

A testimony of survival

Father's Touch

By Donald D'Haene

American Book Publishing, 2002, USA

ISBN 1-58982-112-2

www.fatherstouch.com

KALPANA KANNABIRAN

Is it possible to forget the past? And if so, is forgetting the healthiest course? A powerful testimony of child sexual abuse, *Father's Touch* approaches the difficult question of sexual violence in all its complexity. The different layers in which violence is embedded and the indispensability of the painful exercise of peeling off each layer in order to 'see' and cope with the impact; the different layers to which the impact of violence penetrates and the gradual realisation that the fields of violence and its impact need not be co-terminus, that impacts can spin off in completely different, unanticipated directions; the different layers through which memory must plough, in order to capture the full meaning of the experience of violence—make survival and recovery a daunting task. Writes Donald D'Haene:

"I have recollections of events, of dreams that never lie, of written

evidence that the past did indeed occur...At times these flashbacks paralyse, shock, frighten, or sadden me. Sometimes they make me laugh...The world surrounding me assumes any public disclosure translates into a personal reality. However, in my case nothing could be further from the truth. The more I speak or write about my family history, the more unreal it becomes. Any listener or reader of my words would probably experience an emotional response to my story that I can only envy."

Subjected to sexual abuse since the age of three and a half by a father who abused all his four children, three boys and a girl, and his wife, D'Haene travels in his account, from believing that "home is where I am loved and accepted. Mama hugs and talks to me. Papa plays The Game with me. Home is normal to me", to reflecting on this 'normalcy': "I don't know how I came



Ronny, Baby Marina and two-year-old Donald. "The Game" is just about to begin...

All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner without prior permission of the editor is not allowed

to understand that it was wrong and that I had been changed as a result of The Game when I had never talked about it with anyone.”.

If comprehension is the first step in dealing with abuse, coping is the next, since it is rarely possible for victims to remove themselves immediately from an abusive situation. The most painful part of abuse then, is the period when the victim knows s/he is being abused and continues to experience it because there is no instant road to freedom. The difference in impact of the same cycles of violence by the same perpetrator on the different people who experience it is startling, and yet the narration places incontrovertibly before us the entire continuum of traumatic disorder that must result from the practice of violence especially within the patriarchal family: Dissociation or the simultaneous existence of different selves and the firm separation in consciousness of the experiential self from the intellectual one at one end, an aggressive, ironically insensitive authoritarianism on the other end, obesity, nagging interpersonal difficulties, kleptomania, non performance at school and a complete and almost irretrievable erasure of the self between the two extremes.

By isolating the wife and children from any social circle, by seeking the support and sanction of religious elders in the community for this control, either actively through the preaching of ideologies of forgiveness, or passively through silence and/or inaction, by drawing support from the justice delivery system just by virtue of being a man (evident here in the complete disconnection between the divorce proceedings and testimonies of abuse rendered during those proceedings) in short through the interweaving of domestic violence with sexual assault, and the total legitimate control—

●

The first way of dealing with abuse, they say, is to ‘speak out’: disclosure as a one-time, one-shot blowing the lid off abuse, because the law will take charge the moment we speak. *Father’s Touch* teaches us that disclosure is as multi-layered and multi textured as the violence itself, and the ‘law’ (assuming of course that by that term we mean a secular law) hangs above, barely touching the surface, and even that reluctantly

●

mental and physical—that the perpetrator has over his entire family, he uncovers for us the nuts and bolts of patriarchal systems. Small wonder then that the author Donald D’Haene



‘normalcy’: “I don’t know how I came to understand that it was wrong and that I had been changed as a result of The Game when I had never talked about it with anyone.”

asks “How can I not be a feminist?” [Personal communication].

