



The Spiritual Impact of Abuse

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We know from both the literature and from experience that trauma and abuse violate every aspect of the child – their world, their self, their future and their faith. A child is by definition, in process. Children are vulnerable, dependent and easily influenced. They do not know very much and are learning how relationships work, what is good, what is bad, what I means to a male or female. They are developing in every way and anything growing can be shaped. We believe good nutrition is important for our children because what they consume will affect their bodies not only now but also when they are adults. Raising children in an environment of love, truth, wisdom and patience shapes their characters. Raising children in an environment of fear, evil, deceit and pain shapes their characters as well. The effects of ongoing sexual abuse on the life of a child and on their adult future are, needless to say, profound.

Those of us who have worked with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse know that one of the areas that are profoundly impacted by that abuse is the survivor's relationship to God. We have also had the experience of teaching a much-needed truth to someone and recognizing that it would not "go in". The truth may be assented to intellectually but it does not seem to enter the life and heart in a transforming way. I would like to suggest three reasons why that might be so and then offer some thoughts about how we might help those we are working with to experience the truths they can often so easily recite.

The first block in this obstacle seems to be that a survivor's thinking often appears to be "frozen" in time. A woman who was chronically abused by her father for fifteen years thinks about herself, her life and her relationships through the grid of abuse. Trauma stops growth because it shuts everything down. It brings death. The input of other experiences often does not alter the thinking that originated within the context of the abuse. So a woman may have encountered many trustworthy people since her childhood abuse, but she still does not trust. She may have heard thousands of words about how God loves her, but she believes she is trash and somehow an exception to that truth.

The second block is that the abuse was processed by a child mind and children think concretely, not abstractly. Children learn about abstract concepts like trust, truth and love, from the concrete experiences they have with significant others in their lives. Mommy and daddy label love and trust and truth for them and those labels are rooted in concrete experiences with their parents.

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Third, children (like adults) learn about the unseen, or the spiritual, by way of the seen. God often teaches us eternal truths through the natural world. We grasp a bit of eternity through looking at the same. We learn about the shortness of life by the quick disappearance of a vapor. Jesus taught this way as well. He said He was bread, light, water and a vine. Jesus, in His very essence, is an example of this of He is God in the flesh. God continually brings eternal truths to us in ways we can understand.

If we consider the impact of these factors we will see that many survivors exhibit this quality of thinking “frozen” in time by grasping the abstract through the concrete lessons of abuse and expecting the unseen to mimic what they were taught in the seen. God is viewed through the lens of abuse. The knowledge they have appears rooted in the Word of God. Knowledge personally applied or experienced is rooted in the lessons of abuse.

Consider the following examples. Sarah is five. Her parents drop her off at Sunday school every week. She learned to sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak but He is strong.” Sarah’s daddy rapes her several times a week. Sometimes she gets a break because he rapes her sister instead. The song says Jesus loves her. It says He is strong. So Sarah asks Jesus to stop her daddy from hurting her and her sister. Nothing happens. Maybe Jesus is not so strong after all. Or at least, He is not as strong as her daddy. Nothing, not even Jesus can stop her daddy. The people who wrote the Bible must not have known about her Daddy.

A child is told to get down on her knees nightly by her bed and pray with her father. As he tucks her in he molests her, saying, “Why are you such a whore that you make me do this after we have prayed?” It is not difficult to see from these two examples what kind of spiritual lessons are being learned. It is also not hard to see what deep roots such lessons would have. You do not have to know very much about learning theory to grasp the profound impact of such experiences on a life. The abuse provides the control beliefs by which all other information is processed.

What response can a counselor or pastor give that will be powerful enough to overcome such obstacles? If simply speaking or teaching the truth is not sufficient, then what else is required? I believe that those members of the Body of Christ who have been called to walk with survivors become the representative of God to them. The reputation of God is at stake in our lives. We are called to live out in the seen, in flesh and blood, what is true about who God is. Early on in my work with survivors I worked with a woman who had been chronically abused and who seemed unable to really grasp God’s great love for her. She could recite the Scriptures about that love but it seemed to apply to others and not to her. I clearly remember getting down on my knees and begging God to help her see that He loved her. His response to me was basically this: “You want her to understand how much I love her? Then you go love her in a way that demonstrates my love that makes it real to her.” In other words, we are to demonstrate in the flesh the character of God over time so that who we are reveals the truth about God to the survivor. This is not in any way to deny or underestimate the power of the Word of God. However, often that Word needs to be fleshed out and not just spoken for us to truly grasp what it means.

The second thing I do with survivors is to help them put down deep roots in the story of the crucifixion. I find it effective to do this work much later in the counseling process in part because through the relationship they have developed with me (though far from perfect) they are much

better able to grasp the truths of the Word of God. If I have entered into their suffering they can better understand God's entrance into their suffering. If I have been safe then they can better grasp God as their refuge. Out of their experience in the seen world they can better comprehend what is true in the unseen. Grappling with the truths of the cross is critical because the cross is the only place one can go to reconcile the truth of abuse and a loving God who hates evil. The evil that has been done to them, the love of God for them and the holiness of God, all come together in the cross. We usually begin at a place where they are struggling to understand why God has allowed a particular thing to happen. I then suggest a small portion of Scripture (often just one or two verses) and send them home to read it daily, asking God what He would teach them. For example, I gave the John 19:23 to a woman who had been repeatedly gang-raped as a teen. In that verse it says, "...and the soldiers took his clothes". She returned the next week saying over and over, "They took his clothes, they took his clothes. I never saw that before." She saw for the first time that Christ knew what she felt for He had entered into her suffering and humiliation. It was a real turning point. The cross demonstrates the extent of the evil done to them. The cross demonstrates the infinite love of God for them. The cross deals with the sins of the survivor. It covers sinning, being sinned against and suffering. This is not work I do for my clients. It is work that arises naturally out of our discussions together and it is work I direct them to do. It has far more power in it when they wrestle with the Scriptures before God and wait to see what He will teach them. When He speaks it goes in.

This work is both difficult and a great privilege. The task of serving as a representative of God so that His character can be grasped and believed is far beyond any capability of yours or mine. It is a work that will take us to our knees if we will let it, with hearts hungry for more of God so that we might bring His presence in very concrete ways into places where He has not yet been known.