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Victim's reality changes forever

Her earliest memory of being sexually abused was on a changing table.

More crucial, though, is her vivid recollection of being a 5-year-old girl crossing her fingers and sitting on them, when the man she called "Dad" instructed her, "You must never tell about this. Do you promise?"

It was only years later, after she did tell about the sexual molestation and "all hell broke loose," that Jennifer Giandalone realized she'd been molested countless times over the course of years.

And, the 51-year-old survivor says, it's taken years to recover.

"There were times when I probably wanted to be dead," the slender, brown-haired woman recalls, overlooking the tranquility of the Buckland garden behind her home. "There were times when I was so disconnected from feeling alive that I probably was dead, spiritually and psychically."

It wasn't until seven years of intensive psychotherapy following the death of both her real mother and her half-brother, that she could even begin the journey back to remember what had happened.

"Much of it was occluded," said Giandalone, the daughter of an unmarried advertising copywriter in Brookline who wanted the birth kept secret. Sent to live with a Wakefield couple from the age of 3 weeks, the girl came to know as "Mom" and "Dad" a couple her true mother had hardly met, a couple whose abuses Giandalone kept hidden from memory for years.

"I knew I had been inappropriately ... he used to have me touch him," she says. "I'll always remember that day. He had me do this thing with his penis.

"Then he did the whole thing about 'You must never tell'" she recalls in a whisper, pausing before resuming her normal voice. "Then I did the most awesome thing: I crossed my fingers, and sat on them, and said 'I promise.' We had done this hundreds of times before. I don't know what was different about this one time, but I said, 'I promise.'

Hell broke loose

"Then I waited for his wife to come home. I told her. And all hell broke loose."

Giandalone was returned to live with her mother and step-brother after that incident. The step-brother, 10 years older, had also been sent to live elsewhere, and was physically abusive and “sexually inappropriate.”

It wasn't until she was 34 that she finally remembered the night she told what “the guy I thought was my Dad” had done to her.

“I remembered (my foster mother) flipping out, breaking furniture, breaking dishes. I tasted blood in my mouth, because I'd been beaten and was on the floor and it was that vivid that I tasted blood.”

Years afterward, she was able to confirm the event by talking to the couple's teenage daughters, who been there that night.

“The woman nutted out, and the guy who was abusing me had to get some help. And it was dealt with in the family,” recalls Giandalone, who is still in touch with one of the daughters.

“And yes, he had abused both his daughters. They slept in the same room, and neither knew the other was being abused 'til years after they moved away from home and talked about it.”

Rescued by her true mother, the 5-year-old girl's life was still in a shambles. Her mother would lock her in their Brookline apartment for months.

“There was no discussion about what had happened,” remembers Giandalone, whose half-brother died when she was 21, followed four years later by the death of their mother.

Therapy begins

“A lot of dynamics went into screwing me up. Until I was 25, I didn't know what was wrong. I thought the world was going to end any minute. I didn't feel dirty or slimy until I started getting the memories. Then I started to feel awful. I was kind of drifting and aimless.”

Within three months after her mother's death, she began therapy to help her deal with overwhelming feelings of impending doom.

“I felt the world was going to end. I was terrified by everything. I'd dive under tables,” she remembers. “I think I can identify with prisoners of war in that horrible flashback type thing. It wasn't like I could control that at all. ”

With the help of 24 years of therapy, including biweekly sessions for about three years, Giandalone says, “I learned a lot of life skills that I'd missed out on 'cause I was so scared of everything. (My therapist) was there, in the same place, at the same time, and it took seven years before I started feeling safe enough to start remembering things.”

The fact that her mother and brother were now absent from her life was no coincidence, she believes.

"I think they both had to be dead; a lot of things had to converge for me to feel safe enough to begin to remember. When the memories started, it was like a five or six-year nonstop train. I never pieced it together 'til the flashbacks started, at about age 32."

The memories were of sexual abuse that she realized had been done to her countless times.

"Al had some buddies," she said matter-of-factly of the man who she thought of as her father. "I don't know exactly what it was, but there were a few people who did this to me."

As central as those events had been in Giandalone's life, emerging from years buried from her conscious mind, they still send her thoughts elsewhere as she surveys the garden and she pauses in the critical telling:

Memories rush back

"It involved ... penetration of all orifices. I was (diagnosed) in 1990 with 'disassociative identities disorder,' so I was often somewhere else: often I was in (Hans Christian) Anderson's fairy tales, and I remember a big fascination with volcanoes."

