

Catherine Cameron

# *Resolving* Childhood Trauma

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*A Long-Term Study of Abuse Survivors*

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*Resolving*\_\_\_\_\_

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## Dedication

**T**o the unnamed women who are my coauthors, proud of who they are and all they have accomplished. This volume celebrates their commitment and courage.

To Stuart Oskamp—my colleague, husband, and lover, who has been with me all the way.

To our children and grandchildren, grown and growing, strong and whole, confident of their own worth, giving and receiving, loving and beloved—our hope for a better world.

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# Preface

*Healing from trauma depends upon . . . being able to safely tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community. So before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to do anything, we should listen. . . . The singularity of each story is sacred stuff.*

—Jonathan Shay (1994, pp. 4-5)

## A DUTY TO LISTEN

Shay's admonition launches this preface and this book, *Resolving Childhood Trauma*. Shay challenges all professionals, whether researchers or therapists, who plumb the depths of traumatized lives, to really *listen*. I believe that Shay's message also applies to concerned laypersons whose lives touch those of trauma survivors. He calls on all of us to listen without prejudgment to those who, perhaps for the first time, reveal their profound and secret pain to another human being. He also challenges us to share what they teach us about human trauma with the larger social community.

As I apply Shay's admonition to my own 12-year study of child sexual abuse survivors, I feel affirmed in my research role of objective humanist. I was *not* my respondents' therapist; yet, by "listening" respectfully (through successive surveys over many years) to their struggles and their triumphs, I probably contributed to the healing process that was taking

place during that same time period. Moreover, by consistently seeking *their* viewpoint in interviews, I encouraged the women to *shape my understanding* of trauma, rather than imposing my own viewpoint. In addition, I have faithfully retold their stories—of childhood betrayal, adult crisis, and dizzying cycles of struggle and healing—to audiences in a dozen countries of Europe and Asia as well as here at home. Yet, Shay's admonition *chastened*, as well as affirmed, me. I had promised respondents that their stories would be told in a *book*. They believed that such a book would promote both greater understanding of the crippling impact of child sexual abuse and the realistic hope for a better life through confronting that trauma. I was greatly delayed in fulfilling that commitment to my respondents. In these pages, at last, the promise is fulfilled.

To continue Shay's emphasis on responsible listening, the longitudinal surveys that elicited the data for this volume also provided a forum where adult survivors of child sexual abuse could safely tell their stories. As child victims, they had been ordered "not to tell." During silent decades of denial, they guarded their secret even from themselves. Following their crisis of recall as adults, their own families typically refused to listen. Some of these women were fortunate enough to have a caring friend or partner. Others shared their returning memories only with a concerned therapist. But for each one, there was, at last, someone who cared enough to listen, and their healing could begin.

However, *Resolving Childhood Trauma* is not only a forum for survivors. It also invites *you* to be their audience. This book was written for all persons who are willing to listen, who want to better understand the subjective experience of severe child sexual abuse, its long-term repercussions, and its potential resolution. Readers of this volume may come from various fields of trauma research, or they may be clinicians working with traumatized children or adults. Others will be family members devastated by the memories of a sibling or a child, or media persons caught up in the acrimonious debate, or trauma survivors struggling to put together the puzzle pieces of their life. Perpetrators may choose to be among the readers. Whatever your own motives for joining this audience of readers, you share with all the others a willingness to *listen*. The voices of scores of survivors speak from these pages, describing the pain they experienced and the progress they made in the dozen years between 1986 and 1998. Their openness will contribute significantly to a clearer understanding of the impact of child sexual abuse, and especially of incest.

## A COMMON CONTEXT FOR ALL TRAUMAS OF HUMAN ORIGIN

Why have I prefaced this book about *women survivors of child sexual abuse* with Shay's quotation from his study of *male Vietnam combat veterans*? The simple answer is that I believe Shay's words apply equally well to *both*. A fuller answer is that stories drawn from other traumatized populations have helped me to step outside the specific realm of child sexual abuse. I then began to see child sexual abuse within the context of three broad and inexorably linked issues: (a) All traumas of human origin are (b) violations of human rights and (c) of social justice. These overarching issues provide a common context for *any* study of trauma of human origin. Moreover, studying particular traumas can contribute to an understanding of all of them. As this book unfolds, you will find occasional statements about the relevance of the survivors' stories to the broader context of human rights violations and of atrocities that are recognized in the international system of justice. In making these links to larger human rights concerns, I hope to provide a deeper and broader perspective on childhood sexual abuse.

*Resolving Childhood Trauma* expands dialogue among therapists and researchers concerned with a wide variety of trauma settings. Professionals working with sexual abuse survivors have learned much from those who deal with survivors of other atrocities and human rights violations (for example, genocide, terrorist bombings, torture, or sexual enslavement). Similarly, their intense study of child sexual abuse and its aftermath is advancing the entire field of trauma study and treatment. *Labeling a problem* calls it to attention. *Naming a wrong* demands changed attitudes and corrective measures. "Child battering," "date rape," and "elder abuse" became visible as severe and prevalent wrongs when they were named. Similarly, if we recognize that sexual abuse can produce profound and long-lasting *amnesia*, we can no longer minimize damage by saying "children forget these things." Various sources of amnesia, along with delayed recall, are being increasingly recognized and acknowledged in the trauma literature (e.g., Arrigo & Pezdek, 1997; Elliott & Briere, 1995; Herman, 1992; Pope & Brown, 1996; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996).<sup>1</sup> The label has allowed us to see the problem.

