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ISBN: [979-8-9898434-0-4](https://www.myidentifiers.com/title_registration?isbn=979-8-9898434-0-4&icon_type=Pending)

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**One Woman’s Journey**

**to Healing from**

**Sexual Abuse**

**30th Anniversary Edition**

**by Judy Emerson**

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to you who are still burdened with the suffering of the wounded child within you. May your truth be honored. May you receive comfort, strength, and healing, that the world be blessed by your full presence here.

There is light in the world. And the darkness has not overcome it.

# FOREWORD TO THE 2024 UPDATED VERSION

Most of us really want to believe that families are happy—that unhappy families are exceptions to the rule. I’m so glad to know many families who are healthy and loving. I cherish my witness to and participation in my adult daughters’ happy families, as we continue to heal together.

The family I grew up in was an unhappy one, as too many are. The commercials on TV around Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day sell the idealized parent—the parents we wished for. But somehow, we all must make our lives out of imperfect experience. If it wasn’t ideal, well—even so, we need to find a way to create a life of our own that makes sense, that meets human needs, so the world can go on.

I gave voice to my process of healing from childhood sexual abuse through my journals, scribbled through many nights, which were first published by Thomas Nelson Publishers in 1994. This new volume, thirty years after, offers most of the original version as a record of discovering how trauma had confused my view of the world, my attempts to update my core beliefs, and the healing that resulted. Changes to the original text have been minor, with an added foreword and afterword sharing my ongoing growth and understanding. I am blessed to have had this amazing journey, for which I’m everlastingly grateful. The story has a happy ending.

The material that follows is honest, and raw, and will likely be triggering to some. I encourage readers to be gentle with themselves and seek support if needed.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE ORIGINAL VERSION

The following pages are taken from a personal journal I kept during two years of psychotherapy with a gifted counselor who was a former minister. I scribbled furiously through hundreds of handwritten pages, seeking to understand and overcome the effects of childhood sexual abuse. My decision to share excerpts of them publicly, in my own name, is based on my conviction that it’s long past time for the secrecy that crushes the lives of victims of sexual abuse to be overcome by the light of truth. It is in the light that we confess our old shame and find ourselves accepted. Whatever dirtiness was imposed on us, we are not dirty. Only in the light can we heal and finally reclaim our lost innocence.

**I describe my own experience as a female, and throughout these very personal pages I refer to victims as female, remaining true to my original journal writing, and for simplicity of language. Despite this, I am aware that untold numbers of victims of child sexual abuse are males, who also need acknowledgment, support, and healing as well. Much of my story applies to them.**

**Our cultural unwillingness to know about sexual abuse of all varieties has conspired with abusers to perpetuate the intergenerational cycle of crimes against children and sets up vulnerability for further abuses throughout the lifespan. Silence has kept their offenses cloaked in darkness. It is long past time for that to change. The truth must be given voice.**

**In these pages I offer you a glimpse of the shame that debilitated my life for decades, expressed with the immediacy I felt as it welled up into my awareness. I was not expressing healthy ideas, but sharing them here offers a window into the damaged perspectives that result from victimization. The old shame cannot hurt me any longer, but perhaps its telling can be a part of the healing of others who suffer. I can own my truth. To protect my family’s anonymity, I have changed all names in the book except my own and omitted identifying details.**

**No one has a moment-by-moment recollection of all the events of their early years. Survivors of sexual abuse often find memory gaps of an even greater degree due to repression of trauma. My memories of the events over those years are, of course, incomplete. The purpose of this book is not confrontation, nor complete detailed documentation of events, but to offer healing in the hearts holding old pain.**

**For most of my life I said about my childhood, “Well, it wasn’t what I wanted it to be, but it wasn’t *that* bad.” There are, of course, many life stories more awful than my own. While I was spared the extreme physical brutality many children are forced to endure, my story illustrates the damage done to a child’s soul when she is stripped of her human right to make choices about her own body. No matter how subtle the coercion that precedes the sexual assault of a child, profound emotional harm results. And an especially deep kind of harm occurs when a perpetrator uses the victim’s natural, innocent body responses to blame and shame the victim for feeling what she cannot control. The nerve cells that transmit pleasure are not bad. And the child is not responsible for the actions of a more powerful person.**

**As long as we minimize hurt by sheathing it in insulating generalities, we deny the need for healing balm, and the wound continues to fester untreated. In acknowledging and examining our pain we discover a hidden “inner child”, that part of us who received the hurts, frozen in the overwhelming experience that was beyond her understanding or control. She unconsciously continues to act spontaneously on her truest feelings, rather than to act with rational “adult” deliberation.**

**Of course, we all need to grow up. We need to put away childish things. But that kind of maturation doesn’t happen instantly, or because we vow to ignore the very thing that prompts our childish behavior. We don’t put away old resentments or immature defense mechanisms just by declaring those things are finished.**

**It’s a process, like putting away laundry—which doesn’t happen on its own, just because we will it to be done. We spend time washing it, handling it, sorting and folding, hanging or finding room for it in drawers or on shelves, to be stored for appropriate use. If we chose to simply act as if the laundry didn’t exist, we’d be in a mess very soon. Like we sometimes get into a mess trying to deny our own childishness as an ineffective way of getting beyond it.**

**For myself, I had to learn to acknowledge my childishness, which I first found courage to admit within the safety of the trust relationship with my counselor, in order to find my childlike wonder and joy. My work in psychotherapy as described in these pages began when I was thirty-nine years old, and it was during that work that I became aware for the first time of my dissociation, or “splitting”, from my adult self when under stress. I began to recognize that I sometimes found myself thinking in the voice of a small, frightened child, while in the very same moment conscious of myself as an adult. For the purposes of the printed page, I refer to that child, my inner child, as *judy*. When reading it aloud I call her “little judy”.**

**I became increasingly attuned to my inner child’s presence as I gave her opportunities to share her feelings without judgment. “*Yuu-uuuck*”! she would often say inside my head—not my ordinary adult vocabulary—as a reaction to a shameful topic she feared to think about. I learned to listen sympathetically to her terror, her rage, and her innocence, to respect her pain, and to admire her strength in coping with it even when she had had so few supportive resources during childhood. Eventually she felt accepted, safe, and loved enough to give up some of the rebellious control she had exerted over my behavior. She trusted me enough to let the adult me choose a healthier course of action. It was an honest commitment to move into a new direction.**

**Some readers may be concerned about the danger of over-focus on the past. Before I began therapy, even though I was unable to articulate my pain, my entire life had been unconsciously focused on a childish wish for retribution, a greedy striving for my unmet needs to be attended to, and a compressed, but all-encompassing rage I never admitted to myself. It was during those earlier years that I was overfocused on the past, while it may not have been explicitly stated. Therapy was my first opportunity to enter the delayed grief process that should have been allowed when I was a little girl, each time I was wrongly used. There were many years of unexpressed loss that needed to be vented in the context of a supportive, appropriate relationship that could help me change from rumination on those wounds to the effective release of their toxins. And finally, I could begin to move beyond those wounds into a greater maturity, unburdened of the excess baggage, and ready to forgive. It took longer than I wanted it to take. Other people were impatient with my slowness, and so was I.**

**This phase of healing took up three years of my adult life. Each survivor’s journey is different, attuned to the specific needs of the individual. In time, grief subsides, and peace takes root inside. Often there will be later seasons of more growth as life stages and changes prompt new awareness and new understanding. That has been true for me.**

**The emotions expressed in the pages of my journal were scribbled fresh as they welled up from inside me. Editing for publication as a book was with the intention of organizing and clarifying the message of hope that emerged through the struggle. But the rawness of those feelings has been intentionally preserved because victims of sexual abuse must find a safe way to verbalize whatever shame-infected ideas they discover already exist, in order to clean the wounds. Censoring the thoughts as they appear in our minds only keeps them secret, and powerful. It does not erase the ideas those thoughts represent, which still live inside, denied permission to be understood. They cannot be revised with updated information that was not available back then unless they are heard without judgment.**

**The rawness serves to demonstrate the process by which I was eventually able to put a great deal of childish thought into its proper perspective. I have not amended the warped, “wrong” viewpoints I expressed. The reader is invited into my mental turbulence in order to understand its sources, and to rejoice with me as I was freed from it and enabled to change.**

**The therapist I call “Jason”, who helped me to find my way through that turbulence, was a gifted counselor, whose Christian faith was a model for my own growth. I will always be grateful for his skills. Yet at the same time, I found that working on my issues about sexuality with a member of the gender who had abused me presented a set of challenges all its own.**

**I think it was to my personal benefit that I was prompted by Jason’s gender to repeatedly confront the unconscious confusion about male-female relationships that became apparent during our work, often surprising me with its contrast to what I knew intellectually. Despite that, I would caution victims of sexual abuse of potential pitfalls in therapeutic work. Therapy is by its very nature one of extreme emotional intimacy. Under such conditions, feelings of closeness and attraction in both client and therapist are perfectly natural and common. It is the responsibility of the professional therapist to hold firm boundaries to prevent sexual acting-out on the part of either client or counselor—without judgment or shaming for the emerging impulses that are evidence of the very wounds that need healing. Often a difficult task.**

**Jason, like all responsible counselors, acted to temporarily fill the roles of a healthy, safe parent, teacher, friend, cheerleader, advocate, and guide. He demonstrated to me that I was deserving of care without sexual behavior. He showed me I was worthy of protection. My healing equipped me to make far healthier choices in all my relationships. But such work is never an absolute finish. Life brings more lessons.**

**The millions of women and men who have been victimized by sexual abuse need to know they did not bring on violations through their own childish actions, or because of any innate “badness” about them. They need to know they are not alone, that there is hope to overcome the pain and to become, at last, who they were designed to be.**

#

# Chapter 1

**What was it like growing up?**

**Looking back, can I explain why I finally admitted my need for help? At first, I was focused on trying to fix my friend Tina’s collapsing marriage. It was raging codependency on my part, but I couldn’t see it at the time. I was bewildered by my sudden compulsion to suck in every fragment of written wisdom that I imagined might prevent the disintegration of everything I depended on with no discernible warning. I only knew that her disaster created frightening tremors in my life, and I couldn’t stand not knowing the source of my panic. I clung to an illusion of control.**

**By the time Tina’s divorce set off that first ominous vibration, my carefully patched self-image had been fractured by a thousand invisible fissures that were about to reveal a major fault line. I was in the middle of an internal earthquake that shattered my self-control into rubble. While I was still determined to focus on Tina’s problems, Jason’s words sounded like a rescue team calling to me in my ruins: “But I’m concerned about *you*.”**

Thursday, April 6th

Jason recommended starting a journal to sort out my feelings and jog memories. This must be the kind of prescription a therapist writes. Somebody once said that the main purpose of writing is to discover the message inside ourselves. Is there a message? I’ll start with the topic of today’s therapy session: my earliest significant memory.

Out of the stack of recovery books I already read this year, one suggested that early memories are often a snapshot representation of what childhood was like, as a whole. Our brains choose those particular events to hang onto because they sum up the messages in a thousand other events we have experienced.

When I had read that statement, I was shocked at the force of the picture that suddenly exploded into my mind. The rush of feelings told me it must be important. So, this afternoon when Jason asked me what it was like growing up, I told him the story of that disturbing memory.

I can see the kitchen so clearly in my mind. The counters and table were piled with clutter in perpetual hopeless disarray. At suppertime we shoved back the encroaching mess to clear enough space to accommodate dishes. The centerpiece was a rarely varying display of the morning’s saucer of a half-melted stick of margarine, the sugar bowl encrusted with spatterings of meals gone by, and dilapidated issues of *Woman’s Day* magazines. Likely as not there were dried out used teabags set on assorted jar lids nestled among a cookbook, a phone directory, leftover dirty glasses, breadcrumbs, and a sprouted sweet potato skewered on toothpicks, its roots crowding a quart mayonnaise jar of cloudy water, and its vine straggling listlessly toward the light from the dirty window.

It must have been my seventh or eighth birthday. Of course, birthdays at our house passed by mostly unrecognized. No big deal, no party, no present.

But there *was* something different about this birthday. My mother had baked a beautiful angel food cake with whipped cream and strawberries. Actually, my mother, being especially fond of sweets, had baked this cake for dinner. And when I reminded her that it was my birthday, she called it a birthday cake. But it still made me feel special. Something had been prepared (I told myself) in honor of *me*!

All through supper I savored the feeling of being valued. I surreptitiously licked my plate clean so that none of the perfection of that cake would be contaminated by a stray lump of meat loaf or a limp green bean. Mother never got out the dessert plates; they would have made too much work.

I shuddered with anticipation as she cut the cake at last. Without ceremony, she served my big brother Gary first. I was frustrated, but since we had no established birthday etiquette, I was not especially surprised. I contained my growing impatience as she served cake to my older sister, Carla, and my younger half-brother, Will, from Mom’s second marriage to Martin. (This must have been before she married Richard, so of course Richie wasn’t born yet.) Then she served herself.

But when she sat down and actually began eating her slice of cake, I was so shocked that I burst out, “Mom, I didn’t get a piece of my birthday cake!” As she turned to look at me, her eyes hardened into such an expression of such cold fury that my disappointment froze into a lump in my throat.

“Don’t lie to me to get a second piece of cake!” she snapped. “I gave you the first piece and you ate it already!”

But she hadn’t.

Tears filled my eyes as I stared, stunned, down at my perfectly bare plate. I struggled for words of protest, but none would come. The rushing in my ears drowned out Mom’s lecture on my terrible manners in licking my dish, and I fled from the kitchen in humiliation.

Carla called after me, “You have to come back to help with the dishes!”

The pain behind the tears I sobbed into my pillow that night came back afresh when I first recalled it. Today I thought I could relate that memory calmly to Jason, but the surprising power of the same grief landed with a hollow thud on my chest. Again, there in the office, I struggled not to cry.

“I know that’s dumb…it was only a piece of cake,” I said stiffly. “But it feels significant.”

Jason nodded.

“My mother didn’t believe me… she didn’t believe *in me*. That’s why it stuck in my brain all these years, and why it feels so important now.”

But I wasn’t prepared for his response. Did I imagine tears in *his* eyes? I never expected him to take it so seriously. “Didn’t anybody defend you… tell Mom you hadn’t had any cake?” he asked. Well, why would they? In our family it was every man for himself. Nobody wasted effort defending anybody else—least of all me. Fact of life.

Then Jason leaned toward me and said softly, “Thank you for trusting me enough to share that. I promise never to do anything to betray your trust.”

And why would I be here if I wasn’t willing to trust him? After all, I’m paying for his expertise to help me collate all this stuff I’ve learned about dysfunctional families from the books. It makes sense to lay it out as quickly as possible so I can be done sooner.

When my time was up, he enclosed my offered hand in both of his bigger hands. He met my eyes without wavering, looking past my protective exterior with makeup all in place, seeing deeper. I felt transparent. He released his grip as I looked away, unsettled. It must have lasted only a couple of seconds, but for some reason I was unnerved.

Who knows what kind of relationship to expect with a therapist? I’ve never done this before. To start out as a virtual stranger and spend the whole time talking about my childhood—about personal, painful things—and then for him to look at me that way—with compassion, and caring, as if I meant something to him. I felt exposed, like he could read my mind. How’d I get so vulnerable, so fast? Did somebody push the fast-forward button? It’s spooky.

Nobody has ever wanted to hear all the feelings crammed down inside me. To have somebody really listen to me now is a new experience. It makes me nervous, but it feels good too.

Monday, April 17th

So here I am in counseling. My therapist says he sees me on a speeding train, rounding a blind corner with a bridge out just ahead. That he thinks I’m in crisis. Strange. I don’t see myself in a crisis.

And he sees the train headed for…what? What they used to call a nervous breakdown? Naaah. Jason just doesn’t know my capacity for accomplishing a hundred things at once. I’m okay. But this does appear to be an opportunity to figure out those disturbingly familiar scenarios I found in the books I’ve been reading and make my life work better. With insurance paying most of the cost, that’s enough value to get from therapy.

Tuesday April, 25th

I’d forgotten how much I like to write. I wonder why I haven’t been doing this all along.

Jason and I talked about the idea of an inner child, which has showed up in several books I’ve read lately. The inner child concept didn’t fit too well with my old idea that, when I graduated from high school, I was supposed to be an adult, endowed with the whole set of wisdom and coping skills necessary for life. (No wonder I felt so inadequate…my set was missing a whole lot of pieces! Not that I could admit it to anybody.)

One of the books compared the inner child to the sapling inside a giant redwood. Years of cell growth and the cumulative effects of environmental conditions develop a tree that surrounds the sapling inside. The outer tree may be tall and old in years, yet the infant organism still lives inside at its core.

Jason says we are going to get to know that child inside me. Judging from the memories we’ve talked about so far, she is not a happy little girl. As fascinating as this process is, and as much as I am reveling in the attention of being heard as never before, I have some fear about encountering that child.

I guess a lot of people would call therapy selfish self-pity. They’d accuse me of whining, wallowing in old resentments. But I’ve tried all my life to ignore my background, to pretend it didn’t exist. I thought I had forgiven and forgotten, but this stuff wouldn’t still hurt like this if it had healed. I want to resolve my past and move beyond it to some more effective way of living. Lately, my life isn’t working too well.

Saturday, May 6th

I guess I never expected therapy to be this tough. All we do is sit in chairs and talk, yet when I leave, I feel like I’ve been in a prize fight. I’m worn out.

Why *is* it so hard? It never bothered me much that I had a difficult childhood. I always knew my family wasn’t like the one we used to see on *Leave it to Beaver*. My family was “weird”. I just accepted the fact that we weren’t very happy and tried my best to cope with the present.

But when Jason says, “Tell me about…”, what comes out isn’t merely an intellectual explanation of the facts. I have an overwhelming urge to cry most of the time—which I fight back. Do these surges of—is it grief? —show up just because I’m dealing with specifics? I can’t find any other difference.

“What was the atmosphere like at home?” Jason asked. So, I told him about frequently waking up in the middle of the night to Mom and Richard screaming at each other in the living room. From the time they got married when I was eight, I don’t remember there ever having been a time they didn’t argue. Richard must have been getting ready to go to work… he always got up at 3:00 A.M., and he left the house at 4:00. There was one time especially, that stands out in my memory.

I was startled awake to the same yelling, the volume always turned up to earthshaking. Staring into the darkness, I wished Richard either divorced from us… or dead. We’d be better off without him, wouldn’t we? He made Mother cry, and I was afraid of him. Why *was* I so afraid of him?

*Shut up, shut up, shut up,* I begged silently. But I knew they would go on and on. *Please God make them stop. I have to go to the bathroom.* I was scared to walk down the hall; they’d see me, and I’d be in the middle of the fight. The force of their shouted words whistled through the air and landed like fists delivered hard into the pit of my stomach.

The tension made my swollen bladder ache. *Mom, just don’t answer,* I thought. *Let him have the last word and don’t argue anymore and he’ll go away.*  I knew for sure that when I grew up and got married, my husband and I wouldn’t fight like that. But Mom never quit. The fights seemed endless.

Then I heard a last explosive curse as a door slammed shut. The windows rattled, then silence settled on the house. I held my breath and strained to listen. Had Richard left for work? I crept into the edge of the hall, ready to dash back into my room if I heard his voice. Mother’s muffled sobs came from the living room. Was he gone?

The sound of rushing water in the shower answered my question. Oh, no! He was just *starting* to get ready for work! He always spent forever in there. and a second bathroom was a luxury Mom only dreamed of.

Back in my room I sank to the floor beside my bed and hugged my knees to my chest, clenching every muscle to keep from wetting myself. My fingertips tingled in sympathy for my bladder. “What am I going to do?” I moaned. I shivered in the cold and pulled my nightgown around my legs. I didn’t own a robe.

Carla was in the next bed, either sleeping through it all, or pretending to. I rocked myself rhythmically on the floor, to the throbbing of my abdominal muscles. *Please, please, please, please.*

Once before, I had asked Mom to hurry Richard’s shower so I could use the bathroom. She had made me go in while he was still bathing, on the other side of the thin plastic curtain, able to hear every sound I made. It gave me the willies to think about it.

I would *not* do that again. And I couldn’t explain why.

Mom would just say, “On, nonsense. He isn’t listening and it doesn’t make any difference anyway.” She’d be mad if I resisted. Besides, it might start another fight, and I’d be stuck, with no escape. No!

The pain in my belly was unbearable and being cold made it worse. I was afraid I was going to make a puddle on the carpet. I pulled my bed pillow onto the floor and sat on top of it. I could hear the shower still running, and even after he turned off the water, he would take so long to shave and dress. “What am I going to do?” I whispered again, squeezing my thighs together.

But suddenly there was no decision to make. The pressure in my bladder eased as I lost control. Feeling relief from the pain, I released my knotted muscles and enjoyed emptying myself into the pillow under me. The absence of cramps was such a pleasure that I relaxed into sleepiness.

Except that I had actually wet my bed pillow! That thought snapped me back to alertness. What had I done? Now what? I could sleep without a pillow tonight, but I couldn’t just ask Mom to wash it. She’d be furious with me for doing such a nasty, repulsive thing! I’d never hear the end of it. Later she’d tell Richard too, and they’d join forces against *me*! They’d shake their heads at how disgusting I was, and they’d laugh at me for my stupidity. Better just to hang my pillow out on the clothesline in the morning. Maybe airing it would be enough. But it would be easier to live with the smell than to let them know.

Wow. Describing it felt like I was really there, back then. I can sympathize with that poor child inside me. How hurt she was! There was no way she could win, was there? However she tried to take care of herself, she was always in trouble for what she couldn’t help—being a human.

Saturday, May 13th, 10:00 P.M.

It’s amazing how writing and talking about my childhood bring back events I haven’t thought of for decades. Writing about the screaming in the night reminded me of another time I hate to think about. How old was I? Maybe ten.

I woke up to the yelling again and felt so scared that I started crying. My world seemed poised on the brink of destruction, and their raging shoved and jostled me ever closer to that fearsome edge. I was powerless to stop the endless war in our house.

In the twin bed next to mine, Carla spoke up. “What are you crying about? How can you feel sorry for yourself when you think about Jesus dying on the cross? You aren’t suffering!” So I shut up. How could I compete with Jesus’ pain? Maybe I shouldn’t bother praying any more. My hurt wasn’t important enough to bother God with it.

You might have thought, though, that when the fight was over and Richard had left for work, that maybe Mom would have come in to comfort us and tell us not to worry about it. She never did. I guess we all pretended that nothing had happened. I made believe I’d been asleep all along and nobody was yelling, and we never had this conversation.

Jason said that Carla was probably upset by my crying, and just trying to keep herself from falling apart. He said family pretense was a pattern of persistent lies to keep the lid on secrets. We all made believe everything was okay, ignoring the craziness going on all around us. It’s called denial—one of the hallmarks of codependency. But I thought codependency only happened in alcoholic families. Still, I have to admit all the symptoms were there.

Thursday, May 25th

Jason and I talked about school today—how my re-entry into college classes a few months ago “coincidentally” came about when my friend Tina’s marriage imploding made me feel so off-balance. I guess I went back to school because school was always my comfort zone, and I suddenly felt so vulnerable. I mean, if her marriage could dissolve like that, then maybe mine could too, and then what would I do? I was scared. Maybe I overreacted. With my part-time job, family, and therapy, it’s been a tough semester.

I’m only signed up for one class this summer—Psychology 101. I had registered for that same class that first semester in college years ago, straight out of high school, but I was carrying too heavy a course load and working part-time, and that’s the course I dropped. Back then there was something about the class that made me uncomfortable. But now it’s exactly what I want to learn.

It fits with my fascination with trying to understand why people do what they do. It started with trying to figure out why Tina’s husband had an affair, and I launched into reading stacks of books—maybe to try to fix whatever was wrong between them. I guess it was kind of crazy, feeling a compulsion to understand how everything could go so wrong—to control it? I’ve read more than fifty books from the library by now, on psychology, and relationships. I’ve slowed down now, and I’m reading only one or two books a week.

But I started this entry writing about school. I was in my element in school when I was a kid. I felt appreciated. My teachers loved me. In fact, I was usually teacher’s pet. I never had many friends, though. I always felt different from everyone else. My clothes were one reason why I was different.

By the time she married Richard, Mom had stopped sewing for us, so most of what I wore by then was a hand-me-down or from a thrift store. Which might have been okay if my clothes were clean and neat. But it seemed like Mom had stopped trying by then. She was depressed. Laundry didn’t get done, ripped seams stayed that way. I was ashamed of what I wore. In winter the other girls wore wool skirts, sweaters, and knee socks. I was wearing rumpled cotton dresses, and likely as not, no socks at all.

And I always needed a bath! Weekly baths were the norm in our family. I was a bedwetter, too. Jason said bedwetting is common in families when the kids feel a lot of stress. Did Mom send me to school smelling of urine? Of course. No wonder I didn’t have friends.

I wanted long hair, but Mother wouldn’t let me grow it out. She said it was too much trouble. I couldn’t brush the tangles out, and she didn’t help me, so I had rats in my hair all the time. I envied the other girls who looked how I wanted to look.

Now I wonder if my teachers loved me because they pitied me. I must have followed them around like a puppy, staying in at recess just to be near them, and helping them grade papers after school. How I wished a teacher would take me home.

I worked hard to please anybody who would give me attention, and my teachers all did. So, my report cards, with columns filled with A’s, were a source of pride. I’d hand them over to Mother and bask in her approval… for all of about thirty seconds.

Later I would hear the comparisons. Gary and Carla got lectures because their grades weren’t so great. Gary usually had D’s and F’s, and Carla got B’s and C’s. Both of them resented me because Mom used my grades to shame them.

I couldn’t help the fact that doing well in school was the only thing that made me feel good about myself. But it cost me what alliance there might have been with my brother and sister. So maybe it shouldn’t have been surprising that Carla seemed to prefer spending time with Gary instead of me. It felt that way to me, anyway.

I told Jason about the times—at least twice—that Mom sent me to school on picture day with curlers in my hair. (Hey, that’s the only time it got curled at all!) Since my hair hadn’t gotten completely dry by the time I had to leave for school, Mom told me to ask my teacher to brush it out later. I was humiliated when my second-grade teacher asked me if I was tender-headed. I didn’t know what she meant. Nobody ever asked before.

Jason surprised me. “That’s parental neglect at least, Judy. You’ve been describing an abusive family. Consistent failure to provide a child with a sense of belonging, personal safety, and self-worth is a kind of abuse. They never valued you enough to give you the time it took to brush your hair.”

Neglect? We always had enough to eat. Abuse? I was never hit with a two-by-four. I was spanked, sure—with belts and paddles—but does that qualify? I guess Gary was physically abused, though. He got the brunt of Richard’s terrible temper. And Martin, the stepfather before Richard, used to be really hard on Gary, too. Maybe that’s why Gary was so angry all the time. Still, I had never thought of myself as abused.

But I know it made me feel worthless to be treated like I didn’t matter at all. I haven’t been a great mother, but I would *never* treat my children like my mother treated me.

 Yet Mother and Richard always demanded our respect. Usually in furious shouts. Why would I respect them?

We always heard in Sunday school, “Honor your father and mother.” What about parents whose actions weren’t honorable?

Thursday, June 1st

 Today I told Jason about a recurrent nightmare I used to have when I was a kid. In the dream, I was sitting in a car, behind the steering wheel. I didn’t know how to drive, and I was scared. But drive I did—up the side of a mountain where the dirt road rose up before me, steeper and steeper, while my heart pounded in my chest and my throat constricted in fear. I heard the crunch and slide of gravel as the tires spun, losing traction. The grade pitched upward alarmingly, and the ground fell away into a rocky canyon of dizzying depth, just inches from the right wheels.

Then the whole mountain was alive, moving, angling the surface of the road upward until the car stalled, yet somehow clung to the side of the vertical cliff. The mountain groaned and shifted as the road ahead suddenly curled above me and doubled back over my head. I gripped the steering wheel. For a moment the car hung suspended in silence as the roadway now above me pulled away and disappeared. And the car was falling, falling, end over end through space, until I jerked awake with a silent scream filling my throat. Heart pounding, I stared into the dark.

Thinking about that dream and telling it to Jason gave me the strangest feeling. I’m not sure I understand his response, either, but therapists seem to be deliberately vague sometimes, and after a while you finally get the idea, you’re supposed to figure it out for yourself. I think he disagreed with my idea about it.

I told him I think it means what I now recognize as my perfectionism. Nothing I ever did was good enough to please my parents, to get their attention and make them love me. What were the standards? All I knew was that I had already failed. I thought I could get to the top of the mountain, but the mountain always moved. I could never make it to the top, but I kept trying harder.

When I shared my theory with Jason, he nodded and said, “That might fit. Your perfectionism is a result of the absence of support and approval. I don‘t spend a great deal of time on dream interpretation, and you’re the best person to give the final evaluation—but maybe we’ll understand more in the context of other scenes as we go forward.”

So, I still don’t get it. Have I missed something? File it under interesting, unresolved, and very disturbing.

Friday, June 9th

Jason asked me yesterday whether I liked being a girl when I was a kid. I answered, “Yeah. I always knew I’d *never* want to be a boy! A girl was the only other option.”

Strange, that just made me think about the fact that Grandma used to order pajamas for us from the Sears’ catalog every year, for our Christmas presents. Sears must have gotten the orders wrong, because time and time again, when my sister and I opened our Christmas packages, we found boys’ knit ski pajamas inside. With a fly in the front of the pants, of course. Mother never sent them back, so that’s what we wore.

If my brothers’ pajamas had turned out to be yellow flannel with rosebuds and lace collars. Grandma would have found a way to exchange them in time for Christmas. She must have thought it was okay for a girl to wear a boys’ style—like girls didn’t matter so much. But I always wished for flannel and rosebuds.

Come to think of it I don’t have warm memories of happy Christmases past. They were always disappointing and angry. And sad. As a matter of fact, I can’t really find any warm childhood memories of *anything* in our family. What happened to the history I thought I had?

My whole history turns out to be fiction. Everything I ever told myself about the people I grew up with was a lie. The family I imagined I had was a mental exercise, a defense so I didn’t have to face the fact that nobody ever cared about me. If I’ve got a face only a mother could love, and Mother doesn’t love it, doesn’t that say I’m not worth loving? I couldn’t admit the truth.

Do all therapists know exactly the right questions to ask, to bring up all this uncomfortable stuff? It’s uncanny. And I can’t seem to find the “off” switch once Jason’s question sets my mental gears in motion.

One comment he made at the end of the session seemed to come out of the clear blue sky. He said, “You may find that this work you are doing has the effect of allowing you increased intimacy with your husband.”

 *What? Who brought up the subject of sex?* Certainly not me. I didn’t answer him. I was too astonished to reply.

Wednesday, June 21st, 1:30 A.M.

What is going on? I keep waking up in the middle of the night with my brain in high gear. Reading usually puts me back to sleep eventually, but tonight I can’t seem to focus on a book. So, I pull out the notebook. I am *not* excited to be writing. Oh, please. I just want to sleep.

Okay, here goes, because writing is what eventually calms down the thoughts.

Jason asked me in the last visit, “How did you cope when you were a little girl?” That’s easy. I read books. I escaped into the world of fiction where moms serve milk and cookies and say, “How was your day, dear? I climbed my tree in the front yard, and sitting on a branch among the leaves, I read everything I could get my hands on. I became the character inside those pages, and I didn’t come out until I couldn’t pretend any longer that I didn’t hear them yelling my name.

In books I could watch a character deal with a problem. If someone denied the problem existed, the character figured out how to solve it anyway. They were always brave and smart, enough to come up with a way to change things, to make it better, and by the end there was a satisfying resolution, which brought relief. Resolutions were wonderful. Something was wrong with my problem-solving, because nothing ever changed in our family, and resolutions never came.

I also coped by eating. Food was the only friend I had at home. So, from the age of nine, there was the added embarrassment of being fat. The remarks people made. The name-calling.

My family had plenty of ammunition to use against me. “Judy’s always got her nose in a book, or she’s daydreaming. Hasn’t got a speck of common sense. Fat. Ugly. Lazy. Clumsy.” I know Gary called me those, and they were the words inside my head. Mom pointedly avoided the word stupid. She never called me those words exactly. But mostly—she never looked at me. What did that mean about me? Nothing good.

What chance did I have to be normal? The expressions on their faces told me how inadequate I was from the time I could walk. For a child to be shamed like that is the loneliest feeling in the world.

I suddenly have a very clear picture—of that child still living inside me. She is a child without a friend in the world. A child with no one who would take her side. A child who tried so hard to be loved, to be accepted, to be good. But it’s never been enough. I can see this inner child huddled into a ball in the corner, holding herself because nobody else will hold her. And crying because she is so alone.

Some of the books talk about parenting that inner child, about learning to comfort her. But how do you do that? She needs to be held. She needs to be told that somebody cares whether she lives or dies. She needs somebody to love her.

She is *me*, only younger. She is ***judy***. And I’m the only one she’s got. I’m the only one who knows how much she hurts. So, I guess I’m the one who has to put down the pencil and hold her. And listen to her. Tell her I accept her. I know how desperately she always tried. I won’t be one of the ones who shame her anymore. I won’t call her names anymore. I’ll learn to love her.

Wednesday, June 21st, 10:00 A.M.

Well, I finally got back to bed about 4:00 A.M. I don’t quite know how to explain last night. Maybe I can’t. After I stopped writing, I turned out the lamp and curled up on the couch, clutching a pillow on my lap. I was that little girl again, and yet, at the same time, I was the adult who wanted more than anything to comfort her. I held her and rocked her and wept with her as she poured out her loneliness and loss and longing for everything she never had. We cried together for two hours until we had both spent all our energy in that storm of grief.

I am awed at having touched the core of hurt in the sad little girl I used to be… and still carry inside me. How I have minimized her pain for all these years! I joined the team of people who shamed her, abused her, and made her feel less than nothing. But no more. I respect her suffering. It was real. She deserves to be honored for surviving such a wasteland.

# Chapter 2

**Past Halfway?**

**Rereading my journal makes me ache even now, after these wounds have had so much healing. Back then, I wanted so desperately to be airlifted out of the suffering that therapy brought to the surface.**

**Even before I recognized that young voice in my mind, my inner child was crying out to be heard and understood. I was puzzled by exclamations coming from my mouth or my pen that didn’t fit my adult, polished façade. Her vocabulary was not my own. She spoke in the language of a child.**

Thursday, June 29th, 9:00 P.M.

After only fourteen hours of counseling, I think my therapist knows me better than I know myself. Maybe he even knows my family better than they know themselves.

Today I shared with Jason a memory that must be my earliest. It hasn’t come to mind before, but it reminded me what a creep my brother Gary is.

When I was two years old, Mom went to the store and left Gary in charge of Carla and me. So, Gary, a six-year-old, was babysitting. While Mom was gone, I asked him for a drink of water, since I couldn’t reach the faucet. He refused and kept on refusing, and my thirst grew into a panic. He taunted me for whining.

Finally, tired of my insistence, he grabbed an empty Coke bottle off the kitchen table and thrust it at me. “Here!” he said with a smirk. “Just spit into this bottle, and then drink it!” He laughed hysterically at his own wit.

I finished the story with a comment about Gary’s character as an adult and shifted to a new topic of conversation, but Jason stopped me short and backed me up to explain. I told him that Gary has been in prison several times and was married and divorced three times that I knew of, once to a stripper. He used to sell drugs, and who knows what else. Jason said, “You never told me that!” Well, we’ve covered a lot of ground. I couldn’t tell him everything. We haven’t concentrated on my brother. I haven’t seen or heard from him in years, thank goodness.

It was another productive therapy session. Little pieces keep falling into place. The puzzle is beginning to make more sense. Coincidentally, my Psych 101 class in summer school has confirmed so much about how lessons instilled in childhood affect us.

But at the end of the session, I was startled to hear Jason’s question, “How does it feel to look back over your shoulder and see the crest of the hill behind you?”

“What?” I asked. “You think I’m past halfway?”

“Unless something else important shows up,” he replied.

Wow. That’s a surprise. Of course, I had started counseling thinking I was just going to make sense of all the information I’d already learned from the books. But for Jason to suggest that I might actually be approaching a finish to therapy made me feel like I wasn’t quite ready to call it quits yet. I was just getting comfortable. But he’s the expert.

Monday, July 3rd, 3:00 P.M.

I feel as though someone has just dropped an anvil on my chest, and I can’t explain why. This morning in Psych 101, we talked about antisocial personality disorder. The book described the kind of people you wouldn’t want to hang out with. Lots of criminals in that category. I sat at my desk staring at my textbook, oblivious to the professor, for a long time, because what kept shouting out at me was that I *know* a person like that. Every characteristic described my brother Gary. It was as if the authors knew him personally. And they didn’t like him either.

I was so upset, it’s a wonder I didn’t have an accident driving home. My heart was pounding, and my throat felt like a chunk of granite was stuck in it. Running through my head was this recycling tape whispering, *my brother is a criminal. And my brother molested me!* Now where did that come from? And why do I feel like death? I cannot make sense of this.

If you had asked me directly if I had been molested as a child, I would always have answered yes. It wasn’t as if I had forgotten it. But it never mattered. It didn’t mean anything. Why does it feel now as if it meant *everything*?

Thank God, my husband has the day off today, because I am ill. I can’t cope with the girls. I will let David be the good father today. I feel paralyzed, unable to do anything but indulge myself in a crying jag. What *is* the matter with me?

I told David about this feeling. “I hope you don’t have any major expectations of me today because I can’t accomplish anything. I’m going to be worthless.”

“I don’t have any expectations of you for the duration of your therapy,” he answered.

Bless him. It seems like he’s been taking my stuff almost as seriously as I have. Well, not quite. Seeing how compulsively I’m going at therapy (still reading books the way I can eat chocolate chip cookies), that’s pretty seriously. But suddenly it looks like the intensity just mushroomed.

Jason will help me make sense of this. At least I have my weekly appointment in two days. I hope I can last that long.

Thursday, July 6th, 11:30 P.M.

Well, I dumped it on Jason this afternoon. He could see I was suffering when he first laid eyes on me. “Are you struggling?” he asked, as I pantomimed a person choking to death, hands clutching throat, tongue extended, eyes rolled back. That’s exactly how I felt.

“Yes!”

And then he waited. He just waited for me to spit it out. *Does he know how hard this is? Yeah, I think he does.*

So, I haltingly told him about Psychology class. That my brother *must* have an antisocial personality disorder. And that he molested me.

“I thought so,” he said gently.

I moaned inwardly. “What—am I wearing a sign?” I demanded.

“No, Judy,” he said quietly. “No. I couldn’t be sure. But I could see that you were denied the right to protect yourself from the very first. If there was anyone around you, within the family or without, who was looking to release their own frustrations by acting out sexually, what defenses did you have?”

*None.* “But,” I protested, “this memory has been sitting on an obscure shelf in the back of my mind., labeled ‘Doesn’t Matter’ for all my life. Why do I feel this way *now*? It isn’t as if he raped me. It was *only* touching!”

The sympathy in his eyes nearly sent me over the edge. But I held back my tears.

“The reason you feel this way is because it *is* important. It always was, but you weren’t safe to feel your feelings about it. Your ability to protect yourself was stolen from you. He had no right to do what he did. If you aren’t allowed to be in control of your own body, then you have been violated. He committed a criminal act against you and, if it had happened today, he might have been put in prison for it.”

Then Jason said, “Tell me about your brother.”

*I don’t want to talk about Gary!* But I drew a breath and started, anyway. “My brother is a snake,” I said.

Jason nodded.

“He was only four years older, but he was *so* different! Powerful. I was always afraid of him. He had an explosive temper. He gave me “Indian burns” on my arms. He pinched my nipples—and laughed when he hurt me. He had a collection of stuff under his bead—dirty magazines, of course. He also had an eight-foot leather bullwhip and a machete and a switchblade knife. Violent things. He was a scary guy.”

I told him how Gary once held my head under water, nearly drowning me in a motel pool when I was four, when Mom had left us alone. And about the time I begged Gary to see-saw with me at a park, but he kept teasing me, holding my end too high for me to climb on. Then he suddenly “changed his mind” and sent my end of the heavy plank crashing down on my head. I had a black eye for weeks. I was five years old.

I told how I never learned to ride a bicycle because Gary was the person Mom designated to teach me on the “family” bicycle (I never had one of my own). After trying repeatedly to balance on this boys’-style bike, far too large for me, I gave up rather than continue to listen to Gary’s taunts and insults. I couldn’t stand to hear any more of his ridicule. Afterward, it became a family joke that Judy couldn’t even ride a bicycle. Klutz!

When Gary was twelve or so, the police came to our house after a little girl in the neighborhood told her parents that Gary had molested her. He had to go in for mandatory counseling for a while, and Mom was pretty upset, but it blew over. So, Mom knew what Gary was like.

Most of Gary’s friends were just as mean as he was, hoodlums who ditched school and were in trouble with the police. Gary wasn’t any different once he was grown up, either. He was always mad, always in trouble. Going into the army was supposed to make him more mature, but he went to Vietnam, and came back angrier than ever.

“But my brother must have been that way because of the way *he* had been abused!” I told Jason. “He was six when our real father, Jack, divorced Mom. I was too little to remember, but Gary remembered Jack’s beatings. After that, Mom was married to Martin for two years, and he was hard on Gary, too. Gary was always in trouble, and he got hit a lot. After Mom divorced Martin she married Richard, who called Gary ‘stonehead’ or ‘ironhead.’ He tried to convince Mother to send him away to military school. Richard really hated Gary. He had it rough.”

Jason’s quiet response silenced me. “I think you’ve cut your brother enough slack,” he said. “He was still responsible for hurting an innocent child.”

I didn’t have a reply to that. Still, it was a relief that my therapist was taking me so seriously.

Then came the moment I feared. “You know that we need to talk about this… Or did you think that once you had told me it happened, you could forget it?”

I took a deep breath. “No. Now that it’s out, I can’t stuff it back into the box it came from. It won’t fit anymore. I can’t forget it.” I felt myself tensing as if anticipating a collision.

“How old were you?” Jason asked.

“Nine? I don’t know!”

“Can you tell me?” he said very gently.

“I remember once—coming back from Gary’s room late at night. I passed Carla in the hallway—she was going to the bathroom. She put out her hand to touch my waist, to see if I was wearing underwear under my nightgown. I wasn’t.” I stared hard at my shoes, avoiding Jason’s eyes, intermittently holding my breath and forcing myself to breathe. “The look she gave me was as if to beg me, ‘Oh, don’t let him do that!’ she knew, but she didn’t say the words. I guess that meant Gary molested her too—but she stopped him.”

I went silent, closing my eyes. He waited for a minute.

“Is there anything else?”

“The only other time I can remember,” I started slowly, staring at my lap, “was when I was sitting on the couch in the living room and nobody else was home. Gary came and sat beside me. And put his hand… under my dress…” I stopped.

Jason waited a long time while I stared at my lap.

Finally, he said quietly, “And he stimulated you?”

I must have winced. I wonder what other reflex movement I made because I felt as if I had been slapped. Finally, I whispered, “Yes,” and closed my eyes.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to leap out of the chair and hide in the corner. Or run. I wanted to be anywhere but there. But this horrible feeling was not going to go away on its own. I felt as though somebody had died and I had to talk about it. Jason, my therapist, was my only hope of getting past this nightmare. Even if it meant telling him all this awful stuff about myself. Telling a *man!*

Mercifully, he let me off the hook. He didn’t make me say any more. When he began to speak, I hung on his words. I wanted to hear *something* that would make the pain go away. *Does he have a magic wand?*

But what he said was, “This deep wound has been festering in you for so long. You needed to bring it into the light for it to be cleansed. God wants to heal it. You’ve been in bondage to the wrongs others did to you, when you were an innocent child.”

I want so much to believe what Jason said. For him to talk about God *healing* me makes me wish for a miracle, but I don’t have any confidence in that. Miracles don’t happen anymore if they ever did. So where does that leave me now? Hurting. Alone with this.

When my time was up, I had the impulse to throw a tantrum, cling to his ankles, beg him not to make me go back out there alone. Or maybe that was ***judy’s*** impulse. But because I didn’t want to embarrass myself, I resisted.

Act like a grownup, Judy.

Jason must have observed that I was still upset, though. After thanking me for trusting him with this memory, he made a point of saying how *he* trusted *me* to be okay after I went out the door. Nice. But who’s going to pick me up off the floor?

I *did* ask if I could have sessions twice a week, just until I get through this issue. I can’t stand to wait a whole week. I am *so* thankful he said yes.

As we were going out the door, I asked, “Do you still think I’m past halfway?”

And I wasn’t too surprised when he replied, “Maybe not. But we’ll take it a little at a time.”

I stopped on the way home (with my everything’s-in-control mask in place) and bought chocolate cupcakes at a convenience store. Sugar—my drug of choice. I stuffed them in as fast as possible. Maybe it settled my shakes a little. But I was still quaking inside. I begin to see the attraction in getting drunk. Oblivion.

Friday, July 7th, 3:00 P.M.

Yesterday, Jason said, “If there was anyone, within the family or without, who was looking to release his own frustrations by acting out sexually…” He was confirming my revelation about Gary. And also saying I didn’t have defenses with *anybody*.

Which made me think about Leo. Leo wasn’t in the family. He dated my mother after her second divorce, before she married Richard. When I was five years old, Leo took me into my mother’s bedroom. He showed me his penis and touched me. Maybe I *was* wearing a sign, even then. *Available. Unprotected.* But it doesn’t feel important. It’s—numb.

What makes one incident seem trivial and the other—so dreadfully heavy? I don’t know.

I feel as if I’m in mourning.

Saturday, July 8th, 2:30 A.M.

My brain will not let me sleep. I am cringing at having to *think* about, let alone *write down* the dream I had as a teenager. I remembered it yesterday afternoon, out of the blue. I can’t get rid of the image that is running like a hamster on one of those little wire wheels, around and around in my head. I can’t make it stop.

Ugh! I *hate* this, but here it is:

I was recycling the mental “tape” of Thursday’s therapy session, and I heard again what I said to Jason: “My brother is a *snake*.”

Oh, no! There is no more obvious a phallic symbol than a snake. You don’t have to be a psychologist to know that snake equals penis. And with that thought came the image of that dream (*was* it a dream?) from years ago.

In that old dream I was lying naked on a bed. I was frozen, petrified with fear, paralyzed, although there was nothing physically holding me down. At the foot of the bed between my feet was an enormous snake, coiled as if to strike. I watched in horror as the snake shifted itself, uncoiled, and, flicking its tongue, glided slowly, silently toward me. Closer and closer it came, until it entered my vagina. I wanted to scream, but no sound came out. And here the memory ends.

Oh, God.

Obviously, I’m no expert, but I have read enough to know that my “dream” has to mean there was intercourse. And my guts tell me that’s what happened, too. Somehow, I *know* and can’t pretend otherwise. My hand is shaking as I write this. My whole body is shaking.

This is circumstantial evidence. But just because I don’t remember an incidence of actual penetration doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Although I’ve been a little dubious when I was reading those books, repression of memory is said to be very common in people from traumatic backgrounds. Surely this qualifies as trauma.

Knowing the violent kind of person Gary was, and how afraid of him I was, I could not have stopped him from doing anything he wanted. Nobody else was protecting me. And he wouldn’t have stopped himself. Touching would not have been enough for him. Intercourse. At nine years old. God help me. For how long did that happen? He didn’t leave home till I was fourteen.

Saturday, July 8th, 11:30 P.M.

You’d think I wouldn’t even bother trying to go to sleep when I’ve been reading and thinking about incest all day. The memories, and the feelings of revulsion and anxiety keep pushing themselves into every waking moment. I can’t escape them. Writing it down seems to help. It stills the hamster wheel. So, I’ll write. Spit it out.

In high school I had the reputation of some cross between a “brain” and “pure as the driven snow”—a regular Goody Two-Shoes. Eyes widened in shock the few times anybody ever heard me say a bad word.

My husband David was my second steady boyfriend. We dated for a long time before we crossed the line between “making out” and “heavy petting.” In my mind I always made a very big point of the fact that we had never “gone all the way” before we got married. So technically I was a virgin on my wedding night. Or so I thought.

But that doesn’t jibe with the first time David and I got very carried away and I didn’t stop him…. (I have been sitting with my pen in hand for an hour trying to make myself write this sentence. I couldn’t make the words go down on paper. *Just do it*.)

When our heads had cleared, David asked me, “How did you lose your hymen?”

I remember jerking bolt upright and staring at him in shock. “Isn’t it *there*?” I asked, my voice shriller than I intended. I was at a loss. A little scrap of flesh that meant the difference between being a good girl or a bad girl was mysteriously missing, and I had no idea why. David accepted my stammered speculation that I must have “lost it” during physical exercise without knowing it. *Me*, a bookworm since the first grade!

I haven’t thought about that conversation since that night. (Such horrifying implications in that conversation—and I had no way to cope with what it meant if I let myself think about it!) But the mystery is certainly solved by knowing there was intercourse with my brother. *I want to throw up*. If repressed memories are real, then surely this is one memory I would want to repress. I would need to repress. More likely there’s a major series I would have repressed, or they would have made me crazy.

Jason says the resurfacing and re-living of repressed memories is called flashback, which were first studied and understood in the work with Vietnam veterans who had PTSD. I’m scared to death to even think about reliving those times in flashback. I don’t want to go back there again. I don’t *want* to know what happened. I am so afraid to look at what is down inside me. *I do not want to remember!*

I started to write that I feel guilt, but Jason explained the difference between guilt and shame a few weeks ago. Guilt is the feeling when I make a mistake. Shame is the feeling that I *am* a mistake. And shame is what I am feeling now.  *I am bad! How could I have done that? With my brother! How could I*?

I still have to make it through this weekend. My next session on Tuesday afternoon seems so far away.

Tuesday, July 11th, 4:00 P.M.

This afternoon I tried to disregard my shaking hands and queasy stomach as I gathered my courage and told Jason the snake dream. “I don’t think I could have had that dream without there being intercourse.” I couldn’t make myself meet his eyes, but I saw him nod.

Then a new thought occurred to me. “Except it was rape, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” he said quietly.

“Carla wouldn’t agree it was rape,” I said. “She’d say, ‘You weren’t screaming, were you?’” I covered my mouth with my hand and stared hard at my shoes.

“You were screaming,” Jason said firmly.

“I was only nine years old!” I whispered.

I have wanted to scream and keep on screaming ever since this whole topic came up. But my screams have all been silent ones.

I blew my nose.

“Do you know where tears go when they don’t come out your eyes?” Jason asked.

So, my strong, self-possessed exterior isn’t working.

“Yes,” I said, focusing intently on the Kleenex I was crumpling in my fist. “They drain into your nose.” I blew again.

There’s nothing to hide behind in therapy.

More and more I’ve had the feeling that Jason’s not in control here. And obviously I’m not in control. I’ve never felt so out-of-control in my life. “I feel as though you and I are just standing on the sidelines,” I told him, “And there’s something unfolding beyond the control of either one of us. Like God is the one directing this therapy.”

“Did you just realize that?” he said. Like maybe everybody’s therapy is this way.

