Coming to Terms with Abusive Childhood Sexual Experiences: A Listening Guide Study of Women's Stories

Melissa Geib

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillips@duq.edu.
COMING TO TERMS WITH ABUSIVE CHILDHOOD SEXUAL EXPERIENCES:
A LISTENING GUIDE STUDY OF WOMEN’S STORIES

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Melissa Geib

May 2012
COMING TO TERMS WITH ABUSIVE CHILDHOOD SEXUAL EXPERIENCES: A LISTENING GUIDE STUDY TO WOMEN’S STORIES

By
Melissa Geib

Approved March 28, 2012

Russell Walsh, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Dissertation Director)

Will Adams, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

Constance Fischer, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

Daniel Burston, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Department Chair)

James C. Swindal, Ph.D.
Acting Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
ABSTRACT

COMING TO TERMS WITH ABUSIVE CHILDHOOD SEXUAL EXPERIENCES:
A LISTENING GUIDE STUDY OF WOMEN’S STORIES

By

Melissa Geib

May 2012

Dissertation supervised by Russell Walsh, Ph.D.

This dissertation presents a qualitative study of how women come to terms with abusive childhood sexual experiences. In in-depth interviews, five women described how they have come to terms and the ways in which their experiences of sexual abuse influenced their identities, their relationships with others, and their embodiment. The data were analyzed using the Voice-Centered Relational Method--more recently known as The Listening Guide--developed by Carol Gilligan and Lynn Brown (1992); following this method, the transcripts of the interviews were read through four times, listening for plot, identity (“I” voice), and two contrapuntal voices. The four listenings allowed for a multilayered approach to understanding how the women have come to terms. A multiplicity of voices emerged both within and across participants, with voices of guilt, innocence, betrayal, protection, avoidance, engagement, victim, agency, disembodiment,
and empowerment identified. The ways in which the contrapuntal voices overlapped with one another and with the participants’ identities were explored. Results suggest that coming to terms with childhood experiences of sexual abuse is a nuanced and ongoing process. Implications, including the importance of allowing women to label and describe their own unique experiences, were explored; the nebulousness of the phrase “sexual abuse” and the suggestions for a more subtle understanding of a continuum of experiences were also explored. Ideas for further research in this area of sexual abuse are suggested.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Above all, I want to thank the extremely courageous women who participated in this study. I know it was not easy, but I hope you all recognize just how important your stories are to this project and to the field of clinical psychology as a whole; may all of your voices find expression and peace in your ongoing journey to come to terms.

I am especially thankful to Russ Walsh, the director of this dissertation, and an all around supportive person. Your belief in me and my own voice was immensely important, especially during the many times when I couldn’t summon my own. Thank you, also, to Will Adams and Constance Fischer, for their helpful comments and encouragement as members of this dissertation committee.

Thank you to my colleagues and friends, near and far, who provided encouragement during the cycle of despair and drudgery that is the dissertation process; your small words of reassurance provided the necessary strength for me to continue.

Thank you to “C;” without you and the safe space you provided, I would not have had the courage to take on this dissertation topic and the necessary self-reflection and subsequent (and at times terrifying) growth which came with it. Thank you for always listening to, encouraging, and understanding my range of voices.

Thank you to Mathew, my husband and soul mate, who stood by me through mood swings, financial distress, and--at times--utter despair. From your bravery I glean my own. Lastly, I want to thank Ludington and Thaddeus (a.k.a. “Buddy”), my quirky and adorable cats, who provided me with laughter and unconditional love and for reminding me of the important things in life: play, food, and naps.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Literature Review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevalence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Negative Effects</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on Childhood Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Victim to Survivor</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lag Between Abuse and Disclosure of Seeking Treatment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Early Sexual Experiences May Change with Time</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors that may Make it Difficult to Identify as a Victim</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Participating Victim</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Meaning of Participation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Debate on Repressed Memories of Childhood Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Note on the Importance of Cultural and Historical Context</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Research</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative vs. Quantitative</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Voice-Centered Relational Method</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fifth Voice: My Own</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting the Data</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Listening for Plot</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: “I Poems”</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steps 3 and 4: “Listening for Contrapuntal Voices”</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5: Voices Across Participants</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Mary’s Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Listening: The Plot</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographical Information</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Summary of Mary’s Story</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s Description of the Sexual Experiences</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s Description of how She has Come to Terms</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s Description of how her Understanding has Affected her Identity and Relationships</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Initial Response</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Listening: I Poem</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s I Poem</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Response to Mary’s I Poem</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Literature Review

Introduction

This is a study of sexual abuse. As you read this, you have some idea, an image perhaps, about what is meant by the phrase “sexual abuse.” And you also have an idea of how sexual abuse might be experienced by its “victims” – an idea that is most likely singular and clear. You are not alone in these assumptions; as Sorsoli and Tolman (2008) state, “it is often assumed that a person’s ‘story’ is singular and transparent” (p. 495). A goal of this study is to challenge those assumptions.

With the help of Carol Gilligan’s Listening Guide and the courageous women who shared their stories with me--and now with you--I hope to demonstrate that there is not a singular experience of enduring or coming to terms with sexual abuse. Rather, there are a multitude of ways to understand these experiences, both across individuals and within individuals over time. As you read this dissertation, I invite you to be curious about these women, about their stories, and about the fascinating ability they (and we all) have to understand themselves and their experiences in a multiplicity of ways. I ask you to listen with me not once, but four times to each of their stories. In doing so, you might come to hear a harmony of voices--some booming, and some soft. As the combination of musical notes moves us emotionally when we hear music, so too, I hope, will these women’s simultaneous voices move you. And perhaps by the end of their stories you, like me, will find an appreciation for the diverse range of human experiences and feelings which are encapsulated in the anything-but-transparent term of “sexual abuse.”
This dissertation is a study of five women’s stories of coming to terms with sexual abuse. Before we get to their stories, though, I take you on a journey through a review of relevant, existent literature. I set the scene for the women’s stories by first discussing the importance of studying childhood sexual abuse. I then invite you to follow my thoughts as I discuss trends in the current literature, with a focus on the areas in which I believe there are holes or gaps, areas which I believe—as someone who experienced sexual abuse as a child—ought to be further explored. This will lead us to the crux of the dissertation: the question of what the progression of coming to terms with sexual abuse is like for women, and how their understandings impact their identities, relationships, and bodies. After discussing my initial hunches, I will share with you the women’s stories and my process—informed by Carol Gilligan’s Listening Method—of listening to and interpreting them. I will then discuss the implications of my findings for the conceptualization and treatment of sexual abuse.

Prevalence. Although researchers have argued that childhood sexual abuse has been referred to since Biblical times, perhaps what really brought it to the fore for Western society was Freud’s work with hysterical patients in the late 1800s (Miller, 1984). Freud’s seduction theory, developed in reaction to his work with such patients, argued that women’s hysterical symptoms were the result of having had sexual contact with their fathers. He later revised his seduction theory and developed the Oedipal theory in its place, which suggested that women’s symptoms were not the result of actual sexual contact with their fathers but rather, of a fantasy wherein they desired sexual contact with them. Freud seemed to suggest, as Cameron put it, “[His hysterical patients had been] seductive children who had imagined or invited incest” (2000, p.11). Freud’s Oedipal
theory has been understood by many authors as having, in essence, denied the existence of childhood sexual abuse in general, and of incest in particular (Courtois, 1988). During this “Age of Denial” (Miller, 1984), beginning with Freud and lasting until about the 1970s, child sexual abuse was regarded as a “rather uncommon problem” (Finkelhor, 1984, p. 1). However, more recent research suggests that at least 20% of the women in North America have been sexually abused (Finkelhor, 1994). A classic study conducted by Finkelhor (1979) with 796 college students found prevalence rates at about 19% for women and 9% for men. A meta-analysis conducted by Bolen and Scannapieco in 1999 found that prevalence rates for childhood sexual abuse ranged between 2 and 45 percent for females and 2 and 16 percent for males. Bolen and Scannapieco suggested that, after taking into account that only a small percentage of cases of abuse are actually reported, between 30 and 40 percent of all females and more than 13 percent of all males have experienced childhood sexual abuse. More recent studies are consistent with these findings, suggesting prevalence rates between 23 and 28 percent for females (Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle & Perese, 2007; Fassler, Amodeo, Griffin, Clay & Ellis, 2005).

As Haugaard (2000) suggested, “child sexual abuse” is notoriously difficult to define, as each word of the term has been operationalized differently by different clinicians, researchers, and lawmakers. For example, Fassler et al. (2005) defined childhood sexual abuse as physical contact and at least a five year age difference between victim and perpetrator, whereas Fanslow et al. (2007) defined it as having been touched sexually (while not clearly defining “touched sexually”) before the age of 15. Thus, the real prevalence of child sexual abuse varies according to the definition used, as well as the population and the reporting method. Regardless of these variations, it seems safe to
assert that childhood sexual abuse is a prevalent occurrence and thus an important area of study.

**The negative effects.** There is a plethora of research on the negative effects of childhood sexual abuse. In general, childhood sexual abuse has been associated with subsequent identity disturbances, mental health problems, an increased level of guilt and shame, and interpersonal difficulties. Finkelhor and Browne (1985) suggested that there are four primary traumagenic dynamics potentially induced by childhood sexual abuse, including traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization. One can think of these basic dynamics as leading to the aforementioned areas in which survivors of childhood sexual abuse experience difficulties.

Victims of childhood sexual abuse might feel as if they have a “contaminated identity” marked by feeling invisible, shameful, and self-loathing (Philips & Daniluk, 2004, p.182). In addition, severe childhood sexual abuse has been associated with nonclinical problems such as poor social adjustment, low self esteem and poor life satisfaction (Fassler et al., 2005). In addition, Painter and Howell (1999) suggest that rage is a common long-term effect of childhood sexual abuse for women.

Furthermore, childhood sexual abuse has been associated with increased levels of psychiatric disorders (Linden & Zehner, 2007), in particular higher levels of clinical depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorders (Fondacaro, Holt & Powell, 1999; Roberts, R., O’Connor, T., Dunn, J., Golding, J., & The ALSPAC Study Team, 2004). A recent meta-analysis of 37 studies (including over 25,000 participants) found that a history of childhood sexual abuse resulted in a 20% increase in post-traumatic stress disorder over the baseline, a 21% increase in depression, a 21% increase in successful
suicide, a 14% increase in sexual promiscuity, and an 8% increase in sexual perpetration, as well as a 10% increase in academic performance difficulties (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). High rates of childhood sexual abuse have also been associated with individuals seeking treatment for anorexia nervosa (48%) (Carter, Bewell, Blackmore & Woodside, 2006) and borderline personality disorder (67%) (Herman, Perry, & van der Kolk, 1989).

Not only do many adults with a history of childhood sexual abuse experience higher levels of clinical pathology than those without such a history, but they may have difficulty in interpersonal areas such as intimacy and sexuality (Linden & Zehner, 2007). More specifically, research suggests that victims of childhood sexual abuse tend to mistrust others and sexualize relationships (or avoid sexuality), as well as experience a fear of intimacy, vaginismus, dyspareunia, and arousal and orgasmic dysfunction (Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000). Davis and Petretic-Jackson (2000) noted that childhood sexual abuse survivors may appear to function adequately in superficial social relationships, but have difficulty in closer interpersonal relationships. In addition, the effects of childhood sexual abuse on later relationships include less satisfaction and poorer communication (Roberts et al., 2004). In addition, Forward and Buck (1988) suggested, “[T]hose victims who may be sexually responsive and orgasmic (and many are) still carry a tremendous sense of guilt and loathing toward their bodies and their sexual feelings” (p. 24).

