

SNAPPhila

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Pat Clancy's Story

(The following is a modified version of what I shared at the Mid-Atlantic SNAP Conference that was hosted by SNAPPhila in January 2004. Writing my story helped me find my voice. Sharing my story strengthened my voice never to be silenced again.)

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power. Many of us here today have either personally experienced or have a loved one who has experienced some form of abuse of power...perhaps not sexual abuse, but some kind of exploitation that caused harm... a breach of trust inflicted upon us by a stranger or by someone we knew. Those of us who have experienced such abuses often later have difficulty with relationships both with ourselves and with others. Coping with the residual effects of the abuse can be daunting.

Fortunately, many of us have witnessed our own or a loved one's restoration of health and triumph over such abuse. The pains and triumphs of my journey through sexual abuse have been and continue to be revealed and accomplished through truth and truth telling. Telling the truth to myself and telling the truth to others are instrumental in my healing. Truth telling is a continuum. It plays a vital role in my surviving and thriving as a person.

Today, I would like to share some experiences of my truth telling. When I was sixteen years old I spent a month and a half in an inpatient mental health facility. I was admitted for attempted suicide. In retrospect, I don't think I ever wanted to kill myself. I was trying desperately to rid myself of incredible pain, confusion and hollowness. George Costigan, a Catholic clergy member, had been sexually abusing me for at least seven years...starting before I was nine years old. Initially I wouldn't or couldn't identify his behavior as abuse. My dad had been in and out of mental institutions for all the years I could remember. My mother was essentially a single parent. My younger brother had passed away when he was eight years old and I was nine years old.

George Costigan was my dad's best friend and in my dad's absence we welcomed his presence in our home. To have a clergy member be involved so personally with our family was an honor and a privilege. He was there to comfort and help us. My mother depended on him. I depended on him. George Costigan was my surrogate father. He was also my primary abuser. As is the case with so many sexual abuse survivors, George Costigan was not my only abuser. His years of grooming and sexual predation paved the way for others to hurt me. During these seven years I had also been molested and raped by other men. I was acting out sexually. I was getting high. I was angry and engaging in risky behaviors. In a nutshell, I was spiraling out of control and my psyche and soul were tormented. Taking an overdose of pills was more appealing than living with the pain. During my inpatient stay I shared with the therapist some of what happened with George Costigan. I don't remember what I had shared but it was enough to raise concern on the part of the therapist because she mandated that no clergy member be allowed to visit me at the hospital. My stay at the hospital was an opportunity for me to open the door a little bit to see that what George Costigan was doing to me was, in fact, sexually abusive. Unfortunately, it also provided an opportunity for a counselor at the hospital to rape me, another place that became unsafe.

I was sixteen when I was released from the hospital and had to go back to an environment that wasn't supportive -- my home. The glimmer of knowing the truth and telling my truth was like a fragile rose seed being planted in my soul; but, because I didn't feel safe with myself and others,

speaking more of this truth to myself and others was squelched for more years. However, this was indeed a beginning.

When I was twenty years old I returned to therapy. By this time, I wasn't living at home and I was a single parent. The birth of my daughter Amy was both a gift and a challenge. Her birth released an overwhelming sense of joy and love in my heart and a sense of purpose and direction. I loved her more than I had ever loved anyone in my life. That was a gift. But I was obsessively protective of her. I had nightmares of people hurting her. I was nervous when male relatives and friends were around her. I had incredible distrust and anger towards my own mother especially when my daughter and I were with her. I worried that I wouldn't be able to protect Amy.

These thoughts and feelings were internal. I had learned over the years not to share my crazy thoughts with others. After all, I had spent time in a mental hospital and my dad was in a mental hospital and if I shared any of these thoughts I might be seen again as mentally ill...an unfit mother. I feared someone might take my baby away from me. I was adamant that I would function fine to the outside world. I became quite good at "masking". But my mind was always in overdrive and yet I couldn't hold a thought for very long. I was in a constant state of fear and didn't know why. I rocked myself in the fetal position in corners of my house sobbing uncontrollably or just rocked and banged my head against the walls.