The young girl "blanked out" during the incidents, she recalled. "For the longest time I thought it was that one time. I just remembered his penis and having to touch it. I didn't realize that had anything to do with my fears. I remembered crossing my fingers and I remembered telling, but it was years later I remembered her freaking out and breaking dishes and being beaten up."

Life seemed to grow harder after the memories came rushing back. Giandalone also remembered years of physical abuse from the woman in Wakefield, including being "locked out of the house for hours" as a toddler.

"I went back several years ago, and I was amazed how close together those houses were," she says. "I was stunned: it was obvious the neighbors could have heard. God knows how many of the houses things like that going on in."

"Afraid of everything" as a child, then as a young adult, Giandalone was urged by a friend to seek therapy.

"I was having panic attacks all the time. I was afraid the world was going to blow up, of being annihilated, if a thundershower came in, I was going to get struck by lighting. No one else would; everyone else was safe. I was afraid if I got on a plane, it would crash, and if I got off in California, the big quake would hit. To this day, the very thought of getting on a plane makes me very upset. All that fear was how powerless I felt."

"My ability to trust was affected, but in a sort of twisted way," she said. "I'd trust people inappropriately. I'd trust people when they stole from me or broke my heart or when they lied to me. I put my trust in places where it wasn't wise."

Avoiding conflicts

Giandalone, who still avoids conflict in relationships, also noticed more difficulty in sexual relationships after her memories came flooding back.

“We were in the age of ‘free love’ and everything, so it was OK to be sexual, but I didn’t enjoy sex, and I didn’t hate it. I might as well have been a dead fish.” Only recently has she been startled to realize, “I was more sexually active before the age of 10 than I ever was after I reached the age of consent.”

Through writing, theater and art which she studied at Greenfield Community College, Giandalone’s self-expression helped her work through the intense emotions from her abused childhood. With more confidence, she began attending speak-out events against abuse.

“It helped me understand I was not alone, that this problem is huge. I couldn’t feel anger about what was done to me for a long time, but boy, I could feel anger for other women I was listening to. It was very, very important to get in touch with that anger and get it out of your body. For a while, I felt my anger could be bigger than any atomic bomb, that if I let it go I’d never stop screaming or hitting.”

To release it all, it helped her to write, to scream into pillows, to chop wood and to throw glass at the recycling center where she was living at the time.

Getting those “toxins,” as Giandalone calls them, out of her system was critical to reversing the self-destructive behaviors she says afflict many abuse survivors, whether it’s drugs or alcohol, mutilation, prostitution or eating disorders. In her own case, Giandalone suffered from anorexia, not out of any fear of being fat, but to dissociate from any bodily sensation.

“I’d just ignore feelings of hunger,” she recalls. “I would ignore an awful lot of pain. But by virtue of being on the planet 32 years and seeing the world didn’t end, I learned some basic life skills that internally I was safe enough to begin. I also had some very significant, solid, non-abusive relationships. And boy, did they make a difference!”

Looking beyond abuse

Decades after the abuse, and following years of recovery, Giandalone says she knows many other survivors “who are lost in that lost space (without) a sense of self, a sense of personal power and autonomy.

“I think the thing that’s most misunderstood (about abuse) is that the effects are very far reaching into adulthood,” she added. “The major effect is that when a child is robbed of his or her feelings of personal power, they grow into adults who don’t have feelings of personal power. We don’t consider ourselves able to make a difference. I wasn’t able to be a community citizen.

“I was wrapped up in agony. Before recovering, I was licking my wounds even though I didn’t know what the wounds were. I basically had no idea who I was.”

Giandalone, who today describes herself as “more grounded than not grounded,” believed for a long time that she would never forgive her abusers, including her mother and the wife of the man who repeatedly molested her.

“Then I felt incredibly freed when I realized it’s not my job to forgive,” she says. “I don’t even have to forgive God for letting it happen to me. Then something happened: I think there are some areas of the abuse that are just incredibly bad mistakes, bad decisions.

“Once I realized I don’t have to forgive anybody for anything, I relaxed about it, and a sense of peace came.”

— **RICHIE DAVIS**

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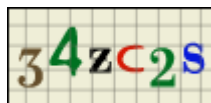
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