Research suggests that women not only have interpersonal difficulties as a result of their childhood sexual experiences, but also parenting difficulties. Research indicates that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse report less maternal confidence and
less positivity in their relationships with their children (Roberts et al., 2004). In addition, children of mothers with a history of sexual abuse may experience negative effects such as conduct problems, peer problems, and emotional problems (Roberts et al., 2004).

Although more research has been conducted on females who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, Romano and De Luca (2001) found that males with a history of childhood sexual abuse have higher rates of externalized behavioral problems such as drug abuse and dependence. Like females, males who have been sexually abused have high rates of guilt and self-blame, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, but in addition, males tend to experience more anger as a result of childhood sexual abuse (Romano & De Luca, 2001).

**Research on Childhood Sexual Abuse**

The numerous hurdles that adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse face, combined with the common prevalence of about 1 in 4 for women and 1 in 9 for men, suggest that childhood sexual abuse is a form of trauma that would be well-researched. However, much of the research on childhood sexual abuse is quantitative and does not take the victims’ experience into account. Exploration of sexually abusive experiences in the average study on childhood sexual abuse focuses on pre-set categories such as the victim’s relationship to the perpetrator, the duration of the experience, the victim’s age at the time of the experience, the specific sexual acts engaged in, and the amount of force used (Finkelhor, 1979). Even those studies that focus on what is traumatic about a childhood sexual experience tend to measure trauma quantitatively via the age difference between the victim and perpetrator, the type of relationship between the two parties, the specific acts engaged in, and the amount of force involved in the acts (e.g., Finkelhor,
What is omitted in such studies of sexual abuse in general, and the traumagenic factors in particular, are the victims’ perceptions and feelings regarding the experience.

For example, Gold, Swingle, Hill and Elfant (1998) analyzed sexually abusive acts recounted in therapy by women survivors and developed a typology based on the idea that power and domination inherent in the sexual act is a critical element in grouping different abusive acts. They identified three factors--compliance, subjugation and objectification—as the basis for grouping sexually abusive acts. The same four researchers conducted another study the following year to determine the relationship between specific sexual abuse characteristics, such as age at onset, concurrent perpetrators, objectification and coercion, and dissociative symptomatology in adulthood (Gold, Hill, Swingle & Elfant, 1999). Similarly, Depanfilis (1987) suggested that a child’s reaction to sexual abuse is a result of the age of the child, the relationship to the abuser, the amount of force used by the abuser, the degree of shame felt by the child, and the reactions of the child’s parents and any intervening professionals. Unfortunately, each of these studies, while based on the descriptive accounts of sexual survivors, neglected to examine the emotional, perceptual, and contextual aspects of survivors’ experiences.

Likewise, Katerndahl, Burge and Kellogg (2005) suggested that, “The specifics about the abuse and the family environment during childhood are important predictors of adult psychopathology” (p. 258), notably excluding the child’s perception (or the adult survivor’s perception) of the sexual encounter as an “important predictor.” Instead, they argued that the specific type of sexual contact (their charts contain specific acts such as “genitalia to child’s mouth” and “penis to child’s vagina” [p. 261]) and the amount of
force used is directly related to the onset of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, respectively.

Not only are universal variables such as age and the acts the primary foci of research on survivors of childhood sexual abuse, they are also the primary focus of studies looking at outsiders’ perceptions of childhood sexual abuse. For example, Bornstein, Kaplan and Perry (2007) studied university students’ and non-university students’ perceptions of different kinds of child abuse. They found that “perceptions of abuse vary as a function of factors such as victim and perpetrator gender, abuse type, and victim-perpetrator relationship” (2007, p. 390). Bornstein et al. argued that it is these objective universals that influence perceptions of child abuse (including both physical and sexual); they do not address the child’s individual experience of the abuse.

In one of his most famous studies, Finkelhor, a researcher who has dedicated much of his academic career to researching sexual abuse, states, “Actual sexual activity is less important than its context” (1979, p.103). Few researchers, however, seem to have taken this statement seriously. Thus, the shortcoming of the aforementioned studies is the lack of context and the victim’s own voice or perception about her or his early sexual experiences. As an alternative, I turned to qualitative research in search of context, thick descriptions, and experience-rich studies. Sadly, a thorough search of recent literature regarding the experience of childhood sexual abuse yielded few qualitative studies. More often than not, qualitative research has touched only tangentially on the direct experience of being a victim of childhood sexual abuse. Instead, the focus in these qualitative studies ranges from the methods of escape children use during childhood sexual abuse to the impact of rage on women’s sexuality after childhood sexual abuse. The following is a
brief discussion of some of the recent qualitative studies, presented in order to illustrate the kind of qualitative research currently being conducted in the field.

Qualitative research on sexual abuse includes studies exploring the adulthood sequelae of abuse, the ability to disclose the abuse, and the connection between rage and abuse. For example, a grounded-theory qualitative study of six couples, where one partner in each couple had been sexually abused as a child, investigated partner awareness regarding the adult sequelae of childhood sexual abuse (Wiersma, 2003). Twenty-one factors that either impede or facilitate partner awareness of the adult sequelae of childhood sexual abuse (for example, relationship conflict) were identified. Another study by Alaggia and Kirshenbaum (2005) used the “long interview method” to identify family dynamics that may affect a child’s ability to disclose sexual abuse. In-depth interviews with 20 adult survivors of intrafamilial childhood sexual abuse yielded four major factors related to the child’s ability to disclose the abuse: (1) rigidly fixed, patriarchy-based gender roles in the family, (2) the presence of family violence, (3) indirect communication, and (4) social isolation. Painter and Howell (1999) interviewed seven women who had been sexually abused as children about their perceptions of their anger as it is related to their sexuality. The researchers applied the constant-comparative method to the interviews and identified seven themes that were consistent across the women’s experiences, including (1) patterns of abuse are re-created, (2) society is oppressive to women, (3) externalized rage is unacceptable, (4) rage has triggers, (5) rage is destructive, and (6) rage is connected to sex (ibid).

A “qualitative-phenomenological” study used in-depth interviews of 10 women’s physical and mental escape responses during their childhood sexual abuse (Darlington,
1996). Darlington’s point, it seems, was to show that the myriad ways children attempt to escape from the abuse is important in aiding survivors of childhood sexual abuse to accept their lack of responsibility in the abuse. Darlington argued that, despite their various ways of coping by escape, the women continued to blame themselves for the abuse.

As I sifted through studies such as those described above, I began to wonder about the way the researchers took for granted the identity of “victim” and the way in which the victim’s identity as victim was presented as a given, stable way of identifying oneself. I also became interested in the issue of blame, which is discussed frequently in the child sexual abuse literature (e.g., Davis, 2005; Graham, Rogers & Davies, 2007; Feiring & Cleland, 2007; Muller, Caldwell & Hunter, 1994; Rye, Greatrix & Enright, 2006). Blame, as it is discussed in Darlington’s study in particular, as well as in the literature in this field in general, seems to be something black or white, such that the possibility of a more ambiguous or complicated identity (in regard to either the perpetrator or victim) in the sexual abuse situation is not considered or addressed. I began wondering how blame figured into the identification of oneself as a victim of childhood sexual abuse, and whether there was an alternative to the black and white thinking that seemed to permeate the field.

In my search for studies that allowed for more complex, ambiguous identities in the sexual abuse situation, I came across several qualitative studies examining “the other side” of sexual abuse, that is, the perspective of the perpetrator. One study, for example, looked at the relationship that child sexual abuse perpetrators have with their victims (Gilgun, 1994). Multiple interviews with 20 men and 3 women who had committed
sexual abuse showed a continuum of relationships, from avenger to soul-mate, with the amount of closeness the perpetrator felt to the child as the differentiating factor between the relationship styles. Other relationship styles included the taker, the controller, the conqueror, the playmate, and the lover. Hence there are many styles of sexual abuse, including styles that blur the boundary between “victim” and “perpetrator” and might therefore result in “shades of gray” in the experience of sexual abuse. That being said, Gilgun’s study examined the complex identity from only the perspective of the “perpetrator,” defined by age and as the one with more power in the relationship, while ignoring the identity that the “victim” implicitly gave to him/herself and to the perpetrator.

Another study, conducted as a dissertation at Duquesne University by Robert Coufal (1996), explored the seductive sexual relationship between an adult and child. Coufal conducted an empirical-phenomenological study of five men who had acknowledged long-term sexual interests in and experiences with children. Coufal found that the pedophile creates “an imaginary childhood for himself,” (p.iii) which is a romanticized way of coming to terms with and mastering the losses of his own childhood. Coufal found that adult perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse often alternately relate to the child as a peer and then as a parental figure (i.e., as the child’s parent). From the perpetrator’s perspective, a child’s responsiveness to his sexual overtures indicates a mutuality in the relationship between the two. Coufal states, however, that this perspective is an “illusion” and one that is based on a wish for mutuality, especially regarding the sexual expressions of intimacy (p. 137).
Durham (2003) analyzed the experience and impact of sexual abuse on seven young men. This study looked broadly at sexual abuse by examining the participants’ feelings about being abused, trying to tell others about the abuse, and the impact the abuse had on peer relationships and on their own sexuality. Qualitative analysis focused on the asymmetrical power relationships inherent in the sexual abuse, and found that the perpetrators used personal and situational power in order to gain access to children, abuse them and silence them following the abuse (ibid). The strength of this study is that it “highlights the importance of survivors’ perspectives” (ibid., p.309) and that it explores survivors’ conflicting feelings, such as those reported by “Colin,” about whom Durham states, “At the time he did not see this experience as sexual abuse, in talking about this at the age of 18, he has changed his mind” (ibid., p.313).

Similarly, Glaister and Abel (2001) highlighted the importance of survivors’ perspectives, as they interviewed 14 women about their experiences of healing from childhood sexual abuse. They concluded that healing from childhood sexual abuse was: a difficult process that required supporting relationships, and involved developing a sense of well-being and acceptance, letting go of secrecy, and forgiving themselves and their perpetrators.

**From Victim to Survivor**

As I conducted my review of research on the experience of childhood sexual abuse, I started wondering about the way different authors referred to those people who had early sexual experiences, primarily about the choice to use “victim” versus “survivor.” My search thus took a turn towards trauma literature for some sort of answer-even if just a politically correct one--on the decision of which term to use.
Trauma literature abounds with discussions of the debate about whether to refer to those with a history of sexual abuse as “victims” or “survivors.” Current practice appears to be to use the term survivor rather than victim when referring to adults with a history of childhood sexual abuse in order to denote a sense of agency rather than powerlessness (Ryan, Nitsun, Gilbert & Mason, 2005). Related research on battered women suggested that the “victim” discourse is both enabling and constraining, leading to deflected responsibility, but also to a sense of weakness and powerlessness, while the discourse of survivor or “empowered victim,” leads to a sense of agency, but risks blame for the domestic violence due to the deemphasis of a “perpetrator” (Leisenring, 2006). Interestingly, many of the 40 women whom Leisenring interviewed did not have a solid identity of “victim” versus “survivor,” but rather, struggled with how to “understand and construct themselves” (2006, p. 326). This finding, as will be evident shortly, piqued my curiosity.