“Jason—it hurts!” I said to him as we stood at the end of the session.

He nodded soberly. “I won’t pretend to know how much it hurts, Judy, but I’m praying for you.”

No instant cure. Talking about it helped a lot, but I still feel like a shotgun has blasted a hole in my guts. And oddly, I find myself walking gingerly, hunched a little, and I’m instinctively holding my hand pressed against my midsection. Like I’m keeping my liver and intestines from falling out onto the floor. It’s a reflex, but even being aware of it now, I am still holding myself. There is the tiniest bit of comfort in it. And I’ll take any comfort I can get.

It’s all I can do to get through each day. I feel so helpless and afraid and sad all the time. I don’t know what to tell my children. They’re overdosing on videos while I hole up in the bedroom and cry and write. I’m not coping with any domestic responsibilities right now. I’m not cleaning house, or cooking.

But I’m still reading voraciously. Maybe I’m looking for the answer in the books. I haven’t found it yet.

Wednesday, July 19th, 11:00 A.M.

My inner child—the nine-year-old ***judy*** inside me—has been stuck in the pain and fear of those awful scenes for decades. My sadness for her losses jumps out at me unexpectedly and overwhelms me. I’m falling apart.

People must be wondering what my problem is. They must think I’m crazy. Maybe I am. I cry at the drop of a hat. In fact, I seem to be weeping, half my waking hours. And I can’t hold an ordinary conversation with anybody. My mind is on a single track, and I can’t seem to focus on anything else.

They would understand if I could tell them someone in my family died. People know about that kind of grief. But this is grief, too. First of all, I have to face the fact that the family I always told myself I had was a cardboard construction inside my head. That cardboard family is now in a bus plunging off a cliff. So, someone *has* died.

And now that the topic of incest has surfaced, I have a whole new magnitude of grief for the real losses of the child I was. I lost my innocence. I lost the ability to think of myself as a good person. I lost my virginity to someone who used me for his own selfish needs and threw me away. What I really wanted was to be held, but he never gave a thought to the value of what he stole from me. I lost the wonder of first discovering sexuality with my husband. I grieve those losses.

I need to know there is *somebody* who knows what I’m going through and who is sympathetic toward me. I need someone to listen to me being real, to offer to take my kids for the afternoon once in a while, or just to make eye contact with me and give me a hug. I feel so alone.

So, I picked out a few women friends to tell about my therapy. I told them I’ve discovered repressed memories that I was sexually abused in childhood. One person said incredulously, “You mean you *forgot*?” Maybe I shouldn’t have chosen *her* to tell. Not helpful—she triggered more shame.

I’ve also talked to Carla on the phone a whole lot. She listens to me, but I have the feeling she’d rather change the subject. And on the topic of Gary, for whom she has very little use, she said, “You think he was malicious?”

Yes.

I think Jason had some reservations about my telling people. Maybe he didn’t mean to let me see that, and he didn’t make a big deal about it, but he did say that some of those people might not be safe to share with.

But I have to tell *somebody*! I look like death warmed over, and I feel worse. I have to know someone cares and doesn’t think I’m just being weird. Not that I’m announcing it in church. But surely one of these friends who have been family for the last twelve years will come through and support me. *Please*?

I can’t continue to live like this for long. I can’t stand it. The thought of the abuse never leaves my brain from morning to night! I need to find a way to forgive my brother for what he did. That’s what God wants, right? Maybe that will make the pain go away. I wonder why Jason hasn’t raised the issue of forgiveness already.

# Chapter 3

**Just say no! How do you do that?**

**In the midst of such detailed self-examination, all the basic assumptions of my identity had shifted. I wasn’t the churchy, rule-following good girl I always thought I was. Incest was intruding into my mind and weighing down my heart every waking moment. I felt soiled and used.**

**I asked my husband what he had seen in me that attracted him when we met. He thought seriously for a minute and answered, “Purity”. I dissolved into tears of grief for that lost illusion, but he said, “That purity was there. It still is.” Could it have been that the abuse never touched the heart of who I really am?**

Tuesday, July 25th, 10:30 P.M.

I’m still in shock from my therapy session this afternoon. We talked about boundaries—that invisible bubble of personal space around us that protects us from unwanted intrusion. Like being able to protect myself from my brother. Or not being able to. The little “exercise” we did brought me face to face with my inability to say no. *Of course* I know how! But I discover I don’t apply that knowledge, somehow.

With my permission, Jason pulled his chair close to mine, so we sat facing each other. “Are you okay with this?” he asked.

I nodded. Holding his hands up in front of him, he asked me to place my palms against his palms, and to close my eyes. Scary already. “I promise you that the only place I will touch you is my hands against your hands. Nowhere else. I’m not going to hurt you. Is this okay?”

“Yes.” My eyes were still closed.

“I’m going to use my hands to push against your hands. I want you to resist the pressure and tell me to stop whenever you want.”

It sounded simple. So why was my heart beating so hard? I *knew* I was sitting in a professional counselor’s office, at one o’clock in the afternoon, as an adult. But suddenly I felt like a frightened nine-year-old. I was *back there* again.

And it was a nine-year-old voice I heard coming from my lips. “*Stop*!” the voice pleaded. But he kept on pressing gently against my hands. “*Stop*!” I said, again and again. But he didn’t stop. “*Don’t*!” I felt so helpless. If the words wouldn’t stop him, what was I supposed to do? I was nearly in tears before Jason told me to open my eyes.

As I slowly pried my eyelids apart, he released the pressure against my hands. I gasped as I saw that my hands had been pushed all the way back, even with my shoulders. I had been so afraid, yet I hadn’t physically resisted him at all!

“I’m sorry,” Jason said softly. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Look around the room, and remind yourself you’re safe here, and no one is going to hurt you.”

I took a deep breath and willed my heart to slow down.

“I believe little ***judy*** wanted to stop what happened to her,” Jason said. “She tried to say no, over and over again. But no one was listening. They taught her that resistance was useless. She never had a real opportunity to protect herself. She was helpless and innocent, and what happened to her wasn’t her fault. There is nothing… *nothing* that will make me believe she was *bad*.”

It's going to take me awhile to assimilate this. I’m still shaking.

Wednesday, July 26th, 2:00 A.M.

There seems to be an alarm that goes off in my head at 1:30 A.M.! Night after night I wake up at about this time. So here I am with my notebook and pencil, after resisting the idea of writing, but knowing that only writing will still the racing thoughts in my head.

I wish I had a nickel for each of the tears I’ve shed this year. Yet now, knowing it was the specter of incest hiding in the forgotten corners of my mind, I wonder how many tears were forced inside because I couldn’t speak the pain of what was happening to me. I already knew my mother didn’t believe me. I learned on that early birthday that she wouldn’t listen when I tried to speak up for myself.

What would my inner child say if she could give voice to her fear? ***judy*** was comforted by the connection we made when I wept with her… when I first began to see how hurt she was. Maybe now she feels safe enough to talk to me.

Are you with me now, ***judy***? I’d like to listen if you could tell me what you’re feeling.

*Will you believe me? Nobody’s ever believed me all my life. Why would it be different now?*

Because you’re part of me. I can see how much you were hurt, how hard you tried to be good. I promise not to shame you. It wasn’t your fault. Were you afraid?

*I was scared to be with Gary. He always did such bad things. He lied to Mama all the time, but she kept believing him. I could tell the truth, but she’d say I lied, and I’d get punished for what I didn’t do. Was there something special about boys that made them more important? I thought there must have been another set of rules—because Mama always took Gary’s side. She always defended him… the way I wanted her to defend me. She loved him. How could I tell her what he was doing to me?*

But didn’t she love you, too? You were her daughter.

*I needed her to love me. But I could never feel it. It felt like some giant vacuum had sucked all the love out of the world. I needed someone to love me, but I was all alone. Gary said he loved me—when he wanted to touch me.*

But did he really love you?

*No, it was another one of his lies. But I wanted so much to believe he did… I kept hoping. Nobody else even said the words to me. Nobody held me.*

*And then… there were those shivery feelings I got whenever he put his hands on me. It must be wrong to have those feelings. He was being bad, and he made me bad too. I was scared and ashamed, but also excited and pleased at the same time. Is that what love feels like?*

No. Love doesn’t make you ashamed. It’s supposed to feel good. You’ve had so many confusing messages about the sexual feelings you couldn’t help having. You weren’t bad for having sexual feelings, they happen automatically if you’re touched a certain way. Gary took advantage of you. He confused you.

*I was so confused. He made me want those good feelings, and then I saw how dirty and nasty it all was, but I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t stop him, and I couldn’t stop myself, and I felt dirtier and dirtier. I hated myself for letting it happen.*

*How was I supposed to say no? Nobody ever, ever, ever listened when I said stop. And Gary was so much stronger than me… even if I had tried to stop him, he could hurt me. And he would! I didn’t want to hurt anymore. Couldn’t I have one good feeling in my life? I didn’t know what to do, and there was nobody to help me figure it out. They would all know I was bad because I didn’t stop him.*

Jason knows now, and he doesn’t think you’re bad.He said you were innocent and defenseless. He said Gary was responsible for taking advantage of you and hurting you. And I think he’s right.

Nobody ever supported you to say no. Mom never let you disagree with anything she said. We were never allowed to express an opinion. Richard exploded into a rage if anybody talked back to him. The word NO didn’t mean anything in our house, except to get you into trouble.

Jason is going to help us figure it out. He said God wants to heal it, not punish us. I’m not sure about that, but I trust Jason. He says it’s not going to feel so awful forever.

And I believe in you. I’m going to find a way to stop your hurting and learn how to take care of you. So maybe you can sleep now. Both of us can rest.

Saturday, July 29th, 12:45 A.M.

Sleep eludes me again. I have been staring at this blank sheet of paper for the past hour. Stalling.

Is it the coward’s way out to write what I’m afraid to say, and give it to Jason to read? I’m afraid to say it to his face. He tells me it’s okay to feel my feelings now, and what I feel is *fear*. Cowardice or not, I will force my hand to write.

Okay. Deep breath. I’ve decided it doesn’t make any sense to go to the enormous effort this process has taken without clearing up every possibility of a hangup. And since I seem to have been stalling even on paper, maybe this *is* a hangup.

*Of COURSE it’s a hangup!* The topic is *sex*!

But if I make sexuality an off-limits subject for discussion in therapy, that leaves me open for a big blind spot where I have the most concern for being healthy. Because the central hurt in my childhood has been sexual, there probably *is* some scarring there.

Is it okay to talk about sex with a therapist? I don’t know what the rules are! But didn’t my *counselor* raise the issue in the first place? I think he’s giving me permission to say whatever is bothering me. Now if my brain will just give my hand permission to put it down on paper. *Write*!

Jason said the most common response to childhood sexual abuse is adult sexual dysfunction. To which I replied, “But I don’t consider myself sexually dysfunctional!”

“I’m glad for you,” he said.

*Ick*. Hearing that felt strange. I know in theory women are *supposed* to have sexual pleasure, just like men. But to have a counselor who is a Christian, as an authority figure, give me his stamp of approval for me to enjoy sex is something else again. Sex is still *bad* to ***judy***. Pleasure is *bad*.

Who am I kidding? Get real. Yes, I am… orgasmic. *Aaack!* (Forming those letters on paper is like hearing fingernails on a chalkboard… I *hate* the words! I *hate* the idea of sharing those words, admitting what they mean. But I can’t go the rest of my life with these questions thumping around in my head. I need to be able to sleep sometime.) I *do* reach orgasm. *But*….

I have read enough books to know that my own experience of getting to orgasm isn’t as simple as what the books set forth as “normal” (if there is such a thing as normal). Is there a reason I have such a hard time concentrating on what’s going on in bed with my husband? Why do I suddenly think of what to make for dinner the next day, or the phone call I forgot to make, or *anything* else except *sex*?

So, the whole process of sex is frustrating. It takes forever, and much of the time doesn’t seem worth it. Is this how sex was designed to be? I think not.

And some of my wires are disconnected. You mean it’s supposed to feel good when my husband… well, I don’t feel much of anything. Speaking of wires, Jason said that when a child is sexualized before she is emotionally and physically mature enough to handle those feelings, and what they mean, that it’s like overloading a circuit. Some fuses will blow, and damage will be done. Great. I guess I have some blown fuses. *But it’s not my fault*!

Reality check with my inner child. ***judy***? You have a hard time with the topic of sex, don’t you?

*Don’t make me talk about that! Why does it have to be sex? Sex is bad, and talking about sex is even worse!*

Jason says sex is intended to be good. God made it that way. That there’s supposed to be pleasure. It’s natural.

*But I never wanted it to feel good. I tried not to.*

You were a pretty tough little kid after all, you know? I think I admire you. At least you never had an orgasm with Gary. As self-centered as he was, you can be sure of *that*, anyway.

After processing this on paper, I feel pretty confident that even though healing it will take time, I don’t have any more hangups lurking in the shadows. But then I’ve denied things before, haven’t I?

Thursday, August 3rd

My inner child said Gary was bad and he made her bad. I guess that translates into my low self-esteem, typical of incest victims. But I never thought I had low self-esteem. I think I come across as conceited. To get acknowledgement, I always called attention to my abilities, but I never felt worthy of *having* abilities! I didn’t believe in them. They didn’t fit me—like a little girl tromping around in her mother’s high-heel shoes, trying not to trip, and pretending she knows what she’s doing.

The most reinforcement and support I ever got was from my teachers at school, for my *performance*. So, is it any surprise that I have focused on performance all my life? I’ve been tap-dancing faster and faster (metaphorically only!) to prove I’m worthy of being accepted and loved. *Just let me show you how smart I am, how strong I am, and then maybe you’ll love me*. But it’s never enough. Because my inner child’s—***judy’s***—wounds never got healed. She still believed she was *bad*. Her old neglect and abandonment were always superimposed on every event in the present. The old pain crowded out any feelings of accomplishment.

It was ***judy*** who sabotaged my successes to prove she really was bad. That’s why I never finished college. As much as I denied it, under the surface I didn’t feel good enough to be educated or have a career. Even without a college degree, I’ve so often set myself up to be visible, and in charge of things—and thus vulnerable to criticism and judgment. And then I made a stupid mistake that sabotaged the accomplishment. I shamed myself mercilessly afterward, every time. And repeat.

Oh, I see! Making myself fail was just like being back home. But my original family wasn’t there to tell me how bad I was. So, I took on the job of shaming myself the way I’d been trained. The self-fulfilling prophecy of failure has a lot of power. I never could get out of the loop. Till now. I see an exit up ahead. There *is* a way out, and I’m headed in that direction. Maybe I won’t hurt forever.

Tuesday, August 8th, 11:45 P.M.

There’s more to my shame about sex than merely being a victim of incest. I’m a victim of society’s messages that give women a burden we should not carry. It isn’t ours.

We grew up absorbing the unwritten “double standard” that said boys will be boys, but girls must be good. The church I grew up in promised hell if we fornicated, but girls were the ones that had to throw the brakes on. The lectures in P.E. class, the movies in theaters, and the articles in *Seventeen Magazine,* all told us that sex was something to be prevented by girls.

We learned that boys are at the mercy of their raging hormones and can’t be held accountable for being that way. Girls had to be constantly on guard to protect themselves because boys were only out to get one thing—sex. It was up to the girl to defend her own virtue because boys only wanted to dismantle it.

Girls were the ones with the power to arouse boys, to tease them, and to say yes or no to them. Girls had the rational control in a clinch. If a girl didn’t have control, she would get a *reputation* for going too far, and after that, any boy she went out with would have an assumed right to go to the limits she had established. Then he’d push to extend those boundaries to “go all the way.” It was expected!

Her reputation was her fault because she hadn’t been strong enough to stop a steamroller. She knew he was a steamroller when she went out with him, didn’t she? Boys never got a reputation. They were only fulfilling the culturally indulged expectation to sow their wild oats.

What I never heard addressed was that a girl had a sexual drive too. If she refused to engage in petting in the first place, she was labeled a prude, or frigid, or just weird, but *something* was wrong with her. But if she “allowed” it to start, very probably she would not feel rational about being in control of heavy petting. Failing to hit the brakes on a date made her bad—morally tainted, or sinful. And for that, she would be punished—by the reputation, and by the fear of, or even the reality of pregnancy.

Because the consequences of pregnancy affected her so much more than him, the responsibility for birth control still rested on her. Meanwhile, the boy (wham-bam-not-even-a-thank-you-ma’am) had faded into the sunset, while she was left frustrated, alone, and ashamed. Because she was bad.

She wasn’t expected to be orgasmic. He was too wrapped up in his own drive toward ejaculation to consider her pleasure, even if he imagined she needed or deserved any. Her goal was to be loved. Fat chance of that!

It’s no wonder a girl from a dysfunctional, shaming, addictive family is so likely to end up as an unwed mother. Statistics bear that out. She’s trying desperately to find somebody who will love her the way she has never felt loved, in the only way she has ever seen affection expressed. She was set up to be in that bind.

I’m talking about myself, even without the unwed mother thing. But I’m on a roll.

When you put together all these cultural puzzle pieces, they form an oppressive picture: God is a *male* who designed sex for the propagation of the race (making babies for which women are responsible) and as a setup for women—to benefit men. “Wives, submit to your husbands!” They pounded that one very hard in my church.

Men are practically guaranteed sexual release. Okay, Jason would remind me of the men who suffer from impotence. Spare me! I don’t want to hear about it.

Women deny men their “rights” to sex, so they are labeled a whole long list of bad names. Or, women allow sex in the futile hope of achieving intimacy, love, and financial support. Which makes women pretty stupid, huh?

If a woman *does* enjoy sex, she pays the price of guilt—for not exercising control, for being bad, and for getting something she doesn’t deserve. The system isn’t designed for her pleasure. It’s a pretty nasty trick for God to play on women. Women have all the guilt, all the responsibility, and all of the work in cleaning up the mess sex makes in people’s lives. Sex is a cruel joke on women, intended to make them more powerless than ever!

If I had been God, I would have designed the same scenario, except with the roles reversed. Now *there* would be the way to get even with men for being all the evil things I perceived them to be.

Let *men* go through the mess and pain of periods every month, become the subject of snickering and humiliating jokes for something they never asked for and can’t prevent. Let *men* carry a growing baby inside their bodies for all those months… a total takeover of their whole being! And then let *men* deliver that child in the midst of pain, only to rise from the delivery table to subordinate their needs to the demands of a screaming infant.

Let *men* change the dirty diapers, wipe the snotty noses, clean up the vomit when it’s sick, comfort it when it’s hurt, and then carry all the guilt when that child turns out wrong. That’s the lot of women. Enslavement to the responsibilities men deny.

Men are holding all the cards, and we are at their mercy. When did I ever see a man who wouldn’t have taken advantage of me? I learned those lessons well when I was a child.

Add to this the list of codependent rules in my family. My opinions weren’t valid, and I had no permission to express them. That pretty effectively took away my ability to say no to sex: I was damned if I did and damned if I didn’t. There was no way to protect my damaged virtue.

I was brainwashed to be in subjugation to men. And if I were to be no more than a possession to a man, when I knew men to be so evil, then my own value plummeted. Self-esteem? What’s that? Why would I have any hope but resignation to the master plan? Submit to *male* God and submit to my husband.

My “submission” to my husband, therefore, always had a germ of anarchy inside it. There was always a dagger up my sleeve. He *seemed* so different from other men I had known, but when I looked hard enough, I could see the telltale signs that fulfilled my expectations of him. Sometimes it took a little sabotage to bring out those characteristics, but then I expected them to be there all along, didn’t I?

As I write this, I suddenly see how orgasm equals a total giving over of control of my body to a man… who already has almost total control over my life. That’s how it feels, anyway. Can’t I withhold at least that?

I don’t think I ever experienced orgasm with Gary, but what an awful thing it must have been if I had! What a nasty smirk he must have had on his face in the midst of it, and what shame I had to have felt for losing control like that. How I hated him for putting me in such a bind that I had to hate myself—for wanting that feeling in the first place, and for letting it happen. I was responsible because men are not responsible.

(I scribbled the above so furiously and fast that my hand is hurting. Intermission while my blood pressure returns to normal.)

I am stunned. It’s clear that I have a deep distrust, even hatred, for men. What rage spilled out onto the page here! What’s so amazing is that I’ve always considered myself very comfortable with men. I have men friends. I trust my husband. Where was all this sewage lurking? The child I was then was compelled to submerge it totally just to survive an evil male-directed world, created by a sadistic male God. I cry for her despair.

Saturday, August 12th, 2:00 A.M.

Another memory has taken me by surprise. I woke up just now with an old picture in my head, that drives home the point about the low self-esteem we victims have.

Growing up in the Southwest, I had classmates who spoke Spanish with one another around me much of the time. So, I picked up bits and pieces of the language, usually the slang words and curse words first. Even though I never said them out loud. I never spoke Spanish but had some limited understanding.

I remembered a conversation with a guy I considered a friend in high school. We were talking during the lunch break, when he teasingly called me by some word in Spanish. He was flirting. I have no idea what word he used at the time, but I remember feeling instantly defensive. I asked him, “*Does that mean anything like the word* ***puta***?” (Nine-year-old ***judy*** was talking!)

The shock that registered on his face was sudden and complete. He backpedaled so fast to deny anything of the kind, that he stuttered. He reassured me that whatever word he had used was innocent and complimentary.

The word *puta* is Spanish for “whore.” Because she couldn’t say no, because she had sexual feelings, because she was so ashamed, ***judy*** thought of herself as a whore. No matter that my peers at school thought of me as strangely pure.

I weep for her lost sense of herself. She never knew she had any real value in the world. If only someone could have loved her enough to show her who she really was.

Wednesday, August 16th

My therapist, thank God, has been so careful of boundaries when we’ve talked about sex. He knows the topic strikes fear into my heart, yet I will never be able to unravel this confusion until I learn to talk about it. It *is* okay to discuss sex with a counselor. Hard as it has been, it has helped me start to understand myself.

Yesterday, Jason asked me if I had ever felt depressed after orgasm. I answered, “no,” automatically. But inwardly I cringed, wondering how he could know to even ask that question. But the true answer is yes. It feels like enjoying sex makes me bad because I fail to be in control. I punish myself with depression.

I’ve always felt so alone. Surely nobody else has ever been as confused as I have been. Nobody else has the sexual gaps I have. But my therapist knows how I feel because he’s heard the same story so frequently. Therapists must hear it all the time.

Victims of sexual abuse must all feel as if they’re the only ones. But we have so much in common. If only we could all find each other and know it’s safe to talk about the pain, the confusion, the loneliness. If only we could all know that it’s not our fault. We aren’t bad, after all.

Jason has used the word *confused* many times. Out of curiosity, I looked it up in the dictionary to see if there was something about that word I was missing. What struck me was that *confused* is a past perfect *passive* verb. It’s a state of being that is *received*—it takes an outside force acting on me to make me a confused person! Being confused is not being stupid or bad. Being confused is having had my thought processes scrambled, having some startling event disrupt my reasoning so that ordinary clarity is obscured. My natural innocent state of reasoning as a child was clarity of thought. I was smart enough to understand cause and effect. Someone else confused the way I viewed the world and relationships and sexuality, even my own value as a human being. I’m still confused because I could never see the lens I was looking through. My low self-esteem is a direct result of somebody mucking around in my brain.

And my greatest confusion has been on the topic of sex. Our sexual selves are the most private core of our being—and that’s why monogamy is the best way for an individual to safely develop over time. When there is damage done to our sexual self-concept, there is an intense harm in the deepest part of who we are.

No matter how we try to shrug off what happened and repress the memories so we can survive the days and years that follow, the damage to this most personal area of our individuality cannot be denied. Sexual abuse creates a festering wound that cannot heal in the atmosphere of shame and family secrecy that controls incest victims. Speaking the secret and opening that painful wound is the only way to release its poison.

Nobody likes to face surgery. But we’ve learned to trust doctors who tell us an operation is necessary for healing an advanced infection. I’m so glad I found a way to trust a therapist enough to finally open that ugly, gangrenous wound—to lance it. I still hurt. But in the midst of the pain, I know that this is the path to peace.

# Chapter 4

**Who IS God, anyway?**

**Shifting my focus to figuring out the confusion I had about God was a relief from agonizing over abuse. I wondered if I was using this new topic as a tangent to avoid what I was *supposed* to be working on.**

**But I had such a skewed understanding—it was only through seeking a clearer understanding of God that I could come to trust a source of comfort and healing. There is no *right* way to do therapy. Some survivors don’t want to have anything to do with God, and they have their reasons. They might come to different conclusions. The questions I examined arose spontaneously in my head because, in my childhood experience, God had been so definitively defined by dysfunctional authority figures. I didn’t know which were human lies, and which were larger truths.**

**In my journals I instinctively capitalized the pronouns for God, not just to follow custom or the requirement by the church to show “proper” reverence, but because that capital H in He was important. That capital letter told my brain, and *judy*, that I wasn’t just referring to any old human male—who, for *judy,* represented a threat, a perpetrator, someone to be escaped—but never trusted. Even in that ultra-conservative church I knew, I had been told that I—a *female*—was made in God’s image too—according to the very book that Bible-thumpers thump—so God *had* to be *bigger* than “*just*” any old human male. God incorporated the male and the female attributes, plus *so much more*. The capital letter marked Him as a not-mortal source of protection, a giver of help. My trust in God was still very wobbly. But changing.**

Friday, August 18th, 11:30 P.M.

A few weeks back Jason raised the issue of what he called “Healing of Memories”, which has shown up in a couple of the books I’ve read. He brought it up again yesterday, asking how I felt about the possibility of guided prayer.

The idea is strange to me. Psychologists call it “regression”, or “guided imagery.” This is not the sort of interaction you might have with a friend over coffee. It’s unfamiliar. It scares me a little.

Memory healing, as I understand it, is a time when the counselor and the client talk specifically about a painful memory. I suppose it would be Jason talking with that child self—a little like I have talked with my inner child. Except that we would “go back” to the scene—in imagery—almost as if it were happening again. And God would be invited, too.

I want more than anything to be set free of this phantom pain that’s been haunting me. I guess my difficulty in accepting memory healing is that I never saw God actively engage in anybody’s life. Not mine, anyway.

It sounds like asking for a miracle, and I don’t think I believe in miracles.

When I said that to Jason, he said, “Maybe it’s not a miracle we’re asking for. Can’t we ask God to be alive, to be involved in our lives?”

“In theory, I guess I agree with that,” I answered. “But in practice—I’m afraid of it. Because, if I’m willing to ask God for that kind of active participation, I have to let God be in charge. I have to submit. And submission to God feels like submission to rape.”

I continue to be surprised by words that pop out of my mouth, unbidden. I guess that means I’m not ready. I’m still afraid of God, and I’m afraid to go *back there* again and face the memories.

Thursday, August 24th

I retained some interesting facts from a child development class I took. One of them applies to the topic of spiritual abuse, which has shown up in some books I’ve read lately.

Children learn from the concrete to the abstract. My daughters learned to count apples with Cookie Monster before they could manipulate abstract number concepts in their heads. Algebra doesn’t come till high school. Makes sense. A newborn infant learns first that Mommy feeds her and changes her and keeps her warm before she can understand that Mommy loves her. Concrete to abstract. But what if those basic needs aren’t met consistently throughout early childhood? For whatever reason, even if the adult can’t help it. Parents are like God to a little kid. They’re concrete, palpable forms of a higher power, the only higher power she’s ever known.

If that child learns that her physical and emotional needs are met only sporadically, then however much she may deny it on the surface, she knows in her guts that nobody cares about her. And she will translate that concrete knowledge into a belief about a higher abstract—that the universe is not a safe, loving place. When she knows the world to be cold and hard and shaming, how can she see the author of the whole system as anything but judgmental and abusive?

Maybe she’ll try to follow the rules about God that’s she’s heard when they took her to church. Maybe she’ll try to please God, just as she tries so hard to please her parents. She might become a Christian and work, work, work to prove herself acceptable. But she won’t ever feel good enough. And she won’t understand Grace.

 Like me. I see now how my inner child’s real expectations of God don’t match the theology they shoveled out in Sunday School. I would never have admitted to not trusting God. I’ve always seen myself as an honest person, but I am amazed at the real content just beneath the surface. It looks like I learned to lie to myself to feel safer.

Tuesday, August 29th, 2:30 A.M.

Awake again. I sure don’t get as much sleep as I used to. How am I going to manage my college classes if I don’t get more sleep? But here I am, and I can’t go back to sleep, so I may as well write.

I was remembering a class discussion in my high school Bible study at church. I was always first with my hand up to answer a question. Just like in school, my “performance” was my play for attention and acceptance. But it also set me up to be vulnerable.

In this instance the topic was “Why We Believe Dancing Is Wrong,” (in the super-conservative church my mother took us to). That idea never made sense to me. The argument was based on the contention that the movements in social dancing would tempt us to lustful thoughts. I could argue eloquently against such a position, but when it came down to obeying the edict against dancing, I submitted without a peep. When there was dancing in junior high P.E. class I went to the library and wrote a paper about the history of square dancing. Which was just one more way I was different from everybody else.

I raised my hand and entered the discussion, saying “The fact that guys are going to have lustful thoughts watching girls dance isn’t necessarily the fault of the dancing! Some guys are going to have lustful thoughts no matter what’s going on. They’ll be lusting looking at a girl who’s just… just… sitting in a tree!”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, alarms started going off in my head. I was instantly embarrassed and ashamed. What kind of stupid example was that—sitting in a tree! Everyone else must have been thinking how stupid I was, too. But I never connected why I “accidentally” chose those words.

Until now. I was the girl who so often climbed a tree in my front yard. I was the girl sitting in the tree, reading a book, in full view of the neighborhood, because there wasn’t any place else that felt safe. But somehow, I must have done *something* to provoke lustful thoughts, because Gary still lusted after me. *It must be my fault because boys can’t help lusting.*

What a heavy burden ***judy*** has carried all these years—believing herself responsible and guilty for any evil thought anyone else had about her. If she *had* danced, she would have felt responsible for other people’s lust even more, because she *herself* was bait dangled deliberately, and she could have avoided it. Because boys couldn’t help it.

*LIES!*

Wednesday, August 30th, 11:45 P.M.

In my therapy session today, I told Jason about that Sunday School class discussion. He pointed out an angle on that situation that hadn’t occurred to me.

“Isn’t it interesting,” he said, “that your family chose a church with such a strict, conservative stance on dancing, while at the same time, they were, in effect, condoning Gary’s molesting you—by being in denial about the kind of person he was? After they knew at least one other girl in your neighborhood had accused him of molesting them? It was kind of like, ‘It’s okay that guys mess with little girls when nobody’s looking—and we *sure* aren’t going to *look*—but you’d better not move your body to music, because that’s *really bad!*’ …What message were they giving you about God’s nature, while they were living out of two such conflicting attitudes?”

I didn’t have an immediate answer. But his question did set the wheels in motion. That’s the kind of assignment he usually gives me to work on after I leave his office. Just a simple, open-ended question that starts me off down a new corridor in my mind.

The rigid attitude about the *badness* of dancing (and smoking, drinking, and illicit sex, among other things) told me that God runs a very tight ship. God doesn’t tolerate any of this self-indulgent frivolity expressing human enjoyment (because human enjoyment is *bad*!) God’s got his eye on us, like Santa Claus: “He’s makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice. Gonna find out who’s naughty and nice…”

Combined with the fact that they ignored what Gary was doing, it told me that God is especially watching out to make sure *girls* aren’t being bad. Gary (and my stepfather Richard, too) was excused from having a raging temper. Gary (and all males) couldn’t help their sexual impulses, so girls had to be in control. And if girls danced, they were deliberately waving temptation under the noses of boys. So, if they got raped it was their own fault.

Of course, none of this was ever spoken out loud. They’d all have denied it if I’d ever been able to put words around these shadowy perspectives that hung in the air. But they were lies nonetheless even without the words.

There’s a quote by Robert Louis Stevenson: “The cruelest lies are often told in silence.” (I wonder what *his* family was like. Anything like mine?)

This is spiritual abuse. My image of God couldn’t be any more twisted. But I don’t want to live by what *they* taught me about God. As long as I continue to relate to God (or refuse to relate to God) as the punishing being they taught me He was, then I am still at the mercy of *their* definitions.

So many of us raised in dysfunctional families have separated from our parents, grieved our losses, and worked for years to be healthier, yet call ourselves atheists because we won’t submit to that concept of God we experienced back home. Holding God at a distance, aren’t we still submitting to the lies our parents told us about God? Are we still living out of fear of that angry, abusive “Being” who might rain abuse down on us? And that abusive higher power turns out to be our parents and their memorized religious teaching, after all. Not God.

Someone else once said, “Even liars sometimes tell the truth.” I’ve been reacting to my family’s acknowledgment that God exists, whatever God’s nature. I think they were actually telling the truth when they said, “God *is*”, but I don’t think they had a clue to what God was really like.

Opening myself (uh, oh,) to the possibility of a loving “Heavenly Father” (uh, oh, “Father” is *male*!) makes me feel vulnerable, so I hang on to the illusion of control in rejecting God. If I reject God first, He won’t have the chance to rape me, and reject me. Ugly picture.

So, who is God, *really*?

Saturday, September 2nd

I’ve begun my search for the *real* God in the Psalms, the book in the Bible that feels safest. Reading it, I’m struck by the fact that I’ve always seen the Bible as dead words on a page. It’s starting to feel different than that.

If the Bible really is “inspired”, its message was not *just* aimed at the humans who wrote down those words on animal skins way back then. Whoever else may benefit from them, suddenly it feels like the verses on these pages are God’s voice whispered in *my* ear to demonstrate God’s purpose and compassion for *me*, a single, insignificant individual living *now*.

David the shepherd wrote most of the Psalms. They were the songs of his soul, in pain and in joy. He was a terrible sinner, though. At the same time, a “man after God’s own heart”. Does this mean God really loves sinners?

If God used a human being as contemptible as the Bible’s David—an adulterer, a murderer, a liar—to hold him up as an example to a whole culture—that would be pretty astounding. Wouldn’t that mean there’s hope that God could love *me* too, however *bad* my inner child thinks she is?

Come to think of it, the stories of nearly every person portrayed in the Bible show us some whoppers of mistakes in their lives. If Bible stories come from God, what’s remarkable is that God didn’t try to cover over those characters’ flaws and sell us an “edited” version of their “good” lives. Why? Maybe we’re supposed to see those characters as imperfect humans.

Abraham and Solomon, Jonah, the apostle Paul, and Peter who denied Jesus three times but was still supposed to be the “founder” of the church—these fallible people are illustrations in the story of God’s interactions with humans. God knew their strengths, and all their great weaknesses. God created each of them, knew their development in the womb, made a plan for each of them, all the while knowing ahead of time the traps they would fall into, the terrible mistakes they’d make. The sin they’d commit. Despite all their flaws, God loved them.

I kept searching in the Psalms: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love…. For He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust.” (Psalm 103 8-14, NIV.)

God remembers that I am dust! He knows how flawed and fallible I am, and I am loved and forgiven, because that is God’s nature. Even though I’ll never become perfect.

God knows all of it, from the beginning of my life, through every moment to the end of my life. And God loves me through all the dark places, and the moments of goodness. Every bit as much as He loved David the shepherd who became David the king.

This is such a different view of God. Maybe I can trust *this* God, and believe He *is* willing to be active in healing me after all. Because He’s cared all along.

Yet, as comforting as this idea is to me, I’m still living night and day with such heaviness in my spirit. This burden of incest is the first thing I think of in the morning and the last at night. I’m starting to see God differently, but I am still awash in constant grief.

Sunday, September 3rd, 1:30 A.M.

I just recognized the missing piece in the last journal entry I made: *WOMEN*. My old idea of God includes there being a different set of rules for men and women. So, exploring the profiles of David and Peter is helpful in some ways, but doesn’t address that gap.

What does God think about women? Does God accept them the same way, even though men are more visible in the Bible?

I once heard a sermon on the genealogy of Jesus, which was written in the book of Matthew. I remember that sermon vividly because it pointed to the women in Jesus’ lineage which made a big impression on me at the time. The Jews were big on genealogy. Traditionally they traced their lineage through the males in the line, and documented the “purity” of their chromosomes by counting generations all the way back to Abraham.

But Jesus’ genealogy doesn’t look so pure. Every single person mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy was a sinner, whether we know their stories or not. Some of the stories we *do* know are pretty shameful. Also, *five women* were included on the list, and women, in that day, were never included!

Tamar, on the list, seduced her father-in-law. Perez was one of the twins born to Tamar as a result of that “sinful” union between Tamar and her husband’s father! And Perez (a bastard) is directly in the genetic line as ancestor of the Messiah.

Rahab, the prostitute who hid the spies Joshua sent to scope out Jericho, was the mother of Boaz. An actual known prostitute—in the genealogy!

Current statistics (from the books I’ve been reading!) claim that between sixty and ninety percent of prostitutes have been sexually abused, (not including the ones who won’t admit it or don’t remember it). Was Rahab’s self-concept confused by sexual abuse? But she’s part of Jesus’ family?

Then there’s Ruth, who was a Gentile, which made her suspect in the first place. And Ruth was held up as an example of faithfulness. The story told in the book of Ruth, named after her, says she offered herself to Boaz (Rahab the prostitute’s son! But Ruth was doing the seducing!), and her mother-in-law (from her first marriage), Naomi, encouraged her: “He will tell you what to do.” Yeah, Ruth started it, Naomi affirmed it, but then she’s supposed to do what Boaz said to do. Submit.

Bathsheba—the most famous adulteress in the Old Testament! —was the mother of Solomon, David’s son, conceived in adultery with King David, who then had her first husband murdered.

There is transgression of sexual norms for all these women in Jesus’ lineage.

Then there’s Mary, the mother of Jesus. For all the ways we focus on the miracle of the virgin birth, Mary’s friends and family must have gossiped about her. Did she have a *reputation*, being pregnant before Joseph married her? How many neighbors thought Mary’s story about an angel was “hogwash?” God didn’t seem to mind those conclusions.

These women’s roles were highlighted in Christ’s lineage, when their names might have been left out entirely. Which looks like an attitude of acceptance, understanding, and forgiveness.

New Testament encounters Jesus had with women showed only compassion and healing. The woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned to death, but Jesus said, “let him who’s without sin cast the first stone.” The woman at the well had five husbands, and Jesus knew it, but He offered her living water. He seemed to hang out with a lot of people with bad reputations, including women.

How can I see all these examples of God’s acceptance of women, and not believe there is compassion for me? Wouldn’t God want me to forgive that child inside me who believes she’s *bad*, to love her, instead?

Tuesday, September 5th, 10:30 P.M.

I hardly slept at all the last two nights, yet nothing came to mind to work on, and I resisted writing. I didn’t understand it, and I’ve been worn out and cranky.

Today, in a mental fog of exhaustion, I went to my first day of college classes for the fall semester. I had registered for ten hours, making sure my classes were easier than last spring, when my life was falling apart, just before I started counseling. But sitting through the first classes, as tired as I was, I felt so overwhelmed I was suffocating. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough. Even the ceramics class seemed like an impossible task. What made me think I could do this?

After thinking about it all day, I still didn’t get the message until I sat down with my husband after dinner and heard myself say, “I don’t think God means for me to be in school this semester.”

David said, “That’s a good thought.”

However stubborn I’ve been about pushing through everything all at once, right now, therapy is truly my priority. I thought I could breeze back into school and slow the pace of therapy—back to once a week—and fit it all in with my part-time job, my roles as wife and mother, and my still-compulsive reading.

But therapy feels primary, and if it takes keeping me awake a few nights to remind me it’s not as simple as it used to be, then God can make that happen—till it gets my attention—and I catch on to what it means. It feels like God is actually paying attention to the details of my life.

This feels like a lesson in submission—no, not to rape. I’m submitting to a larger, wiser truth about what is good for me, that I’m just noticing is already happening. So much different! Like I don’t need to fight the lifeguard who’s pushing me up to get my head above the waterline. Oh! Okay then.

It looks as if God is taking action in my life, in a way that feels like gentle guidance. I’m more comfortable with accepting it. And talking to God is just a conversation, often on the page of my journal. God is patient, not forcing me. I’m starting to trust.

Sunday, September 17th, 7:00 P.M.

I’ve been trying to reconsider God’s nature. The confusing church my confusing family attended taught (besides condemning social dancing), that women are not to preach or lead prayer in mixed company. Women are not to teach a Sunday school class that includes males over “the age of accountability”. Women don’t serve as deacons or elders. They are to keep silent in church, and to submit to their husbands. All of which condones and enables abuse in families. In that system, the only “scriptural” reason for divorce is adultery. Otherwise, divorced people can expect to go to hell when they die. That church structure and system mirrored the crazymaking dysfunction of my family, covering secret wrongs while arbitrary rules maintained rigid controls. Men dominated, and women were told to shut up and do as they were told. What a perfect setup to enable abuse. I can’t make sense of any of that.

But what about Bible passages that say God is Love? What about the examples of Jesus, saying “the greatest of these is Love?” Some of Jesus’ closest associates and members of his inner circle were women. And for all the harshness of some of the Old Testament rules, didn’t Jesus come to fulfill the Law? Jesus completed the old covenant, and ushered in a new covenant based on Grace. He focused on helping, on healing, on loving. Not raging, judging, or punishing.

I can’t trust a God who threatens death and destruction, calling it love while commanding me to love Him—an abuser. That’s as confusing as my family, which asks me to switch off my intellect, common sense, and intuition. But I can follow Christ’s lead. I can trust the nature of Jesus, and expect He’d be willing to help.

I prayed for help when I was little. But the abuse didn’t stop, so I thought God wasn’t listening. I thought maybe it was because I was a girl, and God let males do what they wanted.

But they confused my understanding of the true nature of God, so maybe I missed seeing real help that was given. No, God didn’t strike Gary down in the midst of his misuse of power over me. Gary had free will, like all of us do. Were there other ways God helped?

Did God give me strength to get through those times? Was my love for reading a gift to help me survive? It kept me sane by offering escape from the shame as I pretended to be the character in the book. Did God give me the capacity for codependency? Pretty raggedy coping skills for an adult, but for that time in life when I was otherwise powerless, my hypervigilant focus on pleasing others was a means of avoiding greater pain as a child, and distracted me from my own fears. Was it a gift that I was able to dissociate or repress those awful memories? Living with the constant conscious awareness of what happened might have driven me to a desperation beyond my coping. But now comes a season to heal the larger damaging effects of those temporarily beneficial strategies. My memories emerged in mid-life when I had far more resources to weather the feelings, and gain support.

I’m beginning to see that my life could have been worse. I had blessings I never recognized. There have been people along the way who gave me little bits of themselves and comforted me to the degree I could receive it—teachers, and neighbors and mentors who modeled grace. There are problems in my marriage, but I could have done so much worse. And I’ve been led to my therapist so I can heal. I guess I’ve had to hit bottom to be able to look up. Yes, God is good.

Tuesday, September 19th, 2:30 A.M.

My waking in the middle of the night still isn’t a welcome ritual, but it’s certainly a familiar one. I used to be irritated that I wasn’t getting my quota of sleep. I still wish for more sleep. But lately I see my insomnia as quiet time with God, who shows up in surprising insights unexpectedly emerging on the pages of this journal. Maybe 2:00 A.M. is the only time I’m still enough God can get my attention.

Psalm 23 has been running through my mind lately, but lying in bed when I woke up just now, I suddenly saw an obvious contrast that had previously escaped me.

The Lord is my Shepherd. The author and creator of the universe—is Judy’s (and ***judy’s***) shepherd. Just the way He was for David and Moses and the apostles and every other created soul… even victims of incest.

A shepherd doesn’t sit on a golden throne and direct regal proceedings with an airy wave of his jewel-laden hand. A shepherd sleeps in the field with a rock for a pillow.

The shepherd knows He can’t drive sheep the way cattle can be driven. Sheep can’t be pushed. The shepherd must gain the trust of the members of the flock, and then show them the way, looking out for the ones who aren’t following.

The shepherd doesn’t curse the sheep who gets lost. He values all of the sheep but pays most attention to the ones who are in trouble. He leaves the ninety-nine and chases after the lost one, before that solitary lamb may even be aware of its predicament. The shepherd always keeps a head count and knows when they’re in danger, even before they call for help.

God has arranged to be constantly soiling His hands by reaching out to us poor sheep who don’t even know enough to be grateful. Sheep think they’re in control of their own destinies. So do we.

***judy*** needs a picture like that. A child needs to know that, no matter what awful things she’s done or someone else has done to her, she is still Jesus’ little lamb, cradled in safe arms.

I think I’m being given a second wind. I think God will give me strength to take my eyes off the pain and to focus instead on hope of a very different path opening for me. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to move forward through the fear and not let it stop you. I guess I’m finally at a place that I can trust God to fulfill His promise to me—that He will give me strength and courage to bear whatever comes.

Armed with that thought, I can acknowledge the fear and trembling, yet still face the memories that have to be faced. Is this a turning point?

# Chapter 5

**Going Back**

***Why does it have to be sex? judy* kept wanting to know. To talk about those shameful things went against every instinct for self-preservation. But *not* talking about it hadn’t healed the pain. I couldn’t see any hope but to trust Jason.**

**Eventually I came to recognize that, when there was strong resistance to verbalizing an issue, it probably meant a special need to get beyond the resistance and talk through it. That defense was to protect a deep wound needing the healing that only confession could bring.**

Friday, September 22nd, 2:30 A.M.

After staring at this page for a very long time, I force myself to begin at last, to quiet the churning in my guts. A therapist really knows how to open a can of worms!

“We may need to find one or two more memories with Gary,” Jason said at the end of my session yesterday.

I had cautiously acknowledged the need to talk specifically about what happened. And he had responded, “I don’t know any other way for it to be healed.” As much as I hate the idea of going *back there*, I know he’s right. I have to face it to get past it. But willingly seeking more memories?

“You don’t have to dredge up every buried instance, but enough to access the feelings associated with the abuse. Just remember,” he emphasized, “you have already survived it. And you aren’t alone this time.”

Well, suddenly there is another memory—one that gags me to think about. But stuffing it back inside will not further the healing process. So here goes.

Bringing up this incident makes my whole body stiffen and draw back reflexively, which I’m sure matches the original response. I’m feeling *fear*. Putting the words on paper is as difficult as telling Jason in a session. But I trust my counselor, or I never would have come to this point. Deep breath.

In the third grade when I would have been nine, I guess), some kid in my neighborhood asked me if I knew where babies came from. *No! Tell me!* My curiosity turned to revulsion at the explanation at home, I asked for confirmation of the story from Gary and Carla. And Gary took my innocent question as the occasion to offer more information. This must have been the first time it went beyond touching.

I am nauseous.

I got up and made myself a cup of tea. Restarting now.

Gary took me aside and told me to come to his room after lights out.

Going to his room opens the topic of my responsibility again, because his room is where it happened. And I went there. I have this enormous dread just writing down those words, but it will feel worse if I don’t. So, I force my hand to write.

Gary assumed the role of “sex instructor.” He took off my nightgown and panties, and, touching me, told me the words for parts of my anatomy. Nasty words, for dirty parts of me. I’m sure I didn’t speak at all; I was having a hard enough time breathing! I’m having a hard time breathing *now*.

He stroked my flat chest, telling me how my—oh, *the word he used*! I can’t write it. I want to bolt, but there’s nowhere to go. That word, such a flagrantly derogatory, mocking term for a part of me—a humiliation word—a favorite word of pimply-faced boys leering at girls who can’t walk past them fast enough. I shudder. That word has always made me irrationally furious. How dare he make fun of my body? I couldn’t help how I was made!

Then he had his clothes off, too, and told me to touch his—ugh! I did, in horrified fascination. I am screaming on the inside just writing this, and I can’t finish….

All that is holding me together is the promise that we will move through this, move past it, and be done with it. Soon! I won’t be stuck, hanging off this cliff, forever. God, help me.

September 24th, 3:00 A.M.

***judy*** is so afraid. I try to be quiet when I’m up during the night, so I won’t wake David or my daughters. But I can hear *her* screaming silently, deep inside me. Somehow those screams have to be released, or both of us will go crazy. Writing them, in a way, is giving voice to her screams.

*Do you think I’m BAD?*

No, child. No. Remember? Jason has said over and over that it is *never* the responsibility of the child when there is sexual abuse. Never. Even if a child behaves seductively, she has learned it through a previous victimization. You only wanted to be loved.

*But I went to his room! I could have told him no.*

When were you ever allowed to say no? The word no didn’t exist for you, did it? Without ever having been given a real choice about anything in your life, did you feel as though you had a choice about going to his room?

*He made me. I was so scared of him. It was like I was a zombie, and he had some kind of remote control over my brain. I tried not to, but part of me wanted to go. Because it felt good. He made me bad.*

No, not bad. Only helpless and vulnerable and confused. Nobody was there to help you understand. It’s natural to want to feel good, and those feelings you got were the only good ones you knew about. No matter how many times it happened, no matter how or where it happened, you were trying to feel better in a world where you weren’t listened to, or held, or comforted. You needed touch, like everybody does. You never got safe hugs at home. You never got safe attention, except from teachers at school. Besides hugs from teachers, the only kind of touch ever offered wasn’t safe. That wasn’t a real choice. It was never you who was being bad.

Jason believes in you. He’ll be with us going *back there*. He won’t shame you for what happened. I trust him, and I trust God now. It’s going to be safe. Nobody’s going to hurt you anymore.

Now rest. You don’t have to be the grown-up. You don’t have to be in charge. I’ll take care of you. Rest.

Wednesday, September 27th, 10:00 P.M.

My inner child wants so much to believe what I tell her. But she’s never felt safe before, and she still doesn’t feel safe, when sex seems to be the topic in every therapy session and going *there*, talking about specifics, looms just ahead. I hear her voice at odd times—driving down the street or cooking dinner (not that I do *that* very often!) *Why does it have to be SEX*? she says. How often have I heard that question in my head? And *WHY do we have to TALK about it?*

Well, I can’t help that the topic is sex. The topic for my life has been sex since the first time I was molested. Which was… when? Five when that boyfriend of Mom’s touched me… even though I can’t find any feelings about that one…

***judy*** doesn’t want to talk about it. Saying the words is shameful. But it’s exactly because the words are shameful that they have to be said.

Specifics validate our experience. Family secrecy never allowed us to have words to frame what happened to us. I could live all my life in denial, saying that my family was only “weird”, until I was able to verbalize specifically what happened. Only then I could acknowledge the truth.

If I ask a medical doctor to heal a wound in my physical body, He will ask me to remove the four layers of clothing covering it up. Because to assess what help is needed, the specifics need to be understood. For a therapist to help me heal an emotional and spiritual wound, he will help me explore the particular rationalizations and defense mechanisms disguising it. We have to know the extent of the damage, so the cure will be complete.

Jesus said the truth will set us free, but when it’s hidden in generalities, we are still insulated from it, protecting ourselves from the pain we still hold. We may still believe “it wasn’t so bad.”

