

Some reflections on life

Introduction

I am in my seventies now. On a day- to- day basis, I don't think a great deal about my own experiences or the personal impact on me of domestic violence or childhood abuse. I think more about the abuse of others-vulnerable people by neighbours, strangers, business- people, service providers and by families and partners. This was a feature of my working life. However, the things that I experienced no doubt affected me and my family, and probably how I relate to the world.

My history

As a small child I lived on a farm. We would regularly visit my grandparents, and I loved the contact with them. My grandfather used to come and stay with us. We would also stay in Adelaide as a family, and sometimes just us children, with other relatives who were childless. My grandfather died when I was still young and contact with the other relatives virtually stopped when I became an adult. I don't recall maintaining contact with either side of my extended family beyond my teens. By my mid-teens, we were living in Adelaide where I have remained. I completed year 12, went on to university then worked continuously in the human services field until my mid-sixties.

I have always been drawn to others' problems- defended fellow students on the basketball court if they were being bullied; lent money when someone was in trouble; personally intervened in several neighbourhood domestic violence disputes; worked with those who had the least opportunities in life and stood up to people who pushed and tried to manipulate others. My friends and colleagues have described me as a rescuer. Personally, however, I was and still am slow to trust, reluctant to share much personal information, and have a need to be in control. This is a source of amusement to some and a frustration to others. I get a touch paranoid when someone is challenging me. Fortunately, I can recognise this for what it is, at least most of the time.

Family Revelations

One night in my early thirties, and at home with my husband, I received a telephone call from a sibling advising that we had better get over to mum and dad's. Mum, who was at that time in her 60s, had just told dad that her father, my grandad, had sexually abused her between the ages of 4 and 15. I was told we would have to tell them what had happened to us, not only at the hands of our grandfather but also by our aunt and uncle. I had never had a conversation with my sibling before on this subject and frankly have had few since. In this frenetic phone call, my sibling told me that she knew I had been abused and she felt guilty that she had not protected me.

I was not aware that my sibling had experienced abuse. I was not aware that my mother had been abused. In fact, although I recalled being uncomfortable during adolescent and early teen stays with my aunt and uncle culminating in breast fondling at the age of thirteen, I was not really aware that I had been abused by my grandfather until it was put to me clearly and simply that I had been. The conversation with my sibling that night and since has never included details of the abuse either of us experienced, but occasionally, we make reference to it when we talk about our parents.

Not knowing about the abuse by my grandfather is not true, but it had not entered my consciousness as reality until that night. I had very occasional, and bizarre dreams in my childhood and younger life, but cannot actually remember how old I was. One was standing by a bed and holding the erect penis of a man who I could identify, and in a room which I could identify. The other was my sibling's shocked face when she once found me in the cellar under the house sitting next to three jars of yellow fluid. Her face is the main thing I remember, not the circumstances. I cannot remember either "flashback" being accompanied by distress, and I have not chosen over the years to dig deeply into my memories seeing it as pretty pointless. However, I speculate I was lucky and that I was only at the beginning of the grooming journey. My grandfather stopped coming to the farm around the time I started school, became sick, and died several years later.

The thing I find remarkable is that, through my young eyes, even now I could draw a picture of 3 or 4 scenes of abuse in my early life, 2 around which I am left only with a feeling of naivety, the others, a feeling of distress, embarrassment and ultimately anger by the time I reached 13.

Picture the night that unfolded at my parents' home. A stoic and proud woman having to reveal her childhood nightmare years, then hearing that her children had also been impacted as well. Hearing about the abuse of us not only by her father but also by members of her husband's family.

My sibling did the talking and I mainly nodded affirmation. My father was very distressed, but I do not feel he internalised the fact that his sibling and her partner were part of the abuse scenario. At one stage he sought reassurance that he had not abused us.

That night, I had to face the enormity of what had happened to my mother, deal with the affirmation of my own journey and accept the loss of control of my own privacy where my story went public, not by my choice. Although I was shattered at the end of it, I was a pragmatist, and thought we would put ourselves together and get on with life.

The Ripples

We talk about the ripple effect, the disruption of the natural order, and the expanding impact. Well, this evening and the knowledge that unfolded had a ripple effect which I think was largely beyond our control. What started out as a family crisis, one which we initially hoped would settle, emerged into abuse by my father towards my mother. Despite our training and experience we did not predict the journey beyond this night. We both acknowledge that my father was emotionally vulnerable, anxious, and not always easy to deal with, a little odd, but not a bad father. But physically and psychologically abusive-no? I lived in that household for 23 years and it never occurred to me to define this as a household overshadowed by abuse. Looking back there were indicators in his mental state, but our stoic mother probably protected us. This crisis however triggered for him a sense of personal outrage about how he had been treated.

Early on, after this night of revelation, my dad offered to go to counselling with my mum. She apparently declined. On reflection this is the one point in time where we may have

been able to positively intervene. Had they gone, maybe professional intervention could have helped him with his anger and distress.

It soon emerged that my father was now psychologically and physically abusive towards my mother. He started using demeaning language in our presence, there was evidence of physical bruising and stories of threats, “interrogations” in the middle of the night and controlling acts designed to humiliate mum. I recall on one occasion telling my father to “grow up” when he was ranting- not exactly a constructive intervention and probably dangerous for my mother. Mum told us once that he stood over her and forced her to write letters to her sisters that he dictated to tell them about the abuse. We tried damage control tactics and reached out to our aunts both of whom became angry, said they were too old or sick to be dealing with this and if it was true, why had not our mother raised this with them earlier/warned them. We both decided not to debate the truthfulness as, in our minds it served no purpose to distress these women any more by pointing out the realities. We speculated that others in our generation may have experienced similar abuse at the hands of our grandfather. We also thought there was a distinct possibility that they had been aware of the abuse that my mother suffered.