Using the empirical-phenomenological method with interviews from seven survivors of childhood sexual abuse post “extensive therapy,” Philips and Daniluk (2004) explored how extensive therapy undertaken to deal with childhood sexual abuse impacted victims’ identities. They suggested that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse tend to follow a progression in terms of identity: the beginning identity is that of victim, and with time and support (usually in the form of psychotherapy), identity shifts to the more empowered, agentic survivor, and lastly to a more multifaceted, integrated identity of which “survivor of child sexual abuse” is only one aspect (ibid).

Although Philips and Daniluk’s study shed some light on the transformation from “victim” to “survivor,” I still had Leisenring’s findings about women trying to
“understand and construct themselves” in the back of my mind. That, coupled with my experience of trying to understand and construct my own identity as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, led me next to search for studies looking not at the progression from victim to survivor, but at the progression to victim, that is, the movement or change from the stance of not defining oneself as a victim to defining oneself as a victim.

There are several studies in the field of child sexual abuse concerned with “definers” versus “non-definers” of child sexual abuse (Holmes, 2008; Strander, 2002). Although this research does recognize that some “victims” may not subjectively identify as such, it assumes that defining oneself as a victim of child sexual abuse is an either-or phenomenon; in a very dichotomous, black-and-white sort of way, one either is or is not a victim of abuse. There has been no allowance for flow or ambiguity between the two. Holmes (2008), for example, focused on whether or not men define their childhood sexual experiences as “childhood sexual abuse,” using the following criteria that he adapted from Needleman (1996) and Tanner & Davies (1985):

Any sexual experience before 18 years of age (even those characterized as “willing”) in which: (1) a power differential existed between a victim and perpetrator wherein the perpetrator was ≥5 years older than a victim <13 years, was ≥10 years older than a victim 13–17 years, or was an authority figure (e.g., teacher); (2) coercion was reported to have occurred; or (3) penetration (e.g., oral, anal, vaginal) of victim or perpetrator (by victim) occurred when victim was prepubertal (≤11 years) and perpetrator was postpubertal (>12 years) as well as at least 2 years older than the victim. (p. 12)

Holmes asked the participants whether or not they self-defined their childhood sexual experiences (which qualified as childhood sexual abuse based on the above criteria) by asking the following question, “Would you define the experience(s) you experienced as ‘sexual abuse?’” Again, the set-up of the question is such that a yes or no answer is required, with little to no room for a dynamic or ambiguous response, such as those
implied by some of Leisinrig’s participants who struggled with how to identify and construct their identities.

Clearly the tendency in existing research is to assume that 1) one who has--by legal definition--experienced sexual abuse labels her or his experience as abusive, and 2) that self-definition of abuse is either-or. Both of the aforementioned assumptions seem problematic; the terms we use to define experiences of legal sexual abuse are too simplistic and do not allow for a more descriptive and subjective understanding.

The lag between abuse and disclosure or seeking treatment. It is clear that there is an ongoing debate in the trauma literature in general, as well as the sexual abuse literature in particular, around the discourse of “victim” versus “survivor” and the implications of each. However, what is assumed in all positions of this debate is that victims/survivors of childhood sexual abuse begin with the identity of victim. Following from the sexual abuse literature, I am going to suggest that this is not always the case.

Depending on the study, it is estimated that somewhere between 30 and 80% of victims of childhood sexual abuse do not purposely disclose the abuse before adulthood (Alaggia & Kirshenbaum, 2005). Research points to various reasons for the delay (or complete absence) of disclosure. McAlinden (2006), for example, suggests, “[A] complex range of emotions such as fears of retribution or abandonment, and feelings of complicity, embarrassment, guilt and shame all conspire to silence children and inhibit their disclosures of abuse” (p. 347). Other research points to family dynamics as the culprit, suggesting that rigidly fixed, patriarchy-based gender roles, the presence of family violence, closed and indirect patterns of communication, and social isolation of
the family as a whole contribute to a lag between the abuse and disclosure (Allagia & Kirshenbaum, 2005).

Several studies have looked at rates of disclosure among suspected victims of childhood sexual abuse. One study suggested that initial low rates of disclosure among such victims where gradual disclosure came out during the course of therapy is due to “false products of suggestive therapeutic interviews” (London et al., 2005). London et al. noted that one quarter of those who gradually disclosed abuse later recanted. It was never suggested that perhaps the children were confused not about what “actually” happened, but rather, about how to label it (i.e., as “abuse” or not) and to define themselves.

In a recent study conducted by Hershkowitz et al. (2007), 53% of 30 children between the ages of 7 and 12 delayed disclosure of sexual abuse, with the length of delay ranging from 1 week to 2 years. The speculation about the delay, whether because of the children’s internal feelings, or the family’s dynamics, suggests that children tend to think before disclosing. It is plausible to suggest, as McAlinden (2006) did, that at least part of what the child is thinking about during such a lag is her or his participation in the sexual acts.

Not only is there often a lag between the occurrence of abuse and disclosure, there also is a delay between the abuse and seeking treatment. A meta-analysis of studies concerning psychotherapy with women who were sexually abused as children found a mean age of onset of the abuse between 6 and 7 years, with a mean duration of 6 to 8 years. That the majority of the participants in the study were in their mid-30s, suggests a large interval between the abuse and the decision to enter psychotherapy (Peleikis & Dahl, 2005). It seems likely that, aside from the fact that it is quite difficult for a 7- or
even a 15-year-old child to obtain psychotherapy (or to even know that it exists without
the help of a parent), the interval between the sexually abusive experience and entering
psychotherapy might be related to the fact that the victim did not yet view her or himself
as a victim (after all, psychotherapy is rather easily obtainable at the age of majority). It
seems arguable that many, if not most, survivors of childhood sexual abuse do not enter
therapy until they view themselves as a “victim.” (There are, of course, other reasons an
individual may seek therapy in relation to an experience of childhood sexual abuse,
including having questions such as, “Was I guilty?,” “Did this happen to me because I
was bad?,” “Why am I having trouble being sexual in my current relationships?”
Regardless of which of these questions is primary for the individual, they all point in the
direction of questioning one’s sense of self and relationship with others and the
subsequent implications.

**Perception of early sexual experiences may change with time.** Despite not
focusing on the possible flux of the identity of a sexual abuse survivor, research suggests
that the victim’s perceptions of the abuse may change with time. For instance, research
suggests that adults may redefine their childhood sexual experiences in light of
subsequent knowledge, events, and social support (Strander, Olson & Merrill, 2002;
Leahy et al., 2003). In addition, research suggests that the older the victim becomes, the
more likely she or he is to define a childhood sexual experience as abusive, further
suggesting that one’s self-definition as a victim is subject to revision with time (Strander
et al., 2002; Durham, 2003).

**Factors that may make it difficult to identify as a victim.** Much of the
literature suggests that many, if not all, women with a history of childhood sexual abuse
may not automatically and immediately view themselves as victims, but rather struggle with their positions in regards to that of “victim.” It is thus important to examine what factors might lead to this struggle.

Many victims of childhood sexual abuse may feel that the sexual experience was, in some way, “normal.” The term “grooming” usually refers to the situation where a potential sexual offender will “set up opportunities to abuse by gaining the trust of the child in order to prepare them for abuse” (McAlinden, 2006, p.340). Research suggests that part of the grooming process includes normalizing sexual behavior. Most often sexual offenders normalize sexual behavior by showing children pornography or introducing sexual themes into the conversation (McAlinden, 2006).

One potential reason that some victims of childhood sexual abuse are reluctant to define their experiences as abusive is because they have ambivalent and confusing feelings regarding their experience. Leachy et al. (2003) found that confusion regarding their early sexual experience was a major feeling in a “clinically distressed” group of adult survivors of abuse, but not in a “nonclinically distressed” group. In contrast, the nonclinically distressed group “clearly faulted the perpetrator.” Leachy et al. (2003) suggest that not only is confusion often a common feeling for adult survivors of abuse, but also that its presence seems to create more distress for the individual (ibid, p.662).

The literature suggests that confusion and ambivalence are especially likely to occur when there was no physical force involved in the experience. Research shows that, despite the common (mis)perception, force is not always involved in child sexual abuse, and especially not in incestuous abuse situations (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979; McFarlane, 1978). In fact, in a study of the long-term consequences of “soft” perpetrator styles,
Niederberger (2002) found that approximately 64% of the 129 participants had been victims of a seduction-type strategy, while the remainder had been the victim of a physically coercive strategy. Niederberger (2002) suggested that rather than being tied up or threatened at gunpoint, the course of sexual abuse is more likely to follow the path of, “at first he was just tender, then he kept going farther and farther without saying much,” or “he paid compliments; he flattered you” (endorsed by about 46% and 40% of the sample, respectively) (Niederberger, 2002, p. 63). Additional research corroborates that feelings of confusion and ambivalence about the early sexual experience are increased if the abuser acted warmly or affectionately (e.g., Cameron, 2000; Nelson, 1981). As Nelson (1981) states, “Regarding the feelings toward the other person at the time of the incest, the most frequently checked word was warmth, which was mentioned in the context of both positive and negative reports” (p.168). Furthermore, Cameron (2000) states, “[T]he compelling nature of gentleness has not been emphasized in the literature. According to my respondents, gentle treatment during sexual abuse was profoundly deceptive and confusing” (p.55). Moreover, MacFarlane (1978) suggested, “[The children] are sensual beings who may respond willingly to intimate and gentle contact which they may associate with feelings of being loved, cherished, and cared for” (p.88).

Not surprisingly, some research suggests that confusion and ambivalent feelings are directly correlated with the experience of physical feelings of pleasure during the sexual experience (Cameron, 2000; Durham, 2003). Considering that according to the research, many children report feelings of pleasure or excitement during their early sexual experiences, it is likely that many survivors also struggle with feelings of
ambivalence. Many children report that, what others might refer to as the “abusive situation” actually provided them with some feelings of pleasure, either in that the physical sensations felt good or that the experience satisfied their need for affection and closeness (Courtois, 1988; Finkelhor, 1979; Ingram, 1981). As Forward and Buck (1988) suggest, “Some victims may enjoy incestuous caresses—they may represent the only affection these [now adult] women have ever known” (p. 21). Furthermore, as one participant in a qualitative study of men living through sexual abuse said, “I was a bit confused about it all really. Er it felt good sort of thing…it was comfortable” (Durham, 2003, p. 315). Furthermore, MacFarlane (1978) suggested that even though many children recognize that the sexual abuse is “wrong,” they ultimately still respond favorably to the intimate and gentle contact.

The participating victim. Some researchers have suggested that some children not only report positive feelings of pleasure from their sexual experiences, but also report willingly and actively participating in the sexual acts (Ingram, 1981; Okami, 1991; Swan, 1985; Virkkunen, 1981). Much of the research on the participating victim is from the early 1980s and is based on a victim typology described by Fattah in 1967 (Virkkunen, 1981). I wonder why research in this field has disappeared, and I therefore decided to take up research along this line in this dissertation.

