

The classic book by the author of *MEN WHO HATE WOMEN* and *THE WOMEN WHO LOVE THEM* bestselling

BETRAYAL OF INNOCENCE

Revised, with a new introduction by Dr. Susan Forward

Incest
and Its Devastation

Dr. Susan Forward
and Craig Buck



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BETRAYAL OF INNOCENCE

Dr. Susan Forward is one of the world's leading authorities on incest and sexual abuse. She has personally treated over fifteen hundred victims of childhood sexual abuse, and her unique and effective treatment methods have been replicated around the country. She has been in the forefront of the movement to raise public awareness of this issue through her extensive media work and during her six years as host of her own daily national radio program on ABC Talkradio.

Dr. Forward has testified as an expert witness in numerous trials, and in 1980 she founded the first sexual abuse treatment center in Southern California.

Her second book, *Men Who Hate Women and The Women Who Love Them*, was the biggest selling self-help book of 1986.

Dr. Forward has offices in Encino and Tustin, California. She lives in Beverly Hills, has two children, and is currently at work on her third book.

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Names and other identifying characteristics of the people whose stories appear in this book have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

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1 Betrayal of Innocence: An Introduction

This is not so much a book about incest as it is a book about people—all kinds of people. There are more than ten million Americans whose lives have been touched by incest, and they come from every economic, cultural, racial, educational, religious, and geographical background. They are doctors, policemen, prostitutes, secretaries, artists, and merchants. They are heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual. They are happily married and four-times divorced. They are leading productive lives and they have been convicted of murder. They are emotionally stable and they have multiple personalities. In short, the people whose stories appear in this book have only one thing in common: incest.

My work with the incest trauma grew out of the large number of group therapy sessions that I conducted through the years in hospitals, juvenile facilities, substance abuse programs, and my private practice. I was amazed, at the beginning of my career, at the number of patients who began to disclose during therapy sessions that they had been victims of incest. As I began to become more skillful and sensitive in dealing with this issue, more people began turning to me for help in this area and I'm sure many more had incest stories that they never found the courage to tell.

This work alone would have been sufficient to qualify me to

write this book, so as the publisher's deadline for the first edition of *Betrayal of Innocence* approached, I agonized over whether it was necessary to reveal that I, too, had been victimized in a similar way by my father. I had kept this experience carefully hidden from family and friends for most of my life. The thought of a sudden, public disclosure was terrifying. I considered remaining secure behind my professional credentials, but I realized that if I were to persuade others to break through their walls of secrecy and shame, I had to be willing to do so myself.

TEN MILLION VICTIMS

For many years, incest was regarded as a bizarre experience occurring only in certain socioeconomic groups. We know now that incest has been shrouded in myths, in distortions, and in painfully erroneous statistics that served to comfort middle-class America that it only happened to "those strange people out there." The reality is that incest is ruthlessly democratic and that it occurs in all social, economic, educational, and professional levels. We also know, from every responsible study, that at least one out of ten children is molested by a trusted family member. I strongly believe that even these figures are too conservative, even though they may seem shockingly high to many people.

Among the reported victims of incest, girls outnumber boys ten to one. But as the social climate becomes more sympathetic and responsive to victims, many more men are now coming forth to report childhood sexual abuse, and I feel certain that we will see a revision of these percentages over the next several years.

WHAT IS INCEST?

There are two definitions of incest—one legal and one psychological. The legal definition is limited to sexual intercourse

