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JOURNEY THROUGH TRAUMA

Abstract: People who are not able to overcome the effects of childhood

tial skills through a moderating effect on the mothers' level of depression and intellectual quality in the home (Adams, 2006, pp. 336-337). It is hypothesized that poor cognitive development may be caused by adverse brain development due to child neglect (De Bellis, 2005, p. 150).

While the horrors of abuse of various kinds often find their way into the media and into research, this article shares the stories of eight individuals who overcame childhood abuse. We "privilege" their stories by presenting them first and then follow with theoretical and practical suggestions.

Michael

Mom remarried an abusive man. He would get angry and beat his children and my mom's. (Michael)

Michael is a white male in his late 40s who was raised in upstate New York. He is a sensitive, devout Christian man who freely feels that opening his heart about his past childhood trauma and abuse can bless others.

Family System and Childhood Trauma

Michael was four years old when his parents split up and his mother became single. But she was single only for a short time, and she eventually married an abusive man who would get angry and beat his own children as well as his stepchildren. This second marriage lasted until Michael was a teenager, but his attempt to escape the instability, poverty, and horrific beatings had already led him to alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, crime, and running in the streets. In his heart he knew it was wrong, but there was so much instability and lack of parenting in the home. Michael's need for a structured life led to unhealthy friendships. It was not until Michael was an adult that he found out the truth about his father, that he wanted to repair his marriage and family.

Michael discussed with me his disagreement with mother's transient behavior. "My mother decided when I was 15 she was going to move to Georgia [from New York]," he remembers. "I told my mother goodbye, quit school, got a job, lived in a trailer park, drug dealing and other crimes . . . using drugs daily."

When he was 17, Michael, along with his stepbrother, joined the Navy. He didn't know that harboring anger can result in an unhealthy

body, mind, and soul. And so the instability, insecurity, abuse, recklessness, and separation from family caused Michael to harbor emotions so intense that he was confused, frustrated, and rebellious. Laughing, Michael says, "I didn't stay in the Navy very long. I kind of rebelled because I felt that the ones giving the [drug] test were alcoholics. . . . I knew they were alcoholics. I was angry and frustrated." From the time he was 17 years old, Michael was plagued for years by very severe cluster headaches. But military personnel took little notice of his pain. Michael felt that because of childhood trauma, he led a purposeless, angry life, filled with selfishness, resentment, deception, disrespect for authority, and foolishness behavior. "Everything that I wanted was all dashed," he says, "and more of the same adults making decisions that affected me negatively and I had a stomach full of it."

Michael's ability to be deceptive affected not only his relationship with his family but also eventually his enlistment in the Navy. He lied to his mother and told her he was on vacation when actually he was AWOL; eventually he was discharged from the Navy. "I wasn't satisfied with this life," he says. "I found that the people that I was most comfortable with had the same lifestyle. I realized I couldn't really run away from who I was by changing my locations."

Michael moved on again. But as life goes, one seldom learns from one's first mistakes. "When I [relocated] I got involved in alcohol and drugs," Michael admits. "And wherever you go there it is. So, I was struggling with the same frustrations." He continued a transient lifestyle with no social life or support.

Coping With Support

During his journeys, Michael met a man who introduced him to Jesus; Michael told the man that he had the desire to get to know Jesus. The man gave him the book *Power for Living*, written by famous people who shared how they came to Christ. Michael took the book to his bedroom and was intently committed to change. But he was not able to find a church family or a support system. Michael had no support or mentoring at that point in his life. "The guy who introduced me to Jesus and his church actually smoked pot with me and drank. So I met his family and went to church a few times but it wasn't [at] that church that I came to Christ."

While Michael went to church, he still felt very alone because he did not fit in. Most of the people in the small singles group he joined had grown up in the church but were kind of wishy-washy in their commit-

ment to Christ. They would teach a really good Sunday school class and talk about God and then go and do things in the world. He had already lived in the world; he knew what that was like and had no interest in it. Michael just didn't fit in.