Working out of the field of victimology, which, increasingly in the 1970s was making an effort to study all aspects of a crime (including the relationship between the victim and the criminal and the part the victim played in the crime) rather than just the criminal, Fattah developed a typology that outlined five different types of victims. His five categories of victims were: the nonparticipating victim, the latent or predisposed
victim, the provocative victim, the participating victim, and the false victim (Virkkunen, 1981). The two categories that seem most relevant here are the provocative and participating victim. Virkkunen (1981) writes that the provocative victim plays a “definite role in the aetiology of crime, either by inciting the criminal to commit it or by creating or fostering a situation likely to lead to crime” (p.122). Although participating victims do not play a role in “inciting” the crime, they “play their part” while the crime is being committed, in the form of “adopting a passive attitude or by making the crime possible or even easier” (Virkkunen, 1981, p.122). Virkkunen argues that “many” of the child victims of pedophiles fall under the category of provocative or participating victims. Virkkunen quotes from various studies, saying that the child often “induces the adult offender to commit the offense” and that the child may be a “willing participant if not instigator of a sexual act with an adult” (1981, p.123). Virkkunen notes, “Repeated visits to the offender in spite of continuous criminal behavior is of course proof of the cooperation of the victim” (1981, p.128, emphasis added). He adds, almost as a sidenote, that the children “may” be receiving pleasure or gratification that they otherwise may not get, which is likely to contribute to their “repeated visits to the offender.” Virkkunen suggests that participating and provocative victims are common in both extra- and intrafamilial crimes.

Ingram (1981) found results similar to Virkkunen. He writes, “There can be no doubt that the overwhelming number of incidents that have come to my notice both in this study and in recent counseling of pedophiles, involve children participating as ‘victim,’ a fact of which neither the law, parental reaction, nor police procedures take cognizance” (p.184). In addition, Ingram suggested that both the adults and children
often blur the line between permitting, participating, and inviting sexual contact. He stated of one boy in his study, “The boy participated in the sexual activity with great enjoyment” (ibid, p.181), while some of the other boys regarded their sexual experiences with adults with “a certain robustness, if not relish” (ibid, p.177). In addition, McAlinden suggests, “The use of pornography [during grooming] in particular may encourage feelings of shame and guilt which the offender may exploit by persuading the child that they were willing accomplices in their activities” (2006, p.347). It should be noted that Ingram’s study was conducted exclusively with male children. Although research shows that males are more likely than females to evaluate childhood sexual experiences positively (Finkelhor, 1979; Nelson, 1981; Okami, 1991), it is likely that, as Virkkunen (1981) suggests, many female children have also willingly and actively participated in and relished their sexual experiences with adults. Taking a slightly different stance, Swan (1985) suggests an “interactional perspective” rather than an offender/victim model for incestuous sexual activity.

Agustín Malón, an avid opponent of “victimistic excess” (excessive reliance on victimology and victimization discourse) and “abuse discourse” takes aim at the promotion of childhood sexual abuse by Finkelhor, saying that it “dramatizes sex as inherently dangerous and a cause of disorder, trauma, and domination” (2009, p. 86). Malón proffers that even utilization of the term “victim” equates sex with aggression and leads to “demonization of all of the adult—or even older minor—participants” (2009, p. 79). Malón suggests that not only can a minor participate and enjoy intergenerational sexual contact, but that the terms abuse, victim, and the like are overused and even dangerous (2009).
The meaning of participation. Oftentimes in studies of participating victims, it seems that inferences are made about the child’s experience based on behaviors alone, rather than asking the victim-child (or adult survivor) what meaning the sexual experiences had for her or him. That is, it is often assumed that the child was compliant and/or consenting to sex if she or he engaged in it without resistance or even initiated it.

Both Ingram (1981) and Virkkunen (1981) do suggest that, although children may actively participate in and enjoy sexual experiences with adults, the meaning of those experiences is different for the children than for the adults. Ingram suggests that the child is only seeking attention and affection, while Virkkunen suggests that, “These acts can often seem to them something exciting, an expression of their stimulus-seeking behavior, or a way to establish relationships with adults” (1981, p.131). (See also, Courtois, 1996; Finkelhor, 1979; Forward & Buck, 1988.)

Swan (1985), like Virkkunen and Ingram, argues that the child is seeking something other than sexual rewards when she or he participates in sexual activity with an adult. Swan argues that the child is primarily seeking attention, stating that “children often develop a seductive manner, look, or behavior to attract attention” (1985, p.69). Swan argues that the child could also acquire power by participating in sexual acts with adults, which is “even more attractive” than attention. In an ironic turn, Swan suggests that in incest a parent is not misusing power over a child, but rather, the parent gives up power to the child in an incestuous relationship. Swan concludes that while children can willingly participate in incestuous behavior, the ultimate responsibility lies with the adult because of “age, experience, power, maturity, and social responsibility” (1985, p.70).
Though Swan, Virkkunen, and Ingram suggest that the participation is due, at least in part, to reasons that are not sexual, Okami (1991) proposes otherwise. Okami conducted a descriptive study of 37 male and 26 female subjects who reported “intergenerational sexual contacts” and who reported at least partial “positive” feelings about the contacts. In Okami’s study, the most frequent reason chosen from a list of nine items for why they (both males and females) considered the experience to be positive was, “The experience was physically pleasurable.” Additionally, that same statement was also chosen most frequently as the “most important” reason for deeming the experience positive.

As Courtois (1996) argues, the fact that the child might view her or his sexual experiences with an adult with positive, neutral, or ambivalent feelings does not mean that the activities were nonabusive. In fact, as the research suggests, experiencing pleasure or even ambivalence during the sexual encounter can be a powerful source of shame, embarrassment and guilt for the child (Courtois, 1996; Finkelhor, 1979; Forward & Buck, 1988; Leahy et al., 2003). Okami concurs, stating that, “positive experiences may, however, still be defined as sexual abuse” (1991, p.453).

Based on his study of male pedophiles’ seductive sexual relationships with children, Coufal (1996), suggests that “mutuality” in the relationship, especially in the sexual aspects, is only an illusion on the part of the pedophile and that, from the child’s point of view, the relationship is based on their acting as “someone to comply with the story that [the pedophile] desired to live” (p. 146).

**The debate on repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse.** It seems important to note here that the debate surrounding repressed memories of childhood
sexual abuse and amnesic or partially amnesic victims, while arguably relevant to this topic and interesting in its own right, is beyond the scope of this project. My study will focus on nonamnesic victims, who might endorse a statement along the lines, “I never forgot, but I hadn’t labeled it as sexual abuse” (Cameron, 2000, p. 23). Cameron refers to this identification as “memory without a label” (ibid, p. 27). Men or women who would be likely to endorse statements such as “I had no memory of sexual abuse” (amnesic) and “I had some awareness, but no idea of the extent of the sexual abuse” (partially amnesic) (p. 23), will not be included in this study. There is a plethora of literature available for those interested in a thorough discussion of amnesic victims and repressed and/or recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse (see, for example, Cameron, 2000; Courtois, 1999).

A note on the importance of cultural and historical context. This literature review would not be complete without mention of the importance of the cultural and historical context of defining childhood sexual abuse. It is well documented that in various time periods and cultures, intergenerational sexual activity, including incest, was normative. However, as with the debate on repressed memories, this project does not undertake an examination of the importance of historical and cultural context. This research was conducted in a Western culture in which intergenerational sexual contact is considered by the majority to be non-normative. Thorough reviews of the sexual practices throughout various time periods and societies are available elsewhere (see, for example, Bullough, 1976).
My Research

The at times long period between the experience of childhood sexual abuse and a survivor’s decision to enter treatment, as well as her or his feelings of ambivalence, pleasure, excitement and normalcy, which many victims experience, all suggest that there is a critical period during which many “victims” of childhood sexual abuse may struggle with coming to terms with their childhood sexual abuse. It seems probable, based on my literature review, that they may struggle with the identity of “participant” versus “victim.” This possible struggle and movement of identity seems to be an important step in the process of healing from childhood sexual abuse; after all, how can one heal without first realizing that she or he has something to heal from? However, this arguably common evolution in sense of self from participant to victim and the ambivalent feelings that are inherent in it, though casually mentioned in a great deal of child sexual abuse literature, has not been the focus of research. In addition, as demonstrated throughout my review of the available literature, no research to my knowledge has asked childhood sexual abuse survivors about their own feelings regarding the blurry line between the positions of participant and victim.

Thus, I studied the specifics of the evolution of identity, including the possible shift from participant to victim, and all of the feelings, perceptions and particular contexts that accompany it. I was interested in the how of this shift, that is, how does a shift come about? Is it because a survivor entered therapy due to another concern (e.g., the resulting interpersonal problems or depression that might follow from childhood sexual abuse) and came to think of her or his childhood experiences as abusive then? Or does she come to think of her childhood sexual experiences as possibly abusive when she speaks to a friend?
or sibling about her early sexual experiences? I was also interested in the when of this shift. Does it occur months after the childhood sexual experience, years, decades? Perhaps the most interesting to me, as well as the most useful in terms of clinical and therapeutic implications, was the what of this shift, that is, what does this shift look and feel like? What has previously been useful to the survivor in thinking of her or himself as having been a participant in childhood sexual encounters that suddenly (or gradually?) broke down, necessitating a shift to thinking of oneself as a victim? And does she or he decide once and for all to shift identities or is life a repetitive struggle to come to terms with the abusive childhood sexual experience(s)?

**Method**

**Qualitative vs. Quantitative**

After sifting through both qualitative and quantitative studies, I decided to use a qualitative method, which allowed me to explore the context and individual perceptions, rather than focusing on categories as quantitative studies do. Following in Durham’s footsteps, I strove to “[highlight] the importance of survivors’ perspectives and of allowing [...] young people to speak for themselves and theorize their own experiences” (2003, p. 309). Although most qualitative studies of this sort are retrospective by necessity, which, of course this one was as well, conducting a retrospective study was to my advantage, as it gave me an opportunity to trace the individual’s developmental change in perception regarding her childhood sexual experiences. I believe that this qualitative study will help to fill in the large qualitative and “victim”-focused gap in the literature. Thus, my qualitative study focused on the participants’ experiences rather than
on specific acts. More specifically, my study explored any feelings of ambivalence regarding early sexual experiences, and the process and the impact of any vicissitudes.

In light of Leisenrig’s (2006) study and my own experiences, I suspected that many participant/victims struggle with ambivalent feelings regarding their childhood sexual experiences, wherein one voice within themselves might pull towards identifying as something like a participant, while at the same time feeling compelled by another voice to identify as something like a victim. At the beginning of my research, these labels of “participant” and “victim” were guesses, but what I was more sure of was that a multiplicity of identifications and voices were likely hidden under the more discrete term of “sexual abuse.” Thus, I decided that the method of this study should be able to explore multiple voices within a person’s discourse, allowing ambivalent or conflicting feelings regarding early sexual experiences to be disclosed.