I know I have often been in denial of sins I commit. I probably still am in denial of stuff I don’t see yet. But denial of the sins committed against us is the flip side of that coin. Minimizing, deceiving ourselves, is still “bearing false witness”—it’s unwillingness to face reality—which we often do because reality is uncomfortable to see. But if we lie to ourselves about truth, how can we be set free from its effects? The truth will set us free.

God already knows the truth. Still, we’re told to “ask”, “seek”, and “knock”. And the door will be opened. Why? Because *we* don’t fully see our own needs until we are able to express them. Putting words around experience clarifies their meaning. And *asking* for help acknowledges our powerlessness over making it better on our own.

Saying the words about what happened back then draws us out of denial, lets us recognize the meaning of what happened, and what skewed perspectives we’ve believed about it, and allows us to admit our need for help and healing. And it breaks the chains that secrecy creates. We’ve been in bondage to the sins of the past becausewe pretended they didn’t exist. When we expose the truth to the light, we aren’t bound to the past anymore.

Of course, all this is great on paper, and I can say all the right words intellectually, but I’ve seen how much my inner child is in control. She’s still struggling. But she knows the words have to be spoken.

Thursday, September 28th, 4:00 P.M.

How can I express the relief I am feeling? I walked into my therapy appointment today, filled with apprehension. I left with a song in my heart! And with hope.

As I came into the room Jason touched my shoulder for a tiny instant, and I savored the contact. Is this what a father’s touch would have felt like? Safe like this? He asked me how I was feeling, and I gave him an honest answer. “Afraid.” He nodded. That didn’t surprise him.

I settled nervously in a chair facing his, and we talked for a few minutes about how I’d learned to trust him, and to trust God. God was here with us now, he said. And it felt true. I trusted my new understanding of Jesus, and of God as the author of the goodness in the world.

Then he asked me, “Is your inner child with you today?”

I gave him a shaky smile. “She’s always with me.” I guess that was her wanting Jason’s touch.

He asked if I’d be more comfortable with my eyes open or closed. If my eyes were closed, I wouldn’t have to worry about eye contact. I shut them.

We did some quiet deep breathing for a minute, to get calm. Then he asked me to count slowly backward, from ten to one. I did, wishing this were over, instead of just beginning.

“Do you think your inner child would be willing to talk to me about what happened with Gary?”

Twisting a tissue in my lap, I took a breath, and nodded.

“***judy***?” he asked quietly.

Strangely, I had the physical sensation of gliding helplessly backward as if on tracks that pulled me smoothly away from Jason, to observe from a detached position. But I was still in the chair. I willed my eyes to stay closed. I didn’t want to see his expression.

“*Yes*?” it was a quavery whisper, and *her* voice was all I could muster. As quickly as that! Where was my adult self-control?

“How old are you now, Judy?”

I searched for a reasonable answer, but *her* voice responded again, “*Nine*.”

“Can you tell me what happened when you went to Gary’s room?” Jason spoke very slowly. Gently. He knew he was talking to a terrorized child.

“*He… touched me.*” *Her* voice was barely audible. My heart pounded.

He paused, before he asked, “Were you wearing your nightgown?”

I gulped for breath. “*No.*” Already I was fighting back tears. “*…he …took it off.*”

“And… he touched your breasts?”

*She* recoiled, ashamed to answer such a question. “… *Yes.*” At last.

“Did he… put his finger inside you?”

I shuddered. Why did he have to ask me that question? It only made the scene more real. I felt her horror at what Gary did, at Jason *knowing*, at admitting the truth. But Jason already knows, and he doesn’t think we’re bad, I reminded ***judy***.

It was hard to breathe. She choked back a sob, and whispered the single syllable, “*Yes*.”

“And then… did he tell you to do something?”

Oh, no. Did I have to say it? “*He… made me… touch his penis…. But I didn’t want to! He made me*!”

“No. …I know you didn’t want to,” Jason said. “Did Gary… did he make a mess on your hand?”

I felt myself jerk back reflexively in my chair. “*I… guess… he did.*” Wanting to scream, it came out more like a low moan.

I sensed Jason shifting in his chair a little. “You’ve been locked in that room with Gary for a very long time. Would you like to get out of that room, ***judy***?”

“*Yes*!” Oh, how I wanted out!

“Jesus is there with you, in that room, ***judy***. If you turn your head just a little, He’s there. …Do you see Him?”

“*Yes*!” And I did! There He stood, by the door, watching me with a sad, gentle look on his face.

“Jesus has seen everything that happened. Can you see how angry He is that Gary hurt you?”

I saw Jesus turn his gaze to Gary, and I was surprised by the fierce intensity in His eyes. I nodded.

“Just the look on Jesus’ face is enough to stop Gary. He sees Jesus, too, and he’s afraid, because he can see how much Jesus hates when innocent children are hurt. Can you see Jesus putting his hand on Gary’s arm?

I watched Jesus move nearer to lay his big rough hand on Gary’s arm. And Gary froze in place.

“*Yes—He’s stopping Gary!”*

“And Gary is taking his hands off you. He’s not touching you anymore, is he?”

I heaved out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Gary took his hands off and rolled away from me, but ***judy*** was still frozen there, transfixed, terrified.

“You can move away from Gary now. You can put your clothes back on. …And when you’re dressed again, lift one finger to let me know.”

Jason couldn’t see what I saw. He couldn’t see my nakedness, which helped a little. I watched myself roll off the bed, shaking. I slowly pulled on my nightgown and underwear. When I was covered, I found the strength to raise one finger in my lap.

“Would you like Jesus to come closer to you?”

I answered with a barely perceptible nod. I couldn’t speak.

“Can you ask Jesus to move nearer?”

I hesitated. To speak to Him, after what He had just *seen*? How could I? The shame welled up in my throat and choked back words. Finally, I pushed aside the fear and forced myself to look at Jesus’ face. The compassion in his eyes gave me the courage to whisper, “*Will you be with me, Jesus*?”

Jesus came closer to me and gently enclosed my small, trembling hand in the strength of His grip. He knelt by me, and I felt His powerful arms surrounding me, drawing me close to His heart. His love filled my chest. I was safe, with Him.

“Jesus won’t let Gary hurt you anymore, ***judy***. He’s going to protect you. But before He takes you out, He’s turning back to look at Gary again. As much as He hates the sin in what your brother did, let’s ask Jesus—how does He feel about Gary himself?”

Now that I was safe by his side, I saw the fury on Jesus’ face soften into sorrow. He shook His head as He spoke to Gary: “It’s wrong to confuse her, Gary. Like it was wrong that you were hurt too, when you just wanted to be loved. Both of you needed to be safe. And sex isn’t the answer to that.”

“*He’s …sad… for Gary*”, I said wonderingly.

“Yes. Jesus sees that Gary is hurting, too.”

 I focused on the panic in my brother’s eyes, being in Jesus’ presence. I knew the depth of his shame. “Gary looks so—desperate!”

“He must be pretty scared, seeing that Jesus knows what he’s done…. ***judy***, look at Jesus’ face again. What happened to His anger at Gary?”

I watched as Jesus handed Gary his pajama bottoms. Gary was crying as he put them on. Jesus put His arm around him, and Gary buried his head against Jesus’ chest.

“I think,” I said slowly, “Jesus is so, so mad at Gary hurting me…. But right now, He just loves him. All at the same time!” I shook my head. “Whatever bad stuff he did, Jesus still loves him.”

“Do you think Jesus is still holding *this moment* against Gary?”

*What*? Was Jason talking about forgiveness? But Gary hurt me! And he’d never invited God into his life! He’d never repented, had he? I looked into Jesus’ face, soft with compassion. Would Jesus offer him forgiveness anyway? Jesus met my eyes and nodded gently.

Maybe Gary’s heart would never open to feel how Jesus forgave him. Maybe he’d never be brave enough to change. But… would I be okay if Jesus offered it to him?

I looked again at Gary, who suddenly seemed so small and weak. He’d always pretended to be tough. I’d never seen him that way before. All his power was gone, and now he would never hurt me again. “*He forgives him*,” I answered at last. Of course, Jesus would.

“Yes,” Jason said softly. “That’s how Jesus is. …Is there anything you want to say to Gary?”

I looked again at Gary. He was a scared kid, and he’d never get his hands on me again. He didn’t matter. “*I don’t need to worry about you, anymore, Gary,*” *she* said aloud.

“What do you think should happen to him?” Jason asked.

“*I don’t want to worry about that. God can figure that out. I don’t even need to think about Gary anymore*.”

“That sounds like releasing him into God’s care. Is there another word for that?”

I listened inside for any feelings… “*Yes*,” *she* said simply. “I forgive him.” ***judy*** had turned away from Gary and was watching Jesus’ face. “I’m letting him go.”

“Jesus has seen you struggling under that heavy burden of hating Gary, ***judy***. And you’ve hated yourself, haven’t you?”

A sob rose in my throat and threatened to escape, but I choked it back. I nodded miserably.

“Jesus never wanted you to torment yourself the way you have. You’ve done such injury to yourself… condemning yourself without mercy, all these years. Do you see any judgment in Jesus’ face?”

Jesus’ face had such a sad, gentle look—just loving me. *Of course,* He wasn’t condemning me.

“He’s already forgiven you for harm you’ve done to yourself.”

“*Oh!*” I hadn’t thought of that. Jesus was smiling tenderly at me. “*I’m sorry*!” I said.

Jesus bore me up into his arms, out of that old shame. He forgave me for that! I felt such relief.

“Is there someone else who needs to forgive ***judy***, for being in Gary’s room that night?

I wasn’t sure what Jason meant. “*Me*?” I said at last.

“Well, have you ever forgiven yourself for what happened?”

I shook my head, shuddering. “No.”

“Are you ready to forgive that frightened child who had no way to say no?”

I nodded. ***judy*** couldn’t help it.

“I think she needs to hear you say that.”

I saw how little she was. So scared. She didn’t mean to do anything bad. “…I forgive you, ***judy***,” I said to that little girl. “It wasn’t your fault.” My adult self reluctantly came back just long enough to choke out those difficult words.

“She has needed your acceptance for so long. She needs you to love her.” Jason was quiet then, for a long moment, while Jesus held me.

“Now. Are you ready to leave that room behind you?”

“*Yes*!” I breathed in relief.

“All right. Now Jesus is taking you by the hand and opening the bedroom door.”

But I was still in Jesus’ arms. He set me down now and took my hand as we walked together to the door.

“Now you’re out in the hallway. Do you turn left, or right, now, to get to the front door of the house?”

“*Left in the hall, then right through the living room*,” piped the nine-year-old voice. I was still shaking.

“You’re turning left in the hall, then right through the living room”, Jason said. “Now Jesus is opening the front door, and the two of you are outside, free of that house, and what happened in Gary’s room.”

I watched as it happened, what Jason said. Jesus and I were on the porch now, breathing cool air in the night.

Jason paused while I collected myself. “Is there a special place for you to go, somewhere you feel safe?”

I cast about in my mind for an answer. Was there safety anywhere? Except… “*Sometimes… I used to sneak out at night and lay in the grass, to look at the stars. We lived at a high altitude—and the stars looked like a million diamonds on black velvet. Not like here in the city.”*

“I don’t think you ever told me that before,” said Jason quietly. “Would you like to share that with Jesus?”

I nodded silently. Tears were spilling down my cheeks.

“Then from the front door, with Jesus holding your hand, walk out to the grass and choose a place. Tell me when you’re comfortable.

I watched Jesus follow my lead as I walked to a spot on the lawn that seemed right, and as I settled beside Him, I raised a trembling right index finger. The air was cool on my face, the grass damp, but I was warm against Him. Nothing else mattered.

“Is Jesus close to you?”

“*He’s lying on my right side. My head is on His shoulder, and He’s holding my hand.*”

“Do you think Jesus has seen those stars before?”

I couldn’t help grinning suddenly, through my tears. “*He made them for me!*”

“He made them for *you*?”

“*He told me! He knew me even before He made the stars. He had me in mind. He knew they’d comfort me.”*

“Yes,” Jason said. “He knew all that. He had a plan for you even then, for you to be healed of the fear and pain of that night in Gary’s room.”

I absorbed that idea, wondering.

“Now… just lie there and rest, and be at peace, with Jesus at your side. Know that He loves you. He knows you were innocent. And He will always be with you.”

After a few minutes I opened my eyes. Jason smiled at me and wiped his own eyes as I cried tears of relief. And tears of joy at feeling Jesus’ presence, His forgiveness.

If I hadn’t lived through it, I don’t know if I could have believed it. That weight on my chest isn’t so heavy. I’m sure there’s more work to do, but I *can* believe in miracles, because that festering wound doesn’t hurt so much now. Thank God.

Tuesday, October 3rd, 9:00 P.M.

The change I feel is amazing. It’s not that I don’t hurt anymore, but I have joy in the midst of the hurting. And hope.

I was thinking about those questions Jason asked when we were in that scene. In that moment, I was so horrified that he asked those awful specific questions, even though I know he asked them so carefully, to prompt the terrible words for what happened. But now I can see that the questions themselves, and the old shame they stirred, had the effect of pulling me deep into the experience, instantly transporting me *back then—back there* in a way I can’t fully describe—but I had to really be *there*, to heal ***judy****.* Maybe it was the raw horror of it that took me there and made it so real—and because I was *there*, it made Jesus’ presence, His help, so completely authentic, and immediate. I *was* really nine years old. *She* was the one who felt Jesus’ love. It was that child self who needed to feel the healing, not just my grown-up intellect. It was *not* an intellectual exchange. ***judy*** felt the love, the forgiveness. Like it was happening that night, that original night—when I was nine years old, in Gary’s room.

I read somewhere that they’ve done scans of people’s brains when they’re experiencing an event, and again when they’re remembering the same event, and watched how the neurons fire. And the way the brain cells are firing is the same for both. The brain didn’t differentiate—the event was the same whether it was physically happening or only remembered—like my brain was just experiencing being *there* that night. My brain cells interpreted it as real. It wasn’t a trick.

A window has been opened above me so I can breathe! I can see the stars, and fresh air has rushed into the oppressive closeness of that child’s soul.

***judy*** has spent all her life in fear and in anger at the unfairness of it all. *Why me? Why did I have to live through this?* *She’s* taken her resentment out on my children, and on my husband—because he’s a man.

The world isn’t fair. A child should never have to go through that horror and shame, with no one to help her understand it. But I can see that healing transcends our concept of time. Even now, Jesus can go back to that night and comfort her then, when *she* needed comforting so badly.

I have felt at last the touch of God’s hand. Reaching up in my faltering faith, He stretched out His hand to meet mine. Enclosed my aching heart in His love. Yeah, God still makes housecalls.

Friday, October 6th, 1:30 A.M.

No, I’m not done yet. Jason asked me yesterday, “Do you feel a weight?”

“You mean a weight lifted? Or here… on my chest?” My fist thumped against my chest as if pulled there by a powerful magnet.

As usual, he left it to my own interpretation. Jason doesn’t feed me too many lines. He lets me draw my own conclusions. “You tell me”, he said.

“Well, I’ve felt like I have a thirty-pound anvil sitting on my chest. Like that?”

“That may be the sensation of weight that is called a ‘body memory.’ Very commonly victims of childhood sexual abuse describe that same feeling of weight. Like the mass of a larger body on top of their smaller body, making it difficult to breathe.”

Great. So that sensation is a confirmation of intercourse, what has to be a classic symptom. But what he said next set off more alarms.

It was the end of the session time. “There’s another response that may be a body memory….” He paused.

*Well? Well? Don’t keep me in suspense!*

“No… I think I’ll hold that for another time.”

Is that manipulative? Or just one of the tricks of the trade for therapists to prompt unguarded responses and reveal suppressed symptoms? Probably both. For my benefit, I guess, but *argghhh*.

Whatever it is, it works. I didn’t get it at the time, but now, at 2:00 A.M., I know what he meant. And this writing is another scream in the night—to let out what keeps circulating through my mind.

The other body memory that I’ve written about and shared with him, is difficulty breathing and my throat hurting all the time, like a chunk of granite is lodged there. I’ve tried to ignore it. I’ve written it off to stress. It’s also one of the seven warning signs of cancer, and I knew I didn’t want it to be that. *Naaah*. My allergies are just draining into my throat. Or I’m catching a cold.

No. The truth is that my aching throat is the message that there was oral sex. To a frightened little girl, was that somehow a worse violation than vaginal penetration? Well, it was all awful. I was only nine. But children are told not to put dirty things in their mouths. What could be dirtier than a penis?

Oh, no! I finally understand the meaning in my old recurring dream about driving up the side of the mountain. The mountain moved and groaned, and the angle became more and more steep.  *Like an erect penis*. I remember my throat hurting when I wrote about it, close to the start of therapy. No wonder Jason didn’t just affirm my interpretation that it was only about my perfectionism. Did I tell him that dream before I ever acknowledged sexual abuse? But he had to have known, even then. That dream painted a graphic picture of oral sex. Just look at the way I wrote it! “I woke with an unborn scream *filling my throat*!”

Body memories are another way of re-experiencing the events that caused shame. ***judy*** has no more strength to hold it all down in my subconscious anymore. She’s exhausted from existing *back there* all these years, immersed in the lies that kept her chained to a bed. So she’s letting me know the truth at last. Poor child.

Monday, October 9, 3:00 A.M.

Can’t I have a break, God? Can’t I rest awhile? No. So I’ll write what just occurred to me as I woke just now, because avoidance doesn’t help. Argument won’t make it go away.

When David and I had been married about a year, we went to see the movie, *The Exorcist.* Besides all the ads about how scary it was supposed to be, there were headlines and magazine articles about the national phenomenon—this movie seemed to affect audiences more intensely than previous horror films.

Women, in surprising numbers, were fainting and throwing up and running out of theaters in panic. But David wanted to see it, and I was strong and in control, and I could handle a scary flick… Or so I thought.

I didn’t throw up. I didn’t flee the theater. But I vividly remember being filled with the most intense fear in my memory. My heart raced wildly, and I gripped David’s hand so hard I nearly broke his fingers.

For months afterward I acted weird. I insisted the bedroom door be closed when we went to bed, because otherwise the view from the bed was the top landing of the stairwell down, reminding me of the worst movie scenes. I had nightmares. I was hypersensitive to noises at night. And David vowed he would never take me to another horror movie. When they played the theme music on the Oscars broadcast later that year I leaped up and turned off the TV.

Suddenly I can see why I had that response. My behavior wasn’t so weird, after all. As powerfully as guided imagery, but without the benefit, I was drawn instantly back into a painful scene in my past. I was reliving a flashback! Without warning, I went *back there* without a counselor to help me face it. I was the victim again, all alone. Like the twelve-year-old girl in the movie, I was paralyzed *on a bed*, possessed by an evil male that made me *bad*, that made me want sex. I felt helpless under his control.

Were the thousands of women who panicked over that movie victims of childhood abuse too? Here was a graphic representation that your mother cannot protect you, that evil dominates little girls and turns them into freaks. Of course, we were afraid. We were unexpectedly confronted again with the same heart-stopping powerlessness that had shamed us so many times before.

I only wish I could have absorbed the happy ending. God won out at the end of the movie. The little girl was released from the bonds that held her chained to a bed. I’m being released too. That evil spirit is being exorcised, and I can smell freedom.

# Chapter 6

**Mama**

**When I look back at what I’ve written, a little part of me still wants to protest—But it wasn’t that bad! I’ve told the truth, but old denial dies very hard. Especially when it comes to Mom.**

**My mother’s love is what I wanted more than anything else in the world, and I still long for a connection with her that may never exist. She’s troubled by her own old struggles.**

Friday, October 13th, 5:00 P.M.

I had a hard day today. This morning, standing in my bathroom, holding my curling iron in my hair, my eyes wandered over to a framed art print hanging on the wall. Suddenly I had that now-familiar clutch in my guts that comes with a terrible insight.

My glance came to rest on a print of a famous impressionistic painting of a mother and child, “The Cradle,” by Berthe Morisot. The mother in the image lovingly keeps watch over her sleeping infant. It’s a picture that has given me peace. That’s why I bought it. Seeing it now with new eyes, I know it’s a lie. For me, anyway. That image was the mother I always wanted to have, the mother I told myself I had all along. But it isn’t *my* mom.

I was instantly in tears as my throat closed around a painful lump. I laid the curling iron on the counter and walked slowly over to the wall. Hanging immediately beside the first is a smaller frame holding a print of “After the Bath” by an artist named Paul Peel. Two unconsciously naked preschool-age girls are warming themselves in front of a Victorian fireplace. I always loved that print. But now I wondered what lecherous eyes were watching them, out of the artist’s line-of-sight. Or maybe the artist himself. Two sisters in the age of innocence… before they get raped.

I want to shout a warning to those little girls, “cover yourselves, run away before they hurt you!” But where? There isn’t any safe place. There’s nowhere to hide. There isn’t any mother who will protect them.

I turned and saw the other prints I had collected over a period of several years. As well as I knew those pictures, it was as if I stood in a museum art gallery, studying each image for the first time. Scenes of mother love. Childhood purity. Innocence, and virginity y that I was never allowed to have. Luxuries I never knew.

Some of my favorite artists—Renoir, Mary Cassatt, Jessie Wilcox Smith—were all known for their portraits of mothers and children. And I was drawn to them because I wanted to fill that giant need in myself. I needed a mother.

So now I have a whole new tidal wave of grief for the loss of that illusion-mother I made myself believe in. The cardboard image I thought I had already sent over a cliff in a bus, has gone up in flames. My mother never loved me or protected me. That is truth.

Don’t tell me this grieving is less than the loss of a mother through death! My dreams have died. I never had a mother.

Saturday, October 17th, 1:45 A.M.

I woke up just now from a dream of some “ideal” mother reaching out to comfort me as a child. I stretched out my arms to her to be held, and the image evaporated. As always. The opposite of love isn’t hate, is it? It’s indifference.

My inner child needs to talk, I think. ***judy,*** are you awake? Tell me about Mom.

*It hurts to think about Mama. She didn’t care about me. She used to tell me the story of when Grandpa died, and she took me with her, back home with her for the funeral. Gary and Carla stayed with Jack’s parents—our grandparents. The trip was two long days on a Greyhound bus, and she was trying to wean me. From the breast to the bottle? From the bottle to a cup? I don’t know. I was about a year old.*

*She’s told me how I screamed during the whole trip. The bus driver and the passengers were mad at her because I was a bad baby. The way she told me that story felt like it was my fault.*

*Couldn’t she see that I needed her? It was two days on a strange bus when everything I knew was suddenly gone, the worst time to change how I ate. She was so wrapped up in her own pain that she had no idea how afraid I was. And in all the years she never saw my needs any more clearly than that.*

*I hated her for rejecting me from the start. Was it because of trouble with my father? It wasn’t my fault he didn’t want us! I couldn’t help being born during the war between my parents.*

*I always thought she didn’t love me because of who I was. But it was really something inside her, wasn’t it? I always tried so hard, but it didn’t make any difference. It wasn’t my fault.*

No, it wasn’t your fault. You were only a child. You couldn’t change who she was.

Friday, October 20th, 2:30 A.M.

I wonder if I even get three nights a week of uninterrupted sleep. I don’t think so. Tonight, the poet’s awake. ***judy***wrote:

*Mama never gave me*

*Birthday parties,*

*Comforting arms,*

*Soft hair shining from brushing*

*And brushing…*

*Reassuring words spoken soft,*

*Last kisses before peaceful sleep,*

*Crisp ironed dresses,*

*Pride in being me,*

*A welcoming kitchen that invited friends,*

*A special gladness to be female,*

*Anything of herself,*

*A way to understand the pain,*

*Or childhood.*

Tuesday, October 24th, 1:30 A.M.

I used to think therapy was what happened when you were sitting in a chair in the counselor’s office. But that’s just when the fuses are lit. Therapy is the firecrackers (and sometimes sticks of dynamite) that explode throughout the week between appointments. My counselor’s leading questions blast open new excavations every time.

I could, of course, resist the follow-through, but then the shame would just circulate through my head for the rest of my life. Like the song from “It’s a Small World” at Disneyland, you can’t rid yourself of it for the remainder of your vacation—although that’s far too benign an explanation. I’d rather write it out, to understand whatever awful recognition is exposed by the blasting. It’s finding the context and reframing the old meaning that silences that tape.

Jason asked me what my inner child’s view of women really is, now that I’ve gotten clearer on what she thinks of men. My standard answer used to be, “I get along fine with women *and* men! I have friends of both sexes. Why would I have a problem with either one?”

But that’s another lie I told myself because of the double bind I was forced into. *Of course,* I feared men, and imposed on them a set of characteristics in general to match what I knew. Men were users, liars, and rapists. Why would they care about *my* needs?

Alongside that all-negative view of men, my view of women wasn’t so much better. It was easier to believe a lie about my mother—about women—that they were loving and supportive, spiritual and generous. That they met the needs of their children. Otherwise I think I would have felt absolutely rootless. The first gust of wind would have blown me away.

If you looked at her relationships with her women friends, my mother did fit that positive description. She could lavish all those qualities on her friends (granted, maybe codependently caretaking them) while withholding those same qualities from her family.

Mom never took her children seriously. We were “only kids”. If she could convince herself we were less than human somehow, maybe she could feel less guilt y about ignoring us.

I once heard her say, “Just ignore her, she’s only trying to get attention!” She never noticed the tragedy in that phrase for me, the child who was desperate for real attention. She never gave it. My mental portrait of her shows her sitting frozen on the couch—separate, alone, staring into space.

How could she have been so blind to the effects of how she impacted our lives? She pitted her children against each other. Each of us heard a recitation of our own faults and our siblings’ strengths, resulting in our mutual resentment. Of course, it was every “man” for himself! Divide and conquer. Maybe she was afraid that if there was a bond among us, we’d have each other, and she’d be left alone. As it was, somehow, she won each child’s reluctant allegiance to herself, in opposition to the siblings. And in the meantime, we were pretty effectively abandoned, while she raised up a scorpion in our midst—Gary—and forbade us to defend ourselves against it!

She took away every defense I had and enabled Gary to use me in any way, shutting her eyes to it. Why couldn’t she protect her daughters? We never hurt her. Was she seeing some female characteristic in us that she rejected for her own reasons?

Did she have a warped view of women that corresponded to my view of men? Or was it that the male stereotype she projected onto Gary was so strong that her daughters were insignificant in its shadow? The relative favor she bestowed on us wasn’t dependent on our behavior. There had to be some other reason within *her*.

Whatever pain she carried didn’t take away her responsibility to her children as the adult whose task it was to nourish and protect us. She abandoned me to whoever wanted to use me. I’ve carried guilt and shame all my life that rightfully belonged to her, or to those she allowed access to me.

My mother may have forgotten me, but God has not.

Thursday, October 26th, 1:00 A.M.

I had the feeling you needed to talk to me. Are you upset?

*Just sad and quiet. I’m glad somebody finally listens.*

Nobody ever listened to you before, did they?

*No, they never thought I had anything important to say. I needed Mama to listen, but she was always so busy with her own problems, she didn’t want to hear mine. I remember her saying, “Kids don’t have problems! Just wait till you grow up and find out how hard life really is!” How could she say that? I was being raped all those years. I was so alone and afraid. And anyway, Mama would have blamed me if she knew. She would have said I was bad.*

Don’t you think she must have known what Gary was doing?

*I don’t know. She never noticed anything. Wouldn’t she have yelled at me if she knew?*

Maybe it was easier for her to pretend she didn’t know so she wouldn’t have to think about it… and feel guilty.

*Guilty? Why would she feel guilty? It was me that was having sex when I wasn’t supposed to. I was the one being nasty.*

Maybe she would have felt guilty because mothers are supposed to protect their little girls from people who would hurt them, like Gary did. She already knew he molested that other little girl in the neighborhood.

*But she never believed that about Gary! She always took his side, always believed whatever he said, even though he lied all the time. I never understood how she could love him and reject me, when I always tried to be good. There was nothing I could do to make her love me. She only loved him.*

Maybe she couldn’t face the fact that he was being so bad.

*Yeah, That was more important to her than protecting me.*

Mama didn’t know how to protect you. But God was there. God saw the end from the beginning. He brought you to this day, knowing you would be healing now. And I can stand up for you now, too. It’s going to be all right.

Saturday, October 28th, 2:30 A.M.

Yesterday afternoon I prayed for some insight to help me understand Mom. I was drowning in a whirlpool of bitterness about how she abandoned me to Gary.

Awake at this hour, maybe God has something to show me. So here I am with pen in hand, ready to take down the message. Why, God? I need to understand—why didn’t she protect me?

Is there any simple answer? I can’t know my mother’s heart. She is who she is because of her own set of hurts, and the choices she made in response to them. But her choices hurt me.

When she was just sixteen, she got pregnant. A shameful thing—was it worse than it would be now? Back then, I guess a pregnant teen didn’t have any choice but to get married—it was the automatic consequence at the time. My mother hinted to me that my father Jack was an angry, violent man—no, he was a kid; he was the same age as she was. He ran around on her when she was home with babies, and he later married the woman he’d had an affair with. He had a family with her, and we never even got a Christmas card from him. Mother moved us back to live close to Grandma, and I never saw him again until once, when I was sixteen. Mother cried when she told me Jack had been the love of her life. She was still hurt that he hadn’t loved her.

I don’t remember much about Martin, my first stepfather, who was in the army. They were married three or four years, and had my little brother, Will. I have fuzzy memories of angry arguments. Maybe violence? They divorced. I don’t think I ever saw him again.

Then she married Richard—I’m pretty sure she was already pregnant with Richie. Richard beat Gary physically, but his raging tirades hurt me as much as fists might have. Mother was, and is, a victim to Richard. She always chose abusive men. Did she see it as choice? She had no resources, and no job skills. How would she have fed her kids if she hadn’t attached herself to men? At least we didn’t go hungry.

She chose to turn her back on Gary abusing me. Gary seemed to be a lot like what I knew of Jack. Did Mom’s inner child see herself as unable to say no to Gary—because he was male? And because he burst into instant rage if he didn’t get what he wanted? Was she afraid of not letting him have his way?

Did she see herself as a victim to all males? Did she have a skewed image of men’s qualities that matched mine, and an inability to say no that matched my own flattened boundaries? Nothing creates flattened boundaries like sexual abuse. Was my mother a victim of childhood sexual abuse too? Did someone teach her early on that women have no other choices?

I don’t have the answer to that question. But I have that mental image of my mother slumped, frozen on the couch, staring into space. She was dissociated! Dissociation, I have learned from my reading and my conversations with Jason, is a form of emotionally separating yourself from a reality that is a source of pain. It’s a major effect of traumatic early childhood experience. Her mind was somewhere else entirely.

The very picture of helplessness and hopelessness, numbed by tranquilizers, she sat, passive and still, on that sagging couch, in that filthy house, surrounded by the litter of a life gone terribly wrong. But she wasn’t really there. She ran away emotionally from what she couldn’t seem to physically escape.

All her hopes to be an artist and a teacher were stymied by the urgent necessity of just keeping her head above water, surviving the abuse of the men in her life by trying not to feel her pain. It took up all her energies. She had so little left to offer her children.

From my reading, I know statistics say that incest commonly happens in a multi-generational chain. One study said that 90 percent of mothers of incest victims are themselves victims. The common effects of sexual abuse—multiple sexual relationships, inappropriate choice of partners, obesity, ulcers, drug or alcohol abuse, gynecological problems, hysterectomies, headaches, low self-esteem, emotional detachment, dissociation, chronic depression, chronic rage—all of them apply to my mother.

Suddenly I know to the depths of my being that my mother was somehow a victim very much like me. This knowledge isn’t given to me to make accusations of anyone. I have no evidence to meet legal requirements, to convince a jury or a judge. That’s not the point. The value of this knowledge is solely to satisfy my own heart, and the cry of my inner child who has always wanted to know *WHY*? So ***judy*** can know—that the reason had nothing to do with my own worthiness—I deserved protection and care, even if I wasn’t protected.

My mother’s inability to be present as a good parent makes perfect sense. She was helpless to stop Gary. She defended and enabled him because he was male, and she mentally escaped the realities of what that meant. Being male made him automatically powerful in her mind. Females were *bad*. Daughters couldn’t be protected. There was no way to stop what was going to happen anyway. She ran away in her mind.

How very sad her life has been. And how dramatically my feelings have changed as I have written this very journal entry! I can have compassion for her, even without excusing that my own needs weren’t met. An answer to my prayer?

Sitting here just now, surprisingly engulfed in a sense of euphoric peace that I have never known before, I was thinking how God has guided and shaped my life to bring me to this time of healing… this moment when it is suddenly right to forgive my mother.

And writing that, and sitting with the truth of it, I just heard what I have never believed in before. God’s voice. Not audibly, but words showing up in my head, unbidden. Words that don’t fit my self-concept. They came from some other source, not from my own thoughts. In the silence came the words:

“You are my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased. I sent my Son for your healing, and you are worth the price.”

I am valued! To a degree that takes my breath away. God loves me. I don’t understand the timing of this message, but oh, how much I can believe in God’s love for me now. In the healing of this pain. I have heard His voice.

Wednesday, November 1st, 11:30 P.M.

Jason’s response this afternoon wasn’t exactly what I expected, when I shared my processing about my mother with him. Oh, he agreed with the probability of my assessment of Mom’s history of abuse. And he rejoiced with me over hearing God’s voice. He believed it.

What surprised me is that he didn’t seem to share my enthusiasm for forgiving her right now. Isn’t forgiveness what we’re working toward? Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?

What Jason said was, “Let’s take time to make very sure the wound is clean before we rush to seal it over again.”

Does he think there’s *more* to work on in there? I can’t think of anything else. After all we’ve dredged up, surely, I’m close to being finished, aren’t I? I am *tired* of being in the middle of this painful mess. I want it to be over. I want to keep feeling that peace I was given the other night.

Okay, maybe I *am* rushing to be finished. I guess, given my very faulty memory of my childhood, there could be something else back there in the black hole of my past that needs healing. I just don’t *want* there to be anything else.

Sunday, November 5th, 3:00 A.M.

Is it possible Jason is wrong? O, sure, maybe there is more to work on, and maybe I’m not finished with my feelings about Mom. But couldn’t he be wrong that this forgiveness of my mother is premature? It still feels very right. But Jason has more objectivity. Maybe it isn’t real. How do I know? I don’t.

Whether it’s real or not, ***judy***still has to grieve the loss. ***judy*** and I wrote another poem, from our new understanding of Mama. I wish I could share it with her, but I’m not healthy enough to be with her without getting sucked back into the old family system again. I have to be separate until I’m stronger. I wish I knew how to love her. I wish she knew how to love me.

*Mother,*

*I never knew the secrets bound*

*And locked away inside your soul.*

 *Your barricades of fear around*

*The panic of not being whole*

*Rose to the sky, and kept me out.*

*No entrance to your vault of shame,*

*Without a sentry’s piercing shout,*

*Allowed a glimpse of your old pain.*

*Denial mortared bricks of blame.*

*They made a fortress barbed with lies.*

*Your hate, in sheets of bitter rain*

*Concealed the noise of desperate cries…*

*To save your trembling inner child*

*Who longed to hear a lullaby,*

*To feel safe arms, give shuddered sigh.*

*To rest. Exhausted eyes to close.*

*To trust in others to protect*

*Her innocence in soft repose.*

*To know that harm would not molest.*

*My grief is for our shared despair*

*That could have lifted if we knew*

*Just how to bear the risk, and care.*

*Your secret nightmares were mine, too.*

*We could have held each other’s pain,*

*Drawn strength, and hope, and felt at home.*

*And walked together free of shame.*

*But I must journey on alone.*

# Chapter 7

**My Brother Wasn’t the Only One!**

**No matter how much drama I experienced, there was no quick cure. I got just enough grace to get through each day. What arose to work on wasn’t new—it was only what had already happened long ago, uncovered at last. Grief surrounded me, weighing me down, but in its midst, I received moments of reassurance that buoyed me up.**

**It took me so long to learn to depend on God with any consistency. I still needed Jason to lead me through the steps to getting God’s attention. I was still unconscious of my deeply rooted belief that a man had to be the one praying for me—because females weren’t worthy of God’s attention. That perspective did not disappear instantly because my conscious mind had new information. It was founded on a very old emotional reality.**

Tuesday, November 7th, 11:00 P.M.

Another memory showed up unbidden yesterday. I had called Carla again, and one of her comments reminded me of the time Gary enlarged a crack in the plastered shower wall in the family bathroom, chipping a hole all the way through to the closet in his room. Pervert! Here’s one time, Mom knew what he was doing. She made him patch the plaster. But how long was it there before he fixed it? How many times did he watch me? And Carla? And Mom?

After hanging up the phone, my feelings of disgust grew into a full-blown panic attack. Yes, I finally admit to panic attacks. There is no other explanation for my sudden fear and rapid pulse. I felt as if I had just narrowly escaped a head-on collision with a school bus full of first-graders, amid squealing brakes and the terrorized screams of children. I had the same adrenaline-boosted rush of horror.

That anxiety was prompted by the memory of a time Gary used that hole in the wall to look at me *with* my knowledge. I was following his orders, but the feelings of shame that overwhelmed me in remembering the event were saying *It’s your fault! He wasn’t physically forcing you! Why didn’t you run out of the room?* Over and over the guilt assailed me.

It wasn’t until my session with Jason today that I had any relief. This time I didn’t resist going *back there* the way I had before. I hated the idea, but I knew saying the words would take away this awful sick feeling.

So my inner child recounted the whole shameful incident, and neither Jesus nor Jason was horrified. Jesus filled the hole in the plaster with softened soap, and when He finished the wall was restored as if it had never been damaged. After ***judy***was dressed again, I forgave myself, and her, for being so vulnerable to Gary’s controlling influence.

Jesus didn’t even need to forgive her—He always knew how innocently she was tangled in the effects of her fear, and confusion, and her desperation for someone to approve of her. Gary played on all those things, and she didn’t know how to get free.

And yet again, I saw Gary’s shame and fear. It happened in the past, and he can’t ever hurt me again. Whatever happens for him is between him and God. I let go of him and all he stood for. I wasn’t bound to his control anymore.

Jesus led ***judy*** out of the house and into the daylight. He took off His sandals and climbed her tree in the front yard to sit beside her on that familiar branch. It was the safest place she had.

Sitting next to Him with her head on His shoulder, she knew that whatever else might still be hidden in her darkened memory, however shameful it feels, God will heal it.

Maybe I will still have memories I have to talk about in therapy, but I *can* know how much healing there is waiting for me when I’m ready.

Sunday, November 12th, 1:45 A.M.

Memory loss (which I never would have admitted before) is something society snickers at. It was the stuff of ridiculous soap opera plots. Fakery. The image comes to mind of the old “I Love Lucy” episode—Lucy tries to put one over on Ricky—again. She glides slowly across the room, ghost-like, eyes wide and blank as she coos, “Who am I? What am I? Where am I?” Oh, no, amnesia! Ricky falls for it again.

Real repression of memory is more like when a six-year-old is missing his sneaker. “Have you checked in your closet?”

He explodes, “Yes, and it’s not in there! I’ll never find it!”

So, the parent patiently walks into the child’s room, opens the closet door, and surveys the piles of fallen toys and clothes littering the floor. The first item the parent picks up is a discarded jacket, and underneath, to the surprise of nobody but the six-year-old, is the lost sneaker.

Without any true motivation to find memories that are unpleasant to know, they will remain forever hidden under strategically placed clutter. Something fearful in us doesn’t want to lift away whatever obscures painful memories from view. I’ve said it myself, on these pages: “*I don’t want to know.... I do not want to remember*!” But even unremembered, their presence is felt, like hidden chunks of Kryptonite sapping Superman’s powers. He doesn’t have to see the Kryptonite to be poisoned by it. Denial is no help.

So here, in the middle of the night, is another memory. Are they showing up because I feel safer in believing there is some power that will defuse them, rather than let them destroy me? I think ***judy*** knows exposing them to the light is her only hope. At last she’s willing to risk finding the scary stuff she tucked away so long ago, even though it still hurts to look.

I remembered my favorite uncle, Hank, who married my mother’s younger sister. I used to stop off and visit them at their house, about halfway between school and home. But I wasn’t visiting *them*, I was visiting Hank. I didn’t like my aunt very much—she always seemed mad—but she didn’t yell, anyway. Hank was a postman, home in the afternoon after finishing his route delivering mail. He was always happy to see me.

What triggered this memory? Unexpectedly, I thought of a fragment of a conversation with Hank. We were at Grandma’s house, just the two of us on the porch, talking. The rest of the family was inside the house--the women in the kitchen cooking, the kids watching TV.

Hank was talking to me about tennis, which I knew nothing about, but which he played regularly with a friend. And he made a pun, a play on the word *balls*. But he meant *testicles.* I stared at him blankly, feeling sudden fear.

How does this comment fit with the fact that my uncle was a respected man, a deacon in the church? Why would he tell a dirty joke to a little girl of… what… six years old? The only reason I can find is that he must have abused me, too.

Sigh. A memory of that incident will show up in its own time, judging by the way historical content has been emerging since I started therapy. In the meantime, *I know*.

Thinking about Hank’s life, I can find some puzzle pieces to support that he had a dark side of his character. The hidden side. Maybe the most obvious piece is that he married into what looks to be an intergenerationally incestuous family system. Victims marry abusers. Weeks ago, Jason and I talked about how “water seeks its own level” and people find one another when they “speak the same language.” In this case, the unspoken dysfunctional language of damaged boundaries. People who have healthy boundaries would get creeped out by the inappropriate interactions that pass for “normal” in a dysfunctional family.

Hank was killed in an accident ten years ago. After the funeral, I spoke some words of consolation to my aunt, his widow. Her face turned darkly animated, angry. She said, “Oh, if you only knew what he was really like!” Then she burst into tears. “But if I could only have him back,” she wailed, “I wouldn’t care!” In that moment, I guess I wasn’t consciously aware—but I *did* know what Hank was like.

Oh, here’s another piece that just came to mind. Was it Mom who told me—or maybe Hank himself—that he had affairs with women on his mail route? It wasn’t just a couple of affairs, either. Many! Yeah, that jibes with he uncle I knew. He was a popular guy—witty, fun-loving, athletic. He could charm ladies. And he had access to a lot of them.

As he had access to several nieces. And nephews. Did he abuse my brothers? Jason has told me that child abusers, like men who repeatedly have affairs, are often sex addicts. It’s a compulsion. A sickness.

It makes me sick, too. I feel ill.

Saturday, November 18th, 8:00 P.M.

Today, David and I took our daughters to an afternoon movie, then went to a fast-food restaurant for hamburgers. It was one of those days when the light of my healing broke through the heavy clouds that darken my spirit. I was feeling pretty good, able to focus on the kids and David, instead of obsessing on incest, which is more standard for my state of mind lately.

Then came the memory. We had just sat down at the table with our food when a brick wall collapsed on top of me. I was suffocating, and I certainly couldn’t eat or converse with the children. I gripped David’s arm.

“What is it?” he asked.

“A flashback,” I forced out.

I stared at the table, willing myself to breathe. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Grit your teeth and get through this second. Then the next second. Don’t look at the picture that just exploded onto the screen in your head. Don’t listen to the pounding surf that is only your own pulse beating against your eardrums. Just breathe.

I huddled in the car on my way home, pressing my hand against my belly as if to keep my guts from spilling out, and biting my lip to keep from shrieking at the kids tussling in the backseat. David cajoled and finally threatened them to quiet their bickering. My throat ached. Just breathe.

My old survival style is the one I’m still using. I have to get away from everybody. There is no safety except in solitude. Even alone, the fear doesn’t go away. But it is unbearable to be in the same room with anyone else, to be forced to process any human input when the circuits are already screaming from the overload.

Finally, behind closed doors in my bedroom, I groped for the only lifeline I knew. I called Jason’s answering service and left a message.

When he returned my call, I said, “I have this horrible feeling and I don’t know what to do with it!”

“Tell me what’s happening,” he answered calmly.

“I remembered—about my uncle!” Could he make sense of that? My mouth would not form words any more clearly.

“Okay. Let’s concentrate on your just getting through the weekend until I see you on Monday.”

“Isn’t there something to kill this picture in my head?” I asked desperately.

“It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to go out and get drunk. Better stay close to home.” Getting drunk wasn’t a thing for me. But still—easy for him to say.

“So all I have to get through this weekend is hot tea and aspirin?” *I’m drowning and I have to tread water till Monday!*

“Writing seems to have helped you get through some other difficult times. Why don’t you try that now?”

“Yeah. But it never hurt this much before,” I said. “I keep thinking… I’ve been looking for this memory to show up. Maybe it never really happened. Maybe I made it up to fit what I was looking for.”

“What have we already said about that?”

I sighed and recited, “Nobody makes up something so painful. It’s real or the feelings wouldn’t accompany the picture…. But Jason, you know how creative I am!”

“Yes. But even creative people do not make up a history that would cause this kind of pain. It happened. Not because of you, but because your uncle was a sick man who took advantage of an innocent child.”

How many times does he have to say the same thing over and over again? When is my inner child going to feel secure in the innocence Jason perceives? She hears the words Jason uses to reassure her, and the words I offer to soothe her in the middle of the night, but with each new memory, she is still caught again in that whirlpool of shame. She’s drowning in it.

A ten-minute phone conversation with a therapist is at best an inflatable giraffe swim ring, which might look pretty good to hang onto in a wading pool. But I am surrounded by angry waves in an endless ocean. I can’t see the shore, and I can’t feel the bottom, and God seems very far away right now.

Jason trusts me to be able to survive this flashback without him. I don’t feel that strong. But I don’t have many options. I think I’ll go for a walk. The walls are closing in. Mixed metaphors notwithstanding.

Sunday, November 19th, 10:45 P.M.

Walking yesterday helped just a little to alleviate the stress I was (and still am) feeling. Today when I laced up my sneakers and went out to walk again, I felt as if I were going to explode, like a pressure cooker all steamed up with no escape valve. So, after a block I began to run, working to stress my body instead of my emotions. I ran a half mile, remembering the satisfaction I used to find in physical depletion, when I was jogging regularly about eight years ago. It reminded me of the fact that so many incest victims are self-destructive. I can feel the same agony that makes some of us burn ourselves or slash our wrists, even when we don’t acknowledge suicidal feelings.

It comes from that unbearable pressure inside us. We’re all swollen up and read to burst from the lifetime of secrets stuffed down behind our conscious memory. Like the taught hardness of a nine-and-a-half-month pregnant belly, the surface of our lives is stretched to cover that huge mass of lies and shame. Isn’t there a way to release the pressure before we explode into a million unrecognizable pieces? Cutting might be, for some of us, a misdirected effort at self-preservation, an attempt to create a controlled outlet to vent the steam that threatens to split us wide open. But that practice has too many other devastating effects traded for such a fleeting feeling of numbness. Haven’t we been harmed enough already without doing it intentionally to ourselves?

Exercise is a safer steam valve. Some recovering victims use dance or karate or aerobics. Let the energy from the emotional distress fuel movement. That’s how running felt. Like directing the pressure through a hose to run an engine, instead of a spontaneous rupture spewing in every direction.

It helped some. But I still can’t write it yet.

And this is still a miserable weekend. *God, give me strength.*

Monday, November 20th

My session with Jason released a whole lot of pressure this afternoon. I pulled myself together, panic attack and all, and said the words for what happened.

In the memory that showed up, Hank must have just returned from Germany. He’d left my aunt at home soon after they were married, while he went overseas for a two-year tour of duty in the army. His stint in Germany would have been a perfect opportunity for him to have indulged his sexual addiction, wouldn’t it? A man in uniform gets the ladies’ attention. This was before he had the job with the post office, where he also wore a uniform!

Back at home, there was a family fish fry at our house, to welcome him. This was the only time I ever remember having a social gathering at our house, in part because the house was always such a mess. And in part because Richard was so antisocial. He hated visitors. But this was before Mom married Richard. I was seven years old. It was before Gary!

We were all hanging out in the front yard, in folding chairs on the grass, and on the porch. In the midst of all the noise and talking that was going on, Hank took me around the house into the back yard.

“But that doesn’t make any sense!” I told Jason. “It couldn’t have happened that way. Even a sex addict would be smarter than to molest a little girl around the back corner of the house when the family was gathered in the front yard!”

“Not necessarily,” Jason answered. “Imminent danger of being caught is often a source of a ‘high’ for a sex addict. And in your family, if someone *had* walked in on what was happening, would they have raised an alarm? Would they have protected you? Or would they have disbelieved what they saw and kept quiet?”

I suppressed a moan. “I guess they would have pretended it didn’t happen. Mom never allowed herself to believe what she had to know about Gary. My value wasn’t high enough for anyone to raise a fuss. Men were more important.”

It was real, as much as I longed to believe it was all a lie. And I couldn’t avoid it anymore. But Jason was with me as ***judy*** went back to that sunny afternoon and faced what happened.

*She* broke the silence of thirty years of keeping the secret. For the first time, she told how Hank had spoken softly to her, and knelt in front of her and taken down her summer shorts. He touched her… with his hands. And with his mouth.

Right there in the open yard, in the corner between the back wall of the main house and the addition at the back that was my bedroom. Next to the rosebushes. Just around the corner of the addition was the swing set where ***judy*** spent so many hours alone, swinging endlessly, singing songs to herself she made up as she went along. Trying so hard just to be a child.

But now Jesus was with her. He stopped what Hank was doing and let ***judy*** cover herself. He healed her shame with compassion and forgiveness. He led her away. Then Jesus held her and comforted her as she cried.

It doesn’t hurt quite as much as it did before.

Wednesday, November 22nd, 11:45 P.M.

We’ve changed to three sessions of therapy per week for a while. I told Jason I need that much support right now. All week I’m treading water, trying to keep my chin above the waves so I don’t drown. Therapy sessions are life rafts I can hang onto for a little while before I plunge back into the waves on my own. But I’m so tired. I need those rafts closer together.

Jason raised the question today of the possibility that in the scene with Hank I might have experienced… an orgasm—*Oh, this is so hard to write down! I don’t want it to be true, but I’m afraid—*

I’ll start again. Jason said perhaps I was taken by surprise by the feelings I couldn’t identify, and maybe I thought I was going to die. *Ugh!* Okay, take a breath. Write. I read somewhere that a French slang phrase for orgasm is “*le petit mort”*, which means “the little death.” At last, a tiny use for my high school French classes.

Well, a seven-year-old child wouldn’t know what orgasm was and would have been overwhelmed and frightened by the intensity of it. And, yes, the books say that orgasm is possible at a very early age—even in toddlerhood.

But I resist the idea of being surprised by a sexual climax. Orgasm, for me, has always been an effort of will and concentration. Making myself stay present. I can’t believe I’m writing that down! It was never something that could have sneaked up on me unaware! Is that only because of my sexual damage? Maybe I should ask ***judy****.*

Sweetheart, can you tell me about the feelings you had when Hank was touching you?

*I didn’t want him to!*

I know. He took advantage of you, honey. There’s no way you could have stopped him. But the feelings he made you have… you couldn’t help them, but they had to feel nice.

*I was scared! I didn’t want him to do that to me. It was bad! He made me bad!*

And right now, my heart was racing, and my stomach was in knots.

