. They may have been schooled, through their religious formation, reinforced by the diminishment of a narcissistic parent, that even such transient feelings of achievement constitute 'pride' or being 'above

oneself⁸. Initially, their hope consists in a belief that God will eventually vindicate them, that their abusers will be held to account. In time, if they travel more deeply into God's love by allowing it to surface in later life, in an encounter experienced through the love of another, including that of a loved animal, hope will become identified with enduring love, with its strength and immutability, with the fact that it waits for us and that we must respond in kind, with a certain kind of 'grounded' waiting.⁹ They will learn that waiting on God's love, uncertain as it may feel to begin with, is not time wasted, but time spent as part of a life in the process of being transformed from a state of untruthfulness about oneself, and about the abuse or trauma that we experienced, to an understanding of what it really means to be true to oneself and true to God. They will learn this through right remembering.

Right remembering is normally done with the help of good psychotherapy. It can also be done as part of a person's journey of healing into a place of mature faith, the difference being that God does not ask them to tell him of their pain, a telling which in itself can sometimes add to the sense of shame they already experience, as happens when therapy, for whatever reasons, fails. He asks them to allow him to abide with them in the pain in the present moment of recalling it. In other words, he invites the survivor into a place of compassionate witness.¹⁰ This is not the same thing as telling themselves that God was present to the abuse at the time that it happened, although they may eventually come to realise his hiddenness in their suffering and humiliation at the hands of their abusers. In waiting on the mystery of suffering, on God's seeming hiddenness in it, they come to terms with God's ultimate sovereignty in suffering, that he chooses not to be seen, to 'wait', so identifying and drawing the victim into his own desolation and abandonment on the Cross. It also follows that in time, the survivor will learn to trust and believe in this direct compassionate witness to their pain and, finding themselves in that place, begin the journey of forgiveness and healing which will enable them to be agents for the healing of others. Healing requires that we first look to our own needs and know how to have compassion on ourselves, so that the painful memories of those we seek to serve do not simply short-circuit back to us in the form of triggers.¹¹

⁸ I draw on my own experience of a pre-Vatican II Catholic education and of a narcissistic mother. See also Danu Morrigan 'Dealing with the Shame' in *Dear Daughter of a Narcissistic Mother – 100 letters for your healing and thriving*, DLT (2017), p.34-35

⁹ More could be written about the healing power of domestic animals in the context of trauma memory but the subject falls outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable – Trauma, Gospel and Pastoral Care*, William B. Eerdmans, (2015) Ch. 2

¹¹ Hunsinger p.74 ff.

It is enduring memories that need to be healed, first by remembering them fully without denying the often numerous betrayals that may have surrounded them and, ultimately, through forgiveness. As with the event itself, where the survivor allows Christ to abide within the flashbacks, to take ownership of the trigger moment, she is given the space to breathe. She knows that she is no longer under compulsion to forgive. She accepts that in her situation, only God can do this. She also learns to forgive herself, that she must accept not only the abuse she experienced, but herself insofar as she allowed it at the time, or through accepting the truthfulness of it in later life. She has permission to be angry. She begins to be reconciled with the self that has been denied her, possibly at the hands of a narcissistic parent. She is not controlled by her memories, whether of a specific event, like rape or of violence (PTSD), or the continuous wearing away of the inner person that is the result of prolonged early experience of emotional, spiritual or moral abuse (CPTSD).¹²

The journey from anger to self-forgiveness is also spiritual. It is a journey of faith as the survivor gradually learns Christ who is the trusted other in her life. It is a waiting process in which she learns to recognise and then depend on grace, the grace that is in the waiting. She also learns that her wounds are not the signs of a wasted person, still less of a wasted life, but the means whereby others will meet Christ, especially if they have experienced trauma or abuse in early life. The abuse survivor witnesses not to herself but to a graced wisdom that comes with an encounter at the Cross. It is only when we begin to live through our wounds, and not in them, that we are transformed into persons gifted with healing for others. So we wait on God while at the same time moving more deeply into God through our knowledge of suffering.

As survivors of trauma and abuse we are called to a specific ministry. Our ministry does not require that we speak of our own experiences, only that we bear silent witness to them, as I have found in ministering to students as a university chaplain. A young person will come to the Chaplaincy, pour out their grief and pain and leave after only a word or two of blessing or encouragement, thanking me for everything I said when I said almost nothing. Bearing silent witness to another's pain, out of one's own experience, seldom involves many words. It requires only that we understand from the deepest level of the self what we know to be true, both in our own personhood and in that of the one whose pain we are waiting on.

¹² Pete Walker *Complex PTSD – From Surviving to Thriving*, [Kindle edition] (2013) Ch. 1, p.3.

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