

## MY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE WITH SEXUAL ABUSE

By Bob Williston

It is now fifty years since I was exposed to sexual assault as a child by a stranger. It was at convention and it occurred in a dormitory facility with at least fifty other people present, the closest of them not a meter from me. I know I'm unusual as a male victim speaking out so long after the event, but there are some things I feel compelled to say because I have come to realize that child sexual abuse of males is no less prevalent than of females. But men in our society are woefully unequipped to discuss the problem, to say nothing about admitting they need counseling for their emotional well-being. Also, I realize that as a male I can sympathize with female victims, but my study of abuse issues has convinced me that sympathy is not enough – abuse victims need empathy to give them the strength to heal. Hopefully what I can say here will encourage more people to show the needed empathy for victims.

I was probably not more than eleven at the time, at the onset of puberty, and I had gone to a convention in another province with the family of a man who came to our meeting. When we got there the only bunk I found available was beside a teenager I had previously met and subsequently established a close friendship with. On the other side of my bunk was a 45-ish man I had never seen before. I immediately suspected he was strange, but what difference – most people I considered strange at that age were not dangerous. To save space the bunks were side-by-side, heads at the wall and feet at the aisle – not unusual at conventions.

As soon as the lights went out, the 45-ish man reached in under my blanket and began what turned out to be about an hour of fun, as he probably considered it. I could say I didn't enjoy it, but that's not an appropriate summary of the event. To *not enjoy it* is far too tidy an expression for the emotions related to and resulting from the episode. In retrospect, I understand that it matters not whether the victim enjoys it or not – it is child sexual abuse and it does damage. Furthermore, it doesn't need to be a physically violent or immediately terrifying experience at all – most child predators are intelligent enough to avoid those kinds of encounters.

In my case, I was not terrified. I at first suspected he'd moved his hand there in his sleep. I waited for him to move it, but then he changed position in his bed his hand moved further under my blanket – and then I knew it was intentional and I had no idea what to do. He looked to be older than my father and I was very respectful of older people. So I laid still – for the whole hour.

I don't need to describe what he did, but I will describe how I felt. The important part is that I was quite unprepared for what he proceeded to do. In fact, I didn't know people did that to other people, so I was both shocked and curious. Yes, curious, because I believed everything that happened at convention was *a good example*. It had been only two years earlier that a few of my young friends and I stumbled upon a baptism in progress during convention, and none of us knew what was going on. We raced into the gathering as they were dunking one of the people and almost upset the solemnity of the occasion with our loud questioning about what was going on. We later learned that this was a necessary thing for professing people and there was nothing out of place. Quite a shocking discovery, really, but comforting to know it was perfectly normal.

How was I to know that there was not some other shocking thing to learn at convention that would turn out to be completely normal?

As luck would have it, my physical response to his advances embarrassed me, and I felt ashamed that I'd been found in that physical state in the presence of another person. I still had no idea why he was doing what he was doing, but he was quite pleased with what he had accomplished. I did not know it at the time, but today I would estimate that he was perfectly skilled at what he was doing both in physical technique and in persuasive technique. Trying to make sure no one else detected what was going on was only one of my concerns – I was not about to call for help and attract the attention of everyone in the place to myself in that situation. That, accompanied by what he was doing to me and what he was whispering in my ear, made it so that I quite lost all options for getting out of the situation. So for a while I just hoped it didn't last too long. It got a bit boring in its repetitiveness.

I forget most of what he said, but I do remember that he was most assuring of the notion that what *WE* were doing was perfectly normal – it was just one of the things we were supposed to do in private and it was just not polite to talk about it with others. Everyone did it, I would come to understand, and the more I did it the more I would enjoy it and it was going to be the most wonderful experience of my life. What he was telling me was critical to his scheme because it distracted just enough from the mechanics of what he was doing that I thought that was all there would be to the session and he'd eventually stop and go to sleep.

But he didn't. He continued until he got what he wanted. I did not anticipate that, so I didn't really recognize what was happening – frankly, I don't think I even knew such a thing would happen that way. For a second I was quite afraid that I was having a seizure and was quite relieved when I recovered. He was quite pleased with his accomplishment and told me so. He promptly turned over and went to sleep, and I spent most of the night trying to figure out what exactly had happened to me.

The next morning in the men's room I met the man I had gone to convention with and he was talking to the 45-ish man. When I walked in, he said to the 45-ish man, "Harold, this is our good friend Mr. Williston." To which the 45-ish man replied, "We've already met, haven't we?" What was I to say? As soon as Harold walked away, our family friend explained: "He used to be a worker. A good fellow. Too bad his nerves didn't let him stay in the work." That statement gave me great insight into the common expression that someone had *left the work because of his nerves*.

