



*A Challenge
Not
Destiny*

a guide to empowering
& healing from
sexual abuse & PTSD

BY PROF. K. ELAN JUNG, MD

***A new road map to recovery
for survivors, families & friends***

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*a guide to empowering and healing
from sexual abuse & PTSD*

By

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to those who shared their innermost pain, confusion and beauty of being human.

Note

All patient names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Book One

The Human Drama

Introduction

Thirty years ago Terry, a twenty-five-year-old teacher, began visiting me regularly. One day she came to my office. It was obvious she was scared and reticent. After a painfully long silence, she confessed that she was having an affair. I became very concerned, knowing the implications this would have for her marriage. She said that while she was having the affair with her lover her husband walked into the room.

“So what happened?”

“I went to the kitchen and washed the dishes,” she said.

I waited for her to elaborate, but apparently there had not been a confrontation or crisis. Obviously this was an unusual reaction to a husband walking in on his wife and lover. I knew she was severely depressed, suicidal and panic stricken. Her seemingly troubling indifference to this calamitous event signaled something else had to be involved. Something was wrong.

The same conversation ensued a few weeks after the initial confession of the affair. This time I asked her where she and her lover were having the affair.

“In the living room. On the sofa,” she replied.

“Were you both naked?”

“Yes.” I asked her to draw where the living room was in relation to the front door. She drew a map, and the living room was located directly at the end of her home’s front entrance. It would have taken less than two seconds to reach the living room upon entering the front door.

“Where were you and you partner making love?”

“On the living room couch.”

“Were you both naked?”

“Yes.”

“And your husband, did he come in through the front door? Here?” I pointed to the place on the map where the door opened into the living room.

“Yes.”

“I see a problem here,” I said. “This is the door your husband walked into and this is the sofa where you and your lover were naked.”

“Yes?” she looked at me, perturbed.

“I want to know what happened after your husband entered the room, where you and your lover were both naked?”

“I went to the kitchen and washed the dishes,” she replied. But this time she seemed somewhat irritated by my questions.

“Where did your lover go?” I asked, pointing to the floor plan.

“She left.”

“Look here, Terry. It wouldn’t take more than two seconds for your husband to enter the room, where you and your lover were both naked and having sex. How is it possible for you and your lover to stop having sex, get dressed and leave the house in two seconds?” She looked at me with a blank stare.

“Please look at the map again.”

Suddenly, her expression completely changed. There was no time for two people to get dressed and escape being seen by someone who had just entered the front door. What she saw so vividly and felt so intensely was a figment of her imagination. Terry and I were both speechless. We were both aware this was a significant event, and we needed to work hard to understand it in order to progress in her treatment. And for me, this was one of the most important breakthroughs of my career. Further sessions revealed Terry had been a victim of sexual abuse, and her supposed affair was actually triggered by a flashback of a deeply repressed memory of a rape that had occurred when she was a child. In a mental state psychiatrists call dissociation, Terry's mind had created the hallucination, which was triggered by my question, from that terrifying and terrible memory of sexual trauma.

Although in my training I had learned of the impact sexual abuse can have upon a victim, and I was very familiar with dissociation, I was still unprepared for this shocking hallucination, this bizarre symptom, its stunning completeness, intensity and seeming authenticity. Terry honestly and sincerely believed she had entered into an adulterous affair. I soon came to better understand the depth of pain, confusion, and destruction that sexual trauma inflicts not only on the patient’s life and family, but also the damage it does to society as a whole. It was a day that shaped my entire subsequent career as a psychiatrist over the following thirty years.

There is no other event that makes the human mind as confused, painful, and destructive as sexual abuse and traumatic sexual experiences. It affects the very core of our being, home life and interpersonal relationships by undermining trust, intimacy, and self-worth.

Sexual trauma can happen to anyone, anywhere and can take many different shapes. From molestation, rape, incest, to seemingly innocent childhood sex play, teenage experimentation and many other traumatic sexual experiences, it is everywhere around us, mostly hidden, ashamed, confused, misunderstood and mistreated.

