

A Chance to Break the System

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I cooked for thirty years, 1943-1973. I lived on strong will, brightness, boundless energy, risk taking and close calls. I kept moving. By age fifty, I had lived in fifty houses, twenty-three communities and twelve states. I seldom stood still long enough to allow myself to see or feel my innermost states.

The only deep feelings that reached the surface were those connected with the deaths of seven relatives including my younger brother. Yet, even these events did not keep my heart open or my feelings accessible. I plunged ahead in life with wife, children and career, in reverse order of attention. I did not process my childhood before entering into my nuclear family.

My sexual abuse would not surface until my forties. Other family issues remained cloaked in family secrets that wouldn't make it out of the closet until the 1980's. My clinical post traumatic stress disorder would only be labeled in 1986. I lived in a family that considered time the natural healer whether or not anyone actively worked on discovery and recovery. I would eventually be faced with living out the axiom that those who are abused in turn abuse.

After seven years of marriage and bringing two daughters into the world, I was repeating my family of origin scripts. My behaviors were unconscious, but increasingly damaging to me and to those about me. I was well on my way to becoming what I had promised myself I would not be if I ever survived my childhood.

I blamed and shamed myself, which just added to the explosive charge awaiting a spark. On the surface, all appeared calm. It wasn't. My collective, unprocessed life pain had peaked and I did not know it. I was about to repeat my worst nightmare.

I swore that I'd break the abusive patterns of my childhood. It appeared that I was doing just that. Yet, I was to hear, years later, that there were signs. When my aunt returned from a visit to our home in Virginia, she reported to my parents that she thought I was going to hit my wife in one of our arguments.



I do not recall doing that, which is the whole issue summed up. I was about to go out of control in my family as my father had gone out of control with me. I didn't see it coming any more than he saw it coming. I was as scared after the fact as he.

I knew firsthand what it was like when a parent went into rage. I know that it was my fear of being out of control that kept me from using drugs when most of those around me were doing drugs. I clung to a willful thread-of-a-promise to myself to not do to others what was done to me. My intention was earnest.

I had now arrived at a threshold perhaps like the one that faced those who abused me. I had no more intention of hurting anyone than they probably had when they hurt me. My undealt with material from my family system was no longer to be denied. What an inheritance.

There was a seed in me, a space, different from those who bore me. I was me. I was not them. I had made some choices unique to me. I would not play out the exact hand that I was dealt. I had taken new risks in life. I had drawn some new cards to fill out my hand while discarding others.

Now the hand was to be played. The pot was full. The ante had been raised the last time. It was time to show my cards. The gamble was really in God's hand. For the most part, I was not conscious of what I was doing.

My youngest daughter lay crying in her crib. The noise seemed to get louder. I became increasingly agitated. My wife suggested that I do something about it. I walked into the child's bedroom. I turned her on her stomach to spank her. I struck her one time.

I raised my hand again and all of a sudden in my mind's eye, I saw my father, out of control, coming at me. In the video replay that appeared in that instant, I was my father beating me. I stopped my hand in mid air in a cold sweat.

The images flashed, flipping from me and my daughter to me and my father. Part of me was struggling to sort out the different images. A titanic battle was in progress. I could sink into acting out my repressed rage and continue the family legacy or I could stop.

Later, I saw how I became my father and married my mother, how my wife set me up with my daughter as my mother had set my father up with me. This complexity was only visible after nearly twenty years of psychological work on myself. I understand why most people are not willing to delve into the past. It is tough work.

Yet, my future had no hope of being what I wanted it to be unless I opened my scars and sought emotional plastic surgery. The picture of my life wasn't going to be very pretty unless I faced myself, my shadow and my extended family.

This explosion was like being hit by a deep and ragged iceberg. Underneath the calm, peaceful exterior lay a point of choice about damaging others as I had been damaged. My control board was short circuiting and my choice could heal or kill. My conscience was struggling to rewire

my circuits, to reconnect me with my deepest promises of childhood to escape the prison in my mind.

I turned and left the room. I remembered when my mother lost her control with me and when my father did the same. Most of all, I was staring into the chilling face of my own loss of control. Part of me was thanking God that I had stopped. I was so frightened of myself, so fearful of repeating. I was shockingly aware that the rage and its trigger were not under my conscious control.



I made a fateful decision. I chose to leave. I believed that I had to leave in order to protect my children from myself. I did not trust that I could keep the lid on as this terrorizing experience had leapt out of the shadows almost beyond my ability to cope.

Within two weeks, I had rented a small building to live in and announced to my wife and children that I was moving out. There was little joy left in our marriage, but my words still put my wife into a kind of shock. She agreed, but was now lost into her own fears.

The children were ages five and two. I thought that there was no way they could comprehend what was happening but I sensed fear. I took one very specific and conscious action to hopefully modify their unspoken anxiety. I've watched other children at those ages and now know just how feeling and aware that my children were.

I drove them to my new living space, stayed there for one hour and then drove them back to their home. My

intention was to have them feel that I was close at hand though not inside their home. To some degree this worked. They were confused and upset, but I continued short visits to reinforce that I was physically close even if emotionally separate.

Before returning my children after this first visit, my five-year old astounded me with her comment. "Daddy, I wish you weren't mad at mommy. But, no matter how much I wish, I can't change that, can I?" Those are among the most indelible words that I have ever heard.

I thought through the tears, how wise. Yet, I knew the lie in me. Yes, I was mad at mommy. Yes, she couldn't wish that away. But, I was leaving because I couldn't bear the thought of taking out on my children the frustrations of living that I did not know how to live with without the alternate stuffing and raging which so damaged me in my childhood.

In later years, I explained why I ran away. I did, in fact, break the cycle of abuse at the physical level. I also continued the emotional abandonment that was another part of my heritage. I chose

between the two. I honor the choice I made. It was the best that I could do at the time. It gave me time to work on the rest. I am still working on me, more than ever.

Today, among the parts of my life that impact upon my children, there is nothing that I know or feel that I will not discuss openly with them. I've been living and communicating with them this way for almost ten years. The challenge today is to get them to be as open with me. And, I know that they're doing what they need to do, in their own way, in their own time.

Now, I can see that there were other options open to me, even then, which could have allowed outcomes, perhaps less damaging to me and to them. And, I've come to accept that there are no round trip tickets to the past. I am not proud of all that I've done. If I did have a round trip ticket to the past, I would do things differently, as long as I could carry today's awareness on the journey. But, that form of magic isn't available.

I accept, for the most part, that what I did was exactly what I needed to do to be who I am today.

I made a choice that changed their lives and mine. It was a good choice as far as it went. I broke one very destructive pattern of my family system. My children have a father today quite unlike anything that I believed that I could or would become.

All the pain, for each of us, between then and now, has resulted in new opportunities for all the generations to follow. Maybe that is what we are here for.