Later that morning I discovered that our seats were barely twenty feet from Harold's, across an aisle and at a 90-degree angle to our seats so that Harold could watch me through the whole four days of convention. And he did watch me. Every time I looked at him he was looking at me and smiling widely. I was quite sick to my stomach most of the time. I did find a bunk somewhere else for the rest of the convention, but he still watched me admiringly. I didn't tell anyone at the time. For anyone who wants to know why I didn't tell, here's my answer: I didn't know who to tell, and what to tell to whichever person I told. My instincts told me that the risks involved with telling someone were greater and less manageable than saying nothing and dealing with it myself, so that's what I did.

I was nineteen when I first mentioned that event to anyone. I was going to Teachers College by then, and I was being properly tutored on non-academic interactions with students and the legal ramifications. Thereby discovering that these kinds of things actually do get discussed, I mentioned Harold to some of my friends about that time, and to my surprise every one of them knew about Harold. Interestingly, every one of them thought for years that they'd been Harold's only conquest. The older people and childless people among the friends still spoke worshipfully of Harold, but over the next couple of years I learned that a number of parents had complained to the overseer about Harold while he was a worker, but the overseer wouldn't believe them. The overseer reportedly changed his mind when Harold proceeded to make advances on the overseer himself, so Harold was sent home. I met Harold after he had been sent home.

What also prompted me to speak to my friends at that time was some distress I had come to experience in one of my classes in college. There was a flamboyantly aggressive gay guy in the class who would tell anyone that he had special interests in me and two other guys in the class. I went to great lengths to avoid him, but one of the other two guys actually beat him up one day in class. Following that incident I went to the college psychiatrist and the concern I expressed was: "What should I do about the gay guy who was stalking me?" I didn't make much progress, of course. The psychiatrist's advice was to tell the guy I wasn't interested and that he should just get lost. It was perfectly logical advice, but I had known that before I ever went to speak to him. He waited for me to express some other concerns, but I couldn't think of anything to say. Finally I said, "I just feel really strange that he won't take a hint." And his answer was, "You're a soft-spoken, polite, and sensitive individual. He's not, so he doesn't take hints." I'd been told that before too. I remember that I actually felt afraid of something but I had no idea what it was, so the visit ended and I had gained no insights.

It was one of my friends who verbalized what was going on with me. He confided in me that Harold's advances had made him feel like he had something wrong with him. He felt that Harold had picked him out because he had detected something about him that was different from all the *normal* kids. I remember exactly what he said: "But I couldn't imagine what it was – I knew I wasn't queer." It was a very insightful observation, and it explained perfectly well why I did not ever tell my parents. I was not afraid of my parents, but I didn't want them to know that there was something terribly wrong with me. Actually, I also was afraid that my parents would tell someone and get themselves in trouble with me for simply telling someone. Protecting one's parents from devastating realities and disappointments is a major responsibility for an adolescent to carry, but I did it valiantly.

Looking back, I realize that these discussions I had with my friends were real therapy. I quite discarded the notion that there was anything wrong with me. But the discussions were disconcerting because I came to realize very clearly why there was only one vacant bunk in the dorm that night and why it was beside Harold. All the boys knew about him, and none of the older men had to worry about him. Furthermore, all the boys knew that they should not say a word – as I had instinctively known not to say a word. The realization that we had all been subtly coerced into being co-conspirators with Harold in his nasty business I recognized as a serious betrayal of trust in those who were supposed to be ministering to us spiritually. I was outraged that the overseer would take care of himself and treat other people's children as expendable by not warning anyone about what he certainly knew was going on. In fact, Harold was a far worse problem out of the work than he was in the work because workers spend most of

their time with an adult companion who can keep track of them. When Harold was put out of the work he was left free to prowl unguarded at as many conventions as he cared to attend for the rest of his life. It is the code of silence, the Mafia style *omertà*, that facilitates the destruction of the souls of our children.

