

Living on a "fault" line

A while ago, I had a dream in which I was sitting in a car. The car was parked in front of the home where I grew up. My parents were coming across the lawn toward the car. I was afraid. I didn't want them to see me. The dream ended.

Though I didn't see anyone else in the dream, I knew there was a man in the car sitting next to me. The man molested me over a three-year period beginning when I was 11 years old.

He was a priest.

I'm still trying to deal with this, to solve it, resolve it, even though it happened 30 years ago.

The priest is still working with children, directing a boys choir in California. Church officials in Boston are aware of his past because I told them.

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I can't tell you how I felt during the episodes when he would fondle me, either parked in his car or in a bed at a motel or at his brother's vacation home in New Hampshire. I can tell you how I think I should have felt, how I hope I felt, wish I felt, but there's no certainty I felt any of those ways.

I suspect I was afraid, confused, angry, as well as happy at the attention and affection I thought I was receiving. After all, I worked to be accepted by this man and the group of kids that always surrounded him in his youth programs. I had worked to become part of the group, to be accepted by them and especially by him since I felt unaccepted and unwanted at home.

I didn't seek to be molested.

But this person was an adult, a person to be obeyed. He was not just any adult, all of whom had power and whom we, as 10- and 12-year-old children, had been told to obey, but a priest: the very personification of goodness, virtue, and moral authority in this Irish blue-collar town north of Boston. I often served Mass for him as an altar boy, but I could never go to him in confession.

And since I worked to become part of the group, I must be at least partly to blame for what happened.

Or so I felt.

There aren't many days when thoughts of that "relationship" don't come to mind, uninvited, unresolved, especially when the newspaper carries a story of yet another "model" citizen or priest with a dark secret.

What should I do?

Seven years ago, maybe as a reaction to the McMartin Nursery School abuse case in California, I decided to speak up, to inform church officials of those moments long ago.

On a bright, clear October day in 1985, the sort of day when leaves are brilliantly dying, I drove to the Chancery in Brighton to meet with Monsignor John McCormack, the personal secretary to Cardinal Bernard Law, head of the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. I had remembered where the priest's 1962 transfer took him, just

as vividly as I remembered the black-and-red checked interior of his station wagon, the motel rooms, the vacation home on Alton Bay, New Hampshire. I told McCormack where they could find him.

Despite the cool hush in the anteroom, the bright sun streaming through the bay windows gleaming across the turret-like desk behind which McCormack sat, I shook and sweated and cried. I felt a terrible pain, shame and fear. McCormack said little, only that Church officials would try to corroborate my tale, but I would never be told what they found and what, if anything, they did.

He didn't say it was not my fault.

I left. I thought it was over.

In 1990, I suffered an emotional breakdown. I signed myself into a hospital to avoid acting on increasingly dark thoughts. With the help of a psychiatrist, I finally began to see the origins of my behavior.

I couldn't trust people. I couldn't bear intimacy. I had no belief in myself or my value as a person. I was a workaholic and a perfectionist. In intimate moments, I feared discovery to the point of panic. I was a control freak who had no close friends, a person who had no identity he could believe in, only roles to be played.

I had needed to find a sanctuary, a place safe from the dangers of the world, a world where nothing was as it seemed, where nothing was predictable. I needed to find someone who could explain to me what I was feeling and why I was feeling it.

I spent eight days in the hospital's psychiatric wing. During that period, and the 15 months that followed, the psychiatrist and I tried to explore some of the consequences of that devastating relationship. Among the first insights I learned and understood was that I was not to blame for my abuse. I had not caused it. Perhaps I was only too tempting a victim for such a practiced predator.

I left the hospital feeling a terrible vulnerability, but somehow safer than when I had arrived.

With the therapist's guidance, I discovered how I had begun picking at the scar of that relationship. As a journalist, I was intrigued by people. I wondered why their lives were the way they were and what motivations had moved each person. I believed everyone had one "secret" to living, and that if I could discover and amass those secrets, I would understand life, especially my life. Not until my days in Three East did I realize the consequences of my own secrets, how susceptible I was to failure, frustration and unhappiness.

The psychiatrist also led me to understand that there was positive consequences to that abusive relationship. Though I was emotionally dysfunctional, I had developed an intense intellectual nature. I was intelligent, inquisitive, sensitive, an advocate of the underdog and sympathetically to people who found life difficult, puzzling, unsatisfying, in short, people like me. I loathed people who abused their authority.

