

## **I Promised Not to Tell**

*Incest and rape are not about sex, they are about power and control...My healing began when I was able to break the promises and tell the story.*

I was four years old when my father began to abuse me sexually. He continued his secret assaults until I was in junior high school. Throughout the years of my childhood I endured his painful and humiliating acts in silence, trapped in the promise I would never tell anyone.

I became the quiet, good, obedient child. My parents and my church taught me early to honor and obey older people. Anyone could tell on a child, and children could tell on each other. But I sensed it was wrong to tell on an adult. I learned it was more important to be loyal than honest, and truth seemed less important than keeping a good appearance.

The sexual abuse violated my physical self and tainted my emotional well-being. To cope, I numbed myself and repressed the horror. My mind effectively enabled me to forget the abuse, even as it was happening. But the trauma did not cease. I stopped laughing, crying, and feeling. Childhood became a time of fear and distrust. Any feelings of goodness about myself and my body were destroyed.

The deep wounds never healed. As I proceeded through adolescent and young adult years, I was haunted by a chronic feeling that something was wrong. I frequently spoke and wrote about searching for something missing. Periodically, the wounds would scratch the surface of my conscious mind. In frequent bouts of depression I would sense my woundedness and exert more energy to cover the pain.

After marriage and children I embarked on a satisfying career. I felt competent, as I balanced home, career, and church responsibilities. But this brief period of respite ended abruptly when I was raped by an acquaintance. Trapped under this man's powerful threats, I promised again never to tell anyone.

Life was hell. Unable to sleep or eat, I merely existed. My fear, especially of the dark, kept me home. I distrusted everyone. This devastating and humiliating experience was beyond my comprehension. In desperation, I sought the counsel of a pastor, well-known for his counseling skills. Though visibly distressed, I could not find the courage or words to tell my story. The pastor prodded; I remained silent.

Then in his own bent for power over my silence, he made sexual advances toward me. I left and never returned. I had been betrayed by father, friend, and now pastor—and all three were members of the Church of the Brethren. Any remains of faith in established institutions of support were now destroyed. I knew for sure I could never tell anyone. I was alone.

I was psychologically anesthetized, embedded in a world without color and meaning. Mute darkness surrounded me. I identified with the Psalmist who made reference to being

in the pit, overcome with a sense of powerlessness. And later I remembered Joseph, also in the pit, crushed by the betrayal of those he once trusted. I wished for death. But I never told anyone, not even my husband.

To cope, I resigned my job and invested my energy in graduate school. As long as I remained busy no one could suspect the fear and torment that inhabited the deep crevices of my body and mind.

Six years later, upon completion of graduate school, my body crumbled. My accelerated efforts to cover the accumulated traumas proved fruitless. I looked dead. My color was gray, my eyes dull. Since I could feel no pain, it was only with a complete medical exam that I discovered the extent of my illness. With medication I rallied, but only to a minimum level. My body was telling the story, but I kept the promise and never told anyone.

Several months later, a new pastor preached a sermon on anger. My deep wounds stirred. After two months of unexplained internal wrenching, I found the courage to dialog with him about anger. There I sat, a few feet from my pastor, who gently invited me to explore the anger. My body, which could no longer hide its secrets, was rigid. My physical self came face to face with the lifetime fear of breaking the promise. The risks were high no matter which direction I chose.

The wounds split wide open. Years of anger, fear, and torment burst out. I was overwhelmed with guilt, shame, and pain. The source of the wounds had finally been identified. To name incest and rape was a difficult, but significant, step towards recovery. As ill as I was, I had a compulsion to be whole.

Although I could not see out of my pit, I decided to trust my inner voice and follow its yearning for shalom. The incest and rape seemed to split my mind from my body. To find relief from my pain I invested in wholistic therapy, integrating the healing encouraged by my therapist, physician, and pastor. The healing I wanted required years of commitment and a willingness to care deeply for myself.

To meet my tremendous need for support, I selected a small group of people from my church to be my support group. Care was given to choose people who could provide confidentiality, compassion, and encouragement to endure the arduous journey ahead of me. This group became my sanctuary where I could tell and re-tell the story and be heard and believed. I was anointed with their love and support.

For most survivors of sexual abuse, healing begins with remembering. First I remembered the rape of six years earlier. Then I remembered the childhood sexual abuse of 40 years earlier. When memories surfaced, I reacted physically, doubling over in pain. Every joint, muscle, and fiber of my body hurt, as I slowly peeled away the layers of my story. Remembering allowed me to understand why I reacted to life with anxiety and distrust. I also understood the source of my depression and countless illnesses.

Like all sexual abuse victims, I had to cope with the accompanying guilt and shame. I grew up believing I had caused the abuse. In therapy I learned that young children do not ask to be sexually violated. It is never the fault of anyone but the adult when an adult abuses a child. I also learned that I did not ask to be raped. The rape was an act of premeditation of an adult male who chose me for his victim.

Anger and rage were natural responses to the abuse. I was angry at my parents for their betrayal, for the abuse by my father and the lack of protection from my mother. In therapy I learned I had a right to be outraged. Not only was the expression of anger my right, it was essential for healing. My anger became a propelling force to get well. I stopped protecting my father and my rapist.

As a survivor of sexual abuse, I had plenty to grieve for. I grieved the loss of self and childhood. My father had stolen my right to be a child. I grieved the loss of feelings, both pain and pleasure. I grieved for the damage done to my body and the money required to heal it. I grieved for opportunities missed because of fear and anxiety. I grieved for my husband and children, for the price they had to pay for the abuse. Once I could grieve, I regained my ability to cry, nearly two years into therapy.

At appropriate times in my healing process I confronted the rapist, then my parents. The confrontations were for me. They were part of my journey out of the past; I wanted them to know I knew. I viewed these people as responsible members of the community and the church, yet they all said the abuse did not happen. Their denial ripped to shreds the beliefs I had about family and friends. It hurt deeply to hear denials from the people who were supposed to love me and care about me. I felt betrayed again.

Then I realized I could not open their eyes nor make them hear me if they did not want to. They may continue to invest in denial but I could no longer live their lies.

I finally was able to relinquish the hope that my abusers had my best interest at heart. I needed to release the hopes in a tangible way, so I wrote a statement of lost hopes and buried it in the presence of my support group. As long as I continued to hope that they would admit the abuse or apologize, I was inhibiting my own growth and healing. I finally had the power to let go. A deep sense of relief swept over me.

The long, slow healing process involves gently cleaning the wounds and stitching them closed. The process is like traveling up a spiral; I repeat the same stages, but each time at a different level with a different perspective. As I heal, the divisions in myself move toward the creation of a new whole.

Incest and rape are not about sex; they are about power and control. They are chosen acts of the powerful over the powerless. Healing from sexual abuse enables girls and women to establish their own sense of power and control over their lives. My healing began when I was able to break the promises and tell the story.

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