The Voice-Centered Relational Method

While searching for a method that allowed for and focused on ambivalence within one’s story, I came across the voice-centered relational method. Originally developed out of noticing how girls and women silence themselves in order to enter into relationships with others, Gilligan and Brown’s (1992) voice-centered relational method—later dubbed the “Listening Guide” due to its unique four listenings to the same transcript—seemed to be the perfect method for emphasizing the complexities and multiplicity of voices that can be found in women who are coming to terms with abusive sexual experiences. The Listening Guide, as it is typically employed, listens for four voices in each woman’s story. Implicit in Gilligan’s method is the notion that human development occurs in relationship with others and that the psyche is composed of layers, showing itself in a
multiplicity of voices. Sorsoli and Tolman (2008) astutely note that qualitative research tends to be interested in presenting a participant’s story, as in a singular, coherent whole, whereas The Listening Guide facilitates “a complex and nuanced understanding of participants’ stories” (p. 495, my italics). Furthermore, Sorsoli and Tolman note that, “research questions involving marginalized experiences, including those involving social stigma, shame, or secrecy, are particularly well suited for a Listening Guide analysis” (ibid.).

The Listening Guide employs a semi-structured way of listening to participants’ stories that allows for comparison among participants, to show both what is similar across participants’ stories and what is unique to each participant’s multilayered story. Gilligan et al initially defined the objectives of each listening, but further research with the method has demonstrated that, although the first two readings—for plot and the “I voice”—tend to remain fixed, the last two are open to innovation and flexibility depending on the research question (Belknap, 2000; Gilligan et al, 2003; Kiegelmann, 2007; Koelsch, 2008; Letvak, 2003; Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). My particular structure for the four readings will be explained further in the section of Data Analysis in this chapter.

My initial hunch, based on my own experiences as well as my literature review, was that the voices that would be expressed and silenced within my participants’ stories would be those that disclose the movement of identity between something like that of a victim and something like that of a participant. Although this initial hunch fit for one of my participant’s experiences, it did not fit in the same way for the rest of the women; what I found was a much wider range of voices.
The Fifth Voice: My Own

[T]he first listening requires that we reflect on ourselves as people in the privileged position of interpreting the life events of another and consider the implications of this act. An awareness of the power to name and control meaning is critical; and to avoid abuses of this power, we name and think about the meaning of our own feelings and thoughts about the narrator and about her story. In what ways do we identify with or distance ourselves from this person? In what ways are we or our experiences different or the same? [...] Are we upset or delighted by the story, amused or pleased, disturbed or angered? Writing out our responses to what we are hearing, we then consider how our thoughts and feelings may affect our understanding, our interpretation, and the way we write about that person. (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 27)

It is no secret why I chose this topic to research; the broad topic of sexual abuse arose out of my own history and my own struggle to come to terms (although, to be clear, none of the stories in this dissertation are my own). While this fact may have fueled my passion for the topic, one can imagine that it could become problematic, especially for researchers concerned primarily with objectivity. One way in which to remain attentive to my own voice, without allowing it to supersede those of the participants’, was to take a decisively reflexive position. It is my belief, in consonance with Rabinow and Sullivan (1987), that understanding is possible because, not in spite of, my pre-understandings and situation as having experienced childhood sexual abuse, and it is these pre-understandings and presuppositions that will allow me access to my participants’ experiences (Walsh, 1996). Transference and countertransference can--in any “good” psychotherapy or analysis--be fruitful and enlightening; it can also become a roadblock when not attuned to properly. Such is also the case with the researcher’s own voice(s). In order to maximize utility and minimize unhelpful complications, I followed Brown
and Gilligan’s suggestions for the researcher’s questions to herself as well as compiling a “reflexive journal” such as that described by Koch and Harrington (1998).

To emphasize a point I already made, I include this quotation from Gilligan: “We work to identify our own responses to this particular interview, like a clinician who identifies her countertransference, or responses to her client, in the hope that she will be better able to not confuse her own experiences with those of her client” (2003, p. 161). I include this quotation because, initially, I found separating my own experience from those of the participants’ to be quite difficult. I had difficulty using my own voice to inform my understanding of their voices, and instead used my voice as only a point of comparison. I therefore decided to consult several completed dissertations which had also utilized the Listening Guide in order to find examples of topics that were less emotionally-charged for me. I found this in the dissertations of Koelsch (2008) and Tran (2011). From these dissertations, and others, I was able to get a sense of how I could engage with my own voices in a helpful way, disclosing my own sociocultural and historical position, without making my dissertation into a monologue of my own experiences. Practically speaking, at this point I decided to keep two journals. The first was for my own, more personal responses, for my own comparisons and feelings about my own experience, and for my continued explorations of my own stories; the other was a reflexivity journal in which I explored my voice as a researcher, engaging with participants’ stories and more focused on my sociocultural perspective and voice(s).

Even once I was able to switch the focus from my own experience to that of the participants’, there was still a sense that I could not quite differentiate whether the voices (and understandings) that I was arriving at were actually the participants’ or my own.
There remained a gray area in the process of finding the voices, of finding the meaning or understanding in the stories, that was neither just the participants’ nor just my own, but rather, was co-created in the dialogue between us. This co-creation of meaning is inevitably related to the multiplicity of voices that I found. Thus, although I tried my best to allow the voices to emerge from the women’s stories, my own voices inexorably played a significant role.

**Procedures**

**Participants.** I recruited participants with a serial approach. I began my search by posting recruitment advertisements at Duquesne University and Pittsburgh Action Against Rape (PAAR) (see Appendix A for full recruitment flyer). I received several calls of interest from this approach, but each prospective participant eventually chose—understandably, given the sensitive topic at hand—not to participate; several participants did not show for interviews and two contacted me to explain that they were not yet ready to speak about their experiences.

After this initial search was unsuccessful, I expanded the search to a local newspaper’s online classifieds as well as to several online forums for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. This strategy yielded more interest, but again, many of the perspective participants changed their minds about participating. I was, however, able to obtain five complete interviews from these combined searches; one additional interview was conducted, but I decided to discard this interview due to the participant’s confusion about the reality of the sexual experiences she recounted. Although I was initially interested in speaking with women who were clearly ambivalent about their participation in the sexual experiences (i.e., they felt as if they had participated and had more
conflicting feelings about the experience due to this), I ended up accepting a wider range of experiences (including one extrafamilial incident) due to the difficulty of locating willing participants. The fact that obtaining participants was so difficult and took over six months speaks volumes about the sensitivity of the topic and further indicates that having these experiences as a child has a lasting impact.

The final five participants were all women who described childhood sexual experiences which they labeled as abusive. Three participants reported intrafamilial experiences, one described an extrafamilial experience, and one described one of each kind of experience (resulting in a total of six experiences). The women ranged in age from mid 30s to mid 40s. Four of the women were Caucasian and one was of African American descent. All women were high school graduates and two women had pursued higher education; one woman had an advanced degree (see Table 1, for demographics).

**Interviews.** I conducted each interview in the Duquesne University Psychology Clinic. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, a member of the Clinic staff was available during each interview, should the participants have needed to debrief with someone other than myself following the interview; this service was not utilized in any of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (by pseudonym)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age at Time of Abuse</th>
<th>Relationship of Perpetrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>8-13</td>
<td>Half-brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabitha</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Approx. 8-18</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>8 (neighbor) / 10 (brother)</td>
<td>Neighbor &amp; Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Schoolmate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the interviews. I began the interviews by obtaining written consent (see Appendix B for a full copy of the consent form). I thoroughly explained that the interview was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. The interviews were semi-structured in order to provide a guide for both of us, but to also allow the women freedom to respond in their own way. I began the interview with the following prompt:

Please describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your childhood sexual abuse. Please include how this understanding has changed over time and the influence of this understanding on your sense of self and your relationships with others.

The participants were then free to respond in their own words and style. I asked mostly clarifying questions and, at times, asked the participant to address parts of the prompt which remained unanswered. Overall, I erred on the side of remaining silent and allowing their story to be told organically. I used my intuition to guide how far to press participants when asking for details about the sexual experiences; I found myself again erring on the side of caution and asking less rather than more questions. I noted the participants’ nonverbal behavior and cues as well as my own feelings and thoughts during the interview. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted between one and two hours. The interviews concluded when both the participants and I had reached a sense of completion or closure. The audio recordings were deleted after they had been transcribed. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, as well as for all names appearing in the transcripts; other important identifying details were also changed.

Almost immediately, in my very first interview, I felt unprepared (not unusual for me); mostly, I felt paralyzed when trying to find the right way to phrase my follow-up
questions. For example, in Mary’s interview I struggled with whether or not to use the phrase “sexual abuse.” The best I could come up with in the moment was to use the ever-so-nondescriptive “it” (“R: Ok... Can I just back up a little bit...how old were you whenever you were...when it began?”) Postmodern arguments on the importance of language suddenly jumped from being words in a book to a very real problem; I quickly realized that how I phrased questions could potentially have the power to determine, or at the very least influence, the participants’ responses. Following this initial interview, I took the stance of attempting to remain as neutral as possible, allowing the women to choose their own words to describe their experiences.

**Interpreting the data.** As previously stated, the voice-centered relational method—identified hereafter with the more recent name of the Listening Guide—is built around four readings (or listenings, as Gilligan et al initially both listened to the interviews and read the transcripts at the same time) of each participant’s interview. Each reading focuses on a different aspect of the participant’s story: the first on listening for the plot and unfolding of events; the second on listening for the woman’s sense of self or “I”; and the third and fourth attune to two contrapuntal voices underlying the participant’s story (Gilligan et al., 2003). Gilligan et al argue that multiple listenings are necessary because “simultaneous voices are co-occurring” and that each listening amplifies a particular aspect of the participant’s story (2003, p. 159). Gilligan et al (ibid) suggest underlining each voice a different color. I found that, due to my higher level of comfort with working digitally, it was easier for me to manipulate the fonts (rather than underline) in order to identify the different voices. Next, I describe briefly how I, closely following Gilligan et al (ibid), conducted each reading and analyzed the data.
Step 1: Listening for plot. The first reading/listening, as the title suggests, sets the stage for the rest of the listenings. Understanding the timeline and unfolding of events provides a context for the analysis. In addition to summarizing the plot, I followed Gilligan et al’s (2003) method of noticing recurring words and images, central metaphors, inconsistencies, and my own initial emotional resonances and reactions. In my final analysis, I decided to include not only my own description of the plot of the participant’s story, but also the participant’s summary in her own words; I created a paragraph (or more) by putting together the participant’s own phrases describing (1) her description of the sexual experiences, (2) her description of how she has come to terms, and (3) her description of how her understanding of the sexual experiences has affected her identity and relationships. I chose to include these paragraphs of the participants’ own words in order to keep me focused on the participant’s words and story so as to stay as close as possible to the data. As a last stage in this first reading, I included my initial responses which are excerpts taken from my reflexivity journals.

Step 2: “I poems.” In the second reading, I focused on the participant’s sense of self. This was done, literally and practically, by identifying all instances of the use of the pronoun “I.” I underlined all uses of “I” in the text, along with several of the ensuing words and then combined all of these I’s, in sequential order, into a poem. I initially kept every use of I in the poem, but then decided to shorten it to increase readability and emotional quality (the full I poems were up to 14 pages, single spaced!). I kept the statements in the same sequential order and attempted to keep those I statements that seemed most pertinent to the plot and the participant’s emotions; the full I poems are available for review in Appendix D. As with the first reading, I also provide my response
to the participant’s I poem and overall voice of self, which incorporates recurrent themes or images. I also identified areas in which the participant switched from speaking in first to third person.