Through another acquaintance, Michael connected with a man who understood how much he liked to study Scripture. Michael and his new friend would stay up late studying various subjects, but they did not see eye to eye on some things. Eventually, Michael attended a Seventh-day Adventist Revelation seminar, met the pastor, and found that what

in a home for unwed mothers. She signed me away because back then she didn't have any place to go. Nobody in her family knew she was pregnant." But Denise's mother's aunt eventually found her. Young Denise eventually was reunited with her mother, who married an older man, an abusive alcoholic.

They lived in isolation in farming country in southern Indiana. Her stepfather was a farmer and farmed crops for other people. He was able to pay the rent and provide a small amount of food to sustain his growing family—and subsidize his alcohol addiction. They couldn't afford a car, so they were unable to go anywhere.

Denise's fear intensified with every drink her stepfather took. When he was out drinking on Friday nights, prowlers would harass the family by banging on their windows. "We were terrified," she says. When her mother told the stepfather about the prowlers, he thought she was lying:

"I'd wear a dress with Mom and Dad drinking lemonade in the farm show."

Denise's mother's shame was constantly present within their household. Denise lacked maternal support (something she tried to compensate for when she herself became a mother by spoiling her own daughter in later years). Disappointment increased as her stepfather displayed dissatisfaction with her school work. She became reserved, lazy, and indifferent in her attitude toward school and life in general. Denise continued to live in a perilous, unprotected, poverty stricken, violent alcoholic home until she was 18 years old. She felt terrified, manipulated, and controlled by her stepfather's alcohol addiction.

During the summer before Denise finished high school, she visited her aunt, her mother's sister, in a distant city. She made secret arrangements, without her parent's knowledge, to move in with her aunt after she graduated from high school. "I couldn't wait to get out of there," she says.

After moving in with her aunt and uncle, Denise got hired at a small factory that produced radios and stereo components. "This was my first time to try to do anything," she says. "I always thought I was capable, but I went into that factory and I didn't know anything." She lacked social skills and did not know how to relate to the other women, who were much older than she was. "I felt like it was a job for stupid people that they didn't know where to put me. . . ." After a long pause, Denise finished her thought. "The ladies would giggle at me."

Coping With Support

Denise did not have a support system within her small family nucleus, but support eventually came from the older women at the radio factory. She got really close to them; they became mentors to her. "There were, in fact, several ladies that I was like their second daughter, you know," Denise remembers. "I really liked them. Even my boss treated me in a fatherly way."

She was open and honest with her coworkers, sharing about her past childhood trauma and her violent alcoholic stepfather. "I [was] with them for years," Denise says of this support network. "I ended up working [at the radio factory] for 33 years. I saw some of them retire and some of them die. I still visit with some and see others around town."

Because of the continual extended family support system at work, Denise has been able work through her trauma to lead a reasonably normal life. She values her independence, continues to work hard and

has become self-sufficient. Gaining self-respect through frequent motherly support from her female coworkers, Denise has become compassionate towards people who are less fortunate than she is. Her social skills improved over the years and Denise learned to communicate well enough with the opposite sex to develop a healthy relationship with one of her coworkers, who she later married.

After two years of marriage Denise became pregnant. Unfortunately, shortly after her daughter's birth the doctors told her the baby was very ill and had a rare genetic condition. "The people at work were my support system. I just handled this thing right away. I had to deal with it, because there's nothing more important than your child."

Denise believes that she had the ability to adjust to this trauma because of the women at work who were her support system. "I just thought that when you have a baby you should know. . . . I just had this grandiose idea that I was going to be a good mom."

Denise is adamant that her ability to be resilient and move through her childhood trauma to normalized adult behavior has given her the compassion needed to be supportive to others in need. She has strong family values and enforces freedom of personal choices and religion. Denise is determined to keep her family safe, promoting sobriety and family fidelity.

