

## Making Justice: Sources of Healing for Incest Survivors

*by Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune*

In the face of the injustice of incestuous abuse, it is not unusual for victims to feel anger and frustration with the legal system, with family members who want to forgive and forget, and with offenders who often are permitted to keep offending while victims are held responsible. In the midst of these feelings we long for healing, for restoration, for reconciliation. We use words like “justice”<sup>1</sup> and “forgiveness” because we hope that these are mechanisms to accomplish what we long for.

We long for healing from the depths of our being—not expecting that everything will be fine or just like it was before—but that it will be made right in some way, that the brokenness which resulted from the acts of incestuous abuse will somehow be made whole. This is what we long for whether we are the victim,<sup>2</sup> the non-offending parent, the friend, the helper, or the offender. Some experience of justice is necessary in order for healing to take place, in order for a victim to become a survivor.<sup>3</sup>

Incestuous abuse is wrong because it is a misuse of power to the detriment of one who does not have power, a violation of the roles of family members, usually the parental role, and because it results in a breaking of trust and teaches a child not to trust in intimate relationships.

In summary, incestuous abuse violates the right relation which should exist between children and their family members: right relation meaning a relationship based on trust, respect, safety and protection of those vulnerable to life circumstances.

What little power children have to shape their own lives, what opportunity they have to grow and learn within a trusting relationship is destroyed by the action of the incest offender. This is the essence of injustice. And the consequences for the adult who has been a victim of abuse as a child can be devastating. Low self-esteem, guilt, self-blame, substance abuse, fear of intimacy, sexual dysfunction, avoidance of relationship, further victimization, or abuse of others (particularly for male victims) are but some of the possible consequences. Once this painful experience has occurred in childhood, what steps can be taken to heal the brokenness, to rectify the situation, to salvage something for the adult? How can we as therapists, pastors, friends or family help in this process? Justice is one dimension of experience which can stimulate and enhance the healing process. It is a place to begin.

Justice-making begins with truth-telling. An adult who begins to remember and acknowledge experiences of childhood sexual abuse and is ready to speak about these experiences to someone else, is on the way to becoming a survivor. Justice-making means believing the victim’s story, though the facts may seem muddled and confused. The truth is the reality of that

person's experiences of being victimized as a child. That reality needs affirmation. In order for healing to take place the secret must be broken by truth-telling.

Truth-telling means allowing painful memories to surface; it may mean confrontation with some who do not believe. It may mean opening up old wounds within the remaining family unit. Justice-making may also mean confronting those responsible for the abuse: the offender (if he or she is still available), and those who knew but did not help the child. Whatever the circumstance, those responsible can be called to account. This may be accomplished through a letter to the offender, a direct conversation, or a civil suit filed against the offender. Ideally, the offender's response would be to acknowledge what happened and to confess responsibility. However, this is seldom the case. An adult survivor must be prepared for disappointment when the offender continues to deny the abuse and focuses on the survivor's "instability," or when the offender is unavailable for confrontation.

Justice-making can also be accomplished through restitution by the offender. This is important on both practical and symbolic levels. Practically, it can provide for the expenses of therapy or medical care which may have resulted from the childhood abuse. Symbolically, it is a way for the offender to attempt concretely to restore wholeness in the survivor. Currently, incest survivors in some states are using civil suits to confront their offenders and exact restitution from them. Many of these suits have been successful.

Survivors who confront their offenders often struggle against self-blame and guilt as well as their own internal resistance to what may be viewed as a desire for revenge or punishment. Even after many years, a survivor may harbor ambivalent feelings and strong emotional bonds towards the offender. But it is not revenge to tell the truth or to seek justice. It is no punishment to expect restitution. Calling the offender to account is a way of taking back control. It is, in effect, an opportunity for healing for both the survivor and the offender.

Acknowledgment of abuse from the offender is a great relief to the survivor, and acknowledgment of full responsibility for the abuse, an even greater relief. When the secret is broken there is potential for considering forgiveness as an option, for possibly seeking restoration, for asking restitution to be made, and this can lead to genuine healing. When the offender acknowledges his/her responsibility and is willing to face the consequences and the process of changing his/her behavior, then repentance can be made real. Anything less is remorse which, although it may be genuine, is only words. Repentance is one form of justice for the victim/survivor.

In the absence of repentance or restitution, how can we make justice? One very simple but powerful form of justice is to believe the victim/survivor, to hear the story and to express on behalf of the wider community that what occurred should never have happened. We must be creative in our efforts to make justice without relying on the actions of the offender to provide this experience.

Once some form of justice is experienced, then a victim survivor can be free to consider forgiveness. Forgiveness is about letting go. It is for the sake of the victim, not the offender. It is the conscious act of saying that survivors will not allow the power of the memory of abuse to continue to limit their lives and re-victimize them each day. It puts the memory into perspective.

Forgiveness is only possible if some form of justice has been experienced. So justice-making has to do with truth-telling, confrontation, calling those responsible to account, providing restitution, and supporting the process of forgiving and letting go.

Who makes justice? It is not something we can relegate to the legal system alone. It is a shared task of the whole community to create an atmosphere in which persons feel safe to speak. It is for us to hear and believe these experiences, to support the process of truth-telling and to help confront and call to account. It is for us to find ways to bring reconciliation and healing—for the sake of the victim first, for the sake of the community, and also for the sake of the offender.

This is not an easy task. It requires a willingness to bear the burden of the truth-telling—to hear things we do not want to hear, to believe the unbelievable. Our own internal resistance will always be there in the face of horrendous stories. We do not want to acknowledge our own memories. We fear our own anger in response. We are always tempted to participate in denial on some level. We need to own that temptation so that we can struggle against it. We need to stay in touch with our own anger in order to keep our eyes open to the reality before us.

Adrienne Rich, in her superb essay, “Women and Honor,” observes that

*“Women have been driven mad, ‘gaslighted,’ for centuries by the refutation of our experiences and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us. We therefore have a primary obligation to each other: not to undermine each other’s sense of reality for the sake of expediency; not to gaslight each other.*

*“Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other.”<sup>3</sup>*

We also have a profound stake in baring that reality as we seek to make justice in the midst of it. The festering wound must be drained, the secret must be broken, the lie must be revealed. Then

justice can be made manifest and forgiveness can become a possibility. Only then can the wound heal deeply and fully. Then the victim truly becomes a survivor.

*Adapted from a keynote speech for the Sexual Assault Center Conference of Adult Survivors held in Seattle, Washington, in 1984.*

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<sup>1</sup> Justice as it is discussed here is a therapeutic, ethical and spiritual experience. It is not an academic exercise but a framework of some practical tools for persons victimized by incestuous abuse and for the friends, therapists, pastors and partners who want to assist them. The term “justice” does not necessarily refer to the legal system and its processes. It is clear that we cannot rely on the legal system to make justice, but neither can we ignore or abandon it as a possible resource in our efforts to make justice. I use “justice” to describe a context in which persons seek to restore right relationship and provide for the needs of one who has been made victim by an offender, and to prevent the offender from continuing to harm others.

<sup>2</sup> There is currently much discussion about terms to describe those adults who experienced sexual abuse during childhood. “Victim” describes who has been made powerless by the actions of another and thus is harmed in some way. “Survivor” describes a former victim who is no longer harmed by an abusive situation, but who carries that as part of her/his history. In addition to being descriptive of the time frame of the abusive experience, “survivor” also connotes a condition of healing and empowerment and frequently a pro-active stance of choosing to no longer be victimized by the memory of an abusive childhood experience.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, p. 190).