**Steps 3 and 4: “Listening for contrapuntal voices” (Gilligan et al, 2003, p. 164).**

In the Listening Guide, the first two readings are prescribed, while the latter two are shaped by the researcher’s particular questions. I initially thought that the two contrapuntal voices I would look for would be something akin to the “voice of the participant” and the “voice of the victim,” as my interest following the literature review was in the ambivalence between those two voices and the particulars of a shift between them. I quickly found, however, that to listen for those two particular contrapuntal voices would be to impose my own voices on the participants, as those two voices did not appear to be naturally occurring in all of the transcripts. I worked hard to try to identify common contrapuntal voices across the women’s stories, but this too felt like an imposition of voices that were not actually there; therefore, I decided to locate two unique contrapuntal voices within each woman’s story, thus allowing for voices to emerge from the data itself, rather than imposing them.

Although Gilligan et al describe each reading for a contrapuntal voice as a singular reading (i.e., readings three and four), in reality it took me several re-readings in order to locate what seemed to be the strongest two contrapuntal voices for each woman. For each reading, I first specified the voice I was looking for and then identified how I would know when I found each voice. I used italic lettering to identify the first contrapuntal voice in each participant’s narrative and bold lettering to identify the second. As in the first reading, I then put all instances of the contrapuntal voice (e.g.,
from Mary’s story, the voice of guilt) together to describe the story as told from that particular voice; doing this allowed for me to then easily compare and contrast the narrative when each voice is emphasized. The relationship between each contrapuntal voice and the participant’s voice of self was also explored.

**Step 5: Voices across participants.** The last step in my interpretation of the data was to compare the contrapuntal voices across participants. Although this step of the interpretation turned out to be quite different from my initial hypothesis of exploring the way that the voices of participant and victim varied across participants, it turned out to be fruitful for examining the vast array of ways in which participants come to terms with their experiences.

**Mary’s Story**

**First Listening: The Plot**

**Demographical information.** At the time of the interview, Mary was in her early 40s, divorced, and unemployed. She was married once for a short time and has no children of her own. She was born and raised in a town in Western Pennsylvania.

**My summary of Mary’s story.** It took Mary a long time to come to terms with the fact that her childhood sexual experiences with her half-brother—five years her senior—were abusive. She reports that she craved the attention and she believes that she and her brother “needed” each other, in that their experiences saved both of them from becoming “crazy” due to lack of physical and emotional affection from others (i.e., their parents). Mary has subsequently had difficulty with experiencing physical affection from other men, including her ex-husband. Part of her relationship with her brother included a secretiveness and specialness such that the two of them knew about the sexual nature of
their relationship, but others didn’t. Mary has not had any contact with her brother for many years due to the fact that he will not acknowledge their early sexual experiences with one another. Mary’s brother went to jail (for an unrelated crime) and came back when she was in her 20s, at which point he threatened her mother’s boyfriend (who, at the time was also sexually abusing Mary).

Mary’s ex-husband was nonjudgmental and played a large part in helping her through her difficulties, though he cheated on her shortly after getting married, which resulted in divorce. Mary reported that the sexual interaction with her brother began when she was about eight years of age when she lost her virginity, during which she lost consciousness and bled profusely, and only many years later found out that significant damage had been done during that incident; physiological damage from that incident has rendered her unable to have children.

Mary reported that curiosity, a desire for knowledge (which she lacked due to a lack of sexual education), and a desire for affection allowed her to be “enticed” into a sexual relationship with her brother. Mary reported that she has suffered from depression since the age of about 11 and has attempted suicide on multiple occasions, beginning at the age of 12 and most recently in 2007. Mary continues to struggle with knowing that the abuse was not her fault, but also occasionally blaming herself for “welcoming” it. Mary believes that what has been most damaging about the abuse is her brother’s denial of it, which makes her feel crazy and dirty; she fears that were she ever to see her brother again, her anger would destroy him.

Mary’s description of the sexual experiences.

I know when I was in third grade we started with the hugs. And I guess it was before I turned 8 because I remember it was summer vacation…I was…it was
when...I can remember the day clearly...my mom and sisters went out, I stayed home because I wanted to read a book because I remember I was sitting down, I was laying downstairs on the floor in the living room...I had cartoons or something on, but I was reading my book. I was on my stomach on the floor, my legs were up, I was kicking my legs and I was reading the book. All of a sudden the door opened and he walked in. I was wearing shorts and I guess, like, one of those like tube top type things that were really in the fashion back then (laughing)1 and he’s like, ‘hey short stop’ or something like that...and I’m like, ‘hey’...and he’s like ‘where is everyone,’ and I’m like... ‘out.’ He’s like, ‘oh what are you doing?’ I’m like, ‘reading.’ He’s like, ‘oh ok.’ ( . . . ) He walked by and then all of a sudden next thing I know, he’s bending down and hitting me on my butt. And I’m like, ‘stop it!’ He’s like, ‘no!’ I’m like ‘yeah, I’m reading here,’ ya know. And then he starts tickling me because I’ve always been ticklish on my sides. He’s like, ‘no ones around’...he’s like, you know, it’s... ‘we can be affectionate now.’ I’m like, ‘I wanna read George, leave me alone.’ I’m like, ‘I want to finish this.’ He’s like ‘come on, let’s play.’ I’m like, ‘no.’ So all of a sudden he’s down on his knees and he’s over me...and I always had my hair long and everything and he’s holding my hair back and then next thing I know, he’s got his um, like his ear and his mouth...his nose and his mouth up on my ear and my thing...and he’s like, ‘what do you got on?’ I’m like, ‘nothing.’ He’s like, ‘yes you do.’ I’m like, ‘no I don’t.’ ( . . . ) He’s like, ‘you were in mom’s perfume.’ ‘I was not in mom’s perfume...I know better than to be in mom’s perfume.’ All of a sudden, he said, he’s leaning down on top of me (quieter)...and I’m feeling him...and I’m like, ‘what are you doing?’ He’s like...he’s like... ‘I need you.’ I’m like, ‘what do you mean you need me?’ He’s like, ‘I need you.’ And he’s like, ‘we’ll go upstairs.’ I’m like, ‘mom and everyone will be home soon.’ He’s like, ‘I don’t care.’ I’m like, ‘George, no.’ He’s like, ‘I don’t care, let’s go upstairs.’ So he got up on his knees and he pulled me up. Next thing I know I’m in his arms and he’s carrying me up the stairs. And somehow we’re up in his room. The door’s locked. He’s got me undressed...his clothes were off. And he’s touching me. And then he’s laying on the bed and he’s like, ‘touch me’. And I’m like...He’s like... ‘just touch me.’ And I mean, he’s like... ‘it’s alright, you can touch me.’ I was shaking and I’m shaking my head and...he’s like, ‘you see what you do to me.’ But I was so curious too, at the same time. Because I never, ever seen anything like that before. (silence) And somehow he had me get on top of him. And I passed out. I know I was in pain and I passed out ( . . . ) I mean, when I woke up he was cleaning me up, there was blood on the cloth. And he was saying, he’s sorry, he’s sorry, he shouldn’t have. He didn’t know it was going to be like that (sigh). I mean, and he’s kissing me...and he’s holding me and he’s like, I promise you it won’t happen again ( . . . ) Yeah, every chance we had, being alone it would turn into something. I mean, he was in his sexual...however you want to say it (laughing).

---

1 Four spaced ellipsis points within parentheses ( . . . ) indicates omitted sentences from the interview.
Mary’s description of how she has come to terms.

Well it’s taken me a long time to come to understand um the abuse because it was really…at the time I didn’t see it as abuse…I saw it as affection that I was not getting at home from parents that didn’t know how to show affection. So, it was really hard to say it was abuse…it wasn’t until I got older that I realized what it was. So…and that I came to terms with…that it was abuse. And, um, so for the longest time I sort of like blanked it out or put myself to where it was…I didn’t…want to come to terms with what it really was. So…and now that I have I blame myself a lot for what it was because…it was…I was craving the attention, I was craving the affection and everything like that, so…I let it go on ( . . . ) So, but I mean…now that I know it was wrong, but still to a part of me…on another level, I still say…yeah, it was wrong…but, yeah we were giving each other something that nobody else was giving us. It kept us from going…maybe crazy, maybe…emotionally blind to other people.

Mary’s description of how her understanding has affected her identity and relationships.

I know that…I know that it was wrong…so…and my sense of self-worth and everything was really—is still out of whack because of it. I mean that’s why I feel that I’m still not…how can I say it…still not worthy of the right kind of person ( . . . ) I guess he couldn’t get over the fact that I still had problems with…(sigh)…sometimes the affection and things like that, whereas the sex—I had no problem with the sex, I wanted the sex, sometimes the affection was the problem ( . . . ) Well, holding…the comfort…like afterwards ( . . . ) especially like in large crowds and things like that. Because then I think everyone’s looking at me and …I think I’m being singled out for something ( . . . ) so I’ve been ill with my depression since about 11 years old. I think I started with trying to kill myself about…yeah, about 12…I think I first started taking pills about then, yeah. My first suicide attempt. I always come out ( . . . ) It’s just so hard because I still sort ‘em out myself…and I still try not to think about a lot of it and…I do at times because a lot of times the rage boils up and the sorrow boils up and…I find myself crying a lot ( . . . ) Sometimes expressing myself with them too, it’s like…being subservient with them, um, not knowing how to be aggressive…umm, because you want…sometimes they want you to be…want you to be the one making love to them…and it’s hard to. Yeah…so. I don’t know.

It’s just really, really hard sometimes because I find myself just like, I find myself being back…being 8 years old again, sometimes. Being that small child…at times. I mean, yeah, I can sometimes put it behind me, but there’s times when…(sigh)…I don’t want to say this. When I’m the shy person, where I just want them to be the aggressor, or I want them to take the advantage because that’s…how I was back then.
**My initial response.** Right from the beginning of the interview, I found myself quite interested in Mary’s story and, in comparison to some of the others I would come to hear, more moved. Part of my engrossment is related to the clearly ambivalent position that Mary takes while telling her story, which is in stark contrast to some other participants who undoubtedly identify their early sexual experiences as abusive. Mary’s story was most in line with what I was expecting and initially hoping to hear.

While reading Mary’s interview for the first time, I’m struck by my own confusion in asking her to describe her experiences; I clearly recall hesitating as I looked for the right word to reflect her experiences back to her. It strikes me that my confusion is likely a reflection of Mary’s confusion of how to describe her own experiences and, of seemingly particular importance to her, whom to “blame” for the experiences; multiple times she blamed herself as well as her brother within the same breath. I’m also struck by the theme of a separation between sex and affection, which is apparent in Mary’s story, with affection (not sex, as I might have assumed) being closely tied to a sense of shame and dirtiness. I also immediately notice a theme of men “disappearing” from her life, including both of her brothers and her husband; her brother George not only physically disappeared from her life, but also emotionally disappears when he denies their sexual relationship. I notice that Mary seems to identify strongly with herself as the eight your old child; her description of the day the sexual experiences with her brother began contains the most detail of the entire interview. As she recounts the story, she’s very clear in her descriptions of what was happening (including remembering exactly what she was wearing and doing) and easily puts herself back in time. In sitting with
Mary during the interview, I recall that she became more animated and her face lit up during her description of that day and the interactions between her and her brother.

**Second Listening: I Poem**

**Mary’s I poem.**

I didn’t see it as abuse  
I saw it as affection  
    I was not getting [affection]

I blame myself a lot  
    I was craving the attention  
        I was craving the affection  
                        I let it go on.