No, honey. It wasn’t your fault. You weren’t bad. It wasn’t your fault. You only wanted to be loved. It wasn’t your fault….

I am rocking myself even as I scribble these words and weep with her. I feel like a voyeur trying to see back inside my own memory! Asking myself—*asking her*—those questions feels like abusing her all over again. She doesn’t want to remember because it was too shameful. I don’t have to make her remember.

But I know anyway. The whole memory of that time with Hank is focused on *his* effort to stimulate *me*. He never asked me to touch him, because his excitement came from the power he had over a female—of any age—the “high” of controlling her at the deepest level. Making her want that feeling.

I’d rather he’d have held a knife to my throat!

I cried for a minute and then I got up for a glass of water. Settled again. Deep breath.

Maybe if there was a knife to my throat, I wouldn’t have felt so responsible. I’m sure he told himself he was doing me a kindness, making me feel good. He told himself this wasn’t abuse, it was a tender introduction to loving.

Ha! The truth is, even the gentlest touch that overpowers the will of another is *still* abuse, and the child is violently stripped of her self-control. It’s just another rape. Love has nothing to do with it, he was getting his own rocks off in the most perverted way. She is humiliated in the most agonizing way, because she has to hate herself forever for the badness he introduced her to.

No wonder this memory hurt so much. It’s still painful, even after the healing I received. Because it brought me face to face with my inability y to prevent my own frightening pleasure. I never asked for it. He forced it on me because there was no way to say no to it. I was *not* responsible! But ***judy*** doesn’t believe it yet. Poor child.

***judy*** has been trying to prevent orgasm during my whole marriage—disconnecting the wires to eliminate several paths altogether, and making sure the other lines are faulty. And then there’s the depression, because I am *bad*.

To be able to admit this memory now, along with what it means, is a sign that ***judy*** feels safe enough with the adult me, and safe enough with Jason, to reveal her horror of it. Is there any greater shame than pleasure? But *she* had the courage to face it. That is evidence of healing.

Thursday, November 23rd, 11:00 P.M.

It hurts to know that I was a victim to more than one person. Jason says it’s very common, once personal boundaries are damaged, to be further abused by several perpetrators. Abusers must have radar that picks out victims who can’t resist them because they don’t know how. I was taught by my experience to be afraid of *all* men.

This afternoon I was thinking about my fear of my stepfather, Richard. I remembered a time, after Carla had left home to get married—I must have been sixteen or seventeen—that Richard came into my room while I was lying on my bed reading a book. He walked in without warning, and was suddenly, startlingly, standing over me. I stared hard at my book, ignoring him. I was usually so compliant! What courage did it take in that moment, to change how I reacted to him—to refuse to look at him?

He sat down on the edge of my bed, and without a word, leaned over and gave me an awkward kiss on the cheek. Rigid with hate and fear, I held my breath and fixed my eyes unflinchingly on the page, willing him to go away, but unable to speak.

After a minute, he stood and walked out of my room, leaving me shaking. My experience with men told he that he was about to be sexual with me. Were we alone in the house? Horrible thought. Was I misinterpreting his intentions? Expecting to be treated as others had treated me? Was I right about his intentions, but successful in repelling his approach for—*what?* Resisting with only stony silence? I don’t know. For whatever reason, he left the room. At least that was one time it didn’t happen. But Richard didn’t abuse me like *that*! Did he?

Friday, November 24th, 2:00 A.M.

Jason asked me to do a diagram of the house I was raised in. My first reaction was revulsion. I couldn’t have explained why the idea bothered me so much, but now that I’ve finally done the drawing, I can understand.

A diagram of the house is specific, so I can’t avoid seeing some very disturbing reminders. Like this one, that somehow never came up in our sessions: the fact that my bedroom had no door! No boundaries. No protection. Privacy was nonexistent. *Your room, your possessions, your body is not your own. Do not withhold any of it from anyone who wants it. Ugh!*

Until Carla left to get married two weeks after her eighteenth birthday (as fast as the law would allow), she and I shared a room that had been part of a sort of ramshackle addition to the back of the house. There were two rooms, separated by a partition. Closer to the rest of the house, the first room was used for sewing, and junk was piled everywhere. There was no framework for a door to be hung, either between the hallway of the house and the sewing room, or between the sewing room and our bedroom. There were only openings. Like invitations.

On the diagram, I drew Gary’s room, next to the family bathroom, with the closet where he’d made a hole to watch me in the shower. I drew the kitchen where there was no birthday cake for me. The back yard with the swing set, and the corner where Hank took advantage of me.

But there was more. I drew the row of cedars that formed a giant hedge fifteen feet across—we called them “The Bushes”—and twenty feet high, never pruned, and growing wild and thick, right down to the ground. We weren’t allowed to play in them… there might be snakes or something. But Gary used his machete to hack out tunnels through them. I have the feeling that the only snake in those bushes was Gary. *Something* bad happened in there.

The Bushes took up the whole empty lot between our property and the neighbor to the west, a feature Mother was especially glad about when she chose our house to buy, as they made for “privacy”. Which meant the neighbors could hear less of the yelling. Or whatever else the neighbors shouldn’t know about.

Sketching in the chain-link fence that separated our house from the neighbors on the east brought to mind their adult son Dennis, who was—strange. He was years older, yet he befriended Gary. That’s not enough to prove he was strange. Did he live with his parents? Is there something else about him? The thought doesn’t go away. There’s something. And I’m willing to remember it, whatever is *true*.

Monday, November 27th, 2:00 A.M.

Another bomb just went off. Here I am again, after awakening from a nightmare that became a flashback that has me shaking with panic. I’ll be with Jason this afternoon, and we’ll ask God for healing. But in the meantime, I have to get through the hours. I have to write it down. It’s Dennis, the neighbor….

God, help me with this! I’m so afraid! I can’t make the words go on the paper. Why is there so much *fear?* I was never violently abused. Nobody ever beat me. I have not felt any memories of physical pain.

My suffering through the magnitude of terror I am experiencing at this moment makes me shudder in empathy for the victims who lived through unimaginable agonies from the physical damage of sadistic abusers. It is no wonder that so many of them developed multiple personalities. What strength they had! To find a way, *any* way at all, to survive those horrors with all of those parts of themselves set aside, dissociated, for the day they could find those parts and learn to love them. I’m in awe of their courage to exist through it.

My own fear rises in my throat and threatens to choke me. But I *will* survive it. I am *not* going to let my abusers win.

So, grit your teeth and write it down!

Dennis raped me. He didn’t hold a knife, either. Gary must have told him, “She likes it.” Maybe he suggested it. Kind words were enough for a twenty-something-year-old man to lure a ten-year-old child who was so starved for affection. It was still rape. The word “no” was disallowed years ago.

The neighbor family was among those who were alarmist enough during the Cold War to build a bomb shelter in their backyard, right next door to us. Dennis, a ham radio enthusiast, invited me into the shelter to see his radio. The tour of the tiny living quarters included one of the beds.

I’m not even going to ask ***judy***. All I can feel is the numbness. No pain. No pleasure. Just pressure. The weight of his body on top of mine. The shame! And fear.

There is no way to know how many times it happened. With Dennis, with Hank, or with Gary. Certainly, the memories I have are only representative of other times. But each time was marked by the same despairing powerlessness. Hopelessness. Fear.

Monday, November 27th, 10:30 P.M.

Thank God for the relief I feel after a memory healing session. It isn’t Jason’s power. He doesn’t have any magic. I’m sure secular therapists are helpful to their clients, too, because God works for our good, even if we don’t know how to define the blessing. Benjamin Franklin said, “God heals, but the doctor takes the fee.” Whatever name we have for a power greater than ourselves, there is a force of love that wants to heal us.

I think I see why the memory with Dennis was so powerful, and why fear has been such a strong element, even without physical pain being part of it. It’s because knowing about Dennis makes it impossible not to think of the *list* that keeps growing longer. The list of males that had access to me and took advantage of it. I had almost forgotten about Leo, briefly mother’s boyfriend when I was five; Hank, when I was seven; Gary, when I was nine. Now Dennis when I was ten. If any of those ages are the right ones. They’re based on feelings.

Were there others? How many names are on that list? People who used this body I thought I knew. I was powerless to have prevented anyone at all. Any sexual overture would have frozen me in my tracks into total passivity.

Somehow the *badness* that ***judy*** shamed herself with is magnified with each name added to that list. *Couldn’t I have stopped any of them*? She cries. *No.* Each time the terror of her absolute defenselessness was brand new.

Tuesday, November 28th, 6:30 A.M.

I don’t think I can keep telling myself I didn’t experience orgasm with Gary. Because somehow, I know that Hank abused him too. And he would have coached Gary on what he thought was the best part of sex. Which, for Hank it was making the partner—the victim—the woman—no, *the little girl*—feel pleasure.

Gary knew how.

And Gary was friends with Dennis. What nasty conversations did *they* have? So, all bets are off. Orgasm was always a possibility. Oh, my God.

I sat down to write this just after David left the house to go to work. The girls will be waking up in a few minutes, and I have to get them off to school. Then I’ll go for a walk. A run. And let out feelings.

This is not my fault. My body only did what it was designed to do. It’s about their using a child. I didn’t start it. I just didn’t know how to stop it.

This is not my fault.

Wednesday, November 29th, 1:30 A.M.

Maybe I should give up and write more during the daytime. Would that mean I could sleep better at night? No, probably I would just end up finding something else to work through in the middle of the night.

Reading yet another book about recovery from sexual abuse (this one quite clinical) this afternoon, there was one sentence that hit home pretty hard. The book referred to another trend observed in survivors of incest. Apparently, child victims often develop the habit of sleeping with one hand or foot free of the bedcovers.

When I was a kid, I could never go to sleep unless I had one foot out from under the covers. I would have steadfastly maintained that it didn’t mean anything.

The author of the book, after hearing clients describe that habit, conjectured that victims who slept that way might be seeking a way to have a part of themselves separate from what happened in the bed. Maybe it was an effort to withhold *something* from the total control the abusers exercised over their bodies.

I can believe that. It was as if I might hope that my right foot could say no to possession and powerlessness, while the rest of my body could never find a way to prevent it.

Is there no end to the layers of hurt I keep peeling back, only to find more pain underneath? I *know* it wasn’t all my fault. I *know* God is with me, or I couldn’t exist through the overwhelming sorrow I continue to feel. But I want to be finished! How long am I going to hurt?

Friday, December 1st, 2:15 A.M.

Another memory will show up sometime soon. I just got an edge of a picture of something. There’s more to come.

This flashback is like a silent movie clip, in black and white. I see a hand, but there is no face. I can’t make out who it is. Fingers, with meticulously groomed nails. Fingers in my vagina. There’s another name on *the list*, but I don’t know who it is.

I’ve used up all the adjectives for the grief and sadness I’m wallowing in. I’m so sick of it. But it isn’t going to stop until the shameful things have been said. *God, give me strength. Can’t I be finished?*

# Chapter 8

**Current Events**

**So many interlocking issues showed up all together. I couldn’t separate them; I had to sort out all of them at once. All the old ghosts roaming around in my head were very much current problems. The abuse didn’t stop when I left my childhood home. I was still at the mercy of the shame which had been installed as an ever-present, automatically accessed implement of torture.**

**The journal represented the progress I was making as I worked with Jason, but it never captured all the painful steps I took between entries. I know there were hundreds of little revelations I never wrote and can’t identify now. There was never a day without some new awareness. I never found a way to take a real break from the process.**

Saturday, December 2nd, 11:30 P.M.

Another reason I wake to write at night: I’m alone, the house is quiet, and I won’t be interrupted. Writing is processing the issues my counselor raises, figuring out and feeling the meaning of the puzzle pieces that show themselves. Examining them, I’m exposing myself with such vulnerability—I can’t be observed or interrupted. My only safety as a child was in being alone. I didn’t trust anyone. Any time someone was with me there was risk of hurt.

As for the reason I’m awake on this particular night:

Last week, David took our daughters out of school for a special afternoon together—Christmas shopping and dinner out. None of them had ever met my therapist, and both girls were curious about who I spent so much time with. So they all met me at Jason’s office. I introduced them all to Jason, and they talked for five minutes, then trooped out the door.

At home that evening, I asked David for his first impression of Jason. He answered, “He seems to be a non-threatening kind of guy, which I guess is a good thing for a therapist to be.”

I responded instantly in defense of my counselor. “I don’t know, I can imagine that Jason might be kind of sexy under other circumstances,” I said.

David gave me a funny look, but then one of the girls interrupted, and we never came back to the conversation.

Just now, I finally *heard* what I said! Here is more evidence of how very messed up my brain is! How confused!

I automatically and unconsciously equated the word *nonthreatening* with the meaning “nonsexual”. Conversely, I must have the word *threatening* equated with “sexual.” There’s a whole unconscious dictionary inside me that contains the skewed meaning of words the way they were back then. Where did I learn that threatening means sexual?

From every male who used me, even funny, charismatic Hank!

If you met my brother Gary today, you’d consider him a threatening person, all right. He was already a threatening person when I was a little girl. He taught me that threats and sex were inextricably linked.

So why am I always attracted to “nonthreatening” kinds of men? I *like* men who are intelligent and gentle and kind, men who listen well and have a sense of humor. My husband is like that. Jason’s like that. Every other man I’ve ever felt comfortable with is like that. If my inner child thinks nonthreatening men are nonsexual, why am I drawn to men I perceive as nonsexual?

Because my inner child doesn’t want sex to be demanded of her. My inner child doesn’t want sex! She wants love. Of course, my nonthreatening husband David *is* definitely a sexual person. So that didn’t work out.

What about women who are attracted to men who *would* be perceived as threatening? Maybe like Sylvester Stallone, or Jack Nicholson? I’m stereotyping them. Those macho, “I’m gonna be rough on you cuz I know that’s the way you like it, baby,” kind of guys. Look at all the women who find themselves attracted to “bad boys,” in relationships with one after another abusive men! Show them a “safer” William Hurt or a James Garner kind of man, and they’ll say, “He’s not my type!”

We incest victims seem to fall into two groups, but sometimes we switch groups. Group A says, “If you love me, you *won’t* ask me for sex.” Group B says, “If you love me, you *will* ask me for sex.” Somebody scrambled our brains.

I switch groups depending on the situation, a maneuver which has been completely unconscious, but nonetheless had to have been very confusing to my husband. Somehow, whatever assumption he might make will probably be wrong for that occasion. Poor guy. Poor me, too. I haven’t figured this one out yet.

Monday, December 4th, 10:00 P.M.

We had yet another conversation about sex in my session today. My inner child resists the topic still, but I guess she hasn’t got boundaries enough to refuse to talk about it. And I know I need to talk about it, or it won’t ever get healed.

Jason brought up the topic of splitting. I used to think that word referred to dissociating into multiple personalities. Of course, people with multiple personalities, or dissociative disorder (since the books say there is a continuum of ways people dissociate) have, as a common denominator, severe trauma in early childhood. Most often that’s sexual abuse, which shows how serious sexual trauma is.

I was thinking about the word *disorder.* Why do they label the *survivor* as having dissociative *disorder* anyway? It seems to me that developing multiple personalities is probably the sanest, most creative coping mechanism they could have found to survive the violent hell they couldn’t otherwise escape. The *disorder* existed in that crazy, abusive environment, not in the survivors.

Splitting can be less extreme, though. It’s a way of dissociating by suddenly not being present to what’s going on. Jason asked me where I *went* during the abuse, so as not to feel what was happening.

My best guess is that during the abuse, I went to the same place I still go sometimes, when I space out in the middle of a conversation, or when I zone out and miss my freeway exit. I split to some other place inside my head. In the middle of making love, I find myself suddenly thinking of grocery shopping. It’s hard to stay present.

Some victims relate a sense of floating above themselves, watching what is happening to that little girl on the bed. I’m not conscious of ever watching myself in that way. My splitting was more like daydreaming. It was safer to be *anywhere* other than the part of my mind that was aware and feeling. I just disconnected. It got to be automatic.

So a large part of my sexual dysfunction comes from not being able to pay attention to sexual feelings. Given the circumstances, that seems quite rational. Pleasure felt dangerous because***judy***thinks pleasure makes her *bad.*

If she let herself feel arousal, she was painfully vulnerable to losing control in orgasm. Since sex was something she couldn’t prevent, she tried her best not to be a part of it. Poor frightened child.

Tuesday, December 5th, 3:00 A.M.

***judy*** and I are awake again. For the last hour we’ve been venting grief about her damaged sexuality. Oh, the convolutions of her behavior that were forced in avoidance of pain!

We agonized over “splitting” in a poem:

*I was hollowed out.*

*I left behind the flesh and feeling on my bed.*

*Averted eyes so I could swear*

*I never saw what happened there—*

*What breathless gasps*

*And silent screams*

*And tearless eyes*

*And tortured dreams*

*Were stuffed behind my memory.*

Thursday, December 7th

With Jason’s encouragement, I’ve been to several meetings of Survivors of Incest Anonymous, a twelve-step group for survivors of incest. It’s based on the Alcoholics Anonymous program. My feelings about it are a tangle of conflicts. How do I decide if this is the group for me?

I’ve needed a group for a long time. For months I’ve been spilling my guts to assorted friends who don’t have a clue how to respond to me. Their bewilderment has made me feel like a freak. Some people aren’t safe for that kind of honesty. But who *is* safe?

 I need to hear other women’s stories, to know I’m not alone, that I’m not weird. The meetings have been a relief—no one there has been shocked. We all have common experiences. One woman named Annie may get to be a friend. We have a bond of understanding that doesn’t exist with people who had “normal” childhoods.

I was amazed at my first visit to see fifteen grown women cuddling teddy bears. They have an assortment of stuffed animals for “loaners,” or you can bring your own. It *has* affirmed the reality of our inner children.

I’m getting less self-conscious about holding a “loaner” bear, which is a surprising comfort to ***judy***. A hurt little girl needs a friend to hang on to. I wish I’d had one back then. I don’t remember ever having had a teddy bear as a child. Not that it should surprise me. But David was surprised that *anybody* could be raised without a teddy bear.

Yet I’m concerned that I’m hearing a lot of wallowing—we don’t seem to be focusing on growth. Is anybody moving through their stuff, or are they planning on being hurt and angry forever? The literature they read at the beginning suggests trying several meetings, but I haven’t found another group. Some groups are healthier than others,

And some of the stories scare me. It’s easy to minimize my own pain when I hear the horrors some children went through. Jason has validated my trauma over and over. He cautions me not to deny its importance. There is no healing in denial.

Putting number values on individual suffering is pointless. All injuries need attention for healing to happen. Don’t dismiss a broken leg because someone else has a broken back.

In learning to parent my inner child, I don’t want to repeat Carla’s mistake when she compared my suffering to Jesus’ death on the cross. If I said to ***judy***, “come on, it wasn’t that bad! People got hurt worse than you!” I’d be continuing the same minimizing I’ve always done, and I’d short-circuit the healing process for my own *real* injury.

I’m still evaluating this group. Is it a question of boundaries, to be able to protect myself? Would quitting be taking care of myself, or being weak? I still need someplace safe to talk.

Sunday, December 10th, 12:30 A.M.

I don’t know why I even tried to go to sleep. In the middle of lovemaking with my husband, I had a mini-flashback. A sudden awareness of a recurrent feeling of anger.

I guess for years I’ve stuffed down reactions of irritation at David for things he said or did to communicate that he wanted sex. I have never even identified it as anger, much less been able to recognize the source.

After eighteen years of marriage, the rut we’re in is pretty deep. Both of us know what the expectations are, so why complicate the matter? One of us just locking the bedroom door is an obvious signal, like a command. If *I* lock the door, *I* must be raping *him*, because I’m responsible for sex. Bad ***judy***.

If *David* locks the door, or gives any of the other signals I’ve memorized, then I feel as though he’s summoning me to “assume the position.” Prepare to be used. So I’m a helpless nine-year-old again, about to be raped. If that’s what’s been down inside me every time we’ve had sex all these years, it should come as no surprise that orgasm is difficult and often not worth the effort.

Even more painful, no matter how sweet David is being, if he smiles and says, “Why don’t you come here and take that off?” there’s a part of me who’s *hearing* an order. I’m a lamb led to slaughter, but at the same time I’m flashing to feeling responsible for what happens—I am choosing to take off my garments, walk to the bed (I am not being dragged, led, or carried) and have sex voluntarily! Nobody held a knife to my throat!

***Judy*** cries out, *Don’t make me responsible for what* you *want! I never asked for that burden! I just didn’t know how to stop it.*

She’s angry for being set up.

How I envy women who don’t have all these triggers rigged to every little innocent phrase and look associated with sex! Words and movements I haven’t identified are still setting off alarms in my head, producing fear and anger in response to what happened back then. I’m feeling shame that has been submerged for decades.

Tuesday, December 12th

I read my last journal entries aloud to Jason yesterday. Somehow that’s easier than just saying it.

“How are you going to tell David?” he asked.

I knew that was coming. I had just refused to think about it.

So last night, after dinner, while the girls were watching TV, I read *that* journal entry to my husband. I didn’t know how to say it otherwise. It was a harrowing conversation for us both.

David interrupted me several times, obviously hurt by what I had written. He’s always thought our sexual relationship was the strongest part of our marriage. The discussion was mostly reacting to each other with knee-jerk reflexes, and rational dialogue quickly degenerated to angry accusations.

But we both finally recognized how we were hurting each other and backed up to try and smooth over the damage. But I couldn’t stop crying, and both of us were frustrated.

Then David stood up and said, “Get your coat. We need to get out of the house.” He wouldn’t take no for an answer. He instructed the girls to watch TV and keep the door locked. They’re old enough to stay on their own. And we left.

In the car he was quiet and tense as he drove. Yet he wasn’t angry anymore. I tried to continue the conversation through my tears, but it seemed to become more complicated rather than clearer as we struggled to find words. Who ever taught either of us to communicate anyway?

Then he pulled into the parking lot of the nearby department store where I’d had a part-time job last Christmas.

“Come on,” he said, opening the car door.

I was still crying. “Why? I’m a wreck!” I said through my tears. “I still know half the people who work there!” I grabbed his arm as he started to get out of the car.

Still sitting, he shut the car door, turned back to me, and began to cry himself. “I wanted to surprise you,” he said. “I wanted to buy a teddy bear for your inner child.”

So, then I really broke down. We sat in the front seat and held each other for fifteen minutes, both of us sobbing. I have no idea who may have passed and stared at the couple having a tandem nervous breakdown in the Chevy. I didn’t care.

David wanted to comfort me. He wanted to show ***judy*** she was loved. He needed comfort himself, after the shock of seeing the best part of our faltering relationship suddenly exposed as a lie all these years.

At last, we went inside and bought the most beautiful furry brown bear ***judy*** had ever seen. And it didn’t matter who noticed the tears in my eyes.

Wednesday, December 13th, 2:00 A.M.

How easy it is to forget my blessings when I’m in the midst of pain! I’m blessed to have David, despite the distance that separates us most of the time. We still have moments that remind us of our possibilities. Our breakdown before buying Bear was one of those moments. I still long for a more continuous bond.

I wrote:

*When you first wanted me,*

*I thought you’d fill*

*That empty place*

*In my soul.*

*Relief.*

*Somebody cared.*

*I didn’t have to be alone.*

*But I was afraid.*

*My fear coiled in on itself.*

*Where once it seemed*

*Our souls had touched*

*My panic hollowed out*

*An empty void between.*

*Cold, hard jabs*

*Were easier,*

*Safer,*

*Than trust.*

*We lost each other.*

*But we still had moments.*

*Reminders of touching more*

*Than bodies.*

*Inside, I cried out*

*To bring you back.*

*But my lips were smiling,*

*Said “I’m okay”*

*While I closed the lid,*

*Muffled the inner voice*

*That wanted to be known.*

*Contained was more familiar,*

*Risk too terrible to face.*

*But now,*

*Someone else*

*Has helped me know myself*

*Shown me I am*

*Strong enough*

*To begin*

*To trust,*

*To risk,*

*Even when it hurts.*

*I’m learning to fill*

*My own empty place.*

*I’m asking out loud.*

*Come back to me.*

*I want you*

*For who you are*

*Instead of who I’m not.*

*I’m learning*

*How to love*

*Why to give,*

*What to receive.*

*I hope for more.*

*Come back to me.*

Thursday, December 14th, 2:15 A.M.

I took Bear to my session yesterday afternoon. I was a little embarrassed to carry him into the office.

Jason didn’t seem to think it was odd at all. “What’s your bear’s name?”

“He’s just—Bear,” I answered self-consciously.

“He?”

*Why IS Bear a “he?”*

“I don’t know why, he just *is*,” I answered.

Jason asked me if he could hold Bear and took him from me with an unexpected air of… reverence! I watched in amazement as he set Bear carefully on his knee, nestling the furry shoulders comfortably in the crook of his right arm. He cupped his hand around the sole of Bear’s small foot and looked back to me for a moment, as if to include me in his interaction with Bear.

Then, as Jason began speaking solemnly to Bear, it gradually dawned on me that he was not holding a stuffed animal on his knee. He was holding my inner child, safe against him. He never touched her where little girls are afraid to be touched. He respected her need to keep her body private. He treated her like she was a real person. And he never abused her trust.

Jason told my inner child how very fortunate she was to be welcomed into a family who would love her and take good care of her. He told her she was safe and protected from harm. And that she would always be listened to and believed in.

Receiving Bear back into my arms, I also received my inner child, with a renewed awareness of her vulnerability. Somehow, the adult me has to develop the protective boundaries she was never allowed to have. That’s still very hard for me. but awareness is the first step toward success in making a change. I *do* have determination going for me. That child has suffered enough. I *will* learn to keep her safe.

Saturday, December 16th, 1:30 A.M.

*God, show me my boundaries.* Over and over, I see myself sliding past the guardrails I try to put up. The guardrails don’t stop me. Just before I started therapy, those months of miserably caretaking Tina during her divorce only happened because I didn’t recognize the distinction between her problem and my life. A boundary was only a word, with a definition I knew intellectually. But I didn’t see how to apply the concept. I was so desperate to quell the turmoil *inside me* (turmoil I first noticed when I heard about her husband’s affair)*,* and I tried to fix *my distress* by reaching into *her* life to tinker with *her* relationship. All the intensity of my caretaking efforts didn’t help either one of us.

Sort of like, if my washing machine stopped working, and I tried to fix it by raking leaves in Tina’s yard. Her pile of leaves had nothing to do with my laundry piling up all around me. That’s how much sense it would make for me to distract myself from the true source of my distress by trying to control somebody else. But I now discover it’s a very common, if crazy thing to do.

I was so enmeshed with her that Tina’s disaster seemed like my own. When she asked for my help sometimes tried to say no, but then she looked so sad, and… I said yes. As she poured out her story—maybe she was asking for a listening ear, but—I heard, maybe from *inside myself*, an emergency demand for an immediate solution. Her raw, unsolved catastrophe horrified me. I wanted to stop the sirens going off in her life—I wanted to *fix* her abandonment because I was *feeling* *my own* cataclysmic abandonment. I didn’t recognize her sirens had awakened my past, which suddenly surged into terrible view, demanding attention, craving healing. My own old abandonment had never been fixable. Maybe I could fix hers. I certainly tried.

But I’m getting that I need to learn to differentiate between my territory and somebody else’s. How do I take care of my own self, and put up a fence to protect myself from somebody else who encroaches into my privacy, who bosses me, or judges my behavior, or tries to manage what is my own concern? A fence that really works to keep others out? When was that ever allowed? And how do I stop myself from barging past somebody else’s fences meant to protect *their* rights and responsibilities that are none of my business? When nobody appointed me their guardian? Like I think I did with Tina. Because it sure *felt* like an imperative at the time—in my head, it seemed like I *had* to find a resolution for her, or some worse disaster would overtake all of us.

Jason said once that sexual abuse creates the most significant boundary damage of any kind of life trauma. It teaches us that others will control us and we’re not allowed to be in control of ourselves. So, did he figure I was an incest victim from his first observation of how nuts I got trying to fix Tina’s family? Because that was messed up.

I was living Tina’s life, cleaning her kitchen while she cried in the bedroom, never mind that my own kitchen was piled with dishes. Picking up her kids from school, while my own daughters were walking home from school on their own and letting themselves into an empty house. Et Cetera. If she made helpless noises I rushed right over. I never knew how to say no to her. She wasn’t doing anything wrong, just being in the middle of her own crisis. It was *me* who couldn’t set a limit!

And even now, I watch myself automatically exposing my own vulnerability. Somehow that’s another illustration of the same principle, but I find it hopelessly confusing. I can’t make the necessary connections to understand it in practice.

After Christmas, I’ll be traveling to see Carla at her home in another state. I’m belatedly recognizing that I’ve been chasing after that relationship for months, and it isn’t balanced. Jason brought my attention to the fact that since I started therapy, by my own report, I call her on the phone ten times more than she calls me—mostly to talk about what I’m learning in therapy, and from books, and to urge her to read those books, which she never does. And to get her confirmation on stuff I remember. Carla represents my best hope for family I can hang on to. And I desperately want a family.

Carla rarely asks me to stop talking about incest, because *her* boundaries are damaged. But I’m finally recognizing that she changes the subject, and she’s usually the one who says she has to end the call. She backs away from talking about my therapy and old family stuff because it’s painful for her. She’s not ready to deal with her own buried pain yet. So how can she support me? I guess she can’t.

But when I try to tell myself to hold a boundary—to *stop* and withhold some of my own private pain from Carla, because she’s not ready to listen to that, it’s like—I might as well try to be in control of my progress across an ice-covered pond while wearing high-heeled shoes. Maybe the laws of gravity and momentum are in control, but I’m sure not. *God, I need help with this.*

Carla can’t help me with what I’m going through right now. So how can I be with her in person and *not* talk about it? *Help me out, God. I can’t see where it’s safe and where it’s not, and I haven’t got any brakes.*

Tuesday, December 19th, 2:45 A.M.

Yesterday’s session included another discussion about sex. *Ugh*. I still hear *Why does it have to be sex?* over and over, all the way to Jason’s office. Talking about sexual pleasure is so shameful for ***judy****.*

I told Jason about the image I have of sexual pleasure making me just a bug under a magnifying glass—being observed, on display, when I am most vulnerable and powerless and out of control. Telling that to Jason I felt almost like I was letting him watch too. *He’s another man*! How can I let him know all this about me?

Uh-oh. Just this moment, here’s another flash—a different kind. I just thought of a story David told me years ago, one that always gave me chills. David pooh-poohed my disgust; said I had no sense of humor. I never understood my own reaction, until now.

David told me once that when he was a teenager, his brother Greg excitedly beckoned for David to join him in the family laundry room. A fascinating performance had just begun. David and his brother knelt together to observe a large roach twitching in the middle of the floor. She lay on her back, wriggling her legs in the air (David pantomimes this part enthusiastically). She was bringing baby roaches into the world. Why did he tell me this story?

The two brothers cheered the cockroach on as she writhed in focused concentration, delivering each egg. There was a pause and hushed stillness for a moment as she gathered her strength for the next effort. Finally, under the gleeful encouragement of David and Greg, she brought forth the last of her young, and lay quietly exhausted.

Both brothers congratulated her on her efforts. Greg counted the eggs she had labored so hard to produce.

Then David squashed the roach and her whole brood with his foot. And they laughed.

Funny story? It was to David. But it was a story that made me recoil because it triggered a vision of myself as the bug on the floor. For the entertainment of powerful males, I put on a command sexual performance. My own pleasure—like the laying of eggs or live birthing, a natural function intended in the design of the female body—was the subject of amused derision. Not only did my abusers make me responsible for the abuse (“*she wanted it!”*), but they also ridiculed me for my natural responses. Then stepped on me. I was rejected and left for dead.

No wonder orgasm depressed me! No wonder ***judy*** set up so many barricades to pleasure. What deeper humiliation is there than that? Pleasure made me the object of scorn when all I wanted was for someone to care about me. And none of them would admit to hurting me. They’d all say, “*She asked for it*!” And of course, the further trap was, resisting orgasm meant another hateful judgment: “*Frigid!*” A pretty effective double bind.

*Of course*, victims have tremendous conflict about sexuality! We were brainwashed. The shame our abusers carried was forcibly transferred to our shoulders. But I won’t carry it anymore.

*God! Take away the shame.*

Tuesday, December 19th, 10:00 P.M.

I took a walk in the neighborhood after dinner, but it wasn’t enough to quiet the image that persists in my head. I’m searching for a face to attach to the flashback that’s been hanging around for nearly three weeks without resolution. The black-and-white image of a male hand—fingers in my vagina. I still can’t *see* who it is, but I know it’s not Gary or Hank or Dennis. The name that comes up in my mind as a possibility is Richard. Richard pared his fingernails scrupulously, daily cleaning them with his pocketknife. It seems like Richard’s hand.

I’m trying not to jump to any hasty conclusions, but I’ve been asking myself for months why I was always so afraid of him. I can’t remember a time I *wasn’t* afraid of his rage or his shouted profanity.

Did he abuse me physically? Carla says he never hit either of us girls—she has always had a much softer attitude toward him. She says he stabilized the family, with his good job. He made a commitment to a woman who already had four kids at home, and he stuck it out. They’re still married. Mother wasn’t an easy woman—depressed, angry, a terrible housekeeper. Carla says she always knew Richard loved us; he just wasn’t able to show it. That doesn’t feel the least bit true to me.

I’m not so sure he never hit me. I remember watching him unbuckle his belt. Was it to hit Gary? I draw a blank.

Was Richard’s emotional abuse sufficient to make me so afraid of him? He was tyrannical in so many ways. He never allowed me or Carla to baby-sit for anyone outside the family; he said one of the kids might choke to death, and we’d be responsible. How’s that for instilling self-confidence in us? Of course, we were considered responsible enough to babysit our younger brothers. Because that was convenient for our parents. We were commodities to be used.

Richard’s decisions were arbitrary and unpredictable. If we asked for a privilege, he refused to answer until we came back and made as second request. He made us beg for the crumbs he doled out because it reinforced his power.

I submitted to his edicts because I was afraid to rebel. I had seen Mom pit herself against his rage. Up against him, she could be as loud and angry as he was, and she still never made any progress, never changed his mind. What chance did *I* have? I never dared to raise my voice to him. I could hardly bear to look him in the eye. I felt powerless and weak in his presence. Richard was absolute ruler in the house.

What does it say about him that Richard was so compulsive about being clean? He was a prude about his body. Summer and winter, he never went bare-chested. He always wore a white T-shirt, with his dress shirt over it when he went out, and dress pants and black oxford lace-up shoes. Then how do I remember seeing his shrapnel scars—on his bare chest? Or were they on his back? He never talked about it, but he was in the Air Force in World War II. And I remember his white boxer undershorts. Did he walk through the hall like that on his way to the bathroom? I don’t know.

Does everybody’s memory look like Swiss cheese? There’s another gap I hadn’t thought of before just now. My sixth-grade teacher was Mrs. Zimmerman—I can see her in my mind—she was *very* tall, kind of hunched, like she had a back problem. Glasses. She was very kind. Except that I *know* that Mr. Brooks was my sixth-grade teacher! I’m at a loss. School was my comfort zone, my only security, so why would I have a memory gap concerning anything about school? It was also in sixth grade that Mr. Brooks (or *was* it Mrs. Zimmerman?) gave me a D on my science notebook assignment. That doesn’t fit my profile at school—I got A’s in everything. I remember having a panic attack when I saw that grade. Was there something especially traumatic going on when I was in the sixth grade, that made me blank out whole chunks of my life? What happened?

I hate looking behind me and seeing—*nothing*! But forcing recall doesn’t seem to work. I guess it’ll show up when it’s ready. I feel queasy.

Wednesday, December 27th, 11:00 P.M. (At Carla’s house)

I think I’m getting the answer to my prayer for help with boundaries. I have been stubbornly resisting Jason’s subtle suggestions that I might be talking too much for my own good. If ten people or a hundred people know I’m a victim of incest, so what? If they are people I choose to tell, and I deem them safe, what’s the harm? I didn’t do anything wrong!

But I just now realized something about my willingness to share my story in conversation with people I know—my adult self is claiming an adult perspective on it that makes sense to me—but I’m exposing that frightened inner child to people she doesn’t know or trust. It doesn’t make sense to *her—*she’s not yet completely free of the idea that she’s *bad.* I’m trying to learn to parent her, but I’m scaring her instead.

It’s like a gossipy mother using her child as a conversation piece: “You know, she’s got the cutest birthmark on her bottom! Come here, honey, let me show Maxine!” That’s abusive to the child’s need for protection, for privacy.

Once ***judy’s*** shame is healed, and she can rest, safe inside me, it’ll be okay to share—it will blow the lid off the secrecy that perpetuates the cycle, which is a very worthwhile purpose for me, and for other victims. But for now, it hurts her, and I promised not to do that. I need a more constant awareness of where I need to set my boundaries.

I *am* learning. In-person here with Carla, in her home, I’m following her lead, and not trying to draw her into my process. It feels surprisingly natural to let her be where she is. That’s the only place her own pain will let her be. She’s scared of the stuff I’ve been dredging up, and I know what that fear feels like. I can give her space to deny all of it during this visit, if that’s her choice. Maybe she won’t ever be ready to do what I’ve chosen to do. So, I’m backing off. Which means I’m respecting the boundary I can see she wants for herself, even if she doesn’t know how to express it directly.

The books say that a lot of survivors don’t want to ever face down their history. And if they can find a way to contain it and still function in their lives, what business is it of mine? (*Their business*—isn’t that a privacy/boundary identifier?)

My own memories started popping of their own accord, beginning with the panic about Tina’s divorce that I couldn’t explain. I couldn’t find a way to shut off the stream of questions in my head, other than to seek answers in books, and then more books, and then therapy. For me, I couldn’t make it go underground again, and I couldn’t stand not knowing. But it’s not the same for everybody.

Speaking of backing off, I’m also backing off from Mom and Richard. I sent a Christmas gift for Mom, although now I think I need to break contact for a while. Several months ago, I agreed with Carla to pay half the cost of a joint gift for Richard. But now the idea of giving him *anything* makes me nauseous—it keeps me engaged, in the loop with them. I’m trying to respect *me* more.

Today I asked her to sign the card and send it for us both; that I would honor my commitment, but I didn’t want to be any more involved than that.

“Why?” She asked me.

So, I was right back to the question of boundaries. I don’t want to push her to work on what she doesn’t want to look at. But I also want to honor the truth that I’m in the middle of.

“Because I have a stronger and stronger sense that Richard must have raped me, too.”

Carla turned to look me full in the face, frowning. “No.”

End of conversation. I shrugged and let the matter drop. I didn’t try to convince her or defend myself or explain. I let her think whatever she needed to think. That feels like a boundary. I think it’s growth. But it’s hard to see her so firmly on the other side of the fence. She might be another loss, and I don’t want to lose her.

So, for the rest of our visit, we’ll talk about other things, including her struggles with family stuff, and money problems, and her marriage. We’ll go walking, and visit antique stores, and go out to lunch. There *won’t* be talks about therapy, even though that is taking up most of my attention these days. She’s a very different person than me, with a different way of approaching things that hurt her. I know Carla cares about me, and I don’t think she means to withdraw from me. She’s just trying to take care of herself the best she can. The painful things I’d want to say to her are too dangerous for her to hear yet. Maybe someday, or maybe not.

I need a sister. I hope we’ll find a healthier connection later on. Right now, I feel very alone, even while I’m with her. *God, help us to love each other.*

# Chapter 9

**Declaration of Independence**

**I always knew what rage was like—it was all too familiar in my family. I had vowed to never be like them. For all the “badness” *judy* believed I was, I tried to be a “good girl”, thinking in my primitive belief that good girls wouldn’t get hurt and abandoned. Maybe good girls would be loved instead. And good girls, *she* thought, didn’t get angry. So, I tried to follow the rules of the church. Within my marriage, I tried to submit the God I understood (wrathful, punishing, requiring rules to be followed), and to my husband. I tried to be meek, swallowing back my anger, giving compliant answers, so different than my mother’s.**

**But *judy* still thought of herself as a “whore” for all the sexual damage that had been done to her as a child, what seemed an unalterable identity despite the fact that I never strayed from the marriage bed, never even flirted with another man, ever. And *her* buried rage had only swelled inside, for all the ways I felt forced to lie to myself and the world: “Of course I’m not mad. No, I’m not depressed. I’m fine.”**

 **Finally learning to get honest is messy, at best.**

Monday, January 1st, 3:00 A.M.

Starting a brand-new year never seemed important to me before. This year feels different. For the first time in my life, the idea of a new beginning seems like a real possibility. I have hope. Hopelessness has permeated the very air I’ve breathed all my life, until now. Even so, I would never have admitted it. Hopelessness, like depression, meant craziness. It was too shameful to concede. Another old family lie.

My load of shame is considerably lighter now than it was a year ago. I have joy in increasing measure, but I still hurt. Over and over, I hear ***judy***, at odd times, saying *Jason knows! He knows all those bad, sexual things about me! Why does it have to be sex?*

With her voice in my head, I go right into those old feelings of shame and panic. So I have to be the parent to her and tell her that it isn’t her fault. That Jason doesn’t think she’s bad. And I know she’s not bad. And that eases it a little.

Old shame goes hand in hand with isolation. I need to know I’m not alone. I still need to know I’m not alone. I still need to know that other women have the same shame, the same struggles. I need to talk about it in safety.

The twelve-step support group filled some of that need, but that particular group didn’t seem to be working on the “steps” for recovery. Maybe there are others that do. The members of the one I attended were just sharing heartbreaking stories. There was nobody to help us stay focused on growth. I had trouble avoiding codependency with some of the other women, who were looking for a caretaker like me. I can’t rescue anybody else now. My old pain still consumes all my energy. So, I decided I didn’t feel safe there, and it was okay to draw a boundary—so I quit.

But I had met Annie in that group, and we became friends, sharing coffee after meetings. Annie called me to invite me to a new therapy group her counselor is beginning next week. I’ve decided to join and reduce my sessions with Jason back to twice a week. One of the benefits of a group is supposed to be that of experiencing a new “family” to fill some of the gap left by the loss of family of origin. I need family.

Wednesday, January 10th, 11:00 P.M.

Last night was our first group therapy session. There were eight survivors of sexual abuse, plus Laura, the therapist, and her assistant, Molly.

Laura has been a counselor for only a couple of years. She works within a government-subsidized agency to counsel victims of sexual assault. From what Annie has told me of her own therapy, I can see Laura has helped Annie make some good progress.

Most of our time last night was taken up with sharing some of our histories, punctuated with a lot of painful silence. I’ve loosened up a lot about what I feel safe in saying. Of course, my boundaries have always been flattened to ground-level anyway. So, I shared quite a bit. I have to watch myself, so I don’t take over, which I know is a way I try to feel in control.

Maybe it’s even harder for victims who are naturally introverts or responded to abuse by walling themselves inside impenetrable boundaries. Several group members are still where I spent a whole lot of time—just trying to make the words come out. Or they’re afraid to even start.

From the words that *did* come out, I can see that despite the different details of our histories, we have so much in common.

Maria, only nineteen, is the youngest of us. She’s preparing for the upcoming criminal prosecution of her father for sexually abusing her. He made her pregnant twice and made her get abortions both times. She struggled with guilt about that, besides all the rest. Olivia had several abortions too. Her father used her for sex from the time she was little, but she repeatedly told us how *bad* she was for taking his car when she finally ran away from home. How our abusers have warped our perspectives!

Meg was pregnant when she married the father of her baby, who happened to be her dad’s best friend. Just that statement gave me the creeps. Her dad abused her, and then he shared his only daughter with his buddy. Sick! She’s twenty-three now, still married to a fifty-year-old. She went from her father’s bed to a father-figure’s bed. I think she’s *still* submitting to incest, but she can’t see it. She says he’s different.

Susan huddled in a corner the whole time, and when she was invited to share, she fled into the hallway to cry, with Molly following her out to make sure she was safe. My heart went out to her. She’s so beautiful, but she carries herself like she doesn’t deserve to be among the living.

It was especially painful to watch Annie speak of her earliest memory, when she was two years old. (I used to have a hard time believing anyone could remember back that far, but I’ve developed a whole new respect for the human mind. There’s more under the surface than we’re willing to acknowledge. Most of us have shutdown access to ninety percent of our brains.)

Annie curled herself into a tight ball, her voice faltering as she struggled to describe the abuse she had already shared with me a few days ago on the phone. I knew what she was seeing, a brutal scene of her father hurting her—but the others saw only her fear.

She faded away from us, right before our eyes. Even in her silence, I felt her terror as the memory took over, and she was frozen, *back there* again.

*Get her out of there!* I thought, my anxiety shooting higher.

The longer Annie was silent, the more desperately I wanted to take her hand and pull her from the whirlpool of shame she was disappearing into.

The therapist didn’t seem to know how to help—she still hadn’t spoken.

Finally, I couldn’t stand any more. “Annie,” I said quietly, from where I sat across the room.

I waited as Annie stirred, and her eyes slowly focused on me.

“Did you seduce your father when you were only two?” I asked.

Her body jerked back like she’d been hit by a blast of arctic wind. But she was back in the room with us, and verbal again.

“Well… no!” Her posture seemed to relax a little.

“It wasn’t your fault, Annie,” I said. “Your father was a sick, violent man, and you were a helpless little child. You were innocent.”

Annie was still dazed, but gave a tiny smile, grateful.

The group focus shifted to me. Well, I guess I did take over, when I was trying not to. But everyone present was relieved to be pulled away from the pain of the flashback we’d all witnessed. Laura studied my face for a minute, and then changed the subject to something less intense.

But I think *my* intensity is just getting rolling. When I think of the cumulative agony of the eight victims in that room, I could scream. But this feeling isn’t the fear and shame and sadness I’ve been drowning in for months. It’s anger. What right does any human being have to cause the pain in those faces? They don’t deserve the submission of our tears. What they deserve is retribution!

We victims take on the responsibility for the sin and shame of what happened, because our abusers won’t acknowledge their real responsibility. We’re so immersed in shame; we can’t see how ludicrous it is to call the child the responsible one.

We were all stunned by Annie’s display of shame for what happened to her as a toddler before she could communicate in clear sentences or reach a doorknob or go the bathroom by herself! What control did she have over any aspect of her environment?

It brought home to me how very monstrous are the lies they told us. How horrified society should be that an abuser could use a baby as he did and then brainwash her into believing it was *her* badness that manipulated *him* into violating her innocence at that age! She was helpless!

And because of the emotional and spiritual abuse we suffered, we were trained to be just as helpless to defend ourselves at the age of five or nine or eighteen. We’re *still* helpless, as long as we believe their lies about our responsibility. Until we stop accepting the shame they dumped on us, we can never get out of that whirlpool that sucks us ever deeper into despair.

We’ve been victims all our lives, and we’re victims still. But I refuse to be counted a victim any longer. I survived it, and I will get beyond it, and I will not carry my abusers’ shame anymore. Enough is enough!

Friday, January 12th, 200 A.M.

Oh, what I would give for a week’s worth of sleeping eight hours straight each night! But sleep disturbances are common to survivors. And we have to learn to live with what we’ve got. So, I write.

*Do you have a message for me, God?*

Just write it down. Even bits and pieces help.

I read my last journal entry to Jason in yesterday’s session. When I finished, he said mildly, “That sounds to me like a declaration of independence.”

I gave him a wry smile. “Yeah, but a declaration of independence is just the beginning. The American declaration was followed by years of war!”

“What battles are going on right now?” he asked.

I paused to analyze. “I guess part of me is still afraid to be angry because it makes me like my family. And because God might not love me if I’m angry.”

“Does God withdraw love as easily as that?”

My whole idea of God was so different now. “No,” I replied honestly. “I know God accepts me. But that little girl inside me still needs constant reassurance. Anger still scares her.”

“Hasn’t that little girl been angry all along?”

He had me there. “I guess I’ve already admitted that. I’ve tried to keep it bottled up inside. But it explodes when I lose control.”

“Your family taught you by example that anger was ‘bad’. While they were raging out of control, did you ever have permission to express anger?”

“No. If I had voiced the smallest amount, it would have been a trigger for more of their rage to be dumped on me.”

Jason nodded. “But you’ve learned that you weren’t responsible for the dysfunction in their lives. Their *behavior* when they were angry was wrong, because it hurt other people. But even Jesus showed anger. Sometimes anger is the appropriate response.”

Journaling now, I remember that somewhere in the Bible it says, “Be angry and sin not.”

But how is that possible? What is *appropriate* anger? And how do I express it without turning into *them?*

God gave us the whole range of human emotions, including anger. I’ve read so much about this stuff. But what I’ve learned intellectually hasn’t sunk down to the level where the old shame still lurks. For all the real healing I’ve had, I still have to help ***judy***.

 The purpose of anger is self-protection when wrong is done to us. It’s a healthy defense response when we are hurt. In a functional family, there would have been universal outrage if I had been victimized as a child.

Healthy anger has been the catalyst for so much good in the world. Without anger, would injustice ever be righted? We’d still have legal slavery, and children working in sweat shops fourteen hours a day. Women wouldn’t have the right to vote. Black people couldn’t vote. So, anger can fuel good change. But where exactly is the line between healthy expression of anger and doing harm by my actions?

That’s not a simple question. I can take it to an extreme and know it’s a sin to take a shotgun and go after the people who hurt me. I won’t do that! But in the gray area, I know that while I’m trying to learn how to express healthy anger—and aren’t we all in that phase, if we’re trying to get better? Nobody is perfect about how they manage anger—but if I cross that line and get a little out of hand, I might need to apologize. If that happens, I still need healing, not flogging. Not hellfire. I don’t think God condemns me for mistakes I make while I’m trying to learn.

My family went to a church that told us “Anger is *bad*!” While they ignored raging and abuse happening behind closed doors.

I tried all my life *not* to be angry, because I didn’t want to be like them. But my anger truly only went underground, and then shot out like a geyser when I was stressed—when I wasn’t in immediate fear of retribution. I didn’t verbally show anger at my husband. Honestly, I think I was passive-aggressive instead. David always had a thing about punctuality, and I was always late. He valued neatness, and I didn’t keep the house clean. I did better than my mother, but still… I made promises and then “forgot” to do what I said I’d do. Were those ways I lashed out at him? I *did* rage at my kids, who were less powerful than me. I know I did real damage there. “Stuffing” my anger was just a setup for uncontrolled explosions later.

I have to let it out in healthier ways. I’m going to try walking more often, for a start.

*God help me.*

Saturday, January 20th, 10:30 P.M.

This afternoon while David hung out with the kids, I took a walk, and when that wasn’t enough to quiet my feelings, I escaped the family and went alone to a movie theater, hoping for respite from the insistent pressure of abuse issues that continue to boil inside me. Popcorn in hand, I settled down to the opening credits of *Driving Miss Daisy*, prepared to distract myself with the gentle story it was reported to be. It didn’t quite work out that way.

Late in the movie there came a moment when Dan Aykroyd’s character appeared in Miss Daisy’s kitchen. It was an innocuous scene, and as the camera drew back for a three-quarter shot of him from across the room, I stopped hearing the continuing dialogue. My mouth went dry, and my heart began to pound with fear.