Although every victim suffers from different kinds of mental anguish, there are some predictable and common responses to sexual violation. After the initial trauma, they become confused, dazed and shocked. They tear up their undies, wash their privates a hundred times. They often retreat to their rooms and isolate themselves from their family. They do know something terrible and shameful happened to them. However, they do not know exactly what it means. They know they have to keep their dark secrets from their family and friends. They will spend days in bed trying or trying not to deal with what has happened to them.

“Nobody will understand what I went through.”

“It’s all my fault.”

They feel guilty and are convinced they did something terrible. More often, they are not even clear about these feelings, and the whole episode may disappear into the dark, frightening shadows of unconsciousness. However, those memories do not stay in those corners of the mind for very long.

“Sara” sees a faceless head with dark wavy hair, mumbling incomprehensibly into her left ear. Paranoia sets in. Do “they” know what happened to me? she asks, do I look deranged? She started to get “naughtier,” frightened first at home, then at school. Other kids called her names—slut, whore, weirdo, queer. She had become sexually active by the time she reached ten years old.

“I am bisexual,” she told me in a babylike voice. She would skip school, fight with other kids, be suspended from school for being inattentive, and get involved in alcohol, drugs and promiscuity. By the time she reached her early teens, her life was totally out of control.

Frequently these victims contract sexually transmitted diseases or become pregnant and either have an abortion or a child in their teens, which throws their already chaotic lives into a tailspin. Alcohol, drugs and sex become their lives, in a desperate effort to get out of their sense of utter isolation and being an outcast. Or they may find themselves in prison where they are often raped by other inmates, which puts them on impossibly destructive and self-destructive paths.

When they find some sense of direction through a superhuman effort, by either getting a good job, good education or finding a very understanding friend, a knight in shining armor, they still find challenges in life. Trust, intimacy, sex, interpersonal relationships, the demands of daily life and other boundary issues become overwhelming tasks. They fight, they hurt, they plead, they eat and eat or they starve, they cut themselves, they steal, they set fires, they have affairs, they run away. They feel guilty, ashamed, suicidal, homicidal and hopelessly trapped in their lives. Divorce, acting out children, loss of jobs, and total isolation puts them back into the same chaotic life. They may not be able to find a way out of the hellhole by finding their strength through writing their autobiography, joining survivor groups, working through their problem in their own destructive ways, or by ineffectively seeking professional help. They may feel hopelessly trapped with no way out, and they imagine that everyone will be better off without them.

It is at this juncture, they will knock on my door. Welcome to my world! A hundred square foot cubicle in the small upstate town of Queensbury, New York. I will show you there is hope in your lost life. You will be safe and secure. You will be heard and understood. You will not be punished or abandoned. You will see that you are not alone and that it's not your fault. I will tell you, "you were just a little kid violated by a pervert." You are a special person richly endowed with sensitivity, creativity and the depth and breadth of soul that very few people have, not in spite of the abuse but because of it. Once you see your strength through the toughest challenge of your life, you will enrich not only yourself, but everyone around you.

I will show you the road map to help you understand the nature of your pain and confusion and how to deal with your anger, self-loathing, shame and self-destruction. Ultimately, you will learn to appreciate your warm, intelligent, unique personality, not as tidy and rigid as most of your "normal" friends, but the truly special human being that you are. Sexual trauma is the greatest challenge of your life. Through the painful journey of unraveling and working through your dark past, you will be richly rewarded with a better future for yourself, your family and others who you care deeply about.

I have presented at a number of professional symposia which focused on the various aspects of psychiatric approaches to the assessment and treatment of sexual abuse victims. In the past thirty years of teaching and supervising various mental health professionals, I have become painfully aware that most mental health professionals know little about dealing with sexually traumatized patients. Many patients have become lost after years of therapy without knowing what happened along the way. Consequently, many people and their families have suffered terribly.