The first way of dealing with abuse, they say, is to ‘speak out’: disclosure as a one-time, one-shot blowing the lid off abuse, because the law will take charge the moment we speak. *Father’s Touch* teaches us that disclosure is as multi-layered and multi textured as the violence itself, and the ‘law’ (assuming of course that by that term we mean a secular law) hangs above, barely touching the surface, and even that reluctantly. We learn that the law also ‘copes’ with family violence through dissociation, providing in the process little relief or opportunity for recuperation to survivors! In Donald’s case, the first disclosure was to his mother when he was ten, i.e., six and a half years after he began to be abused. The earliest disclosure outside the immediate family was soon after, when his older brother Ronny told a doctor. The doctor replied: “You’re probably going to turn into a homosexual. Just be careful and don’t turn into a molester. It happens quite frequently,” and sent him home with his abuser and did nothing further. Then Ronny confided in the Elders of the religious community. “Their reaction: a mix of detachment, curiosity, and confirmation.”. Over a period of nine years approximately thirty people had been told about the abuse, including policemen, judges, attorneys, physicians and the Church Elders. And yet, when the survivors decided to press charges of assault, the Crown Attorney failed miserably in framing the charges accurately.

Through this entire period however, the dogged pursuit of stability was possible because of the conviction that freedom is not impossible to find, and the determination to find it:

“We are united on a mission: we want our mother free of her jailor. Her liberation from captivity takes on more importance than our own freedom. The roles of parent and child are forever reversed. At fifteen, I am counselor, caretaker, therapist, and tower of strength for my mother who is forty-one...So in 1976, it was Ronny and I, at the ages of 18 and 15, who convinced our mother to leave her tormentor and who

Subjected to sexual abuse since the age of three and a half by a father who abused all his four children, three boys and a girl, and his wife, D’Haene travels in his account, from believing that “home is where I am loved and accepted. Mama hugs and talks to me. Papa plays The Game with me. Home is normal to me”, to reflecting on this

sought out temporary lodging for the five of us.”

There are larger questions too that must be addressed in the course of growing up. How do we forge a secular community of support? What expectations do we place on it? What are the ways in which we can negotiate with

the different individuals in this community without undermining our self-esteem? How do we begin to reckon with our own sexuality and sexual orientation in positive terms, not binding them down to the sexual abuse/assault, so far our only knowledge of sex. How can we carve out a space for spirituality and belief within this community, while recognizing that even religion can falter? In Donald’s words, “will any of us find god, love and peace?”

There are three levels of narration in the book, chronologically, and three levels of reflection. The narration of the journey through childhood and into adulthood to Maurice is the primary one. Within this, the recounting of that journey with therapist, Wilf and the reflection on sessions with Wilf. This book foregrounds the fact that anyone concerned with the impact of violence, must think through the critical issues of recovery and the return of faith. And both of these are only possible through disclosure, the courage of conviction, the creation of a community of support, and criminal prosecution—a will to act simultaneously and with determination on the home and the world, radically transforming both in the process.

An amazing and deeply moving testimony of survival, faith and courage, *Father’s Touch* reinscribes in positive, empowering ways, the meaning of human relationships and social responsibility. ■

HIMAL
South Asian Magazine
WRITING WITHOUT BORDERS

Take a new look at your region.

Read Himal, the South Asian Magazine, and take your place in the neighbourhood of the future.

You can now subscribe directly to Himal, the regional magazine from Kathmandu known for its “opposing views, dissenting views, and eccentric views”. Every month, you will read the cutting edge of opinion from all over South Asia.

Copies will be mailed from Delhi. Subscribe by sending payment (cheque/draft) favouring Central News Agency to the address below. You can also pay by credit card.

Himal Magazine
GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu, Nepal
subscription@himalmag.com
www.himalmag.com

subscription rates

1 year INR 580
2 years INR 1125

Desired Subscription:

1 year 2 years

Central News Agency
4E/15 Jhandewalan Extension
New Delhi 110001
Tel: (011) 3670532, 3670534
Fax: (011) 3626036
subs@cna-india.com

Credit Card: Amex Visa Mastercard

Card No:

Expiry: Date Month Year

Signature: _____