

Bonus / Deleted Material from Facing the Sunshine

By Sara Jane Thornton

Throughout my treatment and these more recent autumn months in my father's house, the inner insight I have gained while healing from childhood sexual abuse and all that comes with it prompted me to reexamine the following words.

ACCEPTANCE: Early in life I mastered the art of nonacceptance, refusing to give credence to anything my senses told me was true. Unconsciously, I created a deep-rooted fallacy, believing that if I accepted the poignant veracity of my situation, than I would be approving of it. It was difficult to take off my blindfold and step out of denial. The truth, however, set me free, while denial restricted my potential to heal. When I stopped wishing that my life was different and agreed to see circumstances as they were, I was finally able to begin healing. It was important for me to distinguish acceptance (openness to the truth) from approval (liking the truth). To heal, I finally had to accept that I'd been sexually abused and stop wishing my childhood had been different. With that I could see that though I can't change what happened in the past I can refuse to continue living as a victim.

ANGER: My childhood was a time of great uncertainty; however, there was one thing I understood, I was angry. Although getting angry is a part of being human, it became problematic for me when I expressed it destructively and without regard for its causes. Holding on to anger, on the other hand, also destroyed both me and the people around me. I displaced my anger onto those whom I viewed as safe and non-threatening, by verbally, and at times, physically abusing them. And through self destructive acts, I defaced my body and held it liable for my father's actions. When I finally directed my anger at the proper source, my father, I was able to put accountability where it belonged. When my father took back the burden of responsibility, by admitting to his grave misconduct, the grey skies that had for so long loomed over lifted, and I was at last able to let go. Relinquishing the anger also involved investigating the purpose of it, and the truth was, the only purpose that my unexpressed anger toward my father was serving, was to impede my path to intimacy with loved ones and prevent me from healing.

BALANCE: At the age of six, the equilibrium that existed in my fragile world was disrupted when my innate ability to foster a healthy sexuality was severed. The sexual abuse was deeply entrenched in my emotional and spiritual wellbeing, and in an effort to evade nurturing these plagued facets, I became keenly focused on the physicality of my being. Recently, I have come to appreciate that living a balanced life is about giving equal importance to all aspects of my being: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, sexual, and spiritual. By consciously refusing to neglect the entirety of my self, I am able to benefit from a diverse range of outlets, experience an inner state of harmony, and lead a much richer and gratifying life.

CHALLENGES: Ever Since I was a young child, I viewed challenges as unconquerable mountains. Standing at the base of a challenge, I always felt like an unequipped climber. It was only when I received treatment, and gained the proper tools, that I started seeing the potential within the feat. It was crucial that I stop viewing challenges in my life as misfortunes and to start seeing them as blessings. Seen from this vantage point, I realized that challenges become hurdles that, once approached, encourage learning and growth. Accepting challenges makes my life worth living.

CHANGE: With a chaotic home life, as a child and young adolescent, change brought further instability. I was always content to marinate in what seemed familiar. I have come to value that change is inevitable and therefore to be expected. By contrast, hopes for permanence set me up for a letdown. When I attempt to hold on to past patterns or circumstances, I encounter turmoil and distress at every turn; but when I stop trying to control outer events and accept the inevitability of change, I find peace of mind.

CONTROL: As a child, naturally I could control very little. However, the loss of control I experienced at age six took on a momentous meaning. Environmental regulations ceased to be of importance, fighting with my mother over what was being prepared for dinner paled in comparison to the ongoing battle I engaged in with my father over control of my body. Now I see that, although I cannot control what life brings to me, I can control how I react to the circumstances and whether I view myself as a victim or a survivor. I cannot control the fact that I was sexually abused or developed anorexia nervosa, but I can choose to create meaning from hardship and use my experiences for the higher good of humanity.

DIVORCE: Growing up in a moderately conservative community, the notion of nonconformity did not resonate well. At a young age, I learnt that the narrow definitions of “divorce” and the components of a “family unit” can lead to insecurities and other high-risk factors in early childhood. Regardless of my turbulent environment, living as a traditional family concurred with the norm. I gained a false sense of security in the approval I received for being a member of a customary family. Although I habitually prayed for my mother to leave my father, when the time came, I felt unusually conflicted. The stability of my surroundings might have started taking form, but the magnitude of it was diminished; I no longer fit into the mold that I had been accustomed to, and my long standing identity had been disrupted. Now, I have come to conclude that it is not the composition of the members that is significant, but of the setting. Children require a loving, nurturing environment where they can feel secure and know their needs will be met, a place to grow freely and be surrounded by trusted people. Removed from the situation, I value that it’s never in a child’s best interest to stay in a setting characterized by neglect, abuse, or violence—even if freedom from such circumstances requires parental divorce.