***judy*** was abruptly transfixed in horror by Dan Aykroyd’s belt buckle, just above the zipper fly in generously cut pleated-front dress pants. Dacron-and-wool blend perma-prest, with cuffs. *Richard’s pants*, bought at J.C. Penney’s, the only kind he ever wore. They loomed above me on the giant screen, on the body of a man who resembled Richard in his sharp nose, sloping shoulders, and his soft, stocky build.

There was a physical likeness, and perhaps a similar way of moving. And the movie’s story, wardrobe, and set design were all intended to produce the experience of the fifties and sixties—the time of my childhood. But ***judy’s*** frightened gaze was centered on a middle-aged-man’s crotch.

It was a frozen instant in time that smothered me again in my old recurrent dread. I sat in the theater after the lights came up, and it took at least twenty minutes for me to talk myself down from that scene, to bring myself back to the present, reassuring ***judy*** that it wasn’t Richard on the screen. That nothing bad was going to happen. That she was safe. Poor child.

Thank you, ***judy***, for letting me know. She confirmed my conjectures about Richard.

Can I have any lingering doubt that my fear of Richard was related to sexual abuse? I don’t think so.

I am sick of the fear. I am tired of the shame. And I am sick and tired of looking for approval from people I cannot respect!

Wednesday, January 24th, 11:45 P.M.

I can’t sleep. But I’m finally seeing how much resistance I’ve had to allowing myself to be angry at Mom. Yes, she is a victim, and that is the source of the dysfunction that caused her to emotionally abandon me. She has lived with pain. Poor Mom.

I have lived with pain too. That fact doesn’t absolve me from responsibility for ways I have failed my own daughters. I haven’t even begun to address my dysfunctions in parenting. But I know my children must harbor anger against me for hurts they might not even recognize yet. They haven’t learned to express it, but when they are able to, I can’t deny them the right to voice their rage. They’re entitled. And they’ll need to express it so they can heal. I’ll try to support them when that day comes.

Every human being in the world is the victim of wrongs done to them somehow, and they also cause hurt to others, to a greater or lesser degree. Unconsciously or consciously, accidentally, or intentionally. I’d be pretty codependent to say that every other victim in the family chain above me and below me deserves to express their anger, but I’ll be the one who isn’t allowed. I can’t carry Mother’s responsibility, or anyone else’s. All I can handle is my own.

I guess ***judy*** has needed to talk to Mom for a long time, but I haven’t let her. She and I have both been afraid. But I’ll give her a chance. ***judy?***

*Mama, I feel so sad about what happened to me. I think I’m mad, too, but I’m scared to be mad at you because I need you to love me.*

*I never meant to be bad, but you always made me think I was. You were always so unhappy, and I thought it was all my fault. I never thought you loved me. Never. But I had to pretend that you did because that’s what mothers do, isn’t it? You were the only mother I had, and if you didn’t love me, maybe you’d go away, and I wouldn’t have anybody. Even when you were there, I felt so alone. You never ever saw who I was.*

*Look at me! Have you ever seen me? Have you ever listened to me? No!*

*You can’t hear me at all, can you? You can’t hear me because you built a wall around yourself to protect you, but you left me outside the wall like a sack of garbage, with nobody to protect me from Gary or Hank or Dennis or Richard or anybody else that wanted to use me.*

*I was your human sacrifice! But you never even thought I was human, did you? Well, I was! I am! I deserved a mother, but you never were one. You set me up! You were too afraid of men to face them and protect me. You were so afraid they would hurt you that you offered me to them instead.*

*Don’t tell me you never knew! I was crying for help all my life, and you ignored me. They hurt me enough, but the worst was that you didn’t care about me. You treated me like I was worth nothing.*

*You never noticed they were using me—raping me—yes, raping even if I was going to Gary’s room—because every minute they spent with me was one less minute you’d be bothered with me and one less minute you had to deal with them yourself. You raped me every time one of them did, by giving them permission with your silence. I hate you for that.*

*I tried so hard to love you, for so long. I thought maybe you’d love me back. No. Well, I take it all back and you can’t have any of my love, either. Not that you’ll notice. But that isn’t because I’m bad, it’s only because you’re so blind.*

*I hate you for making my life such a nightmare and for always making me ashamed. You made me feel lower than anyone else in the world. And that didn’t start the first time I got raped. It started when I was born.*

*I’m giving up needing you to be a real mother to me. You never could, anyway. I don’t have a mother. Nothing new. I got through without a mother all along, so I’ll be my own mother now.*

*You’ve been in control of my head all my life. I want you out of there now! I don’t want to hear your poisonous messages. I won’t listen anymore.*

Letting go of you is hard, Mom, but it isn’t impossible. I’m responsible for myself now. I’m the only parent my inner child ever had. If I’m going to protect her, I have to help her see the truth of how much of her pain came from you. I won’t expose her to you anymore. I choose to honor her strength in surviving.

Healthy self-respect demands that I keep myself safe from abusive relationships. So, I’m withdrawing, Mom. Maybe someday, if you’re willing to face your own pain and your own responsibility, you can convince me it might be safe to begin a new relationship with you. But I’m not waiting around.

Saturday, January 27th, 3:00 P.M.

Having opened up a door to allow my anger out of its hiding place, I shouldn’t be too surprised to find myself seething with it. I’ve been venting some of the pressure by running more—six times in the last couple of weeks. I managed a whole mile just now without stopping to walk. I’m pushing myself the way I want to push *them*.

I’ve told my husband about the anger I’m expressing, and why. He offered to borrow some boxing gloves so I could discharge some of this furious energy by pummeling him, or some inanimate object, as a scapegoat. But I’m not comfortable with that. When I run—although my pace should more properly be called a jog—and a slow one at that—it’s easy to visualize the shaming, sneering faces of my abusers. My mother stands ahead of me, planted flat-footed, her hands on her hips and her face a mask of rage. “Don’t you *dare* look at me that way, young lady!” she hisses. And I put out my hands and push right through her. She isn’t there at all. And she doesn’t control me.

Gary looms up now, a nasty smirk on his face. “You think you’re so smart, huh? I can hear his chuckle, rising in pitch to a silly, nervous giggle. How pathetic he is! He evaporates as I pass through him.

Then there is Richard, shaking his finger in my face, his blue eyes drilling right through me, invading me. But he’s only a mental image that disintegrates as I continue on.

Together they call after me the combined messages of my childhood: “Why bother trying? You *can’t*… you’re too bad, stupid, ugly, fat, clumsy, lazy!” Those lies have all been invalidated by the fact that I survived them.

Somehow, God gave me the strength to cope with the pain they inflicted, and the courage to face the shame and get beyond it. I have passed by the limitations they have imposed on me all my life.

I’m getting healthy while they’re still frantically paddling to keep their heads above surface of the cesspool of their shame. In their own frightened efforts to stay afloat, each one pushes the others under the surface. They’re only trying to survive, even if it means drowning each other or an innocent child in the slime. It just never occurred to them to look for a ladder to climb out of the cesspool. That ladder requires facing themselves. They’re afraid to consider that.

But I’m *out* now. If I’m going to be the person God intended me to be, I must stop allowing their old messages playing in my head to control me. My jogging, like my recovery, goes against every one of the expectat ions of worthlessness they imposed on me. but there’s another way they’ve still kept me a victim to them.

Every time I compulsively eat what is not healthy for my body, one of *them* is in my head holding the spoon, saying, “Go ahead, you’re hopeless anyway! Even if you deny yourself this bite, you’ve never succeeded at anything, so what makes you think you’ll continue a diet and reach a goal? Eat, *eat*! It’ll keep you from *feeling* the fear and self-loathing we taught you all your life. You won’t feel it at the moment, but it will still live inside you, controlling you. Keeping you weak. It’ll keep you numb and passive and *available* for us to control. It’ll keep you heavy and awkward and hopeless. Go ahead, eat. It’ll make you the person we want you to be. *Ours!*

My addiction to sugar is in response to those messages. Sugar is not heroin, and I haven’t slit my wrists, but I’ve been slowly self-destructing, stuffing myself with a poison that blocks my energy and will and self-confidence. It’s self-destructive to keep myself a victim just because they wanted me to be a victim. But I won’t let them have me anymore. They’ve been in control too long and I’m taking the reins away from them. I will be who I decide I am, not what they tell me to be. My body is mine at last, not a hiding place for all the ghosts of the past. I’m evicting them.

*God, help me find a healthier way to deal with my feelings.*

Thursday, February 1st, 4:00 P.M.

I got back from running a few minutes ago. I’m going a mile four days a week now, and it feels good. I can feel my muscles working. I can feel my lungs laboring to process all the free air I’m taking in. It’s hard work, but I’m quite capable of handling hard work. My numbness is beginning to wear off, and I’m developing a whole lot of respect for this body I dissociated from so long ago. But….

As I walked a half-mile to cool down after the run, another memory popped unbidden to the surface, out of the blue. It’s been inside all along. But feels as if I just hadn’t glanced in the right direction to see it.

I remembered standing in the doorway to my mother’s bedroom in the dimness of late afternoon. No one else was at home. I walked resolutely to her dresser and opened the top right-hand drawer.

With no hesitation, I reached directly into the back right-hand corner of the drawer, behind the underwear. My hand closed around a plastic case. I drew it out and opened it. Inside was something familiar, yet strange. I studied it in confusion and fear. It was a flexible wire ring, about three inches across, with a latex covering that stretched across it to create a shallow concave shield. It was my mother’s diaphragm. And I knew where it was stored.

Remembering it this afternoon, I stopped walking and stood still on the sidewalk of my street. The memory ended, but my brain continued on: *Did Richard use my mother’s diaphragm on…in me?* I don’t believe the question would be in my head unless the answer is yes. No one makes up such a revolting idea.

This memory raises an issue I’ve avoided looking at. For Richard to use birth control with me it meant intercourse. And he must have thought I could have gotten pregnant. I had my first period when I was thirteen. If he was having intercourse with me then, there would have been nothing to stop his continuing until I left home. I was eighteen when I left. *Oh, God.*

Now as I write, I’m looking for the memory that corresponds to this one. The memory of it happening.

I remember one of my younger brothers once telling me he had observed Mom and Richard “doing it” … having sex. Why, then, do I have a picture in my head of… not my brother telling me the story… but of my own observation from the doorway of their bedroom—Richard’s white skin, bare haunches, between the legs of a still form under his weight? Was it Mother? Why would I question that? He was married to Mother, and still is.

I couldn’t have my brother’s visual memory inside *my* head. But Mom and Richard would have locked the door. And the fear I had of Richard was so strong I would never have imagined trying to sneak a peek at them, as my brother had done. Where did this come from? I can’t explain it.

I *am* feeling a difference from the last major flashback I had. Yes, I’m in the middle of anxiety over this. I’m feeling grief and sadness and anger over this. What’s missing is *shame.* For the first time, shame is *not* part of this memory. That belongs to someone else. My inner child is beginning to believe at last that she’s not at fault. Isn’t it about time?

I wonder—now that I’ve started to feel anger—how does that relate to the absence of shame for this memory? Was my shame tamping down my anger? Was my shame a way or routing my anger at myself, instead of at my perpetrators?

Friday, February 2nd, 8:30 A.M.

I woke at 1:45 this morning with the memory I’ve been preparing to see in my head. Actually, it’s not so much clearer than what I wrote yesterday. But I *know.*

Standing at the doorway of Mother’s room, looking toward the foot of the bed, I watched Richard’s naked body moving rhythmically. I can see the legs spread beneath him, but I can’t see her face. Because it’s *me*.

I wrote once before that I didn’t have any memory of having observed from the ceiling what was happening to the little girl on the bed, as so many survivors have described. But this memory is my version of dissociation. Usually I just daydreamed—went someplace else inside my mind—so I didn’t have to feel what I couldn’t prevent. But this time, part of me left the body on the bed and watched from the safety of the door.

*So, Richard raped me, too.* With my mother’s diaphragm, so he could take a perverted pleasure in shaming the mother and the daughter at the same time. Of course, I was afraid of him. I was helpless to stop him.

It’s interesting that I acknowledged that flashback at 1:45 A.M., turned over, and went back to sleep within a half-hour.

Saturday, February 3rd, 9:30 A.M.

Last night the volcano erupted. The anger my inner child always carried for all the wrongs done to her exploded outward.

But first I grieved. David had picked up hamburgers on the way home from work, and the girls ate in front of the television while David and I talked in the bedroom. I’d been holding back feelings all day before I finally dumped the memory of Richard raping me with Mom’s diaphragm to David. And he silently held me while I cried.

I wonder what hearing my old stuff is doing to David? Is it tearing him up? I can’t tell.

I sobbed for over an hour, letting my inner child cry out all the why’s that couldn’t be answered. *She* never had a chance to say no. *She* never screamed out loud or struggled or kicked them or beat upon their chests. ***judy*** never told what they did to her. But it was never less than rape.

They stole all her power of resistance and shamed her for being such a victim to so many. They mocked her for the pleasure response she couldn’t help having, and they denied her any help to understand any of it. They left her to figure it out all alone. Alone. She was only a child! But she was never allowed her innocence.

When the tears finally slowed, David and I took a walk. He was silent as I talked it out, and my grief receded as fury took its place. I wanted to take a baseball bat to each of the people who had hurt me. I wanted to smash them the way they had smashed me, leaving me groveling for crumbs of affection none of them were willing to give.

The walk did not expend my furious energy. We arrived back home with me still shaking with rage and needing some physical expression to rid myself of the poisonous bile that rose in my throat.

I retreated alone to the bedroom while David took the girls to the store. With no one home to hear me, I raged aloud at them all—my mother, Gary, Richard, Hank, and Dennis. I threw pillows around the room. I screamed until I was hoarse the accumulated bitterness of the injustices I had suffered. I cursed them for the crimes I could enumerate and for all the buried rapes I may never consciously remember.

By the time David and the kids returned, my volume was reduced to muttering, but my anger was still white-hot. I kissed the girls good night, then gathered up four three-inch phone books and a wastebasket and withdrew to the bedroom again.

While David got the kids to bed, I spent an hour’s worth of the adrenaline that accompanied my anger to fuel the violent destruction of those phone books. I did it in mutters and whispers, trying to stay quiet, but every muscle in my body participated in the wrenching mutilation of thousands of pages.

In the energy I expended, I forcibly expelled the hatred I had harbored for decades of painful silence. I named each of the hundreds of injuries they had caused me, in damage to my self-esteem and sexuality and ability to function in society as a normal human being. I ripped apart the lies that bound me to their cruelty.

By the time the books were reduced to drifts of shredded newsprint on the carpet, my hands and arms ached pleasantly, all the way to my shoulders. I gathered the mess into the wastebasket and carried it to the fireplace in the living room, where a low fire was burning as David sat alone watching television.

Then, in silence I fed handfuls of paper into the flames. I watched for a long time as each of those bits smoked and curled and flashed into furious flame for such a brief moment, before their heat cooled. Finally, the last of the blackened edges glowed and went out, leaving gray ash that will disintegrate into fine powder when I sweep it all into a dustpan and throw it out.

That’s how much they mean now. That’s how powerful they are in my life—just gray ash that crumbles at a touch. Their illusions of power are only fragile facades to protect their own fears.

I will always hate the sins they committed against me. But they don’t have any more hold on my life. God help them. I will not live my life for them anymore.

# Chapter 10

**Rock Throwing**

**In the midst of venting old rage, confronting my family with their sins was appealing. It wasn’t until a full year later that I recognized my heady feeling of power at the time had been a thin shell of healthy self-control. It was real, but still fragile. My old fear still lurked just beneath the surface.**

**Psychology and physiology say anger and fear bring on our fight or flight responses. Our brains reflexively route the greatest blood flow to our muscles, readying us for a physical response to danger. Which leaves our thought processes at their weakest. Logic deserts us. So, in anger, we’re at our worst in a confrontation. But when we’re angry is when we want to confront.**

***judy* was still only nine years old. I doubt that I would have had the inner strength to stand up to my family’s denial without relapsing into shame, at least briefly. The sight of me quaking with fear would have been a flashback to every time they controlled me with blame. Far from the hope of their acknowledgment and offered apologies, it was more likely they’d have entrenched their self-righteousness.**

Thursday, February 8th, 2:00 A.M.

Tuesday night in our group session, the others were startled by my obvious anger.

In the past two sessions, Susan has finally relaxed enough to share a little bit. This time she told us how her sixteen-year-old brother had crept into her bed when she was eight. She insisted it only happened once, and that she wants to get past it and love him now, because he doesn’t have much time left. He’s dying of AIDS.

“Good!” ***judy*** blurted out. Instantly I regretted saying it. What kind of bloodthirsty person will they think I am? How about some humanity, some compassion here? Seeing the shocked looks on every face except the therapist’s, I went into a sudden panic attack. For the rest of the session, I silently shamed myself without mercy for saying such a vile thing. I’ve unleashed a monster inside myself!

I wouldn’t really wish that suffering on anybody—but maybe that’s a fairly accurate revelation of the most honest, unfiltered feelings victims have about their abusers, if we can ever get beneath all the denial and defenses we put up. I was taught to express only a narrow range of “acceptable” emotions in my family. “Only vanilla”, as Jason put it. No other flavors allowed. Under the surface boiled a bitter concoction of hatred, a natural response to cruelty. However shocked I am to discover that fury now, I’m finally honest enough to admit that it existed all along. Doesn’t God understand that about me? It’s symptomatic of harm done.

No one was ever angry on my behalf—in protection of me.

Society turns away and coughs delicately, afraid to get involved in “family” matters. The women’s movement has raised a lot of ire in defense of women who are victims of rape. Yet when newspapers report child sexual abuse we still read how the child was “fondled,” “molested,” “touched inappropriately”. It feels like rape is the truer word. And a child has no coping skills to deal with rape.

And even the word *intercourse—*that’s a word describing *mutuality* *between* two people, not an interaction between a victim and a rapist. My abusers were not making love to me! They never *fondled* me, because they were not *fond* of me, however they may have temporarily pretended to, motivated only by their lust to get access to my body. They used my body like a piece of meat, without any concern for the fact they were ravaging my spirit and mind.

I’m scribbling furiously now, and my blood pressure must have shot up. This is anger.

Since I was a small child, I’ve never drawn a breath that was not polluted by the effects of their warped attention. They didn’t just rape my body over and over again. They raped my mind. They skewed the framework of my thought processes. My confused understanding of the foundations of human relationships is manifested in a thousand details of my life! As my friend Annie said to me, “Every characteristic of my personality displays my history.” What enormous losses we have!

Friday, February 16th, 2:30 A.M.

Olivia and two other group members have quit coming to sessions. Apparently, the intensity was more than they could deal with right now. But I can’t find a way to take a break from *my* painful healing process. I wonder if they’ll ever finish theirs. Or maybe their path to healing goes a different way. It’s so hard to go through it, but so hard to live with the truths we carry if we don’t find a way to express it.

Therapy *is* a devastating experience. The only thing worse is continuing to exist as I was. There have been times I’ve wanted to quit, too. Surely David must yearn for a day when we’ll be past this. But I’m not past it, and I have nowhere to put those feelings if I don’t get them out. As frightened and exhausted as I have been in the midst of this pain, I know I can’t abandon my inner child’s need for healing. The grounds that my adult self is afraid isn’t enough to stop.

There is a cancer in ***judy’s*** soul. As the only parent ***judy*** has, I would be abusing her further if I told her, in effect, “Go watch TV, honey. You’re not really sick, anyway. I won’t let those mean old doctors cut you open to take out that little bit of tumor.” No. The most loving thing a parent can do for the child is to face her own fears and show the child that the adult *is* strong enough to stand against this pain with her, to find a cure. So I’ve kept on, one foot in front of the other, often hesitating, always apprehensive. I believe it is making a difference.

One step at a time brought me to this group, feeling a desperate need for understanding. I’m appreciating the sense of community we’re developing but I’m surprised to find that the most important lesson I’m getting there is confirmation of what I’ve already accomplished. I guess I’ve come a long way. I’ve done good work with Jason.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday night, we were down to five members. Maria was struggling with the need to document her abuse so her lawyer can have specific dates and events to convict her father. They’ve asked her to try to find more memories. She didn’t want to look for more stuff. She didn’t know how to go about searching, anyway. I suggested drawing a diagram of the house. It sure brought up some of the details for me!

How many of us ever have sufficient *evidence* to legally convict our abusers? Only a tiny percentage. The court system doesn’t have any space for memory repression. But how else could we have coped when there was nobody who cared enough to help us acknowledge the truth?

Every day, in the midst of my aloneness, I must have told myself over and over, “Don’t think about it. Pretend it didn’t happen. Don’t let anybody *know! Don’t even let yourself know*.” Eventually I got enough practice pushing it out of my thoughts that the topic didn’t come up anymore. I had lost conscious access to the memories that might have established evidence for a conviction, if it had ever been sought.

Meg confronted her father last week. She told us how painful that discussion had been; that she had broken into tears several times. His response was not what she had hoped for. He did acknowledge having sex with her. But he said it wasn’t abuse, because he wasn’t hurting her. She liked it. As simple as that.

*Liar*.

Meg told him she didn’t want a relationship with him at all from now on, and that she would protect her children from him. Even after she told him how difficult her therapy has been, and the effects it has had on her life, he stayed firmly in denial. But whatever his response, she said she was glad she had gone through it because she felt as if she were in control of her life again, and not a victim anymore. She feels powerful.

That’s a feeling I’d like to have. Since I started therapy, I haven’t thought I wanted to confront my family because I was afraid I’d get sucked into their craziness again and I’d end up doubting my own perceptions. But fear of that has taken a backseat now to the fact that I want to tell them very clearly that my daughters will not be available for a relationship with them. I will not risk their innocence just to fulfill family expectations. Of course, Hank is dead, so he can’t hurt anyone anymore. I don’t expect *ever* to want any alliance with Gary. I never want to see Richard again.

I’d be abusing myself to seek out people who have nothing positive to contribute to my life. All they offer is poisonous to me. They’ve had a lifetime of practice in shifting blame from their own shoulders to someone else. I wonder if my abusers are molesting little girls now?

Statistics give scant hope of chronic child sexual abusers willingly doing the work—the kind of shattering work I’ve been doing—to face their responsibilities, their crimes—and make real change—to heal what is likely some kind of addiction—to stay away from other children, and even stop *thinking* of children that way. Is that even conceivable? Because that compulsion must be some deep hard-wired link to their old shame.

Then what would I hope to achieve, other than keeping my daughters away from those people—which is an absolute necessity? Well, someday, I’d like to have a relationship with my mother. She’s a victim too. I could hope she might acknowledge her own responsibility and get help for ways she was hurt. I’d like to know she could heal.

Besides, some of the recovery books say confrontation is the step that disconnects us from the abusive past. So we can take back our power and be in control of our lives again. Control! I’ve never felt that in my whole life.

I don’t want to keep avoiding my family forever without explanation. I don’t want to live in fear that they’ll show up on my doorstep, suitcases in hand, with no warning, and force a confrontation by their timing and not my own. I *do* want them to know the effects of their actions on me. I’m tired of the secrets and I’m tired of protecting them.

Jason was cautious about my new theme of confrontation when I saw him yesterday afternoon. He raised some questions about potential hurts I might suffer by their response. He was skeptical that Richard’s response would be anything but lashing out, which wouldn’t be any help. And he wondered how real the possibility of my mother’s healing would truly be, if I confronted her. I’ll do some exploration along those lines. And I won’t rush a decision. But it *is* my decision to make, not Jason’s.

At the end of my session, like he often has, he offered me the loan of a book I might read. But it wasn’t until later, after I had been out running (two miles!) and returned home, that I settled into a chair and focused on the book. And it dawned on me that this was the first time Jason had ever suggested a book on this topic. Forgiveness.

Forgiveness has come up in sessions of memory healing—specific forgiveness for particular moments. But he has cautioned going slowly when thinking about forgiveness in general. When I forgave my mother, he seemed to urge caution. But that forgiveness still feels real, even though I’ve also felt so angry at her too, since then. Even angry at her, I think I really have forgiven, at least some of it. It’s complicated.

But forgiveness for *all* of them? For *all* the hurt? Is that what Jason has in mind? Is it time for that?

I used to be so eager to forgive. I thought forgiveness was expected. That it would make me a good girl. And maybe I hoped it would stop the hurt. But now I feel my inner child resisting. I’ll read the book. I’ll do the assignments anyway because I *always* do the assignments. Just like in school.

Monday, February 19th, 2:30 P.M.

Last night something very disturbing happened. About 2:00 A.M., from the midst of deep sleep, I gradually became conscious of being sexually aroused. I kept hanging on to sleep, fighting off the awareness of stimulation, thinking, *Oh, David, not now. Can’t you see I’m asleep? It isn’t worth it.* Eventually the feeling faded, and I sank back into slumber. But then it started again. From behind me, stroking down my back, along my hip, then between my thighs, reaching between my legs. Finally, I shifted to accept the pressure. The feeling was strong enough to make me willing to enter into pleasure, to waken for it. I swam up slowly, up to the surface of consciousness from the murky depths of sleep.

In transition to wakefulness, I gradually took in the childlike security in the sensations of my arms wrapped tightly around Bear’s fuzzy bulk, clutched to my chest as I lay on my side. I felt David’s body curled behind me, spoon-fashion, his knees fitted into the bend of my own knees. His breathing was slow and regular. His hand was laid on my hip, unmoving, on top of the blankets. He was asleep.

Incest! My eyes went wide as I was suddenly awake and aware that the source of my arousal had nothing to do with David. He hadn’t touched me. I didn’t know who had stimulated those feelings, but it felt like incest.

Horrified, I threw back the blankets and stood up beside the bed, shivering, clasping Bear against me. I breathed deep and willed my heartbeat to slow its sudden surge in pace. I silently reassured ***judy*** that it wasn’t her fault.

David never stirred. Finally, I went to the closet for a robe and a blanket. I settled in the recliner in the living room with Bear, who was somehow ***judy*** again, or a stand-in for her. I comforted her and told her I would never again let her be a victim to sexual advances she didn’t want. Knowing she was safe, we slept at last, spending the rest of the night in the chair.

It was a dream. A flashback. When I woke, I acknowledged my own pleasure, and by moving away from the “scene of the crime,” I said *NO* to whoever initiated those feelings—when I was asleep and vulnerable—I did not consent. Saying *NO* was satisfying!

Just because I was aroused does *not* mean I started it. I was *not* responsible for an automatic physical reaction. It does not matter whatever they might have said in order to shift responsibility to me. My nervous system was wired to be aroused as a reflex to that kind of touch. I *won’t* take the blame anymore.

Wednesday, February 21st, 2:00 A.M.

2:00 A.M. The hour means something new to me now. I read the last journal entry to Jason in our session yesterday afternoon. He surprised me with his response. “I wonder if you might interpret that experience as evidence that someone who came to abuse you in your bed in the middle of the night?”

Instantly I shot back, “But Carla was in the twin bed next to mine!”

“Was there anything she could have done to stop it?”

I seized on a thought that would have meant it couldn’t be true. “Wait! If it was Gary, she might have! She wasn’t afraid of Gary. But…” I shook my head, discarding the idea. “If it was Richard, she might not have stood up to him.”

I paused and took a deep breath. “And it *was* Richard.” I couldn’t say how I was sure, but I was rock-solid sure.

A light bulb went on in my head. “*That* could be the reason she’s so protective of Richard. If she was a witness to some of my abuse, she might have survivor guilt, because she couldn’t protect me. Does she see herself as an accessory to the crimes? She wasn’t.”

“So her denial would be an effort to protect herself from her own shame…”

“Just like mine has been most of my life,” I finished.

“When did Carla leave home?”

Oh! “Wait! Carla got married as soon as she turned eighteen, to escape. And I was sixteen then.”

He nodded, and waited.

“Oh! This makes more sense to me,” I said. “Maybe Richard started on me *after* Carla left home, when there was no one sharing my room anymore. No chance of disturbing anybody else, because my room was way in the back of the house, away from everybody else. And since I was sixteen by then, for sure he would have used birth control at that point. Maybe Carla just can’t see the possibility that Richard abused me, because, for all his raging, and being so unreasonable, he brought the family stability—economic stability anyway… And he didn’t abuse Carla.”

“You feel sure of that?”

I thought for a minute. “I’m pretty sure. She was so different than me. She had a certain power in the household that I didn’t—she was more like a substitute mom, when Mother wasn’t cutting it, which was most of the time. Carla kept us in line—all of the siblings. She bossed us around, organized us to clean the house, and enforced it somehow—although I guess I did say no to her sometimes. Maybe passive-aggressively. I think Richard respected her for managing things better than Mom did—and I don’t think he would have risked abusing me when Carla was there, especially in the bed right next to us. And I think in the two years after Gary left home to join the army, I was safer—as long as Carla was still at home. Before she got married. …That feels true.”

He gave me a minute before he asked, “What was Richard’s attitude toward you?”

“In the household, I was more passive. Withdrew a lot to read. I was scared of Richard. I wonder… Oh!” Here was a new thought. “Maybe Richard knew Gary was having sex with me. Maybe that was part of his pushing to get Gary sent away to military school, to stop it—probably when I was ten or so, but Mother wouldn’t allow it.”

Jason waited quietly while I blew my nose.

“If he knew about Gary… and me… ugh… Richard would have blamed me equally. He would have just thought I was a slutty kid.”

A new wave of sadness rose up. “So, when given the opportunity, Richard would have…” I stopped.

“After Carla had moved out?”

“Yeah. I would have been easy pickings. Richard was—socially awkward, in some ways. An introvert, and—well, awkward. For all his raging, he was otherwise—not very expressive, verbally. He wasn’t smooth like Hank was. Hank was totally charismatic with everybody. But I think Richard put people off. I always froze to silence in Richard’s presence. And if he had gotten the idea that I must *like it* with Gary—so I was already primed for sex—and he took my silence for consent…” I came to a stop.

Jason nodded. “Do you think that Richard was a pedophile?”

I thought for a minute. “Something tells me that wasn’t really his thing. And I was sixteen or so by then… Not that I can be sure, I guess.”

“There *are* different kinds of offenders. Pedophiles have a primary attraction to children, even if they still might have sex with adult partners. But there are also ‘regressed offenders’, adults who act out with children when they’re stressed, and there’s an opportunity. They usually have poor coping skills. And terrible boundaries, of course. It’s still criminal behavior.”

“That sounds more like Richard,” I said. “He took advantage, knowing Gary had already ‘broken me in’, and Carla wasn’t around to make it harder for him.”

This feels completely true, no matter how much I’d rather deny it. Richard came to my bed and—if he started things while I was asleep—whenever was the first time, and I woke up in the middle of it, disoriented, he could cover his awkwardness by being already in the middle of sex. No consent would have been required, as far as he was concerned. He would have told me I wanted it—because—look how I was wet—aroused already. And then he’d justify any follow-up encounters—like in his and mother’s bedroom—by thinking it was already established that I’d let him do that.

*Ugh*!

I laid down my pen, got up and walked around for a minute, before I came back to the journal.

Whatever he thought in his warped abuser brain, *it was still rape*! Arousal wasn’t my fault. That’s what happens to bodies.

And tonight, waking at 2:00 A.M., right on the “schedule” that has spontaneously developed during this year in therapy, confirms all of this.

At least three nights a week during this year (sometimes *every* night), I have awakened for no apparent reason at about the same time—1:30 to 3:00 A.M. Maybe the basis for my wakening was that it was the time I was assaulted in my sleep. Memory resurfacing.

It clears up some questions I didn’t know were there. When we were first married, David was amazed that I usually slept on my stomach. “How do you do that?” he exclaimed. “Doesn’t it hurt your back?”

But sleeping on my stomach was the most self-protective position I could assume. Even then, it left my backside exposed. And Richard could arouse me from behind, like my dream (which of course was a body memory).

Short of a suit of armor, there wasn’t any way to keep from being touched that way in my sleep, even though *I never wanted it!*

This also answers why I’ve always been so instantly, irrationally furious at being awakened when I wasn’t ready. I’ve never felt as though I was allowed to sleep as much as I wanted.

***judy*** has always been angry at being awakened by the screams in the night that were the sounds of Mom and Richard fighting. And angry at having her innocence stolen from her when she was least able to protect herself. She never released any of her own screams.

Richard always went to bed at 8:00 P.M. so he could get up to get ready for work about 3:00 A.M. And it was a way he avoided Mom, too—she stayed up until midnight every night. But Mom would never have noticed his absence from their bed even earlier in the morning. He could wake up while Mom was in her deepest tranquilizer-induced unconsciousness and come to my bed. Then he woke her up to cook his breakfast while he showered.

Were the fights on mornings he hadn’t released his frustrations through raping me? Or maybe they were after a rape—when he needed to shift the focus from his shame by picking a fight.

They’re still married, still fighting, still miserable.

Saturday, February 24th, 11:00 P.M.

I phoned Carla this morning. I didn’t share any of my new memories with her because she doesn’t want to know. But she didn’t like that I was considering confronting Mom and Richard. I wouldn’t even bother confronting Gary—he lives on the other side of the continent. And the only contact he ever has with family is an annual call to Mom, to “borrow” money from her. She still bails him out, incurring Richard’s wrath.

I have to be realistic about Carla. She’s on the fence now, still wants me in her life, but she doesn’t want to hear my stuff. And hates the idea I might do a confrontation. Maybe she’d jump off the fence to protect Mom and Richard from my “persecution”, especially since she doesn’t accept that Richard sexually abused me. Maybe I won’t have a sister anymore.

For most of our childhood, we were enemies. I was frequently uncooperative with her bossy commands that I help with the housekeeping she pushed for. And she must have had judgments about my going to Gary—*ugh*. We never got close as sisters till after Gary left home. We became friends then, with more closeness in adulthood. But have her feelings for me always been based on my following her lead, agreeing with her?

Carla vented, in this phone call, as she has been doing a lot lately, about how her life has fallen in on her. She’s in despair over her family’s financial losses. Her husband’s business is gone, and there’s trouble with her kids. Every catastrophe that could possibly happen to their family seems to have exploded in the weeks since Christmas. Every relationship she has is fraught with conflict, her communication with her husband is—problematic—and she doesn’t have any female friends she can be honest with.

It seems like I had to hit bottom to finally start facing the truth. Is she hitting bottom now? Maybe she’ll see an invitation to change, to heal.

I asked her, “Do you hear a voice in any of this?” She evaded the question, but I pressed. “Isn’t everything connected to how we never were shown how to speak up for ourselves, or be self-protective, or make healthy decisions? How did we ever learn to love ourselves, let alone anybody else?”

And she answered, “We both know our background has a lot to do with the messes our lives have been.” There was a long pause. “I just deal with it differently. Or… not at all.” Then she quoted her trademark philosophy, “Life is hard, and then you die.”

My eyes welled with tears. If I could only make recovery happen for her!

“Life doesn’t have to be like that,” I said. “Mine isn’t anymore.”

And that’s true. I’m still hurting, but I’m—optimistic, in a way I never was before.

But Carla still can’t trust life not to hurt her. She’s stuck where she is. And she’s resisted the idea of counseling each of the many times I’ve suggested it.

I don’t want to say good-bye to the loving sister image I’ve idealized. But I finally have to acknowledge that in every conversation I’ve had with her lately, she has avoided listening to my pain, because she’s avoiding her own pain. She learned the family lessons well, and she can’t do any differently. I created illusions about our relationship because I needed a family, but she’s not in a place to be who I imagined. I need to give up my expectations.

So, I told her I’m not going to pressure her anymore. The next phone call would be up to her. She doesn’t *have* to be on my side if she doesn’t want to. I’m giving her space to make her own decisions, whether or not I confront them.

I guess I’ve never dealt with my feelings of loss about Carla.

***judy***, do you want to talk to her?

*I just wanted you to love me, Carla. Couldn’t you tell Mom I didn’t get any birthday cake? Couldn’t you want to spend time with me instead of Gary? Couldn’t you make the bad stuff stop? Couldn’t you be my big sister? Couldn’t you love me?*

*I wanted to talk to you about how lonely I was. I wanted to be able to share my hurt and hear what was hurting you. I wanted us to be able to cry together. I wanted you to believe in me. But you always sided with them, against me. I was the one who didn’t fit in. I couldn’t help being different than them.*

*You used to drag me out of bed on Saturdays to clean our room. What made it “our room” anyway, when it had no door to keep anybody out, or any possession safe or private? If I cared about anything at all, it would be used as a weapon against me, to shame me. It was better not to feel, not to care about anything.*

*So why would I want to bother waking up to clean what didn’t matter? I’d rather sleep or read or not exist. Because somebody was going to be after me, make me do what I didn’t want, and I didn’t have the energy. Let me sleep! I never got to sleep enough. But you made me feel guilty and lazy if I didn’t help. You thought I was bad. Like everybody else.*

So here I am in recovery, standing all alone with a cold wind whistling around me. You are on your own, Judy. It feels like there are no background relationships.

Thursday, February 27th, 7:30 P.M.

This afternoon, after I read the last entry to him, Jason pronounced me very healthy!

That was a shocker.

“Why?” I demanded. “Because I let go of the last shred of family?”

“Because you are facing reality about whether who they can be is a match for what you’re seeking from them.”

Sudden sadness threatened to crush my chest. “I still hope Carla will get help and face the truth. That I’ll have her back someday. And Mom, too.” I took a painful breath. “But I can’t base my life on the possibility of what they might or might not do. I guess it’s only hope for their healing. Not faith in it.”

“People do heal in different ways, Judy,” he said. “But they’ll have to find their own faith in their healing. What do you think it might take for them? A year ago, could you hear the truth about yourself?”

“I heard *you*,” I answered slowly. “I never heard it before.”

“What made the difference?”

I had to think about that. Why could I face it now when I had always avoided self-examination before? “I guess it was trust,” I said finally. “And knowing you accepted me. I willingly brought out all that ugly stuff to show you because it was safe. You never labeled me. You never told me what was wrong with me, even though you probably saw it all along.”

“How is that different from confrontation?”

Was that a thunderclap I heard? In an instant, I saw the “loving” church discipline I’d observed, wielded over the years in that rigid, legalistic, shaming church I’d been raised in—I saw the accusations leveled, the judgments rendered, the hateful confrontations that turned into angry accusations and ferocious denials, and people being cast out, “disfellowshipped”, because they were *bad*. I thought of Meg’s confrontation of her father. She took back her power, she said, in righteous indignation, but he never budged from his defensive insistence that he was innocent. He wouldn’t hear the truth. I thought of the fact that less than five percent of abusers ever admit any wrongdoing. I didn’t expect Richard to be any different. And Mom—she enabled abuse, by looking the other way. She was committed to staying numb, staying blind, escaping what was too difficult to face. Would my confrontation bring healing, or only more denial? Healing didn’t seem likely.

And I thought of Carla. For months, haven’t I been confronting her with what I believe to be her need for help to heal? I’ve sent her books, I’ve quoted what my therapist has said—and she changed the subject. She’s still dodging the issue. She’s too afraid to look deeper.

How is confrontation different from the trust Jason fostered, so I could face my own truth?

I answered at last. “Confrontation would have been… you presenting me with a list of my dysfunctions. And the wrongs I did. My healing is through my own confession of what I recognized on my own, and can finally admit voluntarily. That only happened because I knew you wouldn’t judge me. I knew I was accepted anyway.”

Jason nodded. “But since you’ve been in touch with your buried anger, confrontation has looked pretty attractive to you.”

“Peer pressure!” I blurted out, surprised at myself. “I’ve felt so different from the others in the therapy group. I’m the only one of us who’s working with a *male* therapist. Most of the others don’t even want to hear God mentioned at all. They’re so mad at God. And the others in the group think confrontation is required to get free of the past, to take their power back. So, I got swept up in that.”

“So, what do you think when you think for yourself?”

I took a deep breath. “Well, the God thing—I’m not mad at God, but sometimes I wonder why I’m not. I can see why they feel that way. And they get to feel how they feel. But I *do* want to take my power back, definitely.”

“Is there anything that *IS* allowing you to feel more powerful?”

“I think—it’s *me* being more compassionate toward myself. That makes me stronger. Not shaming myself. And making choices for myself—to step back from what isn’t healthy.”

He nodded. “What about confrontation *would* be healthy for you?”

“Well… Okay, this is just how I feel—I still *want* to. So, maybe fulfilling that *feeling.* But… I’ll have to think about that.” I sighed. “Okay. I want to take a stand against the lies. In my family, the specific lies. But also, the lies in the way society blames victims. It comes down to—I want to tell the truth, and I want to be *heard.*”

“You’ve been telling Carla. Has she been hearing you?”

“Well—no. Not really, not the way I wanted to be heard…. This is confusing.”

“So… more consideration on that, then?” he asked. “How have you already been getting your power back?”

“By speaking the truth, here, and to myself. By telling them no in my head, in my journal, pushing through them when I’m jogging.”

He was quiet for a minute, letting me think.

“Maybe you always had that power, but there were so many reasons it was hard to express it.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “The fear was always in the way. Fear’s the problem. It’s better, but I still get scared.”

“And what about the idea of disconnecting from the past? Haven’t you already experienced a little of that?”

“In memory healing!” I gasped. How was I forgetting that feeling?

“What do you think was the source of the freedom you began to feel after memory healing? Jason asked.

 “It was—forgiveness. Like—my inner child could really feel it that God wasn’t holding it against me. Feeling forgiven helped me forgive myself. Maybe forgiving myself was the very biggest part of it.” I thought for a minute. “And it was letting God decide what to do about Gary. Hating Gary kept me stuck there in the room with him. When I just walked out of his room, I let go of what would happen to Gary—he didn’t matter. I walked out of being stuck to what happened.”

“You released him.”

“Yes.”

“That sounds easier.”

“Yeah—I’m not dragging around that shame like a ball-and-chain anymore.”

“And about confrontations, again—have you observed any confrontations that seemed to bring real freedom from the past?”

I shook my head. “Not like the change I’ve felt.”

So, maybe confrontation isn’t what I had in mind, but forgiveness is still a tough subject.

What do I do next? I want freedom. I don’t want sexual abuse to be the theme of my life forever!

Wednesday, February 28th, 2:30 A.M.

I recognized some real problems with confrontations in that last session. But that doesn’t mean all my feelings have caught up to these ideas. I like to be in control, and I thought confronting my family would be a way I could be in charge for a change. Powerful.

But does it work? Is it healthy, or right? I hadn’t been asking that. But it seems like signs are pointing another direction. Is that God, making those signs? Of course, I wasn’t asking God. I don’t like to ask for directions. Or follow them, either.

I think I’ve really wanted to see my parents squirm and suffer just a little. I wanted *them* to be *my* victims for a while. *Just let me throw a few more rocks at them before I forgive them. Just let me get some revenge first.*

But however much they might be squirming on the inside; my abusers wouldn’t lay down their arms as easily as that. The battle has been in an uneasy cease-fire during my adult life, mostly because we live in another state. But confrontation, with my throwing rocks at them would bring out their big guns. I don’t suppose I’m a match for the fury they’re so practiced at wielding. Nor would I want to be.

And of course, my wishful thinking looks for a dramatic awakening in them which would bring about their tearful repentance. In my imagination, they would beg my forgiveness and commit themselves, in unswerving dedication, to their own therapy and healing, and making full amends to me. They would then *be* the family I’ve longed for. Violins would play and roses would bloom. Disney would make a touching movie about the bonds of love between our generations.

It’s fantasy. Give it up, ***judy*.** That isn’t going to happen. Even if they chose the path to healing, it wouldn’t be a quick fix. And they wouldn’t be guaranteed to stay the course. So, if that’s your real reason, now is definitely not the time for confrontation, if ever. Spend your energy to finish your own work. And the next step in finishing your own work, for your own healing and freedom, is forgiveness.

*Forgiveness*. This is not a word from my native language. Nobody in my family ever taught me by example what it meant. I have heard the word in reference to God, of course, but that’s not the God they showed me in Sunday school. That God was mad. But I’m seeing God differently through this work I’m doing now. God forgives me, for not being able to do anything other than what I did. And I’m learning to forgive myself—although I’m still not good at it yet.

Forgiving the people who hurt me is scary. I’ve finally learned to validate the pain of my inner child. I’ve felt ***judy’s*** terror, her betrayal, her loneliness, her hatred. And now, asking myself to forgive feels like having to set aside all those emotions that never got heard at all before this year.

I’ve denied my feelings all my life. Those feelings are a part of *me*. I’ve welcomed them home at last. I’m accepting myself—fear, rage, and all—after all these years. How can I accept those emotions honestly and still make room for forgiveness? Especially when *I don’t want to*?

On a rational level, I’m very clear on the need for forgiveness. I’ve read the book Jason loaned me. and others from the library, on the subject. Forgiveness *ISN’T* about excusing bad things they did and saying it’s all right that they did them. It *isn’t* giving them permission to let them do that stuff again, ever, to anybody. It *isn’t* saying things are hunky-dory between them and me. I don’t ever have to be in the same room with any of them ever again if I don’t want to and I’m definitely not required to invite them for Thanksgiving. I can forgive them and still refuse to talk to them if I don’t want to, or ever have a relationship with them.

That’s what forgiveness *IS NOT*.

I know the books say forgiveness frees me from the past. It allows me to forgive myself and accept God’s forgiveness of me. It gives me peace. It doesn’t even matter if the other person knows I’ve forgiven them.

But my guts still have reservations. ***judy***, are you holding back?

*It doesn’t feel safe to forgive. Maybe they’ll hurt me again. I’ve never felt safe before, and I want to feel safe. Why do they deserve me to forgive them?*

Maybe they don’t deserve your forgiveness. I don’t have all the answers for that hard question. Except I’m starting to know that *NOT* forgiving them is keeping us stuck, and I don’t want to be stuck. That’s what can change. It’s inside my boundaries, which makes it possible for me to change it. I’ve never taken care of myself before, but now I can. ***judy***, I’mnever going to let them near you. I’ll get help when we need it, and I’ll keep you safe.

*This* is what forgiveness *IS:* Forgiveness is letting go of expecting them to do anything at all differently in the future, which is facing reality, because they’re extremely unlikely to ever be different than they are. To keep expecting and hoping they’ll change would keep me stuck. And it would make me crazy—correction, it *HAS ALREADY MADE ME CRAZY* to hold expectations of them, even unconscious ones that I would have denied having anyway. I don’t need the job of monitoring their behavior, because I don’t have the power to do it, and I don’t have the wish to focus my life always in their direction. I *have* been doing that, without even knowing it. And I don’t want to do it anymore. I’m not in charge of the universe and I have no authority to make them change. That’s a no-win position to hold, always wishing them to be different, always resenting which makes me feel awful. Forgiveness frees me from the bondage of keeping them chained in a secret dungeon in my head. I want them out of there! They should go have their dirty little thoughts someplace else. Or whatever thoughts they have, which I have no wish to know about. I don’t want to consider whatever is going on with them, anymore. Ever. I’d rather let that be between them and God. Let God have that job of knowing what they’re up to.

*I don’t want them chained in a dungeon in my head.*

Nope. Not good for me. And it’s not my business whether it’s good for them—just keep ***judy*** safe from them coming into my space. So, I release them! Get them out of the dungeon. Get that bad energy out of there and clean it up. I can use the space for a studio. Crafts and sewing and stuff. And a playroom for ***judy***!

Okay, then. I’m gonna need help to really forgive, but it felt like I had help forgiving Mother when I did before. And that was real, even though I had more anger at her later. I’ll forgive her some more. Maybe that’s just how it works. Deciding to forgive, and forgiving some more, including forgiving myself. Seventy times seven, for my own health and well-being, not theirs. Letting go, and letting go, and letting go. And more again, if needed. When needed. Okay, God. *Help would be good. Heal the feelings*

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# Chapter 11

**Letting Go**

**Somehow there was peace enough that my compulsive drive to confront dissipated. The process of forgiving began another cycle of grief, which intensified as I found myself releasing control of circumstances and relationships.**

**I shed many tears. But my grieving was not stagnant depression. It was an unyielding drive to wash the pain through me, to move beyond the suffering. While I still hurt, the desperation of the previous months was easing. Jason and I reduced counseling appointments from bi-weekly to once a week, and I continued with the weekly therapy group.**

**I gradually unclenched my old grip on the past. I felt God’s presence as I was swept into a new sense of freedom. How many years I had spent in bitter clinging to the misery of the past!**

**Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote: “Count them unclean, these tears that turn no mill.” My tears were pure; none were wasted.**

Monday, March 12th, 11:30 P.M.

I can’t get to sleep. Does it have anything to do with the fact that Maria’s father’s trial for child sexual abuse began today? We all sat in the back row at the courthouse to watch the trial. Everybody from our whole therapy group attended, and Laura, the therapist.

After two hours, the judge ordered a brief break, and Maria was ushered out to a private room with her attorney. The rest of us gathered in the hallway. Someone expressed concern at how much anger the prosecuting attorney displayed in her opening statement. I replied that society *needs* to be angry at abusers, or children would never be protected from violence. The prosecutor was modeling an honest emotional reaction to heinous acts. She gave the jurors permission to feel their anger at such a crime.

Will we see justice for Maria’s father? I’m more inclined to think that real justice for people like him is the private hell of their own construction, built of their own shame and rage. Whatever verdict and sentence the state pronounces, God will take care of the rest. There are lots of examples in the Bible of God’s wrath against oppressors, while there is loving compassion for the persecuted. But I don’t know how consequences are administered for any of us.

Isn’t letting go of the need for revenge, letting justice be God’s responsibility, the very essence of forgiveness? However little we deserved the suffering we went through, we don’t have to bear the weight of that toxic connection to a perpetrator any more. For too long, my bitterness kept me locked in a trauma bond with those who did me harm. Whatever their lives represented, I was poisoned by the hold it had on my life for the decades I was so determined not to let them off the hook. I’ve finally realized how heavy it has been, holding them dangling off that hook for all those years. I’ve put too much energy into an unconscious insistence that they owed me a huge debt. That stance kept me stuck in this spot, watching to see that they didn’t escape the consequences I would have wished on them. What I’m describing was the unspoken substrate of my life, a blackness that fed the stream of my depression, and fear, and rage, my unacknowledged hatred that was at the root of my inability to accomplish goals, or enjoy what blessings were poured out into my life.

Now I can relax my grip, release the hooks, drop the chains, and know that somehow, all the while there’s bigger hook holding them to their real responsibility—to God. Let God keep watch over them and balance the scales by a means far beyond my understanding. It isn’t okay that they hurt me. But I’m not the jailer. That feels better. I am not the jailer. I can walk away.

Tuesday, March 13th, 2:00 P.M.

I’ve made a commitment to forgive, but my anger isn’t instantly gone. It does seem to be lessening, though. Last Thursday, Jason and I talked about a perspective on my abusers, seeing them as victims themselves, a context to make it more possible to let them go into God’s hands. Not for the benefit of who I forgave, but for my own necessary freedom.

Victims grow up to be perpetrators, or enablers of abuse, or continue in the role of victim, unless they find healing. Sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes extreme. But the way such violations warp our perspectives, I can’t see how victims could magically become adults with healthy boundaries, or healthy relationships.

