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Disentangling  
Trauma of  
Clerical Abuse

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# Disentangling Trauma of Clerical Abuse

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Another group of survivors/victims<sup>1</sup> have emerged from a few schools run by male religious orders in Ireland to tell of wrongdoing. They do so to raise vital awareness of the pervasive, deadening/debilitating effects of child sexual abuse (CSA) on the life of individuals, and wider. In this article I wish to revisit aspects of these stories to widen the tent of our understanding regarding the persistent, longed-for healing and restoration. Seen through the prism of their stories, we must begin to speculate in another forum whether the aetiology of all reported untoward behaviour necessarily rests on the clinical paraphilia<sup>2</sup> spectrum. What part might the socio-cultural and religious climate of the past have contributed to a less than wholesome understanding of psychosexual being? More specifically, what *compels* the wildly imaginative ways in which offenders seek to express/recover the (natural) erotic impulse?

Any attempt to relegate historical CSA to the past and move on is met with survivors telling society that there is no such thing as ‘historical’ abuse, that the effect of abuse is *enduring* and extends to intergenerational degradation. Like the ripple effect in a pond, ever-widening spirals reach far out to affect all areas of life – family, work, relationships, potential and possibilities.

It seems as if the old story is being repeated time and again, but each time the narrative has a fresh edge. Voicing presently

- 1 Both terms have their place and purpose. Generally, survivor is a term of empowerment to convey that a person has started the healing process and is striving to gain agency and peace in their lives. Victim is a term of disempowerment – having less agency in one’s own life on account of trauma suffered.
- 2 Paraphilia disorders refer to persistent and recurring intrusive sexual thoughts, sexual interests, fantasies, or behaviours of marked intensity involving children, non-consenting adults, situations that are atypical in nature e.g., paedophilia, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual sadism, etc. ....

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## THE FURROW

seems less forensic in survivors' recounting of their injuries, of their violated innocence. Rather, they themselves are their stories incarnated presence! Robbed untimely of their due potential in life, they return never endingly to confront society with a *debt* owed them, evoking afresh the horror and shame caused them; calling out those responsible to pay attention.

## PROFILE

In striving to unbind themselves from a stranglehold of earlier trauma, survivors describe being caught in a vortex of spiralling loss of potential and well-being, a loss that gradually dawns over a long period and which drives the need to compensate – a sense of being *enough* elusive. The gap seems to widen with maturation, deemed as lagging relative to their peers. Additionally, there is sometimes a tendency to position oneself at the margins, preferring the comfort of being invisible to self/others – less exposed.

It is a truism that human nature does not lend to giving in but persists in beginning again and again. As such, survivors naturally fight back, particularly when at times it may seem against all the odds. The will and drive to move away from familiar paralysing reminders of trauma is likely to be fraught with challenges. Neurologists intimate that emotions are the container for what we remember, that emotional resonances wake up past events. For example, shame felt in a different context can trigger the memory of shame associated with the original abuse. Efforts to leave familiar baggage, to reinvent oneself, does not always yield expected rewards; intrusive emotional resonances may be omniscient and omnipresent. (One survivor's anecdote mentioned how he tried to *get far away from memories until an old classmate inadvertently/innocently mentioned the offender in conversation, which left the survivor feeling unsettled with an uncanny sense that others might know of the secret that he thought hidden*).

However, memory can also free up energy, generating and empowering one to break new ground. For example, there are benefits to voice and empty the memories of events - as channelled by the various senses of touch, taste, sight, smell etc. At the same time *memory* can be partly flawed, may not reconstruct events quite as they happened, the sequencing not always logical as it gathers and curates as it sees fit. Important in this regard is recognition that this is the lens through which a survivor's traumatic event(s) is perceived, that has characterised his or her life in ways. Acceptance can help the person move towards another place; urging forensic accuracy of memory can be futile.

## DISENTANGLING TRAUMA OF CLERICAL ABUSE

Of course, professional help and supportive friends, loved ones, organisations, etc. all help to make a journey none can do alone. Survivors and professionals are realising the need to *decode* learned coping skills, recoding these through continuous unlearning and relearning towards fulfilled living. Closely affiliated is a determination to interrupt the cycle of intergenerational degradation. We are learning from family therapists that adult children of parents who are themselves survivors can take on the persona of ‘victim’, blighting their sense of agency over their lives - even though they were never actually abused themselves.