EATING DISORDERS: At age nineteen, I didn't awake one morning and willfully decide that I was going to develop a life-threatening disorder: anorexia nervosa. The illness had been gradually and silently manifesting throughout my childhood and early adolescence. Long before relying on a food and weight obsession as a means for redirecting and channeling the mental distress I was experiencing as a result of the sexual abuse, I engaged in acts of self-mutilation and abused drugs and alcohol.

Eating disorders are signs of emotional and psychological problems and do not simply reflect a "phase" that an individual is going through. These problems are serious and need to be addressed. And although people with eating disorders focus on food, body image, calories, and eating rituals, weight is not the issue, unless the situation is life-threatening; rather, the factor requiring attention is the *underlying cause* of the disorder. An eating disorder is just the tip of a vast iceberg; it is the part under the water that must be faced.

Unfortunately, my disorder was not the result of one particular cause. On the road of destruction, the meaning behind my disorder continually altered to correspond with an unmet need, or to serve a purpose. I believed I was nothing, and unworthy of simple pleasures; therefore, I was condemned to live in a world where even the 6.7 calories in a stick of gum needed to be painstakingly earned. Self-starvation enabled me to develop a false sense of control over my body, one in which I was deprived of as a child. Anorexia was a physical expression of the self-hatred I held for myself and my body. However, eventually the warmth and support I received while ill served as a persuasive motivator to maintain my illness. Finally, anorexia nervosa became my identity; it made me exceptional, and self-starvation was something I could possibly do better than anyone I knew.

Eating disorders mask both pain and potential. Thus, when people are ill, their behavior cannot be seen as reflecting their authentic selves. At such times the job of friends and family is not to correct the behavior but only to be supportive and patient as one day at a time the individual learns to break the cycle of addiction that's been held in place to conceal the pain.

Most people suffering from an addiction recover in their own time, using a variety of methods. Personally, gaining control of my disorder involved three crucial steps: first, deciding to actively participate as a team member involved choosing life, as anorexia was but a slow and certain suicide; second, addressing the fundamental cause, as anorexia was only a symptom of a deeper problem; and finally, redefining myself. Shedding the anorexic identity, and discovering my authentic self; not seeking to recapture what was before the illness, but rather build a new sense of self.

Although every individual with anorexia shares similar symptoms, we have each developed the disorder for our own reasons, and the road to healing and recovery is a personal journey. To generalize my experience onto others would be to feed into the textbook mentality I was so often treated with.

FORGIVENESS: As hard as it has been at times to imagine releasing justifiable anger or hate, I see that's precisely what is necessary for healing and gaining internal freedom. I was suffocating from resentment. Seeking revenge at every turn, I would relive my pain and torture, so much so that I was unable to bring closure to the past. I finally realized that justice would be done through karma and I no longer needed to play the role of judge and jury. I needed instead to be willing to forgive, not only my father but myself, realizing that the sexual abuse was not my fault. To stop punishing myself for the past, I also had to forgive myself for the pain I had caused others as a result of my poor choices. Forgiving does not mean sanctioning or forgetting, but rather choosing to no longer allow mistakes or wrong actions of the past to cloud my life with hostility and bitterness.

HEALING: Throughout the assorted methods of treatment I had received for childhood sexual abuse and anorexia, I had found it to be exceptionally difficult to conform to another's definition of what is therapeutic. I could not see the rational in gaining weight in an effort to smoke cigarettes, nor did I in being kept from human interaction. I have come to believe that we each need to seek our own methods and timetable for healing, since it is a personal journey for learning and evolving. I took a long time to heal, because as creatures of habit, I was reluctant to relinquish familiar behaviors. For instance, I tended not to allow my scars to heal but kept picking at them reopening old wounds. Many times I seemed to be healed but reverted to old self-destructive behaviors, unable to come to terms with my past. Now, though some people who know my sexual abuse history are shocked that I am living with my father, I know it's time to face my fears and forgive so I can move forward in my life. I also find it necessary to disclose the truth about my past to others by writing about it.

HOPE: At the age of six, the insight I had acquired on being powerless, detonated a long-term deficiency in hope, and contributed to frequent bouts of despair. Hope urges us on during dark times and keeps our spirit alive. With the exception of my faith in a higher power, hope is what kept me alive. In fact, it was during the times I lost hope that I attempted to take my own life. In the past, hope has been sporadic and inconsistent in its manifestation; however, I have always been able to recognize it by its ability to fuel my dream for a better future, one graced by more expression of my potential.

LETTING GO: My relationship with my mother had remained stagnate throughout the years, because despite the insight I had acquired regarding the unfavorable consequences associated with being mentally ill, I had been unable to cease holding her accountable for the errors she had made while in a state of depression. I am now able to see that a key catalyst in recovery is letting go of the past. Wishing my past could have been different had been a waste of time

and energy; accepting my past, although I may not applaud it, means I will not have to relive it in my mind. My past reflects mistakes from which I have learned and forms the foundation for my future, but when I focus on it, I miss reaping the benefits of the present and forfeit my future. Letting go of my mother's misconduct has enabled me to take pleasure in the fabulous woman she is today.