Lee

My father was ashamed of my disability. I was an unwanted child.
(Lee)

In introducing me to his heroic journey through childhood trauma, Lee wanted me to know that he is "first and foremost grateful for his belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, though life has not always been this way. However, today it is." Lee, a now middle-aged white male, was conceived in the back of a taxi cab in an unguarded moment of passion. His father later made it clear that he was an unwanted child. Tearful, lonely memories of a painful past became reality as Lee gently confided details that most would only confess to their closest friends.

Family System and Childhood Trauma

Lee was labeled as a "mistake" by his father, who always blamed Lee for having to marry his mother.

My parents tried to make the marriage work. It didn't. . . . Until the age of four, I spent most of my time on my bed or in my crib on my back because of the pain that I had in my stomach. My grandfather came to [our house] to check on us three grandkids. My father had just finished beating me and my grandfather went to my bed

and he rolled me over and he noticed this huge lump in my stomach and it was getting bigger by the second.

Lee's grandfather immediately rushed him to the hospital, where it was discovered that he had a hernia that had erupted. After the long and complicated surgery was completed, Lee's grandparents took him back to their farm to live with them. This arrangement lasted for about two years.

An important detail in Lee's story is that his father was a World War II veteran, a reality that took a toll on his father both mentally and emotionally. During his time in the war, and later at home, his father drowned his sorrows and pain in alcohol.

I guess my dad was an alcoholic. Anyway, my father did not drink all of the time when I was there, anyway, until the end of my stay, which was on a Friday night. And my father went out and got very drunk and was arguing with my mom. The next thing I know my dad pulled a butcher knife from the drawer in the kitchen and proceeded to stab my mom. And as he drew it back I stepped in the middle and I kind of received the knife.

When Lee was later questioned by the local authorities, his mother insisted that he say that he was playing with the knife and fell on it. She did not want anything to happen to his father. "Needless to say, I went back to my grandparents and that was pretty much the end of the story," says Lee. "My grandparents and me. I was raised by my grandparents."

Lee's parents eventually divorced, which was unacceptable in the 1960s and 1970s. His brothers were sent to a children's home in Indianapolis and Lee's one sister joined him at his grandparents, while his other sister was adopted by his great-grandparents. Having divorced parents brought shame to Lee and, because of his insecurity, he was the object of one bully's attention.

At the end of fifth grade I had determined to myself that he had picked on me for the last time. And that summer, because my grandparents had a farm . . . I baled hay. I became very physical. So, [at school] I let the bully get my cookie in his hands and as soon as his hands were occupied I blacked out. I guess I hurt the boy pretty bad.

At the age of 13 Lee found out about football. He could "legally" take all his aggressions and anger out on the playing field. He took pleasure when he could hurt the guys. Lee was a good football player, which allowed him to go to college and get a good college education. Lee

"I owe it to Mr. S. and everything because he gave me stability." Other guys with similar backgrounds became Lee's friends, and as they talked together, Lee says, "we would start to learn to cope and in college I took a lot of psychology classes because one of my majors was business. . . . I learned a lot about how manipulation works and [how to] pretty much get what you want."

The neglect, rejection, and instability that Lee experienced in his family home resulted in feelings of shame and insecurity. He became reckless and angry; this anger turned to irresponsible behavior and the abuse of others. His separation from his family, especially his brothers and sister, led to confusion and frustration. Because of the rejection from his father, Lee harbored resentment against authority and self-medicated through alcohol and sexual promiscuity. He conceded that he was foolish and led a purposeless life.

I will never forget the time my son was born. Notre Dame was playing Duke University in 1978. And my wife looked over at me and says, "Why are you crying about the game?" And I said, "Honey, I'm not crying about the game. I'm crying because I've never known or been taught to be a father and now I need to know somebody to help me, teach me."

Lee made it clear that he was not a good guy—he went to church and drank on the weekends. But one "good guy" commitment he made (never forgetting that his brothers had been sent away to the children's home) was that when he got married and had children, his wife would never work, and she would always be there for his children, and he would always be their father. And so it was. Lee graduated from college, got married, and worked in the construction business, something he had dreamed of doing.