Taking Action

In the end we feared for our mother’s survival and hatched a plan to visit mum in dad’s absence. We put it to her that she was likely to be killed the way things were going and she agreed to leave the home that day. We were able to pack some belongings and help her leave. Her parting note to him left on the table “My help has come.” Fortunately, my sibling was able to accommodate mum and in time we found priority aged independent living accommodation for her, organised Centrelink payments and furniture. At this point I was grateful for my systems knowledge, and we were able to bypass the 1980s specialist domestic violence services.

From that time on, our support divided into my sibling listening to the stories mum gradually revealed and providing practical support to dad and me confronting the challenges of property settlement (“she doesn’t deserve anything”), and listening to the ruminations (“I should have killed her”) and the blaming (“It’s your fault I didn’t leave”- referring to a time when he was threatening to leave the marriage when I was still a Uni student and living at home.) Our relationship was never the same and we maintained a cool hostility towards each other.

I never regret the steps we took with our mother, and she enjoyed her later years of life. Later on, we found that dad had tracked her home one day whilst she was out shopping and asked her to get into the car. Fortunately, she did not. Dad also seemed to gain some pleasure in life eventually moving into a retirement complex where he was “popular.” Although in my presence I could still feel the dark rumination and the Will Kit was often on display suggesting his ruminations.

My mother’s explanation for not revealing her plight to dad many years previously was “he would have killed him” meaning granddad.

What helped?

- **Having knowledge** -our own resourcefulness- many people would not have this knowledge and are put in the position of having to ask for help, to tell their story sometimes multiple times, to justify receiving assistance.
- **Having family support working in the same direction**-this enabled us to move swiftly with certainty and remain in control of those things we could. (The hostile negative responses of my mother's siblings were not shared with her. As far as I know they did not contact her.)
- **Finding Shelter and Financial Resources:** an accommodation service which had a priority list favouring people in my mother's circumstances and immediate financial assistance external to the marital bank account.
- **Survivor family/community engagement:** my mother was able to play an active and productive life role in her families strengthened by her greater freedom. She felt useful and engaged and this was part of a healing process allowing her to live her last decade of life with dignity.
- **Advocacy:** an informal intermediary bore most of the brunt of negotiations regarding money and property without legal fees. This helped protect our mother from ongoing contact and legal costs, and hopefully from additional trauma.

What could have helped?

- **Counselling at least for my father:** Our focus on our mother and, in my case hostility about my father's reaction, probably did not take into account the enormity of the impact on my father's mental state, in effect ignoring his needs. My sibling did contact his doctor and express concern about what was happening in the home, but we have no way of knowing if he was offered any help.
- **Child safety education:** I have no idea whether my mother contemplated our vulnerability in contacts with our grandfather. I have no recollection of child safety education in my schooling. We were not a family that talked about issues really and so I am not sure what impact external knowledge would have had on our early childhood experiences.
- I do know my experiences gave me an antenna for stranger danger but also equipped me to initiate sexualised behavior before I was emotionally mature enough to understand the consequences. I navigated these issues without any external input.
- We can only hope that educational input in schools nowadays helps young people with these issues. We also hope that parents are able to discuss more openly matters of sex, relationships, recognising discomfort and unsafe situations.
- **External support:** Whilst in this case there was sufficient positive strength in the family to deal with the immediate needs of my mother, the impact of the revelations on individuals and their reactions should not be underestimated and this may produce additional trauma/harm for the survivor. The availability of non-judgemental support grounded in knowledge about abuse should be readily available to people who need/want support.
- **Support for families/community:** Although our family forged a private journey, people may benefit from advice and assistance on how to be a *helpful support* to

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those directly impacted. The reaction of others towards a survivor is likely to have a significant impact on that person when they are at their most vulnerable. People need information on how to provide constructive help that is trauma informed.

- **Sound legal advice:** We chose a pathway which controlled the advocacy available to our mother. Whilst she did not object, the availability of independent legal advice was not offered to her. There was no talk of restraining orders, criminal prosecution, legal assistance with property settlement or advice on the restrictive terms of my father's will.

We did it all thinking we were preserving her dignity and privacy. (and really our own). This may have robbed mum of feeling a sense of justice.

The broader context

The vulnerability of children to abuse of all forms as “victims” and “witnesses” is an ongoing grave community issue, and its impact is long lasting in terms of how it shapes the personality, behaviour, psychological wellbeing and health of small children, adolescents, teenagers, and adults. Stranger danger, although serious, is in fact less of a concern given the prevalence of abuse in the context of family relationships. These are people in the child's environment who they are encouraged to trust. I suspect that revealing that you have been abused is extremely difficult for a child because of their limited capacity to understand the concept, apprehension to talk about someone who is often a trusted member of the family, finding the language to get their story across and the fear of getting into trouble themselves.

Unfortunately, the child protection remedies which disentangle children from childhood abuse can produce additional trauma because of a sense of family abandonment, difficulties with attachment and other issues. I do not have the answers only the questions. I only have admiration for those who work professionally in this area and attempt to untangle the messes that us humans sometimes make of each other's lives.

The call to provide mechanisms where perpetrators of abuse can be engaged in court directed and/or voluntary psychological and social interventions which help them to understand their behaviour and contributing factors is strongly supported. However, I think there will be some who will not be motivated by the carrot or the stick approach where monitoring and surveillance, separation and containment will be necessary. These will be the people who see no fault in their behaviour, no empathy for their prey and no inclination to behave differently, and a few who appear to have no or limited control over their inclinations.