I know  
    I know that it was wrong…

I don’t know  
    I say  
I don’t know  
    I mean  
I guess because…

I blame myself  
    I mean  
I blamed him a lot too  
    I still hate him  
        I blamed him  
I blamed myself  
    I still won’t talk to him  
                        I hate him.

I was taking care of her  
    I was making good money  
I was taking care of her  
    I was paying the bills  
I was taking care of her  
    I was taking care of the kids…

I wake up  
I assume  
    I mean  
I was curious
I mean
I don’t know
I know

I was a child.

I put myself through
I can probably say
I shouldn’t have to put myself through
    I know
I shouldn’t blame myself
    I do
I shouldn’t blame myself.

I say
I mean
I welcomed it
    I shouldn’t have
I didn’t know it was wrong
    I’m blaming myself

I didn’t know it was wrong

I need him to acknowledge it
    I know damn well
    I know that
I know damn well

I don’t think
    I was a whore
I was someone
    I asked for it
I needed it

    I paid for it.

**My response to Mary’s I poem.** Mary’s I poem provides an evocative image of the confusion which was palpable during our interview. I’m particularly moved by the stanza, “I was curious/ I mean/ I don’t know/ I know/ I was a child;” there is something in those lines which seems to summarize Mary’s curiosity paired with knowing and not-knowing, culminating in her statement “I was a child” that filled me with sadness for her both as a child and in the present as she continues to struggle. Reading Mary’s I poem
for an emotional response, I identify her as still struggling to come to terms; one voice speaks and a contrapuntal one immediately responds, somewhat erasing the first. And this process continues throughout.

Overall, Mary speaks of herself with many active verbs and, despite her confusion regarding blame, she often speaks with certainty, especially in regard to the actual story she tells of her experience with her brother. She describes herself as someone who was not getting attention or affection and was craving it; she describes herself as an inquisitive child, hungry for knowledge and new experiences. She portrays herself as someone who wants to be acknowledged and heard, someone who wants to confront her brother, but who also fears the power of her own rage and sorrow. Mary depicts herself as a caretaker, someone who had to grow up quickly, make adult decisions, and give up opportunities for others.

Although Mary readily acknowledges welcoming the sexual experiences with her brother, it is also worth noting that she switches to third person when she speaks of physically enjoying the sexual acts, suggesting that she is more comfortable distancing herself from the sexual pleasure of the experience. “Because, well, like I say, you know how they always say it takes two? You know, also, you know, a lot of times…a woman raped is not consenting even though she got off on it because it still stimulates her no matter what because of it…”

Mary again switches from first to third person when speaking of how she currently expresses her sexuality, suggesting that, although she states in the interview that she doesn’t have problems with sex (but does with affection), she does distance herself
from experiencing sexual pleasure, and she is especially inhibited when initiating sexual
activity with others.

**R:** Are there other ways in which you think these early experiences impacted
your relationships with other people?

**S:** Sometimes expressing myself with them too, it’s like…being subservient with
them, um, not knowing how to be aggressive…umm, because you
want…sometimes they want you to be…want you to be the one making love to
them…and it’s hard to.

Mary mentions explicitly and also intimates more subtly that she feels as if she
needs to distance herself from some emotions, particularly anger. She states quite clearly
that she is afraid of the power of her rage; she also seems to minimize her identification
with her anger when she switches from first to third person in the example below:

**R:** It still is and right now the predominant feeling it seems like is anger.

**S:** Oh yeah. It is. But there’s, you know, it’s a lot of hurt…there’s a lot of
anger…there’s a lot of sorrow. Lot of punishment there too (laughter).

**Third Listening: The Voice of Guilt**

For my third reading of Mary’s interview, I chose to read for a voice which I had
already noticed was central to her understanding not only of her experience with her
brother, but also of herself: the voice of guilt. I knew from my first two readings that the
voice of guilt permeated Mary’s story, but when I began specifically looking for it, I
found that I was simultaneously looking for both Mary’s own feelings of guilt as well as
a more diffuse sense of guilt or wrongdoing. My movement from Mary’s guilt to a more
free-floating guilt is a reflection of Mary’s own (likely unconscious) tendency to alternate
between a sense of her wrongdoing versus placing the blame outside of herself by describing it as wrong.

Mary’s voice of guilt is depicted in italics (and all “I” statements are underlined). I decided to include all statements alluding to wrongdoing, secretiveness, and statements of blame or remorse when highlighting Mary’s voice of guilt. Mary’s sense of guilt is a large part of her narrative and of her identity, influencing even her current worthiness of romantic partners.

Mary’s story told from the voice of guilt.

I blame myself a lot for what it was because...it was...I was craving the attention. I was craving the affection and everything like that, so...I let it go on. . . .

So...and I know that...I know that it was wrong. . . . so...and my sense of self-worth and everything was really—is still out of whack because of it. I mean that’s why I feel that I’m still not...how can I say it...still not worthy of the right kind of person... but I could see how wrong it is and how...because now I look for that stuff now (tearful). . . . I think I’m being singled out for something... I would get it back then and I see it as something that’s wrong because we always did it behind closed doors... it was something, you know, we had to hide it... we would pass each other and we would you know, slip our hands...in that context...you know, or, you know...we would touch each other on the hip or something like that...something that no one else would see that we would know about. . . . I know it was wrong, but still to a part of me...on another level, I still say...yeah, it was wrong... I blame myself a lot too... I blamed myself... she would have just said, “he wouldn’t do that to you”...or “you’re egging him on.”... he didn’t say it was like, I egged it on or I asked for it to happen or anything like that. . . . But I was so curious too, at the same time. Because I never, ever seen anything like that before. . . . he was saying, he’s sorry, he’s sorry, he shouldn’t have. . . . every chance we had, being alone it would turn into something. . . . I was curious, because it was something totally new; something different. . . . what do you wanna...you do wanna touch it, but you don’t at the same time because you don’t want to mar it, you don’t wanna...ruin it. . . .

you know how they always say it takes two? You know, also, you know, a lot of times...a woman raped is not consenting even though she got off on it because it still stimulates her no matter what because of it... I mean I welcomed it. And I shouldn’t have... that’s what I’m blaming myself for. . . . I never wanted anyone to know about it. . . . with him not acknowledging it, it makes it feel like I was a whore, or I was someone that...soiled myself to get what I needed. That I asked for it. That I needed it more than he wanted to give it. You know. Sort of like, I paid for it...where he didn’t want to give it.
Putting all of Mary’s phrases in which she speaks from the voice of guilt together into one story made her inner world come alive for me. It reinforced for me that Mary feels guilty not just about her behavior or the fact that her body physically responded to sexual stimuli, but because of her desires—both to fulfill her curiosity and for attention and closeness. Although I can identify with Mary’s voice of guilt from my own life, after I listen to (i.e., read) her repeatedly blame herself for having the normal desires of an eight year old girl, I find myself becoming angry and wanting to convince her of her innocence.

For Mary, the voice of guilt has become louder as she has aged (i.e., “I got older that I realized what it was. So…and that I came to terms with...that it was abuse.”) The feeling of guilt is intertwined with the sense of herself as curious and permeates other experiences in her life, such as the death of her sister. Mary’s feelings of guilt are not just present in the story she tells of her sexual experiences with her brother, but instead, they have gone from guilt regarding a wrong decision with her brother to a more widespread sense of shame about herself. George’s denial of the sexual relationship with Mary exacerbates the voice of guilt.

Fourth Listening: The Voice of Innocence

The decision for attempting to locate the contrapuntal voices of guilt and innocence came to me simultaneously while doing the second reading, perhaps because I sensed that this was an area of confusion for Mary (and also for me as the researcher during my time with Mary and while doing the readings).

I decided to locate the voice of innocence via Mary’s use of the word “affection” or by similar statements alluding to the notion that Mary and her brother were satisfying
their need for affection through their relationship. I also located the voice of innocence in statements about her brother making the decisions and initiating sexual interaction, leading to his blame and her innocence. The voice of innocence is highlighted in Mary’s story in bold lettering; the voice of guilt carries over as italicized, and the “I” voice (or sense of self) is underlined.

Mary’s story told from the voice of innocence.

I didn’t see it as abuse... I saw it as affection that I was not getting at home from parents that didn’t know how to show affection. So, it was really hard to say it was abuse ( . . . ) I was craving the attention, I was craving the affection and everything like that ( . . . ) he was experimenting with me at the time ( . . . ) it was just... I don’t know... I guess we were both looking for affection from one another because we weren’t getting it from the source we needed it from ( . . . ) he was always, he always found time to make sure, you know, there was affection ( . . . ) we needed it I guess because we needed each other ( . . . ) he started me smoking... staying up late watching a horror movie together ( . . . ) but still to a part of me... on another level... but, yeah we were giving each other something that nobody else was giving us ( . . . ) It kept us from going, maybe crazy ( . . . ) hugs, say the hair ruffles, the pat on your back when they did good... things like that ( . . . )

I blamed him a lot too... oh, I still hate him a lot for it... because I blamed him ( . . . ) when he came back around too, in the picture, he tried again ( . . . ) my mom had found a boyfriend and he started doing it... I had to go through it all over again... in my teens again... of, the abuse with him... he put me through it... Touching me and things like that...

[My husband] didn’t like hold it against me... he didn’t blame me... he didn’t say it was my fault... it just happens sometimes ( . . . ) He says, you know, you both needed affection, it just went a step farther, he should have known better, he was older than you. He should not have taken it to the sexual level. You know, the hugs were fine ( . . . ) when I was in third grade we started with the hugs ( . . . )

I’m like, ‘I wanna read George, leave me alone.’... I’m like, ‘I want to finish this.’ He’s like ‘come on, let’s play.’ I’m like, ‘no.’ So all of a sudden he’s down on his knees and he’s over me... he’s holding my hair back and then next thing I know, he’s got his um, like his ear and his mouth... All of a sudden, he said, he’s leaning down on top of me... he’s like... ’I need you.’ I’m like, ‘what do you mean you need me?’... I’m like, ‘George, no.’ He’s like, ‘I don’t care, let’s go upstairs.’ So he got up on his knees and he pulled me up. Next thing I know I’m in his arms and he’s carrying me up the stairs. And somehow we’re up in his room. The door’s locked. He’s got me
undressed…his clothes were off. And he’s touching me. And then he’s laying on the bed and he’s like, ‘touch me’. I’m shaking my head. He didn’t know it was going to be like that. I mean, and he’s kissing me…and he’s holding me and he’s like, I promise you it won’t happen again. He didn’t know every chance we had, being alone it would turn into something. He taught me a lot of things. I know I shouldn’t blame myself for it, but I do…because I shouldn’t blame myself.

I didn’t know it was wrong… I didn’t know it was wrong… no one telling you it’s wrong… there was no one saying, this shouldn’t be happening. There’s no one saying, well, no one should be touching you at this time. You know, no one should be doing these things to your body because you’re too fragile, you’re too young…it isn’t until you get older that these things should be happening. I don’t think he realizes what he did… you know. And, how much damage he has done… enticed by him. I just want them to be the aggressor, or I want them to take the advantage. you never heard of it back then, you didn’t know it wasn’t wrong because there was nobody telling you these things… are they supposed to be doing these or… someone putting their arm around you, dropped down a little bit lower, you never knew what was right and what was wrong back then because it wasn’t talked about.