However, the dream was shattered when, in 2002, Lee was accused of stealing money from the construction company he worked for. Consequently, in 2007, Lee was sentenced to 19 years in prison. Lee's wife of 27 years asked for a divorce when she heard the sentence.

Coping With Support

The Department of Corrections requires inmates to be psychologically evaluated. Lee's examination revealed that his major problems in life had started when his father stabbed him and he was coerced to tell the local authorities that he had been playing with a knife.

While in prison, Lee was fortunate to become involved in an independent Christian ministry. He got to know who God really was by reading the Bible and understanding His Word. He learned in prison

that he cannot do anything about the past or the future; he can only concentrate on the present. He still lives this way. Lee says that God said to him, "You know what? I gotcha. And why are you worried about tomorrow? I'll take care of tomorrow. You're supposed to take care of today."

In a discussion of his work in prison ministry, Lee says that the kids who are left behind (when a parent goes to prison) need to know there's a big guy ready to give them a helping hand. If they just need to go to a ball game or to a park, they need to know they have somebody they can count on. And the spouse left behind needs support too.

I went to prison and I think God sent me to prison for a purpose. He said, "I've got you now." He wanted me to cry out to him like Job did and say, "God, help me! God, what have I done?" I learned to know who God was.

Lee wanted me to know that he believes our society today is failing in the prison system; once you are in prison, you are just a number. Very few people get involved in faith-based prison ministries. Most prisoners end up reoffending when they are released. They lack purpose and the means to an end. They lack a support system and people who believe in them as human beings. The program that Lee is now involved in reports that the recidivism rate among those touched by the program has dropped from 57% to 38%. "That's because it makes you think . . ." says Lee. "It helps you think before you act."

Lee's priorities in life are his faith, family, compassion and giving back. He finds stability in Christ, giving Christ to prisoners, and connecting with people of like minds in faith, family, and parenting.

Leney

The trauma that affected me was incest. It began when I was two and ended when I was 12. (Leney)

Leney is a 54-year-old white woman who lives in the Midwest. She sat calmly and still as the words of childhood trauma tumbled freely from her lips. Her ability to travel through her trauma is nothing short of a miracle. Yet Leney was able to open up to me about some of the sensitive details that have molded her life into what it is today: the ability to help others who have gone through similar childhood trauma to lead lives of normalized adult behavior.

Family System and Childhood Trauma

Leney grew up in the country in the Midwest. She had a close, loving

family and parental ties, was close to her church and pastor, and felt loved and safe. Yet the unpardonable childhood trauma that affected Leney was incest.

Naturally, this greatly affected her attitude and caused negative thoughts towards men. "I am leery of most men," she says. "I think they mostly look at women as sex objects." She was, and still is, an emotional eater, resulting in weight gain and a heavy-set build, what Leney refers to as her "body armor." This body armor has been her protection against men and against feeling alone, scared, and fearful.

When she was 12 years old, Leney told the perpetrator that it was over. She told him that if he ever touched her again she would scream from the rooftop so everyone in the world would know about it. And in that moment, she learned that when you stand up for yourself, and when you speak the truth, things change.

Though Leney was very young at the time of the crime and didn't have the vocabulary to explain it, somehow she knew that what was happening to her was happening for a reason. She knew that someday she would understand what the reason was and that she would be able to "turn a very negative into a very positive." Leney feels that her life is good right now. She is able to "feel" more and is secure in who she is.

Leney confesses that she tends to withdraw when she is hurting. As a result of this insecurity and being out of her protective childhood home, when Leney entered college right out of high school, she was intimidated by the new environment and was very unsure of herself. "So I didn't stay long," she reflects. "I later went back to college here locally but I did not finish my degree. I got married instead."

Leney's life is presently in transition. She got divorced recently after 28 years of marriage. Facing insecurity and the switch from being married to single have not been easy, but finally she is getting to the place where she can "breathe again. The marriage was not good."