MENTAL ILLNESS: In early childhood, I could not grasp that my father's molestation had been the result of a sickness; after all, he had appeared to look healthy, especially to his neighbors and colleagues. Recently, he has been diagnosed with a dissociative disorder, which served as the origin for his initial lapse in memory. Although I am unable to relate to my father's unsettling misconduct, and the cause of it remains inconclusive, I have found refuge in the empathy I now possess for those whose brain functioning is compromised.

As perhaps a method of defense, my father had often used derogatory terms and outdated inaccuracies to define the mentally ill. Influenced by his prejudice outlook, I viewed those with a mental illness as being homeless or superficially possessed. With an insider's view, I discovered that mental illnesses do not discriminate the way in which I did, that a diagnosis does not define who I am, and that a mental disorder is not a life-sentence consumed by illness.

Mental illness is as serious and real as physical illness, but because the psychological disturbances it gives rise to are less visible it is often dismissed or misunderstood. Nearly all mental illnesses derive from a chemical imbalance in the brain or a traumatic event. The brain is an intricate organ, and to believe it is resistant from disease is irrational. Moreover, labeling psychiatric patients as crazy and incompetent proves to be both inaccurate and as debilitating as calling people with AIDS gay men. It is because of such societal stigmas that many people with a mental illness opt to live undiagnosed or refuse to pursue treatment, which further prevents them from achieving self-determination and integration into society. In a world rich with resources and education, it is essential to face two important truths: no one suffering from a serious mental illness has willed it into being, and no one is immune.

PERFECTIONISM: I have spent a great deal of time striving for perfection, and viewing myself as a failure when I am not a model of it. I have come to accept that perfection is a great waste of time and energy. As a human, I was not created to be perfect, which explains why striving for perfection means setting myself up for a letdown. It is through the imperfections inherent in mistakes that I am able to learn and grow.

RESPECT: During my upbringing, I was taught to show respect for my elders, but not for myself. Like love, I had been unable to respect myself; consequently, I had been incapable of showing it to others. Disrespecting my body, the enemy, I cut, burned, and starved it. With such an intensity of disregard, I engaged in unprotected and reckless sexual acts with countless strangers and partners, and

unfortunately, my promiscuity only encouraged further episodes of disrespect. Today, I am cognizant that among the greatest attributes I can possess is respect for myself and others, and that I shall only be able to treat others as well as I treat myself.

RESPONSIBILITY: As a young child, it was my parent's obligation to assume a considerable portion of responsibility for my behavior. As I aged, I had been naturally expected to take on more responsibility, as my parents took on less. I however, had failed to do so, continually seeking out internal sources to credit my actions to. My ill-temper had been the result of my inherited genetics or my parent's approach to child rearing, and my victories had been achieved by coincidence or with the aid of good fortune. Now, I am mindful that taking responsibility means being accountable for my actions, and even my thoughts. I also realize that it is my choice whether the inescapable consequences of decisions are beneficial and empowering, or destructive and adverse.

SURVIVAL: I had become comfortable with the title and role of casualty. Passively surrendering and ignoring my innate instinct for survival had been a far less taxing path to follow; however, it had also been a far less rewarding one as soon learned. For survival, I needed to find the incentives in my challenges, the purpose behind the pain. We all suffer misfortunes, and enduring them well often hinges on simply remembering that someone else is certainly worse off than I am. I had the choice of living as a victim or a survivor. As a victim, I had let unfortunate conditions and those who have wronged me win my internal tug-of-war; as a survivor, I am the victor. By throwing in the towel and admitting defeat, I had allowed a curable disorder to overcome my will to survive.

TRUTH: In the past, being dishonest to myself and others had become a way of life. Lying had served as a persuasive defense mechanism; it had protected me from the overwhelming grief that coincided with the truth. Yet, having not been able to define the origin of my anorexia had insidiously hindered my ability to recover from it, as identification constitutes half the battle. Also, being deceitful to others, having to recall what mistruths I told, and to whom, consumed my energy. Presently, I am aware that telling the truth is what keeps me free, whereas lying only complicates my life. By writing candidly, I have experienced not only an unfamiliar vulnerability, but also an acute feeling of liberation.

VIOLENCE: Unable to articulate my grief and anger, I became a destructive force, verbally and physically causing harm to myself and others. Violence had been a strong solution for my weak-mindedness. The lack of dexterity I had in the management of my emotions contributed to my violent outbursts. Passively acknowledging the cause of my violent temper had been inadequate; actively taking control it has become the key to constructively altering my reactions. Instead of suppressing rage, I work through it with the tools I have since acquired by participating in anger management. In addition, by regularly practicing how to be assertive, I no longer feel the urge to express myself aggressively.