It’s easy to see my mother in that light. My brother Gary, of course, was a victim before he was a perpetrator—of our same parents, and stepfathers, and almost certainly of sexual abuse from Hank, our uncle.

Hank himself, also a primary perpetrator to me, spent the first ten years of his life in an orphanage, before being adopted by a single woman who had, by family stories, a disability of some kind—details unknown to me. It was unheard of for a single woman to be allowed to adopt a child in the 1940’s. Why was that allowed? Nothing about his early life was what we think of as “normal,” and at the very least, he was likely the victim of abandonment and neglect. But given his addictive sexual exploits *that I’m aware of* (because who knows what he did beyond my knowledge), I can only imagine that his acting out was rooted in the trauma and skewed boundaries of having been sexually abused, possibly at a very young age, maybe in the difficult circumstances of an orphanage through the years of the depression.

I know very little about our neighbor, Dennis, except the vague idea that he was a “mama’s boy, and the troubling information that he befriended Gary, years younger than him, and who had very disturbing interests.

But actually, I can’t find much anger remaining, against Gary or Hank or Dennis, despite the outsized emotional reactions I had to those memories when they first emerged. It’s no coincidence that those are the three we addressed in memory healing sessions, which had the lasting effect of removing my shame about them. But beyond that effect, the forgiveness I gave was real, and I think of all three of them now without much distress. Those incidents, and those individuals, don’t feel significant anymore.

Richard? I haven’t written any exploration about him. He was thirty-five and a bachelor when he married Mom, who was twice-divorced with four kids—the youngest, Will, only about three, and the oldest, Gary, a very angry twelve-year-old. Gary must have pushed every one of Richard’s buttons. Richard and Gary were intensely antagonistic from the very beginning. Richard had no experience and little tolerance for children. He insisted that he and Mom eat dinner separately from the kids. He didn’t want to hear us.

Yet Richard insisted on controlling every detail of our lives. Like the fact that we had to ask permission to turn the TV channel, even if he wasn’t watching. His tyrannical need to be in charge led him to humiliate everyone around him, to make himself feel more important.

I remember one of our always-miserable “vacations,” when we would drive interminably across the country, we three youngest kids cooped up in a camper to verbally abuse each other just the way we’d been taught. Likely for financial reasons, the family’s “vacation” era didn’t begin until Gary had left home altogether, and the memory that arises now was after Carla left home to get married—Richard’s earnings must have risen over the years, so the family must have had a bit more funds for travel.

So, in this memory I was probably sixteen, but I never had a sense of dominance over my two younger brothers. Males had the power, unquestioned. Boys were accorded greater freedom by Mother. And Richie, who was about six, was Richard’s biological child, thus afforded much more leeway by his dad. Will, who would have been around eleven, seemed to enjoy a somewhat more reasonable relationship with Richard, too. Both parents were more relaxed with the younger boys. I’m happy to report that both Will and Richie have grown up to be likeable and responsible adults.

Anyway, in the incident I’m remembering, we had stopped at a grocery store before traveling on to the campsite that was our destination for the night. Mom spoke to us through the open window, asking if we needed anything. The kids weren’t invited to get out of the camper, of course.

I whispered to her with some urgency that I needed tampons. But upon their emergence from the store, it was *Richard* who handed me the little brown bag through the window while he cackled gleefully at me, “Here’s your stoppers!” My two younger brothers laughed at my sudden crying jag. Nothing I said would shut them up.

I guess I know why my mother subjected me to Richard. But what kind of cruelty had Richard experienced to make him so sadistic?

When I started college, I was still required to ask permission to go out on a weekly date, with a midnight curfew. Richard had always made an ordeal out of approving dates. He would delay giving a direct answer, so I had to ask in advance, he’d mumble, “I’ll think about it,” then I’d have to ask again as the deadline approached. Now I think that little manipulation was another subtle reminder of his “power” over my life, which by then extended to his dominance over my body, I now understand. Jealous of my dates, probably *expecting* that I was sexual with them (I wasn’t), he reinforced my subjugation.

The last straw was the time when I was getting ready to go out on a date with David, who was my steady boyfriend at the time. I was eighteen, and in my freshman year of college, with good grades, a part-time job, and regular church attendance. I was a straight-arrow nerd, and a prude, as far as my peers knew me. And David was a junior in college, a conservative, Christian clean-cut guy. It was 1972, and I was wearing a cute new shorts outfit—hotpants, they were called, and very stylish at the time. I made the outfit myself. I had been proficient at sewing everything I wore since I was thirteen years old; it gave me some measure of control, over my wardrobe, at least.

Richard, coming into the kitchen, spotted my attire. He gave a scornful laugh. “You’re not going to wear *that*! That looks like something only a whore would wear!”

His words were like a bludgeon to my forehead—the culmination of all the years of crushing shame. And for the very first time ever, I stood up to him. “Yes, I am,” I said evenly, and the defiance that blazed in my eyes took him by surprise. He slapped me, hard. It was the first time he’d done that.

I gasped in shock, then, amazingly, drew back to return the blow. But he caught my wrist before I made contact with his face. I don’t remember any words exchanged between us after that.

I went directly to my room and started packing. There was pitifully little I owned that had any value to me—mostly my homemade clothes. Mom fluttered around, trying to smooth things over. I told her I was moving to Grandma’s house. I had nowhere else to go.

“But you know that’s just the way Richard is!” she wheedled.

I turned to stare at her in disbelief. “Just because he has seniority in being unreasonable doesn’t make him right!” It would have been pointless to have brought up the sexual abuse, even if I hadn’t repressed it. Or maybe I *did* know it consciously at the time, but the guaranteed response from Mom would have been more painful than leaving it unsaid. I moved to Grandma’s house that night.

Now that I’ve unearthed it all, I can feel that hurt afresh. Saying I was wearing something only a whore would wear; Richard was calling me a whore. I had never chosen to be that. I was only what he, along with the others, had made me.

What made Richard the cruel dictator he is? What makes any person seek out the weakest spot in another, to create the deepest wound? Finally, having let myself experience the depth of fury I held inside; I know that Richard’s inner child had to have been terribly hurt to produce so angry an adult.

Richard grew up a white kid in the Jim Crow era, in the deep south, immersed in a culture with horrifying patterns of cruel dominance over black people, including rape and murder. I shudder to think what inexcusable atrocities Richard may have witnessed from early childhood, or was induced to participate in as well, as an aggressor. Whatever the scars on his soul, he grew up with rage in his heart, and racist perspectives. And then he went into the air force in World War II, and never spoke of whatever that experience had been.

Richard’s father was a mean drunk with a foul mouth, spewing racist rants. He lived with our family for about a year when Richard’s mother was in a mental hospital. It’s obvious that their home was shaming and abusive. Richard was a Mama’s boy, enmeshed with his mother, maybe in fear of his father’s violence. Was there incest there somewhere? Unknown, but possible.

His mother fit into the extreme end of the spectrum of characteristics of a victim. She was an angry woman, morbidly obese, who had emotional problems that meant recurrent, and lengthy mental hospital stays. Of course, back then psychology didn’t know what to do with abuse survivors.

Maybe some of what we know as flashbacks today were incorrectly viewed as psychotic episodes then. They used drugs to calm hysteria, but I can’t imagine they were successful at stuffing trauma memories back underground. Maybe they would have committed *me* to a mental hospital with the “nervous breakdown” I’ve been working through, if my crisis had happened back then.

If his mother was a victim, chances are she would have married a victim or an abuser. And Richard’s father was an abuser.

And thinking of Richard right now, I’m not angry. I’m sickened. I’m appalled. I mourn for the waste of human life and vitality, for the misery inflicted by one person forcing his will on another, fueled by rage, rooted in ancient hurt and fear. How long can I stay angry if I let myself truly *see* the chain of hurt that goes back for generations and generations? We are all of us victims to that evil. And we pass it on, blind and unknowing. I know *I* did.

I’ve verbally abused my children, transmitting the anger from my parents’ abuse of me. My parents were trained to hurt me because someone had taken perfect babies and transformed them into clones of their own confused selves. But I didn’t go through this torturous process of therapy only to watch the cycle continue unabated. Forgiveness *will* break the chain, but to start over with my children, how do I learn to love?

Saturday, March 17th, 11:30 A.M.

I was putting away groceries earlier and thinking about how I wished I could have said no to my perpetrators. That I wouldn’t have felt so weak if I’d been able to say no. Maybe I would have felt less ashamed. Carla said no to Gary, didn’t she? But she was different than me.

And Richard didn’t abuse Carla.

And out of the blue, it occurred to me that I *did say no*! I’ve written in my journal that I *did* say no to Richard. I wrote about that time when he came into my bedroom, when I was reading, and he sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. I still shudder to think about that creepy event. But in the moment when it happened, I went stone-still—absolutely frozen. I stared hard at my book and *refused to look at him*.

I didn’t speak the word “no” aloud.

But—nonverbally—I *refused* the advance he was making, which had the effect of stopping the event he had in mind. I stopped the rape that would have occurred. I was sixteen, and I succeeded in stopping a forty-something man I was scared of, from his intention to have sex with me.

I can be proud of that action. Wow.

Oh! There’s a second time, also documented in this journal, from a few weeks ago. That dream, or probably it was a flashback, when I gradually woke up from a dream that David was touching me while I was asleep. David wasn’t.

Once I came fully awake, I recognized it was a re-play of an assault—someone stimulating me against my will, while I was unconscious. It must have been Richard. But this time, I threw back the cover and stood up. And walked I out of the room.

Again, not verbally. But I said no to touch I never sought, didn’t consent to, and didn’t want. This time it wasn’t in the moment it happened, but it was a once-and-for-all declaration that I will not be passive when assaulted—if it’s initiated when I’m unconscious, or by stealth, by emotional coercion, or even if it was initiated by physical violence or threat of it—I will refuse it. I won’t allow my body to be used when it’s not my choice!

All those years I was entangled in such fear that warred with my desperate yearning for some shred of attention and tenderness—I was so alone, in a *void* where love and support should have been—I believed no one would ever offer me *genuine* love. I hated myself and the very bodily sensations that were the only touch that existed in my life back then. But I chose those sensations over the hopelessness that would have otherwise overtaken me back then, in spite of the high cost of hating myself.

But that was then. And this is now. And *NOW* I have broken whatever agreement my perpetrators may have imagined I made with them. They thought I’d comply, for the sake of being held for a little while. But all bets are off.

I’m saying *NO*. No, I will not trade my body, my autonomy, my self-respect, my free will, for the empty promises or fleeting sensations that were offered back then. And I won’t make any new deals of that kind.

I deserve real, authentic love—and in the absence of real love, I will love myself. And God loves me. I am safer, and better able to establish a life I can be proud of, with the only touch being a chaste hug from a friend, or one of my children, or when I choose sex with my husband. I will protect myself. I will care for my body, mind, and soul.

No. They can’t have me anymore. I’m finished with that.

Wednesday, March 21st, 11:00 P.M.

The verdict for the trial came in today. Maria’s father was convicted on one count of sexual abuse, acquitted on the second. I could see the jury really believed in his guilt, but some technical difficulties raised “reasonable doubts”. He’ll be sentenced in about six weeks, almost certainly to jail time. Maybe that’s good. Might he learn something in prison, and come out a better human being? Could it change the course of his life? I’m not optimistic.

Other group members are jubilant. Maria is shaken, relieved, and glad. It’s good she was supported in telling the truth and stopping ongoing abuse. We hope there are other children who might have been harmed, who won’t suffer the same devastation. Yes! Those are good outcomes. Protect the children. Empower one another to speak truth. Say no to domination and cruelty and using a child’s body. Raise awareness of the harm caused by abuse. I join in gladness about furthering those goals.

But I’m feeling sad. It’s another sad story.

How sad that human beings with so much capacity for loving and creating cut such swaths of destruction along their paths instead. How sad God must feel, loving us, creating us for so much good, and offering compassion and healing for the rest.

There’s a verse in Matthew where Jesus says, “Oh, how I have longed to gather you to me as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you were not willing.” What a beautiful mothering image of God.

How little I’ve been willing. I don’t allow myself to receive real love, however I crave it. I’ve taken the counterfeit stuff, too easily, and it doesn’t fill the need. Still craving.

But the “strong” keep on crushing the spirits of the “weak”.

Humanity is a mass of angry, pain-wracked people all out to defend their own interests, and in the process grasping, striving, forcing their will in the world, and inflicting more pain on anybody in their paths. We interpret every other person’s motives through the gray mist of our own suffering.

Of course, we’re defensive! Everybody’s been out to get us all our lives. The world’s not a safe place for babies to grow up in. When you’re rejected from birth, why would you ever believe anybody else would consider your needs? So, we look out for number one and attack the competition.

That paranoia extends to our expectations of God. We go through the compulsive motions of our lives as if we’re the only ones of significance on this teeming planet, and everyone else is a only prop on the stage where we’re the star. So, we can use anyone else for our purposes, right? Because no one else matters, and God doesn’t exist, or if He does, He’s warming up to send down lightning bolts. We focus on what we think we can control. If it’s brought to our attention that God is aware of what’s going on, we revert to a fetal position in a corner, panicked at our expectation of judgment, which equals abuse.

A loving God must grieve when we reject the love and acceptance offered every moment of our existence. The love we’ve been so desperate for all our lives. And we can’t see the gift because we’re armored up in anticipation of more pain. We miss so much good.

I understand why humans resist giving up their anger. Anger feels safe, as if we are “in control.” When we let go of the rage, we’ve laid down our “weapons”. We’re back to being vulnerable. Undefended, like a helpless child. Weak.

But unless you become like little children, you can’t enter the kingdom of heaven. (Which is supposed to be right here in this world too. “The kingdom of God is among you.” Now, not just after we die.) Little children are weak, and they come face to face with that truth over and over again every day. Can’t reach the doorknob. Can’t pour their own drink without spilling. Can’t tie their own shoes. They are dependent on the love of a parent to provide what they can’t do for themselves.

But I had to depend on people who weren’t there or wouldn’t help. They wouldn’t pour the milk for me, then shamed me for spilling it. “Look how helpless she is, she can’t tie her own shoes. Look how little she is, she can’t open the door on her own. Look how weak she is, we can use her body and make her think she’s responsible for it. We can use this weak child to satisfy y our own lusts. Her needs aren’t important.”

Don’t bother to ask for your needs to be met. It’s a sign of weakness to admit you have needs.

So, they taught me that *weak* equals *bad*. Weakness invites abuse. The only hope of defending yourself against abuse (and abuse is always a given, better expect it) is to never be weak. Be strong and invincible and competent for every occasion. Dazzle them with your myriad abilities, and they’ll never see that you’re vulnerable underneath. Fancy footwork will keep them guessing. Never let them see you sweat. Never expose your soft spot.

Or if they notice your soft spot, then *hide*, and don’t come out.

But now I discover that perhaps the whole world might not be out to rape me. That there is a way to trust and let myself be as weak as I truly am, and still be safe. My inner child can be a child. She doesn’t have to be perfect and strong. She’s still afraid, but I remind her that God is here, and loves us both. God knows how weak I am.

Tuesday, March 27th, 2:15 A.M.

Yesterday in my session with Jason, I told him that, in letting go of my anger, I find myself awash in sadness again. So, I asked him, “What’s the difference between grief and self-pity?”

“That’s a good question,” he said. “Self-pity is stagnant. Doesn’t go anywhere. But grief is an active process you move through. It’s hard work to get to a better place than where you are. You’re grieving, working on a new piece of ground every day. Your wheels haven’t stopped turning.”

Waking up and writing is part of my grief work, I suppose. I’m reminded of the beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn. I’ve been comforted since I’ve let myself honestly feel my grief. I never understood that before.

True mourning requires an awareness and acceptance of our emotional reaction to a loss. So many of us deny our pain and avoid mourning. We push the feelings under the surface and pretend we’re fine. We don’t ever grieve the loss and never reach resolution. And we never feel the comfort God offers.

The psychology books agree with Jesus: Blessed are those who can deal honestly with their feelings of sadness, for they will become healthy. Actually, blessed are those who can honestly be present with *all* their feelings, for they will find resolution. And there’s comfort in that.

Blessed are the meek, for they don’t seek taking back their personal power through confrontation, but leave vengeance to God. I know there’s freedom in this direction, but laying down the weapon of my anger, I feel helpless again, drowning in sadness. Haven’t I done grief already? I’m so tired of it.

Monday, March 26th, 9:00 P.M.

Today Jason brought up the idea of memory healing again. He suggested I evaluate what old wounds are still triggering pain that we need to resolve. It also signals the beginning of the end, I think. I know it’s not final. I still have work to do. But I have the feeling that very soon we’ll wrap up this phase of therapy and begin the detachment phase. I’m afraid to think about standing alone, without Jason’s support. I don’t want to be finished.

I ran a mental inventory of my condition right now. To begin with, my relationship score doesn’t look so good. There’s hope (I tell myself firmly) in my marriage and in my relationships with my children. But there’s so much distance there right now. David is exhausted by the demands of supporting me through this intense grieving process. He wants me to be fixed. He wants his needs to be addressed, but I still don’t have much energy for his needs.

And my daughters are about to be teenagers. Those are tough years anyway, and I’ve been absent to what they needed for so long. It won’t be easy to heal that rift.

And my background is all blown away. Besides, so many of what I used to see as close friendships look more and more like pure codependency. I can’t be with those people and get healthy. Caretaking them drains me, takes my attention away from dealing appropriately with my real responsibilities. And it isn’t good for them either, when my propping them up keeps them from developing their own strengths through their own challenges—which might actually be necessary wake-up calls for their own learning. So, I’m without those “friends.”

As for family, I’m talking to Carla on the phone less than I used to, but I’m way more guarded about my stuff. We talk more about her life, and her family. I have some hope that in time it might be deeper. She loves me. She offers what she can, but—there are limits. And I’m doing my best to recognize them.

With an inventory like that, and facing letting go of Jason, too, I get that old familiar feeling of loneliness. What I *want* is a mother! I want someone who knows my story and understands and accepts me unconditionally for who I am, flaws and all. Wait. That’s not a mother, that’s a therapist! That’s Jason.

But I *do* want a mother. I have a long list of losses, but I guess she heads the list. I’m not feeling more anger at her. I understand her too well to sustain the old rage. And God must be changing my heart. ***judy*** and I wrote a poem to her:

MY MAMA

*If my mama could be who she wanted to be,*

*She’d cradle my head in her lap,*

*She’d stroke my temples.*

*And croon my name soft and low.*

*She’d listen as I poured out my heart.*

*She’d cry with me for all my hurt.*

*She’d be on my side.*

*She’d believe in me.*

*She’d hold me close.*

*Till I felt safe….*

*Which would be a long, long time.*

*She’d lock the door.*

*So nobody could come in*

*To hurt me anymore.*

*She’d rub my back:*

*Gentle, rhythmic palms sliding.*

*Shoulder to waist,*

*Shoulder to waist.*

*Till my sobs were spent*

*And my breathing slowed.*

*And I sighed and slept.*

*Against her warmth.*

*And she wouldn’t move. She wouldn’t pull away.*

*She’d be there still.*

*Mama couldn’t be who she wanted to be.*

*Neither of us got what we wanted then.*

*But my wounds are healing.*

*I’ve been held, and loved, and listened to.*

*I’ve been believed.*

*And I’m going to be all right, Mama.*

I forgive her all over again. She’s still so very sad and stuck. God, help me to keep on forgiving her.

Wednesday, April 11th, 2:00 A.M.

Back in the midst of grief, the old questions recycle with more strength than I expected. Why me? Why any of us? It isn’t fair that children should suffer the terrors we survived. Why does God allow such evil to exist in the world. God has the power to do anything He chooses to do. Why didn’t He stop them? I guess those questions weren’t as fully resolved as I thought.

I understand it on an intellectual level. We’re all given free will. If God removed all evil actions and the suffering evil creates, humankind would be mere robots. And free will is a good gift.

In the free choice I’ve been allowed, I sometimes take actions that cause someone else discomfort, and even pain. To remove evil, my freedom to make choices would be removed, because my choices are sometimes evil—selfish, and blindly causing harm to others. Where could the line be drawn between the infinite gradations of the gray between “evil” darkness and “good” light? It would be impossible.

The parable of the weeds, in Matthew 13:24-30, talks about this problem. It’s a farmer metaphor—there are weeds growing amidst the wheat. And the servants in the parable are instructed not to pull up the weeds, because the wheat would get pulled up with them. It’s too hard to differentiate weeds from wheat, and it maybe disturbs the roots of the wheat, which wouldn’t grow as well. At the harvest, the weeds will be thrown out.

The roots of the weeds and the wheat are all intermingled in the soil. Like in humans, there is good and bad in each one of us.

If God kept swooping in to edit out every mistake I made, what developing goodness would get disturbed, and wither before it had a chance to grow? I think there must be good things I’m supposed to do in the world—gifts I can offer somehow. Maybe even some of those gifts are developing more because I’ve lived through these awful experiences that happened to me. Maybe those strengths wouldn’t exist in me, without negative experience to push against, to build those muscles. Like exercise, pushing myself to do what stresses my muscles, because that stress makes my muscles stronger.

I’d never have asked to have been abused. And I wouldn’t ever wish it on somebody else.

But if this is how the universe is constructed, following free will as one of the very things that makes us human, then we can look for ways to turn that bad stuff into something worthwhile—to grow from, and to help others grow. To learn to love better, in contrast to what happened before.

Like I said, I understand it intellectually. Translating that understanding to my inner child, to a heart level, is far tougher. She is still afraid and alone and ashamed much of the time. I can still see her curled into a ball, cowering in a dark corner.

Her fear can’t be explained to someone who hasn’t felt it.

But the *experience* of it—it’s like the feelings moviemakers evoke when they produce a horror movie. Even though horror movies are—well, horrible. Like *The Exorcist*. Ugh. There’s always a victim who finds herself powerless in the face of impending disaster. The slasher or the rabid dog or the alien monster is ominously closing in, to a rising musical score, intent on destroying the victim, who doesn’t know *when* it’s going to happen.

Audiences know that kind of horror. But they can leave after two hours. Is that why some survivors of trauma enjoy horror movies? Because it replays something familiar, and *then they end*—maybe with an escape, and a happy ending? But they end. We who grew up in that terror of violation had no escape. We lived in a chronic emergency state all our lives, however we managed to numb or repress the feelings. I am still at risk of re-living it.

My inner child wants to believe God really knows her paralyzing fear and her loss. She *has* felt Jesus’ compassion and comfort. But I find doubts I didn’t expect. Jesus was never raped! Did he ever experience that absolute helplessness?

The questions popping into my head now are things my old minister might have called blasphemy. Or at least, they were dreaded evidence of my risk of “falling away from the faith!” But right now, my faith feels more real to me than at any other time in my life. And I think if God is the creator in the universe, He’s not threatened by my puny human questions. So….

Even without the sexual abuse, the story of Jesus centers on His willingness to be crucified, however unjust it was for Him to be beaten, shamed and murdered—and He’d done nothing wrong. He experienced paralyzing helplessness, nailed to a cross, before dying. Which checks one of those boxes I asked about--paralyzed. Okay. Some people might treat this as an allegory, a legend, a wisdom story, and not necessarily a record of real events. Some people say everything recorded in those stories in the Bible are absolute literal *TRUTH* and must not be questioned at all. I don’t know if there’s any mid-point between the two.

Some might say I’d be going to hell just for my lack of faith in the sentences I’m writing at this moment. But I’m risking writing them, to try to hear God’s answer, which I’ve been recognizing is not just dead words on a page—a phrase I think I wrote down some months ago. I’m asking God to help me with questions about God. This is how I’ve heard the answers. So, I continue.

I can only speak from what I know—ideas I’ve been exposed to, and reevaluating those.

What Christianity holds up as the epitome of human suffering—death on the cross—was all over for Jesus in a matter of hours. Victims of sexual abuse live with their horror for years. Decades. And we didn’t deserve it, either. My friend Annie, at two years old, didn’t earn the violence inflicted on her any more than Jesus earned the crucifixion, did she? No! And Jesus was a grownup, making an adult decision on His own behalf. Also, He’d grown up in a family that looked pretty supportive, as far as we know.

One of the songs we sang in church when I was a kid comes to mind. I remember it from back then—every Sunday, it seemed, superimposed on the years when I was in the midst of abuse. *Jesus bore it all!* we sang. But did He? It’s the *ALL* in that song line that bothers me. Jesus wasn’t raped, by any story I heard. I never recognized the strength of this resistance inside me before. ***judy*** still holds back complete trust because she isn’t sure Jesus understands her pain. She *wants* to trust. And I think God is willing to hear my questions. Okay, God. What *is* the answer? Was Jesus’ “ultimate” sacrifice greater than that of a suffering child?

I pull out my chain-index Bible. Old Testament prophecies referring to the Messiah: He was “despised and rejected…” “carried our sorrows…” “wounded…” “bruised”. In the same chain, that He “bore the sin of many.” In the New Testament, Christ “became a curse for us…” and “bore our sins in His own body.” And on and on.

The more I read, the more I see the ideas of *sin* and *suffering* all mixed up. Was the Bible using these words synonymously? Did I write—or did I just think—that the reason God hates sin is because of the *pain* it causes His children? I need to consider my internal definition of the word *SIN*.

Missing the mark—which sounds like I am aiming wrong. Transgressing against God.

I used to think that sin was all the *bad* things people did that made God angry at us. God was a punishing judge, just waiting to catch us in a fault so He could jump on us in a rage. Sounds like Richard. But if I believe “God *is love*!”, not an angry dictator, then what would it mean to *transgress* against a God who is loving, who wants to care for His children? A loving God who weeps for all the wrong-headed, confused blundering transgressions of wounded people wasting all the goodness they’re given, blowing chances to live in peace, as they keep on making war? That God who would want to gather us under protective wings. But we were not willing. The God of love weeps for our stubborn resistance to love. Like a loving parent would have compassion for a child who’s too scared and overstimulated to settle into the help and comfort offered.

How would I define sin now? Well, I think sin isn’t *only* the *acts* of murder or theft, or adultery committed by people. It’s broader than that. More than unjust, morally corrupt actions, sin describes global misery, the suffering caused by those actions. Sin is the affliction that plagues us all our lives. Sin is responsible for the agony and hopelessness in every victim’s existence.

Even the rocks cry out in anguish for the suffering that sin brought into the world. And Jesus is supposed to be the antidote for that.

Addiction, of all kinds, is a long-term consequence of sin. Family dysfunction and the violence and pain related to it is caused by sin—and the fear, and secrecy, and shaming, and suffering, which are also sin. It’s all sin, caused by sin’s effect. Sin’s an ever-present darkness that plagues the world. I’ve been infected by that darkness. Sin was imposed on me, and I’ve passed it on by my own selfish, defensive, fearful, misdirected actions.

Sin is the disease. If I believe Jesus “bore our sins” and “*became* a curse” it sounds like Jesus *became sin*, the whole burden of that disease and its effects for all humankind. All of it. If he *became* that suffering, then he *suffered* it. He *experienced* the torment of all of us. He *felt* the misery and despair of every broken moment in each of the billions of lives on this earth from the beginning to the end. He *became* sin so *all of it* from Adam and Eve to whenever the lights go out—would be covered by Grace. Which was the whole point of the Messiah. If I believe in that.

And I do. When I listen to my feelings, it feels true.

God, who is not bound by the timelines we follow, was with me when it was happening, experiencing the torment with me. Knowing all the moments yet to come that represent the rest of my healing. He always knew.

I am again amazed by the sudden insight that appears on the paper beneath my pencil. You do answer prayer, God. Thanks for clarifying my confusion.

I just heard His response! “You’re welcome.”

Which made me cry. It’s more than a polite answer. God said I was welcome! Welcomed into His presence, His love, His family. I’m not a stepchild. What comfort I can feel because I do know how much I am loved, and how much Jesus *does* understand. He’s with me in my mourning. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Friday, April 20th, 2:45 A.M.

Yesterday, Jason asked me, “Who were you in high school?” By now I know him well enough to recognize that this open-ended question, in the context of our conversation, was an invitation to talk about possible sexual relationships as a teenager. I’m inferring the question of possible promiscuity, the most common response to sexual abuse. He’s asking me if I’m carrying any more shame that needs healing.

I can see how easily something like that could happen—if we never learned to say no, and the only “affection” ever given was sexual. Actually, I’m a little surprised that promiscuity *wasn’t* my profile. I can’t explain why. It wasn’t “virtue”. More likely fear.

But his questioning prompted a memory of high school—of another kind, of an incident at our large high school—my graduating class alone had 500 students. Jostling through the press of adolescent bodies in the chaotic rush between classes, I spotted another girl, one I barely knew, walking a little ahead of me. She brushed her hand repeatedly across the back of her miniskirt, in a self-conscious protective gesture that sought to assess the damage to her dignity. There was a red stain on the white denim, announcing her humiliation to anyone with eyes to see.

I quickened my pace to position myself behind her, to shield her “accident” from public view. But she was moving fast, in a frantic rush to escape into the nearest restroom. The flowing crowd of students blocked my path, and I couldn’t catch up with her. I lost sight of her as two boys intervened just ahead of me. But I was close enough to witness the boys’ exchanged glances and hear their stage whispers, mocking her shameful condition. They burst into hysterical laughter.

If I had had a knife at that moment, I think I would have committed a double murder! Looking back now, I can see that my rage at their amusement was a response to my own shame in identifying with the other girl’s predicament.

***judy*** wanted to scream, “*Don’t laugh at me for having a body I never chose, that makes that humiliating mess every month! I never gave my body permission to be female! I was betrayed by my own flesh!*” If there had ever been a way to stop *being* female, with all the indignities attending that gender, I would have done it. It had nothing to do with wanting to be male—a horrible thought! But as a female, the power to be in control of my body’s functions seemed to be in the hands of nature and the males who used me. It was never mine.

Writing that story brings with it another rush of grief, that my inner child should be forced to hate herself so much. Am I going to be weeping forever? *Is this crushing sadness serving a purpose? I’m so tired of it.*

Wednesday, April 25th, 10:45 P.M.

*God, I feel so scared and alone. I know you’re there, but everybody else I thought I could talk to is farther and farther away. Pretty soon, Jason won’t be there to listen, either.*

Yes, I did ask you to show me my boundaries, and the increasing distance with some I called friends is a clear message to me. They weren’t safe relationships. And the therapy group will be ending soon, too, although Annie will still be my friend. But what else do I have left? I need people in my life. I’m afraid of being alone!

The biggest gap will be finding a way to process my innermost struggles without Jason. When the day comes that I don’t have a therapist anymore, who’s going to accept me unconditionally? Who’s going to listen to my feelings without misunderstanding, being disappointed in me or thinking I’m bad? Who will give me confidence when I don’t think I have the strength to go on?

My husband. Is it David, God? He’s my husband, and he loves me, but he and I are perfectly opposite personality types! He doesn’t understand me. Can he grow into that role? That’s hard to believe. I don’t think he wants to.

David has been so good with managing the girls when I’m not available. He’s tolerated my not keeping up with the house, or meals or laundry, when those things are important to him. He works a big job and is always working to fix things around the house, and the yard, plus he spends time with the kids. All while I have a part time job, and therapy, and endless reading and journaling.

David gets frustrated and impatient listening to me go on and on about my *feelings*. Hearing my verbal processing is a burden to him, so I try to spare him. If I were to depend on him to listen the way Jason has, I’m afraid it would strain the relationship unbearably. He’s already worn out by my grief.

He wants me to be finished already, but I don’t know how long that will take. And I don’t think I have to apologize that I’m not healed yet. If it was a case of the flu I’d have been fine long ago. I didn’t ask to be a victim! It’s the depth of the wound that determines the intensity of the pain and the duration of the recovery. But David wants me “fixed”, so we can establish some “normalcy” in our lives. He can’t listen the way I need him to.

Jason only listens so completely because he’s a counselor, and I *pay* him to hear all the garbage I dredge up. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t care, but it *is* his job, which means he’s had training and experience to offer exactly the skills that help me. He’d be very codependent to have given me all the hours I’ve spent talking with him if he wasn’t financially compensated. He has a family to support.

Reality reminds me that my husband has a different assignment in his own work hours, and plenty of responsibility. I need him to keep doing all those things. He’s not my counselor. But who *will* be my counselor?

Jason has filled a multi-faceted role as counselor. He has been a healthy father figure, a teacher, a coach, an advocate and a friend. And he has modeled God’s love and acceptance.

Through him I've experienced for the first time that there exists a relationship wherein I can be completely honest, myself, without fear of rejection. During my therapy, Jason has been a physical stand-in, demonstrating God’s qualities. Like a stuntman in movie production, he has stepped onstage during difficult scenes that required a physical presence. I had to experience a safe human trust relationship to heal the damages from human relationships that abused my trust.

So, if Jason is a stand-in during counselling, who can replace Jason? Oh. Only God. When you take away the stuntman, you bring in the real thing. God. I didn't connect this before. Counselor is one of the names for God.

The counselor role that will be vacated in a few months isn't one David can fill, and Jason can't fill it indefinitely. Eventually when you get healthy, you discover the therapist you learned to trust is only a temporary role. Even the best therapist is only a poor substitute for the counsel God can offer. Of course I have to be listening for God’s counsel, not ignoring it.

Every facet of the counselor role Jason has played—father figure, teacher, coach, advocate, and friend—are ways God relates to me already. I have the original comforter, not just a human shadow.

How can I *not* trust God to fulfill my counselling needs, when I've seen what amazing insights God has given me when I write? So much of my healing has taken place outside Jason's office, in the presence of God. Even when I wasn't conscious of praying! I'm experiencing His counsel right now, in this journal entry, as God responds to my prayer.

How far from God I've been all my life! But with non-judging support, as my trust has grown, my faith has increased even more through His response to me. It's what was promised: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you”. I had to have enough faith to believe He would answer me. I had to have ears to hear His answers. I had to listen.

I will still grieve losing the relationship with Jason. I've been dependent on him through so much pain that the thought of standing alone frightens my inner child. She still needs a physically present person to walk with her through the sorrow. ***judy*** is feeling an impending abandonment.

But an important part of what God is showing me here is that all human beings are always alone in the universe, when you come right down to it God gives us mates and friends to fill up part of that aloneness, so we can share with someone. But eternity is between God and me.

My relationships are comforts God provides me. I need to cherish those relationships and care for them, but they exist inside my relationship with God, not separate from it.

God isn't asking me to quit therapy cold turkey. I have work to finish with Jason. But I won't be abandoned when the time comes to separate. Thank you, God.

# Chapter 12

**Transference? Not Me!**

**Marcel Proust wrote, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”**

**The process of therapy had given me new eyes, and the landscape I saw unfolding within myself continued to disturb me with its dark complexity.**

**I examined in increasingly painful detail *judy’s* understanding of what men expected of her. Her shame at this depth proved to be a generalized expectation that she couldn’t be valued for anything but sexuality.**

Tuesday, May 1st, 11:30 P.M.

Jason asked me again this afternoon if I had thought anymore about memory healing. But he didn't suggest a date to schedule it. Do I need another memory healing? I can't find much leftover shame about any of the flashbacks I've had. I don't feel any pressure to get a healing session done, like I did the times before.

Later, when we were talking about unhealthy friendships I've moved away from recently, Jason asked if any of them had been unhealthy of friendships with men. “You mean the relationships I’m just now leaving behind?” I asked, puzzled.

“Whenever”, he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well,” I began slowly. “I've had men friends. Unhealthy? I guess I've been a caretaker with one or two—but not like the obsession with Tina’s problem—trying to rescue her like I did. Nothing that was any big deal.”

We went on to another topic of discussion. But I've come back to that fragment of conversation because now sitting in my living room with my journal, I suddenly see that Jason was lighting another fuse. Here's the detonation. He asked if there had been any unhealthy relationships with men. He was offering me an opportunity to explore any relationships I regretted. He was really asking me if I had ever committed adultery!

I understand where that question comes from. Victims of incest had had their boundaries damaged or demolished. Mine were pretty much destroyed. Add that to the fact that our relationships don't work because we don't know how to communicate our needs, and that our understanding of intimacy is confused. We are so angry inside, and so we are miserable.

There's an old country and western song that says lonely women make good lovers. I guess we are easy targets for men who are looking for sex without commitment. Even women who are Christian. We are prone to that kind of mistake because of our conditioning and our hunger for affirmation.

And Jason knows that my marriage has been struggling for years. Of course, I have denied that there was a problem, have pretended our relationship was perfect. (Whoever taught me to confront problems in healthy way? I wonder now how we managed to stay married. But we did.)

Our relationship has degenerated into an angry, frustrated parent and a frightened, cringing child. David was always right, and I was always wrong. Despite my husband's many good qualities, I still had trouble seeing him beyond my inner child's deep conviction that men are abusive and women are victims. And under my surface was rage.

But adultery? No, never that.

I have an uneasy feeling, though. Jason's question was another variation on the theme “Who were you in high school?” Both were gentle offers to explore the potential for sexual experiences other than marriage and the history of incest. And both questions are based on the concept of transference.

Jason hasn't labeled any of my issues as transference. He doesn't use a lot of psychological jargon. But my psychology class last summer did address it briefly. Applying the label to the question of my adult sexual behavior is clarifying.

Transference is carrying forward the emotional responses to a person from a past experience (usually in childhood) and applying them unconsciously to a different person in a current situation that reminds us of the old event. The word is commonly applied to the relationship with a therapist, and that fits. But it happens in other relationships too. Like the sudden panic attack that startled me recently when David neglected to shave before initiating sex. That fear wasn't about my husband! I instantly transferred my old response to my stepfather into the present relationship. Ugh.

Transference has been speaking loud and clear in every personal interaction I've ever had, because of my old expectations of how I would be treated by both men and women. My old expectations said: Don't expect to get your needs met! There is no justice, no recourse for unfair treatment. So look out for yourself. Defend yourself because nobody else will. But put up a facade to make yourself look like the good person they say you are supposed to be. Keep the secrets hidden, or people will know how *bad* you are. And if they know, you’ll be punished or abandoned.

And especially, expect that you will be used, sexually and emotionally. The word “no” doesn't exist. Resistance is hopeless.

With that transference of old emotional responses in play, why would anyone be surprised that victims fall into repeated destructive sexual relationships?

But I didn't. Unless, unless I repressed something that happened with Ken, my first and only steady boyfriend before David. We dated for a full year, when I was sixteen, within the rigid structure my stepfather would allow, with a ten o’clock curfew. There was a whole lot of making out, but that's where it ended. Wasn't it?

But—maybe not. I remember at a drive-in movie once, us in the back seat, double dating, another couple in the front seat. Ken’s hand on my bare thigh, moving up. I was wearing a dress. My memory ends there. Is that all? But that piece of memory might be a fragment of a picture that would show me in helpless compliance to whatever he chose to do.

Ken would have been surprised to discover I wasn't a virgin. Contrary to my reputation as a prude. A church girl. Discovering I wasn’t a virgin, he would have taken that as license to keep going, interpreted my petrified silence as giving consent. But he would have been wrong.

I don’t remember. But still, there is new grief at this unexpected loss. Even the public good-girl reputation I assumed was intact may have been an obvious lie to everyone else. Through transference, my family stole the last of my ragged shreds of dignity.

I am not ashamed. But I weep for the hopelessness of that 16-year-old girl. She never had the opportunity to hold her head up and know she was worthy of protection.

Wednesday, May 9th, 2:00 AM.

Yesterday Jason asked me, “How has your experience with men as a child affected your expectations of men in the present?”

I have to laugh and cry at the same time, when I think that a couple of years ago, I couldn't see any problems at all in the way I related to men. Denial kept the secret inside, so I could survive it. But now I know what an enormous impact those old experiences had on my adult life.

We talked about another puzzle piece I've never examined, the influence of my natural father, Jack. Since their divorce when I was two, I've only met him twice.

He was on a driving trip, passing through our hometown once, when I was five or six. He had stopped to fill up with gas at a service station. Improbably, my mother happened to be driving by and recognized him. She pulled our car to a screeching halt and dragged his three children out to present us to him. She was shrill and accusatory, he was defensive. He knew Grandma’s house, and we lived just down the street from her. But he’d had no intention to stop by and visit us.

Years later, when I was in high school, our family took one of our long driving trips through the state where Jack lives. Mom had stayed in touch with Jack's parents, So, we stopped to visit them. By this time Carla and Gary had left home, so it was me alone of Jack's children to meet him for an ice cream soda. He rationalized that whole period of his life, saying he and Mom should never have gotten married. They were too young. So, I guess he was calling me a mistake.

***judy***, did you learn some lessons about men from Jack? Would you like to talk to him?

*Yeah. Are you the one I was supposed to call daddy? You are the one who was never there. You showed me that daddies make babies with moms and never notice that the babies even get born. I learned you can't expect men to buy milk or shoes or houses for moms or for children. Moms have to do that by themselves because you can't find the daddy when kids are hungry.*

*All the daddy ever wanted anyway was to use some other woman's body to make himself feel good. When he does that, he gets to feel important. He gets to make the woman he has sex with feel better, and at the same time, make the mom and the children at home feel bad too. So that makes him strong.*

*Men think they're great because their penises give them power over women. Making a baby means he controls the mom because she has to stay home with it to feed it and take care of it and then cook dinner and clean house. He can come home after being in bed with somebody else and put his feet up and yell at the mom for not being beautiful anymore and for being tired all the time and for being a witch and for never having enough money.*

*I hate you, Jack, for the crazy picture you gave me about men. You made a lot of big empty promises, and then showed me what a liar you were by leaving us. You never sent us any money. You never even picked up the phone.*

*You were the one who wasn’t there when I cried, and nobody helped me. You were the one who should have known what my first words were and what my laugh sounded like when he carried me on your shoulders. You were the one who was missing when nobody taught me about the love between a husband and wife, or between a father and his child.*

*Because you were gone, there was no daddy ever to be proud of me when I went to the city spelling bee, or to give me a special hug when I went on my first date. There was no daddy to give me away at my wedding or be a grandfather to my children. You were never there for a birthday or Christmas Day or any other day that was important to me. And it never occurred to you that you should be because you never gave me two minutes’ worth of thought in all those years.*

*You showed me that daddies don't exist, and you showed me that I wasn't worth caring about. Lessons from you taught me to hate myself for not being good enough to be loved.*

*You left me behind without protection, to be raped all my life. And if you had been with us, you would have raped me, too.*

In spite of you, and the mess you left behind you, Jack, I have become who I am today. I am a woman that a real father would have been proud to have claimed as his daughter.

The healthier I become, the more loss it is to you for what you could have had in a relationship with me if you'd only cared. But you probably will never understand that. I'm forgiving you, Jack, because I don't want to be chained to you anymore. You simply don't matter in my life. I leave you in God's hands.

Tuesday, May 15th, 9:30 PM.

I shared my processing about Jack in my session with Jason today we talked about the contrast between what I experienced daddies to be, and what my daughters have experienced with David.

“Have you ever been jealous of your daughters, that they had a father?”

“Oh no. I cherished the fact that they have had a father who's been there through all the years,” I answered. How wonderful that there are *some* children who don't have to suffer through abandonment and rejection.

Saturday May 19th, 4:00 PM.

As I jogged this morning, I mulled over the question of transference. Are there more ways my abuse has affected my expectations today? Yes. I've probably only scratched the surface.

Like my weight. Since I began running and addressing the eating disorder by giving up sugar, I've lost 28 pounds. It helps that I'm running (well, jogging, and not very fast!) 5 miles pretty consistently now, several times a week. I need to lose more, but I respect my body, and I feel stronger and healthier.

Months ago, Jason asked me if my extra pounds might have been an effort to avoid gaining the attention of men. I denied it at the time, but now as I look at that issue in reverse, I discovered that Jason was right. I've recognized that without the layer of protective fat, I find myself very surprised that my husband can keep his hands off me. I realized that I've unconsciously anticipated increased sexual demands because I am thinner. So, the opposite must be an unconscious expectation of decreased sexual demands when I'm heavier. My inner child was trying, one more way, to say no when it wasn't permissible to say no. She thought maybe her body size could prevent the question from being asked. But even fat hasn't kept her safe from sexual attention.

I've seen for a long time that I've used food as a drug to numb myself from uncomfortable feelings. Now whenever I see obese people on the street or in stores, I wonder what inner pain might have driven them to wrap themselves in so much insulation.

I don't expect that my eating disorder will cease to be a struggle for me, but if *judy* can experience often enough that she can choose her own response to sexual situations, perhaps she’ll be more comfortable with allowing the body size to be what it was intended to be. She has a right to say no. And I can back her up with boundaries instead of poundage.

Wednesday, May 23rd, 1:30 AM.

Here is some writing I've tried to evade, but the topic is increasingly uncomfortable. ***judy*** wants to escape it. But I don't have any other means to get it out of my head other than write it down.

I cancelled my therapy appointment today. I had a cold, and all I wanted to do was sleep. But I've had colds before, and I kept my appointments anyway, because my commitment to therapy has had such a quality of desperation in it. I couldn't let go of my lifeline.

Was this cold truly a coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences anymore. There was a reason not to see Jason. I was avoiding him.

The previous week's session produced a question from Jason that shocked me by its directness. “Has the topic of sexual attraction ever come up between us?” My blood pressure went up, I think, but I wouldn't let myself feel it.

“No,” I answered quickly, and skirted the issue to address something more comfortable.

For a whole week I've pretended he didn't ask what he asked. So I'm still avoiding a painful issue I've never acknowledged an issue that has existed for a long time. I'm still running away from confronting what's hard to acknowledge, like I’ve done all my life.

In a polite conversation with any other man I know, he would not ask me directly if I—a married woman—were sexually attracted to him—but I don't have polite conversations with my counselor. Therapy goes beyond the polite, to the honest. Honesty can be a very scary attribute to cultivate.

Why do I have to deal with this? If I had a woman counselor, I wouldn't have this assignment, would I? I don't want to acknowledge what feels so shameful. Should it feel so shameful?

Is it bad to be attracted to a man who has been so attentive and concerned for my well-being? It has very little to do with the fact that he’s a nice-looking man. Is it a sin to be drawn to another human being who has supported me through the most intense grieving in my life? He knows all the ugly secrets I held inside for 30 years. And he accepts me, anyway. Is it shameful that I would find something attractive in that?

Being with Jason is an experience of being at home for the first time In my life. I feel safe and protected. When I'm not with him, a part of me is so lonely for that feeling! There's an emptiness, a longing I can't quite define.

But he's married, and he has a family! And I'm married, with a family. We're both moral, monogamous people with an entirely different purpose in mind. Neither of us is seeking a sexual relationship with the other. Why does it feel so *dangerous* all of a sudden? As if I were about to fall off a cliff! I can feel ***judy’s*** anxiety skyrocketing.

Jason established very early in therapy that he recognized my vulnerability, and he promised not to be sexual with me. He said he wouldn't take advantage of my trust. Then where does this feeling come from, as if I expect that sexual demands will be made?

Wait. Where have I gotten *all* my expectations about sexual behavior? From my past experience. Have I ever experienced a close relationship with a man that was not sexualized? No. ***judy*** can't quite believe a man could care about her and *not* ask for sex. Besides, why would ***judy*** believe any man's verbal promises that she is safe? Words are empty.

Will I ever reach the bottom of the pile of manifestations of incest in my life? Will I grieve this confusion forever?

I got up to make a cup of tea. Stalling.

Oh, no. There's more. I have to face the fact that it's more than just an expectation that Jason will ask for sex. Now that I'm faced with the impending loss of the therapeutic relationship, it feels like ***judy*** is grasping at straws to hang on to a person she needs. She's afraid of abandonment, and by her experience, sex is a way to hold on—even though it only works for a while. Perhaps for her, being sexual wouldn’t be too high a price to pay to keep Jason, even if I know rationally that I'll be okay, and stopping therapy with Jason is a wise decision.

As much fear as that little girl had about sex, her need to be loved was vastly greater. Does this mean ***judy*** may have initiated some of the sexual behavior as a child?

Probably.

Sigh. Certainly.

Poor child. She had real human needs to feel safe and valued. She needed touch and affection and nurturance and companionship. She needed to feel special to someone. She needed someone to acknowledge her existence. It isn't bad to want those things.

***judy*** was conditioned to expect that none of those needs would be fulfilled anywhere outside the sexual relationship. The *sexually abusive* relationship. Experience taught her that sexual behavior kept them coming back for more. She was able to create a sense of belonging that had never existed otherwise.

But the price tag was so high! For the hollow comfort of their attention, she sold her soul along with her body. And she's willing to make the same deal again to keep Jason, now that she's faced with losing him.

*Oh, God*!

Of course, I've been ashamed of my life! I'm ashamed now that these feelings exist inside me!

I want to honor the non-sexual nature of the therapy relationship. I am committed to being faithful to my marriage vows. I respect Jason's integrity as a therapist, as a professional, and as a husband to his wife. But there is a force within me that has very different concerns. That force is very young. My boundaries are still wobbly. Can I keep ***judy*** within the limits I set intellectually when she is so needy?

So, this is where compulsions come from! This is the source of addictions, that irrational drive of a needy child to fill up the hole in her soul with whatever substance makes the pain go away for a while! I've used food to numb that pain all my life. So many of us use alcohol and drugs. Sex is a powerful, addictive drug, too. I am resisting using any drug that isn’t good for me.

But my inner child is throwing a tantrum on the floor. She wants what she wants because she wants it, and nobody had better tell her any different! She's like a toddler who grasps a fascinating new toy—a shiny butcher knife. To be a loving parent to her I must be willing to pry her clenched fingers from that blade. I have to be strong enough to listen to her screams and feel her kicking my shins, without giving in to what she thinks she wants. What isn’t good for her. And do that without shaming her.

Am I that strong? I honestly don't know. It would be so easy to relax and let her have her way. Then it would be up to Jason to say no. I hate to acknowledge this in myself but I'm still not sure if I can be that firm with her. So, I'm praying for Jason's boundaries. God, make him stronger than I am.

Sunday, May 27th, 11:00 PM.

Maybe someday I'll get past the insomnia that has plagued me this year. I am getting more consistent sleep without waking than I used to. But since I can't get to sleep now, I'll record and clarify the insight that came while I was making dinner.

I was thinking about this new issue of attraction to Jason, which is another instance of transference. I suddenly saw that most of the shame is a direct result of the fact that the attraction seems sexual. At first glance, that's a natural assumption. If an adult woman is attracted to an adult man, it must be a sexual attraction, right?

I'm very sure that sexual attraction is a part of these dangerous feelings I'm struggling with. But maybe I assume too much to put all those feelings into the same category as the results of sexual abuse.

After all, I do have other trauma from my childhood besides the incest. Parental neglect, being one. Before I began writing right now, I looked back at one of the books that's been helpful, which confirmed my vague recollection of one of the effects of neglect.

Neglect creates, among other things, the effect of a sense of emptiness, and indefinable loss, and longing, a wanting for something, we know not what. I think perhaps a large part of this desire *judy* has felt is in response to my neglect trauma.

