

The
SPIRITUAL IMPACT
OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Diane Langberg

The Spiritual Impact of Sexual Abuse

Diane Langberg



www.newgrowthpress.com

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404
www.newgrowthpress.com
Copyright © 2017 by Diane Langberg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.* Copyright © 2000; 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover Design: Trish Mahoney, themahoney.com

ISBN: 978-1-945270-65-9 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-945270-66-6 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on file

Printed in China

24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 1 2 3 4 5

Those in the counseling field are talking more and more about what is called “meaning-making.”¹ The concept originated in Victor Frankel’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* and refers to the process of how people make sense of knowledge, relationships, and self. Trauma of any kind has the capacity to shape meaning in a person’s life. For example, a boy who grows up in an urban setting in poverty, with an abusive, alcoholic father, who experiences a cycle of homelessness due to his drug-addicted mother, and who has been raped by some men in the neighborhood has a life meaning and purpose shaped by trauma: Life is chaotic and disordered; no one can be trusted. Get what you can when you can and watch your back unceasingly.

On the other hand, trauma can shatter meaning. A young girl grows up in an intact home, nurtured and cared for with many developmental opportunities and goes off to the college of her choice. One evening on the way back from the library she is violently, brutally raped. The meaning and purpose she has for her life is now destroyed. Nothing makes sense, trust is eradicated, and the meaning held to by the urban youth now makes more sense to her than her own.

When a situation is destructive to familiar, comfortable beliefs, a person’s distress level is high. When someone’s pre-trauma beliefs and meaning are resilient and have the capacity to include trauma, suffering, and injustice, the ability to weather the trauma without

destruction of meaning and purpose is much higher. The adherence to rigid, pessimistic, or incoherent meanings, particularly those that assume protection from all suffering, seem to prolong trauma symptoms and leave one vulnerable to chronic PTSD. Therefore, it is critical that we grasp some of what sexual abuse in particular does to the meaning and purpose of a child victim and the adult they become, as well as what is involved in helping them find true meaning and purpose not based on pretending the trauma never happened or that it did not really hurt.

Sexual abuse has a spiritual impact. Let's consider this impact specifically as well as what responses might be helpful. There are three things to keep in mind as we seek to both understand abuse and minister to survivors of this childhood trauma. The first is that much of a survivor's thinking is "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 the abuse. She may have encountered situations where people proved trustworthy, but she does not trust. She may have heard thousands of words about how God loves her, but the abuse has led her to believe she is trash and an exception to the rule. Trauma stops growth because it shuts everything down. It brings a sense of death. The input from many other experiences, relationally and spiritually, often does not seem to impact the thinking that originated within the context of the abuse.

Second, the abuse occurred to a child, not an adult. 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. They learn what love is by how Mommy and Daddy treat them. They learn about trust by the trustworthiness, or lack of it, in Mommy and Daddy. In essence, they learn about intangible things, ideas, and values through the tangible. If those who teach them are repeatedly untrustworthy, cruel, hurtful, and lying, then to grasp the meaning of concepts like trust, safety, love, and truth seem like an exercise in the ridiculous. Children can be impacted in these ways not just by sexual abuse but by domestic violence, by physical abuse, by ongoing verbal and emotional abuse, by neglect, and by addictions and rage in the home. They make meaning out of their life experiences.

Third, not only do children think concretely; they learn about the abstract by way of the concrete, adults are also taught about the unseen through the seen. We are of the earth, earthy. God teaches us eternal truths through things in the natural world. We grasp a bit of eternity by looking at the sea. We get a glimmer of infinity by staring into space. We learn about the shortness of time by the quick disappearance of a vapor. Jesus taught us eternal truths the same way. He said he was the bread, the light, the living water, and the vine. We look at the seen and learn about the unseen. Consider the sacraments—water, bread, and wine. We

are taught about the holiest of all through the diet of a peasant. This method is also used to understand the character and nature of God himself. God in the flesh, God with skin on, came in the person of Jesus. God explains himself to us through the temporal.

If we consider the combined impact of these factors, we see that many survivors exhibit this quality of thinking frozen in time in that they learned repeatedly through the concrete how to think about the abstract, and they learned repeatedly through the seen what to believe about the unseen. One area that this profoundly impacts is the spiritual. God is viewed through the lens of abuse. Who he is and what he thinks about the survivor is understood based on who Daddy was, or Mommy, or a grandfather, or a youth pastor, or whoever. They have learned about love, trust, hope, faith, through the experience of sexual abuse. They have also learned about the unseen through the visible. The ins and outs of ordinary life have taught them many lessons about who they think God is. That is why a therapist or pastor may have the experience of speaking the truths of Scripture to a survivor, truths desperately needed, and yet finding that they seem to have no impact. The truths and principles don't sink in. Many times survivors can speak eloquently of the truths of Scripture, but on an experiential level their lives are lived out in the context of what the abuse taught them. Intellectually, truth is rooted in the Word of God. Experientially, or personally applied, the truth is rooted in the lessons of abuse.