

Introduction

I have lived with the reality of having been sexually abused from the ages of three through 17. The abusers included a relative, clergy, and other adults in positions of trust and power. The trauma I endured was so severe that my first task was to survive. I had to sever myself from that young victim and bury her deep within my subconscious. This book is about how I both survived the terror of child sexual abuse as a young victim, and the terrifying memories which began to surface within me in 1981 at the age of 27. I will be focusing on what I had to do over time to retrieve and face those repressed memories, or what is currently called dissociative amnesia, in order to reconnect to that severed part of myself.¹ (For purposes of consistency, I will use the term ‘repressed memories’ throughout this book.)

I am amazed not only that I have not killed myself, but that I am able to live a seemingly normal life, even as I continue grappling with my past. I spend much of my time dealing with an always present, yet thankfully decreasing, sense of fear.

It is ironic that even though I am no longer a member of any one religion, I have used my periods of quiet meditation

1 “There is a large body of research, conducted over the last century, that provides evidence that dissociative amnesia is a common reaction to trauma. There are now hundreds of studies in lots of different populations showing that people forge trauma,” said psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk. “We see it in victims of sexual abuse, natural disaster, torture, rape, war, and kidnapping. And research also shows that delayed memories of abuse are as reliable as continuous memories.” *Mad in America: Science, Psychiatry and Social Justice*, “The False Memory Syndrome at 30: How Flawed Science Turned into Conventional Wisdom,” by Joshua Kendall, February 7, 2021.

and my journaling to remember and deal with the memories of what the priests, other clergy, and adults in my Catholic high school did to me. I developed these self-awareness skills through my religious training as an adult, although I found similar therapeutic techniques are available in other spiritual traditions and secular modalities.

One of the ways I get in touch with my memories is through quiet, deep reflection. Some may call this meditation, and some may refer to it as contemplative prayer. I learned this method of deep reflection, which I call 'my quiet', from the Catholic community, including clergy, both before and while I was learning to be a spiritual director. I have also been able to access some of the emotions and memories of what happened to me through the technique of journaling, a form of dialoguing with one's inner self, which was introduced to me by a priest. The journal mirrors myself back to me.

I can remember only as much as my mind is able to handle at any given time in my life. Often during my quiet, I experience a spontaneous form of 'active imaging' that flows naturally throughout my inner journey. New memories reveal themselves to this very day. And just because I write about my experiences does not mean I always understand their deeper meaning at that time. However, one of the benefits of writing this book, similar to journaling, is that the process of writing has brought about more clarity. The inner work needed for me to accept, understand and integrate these memories which make up my past is ongoing.

To cope, I continually rely on my support network, including my adult nuclear family, my birth nuclear family, my confidants, and my therapists. As I continue to integrate and become healthier, I need their assistance less and less.

My purpose in writing this book is not just to tell my story, although that is part of it. I hope that others who have gone through traumatic, abusive situations, will be inspired to look around for similar supports, whether those are family, friends, therapists, and/or spiritual advisers. I also want

to support therapists who work with individuals suffering the impact of trauma in their lives. It is my further hope that others may find the power of reflective prayer and a variety of journaling techniques as valuable in dealing with past trauma, at times with professional guidance. These journaling techniques may include free flow writing from the heart, creating mandalas for a sacred space to contain thoughts and emotions to gain clarity, and dialoguing with oneself and others.

While these supports allow me to handle my trauma from day to day, I find that equally important is the wisdom I have discovered in myself. Other people would speak of observing or being drawn to this wisdom in me. However, I was slow to understand that the feeling I was experiencing was a deep spiritual awakening, connecting my body, mind, and spirit, which helped me cope with what happened to me. By opening myself in an honest fashion, and relentlessly struggling to make difficult choices, I have found that realizations and understandings come to me in ways I would not expect.

This wisdom spawned the meditative vignettes I will present in this book.² The vignettes involve my memories, along with my spiritual process and growth. My meditative periods may occur anywhere I feel moved to be still, breathe, and reflect. When the memories begin to surface, I feel very vulnerable, so I am usually by myself. The intensity of the experience can be shocking, causing me to feel totally out of control. Once the innermost movement begins, whether it be the beginning of a memory or an ongoing spiritual quest, I allow what comes up to just do so.

Sometimes, there are personas who emanate from my heart and mind. These are subconscious aspects of myself, created by me as a young girl, which held the trauma I experienced.³ The personas are my coping mechanisms

2 A chapter which presents a meditative vignette will be indicated as 'vignette' in the chapter's title.

3 I also refer to persona as 'aspect' or 'part' and will use those terms interchangeably.

which have developed organically. While working with these personas in these meditative vignettes, I understand who I am, where I am, and the plane I am living on as an adult.

Other times, experiencing a type of spontaneous spiritual imagery, I am assisted by guides who take various forms, including a tiger, a snake, an owl, and individuals.⁴ I believe these symbols, guides or images, similar to the cross for Roman Catholics, are understood within a deep spiritual dimension of our beings. One such guide, the Greek goddess, Aletheia (pronounced uh-LEE-thee-uh), is the namesake of this book. She is the goddess of truth, holding a mirror out for us to see our truth.⁵

The memories I have are rooted in and percolate throughout my body as if they are imprinted on my very cells. They are painful and evolving to the point that I may never really know when the memory has reached some form of completion. At times, the healing impact, which comes about through my inner work, may be accomplished without my needing to remember the full experience.

The vignettes may also include spiritual reflections about the significance of the images and the communication with myself which arose during my meditation. The reflections will at times delve more deeply into the facts of what occurred during my time as a child, particularly as it relates to the sexual abuse I experienced. Some of the vignettes also focus on new spiritual insights that unfold.

My life history will give context to the reflections and vignettes I describe. However, this is not a full biography of

4 "Deep imagery refers to inner journeys in which you interact, while awake, with the other-than-ego inhabitants of your psyche. With deep imagery the images come from the depths of your own unconscious, and the guide (when there is one) doesn't know any more than you what will take place on your journey. Among the most effective methods for cultivating deep imagery are those that involve *power animals*, inner guides to healing, growth, and soul work." *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* by Bill Plotkin Ph.D., New World Library, 2003.

5 I was introduced to Aletheia by my son, Greg, when he presented his carved gift of the goddess' image to the crew of *The Keepers*. See "The Gift of Aletheia," page 135.

what happened in my life or a full account of what happened at my high school.⁶ I am just one of many girls who had this experience at my school, and it is not my place to speak for them. I will not be going into the detail of all the experiences we had, many of which have been shared in past journalistic articles and *The Keepers*, an Emmy-nominated Netflix documentary series.

My life's history will lay the groundwork for how I was able to handle the horrible memories which would arise. I will describe how my spiritual journey, my psychological self-awareness, and my emotional maturation saved my life.

Coping with the trauma of child sexual abuse is difficult for any adult. Remembering it for the first time as an adult creates a second layer of trauma—the shock of remembering it and experiencing it as both the child/victim, and the adult who desperately wants to protect that child within.

This book is my opportunity to share how I lived through and dealt with the trauma I experienced in my life. This process has helped me realize the courageous power of the human spirit which continues to move me toward wholeness. That spirit helps me see that I am so much more than the abuse.

Here is what happened to me.

6 I will not be sharing all the details of my abuse at Keough, only those which have relevance to my explanation of how one can heal after such experiences.