It's a longing for the ultimate loving that a mother gives her child. The absence of bonding with my mother is about the most primal of losses. The loss of the bond between infant and mother. Is some of the attraction to Jason aimed at the parent role of counselor fills? This is such a primitive urge.

Uh, oh. I wrote a couple of months ago that what I want is a mother, someone who knows my story, and accepts me for who I am, flaws and all. Then I said, wait. That's not a mother, that's a therapist. That's Jason.

Well, that's what Jason has been. Someone who accepts me. But it *is* a description of a mother, or what a mother *should be* anyway. So I’ve projected that onto Jason. I want Jason to be more than just my therapist. I've wanted Jason to be father/mother/higher power to me because each of those roles in my childhood was distant and abusive.

My inner child wants dependency, because she was never allowed safe dependency when it was appropriate. In infancy and early childhood. ***judy’s*** longing is a childlike wish to cling to a safe nurturing parent. That's not a sexual longing.

*Don't make me be grown up*, ***judy*** pleads. *I've been grown up all my life, and I don't want to anymore!*

But even with this recognition, the longing is still dangerous, and it is sexual, because ***judy*** can't possibly have a clear understanding of the role of a healthy parent figure—which *never* includes sex.

The meaning behind the word father that ***judy*** learned is a confusing mixture of supporter, protector, user, betrayer, and sexual partner. What should be and what is are all mixed up in her mind. How can she get that untangled?

So the inner pressure to be sexual, to hold on to the relationship is still in effect! ***judy*** learned early that sex itself was a tool to make someone stay.

That leads me to where I was before. I'm at the mercy of Jason's boundaries (***judy*** never knew a man who had boundaries at all). I'm afraid to trust him. I'm afraid to trust myself with him. That's why I cancelled Tuesday's appointment, even though I wasn't conscious of it at the time.

Now that I've recognized it, I can't just ignore this. Jason raised the question of attraction between us because it was important to understand all of ***judy’s*** expectations and needs. And I have learned that the more uncomfortable I am in addressing an issue, the more I need to address it. *Argggghhhhh*.

As much as I dread it, I will talk to Jason about my feelings about him. I won't run away from it. Because it won't heal otherwise. And telling him, putting this uncomfortable dilemma on the table, is the best insurance that I won’t act on this urgency coming from ***judy***.

Jason has been telling me for quite a while what a long distance I have come toward being healthy. I think I'm beginning to believe him.

But won't it ever be easy?

Wednesday, May 30th, 2:45 AM.

Yesterday's session focused mostly on the transference between Jason and me.

No matter that I was uncomfortable with the topic, Jason didn’t seem at all disturbed by it. He didn't assume I was out to rape him. It took a lot of the pressure off to have him confirm that these feelings are a natural consequence of the conditioning created by abuse, especially sexual abuse.

But one comment Jason made has brought some unsettling new thoughts. He said I hope I haven't done anything to contribute to those dangerous feelings you're experiencing. Therapists are human beings too, and it's possible I may have made some mistakes in our work together that confused you. If so, I'm sorry.

In acknowledging his humanness, Jason gave me permission to confront him if his behavior had contributed to the problem, which was intentional, I’m sure. I can't see anything he's done that might have added to that burden, but how clear is my vision? My blind spot is now minuscule compared to the self-deception I used to live in. But I know there are still issues I can't identify. I just don't see them.

One I can identify: ***judy*** is uncomfortable with the fact that Jason is a human being who makes mistakes. There are rumblings of anxiety as I write that sentence. No, it’s bigger than anxiety. It’s fear. Underneath my intellectual awareness that no human being is perfect, is her terror of that reality.

*Why can't he be perfect*?

My own perfectionism comes from my attempts to achieve some measure of control amid the chaos of my family. I shame myself mercilessly for mistakes. Mistakes are a chink in the armor of perfection that ***judy*** depends on as her only hope for survival. Her own mistakes seem to make her vulnerable to more abuse.

Taking my therapist off the pedestal I constructed for him means he isn't perfect. Of course not. I totally get this with my intellect. But ***judy*** doesn’t.

So there's a fear that maybe he's just like all the other men ***judy*** knew as a child. Her thinking is black and white. Being emotionally vulnerable to an imperfect person means I'm at risk for abuse from the very man I need so desperately to trust. That's what *she's* thinking.

Of course, I need to recognize that therapists aren't perfect! But the illusion that he is perfect exists because I needed to trust somebody. ***judy*** could never believe in the balance of a person who could be both flawed and trustworthy. Nobody in my childhood was trustworthy.

Even David, for all his good qualities, has wounded me over the years. Probably in ways I pushed out of my mind, ways I'm still not aware of. ***judy*** added my husband's name to the list of abusers, because he was sexual with me. She couldn't have hope for anything more than what she knew. So she removed her trust from David. And how has she been acting on the fact that she doesn’t trust David? What am I not yet recognizing about my own behavior? Well, I already recognize the passive-aggressive tendency to lateness. The not keeping up with housework. Is there more?

I had to believe in Jason's perfection, on some level, at least, or I would have been too afraid to trust him for this work. I needed the illusion first, even though it set me up to suffer a loss when I would finally come to grips with the reality that Jason, like everyone else, has feet of clay.

This is the same grief that children should experience, with support, when they’re very young. In functional families a child comes to terms with the parent as loving and accepting, *and also* sometimes uncomprehending of the child's pain. Maybe in healthy families, a parent he is strong enough to weather the child's tantrum with patience and kindness as the child processes something beyond her understanding and begins to know how to hold both opposing ideas at the same time (daddy protects me *and* daddy won’t give me the toy I want). I guess it's never verbalized that clearly. But through all that, the child of a healthy family learns to retain her belief in the parent’s basic trustworthiness, even if she doesn't like a mistake that he may have made, or a wish he won’t fulfill. It must be easier to learn it early that way.

I still believe intellectually in Jason's trustworthiness. And in his boundaries. But ***judy*** is afraid. She thought she was bonding with someone she had proved infallible through a series of little tests during the process of therapy.

He passed the tests. Within the role of counselor Jason has responded to me in consistently supportive and respectful ways, even while he has challenged me to face painful facets of my life. He knew I was strong enough to confront my old shame.

But as well as Jason knows me, I know so little about him personally. If I'm going to let him be a human being, step down off the pedestal, ***judy*** needs to believe that he's really a safe human being.

Human beings make mistakes that are related to the unresolved wounds they carry. I know that from my own life. I need to find a way to accept him as he is, knowing he has his own set of wounds, and his own set of mistakes, in order to trust Jason enough to depend on his boundaries, and finish therapy with him. But Jason is a man!

Women therapists too, are human beings, and sometimes abuse clients. But for a victim of incest with a history of abuse by male parent figures, her vulnerability with a male parent figure therapist is exponentially higher than with a woman. A victim’s ability to say no is guaranteed to be more greatly damaged in an intimate situation with a man. And therapy, while it is not sexual, *is* profoundly intimate.

And the unconscious vibes her inner child sends out to a male parent figure could be interpreted by a wounded, needy male therapist (scary thought, but it happens) as a sexual invitation. There is already the natural dynamic of sexual attraction when working on intimate issues with a member of the opposite sex. That pretty much always happens.

Deep therapy work requires us to lay down our old boundaries that surround speaking the secrets. We are at our most defenseless in a powerfully bonded relationship with a counselor. Some therapists have weak boundaries and gratify their own needs with clients. It's an all-too-common story of re-victimization, a new incidence of abuse with a parent-figure.

No one ever taught us to make objective judgments about therapists’ trustworthiness. We can't see their motives until it's too late. Some of them are safe. Jason must be, or he would have taken advantage of me already. Because it's been intense. But every therapist is human, and we—victims of abuse—can't tell them apart.

Paradoxically, I believe I was led to Jason. I can't explain it, but I also can't ignore the fact that God has done an amazing healing in my life, using Jason as His representative “with skin on”, to minister to me. God didn't wait until Jason was perfect before he blessed others through him. God won't wait until I'm perfect either, before he works through my life to help others. In ways I can't know.

Could it be that God has shown me this question of Jason's imperfection because He's teaching me to accept and trust myself, even though I'm an imperfect person? Doesn't God accept me, and Jason too? With all our flaws? That’s grace.

Nobody's perfect.

Do you hear that, ***judy***? We are never going to be perfect in this life. Nobody's perfect. Maybe if you can accept and trust Jason as imperfect, it's another step toward accepting yourself. You can forgive yourself for mistakes you will continue to make as long as you are a human being.

So how is that trust for Jason going to be restored? It will have to be on faith, I guess. I can see the purpose of this exploration. There will be help to trust Jason. It won't be perfect, but trust is the only way I will get through this work. And finish the healing.

Oh. Is this diminished trust that I'm recognizing the reason behind the fact that I haven't felt any urge to do a final memory healing as Jason suggested? Maybe, instead, ***judy*** has been resisting going *back there*, because it requires a whole lot of trust in the man who's going to lead me. Memory healings have been some of the most vulnerable work. But Jason has already proven himself trustworthy, hasn't he? Yes.

Thank you for the lesson, God. Restore my confidence. Strengthen Jason's boundaries, and mine. And keep us both safe.

# Chapter 13

**Healing the shame**

**I couldn't be sure that what I thought was the deepest of wounds was, in fact the final need for healing. I couldn't guarantee that my most painful work was finished. But the time seemed suddenly to be right. I was ready to take it before God. Perhaps there would be more to do later**.

Thursday, June 7th, 8:00 AM.

I awoke from a grisly dream this morning, hyperventilating and repelled by the graphic image I experienced.

I dreamed I was in the restroom at church, talking to my friend Rosemary. She was invisible behind the partition, in the stall next to mine. We were both menstruating, and she joked about the giant imposition periods are. I agreed emphatically.

Our conversation began as easy sardonic banter. But it soon developed, as we continued to talk, into a heated, angry outcry of our mutual frustrations about our powerlessness over ovaries and uteruses. Our reproductive systems, with the messy functions they perform of their own apparent volition, are burdens we would gladly relinquish.

Then I was alone. Rosemary was gone, and the restroom was empty, hushed and cold, echoing—like an operating room. At the sink, washing my hands, I was taken by surprise in a sudden wave of weakness. My knees buckled and I sank, frightened and dizzy, to the sterile whiteness of the tile floor, my back against the wall.

A silent trickle of vivid red emerged from between my legs. I stared stupidly as it began to pool beneath me, warming the chill ceramic surface. I wanted to cry out, to stop the flow that soaked my skirt, and caked around my calves and heels. But I was mute, helplessly observing in rising dread as the red stream swelled to a river.

Despite my desperation to stanch the flow, an impulse to push, like that final stage of childbirth, irresistibly urged me to bear down. I delivered only clots of blood, pushing, pushing out larger and larger clumps until they emerged like enormous chunks of raw liver. Pieces of myself. But still the flow increased. I was hemorrhaging, prostrate in a lake of blood.

The room began to tilt, and swirl around me, and the last of my energy ebbed away. *How can I lose so much blood and still live*? I thought in panic, and jerked awake with a start.

Now, horrified and alert, I consciously ask, how could I reject so integral a part of myself and still live? ***judy*** has given me a clear vision of her wish to rid herself of her hated femaleness! It was an ironic choice to cast my real friend Rosemary in the supporting role in my dream. She had medical problems that required a complete hysterectomy years ago, when she was in her 20’s. She has, in reality, succeeded in ridding herself of several representative parts of her femaleness. Hysterectomies are common to victims—was the body demonstrating something was wrong? What dysfunction lies behind Rosemary's self-destructing uterus?

I haven't had gynecologic problems. Instead, that core of shame festered deep inside me while I whitewashed the darkness of my real opinion of myself. Oh, I was a great actress! I always wore a perfectly believable mask, with a wide smile. I was an exemplary friend, supporter, leader, teacher, helper. I focused on anyone besides myself. I couldn't maintain the act if the camera focused on me.

***judy*** couldn't tolerate the fearful possibility that others might recognize her for what she truly believed herself to be. If she lost control of the situation, and her mask was ripped away, she'd be publicly exposed as a hideous, misshapen monstrosity—a female!

Inhabiting a female body defined me as responsible for the sex I couldn't prevent, didn't it? Double bind is a phrase Jason has used before to label an untenable role I was required to fill. It seems far too weak an expression for the craziness of this disgust of my own flesh. There were a hundred different locks on this bind I was in.

I always disdained Sigmund Freud's notion of female penis envy. Why would I ever have wanted one of *those*? No, even in my most painful honesty, I can't believe I ever harbored a wish to possess a penis. But perhaps Freud misidentified a very real longing—*not to be female*. Perhaps being a violent male oppressor would be the lesser evil over the inescapable despair of female existence as I saw it. I was cast as both helpless, hopeless victim, and evil seductress. I couldn't escape any aspect of that role.

This, then, must be the bottom of the well. It has to be. This pain is far more profound than the shame of any specific event in my past. Can there be any deeper injury than the ultimate humiliation of despising my own existence within the gender that I am?

What cruelty lay behind God's decision to make me this way? Does all of heaven laugh at the burlesque of a female attempting to survive this male-dominated world, in a body that is booby trapped with all the wrong parts? Are females nothing more than a central *hole*? I shudder at that word! We have a void of soft mucous membranes where hard muscle and bone should be.

We are only receptacles, empty waste containers to be filled with the slime men rid themselves of. My inner child long ago internalized the summation of the female sex, in an exchange I overheard between two teenage boys one summer on vacation. One boy said gleefully to the other: “Just look at all the gash on this beach!”

***judy’s*** reality was exactly that. An identity as *gash*. No other quality mattered.

Oh, honey.

It should surprise no one that feminists are so angry at the male-to-female inequities of a universal system where males call all the shots, and women get the crumbs—in law, employment, government, finances. In families. In the church I was raised in. They are dug in for battle, flashing their claws and baring sharpened fangs. Perhaps their defensive rage at being so victimized hearkens back to a common core of revulsion for femaleness itself. None of us were ever offered the opportunity to sign up for the male gender. We never had options.

I see at last the true reason why Bear, representative of my inner child, has always been a *HE*. Maleness, while hated and feared, was still unquestionably preferable to the abomination of femaleness with all its pitiable connotations. If ***judy*** had no hope of being any less a victim, then grant at least this one wish. *Let Bear, at least, be not-female*.

God help me.

Friday, June 15th, 11:30 PM.

In my session yesterday, I started by reading my entry to Jason. “Wow,” he said.

“I need to talk about this stuff,” I said. “But—I’m realizing… I think—could I—am I? I think I’m writing a book!”

He smiled broadly. “Did you just get that?”

I shook my head in wonder. “I’ve been thinking... for a while.”

“It might be tough to share it. Pretty vulnerable stuff.”

“Yeah, but…. I didn’t do anything wrong! It isn’t my awful behavior.”

“That’s completely true. You were innocent.”

“But it’s so raw. I’d have to help ***judy*** with it.”

“Yes, you would… What would be your intention? Your goal?”

“That I’d be telling the truth. It’s not about confrontation—none of my family is likely to read it, anyway. What I’ve been writing—it’s turning out to be exactly what I needed to read—in all those books I kept inhaling—I was searching for something that wasn’t written yet.”

He nodded.

“I’m sick of the world telling us to shut up and be polite, when knowing might save our lives! I can’t be the only survivor who deals with these same issues, that nobody talks about! The body hatred, the shame about pleasure.”

“No. You’re not the only one.”

“It needs to be said! It’s important.”

I’ll be thinking hard about this. I don’t know if I’m brave enough, but somebody needs to tell the truth about the pain of this struggle.

And I always thought I was supposed to be a writer. I was afraid I wasn’t good enough. But now I think I am.

Anyway, after that, we talked more about gender shame.

Jason displayed his usual acceptance and empathy. I felt reasonably comfortable trusting him, even with such a sensitive self-disclosure. But I can't help thinking that Jason, for all his skill and gift as a counselor, cannot fully comprehend the depth of this awful sense of dread about being female. Jason can't heal it. I'm praying that God will.

In keeping with that prayer, instead of passively assuming that Jason will tell me when the final memory healing will be, I said I was ready to schedule it for next week. We planned extra time for that session, next Friday.

It’s time, finally. I had to bring to the surface the concerns that needed healing. Body shame wasn't apparent to me until I finally saw it behind that last wall of self-deception. Without honestly exposing the injury to assess it, it can't be healed.

The other item on the list for healing is something I've recognized as the most recurrent theme, as I have reread my journal. I need to be healed of the wound from mother's emotional abandonment. It still holds a surprising amount of hurt.

And to face the pain with Jason beside me, I had to be sure of my trust for Jason, which seems to be restored, to the degree that I can see. I don't find any leftover qualms there, so I'm ready to move on.

Tuesday, June 19th, 2:00 AM.

Unexpectedly, I had another new issue show up. And the hits just keep on happening!

At the mall yesterday, I browsed through the recovery section in a bookstore. A bookstore is one of my favorite places. Books have always been a comfort to me. How strange that such a strong extrovert as myself has spent so much of her life alone, curled into a corner with a book. I sought safety in solitude and answers in the printed word. Books saved me for a long time.

That sense of safety evaporated in that moment yesterday, there in the bookstore. I turned from the self-help shelves, and was confronted, on the facing wall, with an array of volumes about sexuality. I had a sudden impulse to buy a sex therapy book, one that might help me to deal with some of the difficulties I've become aware of in my sexual relationship with my husband.

But holding those books in my hands, and skimming them to choose one, I became conscious of looking over my shoulder to see who might be witnessing the heinous crime I was committing. My anxiety level rose dramatically.

Anxiety? The recognition came as a surprise. of the 150 or so psychology and spirituality books I've read in the past year and a half, dozens have directly related to sex. Has this anxiety been present through all of that reading, without my awareness of it? Have I been as numb as that?

I suppose my generalized anxiety through this whole gut-wrenching process of therapy has been so high, that I might not have consciously acknowledged the source of any additional discomfort. True to my standard form, I bulled my way through some very heavy reading—a lot of very disturbing stuff—books I chose in spite of Jason's cautions not to overload myself. Is it possible ***judy*** needed me to draw a boundary, to exclude some of that threatening material I kept on snorting like cocaine? I can finally hear her uneasiness.

*What if somebody sees me holding this book, or buying it? They all know I want sex! They'll know I like it! They'll know I do those nasty things!*

Wait a minute. Is there something known as objective reality on this topic? I can recognize that ***judy’s*** viewpoint on sex is confused, in natural response to the abuse. But what is normal? I still don't know.

Intellectually, I believe what I have read, and what Jason has emphasized, that sexual union between a husband and wife is natural. God designed it. Pleasure was an intentional part of how it was designed.

But the voice in my head disagrees. ***judy*** sees buying a book dealing with maximizing sexual satisfaction as asking for sexual pleasure. She's right. And the idea is horrifyingly shameful to her.

But ***judy***, it's okay to ask for pleasure. It's okay to communicate sexual needs. Sexual pleasure bonds a husband and wife together. God didn't make sex just for conceiving babies, but for enjoyment. It's a gift he gave to you.

*But I never asked for it! I never wanted it! God gave me something he must have meant for somebody else. It doesn't fit, I don't want it, I don't like having those bad feelings! If God wanted to give me a present, couldn’t he have given me something else, warm socks, or a book? Anything, anything but that!*

Oh, child, how they hurt you! I can't argue away this stubborn conviction. I need help to heal this shame. Perhaps we will have time to include it in the memory healing session on Friday. There must be a reason it's been shown to me now.

Friday, June 22nd, 9:00 PM.

In spite of my emotional exhaustion, I need to record today's healing session before I forget the details. I can't sleep until I write.

As I entered the office, Jason saw my fear, behind my determined mask of calm.

To put me at ease, he began the session by reminding me how God has shown up for me over and over as we have asked for help. I have never been judged or blamed. There is now no condemnation. Jesus has taken me out of awful moments, and answered my questions, and held me while I cried. God is faithful.

When I said I was ready, Jason began by asking God to be present. To keep me safe as He had in all the sessions that had gone before. And to hear every word I spoke as prayer of confession of my deep pain from old wounds.

My eyes were closed as he prayed for me, claiming on my behalf God’s promise of healing. I felt awash in warmth and light. Calmed. Nothing would harm me here.

Then Jason asked God, who is not limited by time or space, to go with us to a time before conscious memory.

And the cosmos spread itself before me. Really.

Jason’s voice was speaking to me, yet he and I were both acutely conscious of God's presence. God was listening to Jason’s words with a concentration greater than mine, perhaps infusing the words through Jason’s voice. There was no separation. I can hear them now as I’m writing.

“***Judy***, there was a time, before you were born, when your parents had no knowledge of you. At the instant that an egg and a sperm joined together to begin developing a new life, your mother and father couldn’t imagine the unique being who would be born of that union. But God knew your soul, from all that came before, and all that would be. Jesus knew, as the personification of God on this earth, everything God knew in that moment—and all moments. He knew your soul, from the beginning of time, and created you to be exactly the person that you are. You came into being by God's own purpose for good.

“Jesus had already known you before He was with God, and *was* God, in creating the stars in the heavens or the foundations of the earth.”

I could see the vastness of space, the glow of the Milky Way spread before me.

“And from the beginning, there had been a plan for the texture of your hair, the color of your eyes, the tone of your voice, and a million other details that defined your individuality. He could see even then the person He longed for you to become, the person you are becoming even now. He made you for the pleasure of knowing you. He created you especially to be adopted as his own dearly loved child.

“You developed from a fertilized egg into an embryo and then a fetus, with distinct body parts promising the form of your eventual completion. He oversaw the growth of fingers and toes and inner organs, specialized to accomplish their own necessary functions in sustaining your life as you grew within your mother's body. God was pleased that your time had begun.

“According to God's intention for you from the very first, he directed the formation of ovaries to determine that you would be female. He bathed you in a perfect hormonal balance, of a fluid designed to nourish your growth as a girl child, because that's who He designed you to be.

“Within your mother's womb, He formed inside your body a uterus and a vagina. Even while you were yet so tiny, He instilled messages within your brain to be transmitted years later. At the perfect time of your life, those messages would direct your body to initiate change from a girl child into a physically mature woman. God’s blueprint for your sexuality was complete even in the womb. As the time for your birth grew near, God saw that you had perfectly developed as intended.

“In the warm darkness surrounding you, your consciousness must have begun with your mother's heartbeat, and the rhythms of her body. The motions of your mother's activities could roll you into a comfortable twilight. Every sound that your ears received was filtered through the sound of steady rushing of blood pulsing through her uterine walls.

“But those months inside your mother's body weren't free from the impact of the world outside, were they?”

I was so transfixed, in awe at the scene Jason had painted for me, that I had to rouse myself to answer him at last.

*“No,”* I whispered.

***judy*** resisted letting go of the beautiful image of God's creative energy in her life, to look instead at the pain of family influence. But Jason continued, drawing me firmly to more unpleasant things I needed to heal.

“We know that every growing fetus receives physical and emotional messages from mother's own life and environment…. Were the circumstances of your mother's life during that time happy, ***judy***?”

Jason already knew the answer to that question. I shook my head.

“That time wasn't tranquil for your mother, and her stress was naturally transmitted to you through the hormones that infused the fluid you floated in. There were startling invasions into the essential calm of your environment. Muffled noises disturbed your sleep, and sometimes, there were sudden, jarring intrusions, pressures that threatened to crush you. Your infant mind craved peace and security to develop as God intended, but you were powerless to stop the clamor outside. You were screaming, from before your birth.”

*How could Jason know all this*, ***judy*** thought. *It was never safe, even before I was born!* By this time, tears were running down my face in confirmation of everything spoken.

“Do you have any words, ***judy***, for the feelings that you must have experienced in the midst of that chaos?” Jason asked me gently.

“It was all mixed up! I was afraid—and there was rage! But I couldn't—" I choked to a halt, inarticulate.

“You were powerless?” Jason offered.

I nodded miserably.

“In those moments, could you feel hope for something better?”

“*No*,” I whispered, blowing my nose.

“And then, without warning, you were being squeezed from every side. Over and over again, your whole body was strangled in the grip of muscles tightening, pushing you into an unfamiliar passage. For hours, you were battered, constricted, and paralyzed. Afraid and angry.

“Then suddenly, you were thrust out of that close dark warmth that was all you had known since the beginning. Now there was only an open place of dazzling light, piercing noise, and cold air. For the first time, you've voiced your fear with a loud cry of your own.

“But there was no comfort. Foreign objects were thrust into your mouth and nose, and a sharp prick in your foot brought blood and more pain. Even your mother's heartbeat was gone. It was the time of your birth. Was this new place any safer than where you had been?”

“*No*,” I whispered. I never felt safe.

“Did you know, ***judy***, that there was someone present at your birth who wanted to make you safe then?

“Was Jesus there?” I asked wistfully.

“He was there all along. I think if you look again, you'll see Jesus peering over the doctor's shoulder, smiling at you. Can you see Him, ***judy***?

“*Yes*!” Just as Jason said.

“Can you see the nurse take you from the doctor's arms and wrap you in a blanket? She's laying you in a warming bassinet.”

I nodded. I felt warmer.

“And the doctor is turning his attention back to your mother. But Jesus has moved to stand next to your bassinet and He's looking down at you. Is there something you need from Jesus right now, ***judy***?”

I didn't wait for Jason's prompting this time.

“*Will you hold me Jesus*?” I said.

My heart was so full of longing and hope as I watched Jesus reach into the little bed and scoop my newborn baby self into his arms.

“*But does he really want me*?” I said through my tears.

“Why don't you ask him?”

I looked into His face and said, “*Do you want me, Jesus*?”

Jesus smiled at me, crinkling the corners of his eyes. Then, cupping my head in the palm of his hand, he cradled my baby body in the crook of his arm, enfolding me.

I heard His voice whispered into my ear, rumbling through his chest. “Yes! It's you I want. I made you with this moment in mind. I chose you to be my own child.” He rocked me.

I was safe. I was wanted. I was loved. Just for who I am.

Jason asked quietly, “Jesus does want you, ***judy***. Is He holding you now?”

I had to smile a little at another confirmation that Jason doesn't have any magic. He couldn't see the scene I was living.

I nodded.

“Can you hear Jesus’ heartbeat?”

“*Yes*.” Against his chest, the pulse reverberated in my ear.

“Jesus can be the parent you never had as a child, ***judy***. You are in His care now, and for always. He's promised you that. Now that you're safe with him, let Jesus carry you out of the delivery room. He is still holding you close, wrapped warm in the blanket against Him. He's walking down the hallway, through the glass doors, and outside into the night.”

It happened just that way.

 Jason began to sing softly to me, “*Jesus loves me, this I know*…. Then he said, do you know the words ***judy***?”

I struggled to get out any sound at all, barely able to whisper along with him through my tears, as Jason sang “*Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, and He is strong*.”

After that Jason invited me to gradually come back into the office again. I returned as the adult me, with a sense of relief, and the emotional depletion that comes of intense effort expended.

After that, Jason encouraged me to relax for a few minutes. I drank water. Did some deep breathing. We exchanged wondering comments about the experience.

But there was more work ahead. I resettled in my chair for another trip back through the years.

“Is your inner child ready to look at another memory?” Jason asked.

I took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“So, you can close your eyes if you like, and let yourself feel the safety of this space. God is here, sending calm through your whole body, with every breath. You’re safe to approach another time, that wasn’t so calm.”

I nodded.

“We've both agreed that emotional abandonment is the wound that we need to address,” Jason began. “Is there a particular scene that comes to mind that represents that pattern between you and your mom?”

“My eighth birthday,” I said without hesitation. It was more than a year ago when I first told Jason about that memory.

“The birthday cake,” Jason confirmed. “And can you see the kitchen?”

“*Yes*.” I was already there.

“Tell me what you see, and what happened there.”

I took a deep breath, and described for him in detail the clutter, and the family gathered around the table. Sarcastic jibes from Gary, as he wolfed down his food. Mother's face worn and tired, as always, impatient with the ever-present conflict among us. Carla and my little brother Will, eating quietly, resolutely.

But all during the meal, the cake, that perfect confection whose very existence was an affirmation of my value, called to me from the counter across the room. It positively sang to me: you are worth angelfood cake soaked with the juice of the sweetened strawberries, slathered with the lightest whipped cream! It said I was important.

I finished my supper. Meatloaf. Green beans. Mashed potatoes with butter. I ran my finger around the plate, licking away the last of the crumbs I scooped up. Only when the plate sparkled was it finally prepared for what was to come: my birthday cake.

But that didn't happen.

“When your mother served the cake, who got the first piece?” Jason asked, when I paused at the climax of the story.

“*Gary did*.” It was ***judy*** speaking. Gary, who took my mother's attention and Carla’s allegiance. *Gary, who hurt me all my life! Mom gave him the first piece of my cake. And I got nothing.*

What do you want to say to your mother? asked Jason.

“*But mother, I didn't get a piece of my birthday cake!”* Struggling to hold back my tears, the words came out a little girl whine.

“What else didn't you get from your mother?

My mother’s face was set in hard lines of bitterness.

 “*Attention. Love. She never looked at me*.”

“No. Your mother didn't give you what you needed. She didn't listen to you. And she didn't believe you about the cake.”

“*No. She said don't lie to me to get another piece of cake! I gave you the first piece and you ate it already!”* Tears dripped off my chin. I blew my nose.

“And no one defended you?”

I shook my head. There was never anyone to defend me. Nobody cared.

“I believe we can change that image, ***judy***,” Jason said quietly. “Why don't we back up a little bit, to the moment just before your mother served the cake. As she stands to get the cake from the countertop, can you see yourself push back your chair?”

I nodded.

“And you stand up and walk to the front door. Open the door. Is someone waiting there?”

I smiled as I swung the door wide. “*It's Jesus*.” He was smiling too.

“Do you think you'd like him to come in?”

I nodded.

“Invite him into the kitchen.”

“Come in, Jesus,” I whispered.

“Let him take your hand and walk with you into the kitchen. As both of you stop beside the table, your mom is turning around with the cake plate in her hands. Can you see her surprise as she notices who's with you?

“*She almost dropped the plate*!”

“Let's let Jesus take the cake plate out of her hands. He can set it down on the table in front of you. Now, as Jesus is making eye contact with mom, can you describe the look on His face?”

“*He's—disappointed. He's—stern*.”

“He's disappointed in the way she treated you. Is He angry that she let you be hurt?”

I nodded.

“How does He feel about *you*, ***judy***?”

“He loves me. He wants to protect me.”

“That's why He's with you now. He won't let you be hurt any more. But now that He's protecting you, can you see what your mother is feeling?”

I looked at her face and saw all her hopelessness. “*She's afraid. Ashamed. She's ashamed like me*.”

“Does your mother need forgiveness ***judy***?”

I was ready for this step. “*Yes*.”

“Are you okay with allowing Jesus to forgive your mother?”

“*Yes*.” I was glad to let her go, to let God take the burden from me.

“Is there something you need to say to say to your mother?”

I took a deep breath. “I forgive you, Mama.” Holding a grudge never changed anything anyway. I didn’t want this memory to keep hurting me. Jesus smiled at me. I was about to be free of it.

“Jesus knew how that old resentment kept you stuck in this memory for too many years. Forgiving your mother is an important step to release you from that. Does anyone else need forgiveness for what's happened here?”

“*Me*,” I whispered.

“Jesus has grieved that you’ve kept yourself bound to that old wound, saddened that you have held yourself back from becoming the whole healthy person He created you to be. For letting hatred fill you up and keeping love out.”

I nodded and focused on Jesus’ face. I could see the pain on his face. “I'm sorry, Jesus. Will you forgive me?” He put his arms around me and drew me close to him.

“And *are* you forgiven, ***judy***?” Jason asked softly.

It took me a minute to compose myself and answer. I blew my nose. “*Yes,”* I said. *“He forgives me*.”

“Have you forgiven yourself, ***judy***?”

The adult me was responsible for this one. “I haven't forgiven myself before. But I forgive myself now.”

“I’m glad. Jesus has been waiting for this day, for too long. It's time you found peace, at last.

While I was absorbing the moment, Jason said, “Do you think if you ate some birthday cake with Jesus it would set you back in your healthy eating? I know you haven't been eating sugar.”

I smiled. Jesus can do anything. “He can make it sugar free!”

“Good. Because now I think He wants you to have your birthday cake. As Jesus begins to cut the cake, ***judy***, why don't you get two clean dessert plates from cabinet?

Grinning in spite of myself, I watched my young self climb onto a chair and step onto the countertop, to fetch two plates from the good dishes on the top shelf of the cabinet. And two clean forks from the drawer.

“Jesus has cut two very big pieces of cake, with extra strawberries, and extra whipped cream. He's putting the cake onto the plates you brought and handing you one. He picks up the other plate in his right hand. Let him take your right hand with his left, and together you can walk to the front door, and go outdoors, carrying your cake.”

I saw it happen. We emerged from the house into the moonlight.

“Would you like to climb your tree with Jesus?”

I nodded.

“Who's going up first?”

“Jesus. He's taking off his sandals, and I'm holding His cake while He climbs up.”

“Who told him to take off His sandals?”

“He knows you have to be barefoot to climb a mulberry tree!”

“I guess Jesus has climbed trees before,” Jason said. “So, when He’s settled on the branch, He can reach down for the cake, while you climb up to join Him. Let me know when you're comfortable.

I watched myself balance on the branch and lean back against the trunk. Then I nodded to Jason. Jesus lit a candle on my slice of cake and handed it to me with a smile.

I already had my wish. I blew out the candle.

“Before you eat the cake,” Jason broke in, “There's a surprise for you up on that fluffy cloud that just passed in front of the moon.”

I looked up through the leaves of my tree, to see the cloud, luminous with the moonlight shining through it. And as Jason described the scene, a choir of angels in white robes appeared. When they were assembled, they sang a chorus of *Happy Birthday to You*. Jesus held my hand.

And I let myself cry.

# Chapter 14

**Aftershocks**

**How amazing to see that the same person—me! Who struggled, just a few months before, to believe in a God who would answer prayer, was expecting God to show up with a miracle. My faith was a gift, from gentle prompts into gradually deeper and deeper trust. I had experienced His involvement in my life. I knew He would finish the work.**

Saturday, June 23rd, 11:30 AM.

I find myself waiting for the other shoe to drop. The healing session yesterday was real. It was wonderful. But it was incomplete. We didn't have time, or insight enough, to heal everything. I'm listening in expectation of a voice I don't hear yet. I'm waiting for God to do something more. Is there more?

I don’t know. Maybe. But…. Here’s the thing. Gulp… I don’t feel resolution for my shame about sexual pleasure. And how does that get fixed in therapy? We’re not going to call up a moment when I’m having an orgasm—in a session? *Ugh*! No. I don’t want to picture *that*.

How does that get repaired, then?

I’ll start with what I’m good at. Research. I gave myself an assignment to figure out what’s normal. Yeah, I know. The sex books say orgasm is normal. And Jason says God created the whole system. I hear you.

But the *feelings*! Of course, the sensations are, in the moment—well… No words are showing up. Is ***judy***digging in her heels? The sensations are—I don’t even want to assign a quality—or a rating scale—I want to recoil from the very idea of that feeling. That yearned-for, and dreaded feeling. I have the experience, and I love the feeling, but I hate the feeling while I’m feeling it. *Ugh*.

The difficulty is because of my history, not because the topic itself is objectively horrifying all on its own.

*Why does it have to be sex?* ***judy***asks again, for the umpteenth time.

Okay, God, what do *YOU* say about pleasure? Crickets chirping. Silence. So, I'm looking through my Bible concordance references to find the word pleasure. Researching pleasure in the Bible. Is that ironic?

***judy*** seems to have taken sexual pleasure out of the context of any other kind of pleasure that humans experience. But now I'm thinking that all variations of pleasure exist on a continuum. The Bible says God has pleasure. It's one of the ways humans are like God. There's a whole bunch of references to God's pleasure in the Bible.

Some translations interpret the same word—the original—Greek? Hebrew? Aramaic?—into English, as “*pleasure*”. Other translations, using the same original noun—say that word actually means *will*. That we if we do His *pleasure*, it means we do God’s *will*. How are those two things synonymous?

I'm still very confused here. OK, it's easy to say that God is pleased if we do His will. I guess if the same original Hebrew word can be translated variously as God's pleasure, and as God's will, intention, perfect design, or purpose, then—I am forced to acknowledge pleasure is good. At least God's pleasure is good. ***judy*** is still fighting me here.

But what about human pleasure? Pleasure is not only defined as arousal about sexual stimulation. The cessation of distress feels like pleasure. It’s a pleasure to scratch my itchy elbow and feel relief. Don't we experience pleasure at the sight of a colorful sunset, or hearing the gurgle of a baby's laughter, or feeling the comfort of a trusted friend's embrace?

As a parent, I take pleasure in my children. NOT SEXUAL! I have a psychological-emotional-physiological experience of goodness or pleasure, in response to my daughters’ expressions of love for me. God designed us to be like Him, beings who feel pleasure at positive events or circumstances.

The God who designed the flashing iridescence of a tiny hummingbird’s wings, or the impossibly sweet scent of orange blossoms, or the peaceful sigh of a breeze whispering through pine trees, had to mean it all for our enjoyment. Pleasure. How have we become so numb to the goodness of God?

The same God who made the glimmer of stars in the heavens, the Grand Canyon’s breathtaking vistas, the rush of blue waves foaming onto a white beach, not to mention the sound of a baby’s laughter, the taste of fresh pineapple, birdsong, butterflies, honeybees, and a billion other beautiful things that give me pleasure—also made me. Created my body, *my whole body*. I think my inner child figured He must have left blank spots that Satan filled in with evil genitalia. But God is responsible for *all* the goodness of human sexuality too. Yes, ***judy***—goodness!

He might have chosen to implant the drive to propagate our species as a horrible compulsion, to provide a fleeting respite from pain. Instead, he gave us a gentle sensation of tenderness that blossoms into delicious arousal, culminating in a joyous release of exquisite tension. He made it feel so good because He meant it to be good. He meant that goodness to draw us into oneness with our life partners.

Surprise! Even in the semantics that flow from the tip of my pen here, there seems to be an intertwined relationship between various forms of the word *goodness*, and that which is *pleasing, pleasant* and *pleasurable*. The dictionary and thesaurus confirm it.

God is glorified by my experience of pleasure, as a recognition that something He created is good. If I’m admiring an original painting, the painter is complimented. Most of the time we fail to give God credit, but each sensation of pleasure is intended as a cue for gratitude, to appreciate God as the source of the good gift that produces the enjoyment. And gratitude enhances my connection to God, which makes me feel loved.

Yet how many people are comfortable enough with sexuality to invite God's presence into their bedrooms? This despite the calls of *oh God, oh God*, in the bedroom.

This is opposite to ***judy's*** lifelong belief, but I recognize intellectually that God would surely be pleased if we could trust Him enough to ask His blessing on lovemaking. If I tell ***judy*** that it's okay to ask for pleasure, can't I tell her that it's good to ask God to teach the trust that would enhance sexual pleasure? And then it's good to praise Him for orgasms? She's still aghast at the idea.

God sees anyway. Everything. Always. He's known all along what goes on under the sheets. But our *sinful* (there’s that word again!) society has so warped our understanding of sexuality that, in our shame, we unconsciously deny that God has any awareness of it.

Like children (or food addicts!) sneaking cookies from the cookie jar, enjoying just as much of this bad, guilty excitement as we can clutch in our grubby little hands, we keep watch over our shoulders to make sure we aren't being observed in our sin. We children never knew that those cookies were baked just for us. God wants us to savor them.

A loving, lifetime monogamous sexual relationship, the gold standard of what enhances human lives best, is protective of our emotional vulnerability, and encourages spiritual and emotional development. At the same time, it encourages the trust that frees us for ecstatic sexual abandonment. But most of us treat the marriage bed—ordained by God, and *undefiled*—as a family secret. What we call privacy is more often an inability to be frankly verbal about sexual needs. We can't say the words! Unconsciously we bought the line about the badness of sex. But God meant it for good.

I don’t think that means God hates us when we don’t succeed at a lifetime monogamous relationship. We’re already missing some of the benefits of the most loving relationship possible. But we’re humans, after all, in need of Grace.

God doesn't want me to waste the goodness of the sexual feelings He created in me. My stubborn resistance to a grateful acceptance of the gift of sexuality is a victory for my abusers, not the determined insistence of purity that ***judy*** meant it to be. She always misunderstood. She was confused. Understandably so.

There's a quote by William Cowper—maybe he was referring to a sexual abuser when he said—he “stamps God's own name upon a lie just made.”

It was *sin*—that ever-boiling soup of human fear and rage and suffering and aggression that we’re all submerged in for so much of our lives—*not* God, that imposed shame onto sexual feelings.

I can still feel her resistance, but I will not let ***judy*** live out her days in submission to that lie. The truth will set her free.

Saturday, June 23rd, 10:00 PM.

This afternoon I recognized another piece of insight toward healing ***judy*'s** sexual shame.

I can’t even say where all these ideas flow from. Certainly, lots of conclusions are gleaned from the huge stack of books I’ve read in the past couple of years. Plus, all those hours of therapy. And my own brain, participating, too. So often, in journaling, it shows up on the page as I write it—and it grows from there as I stay with it. I think that’s God. It’s a little scary sometimes.

Anyway, here’s what came to me, plus whatever else shows up under my pen along the way.

Sexual perversion inflicts what we might arguably call the deepest human damage (especially perversion inflicted during childhood). It distorts one of God's best gifts. And it’s human-to-human harm, rather than an act of nature. Somehow, an intentional transgression against my personal sense of safety, by a human being who I would expect to be respectful of me, is so much worse than a natural event that isn’t personally directe, like a lightning strike. And sexual abuse isn’t a once-and-done injury. It creates damaging effects to every single sexual encounter throughout the victims lifetime, until it can be healed. Even then, I’m not the same person I would have been if I’d never experienced the perversion imposed on me.

Oh, how far people stray from God's purpose in all good things. We pervert the natural function of bodily nourishment by gluttony. We overload our senses and seek satiation in drugs and alcohol and mindless television. We numb ourselves to present reality through every compulsive process we indulge in.

Adult monogamous long-term commitment is the best venue for sexual experience because sex is so important to our most intimate self-concepts. Sexuality is the most vulnerable, the most private part of a person. And sex is the single most outstanding characteristic that sets apart the marriage relationship from other relationships. Which makes it even more illuminating that human marriage is universally accepted as a picture of our relationship to God.

The church is called the Bride of Christ. Bride, as opposed to helpmate or wife or matron or old lady. A bride is a picture of purity and devotion, and wholehearted love for the husband. And she's also sexual. A virgin bride is brimming over with eager anticipation of sexual gratification. A honeymoon is a period of sexual activity rarely equaled in later years.

Historically, the Old Testament advocated a full year for a honeymoon of withdrawal from social responsibilities and civic obligations. (Peasants couldn’t have afforded this, of course—lucky indeed are those privileged enough to abstain from employment for a year! I have conflicting feelings about that.) The new couple was encouraged to focus entirely on each other, to become intimately acquainted, to Biblically *know* each other. Learning to give one another pleasure, to deepen the bond between them, was a responsibility that was especially blessed.

So, is the intensity of sexual climax, the moment of deepest oneness between a couple, a metaphor for the transcendent fulfillment possible in our intimate communion with God? Then He must be pleased with their orgasms, as they experience a tiny window into the surpassing exhilaration of truly knowing God!

How radically different a concept of sexual pleasure this is from a hopeless shame my inner child always carried! Perhaps the writing I’ve done today is a step in completion of God's work of healing my memories. Maybe he's going to simply give me new discernment to take in intellectually and incorporate gradually into my emotional reality. I suppose that's enough. Not so dramatic as our healing sessions in the office have been. Recovery all the same. Thank you, God.

Sunday, June 24th, 3:30 AM.

The clock says 3:30, at the moment when I’m starting to write—recording what already took two hours to unfold before that.

I was startled awake at 1:15 by the dog barking for no apparent reason. The dog settled back to sleep, but there was a reason—it was time for me to wake up, even though I hadn’t gone to bed till nearly midnight. There was something more important to do than sleep, as it turned out.

But lying in bed, I fought it for a little while, until I heard in my head (no, I promise I’m not crazy) a part of a Bible verse in my head: “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” What? For a start, it’s further evidence that I was raised in a tradition that required me to memorize Bible verses. I sleepily resisted focusing until the word *finisher* resounded again with added strength.

“Finisher of our faith.” Are we going to finish something now? I thought. So, I decided to get up and write. Sleep was impossible, anyway. I made myself a cup of tea, settled on the couch and found the verse, in Hebrews.

Funny, I never used to see any action from God. But God really shows up now.

The habit I've developed this year has been to write when I wake during the night. But this time I sipped my tea while I read the passage, then switched off the lamp and curled up on the sofa. “God, are you finishing something?” I asked.

It was ***judy*** who needed to talk to God—not adult me. So, I asked ***judy*** to climb the tree, and closed my eyes to watch Jesus take off His sandals and climb up beside her. There was a new addition in the branches! Jesus, the Carpenter, had installed a wooden platform so we could sit more comfortably than the branches had allowed. Maybe He expects us to use this spot for future conferences like this one.

***judy*** was still a little scared to be with Jesus all by herself. She began haltingly, but then her questions welled up and tumbled out. *Jesus, were you really there before I was born? Did you really mean to make my body this way? Isn't it a mistake? It feels so bad and wrong. They made me so ashamed about having a vagina instead of a penis. I was ashamed of soft breasts and hips. And that bloody mess every month. That was the worst. It must be a mistake!*

Jesus didn't mind that she was crying. He held her and rocked her a little. “Yes, I was there. I had the pleasure of anticipating the woman you would become one day. I knit together your bones and sinews as you formed inside your mother's body.”

***judy*** clung to him and sobbed helplessly while he soothed her and told how he had watched her growing.

“I directed the development of your ovaries and uterus—important parts of being female,” he said gently. “I gave you a pelvis wider than a male’s, to shelter and deliver the babies you would someday be a mother to. Your reproductive system was designed for the miracle of creating life. It was, and is, very good.

“The blood is for a special cleansing, a preparation for the seeds of children to have a healthy place to take root and grow, until the time is right for them to be born. It's all a part of the perfect design for a woman’s body, to complement how a man’s body is designed.

“Have you forgotten, ***judy***, that I was born of a woman? Mary's ovaries produced eggs, like yours did. One of those eggs was the seed of Christ. I was a baby carried in a uterus like yours. I was delivered into the world through her vagina, through the nourishing blood that cushioned the walls of Mary's womb. Part of My purpose in entering the world as a baby through natural birth was to show you the perfection of God's purpose in femaleness. There is no uncleanness in the blood.”

***judy*** still cried, and I was surprised to recognize that Jesus was weeping with her. But then I felt the sudden clenching in the muscles in His shoulders and His arms, holding little ***judy***. He was angry! “How I *hate* the way they have confused and hurt you—and all My children!” he burst out. Then he took a deep breath and his body relaxed. He finally resumed his soothing undertone again.

“Your awareness of your body's beauty has been corrupted by the evil that victimized you. The shame you’ve carried is a part of the curse that sin brought into the world. I have no part of that! And neither do you. It belongs to their sin, not to you.”

***judy*** huddled in his arms, crying unashamedly for what seemed like a long time. Finally, she found words to ask him, “But*… what about pleasure? It’s—awful.*”

He moved one hand to cradle her head as it rested against his chest. His fingers stroked her hair in that gesture of loving consolation she'd always wanted from Mama. I could see her hair shining in the moonlight. There were no tangles in it now.

“It’s not awful, ***judy.*** Those feelings are exactly as they should be,” Jesus said softly. “When I made Adam, I knew it wasn't good for him to be alone—so I made Eve to be with him. Male and female were made for one another, and sexual pleasure was one of the ways for both of them to enjoy each other—to show love for each other. I gave them those wonderful feelings because I loved them so much. And I wanted them to know from the strength of those sensations, that the Father who gave them such a special gift must love them very much.

“I knew even then that humans would make choices to misuse the goodness of those gifts. But it still wasn’t a mistake. I knew sin would cause strife, and husbands and wives would be driven apart, out of the pain sin brought. I wanted their sexual experience to bond them, for their own happiness. And because divorces hurt children too—and they hurt Me, because I feel their anguish.

“Pleasure helped to heal the wounds between them, to draw them together again and again, in the oneness I intended. I never wanted them to feel so alone.

“I lived a life of loneliness in my years in human form, and I grieve for so many of my children who have been forsaken by others as you have been, ***judy***. So, I intended the sexual relationship, and especially orgasm, to hold couples together.

“The perfection of the design for sex wasn’t perverted, even though people acted out their own wounds and victimized you, ***judy***. It is still a very good gift, and I’ll continue to remind you of its goodness, if you forget. I’m restoring your belief in your own purity, and you’re healing.”

They sat quietly in the tree for a few minutes while ***judy*** tried to absorb the enormity of this love. She had never felt loved like this. Which brought her to another question.

*But what about Mama?*

Jesus arms drew her closer to his heart. “Do you need all the answers about her, to heal?” He asked.

Suddenly that didn't matter. *“No, not now. Maybe Mama won’t ever understand.”*

“I long for your mother's healing ***judy***,” Jesus said sighed. “But she has choices to make, just as you did. It will be up to her if it happens. You don't have to worry about that now.”

*“But I never had a mother who cared*,” she said sadly.

“You always had me,” he answered. “You always *will* have me. I’ll be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

That’s forever!

Jesus asked ***judy*** if she could forgive Mama, and it was easy to say yes. They talked about Jack and Gary and Richard and Hank and Carla. She let go of wanting to change anything at all about any of them—she chose instead not to be bound to them anymore. Which felt like real forgiveness, and relief.

She rested in Jesus’ arms until she fell asleep. But I roused myself to record it.

God will heal any leftover feelings over time, but right now the past just doesn't seem so very important. I guess the suffering was there for contrast, so I can see what the bright parts mean. It's all part of my life. And in this moment, I have no regret for the past. Together, ***judy*** and I have a brand-new start. And there is such an incredible feeling of peace. I’m assured of His presence and strength to accomplish what I need to do. And He's waiting in my tree any time I need help.

Thank you, God, for the love in my life. For the family you've given me in my husband and children. For Jason, and the example he's modeled, of Christ’s compassion and acceptance. You've seen my needs and provided for them. You've given me catalysts and comforts. And I can never be the same again.

Monday June 25th, 4:00 PM.

As high as I was on Sunday morning with the elation of my healing, I have had such a feeling of weariness since then! I've been surprised by the sense of letdown and sadness. Despite euphoric moments alone in prayer, and during worship at our new church, my general mood has been lower than I would have anticipated. I guess I'm emotionally exhausted.

I've been disappointed in myself for not maintaining a positive attitude after such a powerful experience with God. I mean, how ungrateful can I get, to be depressed after Jesus personally took me in his arms and healed my wounds?

So, I just dumped it on God this afternoon.

God, I just feel so weak! I'm impatient and critical with the kids. I'm still withdrawn when I have such different intentions. It feels like healing my marriage, and relationships with my kids, and whatever else is the purpose for my life—is more than I can do—even after all the drama!