For survivors who are believers in a Christian context, their relationship with God matters<sup>3</sup>. Some speak with sorrow of the wilting of a once thriving faith life. Loss of existential meaning and purpose can render one somewhat rudderless in life. Many in their mature years floundering in hapless ways – struggling with alcohol, drugs, despair, self-hate, interpersonal turmoil etc – are asking where now to search for the Wise One as guide or muse? Others remain confuddled by the behaviour of priest-offenders, once emulated to be ideal Christian role models.

Ultimately, the tragedy of having one’s first sexual encounter with a priest can be crushing. It is difficult if not impossible to reconcile the unrightful taking of one’s innocence, an irreplaceable loss.

Survivors/victims cannot help ruminating – *What if CSA did not happen to me? What would my life be like now?* They long to turn back time; they know that they could never return to being the person they were before CSA, that complete resolution may be out of reach.

### FRESH EYES AND EARS

We are all familiar with harrowing stories of CSA. But can we steel ourselves to walk in the shoes or inhabit their skin for a moment? Take sons. They revere walking the corridors of the same school once walked by a parent, continuing the family legacy. Then noble hopes for making family proud are dashed by the interception of CSA. The loss incurred may smear the ancestral story, which may stretch back generations. The once felt pride and joy are now interchanged with the yoke of responsibility for family misfortune.

All parents aspire to want something ‘more and better’ for their offspring. For many it might require substantial sacrifice to afford sending their children to the ‘best’ schools for ‘best’ outcome. In addition, being educated within a Christian ethos, nurturing the

3 See Johanna Merry. ‘Faith and Survivors of Abuse’. *Doctrine & Life*, Volume 75 No.4 (April 2023), p. 2-9.

## THE FURROW

potential to be a model productive citizen, enhances parental wishes for their children. Short-changed by the visitation of CSA can result in a *life-long* struggle for families as well as victims to conciliate.

Compounding extended offence, children or adolescents wrestle to reconcile the dilemma of withholding the truth of unhappy experiences from their parents, often choosing *not* to tell. Why so? Seduced by an offender into being made to feel special and bound by silence, or singled out for punishment for resisting overtures, are both well documented ploys. Not wanting to hurt parents, save them pain and disappointment, demolishing their belief and trust in the clerical church in which their lives are rooted and sustained. Survivors may settle to offer an *edited* version of their narrative to avoid inflicting a double pain, or tarnishing the cherished bond with their parents. Where parents have passed on, regret in having denied them the right to know the full extent of what happened can linger....

There is an added dilemma around disclosures. Say where the CSA occurred at age ten, the adult survivor/victim may have kept their ten-year-old self hidden with its bruises and secrets. It can be unnerving when a decision is taken to out the hidden secret and tell 'other', it may be with a vague assuredness that it can then be nailed back into its coffin. It rarely transpires as such but wakes up again and again in unexpected ways and places ... each time equally distressing as first time.

Further incongruities can damage well-being. Survivors report incidences of corporal punishment, calling out experiences whereby the offender, known or unknown to himself, appeared to get erotic pleasure in disproportionate, repetitive beatings. The one beaten is left to make meaning of the *why* of excess ... perhaps well deserved? In mature recollection, survivors of extreme corporal punishment comment upon a demeaned sense of self in complicity saddling a guilt and shame not their own. Rather, the responsibility of an offender seemingly dissociating from the offence.

In a similar way subtle boundary crossing behaviours have been veiled under the guise of *sports*. Many survivors tell of visceral memories of inappropriate touching that corrupted their psychosexual development, with limiting consequences for subsequent relationships, enlightened and enlarged with the passing of the years.

It is not unusual for survivors who have had serial CSA experiences to puzzle over whether they are marked with a *sign* on their forehead for pre-selection, in cases singled out and passed from abuser to abuser. Some speak of turning to a trusted priest to confide their trauma but found themselves similarly compromised

## DISENTANGLING TRAUMA OF CLERICAL ABUSE

– vicariously or physically. Confessors in the past sometimes insisted on eliciting unnecessary intimate, intricate details of sexual experiences (sexual sin) as a seeming need to satisfy erotic curiosity. Individuals can be burdened with a sense of guilt, shame, fault because of a warped understanding of sexual sinfulness.

Others remember the unease of being enveloped in the mystique of being seduced by the offender, into being made to feel special and fastened by the ‘little secret’ that connected them. To discover in later years that such specialness was born out of darkness/less than wholesome can prove annihilating.

Is there any escape from the insidious nature of the erotic grasp? Could it be that attempts to squeeze out and tame the natural impulse in less than wholesome ways can kindle a reckless imagination that knows no bounds?

### BARRIERS

A unique trauma bond unites victims/survivors with each other, united in an intimate way of being able to walk in each other’s shoes because of their shared, unique life experience. The will to pursue justice is more than self-serving – it transcends to solidarity with peers, social protection and common good.

