

# SOARING ABOVE THE ASHES

## INTRODUCTION

I never thought I'd write this book. And publicly identify myself as someone who was sexually abused? Never! I had too much shame and fear.

Shame can do that to us. All humans experience it, but for sexual abuse survivors, it is an especially heavy burden. Shame persuades us to stay small so we won't be noticed. Fear convinces us to keep our mouths shut. Even without weapons or words, our abuser's power threatened us into silence. Besides, if we tell, people may blame us, turn their backs, or run the other way. So we carry our shame buried deep inside and create a mask that shields us. I know I did.

In the beginning, I figured I could write this book as an expert in trauma recovery, Dr. Psychologist. But the more survivors I met, the more I felt like a fraud. There I was, asking people to tell their stories, give their names, and show their faces, while I hid behind my title. Their openness and honesty inspired me to break my silence. I came clean. So here I am in these pages, sharing my story, too. I know the healing journey as a survivor and a guide. Between the stories I also describe the emotional and psychological processes that are a part of healing from abuse.

I have been a trauma therapist for over 35 years. In my graduate studies in psychology, I was taught that incest happens in one out of a million families. When I started my psychotherapy practice in the late 1970s, my first four clients were incest survivors—abused by father, stepfather, uncle, and mother. Either I had hit the jackpot, or there was an awful lot more incest going on behind closed doors.

It turned out not to be the jackpot.

If you are female, your chance of being sexually abused by the age of 18 is one in four. If you are male, it's one in six. That means over 40 million females and almost 26 million males in the United States have suffered the helplessness, terror, and humiliation of sexual abuse. They hide in plain sight. They are working in the cubicle next to yours, performing surgery on you, building your home, policing your street, and walking door-to-door with their daughters to sell Girl Scout cookies.

Dealing with the ugliness done to children is heartbreak. I bear witness to my clients' suffering. To heal, they travel deep inside to reach the source of their wounds. Along the way, they feel their terror, grieve their lost childhoods, rage against their violation, and move past their shame. I hold the flashlight to guide them through the darkness inside. I am with them as they return to the light, transformed.

As rewarding as my work is, bearing witness to so much pain threatened to sap my spirit. I wanted to find hope for my clients and for myself. I was eager to listen to the stories of empowered survivors who had moved beyond their shame, to learn about how they struggled and how they healed.

I wanted to meet people in person, so I traveled to North Carolina, Texas, New York, Ohio, New Mexico, Massachusetts, California, Virginia, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Washington, D.C. If only I had made a map of the connections to healers, activists, and survivors. The strands would

be woven into a massive tapestry. There's a community out there, but many of us go it alone and don't realize we're members.

In this book you'll meet men and women who have freed themselves from the prison of abuse. Some of their stories are wrenching. Some are graphic. All of the storytellers speak the truth as they remember it. They tell their stories in their own voices, edited from face-to-face interviews. They show us what courage is all about. It's not about being fearless. It's about acknowledging the fear, but summoning the strength to keep moving forward despite it. They speak openly about their struggles with the unspeakable: the story of their sexual abuse, how they were shaped by it, and what they've done to heal.

In black-and-white portraits, their faces tell stories, too. They are proud faces, free of shame. Each face says, "Look me in the eye. It happened, but it didn't break me. I've done my work to recover."

As adults, they now have the safety to hear the pain of the children they used to be, and the power and language to give voice to their experiences. They are thriving in the present with meaningful work, healthy partnerships, fulfilling friendships, and creative endeavors. Each one has a compelling story to tell and a triumph to celebrate.

If you are one of those children who were hurt, the men and women in this book are speaking to you. They are saying, "We did it. So can you. Sexual abuse doesn't have to be a life sentence." Others have forged the path through the darkness of their own history. They've emerged into the light of day. Yes, healing hurts. We have to remember what we've worked so hard to forget. Diving into our memories, feeling the grief and rage, moves us through to the other side where we can thrive. If we face the past with compassion for the children we were, we can become strong at the broken places—wiser, more resilient, and even joyful.

This book was created to:

- Offer hope to all the survivors who are still struggling to outrun their pain
- Help survivors heave the burden of shame off their backs and place it where it belongs—on the backs of their abusers, the silent bystanders, and the institutions that provide safe havens for perpetrators
- Encourage survivors to step forward and share their secrets
- Reassure society that it is possible to survive a horrific childhood violation, that victims are not beyond hope, that there is the promise of a meaningful life after sexual abuse

To be honest, when I started writing I wanted to reassure myself.

And I did.

I hope this book will do the same for you.