Jason sang that old song with me—"*Jesus loves me, this I know…. they are weak, but He is strong*.” Weak used to mean *bad*. But Paul said we can boast of our weakness because in our weakness, His strength is made perfect. Haven't I admitted more than once that I'm powerless? I'm supposed to feel weak because that's what I am. Humans are weak.

Having seen the magnitude of God's power to heal my life, I know He’ll also help me with the work still ahead. He’ll lend me His strength.

I'll still have times of withdrawing. That's been a lifelong pattern, and I'm not suddenly a different person. I’ll have periods of sadness, and maybe depression sometimes. Behavior modification won't happen as fast as the spiritual surgery I'm recovering from. But I can trust Him to change me, heal me, if I do my part. I can give myself permission to be imperfect, and weak. After all, weak people are the only candidates available.

Tuesday, June 26th, 10:30 PM.

David might be as grateful as I will be when my sleep patterns eventually conform to normal expectations! Except for the occasional visit from God, I don't wake up in the wee hours so frequently anymore, but I still have difficulty settling at bedtime sometimes. So, when I can't sleep, I write instead.

David and I took a walk this evening after dinner and talked. At my request, he’d read my journal entry about the healing aftershocks. He’s never volunteered to read anything I’ve written. I see it all makes him very uncomfortable. Most of his feedback has to do with proofreading, catching grammar issues and the rare misspelling (which happens when I’m scribbling in fury, but otherwise not often).

I was so blown away by the emotional difference I felt—I was overwhelmed with awe and wonder and relief. I was surprised that David focused on a point of theology. We didn’t agree, even though I saw his point.

Yeah, he was raised in the same church, with the same teachings that shaped me. And David tends to intellectualize, like my old standard habit. It’s been one of the things we’ve had in common. David’s more comfortable with analysis. Much less so with feelings.

After we got home from the walk, we looked up a Bible passage he was referring to. I re-read it just now, and wrote several pages about our discussion, parsing the meanings. But I crossed it all out because I ended up even more confused. I don’t think I can think my way through this, however much I’ve felt such an insistent drive to understand, to master my history—and thus to feel more in control.

What I’m sure of more than anything is—even if I didn’t capture the nuances of that passage, or other Biblical teachings, which I’ll never entirely absorb or apply perfectly—that Jesus offers grace. Whether David was right, or I was right, I am loved, and David is too. I am forgiven, I am cleansed. I’m God’s child, and I won’t be disowned. When I make more mistakes, I’ll be forgiven, over and over. Whatever good I can do by my own strength isn’t the answer. It’s better to let Jesus help.

Just come back home, child. You’re wanted here, in Jesus’ arms.

Friday, June 29th, 8:30 PM.

I finally had a session with Jason to share my journaling about the aftershocks. He was so pleased for me, and thankful, that so much good has happened. Tonight, I was just thinking we’ve probably only discussed in sessions maybe a fourth of the writing I have done at home. There haven’t been enough hours of therapy time to cover it all, and new thoughts have kept coming, emerging from the questions in our conversations. By now he’s read most of my journals, but much of what I see as important insight in those pages has never been confirmed by Jason's expressed approval.

Again, we couldn't cover every entry I wrote just this week, and I expect we probably won't manage to fit it in ever. New issues are more important, to use our time well. But I just now recognize the benefit of *not* talking it all through. I don't need Jason's initials on my insights. He doesn't have to confirm what I know to be my own growth. I can believe my own perceptions, whether my therapist is ever aware of them or not.

I’m better now. He agrees, but it’s my knowing it that’s most important.

The light dawns. Maybe this is what is known as self-esteem! If codependency is defined by its focus on the other, rather than self-awareness, then health must mean being an adult, and my own interpreter and self-affirmer, rather than a student nervously waiting for a grade from the teacher. I can approve of myself. And God already approves of me.

I guess it's about time. Having worked so hard, I can appreciate my own effort, and the fruits of it. I can look behind me and appreciate the journey itself. The experience of travel is just as important as the destination. Of course, the destination is only temporary anyway. There will be more growth ahead of me my whole life. But I like myself the way I am today, which is a wonderful feeling.

Sunday, July 8th, 10:15 PM.

Drum roll please! Mom called me this afternoon. Wow.

My last call to her was over seven months ago, and I don’t remember the last time *she* called *me*. I was silent as she talked for a long time, just praying for words I wanted to say. I knew I didn't want to confront her yet, if ever. I do forgive her. I wish her healing, but I still can't be with her, even by phone, and feel safe.

So, when she finally faltered to a stop, maybe in tardy recognition that I wasn't participating in the conversation, I began speaking softly. “Mom,” I said. “You know I've been seeing a therapist. I've had a tough year.”

She was slow to answer. “Yes?” I heard fear in her voice.

“Well, I've been working on some very painful experiences from my childhood. And I'm at the point where I'm working on forgiveness,” I said. “But I still need space to finish my healing. You've noticed that I haven't been in contact for quite a while…. That's because being with family, even by phone, is still hard for me. So, I'm asking you to honor my need for detachment, until I let you know I'm ready for communication.”

The phone line must have been vibrating with the tension. There! I've drawn a boundary, focused on my own feelings, without accusations, or blame.

There was a short silence, and then she asked carefully, in a small voice, “Was it something I did?” Her inner child?

But she didn’t want to know. She’d shown me that, for years. I reminded myself to take a breath.

“Mother, I know you did the best you could,” I answered. “Some things are handed down for generations, and we just don't know how to be any different than we are.”

I can't remember anything more of the conversation. She didn't show obvious anger or hurt. I think she was numb. Underneath, I know she must have been afraid. And by the time I hung up, I was shaking.

Now afterwards, I've been looking for any anger that might have been resurrected by talking to her, after so long. I can't find any. What I see is my mother's wistful longing to be loved. Does she even recognize that? She hurts so much, that I don't think she can feel anything else but her own pain. That's the story of her life.

The love she actually transmitted to her children seemed so small. But I can accept what was offered and forgive the rest. Forgiving Mom is the hardest of all, I think. Maybe that's why it's happening in stages.

Maybe it’s been so hard, and so important, for another reason, too. Forgiving Mom leads directly to forgiving myself. They’re linked because I’m so much like her. Trauma survivor, depressed, messy house, food addict, ashamed and stuck and stalled and self-sabotaging when it came to taking action on our goals—for such a long time. Mom wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to be a writer. We’re also both smart and funny and artistic.

I can love Mom, from a distance, keeping myself safe. I don't know when, if ever, I'll be able to spend time with her. But surely, God, if You want us to love, even our enemies, You’ll give me grace enough to love my mother. She's not my enemy. She did what she knew how to do—which was to keep her own head above water.

The author Scott Peck said, “Love is *the will to take action* that benefits the spiritual growth of the loved one.” Mother’s will to take action for anyone else’s need seems forever blocked by her fear. I find loving feelings in my heart for her, but right now the most loving action I can take is to attend to my own path to become a healthy adult. Maybe in the cosmic scheme of things, my contribution of good to the world serves to honor my mother, since I was a product of her parenting. I don’t think it’s loving, nor does it fill any purpose I can see, to force her to face what she can’t face—she wants to push it underground again. It wouldn’t help her, and it’s beside the point for what is healthy for my life.

I had a talk about Mom with ***judy***. She was still so sad. I told her, “Mama wasn't perfect, and she let us be hurt because she wasn’t paying attention, but it wasn't what she wanted to happen. Mama couldn't love us very much, and you needed to be loved, but God made up the difference, with grace. Amazing Grace. You weren't an unloved child, ***judy***. Some of us just need more grace than others. But you were never alone.

Mom's phone call was an opportunity to take stock of where I am. There's still sadness. Grief. It will lessen in time, as I re-engage in life, in more meaningful ways. But I can't find anger, or shame, or resentment. And I don't think it's denial. It's healing. God has brought me to this point, light years from the bitterness that used to consume me, so that I can experience freedom.

# Chapter 15

**Full Circle**

**My journey began with *judy's* old cringing: “I am bad, it's all my fault.” My controlling outward focus on others was rooted in my defensive drive to camouflage my sense of badness. To make others think I wasn't bad, even when I was so sure of it. In counseling, I have acknowledged my angry fixation on my own wounds: “They made me be this way! How dare they hurt me so!”**

**At last, I arrived at adult accountability, learning to say quietly: “I am responsible for the pain of others, and I must expend my energies outwardly toward them, to do what I can to heal the consequences of my actions.” Full circle, and my heart had changed. My caring for others could now spring from compassion, rather than a compulsion to avoid my own pain.**

Thursday, July 26th, 930 AM.

I had a scary dream this morning. I dreamed of being compelled to return to that old way of life. In the dream I was forced at gunpoint into a panel van filled with abductees, all contentious strangers. Instantly I withdrew miserably inside myself, feeling isolated, different from the rest. They all seem to have memorized the weaknesses in their companions, firing nasty slurs aimed to strike in the most tender of wounds in one another. Why are they so infuriated at fellow victims? And they altogether ignore the captors, who smugly observe the rising hostility!

For torturous hours, the van winds its way over rough mountain roads, until our arrival deep in the wilderness, at what seems to be a secret field headquarters for a guerrilla army. Sentries wearing plaid lumberjack shirts, blue jeans, and hiking boots, greet each of the prisoners with suspicious glares and terse commands to stay with the group or face violent consequences. The superficial peace and quiet of the heavily forested surroundings belie the hatred and fear palpable in the atmosphere.

Two guards lead the group of prisoners, now subdued and passive, staring curiously at cabins and tents as we pass. Perhaps thirty men and women busy themselves around the compound; burly men unload wooden boxes stenciled with arms manufacturers’ imprints—guns and ammunition— from a jeep pulled up at the back entrance of what appears to be a chapel.

I steal furtive glances at the captors, all dressed in similar outdoorsman-style clothing, but with a military bearing that sounds a warning not to question their dominance here. Clearly this is an army in disguise—for a covert operation? I am chilled to recognize the deadly nature of their mission, from which they will not long be distracted.

My fellow prisoners follow more like gawking tourists trailing a guide than the hostages they are. Are they stupid? As we arrive at a dormitory-style cabin equipped with rough pine double-decker bunks, I fight back my own paralyzing fear, to marvel at their apparent indifference to captivity.

Discovering a color TV in one corner of the otherwise primitive communal room, they all rush to assemble on the benches arranged around the TV set. After some initial scuffling and cursing one another over the choice of programs, their irritability dissipates as they focus on the screen. Their faces go immediately slack-jawed, dazed. Like they’re drugged.

I climb, trembling, to an upper bunk, where I curl into fetal position, facing the window view of a group of sentries who stand under a tree in grim discussion, over clipboards and maps. Unexpectedly, one of them turns to cast a piercing glance up toward our cabin and directly into my eyes before I can react too late by squeezing my eyes tight shut to feign sleep. I have been singled out!

The group in front of the television squeals and guffaws at some inane action on the screen, and I wonder at their apathy. Weren’t they forced aboard the van too? Don’t they see the barbed wire strung between trees, or the guns stockpiled in the Chapel? Whether they are pretending normalcy or truly blinded to our endangerment, their behavior serves to increase my sense of suppressed hysteria. Am I overreacting? I question my own reality.

Suddenly, I am aware of my daughter's presence beside me on the upper bunk. A wave of despair that she, too, has been captured, threatens to undo my last vestiges of composure. She is alarmed at my emotional state and tries to jolly me out of my bad mood. She accepts the performance of the others in the cabin, and like them, ignores the danger, as if it doesn't exist. They all pretend this is normal.

I grip her arms, trying to convey to her that she must keep her head down, must not provide her captors with any reason to attack her. It is far too critical time for hilarity—our lives are at stake! As she resists my struggle to quiet her, she falls backward off the bed.

She hits the floor with a loud thud and snap of bone. Knowing I am responsible for her fall, I try to move to help her, but find myself paralyzed on the bed, strangling on the fear rising in my throat.

She screams, and the television watchers crowd anxiously around her. “Oh, it's not that bad,” they chorus. “Don't be so dramatic. Come watch TV with us, it'll take your mind off things. There's a good show coming on.” Her screams quiet to helpless whimpers as they lead her away.

And I awake in a cold sweat.

I shudder to reread what I've recorded here. How easy it was to question my own sanity amid the denial of fellow captives of dysfunction. Until we can learn to face painful truth, we cope by drugging our fear—numbing out with compulsive behavior. But we are all prisoners in the same concentration camp of intergenerational harm. Even the church has been perverted to house weapons for the repression of prisoners, rather than sheltering the lost lambs Jesus came to save.

But most of all, I'm struck with acute grief from my very real responsibility in hurting my children. One daughter in the dream represents both. Without intending it, I have passed on the chain of family pain to both of my daughters, in ways I can't see yet, and they don't yet feel safe enough to express. They have been abandoned by the effect of my emotional withdrawal and wounded by my chronic anger. I’ve been paralyzed by old fears which overrode my puny impulses to comfort them.

Facing the fact that I'm accountable for the damage in the lives of innocent children is so hard. Helping the process of healing their wounds will require me to become the kind of mother I always wanted for myself. I must give when I want to receive, spend time with them when I want to withdraw. I must be patient with their needs when I want to lick my own wounds.

Part of me rebels at the work ahead of me still: *But I don't want to give them my time! Breaking old habits is too hard. I'm the one who's been working so hard for so long. Why does it have to be me? I didn't get a childhood! Why should I work so hard for theirs?*

That's my inner child talking. She's jealous that they've already had a life so much easier than she ever had, yet there are still changes to be made, because I'm *not good enough yet*. She resents their needs when her own needs haven't been met. Even though I know so many of her needs *have* been met. And more will come.

Jason once asked me if I'd been jealous of my daughters. Blindly, in that moment, I said no. But ***judy*** coveted every morsel of love my daughters ever received. Is my inner child in competition with my daughters? Can't she learn to be friends with them? Even that is work.

So my basic selfishness is exposed. All my life I have focused on others only to look good, and to distract myself from the pain inside me. I hoped that others would love me and return the attention. So, it was selfish. Manipulative. But now when I began to see the real needs of my children, and my real responsibility to meet them, I rebel.

*I'm so tired! Can't I just think about me for a while? I don't want to be the strong one all the time. Just let me be a child. I never got to be a child.*

It's a tough assignment, and I'm not going to solve it in the next five minutes. But I will deal with it. Despite the complaints of my inner child, I've come to expect integrity of myself. I won't shame her for her whining, but I won't run away from the challenge to face more responsibility. This will not be easy. And it probably won't be fast.

Tuesday, July 31st, 9:30 PM.

Why do I keep thinking I'm finished with tough assignments? How many more will there be?

Jason lit another fuse this afternoon when in a conversation about healing the family he asked, “What kind of father did your inner child expect David to be with your daughters?”

The detonation was instantaneous, and another brick wall came down, exposing a painfully defended truth. My inner child lived in the same house, slept in the same bed, with someone she considered a convicted rapist. Because in her mind, all men were convicted rapists. Had she known any other kind?

Over the years, watching the bond develop between David and our daughters was a constant reminder of her gut knowledge that men expect sex from little girls. Was David playing the good father only to lure them into an incestuous relationship? No! As I look carefully at the interactions I've seen between them, I can't believe he has ever been inappropriate with either of them. But my inner child is still afraid.

What did you think would happen ***judy***?

*Daddy's fool little girls into thinking they care. They make little girls need them, then they use their bodies for sex. That's what daddies do, and that's what little girls are for.*

Oh, God, did I set them up? Did ***judy’s*** expectation that incest was inevitable because little girls are victims enable what might have happened—because she couldn't stop it? I do not believe it happened. But I can't take credit that it didn't.

Over the years, my chronic rage has shown up more in my relationship with my daughters than anyone else. I've always had a hair-trigger temper, and my girls have received the brunt of my anger, because ***judy*** felt safe to vent it on someone smaller. She couldn't be angry with David because he was a man and more powerful than she was. She expected him to hurt her, even though he isn’t like that. She knew in her gut she wasn't safe to be mad at him. So, she yelled at defenseless children.

The most difficult times to hold that anger in check were in the evenings. After dinner, my nerves were always strained to the breaking point by a full day of trying to control two little girls who wanted to be themselves, rather than automatons doing my will as I demanded. Every childish assertion of their independence threatened my tenuous grip on the control that held my sense of *badness* at bay. By bath time, rage was ready to erupt unchecked. David was shocked and angered at my behavior, and soon took over evening parenting. I would exit to cool off.

It was the time of day that culminated in bedtime, in bedrooms, where bad things happened to children, but ***judy*** held those fears underground, away from my awareness. I never understood the source of my anxiety through all those years.

We established a routine that David would be responsible for baths and tucking the girls into bed most of the time. Ashamed but relieved, I would withdraw to finish cleaning the kitchen, and then go out for a walk. I always told myself it was because I had just run out of energy to deal with them. I was tired and stressed after a long day, and it gave David some quality time with them anyway.

But now I see with horror that I abdicated my role as mother-protector, at exactly the time of day that ***judy*** expected David to sexually abuse my daughters. *Her* turmoil was the reason I would explode, but I couldn't see it then. Repression hides the conflict in an unseen cubby somewhere in the unconscious mind, but old beliefs are still alive, still prompting actions that fit old requirements to submit or escape. But facing and confronting the problem can’t happen when our understanding is repressed. And this is how abuse continues in intergenerational chains.

*Bedtimes are when it happens! It's going to happen and I can't stop it. Just like I could never stop it happening to me, so don't make me be there to see it happen to them. Just let me be somewhere else.*

Oh, ***judy***! I abandoned my babies to David's care because my anxiety was too intense to face. I purposely left my children with a man ***judy*** believed to be a rapist, knowing unconsciously what he might do to them.

I let my daughters be human sacrifices to spare my own suffering. Anything to still ***judy’s*** anxious voice in my head. Anything to keep the lid on my pain. I made the swiftest exit I could, over and over and over.

*Just don't make me know it's happening!*

I've done exactly what my mother did. She didn't let herself know I was being abused because she was hopeless to stop it. She kept herself safe at my expense.

I played the same role, and if my children haven't been abused, it's only because my husband didn't have the same script.

Every incest victim might ask herself at some point, *do mothers know?* I must answer, *mothers don't know until they finally know. And then maybe they discover that they knew all along.* God forgive me.

Wednesday, August 1st, 11:00 PM.

This morning, I put in a call to Jason. I thought I was past panicky phone calls for reassurance. But the question kept pounding in my head: “Am I wrong in assuming David hasn't sexually abused them? Is there something there I can't see because of my own blind spots?” I couldn't stand not knowing.

When Jason returned my call, despite my initial rush of words, I had trouble framing the question. “I've been processing what we talked about yesterday—that I expected David to abuse the girls—and you were right. ***judy*** assumed it would happen, and that's where a lot of my anxiety about parenting has come from, and why I've been around been so angry around bedtimes...”

Finally, I pushed past my fear to blurt out, “Could he have done that, Jason? Am I still in denial to think that he didn't? Did I enable incest in my own family?”

“Judy, I haven't seen any evidence to lead me to conclude that David is a sexual abuser. I've met your girls several times now, and I've observed their responses to me, a man. I haven't seen any red flags. I can't give you guarantees, but considering how you’ve been so open with him about what happened to you—I think that David would already have bailed out of this marriage if that's who he is.”

I was limp with relief, but still searching for absolute confirmation. “Could he have been as supportive of my therapy as he has been, if he was an abuser?”

Jason gave a short laugh. “The sexually abusive men I've known would never have hung in there through this tough year with you like David has. The way you’ve gone about your therapy would have triggered his own conflicts. Seeing your pain would have been intolerable for a man carrying the shame of abusing his own daughters. No, I don't think he is. I think not.”

“Thank God,” I murmured. But no guarantee. And there was still the issue of my responsibility. I was glad to be on the phone with Jason instead of speaking in person. I didn't have to look him in the eye. “But I still played the same role my mother played! I'm just as guilty whether it happened or not. I set them up!”

He answered softly, “Judy, one of the things I really like about you—”

I mentally interrupted to rebel at his approval of me: *He likes me? How can he like a person who would sacrifice their children like I did? I shouldn't be liked; I should be stoned!*

“—Is your courage in facing the toughest issues,” he continued. “This is a hard one. But after you've processed it, I think you can find a way to forgive yourself for it and go on from there. You’ve been freed from the past that triggered those responses to your children. You’re free to love your daughters *now*. If they’ve been hurt, however they’ve been hurt, you will help them through it. You can have a lot of hope for the healing of your family.”

Hope. I used to wish for my life and my family to be different. But I do have real hope now, rooted in the foundation of experience that real change is possible, however tough the challenge.

Yes—it’ll take me some time, but I will forgive myself. Because I need to put the past behind me, to face the challenges of healing my family. ***judy*** still struggles, but I can parent her as I parent my children. I don't *feel* ready yet. But I know I wouldn't have recognized the task if it were not time to work on it. I have the tools for change, I just have to apply them to work outside myself, rather than inside. God give me strength.

Thursday, August 16th, 9:30 PM.

My days are filled with a strange mixture of emotions lately. While I feel God's presence so profoundly and am apt to cry tears of joy for amazing goodness in my life, I alternately descend to deep loneliness. I still hunger for what my childhood ought to have been.

As I look back at the former intensity of therapy, its progression seems independent of any agenda directed by Jason or myself. God must have been in charge. He daily gave me the lesson appropriate for that day, accompanied by the strength to deal with it. The assignments followed in the order I could accept and integrate them.

It has been as if, from the dark underwater depths of my soul, painful hurts have risen to the surface by a natural force of buoyancy unconnected to my effort or will. I've had a whole village—ha!—an underwater *metropolis* of assorted bundles of old trauma, each one firmly wrapped in layers of numbness and denial, chained by iron control, and padlocked with repression to its own bolt at the bottom of the ocean that is my unconscious.

Gradually, over decades, the chains and locks had become encrusted with the barnacles and rust of bitterness and shame. While the ever-thickening sedimentation held the bolts rigid in the bedrock, the iron control under the layers was weakening, eaten away by rust. Then last year, the shifting tides and currents in my circumstances finally broke apart a crumbling link in one of the chains, abruptly freeing a bundle from its anchorage, to rise with gathering speed up to the air and light.

Meanwhile, adrift in a tiny raft on the surface of the choppy sea, I was oblivious to the underwater drama. I was shocked by the surge of that first shameful bundle as it erupted from unconsciousness into awareness, bringing with it a storm of grief. In spite of my dread at what I might find, I determinedly peeled back layer upon layer of numbness, and plunged my hands into slime accumulated over years of submersion. Deeper I probed, feeling my way, blinded by the tears and rain. Finally, my fingers closed around one small object in the center of the ooze. I drew it out and held it up to wash it clean in the downpour of my tears. As the sludge melted away, I recognized the razor-sharp edges of an old block of crystallized anguish I thought I had disowned long ago.

Time after time, more bundles of tormenting experience bubbled up into view, overwhelming me with the renewed squalls of grief, rage, and yet more grief. But it was only in unwrapping and examining the contents, of welcoming those pieces of myself back home, that each storm abated, and there was peace in greater and greater measure.

However agonizing it has been to examine the wounds, I see it last that they are all buried treasure, and I've found comfort in accepting the hurts and releasing the shame. I have learned to cherish all those aching fragments of myself to find in them my long-lost purity and integrity. They are the feeling parts of myself that made me whole and healthy. Along with the grief, they contain my capacity to love and be loved, my empathy for others, my contentment. These were the qualities I saw in the lives of others but secretly never believed could be elements of myself. Until now. It is worth the pain to find the peace.

Welcome home.

# AFTERWORD

2024

As I’ve transcribed those harrowing pages from the original journal written between 1989 and 1992, and published in 1994, I’ve been again struck by the enormity of the change I experienced through those years. My work in therapy with Jason was radically freeing, and that freedom has lasted through the whole of my life afterward. Once I recognized better choices available to me, I couldn’t go back to living under the oppressive weight I’d finally thrown off. It’s better on this side of that hard work.

Back then, as I ended individual counseling with Jason my attention turned to the work of marriage counseling and family therapy, which were beneficial, but not enough to save my marriage.

“David”, the father of my two children, was supportive through those years in so many ways, and also showed evidence of his own old wounds that I did not describe for publication, reserving that material for family privacy. It wasn’t meant to be a book about my husband, who carried his own burdens from his dysfunctional upbringing. He held damaging wounds of his own that manifested in his life much later, after we had been divorced for years.

In January of 1993 David had initiated the decision to leave and moved into an apartment. I stayed in our home with the girls. We were separating, with a clear intention to divorce. I still had very mixed feelings, with relief looming largest in my awareness. I was preparing to return to school and finish my long-delayed degree so I could create a career, after fifteen years of being a stay-at-home mom. Classes for the new semester would start in another week or so.

One morning, I struggled out of bed after a nearly sleepless night of tossing and turning. I helped my two daughters to get ready for school and on their way. Then, still exhausted, I climbed back under the covers and fell asleep.

I awoke two hours later from a vivid dream which seemed so significant I wanted to understand its meaning. I immediately began writing it down.

In the dream:

I was in the living room of the home I’d shared with my husband, where I still lived. Beside me on the sofa was my husband’s stepfather, Sam, who I had always liked. But Sam was sobbing, devastated that his adult daughter from his previous marriage was getting a divorce. I was commiserating with him.

Then the scene changed, same dream.

I was standing in the kitchen of the same home, holding an infant that I was bathing in the kitchen sink. While I could feel the warmth of the bath water, and the smooth skin of the baby, slippery with soap, my eyes strayed to the countertop at the left of the sink.

On the countertop was a startling sight: there was a severed human eyeball in a little puddle of fluid, lying on the counter! In shock, I raised my left hand to feel my own eyes and discovered that my right eyeball was missing! I had an empty eye socket there, despite not feeling pain.

I called out, “Help! I need help! I’ve lost my eye!” I “knew” that my husband’s mother, Mary (with whom I’d had a very difficult relationship) was somewhere in the house, but she didn’t answer my call, or come to assist me.

Someone (unidentified) standing beside me to my right took over attending to the baby, and I turned my full attention to figuring out what to do about this medical emergency.

I thought, “Should I put the eyeball in a plastic bag and take it with me to the doctor? Maybe they can re-implant it somehow, like they can re-implant a tooth that is accidentally knocked out. But wait, this eyeball has been lying on the counter, which surely isn’t sterile—would it only be introducing infection to my body if they tried to put it back? And the eye socket is right against my brain! What deadly effects might that have?”

That’s when I woke up, stunned by how real it had felt.

And I started writing.

As I pondered this grisly image, an intrusive thought came to mind—of the Bible verse that said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you.”

*Seriously*?

I pulled out my Bible Concordance and searched for the passage:  Matthew 5:29.

What was the connection?

This dream started out explicitly naming the theme of divorce, in the conversation with my father-in-law. He was a man who had been previously divorced, before marrying my mother-in-law, however distressed he was now in the dream, about his daughter’s impending divorce. And the dream came to me when I’m getting ready to be divorced. So, what was God trying to tell me?

Some of the books I’d read suggested that each element of a dream represents an aspect of the dreamer herself. So, my father-in-law represented… the part of me that grieved the loss of my marriage? Okay, that fit. I *did* feel sad we were divorcing.

I pulled out my Bible and read the passage in context. And discovered that this *very* familiar verse was taken from the Sermon on the Mount, smack in the middle of Jesus’ preaching about adultery (which did *not* apply to David or me) and *divorce* (yes, this applied).

Wow. I never knew that was connected. Was that verse always quoted out of context? It was—in my experience, anyway. I remember that verse being used in the church I was raised in, as justification to “disfellowship” a church member who was sinning and wouldn’t repent. He’d be kicked out of the congregation, cast from our midst.

So, what did the eye-plucked-out represent in the dream? Removing—my husband? Plucked out of the “one flesh” of our marriage, removed from *us*—by divorce? But in these verses the eye was plucked out because it caused sin!

Our family had recently found a new church, more focused on grace. But the church I was raised in, the same church we had left behind, that had reinforced my deepest understanding of God as a raging parent, preached that “scriptural” divorce was limited to grounds of adultery And a “non-scriptural” divorce was grounds for going to hell.

Neither my husband nor I had had an affair. So did our divorce mean we were going to hell? Were we sinning by divorcing? Was it unforgivable? My old church made it seem so.

Was this very fear buried below the relief I had been feeling, as family tensions subsided through our separation?

But wait. I had come to understand that sin wasn’t just an isolated action—it was really about a pattern of orienting myself away from God—refusing truth, living in lies, hiding from God in shame, rather than opening to God, and at the same time opening to honest relationships with others. All of which meant that while I lived that pattern I couldn’t receive healing, and I couldn’t really “know” God.

Did David and I "cause each other to sin" without adultery? By my new understanding of sin, then YES. *We were sinning by staying together—*because we kept on reinforcing each other’s dysfunctional self-protective defenses—preventing healing or growing further.

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you.

Through my own individual therapy and eighteen months of marriage counseling, trying to learn to communicate in healthier ways, I could see that each of us had become ever more defensive with each other. We each doubled down on our positions, ever surer that the other person was wrong, and we were right. And that pattern was only intensifying. Efforts to be honest and vulnerable devolved into interpretations that the other was attacking or apathetic. We closed off. We built walls of resentment against each other, and each hid behind a wall of self-protection.

Hadn’t our walls also shut us away from God? Yes. It felt to me that if the marriage continued, it could only happen by some set of accommodations that was dishonest—it would be pretending to agree to “keep the peace”, which wouldn’t be peaceful, and wouldn’t support authentic growth. I couldn’t become the person I now knew I was intended to be, just complying with my husband’s expectations. And that wasn’t just about housecleaning, or sex.

For all the prayers I’d lifted, God never told me to fake ANYTHING to please my husband, or anyone else.

And what would we model for our daughters buy living in accommodation? That a marital union was to be preserved at all costs, including the loss of integrity of the partners? That’s what I observed in my parents, who fought viciously for decades, but continued a painful, destructive union.

How often had I heard that God loves marriage?  A million times.

Yet God loved me before I was even formed in my mother’s womb! God knew me and loved me before I ever married David. And God wanted me to grow and develop and become the fullest form of who He designed me to be. God loved David too and wanted him to grow. Could that happen for either of us within this marriage that God loved? Would God sacrifice the “loved individual” to continue a “loved marriage” that perpetuated the “sin” of ever-deepening defensiveness and inauthenticity? “Thou shalt not bear false witness” was one of the ten commandments! Wouldn’t I have to live a lie to stay in a marriage that wasn’t allowing me to be truthfully ME?

All this exploration kept coming back to: God loves me. Even if there is sin in this divorce (which felt less and less true to me), God loves me. I am covered by Grace.

I took a break from writing about the dream and walked around the block, asking God for truth.

Coming back and picking up the pen, I came back to the dream again, and another question arose.

So—what does that baby represent?

Whoa. I hadn’t even thought of that element of the dream! The baby I was bathing in the sink. But instantly I knew.

The baby was my inner child as an infant, never bonded to Mother—she was that developing part of me who was now getting a brand-new start. I’d been learning to acknowledge her and care for her. I’d been listening to her needs.

On the threshold of divorce, I had to turn my attention away from the baby to focus on day-to-day practical needs. I let go of her to focus on the “emergency” of the severed eye, to consider seriously whether re-implanting (the severed eyeball OR my husband, if that were even possible) would be healthy (which I had already rejected) or destructive, and what I must do to resolve the problem.

Focusing on *actual* day-to-day needs in the waking world meant attending to parenting my daughters who were entering their teen years and were carriers of their own traumas (for which I carried much responsibility), getting myself through school and creating a viable way to make a living and a life for us all.

So then the question came: And in the dream, who took over bathing the baby? Which hadn’t occurred to me until then. But the answer was instantly clear.

It was Jesus!

*Thank you, Jesus, for showing up when I need you!*

God was caring for that vulnerable part of me, as God always had—while I was attending to the practical aspects of creating an independent adult life and tending to my responsibilities. I would be taking a full-time load of college courses, and working to be more present to family, but God was taking care of me through it all. I wasn’t abandoning myself.

God was taking care of *all* of us. Wow.

The dream brought me peace. If divorce *was* sin, it would be forgiven. But I felt sure God wanted me to be ever more honest, and divorce allowed me to continue that path of growing. And gave David the freedom and opportunity to grow too. He’d have to choose it.

*Yes.*

So, besides re-starting my college courses, I returned my attention to my ongoing work on editing my original journal, pulling out entries that felt the most significant to my changing understanding and my healing, and sorting them by themes to make my chaotic process more coherent for a reader. I winnowed my handwritten pages down considerably—what was eventually published represented about one-fourth of the entries I had written. I did more grief work through the many hours of typing and editing.

The manuscript’s focus—and the eventual book’s—was always on healing the effects of child abuse. I wanted readers to see, among other things, what support a partner could offer, without blame to my husband. David encouraged me in the publication of the journal, seeing it as a real achievement for me, but the material was always disturbing to him. He was saddened at the harm I had suffered, but still angry at my ongoing failures as a wife, which were considerable. I was troubled that he never expressed any anger at those who had harmed me, which remained an uncomfortable mystery to me. Our marriage, and its impending dissolution, stayed private, a decision that was entirely mine.

While still working on the manuscript, in early 1993, I sent a query letter directly to Thomas Nelson Publishers, the largest Christian publisher in the United States. (Thomas Nelson is now a part of HarperCollins Christian Publishing.) Today I would have needed an agent to approach a major publisher. But back then, within a few weeks, they wrote back requesting I send them chapters from the manuscript. I had seven chapters in fairly good shape by then, which I sent. And within a few more weeks, they offered me a contract for publication. The editing they asked for was minor, and the finished book was published in early 1994.

It was very unusual (and still is) for a writer’s first approach to a publisher to be immediately accepted and to culminate in a published book. I never sent another query—it wasn’t necessary. It felt to me that God had a hand in bringing the book to publication. My editors agreed.

The timing of my therapy, and my writing, happened to place me fairly early in what became an enormous wave of increasing awareness and writings about recovery from child abuse. Publishers were seeking stories like mine, in answer to rising public acknowledgment of the effects of child abuse, which made room for the quick acceptance of my manuscript.

The earliest serious public attention to childhood trauma hadn’t begun until as late as 1979, with newspaper headlines recounting the shocking events of the Chowchilla, California school bus kidnapping. Lenore Terr MD was a psychiatrist called in to consult with the child victims who had been abducted, along with their school bus driver, by three men. The schoolchildren and their driver were forced into a van and driven to a rock quarry where they were held captive, locked inside a moving van that had been buried underground in the quarry, for 16 hours before they managed to escape. (All three of the kidnappers have now been released from prison after more than twenty years’ incarceration. The victims suffer from nightmares, anxiety, and claustrophobia to this day.)

Dr. Terr’s scientific publications describing a longitudinal study of the effects of trauma on the psychological lives of children were, astonishingly, among the very first to take seriously the impact of personal trauma on children. Before 1980, the field of psychology insisted that children did not suffer any ill effects from traumatic events directly, believing it was beneficial that they “forgot” those experiences. But over decades, Dr. Terr documented for the first time the clear signs of addictive patterns, unstable relationships, and psychological problems that troubled survivors of that kidnapping, as they grew into adulthood. The cause and effect were made clear. Her work and other publications were the earliest to acknowledge the great damage done to a traumatized child’s psyche and paved the way for a revolution in therapies for childhood trauma.

By the mid-1980s, child abuse was considered a leading social problem in the US, and in other countries. On November 10, 1986, Oprah Winfrey had revealed to her audience on her nationally syndicated talk show that she had been raped by a relative when she was nine years old. (Yes, she was raped at the same age as I remember it happening to me—a coincidence that doesn’t diminish the truth of my own history.) I don’t remember if I saw that broadcast of her program, but it strikes me that if I did, it may have been another catalyst I hadn’t recognized, to spur the loosening of my repression and prompting my own initiation of therapy two-and-a-half years later. There rose an international groundswell of women talking about what harm had come to them in childhood, on TV talk shows, in magazine articles, and in books.

The field of psychology and the women’s movement had by then extrapolated knowledge originally gained from federally-funded veterans’ agencies’ research into PTSD that was suffered by American soldiers returning from the Vietnam war. That insight was eventually applied to understand the effects of child abuse as well.

And the twelve-step movement founded by Alcoholics Anonymous embraced the application of new understandings of trauma’s effects. Inner child work became an integral aspect of treatment programs for addicts, acknowledging trauma as a frequent contributor to addictions in adulthood.

This was the social milieu of the time leading up to the beginning of my work in therapy. Books on trauma resolution began to show up on the bestseller lists and were available at my local library and bookstores as my friend’s marriage broke down and I began wildly inappropriate levels of caretaking what wasn’t mine to fix. I read compulsively, from a wide range of new offerings on the themes of family dysfunction, abuse, and recovery.

Fewer new publications in these current years make reference to inner child work, which was widely written about in the 1990’s. But my book bears witness to its timeless value. I once heard the remark that the concept of the inner child was “just projection.” I would agree that it’s projection—I could recognize my inner child’s distress even while I still harshly judged myself. But I wouldn’t call it “*just*” projection, as the idea was central to my own deep healing.

During the time it took for me to work through my old pain, it helped immensely that I could find empathy for a child’s experience when I had little compassion toward my adult self. I was still invested in shaming myself to submerge childhood pain, and I had no leverage to change that pattern. I know that had I not been able to differentiate the childlike fears and confusion inside me, separate from my adult ego state who relied on competence, intellect, and self-control, I could not have made the strides I made, and felt the enormous relief that came in healing the little girl in me.

That little girl is, and always was, of course, *me*. With healing, I gathered her painful history into myself, and owned it fully, integrating the trauma, and being a stronger adult for it.

Perhaps most importantly, the idea of the inner child is an accurate descriptor for the natural process of dissociation that is already an actuality in many victims’ experience. Dissociation is the only resource readily available to a very young child, amid traumatically painful circumstances. What else can she do but shut away overwhelming experience into separate mental compartments? In order to survive it, she must somehow manage 1) awareness of shameful truths and the conflicted feelings attached to them, 2) requirements to hide or deny those experiences and feelings lest their expression trigger further harm, 3) simultaneously continue to appear “normal” to a world she depends on for any reassurance, support, and basic needs, and 4) continue to weather the ongoing emotional and physical onslaughts of her frightening environment. All while limited to the skills and maturity inherent in a small child.

The demands of those complex tasks would overwhelm any adult with fully developed cognitive resources, but a small child has exponentially more difficulty. She can’t physically escape a powerful abuser. She has nowhere else to go but inside her own mind, as best she can, with no coaching, instruction, or support. She invents her own internal hiding place through dissociation, a (God-given?) miraculous resource when none other is available. And the dissociated inner child, walled-off from the adult intellect (which may develop with little or no knowledge or feelings about the denied abuse), becomes, by her very separation, a holding space for pain. She is disconnected from help. Hidden away, she has no awareness of the passage of time. And her suffering never softens, is never acknowledged. She is increasingly desperate for healing. Statistics tell us that by the age of 35-50 a survivor’s old defenses have eroded to the extent she is most likely to enter therapy. She can’t shove her pain inside so effectively any more.

That was me at the start of my journals, when I was 39 years old. By the end of my work with Jason, my life was very different.

In 1994, when *In the Voice of a Child* was first published, I was in the middle of a college semester. My daughters resided with me full-time, and their father regularly visited with them in my home (usually while I was in class or studying) and took them for frequent outings. In 1996 I transitioned effectively into a productive career that I maintained for twenty-five years. I was un-stuck from my old depression.

After the book’s initial release, I was interviewed on several radio programs. On one program I had discussed how my book showed the importance of addressing the specifics of having been abused, in order to get at the feelings that were shielded by defensive generalities we often use to mask our pain. And I remember one male caller to the show (who had not read the book), who asked me if I worried that someone might read those specifics and be sexually aroused by what I had written. It was an astonishing question. In the moment, I answered that I did not believe my story would provoke that reaction and had never heard that concern from anyone who had read it. I wish now that I had been quick enough to wonder aloud if his question might reveal something about the caller himself.

Acquaintances of mine who read the book soon after publication expressed admiration at my courage, and some astonishment that I had the “guts” to be so open about my personal experience. Really, who talks about orgasm and shame and God, all on the same page? The book is certainly raw and vulnerable. I did have some anxieties about that, but I continued to remind myself that those details were innocent and natural responses to criminal actions others imposed on me without consent. The central motivation for my sharing them was that I knew my own conflicted experience about sex might help other survivors heal.

*In the Voice of a Child* turned out to be the very material I had so desperately craved to read when I was in that crisis state. Other people are in the same crisis now, and at every moment. Someone has urgent need to understand and heal what is emerging in their awareness today. It’s worth setting aside some of my privacy to shed light where it may help others. It does not do me real harm. My inner child is safe from it now.

Others, of course, may hold opinions that are not so generous toward me. But I learned a long time ago that someone else’s opinion is their business. I have a boundary that says my worth is internal, determined between me and God. I am not required to negotiate my worth with critics.

But what about the fact that I walked (I was not bound and carried with a knife to my throat) to Gary’s room, when I was nine? As I had walked to Hank’s house, when I was seven or eight? Yes, I sought attention, and I could anticipate that attention would be sexual.

Is that blameworthy? Not for a young child who had no better options available, whose life experience *never* included the sustenance of healthy touch. A child never cuddled, rocked, or hugged will seek “gentle” contact where they find it, because that is a choice for vitality, for life, to escape the deadening weight of rage, conflict, and deprivation for a brief time. How might that child otherwise sustain a will to live? She seeks to survive, and sensation may give her *something* to hold onto, when she can’t see another choice. Drugs and alcohol may provide the same experience for other children. If it’s available, and there’s nothing else, we may see her choices as life-affirming. But it’s only a temporary “fix”, with so many negative consequences, setting up self-hatred and a host of other complex life problems.

But a child has to survive first, and continue to survive, until they can reach a time when help is available, and they can open to it. Healing can come later.

I went to Gary’s room because I chose life. Like I would have chosen to breathe in smoke if I was in a burning house. There was dangerous pollution in it, but I needed sustenance for life. And I could not catch enough breath otherwise. I wish there had been better options, but wishes don’t make reality.

So, I forgave myself for continuing to seek to breathe as best as I knew how to do when I was only nine years old. God knew the whole story all along. Forgiveness for innocent efforts to stay alive? That was beside the point. God knew the end from the beginning, and rejoices that I am here, fulfilling the life possibilities that had been dormant in me for so long. So do I.

I’ve been asked if I really never did confront my perpetrators, in order to prevent them from continuing to hurt other children. I did not, although I considered the question seriously in therapy. My decision might have been different had I ever believed that any of them still living were truly pedophiles. I didn’t think Hank was, and he was dead besides. In my thorough evaluation during counseling, I saw both Gary and Richard as “regressed offenders” who’d violated me because of my “convenient” defenseless availability to them. Gary was a kid himself when he abused me, acting out with whoever was in his sphere of influence. And Richard was profoundly uncomfortable interacting socially with anyone—I couldn’t imagine him grooming a child outside the family.

And I recognized that imagining my confrontation would be guaranteed to change the course of a perpetrator’s pattern of harming others, or access to small children was magical thinking. Surely the survivors who make the courageous choice to confront and seek prosecution of predators are often heroes who do have real effect to prevent potential victimization of vulnerable children. But the complexities must be weighed.

I chose instead to focus my energies on healing my immediate family, and on offering hope to adult survivors—so they might become more aware and protective of themselves and their kids, and in healing, make choices for healthier partner relationships—the effect of which would be safer children, and a safer world.

I’m very grateful that when I went into therapy my husband’s health insurance still covered as many psychotherapy sessions as were deemed necessary by the professional providing care, with a low co-pay. “Managed care” was on the rise even in the late 1980’s, and a few years later, our health insurance provided through my husband’s employer drastically reduced the benefits for mental health coverage. Mental health benefits can make a significant difference on the well-being of individuals and families, and on society as a whole. Parity for mental health coverage to equal physical health insurance benefits is crucial for well-being.

Today, the financial cost of healing from pervasive abuse is a barrier that few can afford to surmount. Which makes the re-release of this book seem all the more important. Books can’t replace professional help entirely but can greatly aid recovery from childhood wounds.

Today I am at peace with my family who remain. My mother and stepfather remained married until their deaths in 2008 and 2009, Richard of heart disease. Mother was affected by Alzheimer’s disease for years before she died. I wondered if it might have been easier for her to forget a life that caused her so much shame and sadness. The forgiveness I gave to my parents was real, but I did not allow visits between them and my daughters. I had very little contact with them myself until a few years before their deaths, when I pitched in to assist my siblings’ efforts to support my mother’s care as her health declined.

My older brother Gary died of heart disease within a few years after that. I hadn’t seen or spoken with him in twenty years.

My sister is a dear friend now. We sometimes marvel at what functional and satisfying lives we’ve made after such difficult beginnings.

My two younger brothers experienced our family differently than Carla and I did. Family stresses generally reduced in their experience after Gary moved out, and they were still very young. And they were males, which was a preferred status in our family’s unspoken belief. Both Will and Richie are good human beings, and I’m glad for their presence in the world. We all regularly gather as a family to reconnect.

My mother was so smart, quick-witted and clever, extroverted and funny, a good cook, a spiritual seeker, and a generous friend to those outside our family. All these wonderful qualities, which she passed to her progeny in varying ways, found inconsistent expression as she was stymied by her conflict-filled marriages and her depression. I believe she had good intentions always, but her trauma blocked her awareness of her children’s needs. She showed signs she disliked herself for not fulfilling every role perfectly. She didn’t mean to hurt her children.

When her kids were grown and gone, against the wishes of my stepfather Richard, she finally tested for and was granted her GED, and then went to a local university, earning a bachelor's degree in education. She worked for a number of years as a special education teacher and had a positive impact among her students and peers.

But I don’t think she ever got over her old wounds.

While my caregivers’ reasons for not being able to meet my needs in childhood are worth consideration, they were a separate concern from the work of my own healing. I would be still stuck in my own disfunction if I hadn’t released all those feelings of rage and loss for the harm my mother enabled. My parents needed treatment too, but I had no role in that. I was responsible to work on my own healing. When a patient is bleeding out from a knife wound, it’s not the right time to puzzle over the assailant’s motivation.

But resentment does not make a good home, and I needed to move out of that neighborhood, so I could find freedom and health beyond those events. The agonizing exploration in therapy was the way I gradually accomplished that move, culminating in forgiveness when I was ready. It took a long time. All told—my story has a good outcome. I do not regret the past. I thank my parents for doing what good they could see to do when they could, even with all the gaps there were. All of that got me here. And I’m grateful for it now.

Mostly, the people who parented any of us probably didn’t see what effect they were creating at the time. Like I didn’t see my own blind spots and mistaken ideas and wrong-headedness along the way, or how it impacted my kids. My path to awareness, and eventual gradual changes to healthier patterns, required me to look honestly at my own life first, and psychotherapy gave me a safe environment to face those humbling recognitions.

My trajectory after those years was as a vastly more functional, caring, and insightful person, but never perfect. It turns out that as long as we live and breathe there will be more to learn if we’re up for it. But standing now in this last stage of the life I cherish; I know the work in these pages shows the catalyst that propelled me into a life more beautiful than I could have otherwise conceived.

Whatever mistakes there were in yesterday, I’m given another breath NOW, to see what I might do with it. And then another breath, however I might have used the last one in ways that seem unwise. And then another breath. That’s grace. And then more grace.

It’s like the movie, *Groundhog Day.* That story is more than just silly fantasy. It’s life. I keep getting the same chances, over and over and over, and I still have the same tendency to make those familiar errors. My ego rears its ugly head. I ignore the same blind-spots and re-play the same muffed opportunities to learn to be loving. I waste a million possibilities. We all do. I’m mostly less ego-driven these days, but not always. I love better than I used to. And life keeps serving up another sunrise, another fresh doorway to walk through, to do it right. And another. One day at a time. Because that’s all I ever get, like everyone else. Just today. To see what I can do with this one.

I’ve cleaned up messes, made amends, made peace, forgiven myself and other people. And the beat goes on.

My old depression did not return. I’ve moved through hard challenges and celebrated great joys. I’m making good use of my time here. And God has loved me through all of it.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Emerson always wanted to be a writer—her training came not from formal classes, but through the kindness and encouragement of teachers and librarians, and the compulsive reading that sustained her through childhood and beyond—she absorbed the qualities of good writing. Even so, she *didn’t* write—she spent her first forty years mired in depression and procrastination before the work she did in therapy to recover from child abuse brought her lasting healing and got her moving.

In the past three decades she developed into a self-starter, a leader, and a positive presence in the world. She created a career in a helping profession that made a difference for those she served. And she learned the hard way that perfection didn’t exist for anybody—she certainly never attained it. The mistakes she made along the way were often humbling, but eventually showed themselves to be wake-up calls, bringing her to deeper healing and increasing trust in her own soul-work. She’s come to value those messy lessons and the wisdom they brought. Along the way she reconnected to her love for writing and has made a practice to develop her skills over the years. She always meant to re-publish *In the Voice of a Child.* Now she has.

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After her retirement Judy began serious work on a story that had been tugging at her heart for a long time, which became the literary fiction/suspense novel *Sack of Wrongs* (available on Amazon in eBook and paperback formats), about a family not so very different from her own family of origin—but their fictional story is not autobiographical. In fact, there’s plenty of resonance between ***judy*** in the pages of this memoir, and the character of Katie in the novel—and you’ll notice Katie and Ben’s parents have some familiar traits. But Katie’s brother Ben tries hard to be a good guy—he wishes he could rescue Katie. Every one of these characters craves the experience of being seen and understood. Don’t we all want wrongs righted? Judy brings to life her understanding of the dynamics of troubled families in the creation of *Sack of Wrongs*, telling the truths she knows from real experience in this riveting fictional story of Ben’s quest to lay down that sack of old wrongs he’s had strapped to his back.

# SACK OF WRONGS

a novel

By Judy Emerson

When he fails everyone who matters, will he turn into the thing he hates the most?

Ben Keegan despises his parents. Even after five years with these mean drunks, the teenager is still shocked that his beloved Nana had denied him the only home he’d ever known. But when his brutal stepfather beats him senseless and casts him out on the street, Ben vows to become a very different kind of man.

Tortured by the desperation in his little sister's eyes as he leaves her behind, he forces his broken body to make it all the way across town, to the only people who might help. But with his growing rage threatening to erupt, Ben fears he could bring ruin to the people who’d put him back together again. And now someone is twisting Ben’s worst blunder to an ominous purpose.

Can Ben overcome someone’s shadowy plot to subvert justice, and make peace with all the wrongs done?

**Look for it on Amazon.com**

*In paperback and eBook formats*

# Appendix

For help, go to:

[Domestic Violence Support | National Domestic Violence Hotline (thehotline.org)](https://www.thehotline.org/)

[Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline | (childhelphotline.org)](https://www.childhelphotline.org/) call 800.422.4453

[Lifeline (988lifeline.org)](https://988lifeline.org/) Mental health hotline, dial 988 anywhere in the U.S.

[Have a problem with alcohol? There is a solution. | Alcoholics Anonymous (aa.org)](https://www.aa.org/)