There are many valuable books today that focus on a *particular* theme and readership—therapists, academicians, researchers, survivors, or laypersons. This book—perhaps because it was so long in its birthing—is

different. It took on a shape and direction of its own. Layer on layer, it *became* a longitudinal study, it *transcended* child sexual abuse, it *demand*ed comparison with other forms of trauma. And now it *requires* of readers, whatever their background, that they find for themselves whatever is most meaningful in these pages.

## ANATOMY OF THIS BOOK

In this book, *Resolving Childhood Trauma*, the women respondents make a unique contribution to an exchange of ideas by teaching us about the life history of traumatic amnesia—its origin, its impact over time, and its eventual dissipation. Amnesia was both an outcome of their trauma and an influence on it for many years to come. The nature of their abuse (Chapter 4) helped to determine the kind of amnesia that sprang from it. In personal terms, their memory loss expressed itself across a *continuum* from full recall to obliteration of *all* traumatic incidents. In research terms, their “memory of abuse” ranged from no amnesia, through partial amnesia, to full amnesia. Yet, as this book went to press, over half of the women who originally believed that they had “no amnesia” regarding their abuse had also recalled important lost elements. And some amnesic women realized that there had been elements of awareness beneath their “not knowing.” In the study, the women were assigned to their memory group in accordance with the way that they first presented themselves to their counselors and to me.

This volume is divided into five sections, briefly described here. In Part I, three introductory chapters provide an orientation to the various contexts that frame this study of survivors. The first explains the general background of this longitudinal study. The second reveals the societal context—during this period, for the first time in human history, serious attention was paid to child sexual abuse. It also briefly summarizes the research procedures and groups of participants. The third introductory chapter describes the respondents’ early personal and family life.

Through the course of this book, beginning with Part II, the survivors unfold their stories sequentially—from childhood abuse to adult resolution—a real-life journey of anywhere from 35 to 65 years. They describe the early part of that journey (up until 1986, when this study began) *retrospectively*. They share their healing experience (from 1986 to the present) *concurrently*. As a reader, you can walk with them, witnessing their strug-

gles and recognizing their remarkable growth. Chapter 4 introduces the original group of 72 women respondents and describes their personal histories of childhood sexual abuse and the family settings where most of it took place. Chapter 5 gives evidence of the cumulative developmental damage that followed in the wake of their trauma. Chapter 6 examines amnesia as a key issue—why it is linked to *many* forms of trauma (not just to sexual abuse) and how it both facilitates and disrupts the lives of victims. For many centuries, society had virtually denied the existence of incest and minimized the prevalence and impact of other forms of sexual abuse. This idealized “construction of social reality” dominated world opinion until the latter part of the 20th century. Behavioral patterns of amnesia, dissociation, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became means to psychic survival for respondents until they could safely address their trauma in adulthood.

In Part III, Chapter 7 focuses on the interim years between abuse and recall. It spans a period that typically stretched over three decades of “secrecy and silence” in the women’s lives—a period of time when they denied their past abuse in whatever way they could. Their stories recount the public behavior, private feelings, and the means of coping that they used to avoid dealing with the past. In Chapter 8, the (formerly) amnesic women describe the triggering of lost memories, and the nonamnesic women share their reevaluation of past trauma. The meaning and impact of what they then recalled ended the long silence of the interim years.

Part IV (Chapters 9 through 12) begins with the disruptive “crisis of recall” as survivors faced the past, frequently through flashbacks, and recognized the wrongs they had suffered. It follows them through the roller-coaster process of remembering past traumas that still held power over them—a journey that took many months or even years, depending on the severity of what they had to recall. Amnesic women, previously unable to remember, now faced a horror that they had not known existed. Nonamnesic women, who had been unable to forget, were forced at last to recognize the meaning and impact of abuse, which they had tried so long to ignore or minimize. Chapter 10 illuminates the survivor’s personal responses to remembering and the nature of the long process of recall and recovery, whereas Chapter 11 summarizes the reactions of people close to them. Chapter 12 examines an issue faced by many of the survivors—whether to confront their past abuser(s) if they were still living, and if so, how, when, and where such a confrontation could best occur.