*Barriers* erected by existing laws retard progress of longed-for resolution, however partial. Survivors have encountered in their quest the Statute of Limitation, a hurdle whereby legal justice seeks to apply statute of limitation to safeguard contestable evidence that may have deteriorated over time. Given what is known of the range of vulnerabilities survivors carry, understandably some victims are just not emotionally ready to fight for justice within time-bound requirements. Counselling care or other accompaniment may take many years before they are able to do so. Eventually, with strengthened stamina some are ready to fight their case. Being statute barred can precipitate regression, despair, rage, or revenge; negative thoughts and feelings that diminish the capacity to progress matters.

A further snag in the way of justice is the 2017 Supreme Court Judgement which declared religious orders to be unincorporated associations – not a corporate body or entity. Law requires victims to name someone who can be sued, and religious orders are *not* obliged to nominate a defendant. That is a choice for the religious order to make. If they fail to nominate a defendant it falls to the victim to sue *all* members at the time of the alleged abuse as being co-responsible in part, in accordance with the 2017 Civil Liability Act. Consequently, awards of compensation can be considerably reduced given escalated legal and other costs where a number of

## THE FURROW

parties responsible are to be sued. Where proved an individual has been wronged, constitutional rights to collect entitled compensation awarded by the courts can be prolonged, suspending closure.

As it stands, legal process can impede and protract the pursuit of justice, compromising a significant marker for survivors. They are adamant that their robbed child needs *first* to get the deserved justice so that the adult survivor can be released to begin a journey of recovering due self-agency as an adult. *Delays* in processing matters can extend trauma and anxiety for already stretched victims; adding another layer of abuse?

## TURNSTILES

Longed-for steps in favour of survivors/victims to cross over legal barriers encountered are currently under consideration.

Those religious orders regarded as unincorporated associations are currently favoured by the law. Advances signalled in law reform of the 2017 Supreme Court Judgement could unlock stymied court proceedings for survivors/victims. At one time it was thought that charitable assets held in trust by religious orders was binding and could not be altered but hopes are raised that this need *not* be the case as demonstrated by happenings elsewhere, for example in Australia. Should Irish Law Reform Commission change in this regard survivors would be able to receive the debt owed them as established by the courts to expedite a significant step towards closure.

## CONCLUSION

The Irish government's March 2023 renewed commitment to carry out a victim-led inquiry into alleged historical sex abuse in schools run by religious orders has resulted from persistent advocacy by CSA survivors. Any findings will hopefully stretch contemporary systemic understanding of the complex entanglements of CSA. Conversations in the public domain are allowing the possibility to move hearts and minds to do the right thing (in the case of religious orders, conceding to name a defendant).

Incremental CSA discourses compel us to lay bare the patent need to reckon with the power of our complex erotic drive – *eros* as nature's impulse for life. How can we be moved to redefine and redirect its creative power to make respectful, elegant connections with all of life? Sebastian Barry in his recent fictional work<sup>4</sup> bemoans 'all the dead children' that fail to thrive under Christian righteousness. He intimates that there are sad stations of memory, but now there is strength for fight.

4 Barry, Sebastian. *Old God's Time*. London: Faber and Faber, 2023.

## DISENTANGLING TRAUMA OF CLERICAL ABUSE

Could it be time for us as Church/ society to adjust the pegs, enlarge the site of our tents, draw back the awnings (Isaiah 54:2) to cast *light* on what old stories might teach us anew so that lives can flourish, no part of us dies, and unrightful violation of innocence debarred? Could it be that God is in the fight, ... *the Lord your God himself will fight for you* (Deut. 3:22), not just for survivors/ victims themselves, but for generations to come?

**A beautiful World.** We have a beautiful world and we humans are behaving towards it in an irresponsible way. Understanding what is going on is vital for everyone so that the steps needed to sort this out can be taken and supported. We share our world - there are other ways of living besides ours. We do need to understand this. We are only one species and yet so often the attitude to an unrecognised fellow species and sharer of our world is 'what is this and what will it do to me?' Or 'what is this and how do I get rid of it?' It's not all about me, actually- it's all about us all. If we don't know how the world works, how can we possibly know how to behave in it? By a series of amazing coincidences, planet earth is suitable for living things to exist on. This is so remarkable that, as of yet, in all the galaxies in space that we have discovered, we have not found a single other place where we have detected living things. There are no other planets to which we can migrate when we have banjaxed this one.

- ÉANNA NÍ LAMHNA, *Wild Musings: A Celebration of the Natural World*, Dublin: Beehive Books, 2023, p. 18.