between closely related individuals. Clearly, this definition doesn't begin to cover the tremendous variety of sexually abusive experiences and is one of the reasons that many victims who were fondled, forced to endure or perform oral sex, photographed or otherwise invaded or exploited did not even realize they had been victimized. Fortunately, the psychological definition of incest and the one that is widely accepted among most professionals is far more inclusive and realistic. This definition, and the one with which I am most personally comfortable, states that incest is any overtly sexual contact between people who are either closely related or perceive themselves to be closely related. This definition would include stepparents, stepsiblings, stepgrandparents and even live-in lovers, if they have assumed a parental role. If that special trust that exists between a child and a parent figure or other relative is violated by any type of sexually exploitive act, that is incest. It makes no difference, for example, whether the aggressor is a natural father or a stepfather. I am often asked if French kissing and fondling a child's or an adolescent's breast is also incest. My answer is yes, because those acts, even though they don't involve the child's genitals, are still a violation of the child's rights, boundaries, and dignity. They are invasive and confusing, and many victims have reported feeling as repulsed and degraded from an inappropriate kiss or a one-time fondling as they felt when the same aggressor actually penetrated them. What all this tells us is that the definition of incest must be shaped out of the subjective personal experiences of the victim rather than legal or psychological jargon.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INCEST

There is also a wide range of experiences that are forced on children that may never involve actual body contact, but which, nevertheless, create a climate in which the child feels unsafe and bewildered. These are the behaviors I have labeled "psy-

chological incest" and include voyeurism (I have had several clients who told their fathers demanded that they leave their doors open while they undressed, or drilled holes in the bathroom or bedroom doors in order to spy on them), exhibitionism, masturbating in front of a child, having the child pose for nude pictures often in sexually suggestive poses, and repetitive seductive and suggestive remarks.

The great common denominator among all of these behaviors—whether they involve a direct assault on the child's body or emotional well being—is secrecy. Anything that needs to be kept a secret is not in the child's best interest and can run the gamut from inappropriate to criminal behavior.

A FAMILY PROBLEM

Incest develops in troubled families. Rather than causing a breakdown in a family, incest is the result of such a breakdown. Family members are often emotionally isolated from one another and there is usually a good deal of stress, emotional chaos and a confusion of individual boundaries and family roles, which sets the stage for incest. Unlike other sex crimes, incest is not merely the result of a perverted individual assaulting a random victim. Rather, it is the acting out of complex family dynamics, which I will explore further in the course of this book.

LET'S PRETEND IT ISN'T TRUE

When I first began my efforts to raise public and professional awareness to the epidemic proportions of incest in our society and the havoc that it wreaks on the lives of all involved, not many people wanted to listen. People in the media were extremely uncomfortable with the subject and many members of my own profession derided my insistence that sexual abuse

of children is a a root cause of much adult and adolescent disfunction. I was called the "Joe McCarthy of incest," accused of seeing it everywhere and of conducting my own private witch hunt. I persisted. I knew there was a huge, invisible population out there of adults who were crying silently for acknowledgment, for validation, and for help. I knew that someone had to reach out and let them know they weren't alone.

Little by little, the media opened up to me and I began to talk about incest on radio, television, and in newspaper interviews. In 1980, I had the privilege of being invited to appear on the Merv Griffin show, in which the entire ninety minutes was devoted to the subject of incest. The response was overwhelming. Thousands of people called my offices wanting information and help. As a result of that program, I was able to form the first sexual abuse treatment center in the private sector in California, perhaps in the country. I have personally treated more than fifteen hundred victims of incest and have taught thousands of therapists throughout the country how to treat victims of sexual abuse and their families. And over the last ten years, I have designed and refined a group of techniques that have proven to be extremely effective in healing the wound left by incest.

From 1982 to 1987, I was fortunate enough to have my own national call-in radio program. While I dealt with all issues related to human behavior, there were a tremendous number of calls from adult victims of incest. Many of these callers said that they were talking about this experience for the first time in their lives. Several men and women also told me that until they listened to my program, they had not realized that they were even victims, because they had not actually been penetrated. Equally dramatic and moving were those callers who told me that listening to me had allowed them to recall long-repressed incest experiences. Many sought professional help as a result of the brief time we shared together on the air. Words are inadequate to describe the deep sense of satisfaction I feel when I think of

the thousands of people whose lives have been changed as a result of this work.