I continued to live a dual life in terms of my behavior. This led to a deep depression and fortunately to the door of a very good therapist. It was at this time that more truth telling surfaced...telling some of the truth to myself. My therapist helped me to begin to feel the connection between my sexual abuse and my behavior. It was a very big step but much too scary to stay with. I didn't like the feelings that this truth evoked in me. These revelations felt dirty...sick...crazy...confusing...scary...painful... Memories of events with George Costigan. My need to up the ante in terms of reckless sexual and social behaviors. My loneliness. My absolute fear of intimacy. These feelings were too much to bear. It WAS my truth but I wasn't yet ready to completely embrace this truth. So, I didn't. The tiny rose seed of speaking my truth begged to remain rooted and to grow. But I was twenty one years old and convinced myself that returning to my comfort zone of denial was a safer place. I retreated to being the highly functional dysfunctional person I had learned to be.

When I was thirty years old I again returned to therapy. I had been married for four years and had another child. Throughout my marriage my husband and I were challenged with intimacy issues. We made small attempts to address these issues, but, sadly I wasn't capable of dealing with them. Nor was he. In my distorted thinking, I felt if my husband truly loved me that he wouldn't want to have sex with me. My internal feelings of shame and confusion and fear were not only resurfacing...they were bubbling over.

My husband and I divorced after eight years of marriage. I was devastated. But in that devastation I began to address the things that I was running from for years. I stayed in therapy. I needed to figure out why I made the choices that I did. I needed to find out why I was so disconnected from myself. I ached to find a way to feel safe in my own skin. It was time to revisit the sexual abuse and its impact on my life.

My truth to myself: I was doing unhealthy and unloving things to myself, in large part, because of the shame and pain inflicted on me by George Costigan. I feared intimacy because I had learned from my experiences with George Costigan that I was unworthy of loving myself and being loved by others. I carried a secret that painfully permeated my entire being. The sick and sad truth that I had to feel was that I had loved George Costigan. I loved him and trusted him

and wanted to please and protect him. I had feared his presence in my life...and I feared his absence.

This truth and the primal feelings connected to that truth were monumental in serving as a catalyst to healing. ***I didn't die*** when I spoke the words, "I loved him". ***I didn't die*** when I revealed the horrific details of his sexual abuse of me. ***I didn't die*** when I admitted that I had an orgasm during some of the abusive experiences...an admission that spoke to the devastating confusion of mind and body manipulation I felt during this time. ***I didn't die*** when I felt the shame and the pain and the confusion that emerged. ***I didn't die***, but I wasn't sure that I didn't want to die.

There were times when I didn't want to know these truths. It felt like a huge bag of feces that I had stuffed deeply inside myself for so long and then something came along and burst this bag and splattered the vile contents on every cell of my being. This statement might feel offensive to some of you. You might feel uncomfortable. It resonates with anger and pain. I would submit to you that this is truth telling...the recognition of the disgust and despair of sexual abuse. The feelings of degradation that were inflicted on me by others and that I inflicted on myself were sometimes too much to endure.

Gratefully, I had a therapist who was kind and gentle and affirming. She helped me travel to the dark places and see it, sit with it, feel it, believe it, and then reemerge -- cleansed. As painful as these truths were, they were part of me. I needed to own them, all of them, the ones I wasn't responsible for and the ones that I was responsible for. I decided to allow hope and healing to share the space in my soul that despair and pain so often monopolized. The seed of speaking my truth and of seeking healing indeed remained rooted. I tentatively, yet courageously, began to cultivate that seed more and more.

As part of my continued healing I sought support from others who experienced similar abuse. It was at this time, in 1993, that I learned about and sought help from SNAP. (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests and other clergy) What a gift! Through the support of my therapist and the support of SNAP members I decided that it was time to speak my truth to those responsible for the many years of abuse and its devastating effects on my life. It was time to confront the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and my perpetrator.

