

A Very Hard Promise to Keep

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Promises, promises, promises. My life is full of promises, mostly to myself, many to others. Some have been broken and some have been kept. Today, my daily planner includes a listing of promises entitled “Word Given.” When I give my word, I am offering my integrity. It is critical to be congruent if I am to avoid self contempt and resultant assaults upon my self esteem.

Broken promises and betrayals are among the growth opportunities people give to each other. I seldom recognized, during the distress of the moment in which a betrayal occurred, that it was an opportunity in disguise. But I came to know that I would forge my blade of truth through surviving these upsets.

I recall one very big promise that was difficult to make but easy to keep. It was easy to keep because the promise was so intimate and integral to the person’s healing that I could do no less. It was difficult because the promise prevented me from taking direct action to assure that this person’s nightmare was not repeated for her or anyone else. However, the greatest way to begin the process of rebuilding trust lay in her being able to trust me.

Listening to the person’s description of the things that were forced upon her begged all the compassion that I could muster. On hearing the story, I began physically resonating to memories of my own history of abuse. And I needed to hold a space of loving detachment to be fully available to this person as she stood in the midst of her memories and personal devastation.

These are the times that truly test my faith and reinforce that God is in charge. This was particularly challenging for me as the person relating her experience was my daughter.

In the eighth year of her life, my daughter was subjected to one of life’s most imprinting experiences. In the eighth year of my life, I had been subjected to the nature of abuse. I cannot forget my time in that violation. I doubt that she will either. We are more bonded from the processing of her four-year secret.

To honor her privacy, I asked for permission to relate these events. I write them as testimony to others that they are not alone in confronting abuse. The full light of disclosure can remove the



shadows of shame and blame. I questioned why a father and a daughter would be exposed to similar abuse at the same age.

In her twelfth year, as her body began awakening to its creative potential, she began to ask me questions. The mother of my children was unable or unwilling to meet her daughter's inquiries about their bodies and feelings. They were left mostly to friends and sometimes to me. How short sighted society remains. Beyond her specific questions, her body language and certain of her personal behaviors alerted me to hidden issues lurking in the silence. She'd often start to talk to me and then a look or comment from her older sister would stop her. Once when her sister was asleep, I asked if there was something special she wanted to ask me or tell me. She nodded yes, so we went outside to sit in the porch swing where we could talk out of range of her sister.

"There is something that I want to tell you. But you have to promise me that you won't do anything. You have to promise me or I won't tell you."

"Wow! This sounds serious."

"You have to promise me."

"If I promise, do you realize that I may not be able to help you resolve whatever has happened? The promise may limit what I can do."

"I know. Will you promise me?"

"Yes, I will. I'm getting really concerned and, yes, I promise not to do anything."

By now her tears were flowing and her body was shaking. I knew that look and movement. I'd been there too.

"I was raped when I was eight and Mommy and my sister won't let me say anything. They act like nothing ever happened."

She began to pour out her broken heart and pierced soul. I could barely contain my emotions and stay available for her. I kept breathing and listening. An internal part of me was asking God why family systems attract many of the same lessons in life. I knew part of the answer and I just did not want to face my part in her pain.

Perhaps her hardest questions were, "Why do people do those things? Why would a person do that to me? Why did he hurt me? I didn't do anything to him. Why did he hurt me? I didn't hurt him. Why me? I don't understand."

We cried together and when the tears stopped, I very gently held her, very gently, not wanting her to imprint or in any way unconsciously associate a loving touch with a memory of ultimate violation.

Touching is the most common violation of boundaries. People generally touch for their needs, not for the other person. Men touch women. Older people touch younger people. More powerful people touch less powerful people. The temple of the body is continually violated under the guise of pity, righteousness, and projection.

Let people have their pain. Their pain can be the beginning of healing. There will be time for touching and reassurance later. Always ask for permission to touch. Bodies hold cellular level memories that can be activated just by touching. The best intentions can have very adverse effects.

This wasn't the end. Not much later, both girls were across the street from their home at an older man's house. The older daughter left the younger and the man began to fondle her.

I was learning of these events more than four years after they happened. And my soul wept in remorse that this portion of my family legacy had not ended with me. My mind was asking, "Would this have happened if I'd not left the family? Why didn't my former wife tell me?"

As I pieced the puzzle together it seemed that the mother felt guilty for being a single mother who was not at home. The sister felt guilty for having allowed the abuser access to the house. Whatever the reasons, none of them served the child who was living in pain and confusion with nowhere to go except into her wounded soul. I thank God that she opened up to me.

A growing voice inside tells me that I am who I am because of my collective experiences. I am the best person today that I've ever been. I keep praying that spiritual mediation will transform her trauma through soul work to her enlightenment.

I pray that she will transmute the trauma to strength. She refuses to do clinical work on the issue. I would have done the same at her age. I began my sexual abuse work in my mid forties. I must trust that she'll find her own way and time.

At the end of the disclosure I said, "Do you remember the promise you asked me to make?"

She replied, "Yes."

"Do you still want me to do nothing except listen?"

"Yes."

"There is one thing that I want permission to do. I want to talk to your mother about this. Do I have your permission?"

"Yes."

Speaking with her mother only reinforced the depth of the denial. It wasn't lost on me that my mother's first response was that it could not have happened to me because she knew where I was all the time. It couldn't have happened. There was no opportunity. To her, acknowledging the

abuse would be tantamount to her being responsible for it. If she didn't admit it, then she couldn't be blamed and become less than a perfect mother. So, it wasn't.

Now, my daughter's mother was doing essentially the same thing to her. The mother's contention, "I think that she made it up or at the very least exaggerated. Don't worry, she'll grow out of it. You know that I'm a working mother. I can't be expected to be here all the time. I talked to her sister and she said nothing happened."

When you have been treated as my daughter and I have, you don't need to exaggerate. It's already quite terrible enough. And, we don't grow out of it. At best, we grow through it. I know. I've been up and down this path.

I'm sure that there is more learning in here somewhere, but right now I cannot get to it. Too much of my own work is in process. I know the state of mind that follows abuse and my daughter told as much of the truth that was possible for her at that time.

After her sharing I said, "I love you. I admire your courage. I am sorry that you hurt. I wish I could make it go away, but I can't. I'm grateful that you talked to me. People sometimes do bad things to other people. I can't tell you why. I don't know why. I do know that it wasn't your fault. You did nothing to deserve this. The other person did it to you. You are a precious and beautiful person and you deserve better. I love you."

"When you are ready, please let me help you get counseling or other support. Call me collect. You never have to be alone with this again. I know how hard it has been for me to deal with my abuse. I hope you work on yours sooner than I did. I won't force you to do anything, but I'll be there as soon as you ask me."

The rest of the story is for us to live with as best we can. I am eternally grateful for whatever I did that allowed my daughter to confide in me. I am grateful that I had come far enough in my growth to be there for her and not to impose and project my own stuff. I pray for forgiveness for any thread that I wove into her life tapestry that may have contributed to her harsh learning.

I yield to the Grace that cleans the slate.