A LOT LEFT TO DO

During the last few years, we have seen a tremendous upsurge of awareness and responsiveness to the sexual abuse of children. Numerous books have been published on the subject, media coverage has been extensive, television and film dramas have broken the silence. So we have indeed come a long way—or have we? The built in “need to disbelieve” that fathers, mothers, uncles, grandfathers do these terrible things to innocent children is still very much a part of our collective social consciousness. We are willing to accept (at least to a far greater degree than ever before) that children are molested in large numbers outside of their homes by caretakers or strangers. But it is far more difficult for people to accept that many of the worst crimes committed against children take place in their own homes.

And while much has been done to educate the public about incest, we cannot become complacent. It was extremely important to me to revise the original edition of this book and, in so doing, have an opportunity to express the knowledge and additional experience that I have gained over the last ten years. Most importantly, I felt a powerful need once again to remind everyone who has been victimized through incest that, despite the horror, despite the damage, there is tremendous hope. Incest is a pervasive and crushing problem for both individuals and society, but it is definitely not a dead-end street. The damage is not irreparable. Self-worth and dignity can definitely be restored. I know this from both personal and professional experience.

2 The Incest Taboo

In those few circles where incest is discussed—primarily among psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists—the act of incest and its effects are rarely mentioned. Instead, conversation often centers on the “incest taboo.” An examination of the taboo (sometimes referred to as the “horror of incest” or the “incest dread”) is vital to the understanding of human nature, not because it implies a natural aversion to incest, but rather because it implies a natural incest attraction. If we instinctively avoided incestuous behavior, we would have no need to prohibit it. As anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote in 1926, “A social taboo does not derive its force from instinct, but instead it always has to work against some innate impulse.” Some innate impulse like incest.

It is only natural for people to become sexually attracted to others with whom they live in close quarters, share meals, and have close emotional ties. However, in our society, a great many social prohibitions are essential for peaceful coexistence, and the incest taboo is one of them. Relationships between family members are complicated and tense enough without sexual competition and jealousy playing a part.

Incestuous desires are in us all, though we engage a variety of unconscious mechanisms to deny them. As infants our sexuality is not focused in our genitals or erogenous zones, it is all

over our bodies. Sensuality and sexuality are one to an infant. Every sensation is new and thrilling, whether it be touching a face or being poked in the belly. A child does not really begin to understand sexual differences until he or she is three or four years old. Infants' sexual drives are naturally directed toward their mothers.

When we are separated from mother we miss her tremendously. More and more we realize that much of her time is taken up by father. We learn that she is father's mate, and that there are limitations on the extent of our intimacy with her. We long for her secretly, and we are jealously angry at father for taking her, but we feel guilty about our forbidden thoughts. This guilt is the heart of conscience. We feel incestuously attracted, yet everything we are taught lobbies against that attraction. We are caught in a sexual and emotional Catch-22.

INCEST AND OEDIPUS

The conflict between our incestuous desires and the incest taboo lies at the center of Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. Though he admitted that female Oedipal development was something of a "riddle" to him Freud asserted that boys, around age four, want to sexually possess their mothers and replace their fathers (just as Oedipus, in Greek myth, killed his father and married his mother).

I believe Oedipal desires are symbolic emotional desires and indistinct physical urges, rather than specific incestuous scenarios. The very young child does not specifically want to have intercourse with his mother. He wants her undivided attention; he wants to possess her; he wants her to do the things that give him pleasure and that arouse him. If he were older these desires would be sexual urges, but in his infancy and early childhood they are unfocused.

The guilt that eventually stems from these desires creates what Freud called "Oedipal conflicts." Whether we are talking about

Oedipal conflicts in boys or corresponding conflicts in girls we are talking about conflicts that stem from deeply rooted human desires. There is no escaping it—incestuous desires are at the core of human psychology. Despite the power of these desires the bulk of civilization manages to resist them. That is the doing of the incest taboo.

How interesting that Freud only focused on the child's yearnings and not the adult's!

