



Why Explore a New Relationship with the Church that Hurt You?

Or, Breaking with the Past

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There are many compelling reasons not to disrupt a settled life just to revisit a childhood experience of sexual abuse. I have championed these reasons. Reason helped me resist grief and suffering. It was my last line of defense against remembering in psychological Technicolor. I had made a break with my past, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Reason, like my very ample anger, was a source of power, too. After having been overpowered by my abuser to spend years weakened, like a dazed and wounded prey, I held tightly to whatever made me feel powerful. What if danger returned?

So my young adulthood progressed like psychological resistance training. Every time a memory rustled or a forgotten emotion shuddered, my reason drove it back, growing ever stronger. My mind compartmentalized emotional pain and memories. I accepted, even cultivated, a rift between my public and hidden self. Having mistaken for stoicism, there I was, unsure why no one seemed to know me. I had become what can be a very unstable thing—that is, an entirely reasonable person.

We are truly innocent of the sexual abuse perpetrated on us as children, but that tragedy doesn't earn us a pass later in life when difficult realities occur. We emerge from abuse with unique compassion and tenacity, but that doesn't mean our life is easier, and it doesn't mean we are easy companions for others. Indeed, with our tightly locked emotional compartments, we implicitly force those we love to accept the arm's length at which we hold them from our deepest selves. That is, we pass along to them the terrible isolation our abusers taught us far too well long ago.

With age I hit that point in life when I confronted dire limits on my powers. I had stumbled on the end of my reasonableness. Friends with similar backgrounds were succumbing to drugs or alcohol or episodic mental illness. I was losing friends to suicide and other loved ones to terminal illnesses. There were job losses and moves and radical life changes. There were marriages and births and other watersheds. Reason fell, as reason always falls, short managing upheaval. Moreover, the failsafe power of my own intellect was eroding as I faced chronic physical health crises from suppressed stress.

There are many tools for recovery. Gradually I used many. They came with promises of relief or enlightenment, even freedom. These promises proved somewhat true some of the time. Therapy helped integrate past with present, bridging the rift between whom people know and who I am. Meditative practices took up where medications left off managing depression or anxiety. Water therapies and acupuncture helped with emotions and physical pain. The list goes on. All these things created a patchwork of support, even comfort. Yet, still, these are tools. Tools work only after we pick them up. They require my choosing again and again between the darkness of the past and the light I seek. They, like my own human powers, proved useful—and limited. They rely on my choice before I can rely on them. And, sometimes, I was just too overwhelmed to choose.

The limits in all my options kept leading me back to the limitlessness of God. God begins where I leave off, works miracles where I fall short, is strongest where I am weak. God works even when I can do no more than groan in grief. Even as we demur from speaking the truth of abuse, God already knows, already rejects our shame, already surrounds us with power that does not overwhelm or intrude or harm. Accepting this involves doing less, not more; that is, we stop resisting instead of starting anew.

Coming forward to share my story with my Bishop and our diocesan ministry, then, was simply a matter of resisting less. I became willing to accept what God offers. This choice added opportunities for God to help me through others. Stepping forward turned out to be my real surrender. This surrender was not forced on me by a predator. It did not lead to my being wounded. This surrender was forced on me, but was my own free choice. It opened me to greater grace. It let me be more the woman who I was created to be. It was the anti-wounding. It has turned out to be the anti-victimhood.

This step forward wasn't gracious. My first statement to the Assistance Minister in my diocese was accusatory: "Is this window-dressing?" After that, the journey involved false starts, upsets and missed appointments. It was a walk crippled by all the shame that broke like a fever and screamed for me to go back into existential hiding. I learned yet again the fruits of walking through pain. As the fever was breaking, was I feeling awkward, foolish, disoriented and scared. Look at Peter, faced with the impossible. To let Jesus make him part of a miracle, he had to take the first step out of the boat onto the water.

So, why pull up the blocks laid in place long ago to bury the darkness and misery? What can be more appealing than having made a break with the past long ago?

Certainly changes we enjoy from working recovery tools are freeing, but for me they weren't enough incentive to sacrifice my reasonable fortress of stony peace. Knowing what I know now, here's why I'm glad I pulled up those stones and planted a garden of my choosing: In our suffering we gain astounding capacities for feeling, for appreciating, for creativity, for sensing others, for loving. Yet, our wounds restrain these gifts. As we heal psychologically, emotionally and spiritually, we are freer to offer what gifts we have drawn from our suffering to a suffering world. We become more than we could have even imagined before we took one step forward, out of the boat and onto the water.

It's worth the struggle to face our past abuse, our current limitations, and our divine destinies. That's not something our reason can comprehend. It's something our hearts know. My wish for you is that, by stepping forward, you can make, like I have made, a profound break in the chain that can keep us bound to our predators for a lifetime, through their impact on our personalities, our relationships, and our freedom to love and live spontaneously. When we claim our identities as children of God we reject the lies predators said and showed us, that we were worthless, disposable and consumable. This is the real break with the past I wish for all survivors of child sexual abuse by clergy or any other trusted authority figure.

Teresa Hartnett founded and works with Spirit Fire, which promotes Christ-centered restorative justice for adults, families and faith communities wounded by child abuse. Spirit Fire offers spiritual mediation, pastoral training and survivor partnerships to inspire and energize Catholic and all other Christian ministries. For our resources and services, see SpiritFire.Live today.