Coping With Support

Leney says that it is not easy for her to go to someone for support when she is hurting. She met her therapist when she was in her late 20s. She had not told anyone about the incest until then. This therapist, who is now one of Leney's best friends, helped her face that closed door inside of her and let her know it was safe to walk through. "The main thing," says Leney, "is those people [who] believed in me. They saw something then and now in me that I can't see in myself. Their support in who I am gives me the courage to keep walking."

Although Leney's parents were an integral part of her support sys-

and Scarlet met in their early 20s, they had no idea that they shared the all-too-common thread of alcoholism. Both of their fathers were alcoholics; their lives were saturated with the effects of substance abuse. Partners for over four years, Gabriel and Scarlet support each other by understanding their traumatic backgrounds and abuse. In addition, they concentrate on the maintenance of the vigilance that it takes to sustain daily normal behavior.

Family System and Childhood Trauma

Scarlet was six years old when her father's motorcycle accident occurred. As a result of the accident, he became an emotionally and verbally abusive alcoholic. He would drink all day long. Without the physical, financial, and emotional support of a father-figure in her life, Scarlet, along with her mother and older sister, were responsible to care for themselves. "That made the three of us close," Scarlet says. "But that excluded my dad. We had to stay home. He didn't want anyone near us] TJ- (home.)-23 r01 435 T

home to cope with her father's abuse. He would drink all day and get very talkative about things that did not make sense. "I guess that was really embarrassing for me," she says, "and I never wanted anyone to come over."

As a young boy, Gabriel's experience was much like Scarlet's. He did not want to bring anybody home to his house because he, too, felt embarrassed, especially when his parents would get into big fights. Gabriel also experienced similar feelings of isolation in his youth.

Young Scarlet, feeling rejected and alone, dealt with her anger silently. She still has bouts of anger. And she still has no support from her mother, who works most of the day. Gabriel understands that Scarlet does not feel bad for her mother. "I love her mom to death," Gabriel laments. "She's an awesome person . . . , but she gets walked all over by him and there's no reason for it."

Gabriel and Scarlet experienced a normal stage of dating and did not bring up underlying problems or childhood trauma. But their paternal connection revealed its ugly head when Gabriel's father came over disheveled, high on drugs, and emaciated from years of alcohol abuse.

When Scarlet entered high school, she joined groups like track and band, which got her away from home for short spurts of time, but she was not allowed to go out with friends. She had to be careful to come home from school right after her activity was over. There was little joy in these school activities because of the constant fear of what she would be confronted with upon returning home. "My mom would go to work and during the day he said he was going out and looking for a job," Scarlet remembers, "but we knew he wasn't because he would come home and he would be drinking and pass out." Scarlet was always scared of what would happen when she got home from school.

Homework was not affected by Scarlet's father's alcoholism; since she had a very limited social life, she had time to do homework, though she did not "do good in high school." She was awkward, afraid to meet people, and did not want to bring anyone home because she was embarrassed of the condition she would find her father in.

He would be drinking all day long, and when I'd come home . . . I tried to get away as much as possible. I used band to get away and when I'd come home then he'd want to talk to me and talk to me. And he'd go through my room and destroy things sometimes. He'd get really mad at me about the most ridiculous things.

Unlike Scarlet, when Gabriel entered high school, he never had a problem with social life. Not wanting to sound conceited, Gabriel said he was always pretty popular and was voted most irresistible in his sen-

ior class. It is obvious, with his kind eyes and winning smile, that he easily made friends. "I just had a good social life and was always hanging out with friends. But," he admits, "I think it led me to partying and stuff I shouldn't be doing." Gabriel started living the fast life, indulging in alcohol, drugs, and sex. This led to paths that he should not have gone down, paths of self-destructing and illegal behaviors. His focus turned to making more money, and he lost interest in academics in high school. His mother had him arrested more than once.

Coping With Support

When Scarlet was a child, her support system came sometimes from

done a good job of putting me through counseling.