In Part V, Chapter 13, "Changed Lives," updates the reader on the women's recovery by 1992, 6 years after the original survey. It describes the momentous task faced by survivors of integrating the reality of abuse into their concept of the world, their life story, and their view of themselves. Important changes had taken place in the women over the span of this study. A major but seldom emphasized task of recovery was to recognize and overthrow destructive patterns of thought, feeling, and action, which may have helped them survive over the years but which now obstructed their recovery. This chapter describes the women's subjective struggle toward wholeness, as well as objective measures of their success. Most of these survivors had come to terms with the past, were dealing realistically with the present, and were feeling optimistic about the future. Chapter 14, the Epilogue, was written in late 1998 and 1999 to bring closure to the women's stories. As the book manuscript was being reviewed prior to publication, a final survey of the respondents revealed still further personal and interpersonal growth. Letting go of the past, the women had moved well beyond mere "recovery." They were embarking on a new way of living—with strength, compassion, and even joy. Trauma was no longer the driving force in their lives.

## NOTE

1. Of course, evidence of amnesia (and memory loss) was not *absent* from earlier trauma literature. However, it was typically *assumed* to be common in the aftermath of trauma, without being *examined* as a key variable in its own right.

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## PART I

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# About This Book

*Andrea, age 38, began in 1986 to remember sexual abuse at the hands of her father and her uncle when she was a child. She was in crisis. Memories, like ghosts from the past, haunted her by day, and distressing dreams disturbed her sleep at night. A week before our first interview, she dreamed of finding a small band of sexually abused children, disconsolate and wandering the streets. In her dream, Andrea shepherded them into a court of justice, choosing the oldest, a 10-year-old girl, to tell their story to a judge. However, peering down at the child from his high bench, the judge frowned, pounded his gavel, and announced impatiently, "Case dismissed. This girl cannot give evidence. She has no mouth."*

This book provides a mouth for Andrea's silenced child. It is the voice of all the women who entrusted me with their experiences of childhood sexual abuse. It tells the story of their courage to remember and to resolve trauma experienced decades before. They have told their stories to promote a greater understanding of the impact of childhood sexual abuse and of the challenge involved in overcoming it. Their hope, and mine, is that such understanding will help to provide a climate in which this kind of exploitation of children will become unthinkable.



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## CHAPTER 1

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# Background

*Being one of the women who help you with your book makes me feel less alone. You "connect me" to the others, and we are working this through together.*

—Pamela, 1988

**I**n the past two decades, more people of all ages have been working through the sexual traumas of childhood than ever before in the history of humankind. This book could not have been written 20 years ago. Its focus on amnesia would have been premature. Back then, mental health workers and researchers were only beginning to recognize and document the prevalence of sexual abuse and its position among the most serious forms of trauma. Now, they are far more knowledgeable. They have created a burgeoning literature of increasingly refined information about the prevalence and consequences of sexual abuse as well as its treatment. These pioneers have mapped out the terrain. Now it is time to specialize and to ask questions that remain unanswered. We need research-based books that investigate particular aspects of child sexual abuse. This book's contribution is to relate traumatic amnesia to survivors' experiences over time and to describe to others the meaning of abuse, its aftermath, and its healing in their lives.

As professionals pursuing specialized knowledge, we also need to relate our work to the overall context of trauma. In this, the most violent century ever, there have been many forms of trauma to study. Two general types of trauma are differentiated by their origin. The first is unin-

tended trauma, such as major accidents (e.g., the crash of TWA Flight 800) and calamities of nature (e.g., the Northridge earthquake); these are called *disasters*. The other is traumas of deliberate human origin (e.g., the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, barbaric hate crimes); these are called *atrocities*. This second form of trauma ruptures basic personal and societal assumptions about human bonding. The closer the relationship that is betrayed, the greater is the psychological damage. This is true whether trauma occurs on a battlefield or in a small child's bedroom (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Freyd, 1996; Shay, 1994).

Research into one form of trauma can benefit another. The study of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in combat veterans was valuable later for understanding the more personal trauma of child sexual abuse. Similarly, the concept of "amnesia and recovered memories," when applied to survivors, called attention to the fact that amnesia (and other memory deficits) follow many kinds of trauma. Examples of amnesia that have been well documented in the trauma literature involve survivors of natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and floods, witnesses to murder and other violent crimes, and victims of torture or concentration camps (Arrigo & Pezdek, 1997; Pope & Brown, 1996; van der Kolk, 1987). Naming the occurrence of amnesia permitted it to be recognized more easily, and finding amnesia in many traumatic contexts has underscored its importance.

The years that I have spent completing this book allowed me to maintain contact with most of the research participants, to recognize the enormous complexity of their healing process, and to bear witness to their painful but gratifying growth. In trying to understand why some survivors of sexual abuse became amnesic, how this affected their growing-up years, and what caused their confrontation with the past as adults, I familiarized myself with multidisciplinary studies of memory. As a result, I find myself advocating cooperation among *all* professionals interested in memory, and especially between experimental and clinical psychologists. It is common knowledge that these fields diverge in method and focus. It is less often recognized that, with cooperation instead of antagonism, both disciplines could be enriched.

In writing about *women* sexually assaulted as children, I am fully aware that many men have also been traumatized. Their story is being written by others (e.g., Hunter, 1990; Lew, 1988), as adult male survivors also begin to deal with the past. Such accounts reveal trauma and conse-