

*The
Whisper*

Plus

A Guide To Living Free:

28 practical steps to overcoming
sexual abuse

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Prologue

*H*urriedly, I pushed through the beauty salon's heavy glass door. The clock on the lavender wall read 5:45 p.m. Shoot, I was late again. I promised myself that wouldn't happen but... it did. An hour earlier, I had stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few items. However, the shortest checkout lane ended up being the slowest line, which made me late once again. Somehow delays are a frequent part of my life in spite of my best efforts.

My hair appointment was the last one of the day. I hoped I could still get it cut and my eyebrows waxed before the busy weekend began.

As I looked past the display of beauty supplies I saw Kurt's pleasant smile. He motioned for me to come on through. I apologized for my tardiness as I hustled toward him.

"So what are you doing these days, and how is your book coming?" asked Kurt as he wrapped the plastic apron around my neck. He lowered the back of the chair down to the sink and began to wash my hair.

"Well," I said, "I finished my book and I'm now in the process of getting it published."

He replied, "Good, that's good. I know your story will help a lot of people."

Listening in on our conversation was an elderly lady sitting immediately to our right. Her silver locks were wrapped in tiny curling rods, waiting for her perm to set.

After the cream rinse, Kurt towel dried my hair and began to comb through the snarls when the little lady asked, "You've written a book?"

I nodded yes.

“I’ve never known anyone who’s written a book. What’s it about?” she questioned.

I smiled and replied, “It’s a combination autobiography and self-help book. During my childhood I was a victim of incest by my father, who at that time was an influential Protestant minister. At seventeen, I finally found a way to stop the incest. I was so wounded and shamed by that experience that I locked my secret inside for over thirty years. By then, I had anguished so much about my sexual abuse that it had to tumble out.

My book tells about my life as a victim of sexual abuse, and how I eventually found healing.” I paused briefly. “I had huge obstacles to overcome, but my health and faith have been restored, and I consider that somewhat of a miracle. I wanted to encourage other victims that wounds of this nature can heal and life can be good, even after incest, so I began writing my story.”

Leah, the little lady, began to shake her head and grieve. For a moment all you could hear was the background music coming from the radio. Then she said, “You know, I was a victim of incest, too. I was. It happened over fifty years ago only I’ve never told anyone about it. I can’t believe I just told you. Isn’t it funny? I’m telling a stranger my worst secret.” She paused for a moment and then added, “Incest is terrible, and it affects your whole life, but no one really knows how bad it is unless they’ve experienced it, too.”

I agreed wholeheartedly with her and told her I was glad she told me. As soon as I finished speaking, she began to tell about her sexual abuse.

Leah was raped in her twenties while still a virgin. Her brother-in-law, a physician, was the perpetrator. This devastated Leah and threw her life into a whirlwind. She ran away from home to escape the memory of her sexual abuse, and started doing things she never dreamed of doing before. She tried everything to cover up her emotional

wounds. The rape shattered her life. A while later, she found herself pregnant and single. Leah had her baby and then, for financial reasons, moved back home with her parents. She eventually found a job to support herself and her son. She never married, and devoted the rest of her life to her child. Her parents died never knowing why their beloved daughter turned from her once virtuous ways and became so wild. And what happened to her brother-in-law, the rapist? He died a respected physician. Yep. Life isn't fair.

By now, Kurt had finished trimming my hair and was about to begin the waxing. I reached out to caress Leah's hands as I commended her on her courage for telling her story. I reinforced the importance of her sharing it. Telling is freeing. Leah had just taken an important step. She must have felt tremendously relieved. I know I did for her. For a half a century, Leah had kept her tragedy a secret, and as I listened, I was reminded once again how devastating and shameful incest is. I reminded her she was victimized, an innocent young woman caught in a terrible situation, and what happened to her did not change one ounce of her worth. The shame she embodied belonged to her brother-in-law. She is an incredible lady, and I was thankful I had the chance to meet her and learn about her experience. We agreed to meet again.