But there are also jagged edges, pieces that don't fit, gifts of personality, interests and a cynically disarming sense of humor as well as nightmares of loss and immobility.

While in therapy, I decided to locate the priest. I knew he had moved to California in 1962. I began there.

I tracked him down after five or six telephone calls that took a couple hours time. In the process, his former supervisor told me the man was no longer performing parish duties.

I felt relieved.

Then I spoke with his current bishop, who described himself as this priest's "best friend for 15 years."

I began to be afraid, and angry, that nothing had changed.

Father Richard Coughlin, of St. Patrick's parish in Stoneham in the 1950s and St. Mary's of Lynn in the early 1960s, was the director of St. Michael's Abbey boys choir in Orange, California. Nothing had changed.

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I decided to call him, to tell him how much he had hurt me, how confused my life had been, to have him take responsibility for what happened, to tell me it wasn't my fault.

We talked and I failed to be angry. My feelings, the ones I could discern during the conversation, were confused. I couldn't be angry, I felt embarrassed at the reason for my call, guilty for my pursuit of him, ashamed to be hunting down a 75-year-old man with white hair, the man who still clucked his tongue in his throat before speaking.

I wanted to be strong; instead, I was weak, a child again. I couldn't be angry with "Father." We talked. He said I was always the "brightest" of the group, that I was the best among my three brothers, that he'd always thought there was "nothing to hold me back" from future success. He played me like a musical score; a part of me glowed under his praise, but I forced myself to tell him of the alienation, the disconnectedness, the years of searching for something with meaning, the divorce, the aloneness and the pain.

I told him I had to finally resolve "our relationship."

He seemed bewildered, aghast, at my words.

He denied any such relationship ever existed.

I felt terribly frightened, believing for an instant my memories were fantasy, inventions, a bad dream. But they were true, I knew, not imagined, not a fantasy. He acknowledged traveling to the places of my memories, Cape Cod, New Hampshire, New York City and Lake George, but he said in his memories he was accompanied by someone else, not me.

I persisted: his brother's place, Laconia Country Club and Wiers Beach, Oyster Harbors Golf Course and Falmouth, the Margate Motel in February and skiing at Sunapee, his blue can of tooth powder. Finally he said, "If that's what you remember, it must be so."

But he never said it was so.

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Talking about the abuse has been therapeutic, with my therapist, my brothers and one trusted friend.

But my parents cannot confront it, for there's an accusation in my words. Why didn't you protect me? Why didn't you know? Were there signs? Or was it truly a secret between the him and me?

There could have been signs, as I discovered, report cards from the sixth and seventh grades, showing my grades plummeting from mid-90s to 70s and lower. There were absences from school for undiagnosed illnesses, nearly 100 days in those two years, 35 days in the sixth grade's first quarter alone. I quit being an altar boy. There were my two aborted attempts to run away from home. More than once I said I wished to live with some other family.

Why didn't they know? Why didn't I tell them?

My father was out of work for part of those two years, and my oldest brother had fought with him and moved into Boston. There were two other brothers, each with demands and needs to be answered.

But should my parents have known?

And if they had? - They've told me they may not have believed me, or if they had, wouldn't have risked the pariah's role in the community, in the parish where my grandfather built the church, by accusing a priest of molesting their son.

Of the recent scandals of Boston-area Catholic priests being accused of similar molestations, a front-page story in the Boston Globe for nearly four months, my parents and I have not exchanged one word on the subject.

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So what can I do to reconnect with my feelings and emotions, a part of me that has been the far side of the moon for most of my lifetime? How can I put this to rest, and end the other feelings that I've carried since - feelings of self-hate and fraudulence, a fear of intimacy and a compulsion to trash relationships, a lack of friends, a mistrust of my instincts, a need to be perfect in everything just to be as good as everyone else.

Lawyers have told me I have little chance in court. Some states, and Massachusetts case law, permit victims of childhood abuse to press civil suits within three years of discovery of the memories. My visit to the Chancery in 1985, said those lawyers, would likely have started the three-year clock ticking. Further research indicates the seven year criminal statute of limitations is "frozen" should the accused leave the state.

I had hoped therapy would be a conclusive end to this, but it wasn't. Public disclosure, for its own sake and with its own consequences, to bear witness to what happened, to what I fear continued after Coughlin and I went our separate ways, is the only recourse I have left.

To do otherwise is to perpetrate a second victimization, to let Coughlin escape the public justice that accompanies this accusation. He has become an old man, respected in his community, respected because of my silence, a silence that has to end.