

D. Lavett, *A Still, Small Voice: Healing from Abuse* (New York and Bloomington, iUniverse: 2010)*

Those of us who have not been physically or sexually abused face a difficult problem: How can we get into the world of abuse deeply enough to sympathize, to empathize and, eventually, to help or at least to comfort? How can we, the (relatively) safe, imagine our way into a world that is systemically unsafe? We want to help, or at least to be present but, can we do this?

The problem of entering the world of the other, at least enough to be able to speak, is not limited to the realm of the abused. Indeed, how do we, non-survivors, enter the world of the survivors of the shoa? And, in a lesser sense, how do we, steeped in middle class comfort, enter the world of the systemically poor? How do men enter the world of women? The other is the challenge. Yet, if we do not reach beyond ourselves, there can be no understanding however partial, no rapprochement however tentative, no dialogue.

Diane Lavett's book, *A Still, Small Voice: Healing from Abuse*, is a door into the terrifying world of childhood physical and sexual abuse and, into the tough world of healing. It is a gateway for the non-abused, as well as a path for the abused. Those who have been abused will recognize themselves; they will see and hear echoes of their own stories – the pain and the struggle. Those who have not been abused will stand aghast at a world so far beyond our imagination. We will recoil from it. We will be tempted into disbelieving it. But, that world really is real – for a lot of people – and we owe it to them, and to ourselves, to go through that door.

Disclosure: I have known Diane Lavett for a long time. She has been a friend and colleague, eating often at our table and sharing the ups and downs of our life. I have read this manuscript in several forms. The first version contained only the physical abuse. The second added the sexual abuse. And the third gave form to the whole. I have followed its evolution and am glad, for Diane and for her readers, that the book is out in the open. It is a realistic portrayal of abuse and a very touching depiction of the slow process of healing.

Childhood isn't all abuse. There are moments of normalcy: Diane plays; she is something of a tomboy. She goes to school; she is pretty tough. She does her chores around the house. She has relatives, though they seem pretty remote. I suppose most of her childhood was "normal" in this sense. But, then there are the moments of horrifying abuse: being thrown off a bridge by her father, being beaten, watching her siblings being beaten, cruelty to animals. And there are moments of incest (who can imagine these things?). And there are a lot of moments of tension: father is about to explode, mother is about to break down, siblings about to be abused, and herself running, fleeing, trying to mediate a situation way beyond the competence of a child, and feeling guilty for things she could never have mastered. A metaphor catches the reader's impression: the air full of electricity; gray shading into black. Which was worst: physical abuse, sexual abuse, or the ongoing fear? What a stupid question! Only a non-abused person would ask it; and we do.

In Diane's case, there are Jewish roots in the family – and a very determined effort to hide those roots. The conspiracy of silence; the frustration of Diane as she realizes and searches, only to find more obfuscation and obstructionism.

To read. To ponder. To rest with the horror, and the terror.

And then there is healing. How, in the name of heaven, does one pull oneself out of this very real hell? Diane, a very intelligent and determined child, young woman, and mature woman, decides to help herself -- no one else is helping -- and she has some luck: she stumbles upon a remarkable therapist, a woman who by instinct and training knows that healing from abuse (indeed, from any trauma) is not the same as healing from neurosis. Renee helps Diane with techniques most of us have never heard of -- and this is in the period long before abuse was recognized and before abuse-therapy was a known discipline. Renee supports, encourages, nudges, reins in, cautions, and always seems to understand that even the most repugnant behavior is part of the whole. Renee builds trust. (It's too bad she didn't write a parallel book.)

Healing from abuse is not a cure. There is no point at which one "digests" trauma, at which one "resolves" trauma. Healing from abuse is a process, an ongoing relationship with life -- with the past, the present, and the future. One manages abuse; one does not cure it. Healing is managing. Diane does a wonderful job of displaying this process: its great moments, its low moments, and its persistence. Years earlier, Diane and I had published something together but she insisted on anonymity and I remember the moment I raised the question, Are you ready to go public with this? The publication of this book is itself part of the healing.

Writing this book is an act of courage, and an act of healing. Reading it is also an act of courage, and an act of healing.

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