More people than we realize are victims of incest and sexual abuse. My counselor told me that one in four females and one in six males are victims of sexual abuse. And because it is such a shameful, degrading experience, most of us hold it in and try to bury the tragedy. For three decades, I kept my abuse hidden. In fact, I was never going to tell anyone. I had planned on taking that secret with me to the grave, but my plan began to crumble as my health and personal life deteriorated. There was no other way to get healthy but to find the courage and start talking about the incest, and so my journey to health began.

In the following pages, I have opened my heart and shared my most intimate experiences. At times the writing was grueling, but I wanted my readers to understand what a troubling life and unbearable shame a victim of incest endures, and also, to what lengths one will go to escape such a life. I hope my honesty will open the eyes of many, and encourage other incest victims to come forth and tell their worst secret. For when they do, it will be the beginning of the end of their true-life nightmare, for telling is transforming.

Writing this autobiography was a difficult task for many reasons. First of all, attempting to write about events that happened over 40 years ago stretched my memory. That is why I found it necessary to pray for wisdom, and consult with family members and friends about many incidents. I am sure this book is not perfect, but I have tried to do my best to make it as truthful as possible.

When incest has occurred in the home, you can be sure that other forms of abuse occurred as well. In addition to sexual abuse, I experience emotional abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, spiritual abuse and abandonment issues. I did not realize the depth of my abuse until I began my journey to freedom. Because of my dysfunctional childhood home, I found I needed to make a lot of changes as I faced the depth of my own dysfunctions.

There are life long, crippling consequences that piggyback incest and sexual abuse. Until we tell our stories and expose how horrible it is, and those who do it, we won't have a chance at eliminating sexual abuse from our society. Nor will there be opportunities for us to find healing. I am convinced that as my voice is heard others will dare to share their experiences as well. This is already beginning to happen. Others, like Leah, have come forth and told me their story.

If you were raised in a Judeo-Christian home, you will easily understand the added frustrations I encountered.

Because my abuser was also a minister, my faith was greatly compromised, and at times nullified, by what went on in my household. Consequently, I struggled with many issues. Most understandable was the sexual abuse and the intense hatred I had for my father. Second was my disillusionment with the Christian faith and the God my father professed to know.

For a time, I considered my father and religion useless. On my journey to find peace and wholeness, I eventually learned to dissolve my hatred. I was also able to reclaim my faith in God, which I consider somewhat of a miracle.

Hope was another important attribute that helped me get through my roughest time. If you come away with anything after reading my story, I hope I have given you hope, for you too can break from your past and the baggage that comes with it. I can personally testify that miracles of the heart do happen, and it's my prayer that all victims will experience the same wonder.

We victims of sexual abuse do not realize how badly crippled we really are. We try our best to function normally. To us, it seems like we are doing pretty well in spite of our abuse. The truth is, we think we are doing better than we really are. Only when we take a good look at the seriousness of our abuse, our childhood environment, and evaluate ourselves relationally, will we see how much our sexual abuse has negatively impacted our lives.

As you read my story and journey with me, you will realize that this is hardly a joy ride. Yet, the personal benefits I received at the end certainly made it a remarkable ride. The peace and health I gained are like none I had ever known, and as an added bonus, I was able to experience and return a love that I never knew existed. I only wish I had started my journey much sooner. I can never retrieve those lost years, but if I could, it would have eliminated much heartache in the years that followed the incest.

I have included an important second part to this book. It is a guide to living free from sexual abuse, which includes 28 steps that helped free me from the consequences of the incest. There are actual things we can do to stop a horrendous past from ruining our lives. The purpose of this segment is to empower victims to begin their own personal journey, and experience peace and wholeness.

During our lifetimes, we each struggle with a secret pain, a private unexposed wound. Sexual abuse, abandonment issues, alcoholism, and relationship problems are a few examples. How we handle those hurts will greatly affect the quality of our lives. The lessons I've learned on my journey to wholeness were lifesaving to me. I believe the same principles will also add insight to those who suffer with similar issues that crush the spirit. And if you are a victim of sexual abuse, please continue reading for *The Whisper* was especially written for you. There may be parts that are difficult to read, but ***don't stop reading.*** There are many mini messages throughout the book that will help you on your healing journey.

Passing Hope On ~

Shirley Jo Petersen