

Publisher's Note

When I first read Sara's manuscript, it hurt so much that I could read only a chapter at a time. She made me feel her pain, despair, and occasional desire to die. I was also terribly frustrated as I read. At times, she'd write a sentence or paragraph professing hope for herself, and I'd buy it. I'd get excited that the agony she so eloquently described—and I experienced with her—was over. But a few sentences later, she'd be hurting herself *again* without any explanation of why she couldn't act on the hopeful thinking she had just described. Sometimes she'd make a brief reference to her father, the man who sexually abused her, and I'd hope she'd tell me more so I could better understand her circumstances, but nothing more would follow. Yet the more I read, the more I realized how exquisitely authentic were her words. She was writing to survive, not sell books. And she was bringing us through her ordeal in a way that few guides ever accomplish. I felt honored to be let into her world as it was. As a human being and a youth care specialist, I knew her her words made me better.

When I decided to publish *Facing the Sunshine*, I knew some of the missing pieces and mood swings would need to be addressed to make the book friendlier and more informative to the reader since its goal is to bring light and warmth. I think this final edition does that. The editor has managed to capture and maintain the raw emotion of Sara's experience but has also encouraged Sara to add enough information to beautifully fill in the pieces of a fractured life that has healed.

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Preface

Little did I realize at age six that pushing my bed against the door at night and pleading not to be sent on father-daughter trips on weekends reflected an instinctive fight for survival. Nor did I imagine the battle, enshrouded in clouds of darkness, would rage on after the midnight visits finally ended, six long years later. But it did.

Facing the Sunshine is a true account of a journey to well-being following a childhood lost in the shadows of sexual abuse and subsequent mental illness. The journey began with the arduous retrieval of traumatic experiences, an ordeal that tested me, for I had buried some in places far from my consciousness. The more of them I unearthed, however, the better equipped I became to understand my inner self. Fortified by these insights, I eventually came to terms with my menacing past so I could heal. But it was in writing about my recovery—not only from the childhood sexual abuse but from the ensuing struggle with everything from obsessive-compulsive disorder and anorexia nervosa to suicide attempts—that I found meaning in my past, which enabled me to reconnect with the boundless spirit I once possessed.

While this book explores my personal winding path to self-awareness and recovery as a foundation for future wellness, it is also about the amazing survival instinct and potential we all have for healing. And whereas some segments may be offensive to the reader, the purpose of including explicit descriptions of my experiences is to inspire, challenge, and educate individuals suffering from such disorders, as well as those assisting in the healing.

I am very grateful for the many people who influenced my life and those who encouraged me to write about it in this book. Although it is based on actual events and individuals, their names have been changed to protect their privacy. I have decided not to protect my father, however; nor do I wish to shame him or cause my family to suffer as a result of public disclosure of private experiences, but only to reveal the elements necessary for healing to occur. For me to make sense of my childhood misery, it had to have a purpose; similarly, in sharing my past through the writing of this book, I hope to shape a new future.

To best express the various facets of my healing, the book alternates between present insights and excerpts from journals written during my participation in a variety of treatments. As such, it presents the entire evolution of my disorders as well as my fears and eventual insights about recovering. They will have more than served their purpose if these experiences help the reader better understand others who have suffered the agony of abuse and, perhaps more importantly, assist them in anticipating an infinitely brighter future.

Introduction

I decided in September of 2000, at age twenty-four, to come back to my childhood home, the place where my problems began, to make it the place where they would finally end. My intent was to undergo a symbolic suicide and rebirth—to quickly close what I considered to be a sad and forgettable chapter of my life and start anew, only to learn that this chapter was in fact still being composed. In retrospect, I realize that I was drawn back to my childhood home to resolve the conflicts that still plagued my troubled body, mind, and soul.

As it turned out, I stayed for two years, living under the same roof with my father, who had sexually abused me as recently as twelve years before. My mother, older brother, and older sister had by then moved out, so the sole occupants were my father and myself. During my first one hundred days at home I compiled this book, interweaving accounts of my time there with journal entries I'd made during my previous two years of hospital treatment. Subsequently I attended college and exorcised a few demons. In addition, I transformed the basement of the house, applying fresh paint that I now know will never obliterate my dismal memories of the place. I didn't touch the upper half of the house, however. It remains as if time stood still—with its 1970s shag carpet, the smell of mothballs on my dead grandmother's furniture, and the curtains my mother hung while she was pregnant with me.

My father now lives alone in this house. In fact, it occurs to me that maybe he was alone when we all lived here together. He struggles often with the realization that he sexually abused me, alternating between expressing remorse, accountability, and a desire to understand his past actions. He also clings tenaciously to a memory of my childhood as innocent and joyful. It is no coincidence that my room has been restored to look as it did then, with small twin beds, Girl Scout uniforms hanging in the closet, and propped in the corner, two teddy bears that comforted me in the menacing hours after midnight.

While my father admits to having blocks about the past, I have not been as fortunate. I remember what he did to me in the shower, under his covers, and on the plaid couch in the basement. I also recall the recurring game of "hot dog." It is little wonder, then, that writing this book in the solitude of my father's basement ignited a flood of emotions. Being home literally and figuratively, I subsequently felt a wheel of health and absolution in ceaseless motion, initiating waves of catharsis.

The chapters that follow, arranged chronologically during those first one hundred days in my father's house, juxtapose my unexpected experiences there with a chronicle of my fractured life as I knew it until that time. The first four chapters address the horrors leading to the demise of my childhood and

adolescence, which ultimately yielded symptoms of anorexia nervosa, a debilitating eating disorder. The next six chapters describe the controversial, and often adverse, treatment I underwent at the hands of a pedantic and regimented physician on staff at the local hospital. Chapter 11 examines the challenges I faced as a result of leaving treatment prematurely. Chapter 12 portrays the mismanagement I suffered upon being readmitted on involuntary status, after which I was transferred to a facility approximately two hours from my hometown. Chapters 13 and 14 chronicle the more self-empowering treatment I received at this facility, where I spent time as both an involuntary and voluntary patient. Chapters 15 and 16 elucidate a thwarted attempt to reclaim my freedom and well-being while living independently. Finally, in Chapter 17 the past merges with the present, allowing me to embrace the moment while finding purpose in those that came before.

To avoid propagating the textbook mentality that guided a significant portion of my four years of treatment, it must be pointed out that my experience with anorexia cannot justifiably be generalized to that of others. Although common threads and related symptoms unite anorexia sufferers, we are more than our diagnosis and self-destructive behaviors. We are each an individual on a path of our own, lit continually by the guiding spirit of love, no matter how dark the night may seem. In the end, it was the enormous constellation of love in my midst that saved my life and taught me how to love myself. For when I faced the sunshine the shadows fell behind.