I went to the Archdiocese with a SNAP member and a close friend. I told my story and requested that a meeting be facilitated with my perpetrator. The Archdiocese was quite reluctant to grant my request. I was insistent and persistent and, in the end, got my meeting. I composed a script to read to George Costigan.- a script that detailed his abuse of me and my family and its impact on my life for the past twenty five years. My therapist and I reviewed and rehearsed the script. We role played. We talked about different scenarios that might happen on the part of the Archdiocese and George Costigan. Another truth: I could and would, as much as possible, be in control of speaking this truth. I was reclaiming my power.

On November 19, 1993 I came face to face with the man who stole my childhood: The man who mutilated my soul; the man who the Catholic Church protected and provided for decades. Amazingly, I didn't have to read the script that I prepared. I knew what I had written and the words flowed from my lips. I was able to look into George Costigan's eyes and speak my truths: the truth of how he manipulated, groomed and violated me; the truth of how his crimes affected every aspect of my life and how it shaped and molded me to experience years of self doubt, self degradation, depression, and disconnection from myself and others. I also told him that I was there to let him know that despite all that he took from me and all the horror and pain that he inflicted on me I was now speaking to him as an intact thirty seven year old woman. I wasn't

that nine to sixteen year old kid that he had molested and raped. I told him that I was reclaiming my soul and that telling him of his crimes was part of that reclaiming.

As you can probably imagine, George Costigan denied all his crimes. I told him that he could deny.....but that I knew my truth.....and he knew my truth.....and god knew my truth. This was one of the most healing moments of my journey. The seed of healing that was rooted in my soul morphed into an awesome rose bud determined to survive and thrive.

The months that followed the confrontation with my abuser were painful and exhausting. The church that I grew up in, the church that my family financially and spiritually supported for years did nothing to proactively help with my healing. The facts around my abuse involved three different jurisdictions in the Catholic Church. Each of those jurisdictions passed the responsibility to the others. Under the veil of "jurisdictional responsibility", no one took responsibility. The truth of what this church was really about...protecting their institution, at all cost, even if it meant revictimizing someone who had been sexually, emotionally, mentally and spiritually abused by one of their employees was painfully clear to me. In my heart, I hoped that they would do the right thing. Here was another truth finally revealed: The Catholic Church was guilty of abusing their power by harboring a criminal and reviolating me.

Today, that truth passionately stirs my soul to work for the protection of children from sexual abuse. It energizes me to work for justice for the many voices that can't be heard or not yet able to speak their truth. I embrace moments to tell my truth about sexual abuse and its effects. Each moment of speaking my truth helps shed another layer of the pain, shame and hurt and affirms my worth and dignity. The awesome bud residing in my being is now a unique rose with its petals beginning to unfold.

In closing, it's important for me to say again that truth telling is a continuum. Truth telling is a process that is essential to all aspects of my life....those related to my abuse and those related to other things. Sometimes it's difficult for me to do. I learned at an early age that the truth can be filled with pain and sometimes easier to avoid than to address. Old tapes manage to find their way into my head. The impact of the sexual abuse by George Costigan, the Catholic Church and other individuals is a part of me and always will be a part of me. That truth is, at times, still a challenge for me to accept.

The past is a part of me; but, it no longer controls me. I've learned and am still learning to replace those old tapes with new ones. And by doing that I get to own my truths. For it is only in owning my truths that I am able to improve and flourish as a human being. My core...my essence...are like the petals of my soul's rose that gently, slowly, deliberately unfold and continue to reveal the many layers of me---my pains, my setbacks, my doubts, my fears AND my healing, my triumphs, my hopes, my tranquility. It is my soul flower that nourishes, in wondrous ways, what is true and meaningful to me and helps define my spirituality. The spirituality that resides so divinely in me. The seed of truth, the bud of hope, the flower of flourishing...this is my spirituality.

And so, I wish for all of us the solace to know that, in the end, our truth is a light....a light that can shine in to the despair and darkness.....a light that can illuminate hope and redemption.

Patricia Clancy
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