NEGATIVE MAGIC

Sir James Frazer, in his classic anthropological work, *The Golden Bough*, tried to explain what taboo is by comparing it to sorcery: "The aim of positive magic or sorcery is to produce a desired event; the aim of negative magic or taboo is to avoid an undesirable one." If incest went unpunished in the Northern Gilbert Islands, for example, the inhabitants traditionally believed that the sun would fall from the sky. Similar taboo violations on Celebes Islands, in Indonesia, were thought to precipitate crop failure, and on Mindanao, in the Philippines, to bring on flooding. Adhering to the taboo was said to prevent these natural disasters.

Taboo is not a simple concept. In our modern society we have a tendency to equate the incest taboo with moral, rather than magical, restrictions. But taboos are not moral issues. For instance, until recently the open discussion of death was taboo in our society, yet there is certainly nothing immoral about such discussion. The true meaning of taboo is difficult for us to pinpoint, for as Freud wrote, "the concept connoted by [taboo] is one which we no longer possess." Perhaps the closest we come to it is "superstition."

Freud's attempt at defining taboo, in *Totem and Taboo*, is as good as any, though he tells us more about what taboo *isn't* than what it is: "Taboo restrictions are distinct from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not based upon any divine ordi-

nance, but may be said to impose themselves on their own account. They differ from moral prohibitions in that they fall into no system that declares quite generally that certain abstinences must be observed and gives reasons for that necessity. Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin. Though they are unintelligible to *us*, to those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course."

In our culture the incest taboo is taken as "a matter of course." If asked, the average person would say it would not be proper for a man to marry his mother or sister. But if asked why, he or she probably could come up with no better answer than "Because it's wrong."

Incest has probably been "wrong" since prehistoric times.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE INCEST TABOO

An interesting relationship between the development of the incest taboo throughout history and the development of the taboo in an individual can be described by a jargon-jammed truism of biology: "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." This means the development of an individual copies the evolutionary development of the species. Thus a fetus develops its organs in the same order in which those organs evolved over millions of years. The truism also works in psychology. The human race began with an incest impulse—probably hundreds of thousands of years ago—later developed an incest taboo, and taught its members to substitute more appropriate desires for the incestuous ones. Similarly, a child is born with, or quickly develops, an incestuous attraction. Later he learns of the taboo. And still later he learns to divert that attraction to appropriate partners.

There are various theories that attempt to explain how the incest taboo came to evolve, all relating to the customs of ancient cave dwellers. For example, early man dominated his mate by virtue of his greater strength. He considered his "wife" his property, and he defended her as such. When his sons grew to

puberty he protected his wife from their sexual invasion as he defended all his property against them. Eventually this paternally imposed prohibition became a custom, which, in turn, developed into a taboo.

Another theory contends that the taboo grew out of biological necessity. Because ancient humans died at an early age parents were either dead or ravaged by age by the time children reached puberty. The fertile years were short, survival of the species dictated that everyone marry early. Since older siblings would be married by the time younger ones reached puberty siblings rarely married each other. So exogamy—marriage outside the family—became the custom. By the time human life expectancy increased, allowing an age difference between mates, the custom of exogamy had become so entrenched that the incest taboo followed naturally as a means of maintaining the status quo.

Freud suggested that the taboo evolved through a “primal scene,” a sort of instinctual memory in us all. He envisioned this primal scene as a family in which the sons killed their father to possess their mother, then fought among themselves over her. Eventually they realized they had destroyed the social order and felt remorseful over having committed patricide, so they imposed an incest restriction on themselves as penance. Freud saw the incest taboo as “the oldest form in which we encounter conscience.”

Many people believe the incest taboo is instinctive, coded in our genes, citing as evidence the universality of the taboo. But, in fact, the taboo is not universal. Many anthropological studies attribute various practices to the taboo, but these practices often stem from different definitions of incest. As nineteenth-century sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote in *Incest: The Nature and Origin of the Taboo*: “The same cause cannot explain why in one place marriages between maternally related kin are specifically prohibited while elsewhere the prohibition extends to marriages between all consanguine [blood] relatives, why in one society the prohibition reaches out to infinity while in another it does not go beyond the closest collaterals, why among the primitive