I cannot say that I was traumatized by the event, but that is not to say another person in my position would also not be traumatized. I believe I had the wherewithal to deal with it much better than most. I became very aggressive in my efforts to settle my confusion about the event, and I have a habit of not shutting up until I get my answers. Being a teacher, I had no problem researching any such concern I had. Also, I never cared for the notion that there was anything I should not know *for my own good*, and I have frequently gotten myself in trouble for investigating things others thought I should leave alone – but it satisfied my curiosity. And I also don't care for second-hand information – I've been lied to a few times in my lifetime. It's not that I want to expose a liar – I just believe in taking personal responsibility for knowing the truth. Another thing, I have never accepted that I should accept the blame for someone else. I've been in trouble a few times for refusing to do that, but I consider that the cost of maintaining my own personal integrity. I also do not accept that anyone else is responsible for my comfort. They may cause me to be uncomfortable, but it is my adult responsibility to provide for my own emotional comfort and well-being. Most of all, I'm a scholar of sorts, and I have extensively researched abuse and written about abuse in efforts to help others deal with it. I am presently teaching self-esteem classes at a school for juvenile delinquents, and this has given me great insights into the mechanics of abuse.

We occasionally hear that *every adolescent boy wants it*. This is nonsense, if not a smokescreen. Every adolescent boy is curious, and many will experiment – but no adolescent boy wants to be the object of the sexual fascination of someone he is not personally attracted to. It is only in homes where children are exposed to constant diets of bawdy conversation, overt sexual expression, and/or expressed approval of promiscuity that they will consider such advances upon them as normal. Even then, it is still illegal and abusive behavior. In fact, children raised in safe households, which is true of the majority of children raised in this fellowship, are sufficiently naive about such behaviors by adults that they are much easier targets for predators.

In my case I was quite aware of the mechanics of the facts of life. Neither was I unaware that sexual experiences were intended to be pleasurable. The obscenity of the situation was that I was made/forced to have my first orgasm *unexpectedly* and without my consent, for someone else's pleasure, with someone I did not want, and at a time and place no one would want. What pleasure I received from the experience was no compensation whatsoever for the embarrassment, shame, fear of detection and even momentarily of *seizure*, and the disgusting scratch of his day-old beard on my cheek as he whispered in my ear – all of which are vividly memorable aspects of the event. I had other plans, even at that age, for the scenario of my first orgasm – I was hoping for something romantic. Such an occasion should never be so inextricably associated with a combination of fear, embarrassment, shame, and disgust.

There is one common statistic that begs the following question: How many children, of either sex, have been predisposed to become child sexual abusers themselves because they were not sufficiently traumatized by their original encounter with it? The statistics are available and they indicate the clear tendency of abuse victims to repeat the cycle of abuse as adults. At a critical

point in the development of one's adult sexuality, expressed approval for abusive intimacy is the most dangerous message he/she needs to receive.

But this is not all I learned from this experience. I learned that because of the conspicuous prominence of the event in one's life, one can be programmed for life in one's subconscious to be repulsed by the intimate advances of another. In a marriage, this is a damaging situation for either a man or a woman. Unless and until a person realizes that is happening in their relationship, that situation will persist. A spouse has reason to be concerned and even suspicious when faced with this kind of rejection. It is certainly nothing any worker is equipped to consider when offering their version of marriage counseling.

Another problem for men is what to say about the event in the rest of their lifetime. Men are supposed to be macho and in control and suck everything up and get on with life. That's not really the case, of course, and the most macho of men know that. But sooner or later someone will make a comment that will address the man's *secret* that he cannot respond to and dares not explain, and it reinforces in his subconscious whatever inhibitions he has accumulated because of his experience. It is possible and acceptable for many men to maintain such a macho facade as to hide every problem that originates child sexual abuse, even from himself. But in his intimate relationships he can still suffer from emotional and sexual inhibitions and inadequacies, and no connection will ever be made to his experience with abuse. Furthermore, a perceptive wife who attempts to intervene and help with such a problem can face unpleasant, even violent reactions. The law will take care of the men who beat their *nosey, prying* wives, and the workers will advise the wives to be submissive and – *whatever!* But unless and until a person realizes that is happening in their relationship, that situation will also persist.

It has been decades now since the overseer in my case passed away, and Harold has also passed away. They had both passed away before I came close to resolving all the issues in my life that I found related to that event. That was not necessary. In a climate of trust I could have seen my molester brought to justice, and I could have been counseled on how to understand what had happened to me. It would have prevented much of the subsequent reasoning in my subconscious that would disturb my psyche in later life. Instead, it took me a decade just to be assured that I was not the only one, I did nothing wrong or shameful, and Harold had in fact committed a criminal act. It took another decade to analyze my own subconscious and unravel the causes to a variety of intimacy and communication difficulties that stemmed from that event. Fortunately for me, I made a career of teaching adolescents and preparing myself to counsel troubled adolescents, and that has given me the tools to discover what most of my difficulties were. Parents, workers, and individuals in almost all other professions do not normally have those tools at their disposal, but that doesn't mean they have to go without the diagnosis. Children who see justice done and receive appropriate and timely professional counseling do not need to suffer what results from a system that hides and denies the reality of what is taking place in their midst.