Gabriel understands that his father has a disease, is an alcoholic. He has forgiven his father, and accepts that he will likely never change.

Scarlet assured me that her journey through childhood trauma has definitely given her compassion for other people. She is very caring and is involved in social projects at college and in the community. "I like to be there for people, sometimes too much, even within my family. I always want to take care of people and please people. I don't like letting people down. I have self-respect." Counseling would have helped, but she never had the opportunity. Gabriel's mother is now Scarlet's counselor and nurturer. "She's everything to me. I'm grateful."

Neighbor-Love: God's Grace, Religious and Spiritual Support

According to Christian tradition, God's grace frees us to love God and neighbor. Recognizing the socially mediated dimension of God's grace heightens our sense of obligation toward our neighbor. . . . What specific forms of neighbor-love can best respond to the needs of [trauma] survivors? (Beste, 2005, p. 98)

Child abuse can leave a victim feeling spiritually deprived, as noted by Franz (2002): "There can be profound spiritual damage . . . where the abuser and the victim are both religious. If the victim prayed to God for protection, and the abuse continued, the victim may see God as uncaring" (p. 5). Nearly all of the participants in this study see spiritual support as highly important. Franz supports this view:

The goal of churches should be to guide their parishioners to the answers to [their] questions, allowing victims to share their stories—and their pain. . . . The church is a place people should be able to go for healing—all people—regardless of who they are or

ship with God. . . . The Church is the enduring presence of grace to the world. . . . Interpersonal support and love is absolutely essential for healing—particularly those chronically abused as children. (pp. 90-95)

Spiritual communities need to provide a safe facility, with an “open

Severe emotional and behavioral effects of childhood trauma were experienced by all eight participants. But how can adults determine if a child is being abused or neglected? What signs can one look for without causing the child more trauma or stress? Most children are prone to curiosity and have vivid imaginations; they also have a knack for creative storytelling. Nevertheless, adults should be aware of the signs of possible child abuse and trauma revealed in children's stories. Stories should not be overlooked, even if they border on excessiveness and extreme exaggeration.

Multiple lists of signs of abuse or trauma are available for professionals and laypeople. These lists include:

1. Repeated injury to a child with unconcern on the part of the parent(s), or with unlikely explanations.
2. Aggressive behavior that implies a child's cry for help.
3. Neglected appearance.
4. Overly critical parental attitude.
5. Withdrawal, depression, and self-injury. (Hoff, 2009, pp. 382-383)

Terr (2008) suggests that if a child is inclined to storytelling, that the adult or professional who suspects abuse can also apply his or her own storytelling techniques. For example, the adult listening to the child can suggest a game of storytelling and start a story so that the child can fill in the blanks. This can encourage the child to be more open, participating in "play" but revealing truth within the tale (pp. 46-47, 243-244, 252).

Beste (2005) encourages adults to care enough to expose and prevent abuse:

Appreciating how our own freedom bears the stamp of the guilt of others in a way which cannot be eradicated equips us to understand better why it is so difficult to overcome indifference, and it makes us critical and cautious (rather than complacent and optimistic) about any constructive steps we may take to prevent abuse. (Beste, 2005, pp. 97-98)

But "in spite of the most adverse circumstances, some children manage to survive and even thrive, academically and socially, into adulthood" (Condly, 2006, p. 211). Each story and trauma is different. Neglect, abandonment, poverty, and substance and physical abuse are observable experiences. But when a child does not know how to speak up and report the hidden sexual assault or emotional abuse she incurred, the trauma becomes less obvious. All the stories must be told; all the voices must be heard. A young boy who was shunned and abandoned by his father, partly due to his physical disability, ended up with feelings of rejection, self-loathing, and shame. Another boy, born

addicted to heroin in a drug-infested family, led a life of abandonment, anger, reckless behavior, corruption, and eventual incarceration. A

Condly, S. J. (2006). Resilience in children: A review of literature with