This inadequacy of the ministry in dealing with CSA has for generations enabled child molestation to persist unchecked in this fellowship, and by so doing the ministry has also not acceptably contributed to the health of the core human relationship they profess to promote and support – marriage. I perceive that in the minds of many workers (probably all who fancy themselves capable of counseling couples), marriage is a contractual arrangement which lends morality to one of man's most basic and primal needs – without any regard for and scarce

knowledge of human sexuality. This is reprehensible. It matters not what scripture they find to remedy a troubled marriage – if the problem stems from unrecognized fallout from CSA they will offer nothing but window-dressing to the problem. That is unacceptable for a generation that expects marriage to be the most comfortable and intimate relationship of their lives – for the rest of their lives. Human beings are not machines that can be wound up and made to tick like a clock to deliver someone else’s message – they are individuals with sensitivities that can be traumatized and psyches that can be destroyed, and they need to be cared for so they can reflect the sensitivities necessary to sustain comfortable intimacy. Intimate relationships cannot be directed by outsiders and the dynamics of the relationship cannot be legislated. Unfortunately most workers who counsel seem to believe that advising, directing, and even legislating is *counseling*. Professional counseling is none of that.

I am sixty years old and I feel greatly blessed today with my position in life. I am a very comfortably adjusted individual, and I modestly claim that I am very highly thought of and respected by my family and my close friends. My resolution of the problems occurring from that past experience have proven valuable to me in recent years when I found myself confronted with another equally traumatizing situation – but that is another story. Importantly, it has taken me at least forty years to articulate the insights I have mentioned here. If anyone wants to help others, I implore you to be patient with them – you are not a professional counselor but you can provide empathy. Chances are the person you want to help does not fully understand his own problem, so you are not in any position to *wind him up and send him on his way*.

I sometimes wonder what happened to the guys my age who stopped coming to conventions before the time when I could talk to them about this. I know of at least 30 boys within 5-years of my age from my home town who have been at that convention as adolescents, and there are as many as fifteen other fields of workers in that region of Canada whose families have all attended conventions Harold was known to frequent. There is no telling how many boys a brazen man like Harold had molested over his lifetime.

I also become extremely annoyed with people who, because of predators like Harold who molest young males, advocate that homosexuals be singled out for censure and segregation because of their danger to children. My experience with Harold did absolutely nothing to influence my sexual orientation – we are hardwired with our sexuality at birth and no one knows what to do to change anything in that respect. Furthermore, I don’t even know for sure that Harold confined himself to male victims – child predators have been known target both sexes. Harold did have one known incident with his mature adult companion. Today I understand that my incident with Harold was not primarily a homosexual experience – it was a child molestation experience. In any case, the vast majority of homosexuals I know are not interested in children of either sex and they are not inclined to sexual assault. What we can do something about is protect our children from the people who want to molest them – child predators specifically. We have an obligation to both educate and protect all our children, including any who find themselves to be homosexual, from child molestation *of any sexual bent*. It is the abuse and molestation that damages lives. I want to lend my voice to any who are involved in taking child predators out of circulation and providing proper care for those who have been violated.

By Bob Williston, June, 2008

## PROGRESS REPORT:

**RE:** Molestation by Male Ex-Worker when Victim was approximately age 11

**COUNSELING:** Victim received none.

**CHARGES:** None

**CONVICTIONS:** None

**APOLOGIES:** None. He was quite pleased with his accomplishment and told me so.

**REACTIONS:** “He used to be a worker. A good fellow. Too bad his nerves didn’t let him stay in the work.” That statement gave me great insight into the common expression that someone had *left the work because of his nerves*.

**OFFENDER:** There is no telling how many young boys Harold victimized in his lifetime. A number of parents had complained to the overseer about Harold while he was a worker, but the overseer wouldn’t believe them. The overseer reportedly changed his mind when Harold proceeded to make advances on the overseer himself, so Harold was sent home.  
VICTIM: I thought I was having a seizure and was quite relieved when I recovered....and I spent most of the night trying to figure out what exactly had happened to me.

**QUOTABLE QUOTE:** ...what *WE* were doing was perfectly normal – it was just one of the things we were supposed to do in private and it was just not polite to talk about it with others. Everyone did it, I would come to understand, and the more I did it the more I would enjoy it and it was going to be the most wonderful experience of my life.