It was good memories because we were getting out, we were doing things, we were having fun… we were enjoying… it wasn’t sexual, it wasn’t anything like that… it was just… fun… it wasn’t like, molesting… it wasn’t abuse, it wasn’t anything like that… it was just a brother and sister more or less having fun, doing something that they would actually do together… yeah, without anything else going on. But yeah… because I remember him trying to teach me how to roller skate and ice skate and things like that (laughter)… taking me putt-putting and bowling and… taking me on my first rollercoaster ride… that was at amusement park and we were on the roller coaster. We were on the back of the roller coaster and we were on the one hill and I flew up (laughter). I thought I was flying out (laughter)!

As with Mary’s voice of guilt, her voice of innocence is also heavily intertwined with her sense of self. Mary’s voice of innocence is heard most strongly in four areas of her narrative: childhood innocence, lack of information, sexual identity, and healthy sibling memories. I explore each area of overlap between her own voice and that of innocence below.

**Childhood innocence.** Mary’s sense of identity as a child, when the sexual interactions between her and her brother were actually occurring, was in line with a voice
of innocence; not only did she seem to understand herself as innocent at that time, but she also seemed to regard the entire situation as something innocent (e.g., "I didn’t see it as abuse…I saw it as affection that I was not getting at home from parents that didn’t know how to show affection").

The voice of innocence is prevalent in Mary’s description of the initial sexual interactions between her and her brother. Mary’s sense of identity at the time of the experience again shows up as more innocent than guilty, as she states that she initially said “no” to her brother and attempted to keep their relationship innocent (e.g., “I’m like, ‘I wanna read George, leave me alone.’; I’m like, ‘no.’”).

Mary describes the experience with her brother as mostly innocent on her part, with her identity not being suffused with the voice of guilt; she describes her brother as being the initiator and as things “somehow” happening, without her full awareness (e.g., “Next thing I know I’m in his arms and he’s carrying me up the stairs. And somehow we’re up in his room.”)

**Lack of information.** Mary’s identity overlaps with the voice of innocence again when she iterates that she didn’t know that what was happening between her and her brother was wrong. She generalizes this lack of information to a societal level, implying that her family as a microcosm of society and society at large during that particular cultural and historical time period did not provide information on sexuality (e.g., “no one telling you it’s wrong…there was no one saying, this shouldn’t be happening. There’s no one saying, well, no one should be touching you at this time”). Although Mary describes her experience as lacking information, when I read the above quote in the context of her entire narrative as she told it, I cannot help but believe that underlying her
lack of information is a deeper sense of feeling neglected; she states, “I saw it as affection that I was not getting at home from parents that didn’t know how to show affection.” If Mary’s parents could not provide her with the affection she so clearly and understandably needed, it is likely she felt this deeper sense of being not cared for as well.

**Sexual identity.** Mary seems to have allied her sense of self with the voice of innocence in terms of what she likes sexually, as she connects her desires to her experiences with her brother (e.g., “I just want them to be the aggressor, or I want them to take the advantage because that’s…how I was back then”).

**Healthy sibling memories.** Though she doesn’t speak in first-person, Mary’s memories at the end of the interview highlight the voice of innocence which she connects to her experiences with her brother that were not sexual, but rather, that were in public and were, in her words, “just a brother and sister more or less having fun, doing something that they would actually do together.”

**Relationship between the voice of guilt and the voice of innocence.** Mary’s voices of guilt and innocence frequently overlap in her narrative; the voice of guilt is heard, then quickly silenced by an overpowering voice of innocence (e.g., “So, but I mean…now that I know it was wrong, but still to a part of me…on another level, I still say…yeah, it was wrong…but, yeah we were giving each other something that nobody else was giving us.”). The two voices seem equally powerful and as if they are vying for the title of loudest.

Voices of guilt and innocence fight and become intertwined the most when Mary speaks about craving affection. Her description of “affection” is vague enough that for
her to crave affection (not sex, but something which she closely associates with her brother) seems to highlight both a voice of guilt and a voice of innocence. She, as a normal eight year-old, wanted attention, hugs, to feel special, to have someone interested in her, and to have someone help her fulfill her curiosity—she wanted to be loved. She could only attain this through sexual interaction with her brother and so, understandably (and confusingly), she is both innocent and guilty.

Guilt and innocence are logical opposites; seemingly different in every way. It was, therefore, surprising how difficult it was to separate out these two voices in Mary’s story. It became very difficult to differentiate between guilt and innocence, and even between Mary’s guilt and her brother’s guilt, her innocence and his innocence. The confusion in delineating guilt and innocence, hers and his, is likely reflective of the confusion in Mary’s psyche. I imagine that this difficulty is not something unique to Mary’s story, but rather is found in many stories of women who have been sexually abused. This sort of confusion is what I was initially interested in with this research—the dance between participant and victim and it is this confusion in delineating one’s identity in a situation which is both abusive and inviting that I imagine makes coming to terms difficult. What is the term to use in this instance? Though Mary states that she now considers the experiences to be “abuse,” it wasn’t the term that came to mind during the actual experiences and it is clear from the way she easily puts herself back into those experiences of the eight year old girl, that she doesn’t entirely buy the label of “abuse.”

Concluding Thoughts

Mary tells the story of a woman who was involved in a childhood sexual relationship with her brother, to whom she lost her virginity at the age of eight. Mary did
not initially identify the sexual relationship as abusive, but instead understood it as a way (i.e., her only available way) in which to obtain affection, attention, and a sense of closeness with another human being. There is an overwhelming sense of confusion in Mary’s story of identity, as she identifies herself as one thing (e.g., innocent) and then immediately erases it by calling herself the logical opposite (e.g., guilty). Her identity seems to still be heavily tied to that of her childhood identity. The two loudest and most central voices to Mary’s story appear to be that of guilt and innocence, with each struggling to be the loudest. The contrapuntal voices of guilt and innocence accompany and adjoin one another and both seem to equally inform her sense of past and present identity.

**Janet’s Story**

**First Listening: The Plot**

**Demographical information.** At the time of the interview, Janet, like Mary, was also in her early 40s, divorced, and unemployed. She was married once and has an adult daughter and two young grandchildren. She was born and raised in a town in Midwestern America.

**My summary of Janet’s story.** Janet describes her experience as one of being put into a situation of abuse with her uncle, a situation similar to one her older sister had experienced. She describes her difficulty in coming to terms with her experiences as primarily the result of wondering why she was put into that position. Janet’s experiences happened during the summer when she was 11 years old and visiting her biological father and step-mother, and her uncle and aunt. She describes her uncle as molesting her, which she responded to by trying to avoid being alone with him. Janet focuses on who believed
her and who didn’t (her step-mother and biological father didn’t, and mother and stepfather did). Janet relates her experiences as a child to her adulthood identity as the protector: of her sister, her daughter, her friends, and her mother. Janet’s abuser, her Uncle Harold, also sexually abused his own daughter and is now in prison for life; according to Janet, only Harold’s death will serve as resolution for her.

Janet is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and has had bouts of panic disorder; she at least partially blames her problems on her history of sexual abuse. Janet told her mother about the abuse only years after the abuse took place, when her Uncle Harold was scheduled to come into town. Her mother took her and the family to a priest for counseling and Janet went to her own counselor years later, but believes that no further counseling will be helpful. Janet states that she felt “dirty on the inside” for many years as a result of her sexual abuse and that she attempted to fill the dirtiness with food, resulting in significant weight gain. Janet states that she was married to an alcoholic and eventually got divorced. Janet hopes that telling her story to others, including me, will be healing for her and helpful to others.

Janet’s description of the sexual experiences.

It was a big open space, like a big play room. Looking back now. But it had a TV and stuff in there, and then…the room that I was sleeping in. And…the first time it happened, Chelsea was there…she was upstairs cooking. He came down the stairs and, um…he had me come sit on his lap…and he started touching me. And, I mean he didn’t even bother with the chest…he immediately started touching down here. After that happened, I tried to stay upstairs (…) and then one night…I had already gone to bed and he came in and got me and carried me upstairs to their bed. Chelsea wasn’t there. Her…I don’t know if it was a friend or a cousin of hers…something had happened and she was taking them to the hospital and that’s where it happened. And, um, it happened two more times before I left.

Janet’s description of how she has come to terms.
Um, I don’t know if I’ll ever fully understand why…um. A lot of what took me so long to understand was that it had happened to my older sister and then I was put in that same position. And, so there was…I didn’t understand why I was put into that position after it had already happened (. . .) And I think that’s when I finally…that started giving me some closure to what happened…was when his daughter finally, you know, spoke up (. . .) I don’t think you ever fully come to terms (. . .) but I know I’ll never fully understand (. . .) I really don’t think there is much more counseling that can be done. I think I’ve come to terms as much as any person can ever come to terms with this (. . .) You know, it’s, it’s…you take an 11 year old child, and you take every ounce of innocence from them…you never, you really never get over that (. . .) I started journaling a lot just about that because it was just…it got real, real bad. And that’s probably the most understanding that I’ve had through all of it (. . .) I don’t know if you ever really totally come to terms or understand. You just kind of get rid of the anger in time.

Janet’s description of how her understanding has affected her identity and relationships.

As I’ve gotten older, this has affected my relationships a lot, um, my ex-husband is the only man I have ever been with. I’m not one that’s ever enjoyed sex…to me it was always a punishment and it will probably always stay that way because of what’s happened. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to come totally to terms with that…and I’m ok with being alone, I really am. (Laughter). I think I was more protective of my daughter and my younger sister--because she’s considerably younger than I am—because of what happened because I was so, you know, I mean, I wasn’t even comfortable—and this sounds terrible because I know my ex-husband never, ever, ever would have touched her—but I didn’t like leaving her alone with him. You know, and so it…she felt a lot of times, she felt like she was being smothered by me because of this (. . .) There was a lot of shaky ground…um…and I think because I was still trying to come to terms with what had happened. Um…and I wondered, you know, he had a couple of affairs…and, um, of course in my mind I believed, you know, once again that was my fault…you know. And, um…what it ended up…he was just a little piece of crap. Um…after all that, you know, Harold had done this to me…I started questioning everything that had happened in my life. Was it my fault? Um…that really opens the gate of that…of you wondering…is it my fault? What did I do to deserve this? . . . It’s not…I don’t…I still question things, but not as deep as I used to (. . .) I mean, I used to really, you know, because everything…for a long time, reflected back into that, you know, what did I do to deserve this? You know. When my ex-husband was pullin’ his little shenanigans it was…oh boy, what did I do? Did I instigate this? Did I… I have very few close friends. And that’s by choice. I just…I have a natural ability to not trust…because of what happened (. . .) Very dirty. And it was…more than just, a physical dirty…..inside felt so dirty (. . .) As I got older, I…started feeding that…dirty. My weight at one time had
gotten up to 428 pounds (...). Um... I don’t feel that dirty on the inside anymore...but it’s something that took a lot of years.

**My initial response.** Understandably, I don’t think Janet has really come to terms with her sexual experiences with her uncle. She states that it is taken a long time to come to terms, but later on in the interview she states that only her uncle’s death will provide her with resolution. Janet sounds very angry and, understandably, seems to be unable to get past the question of why her uncle did what he did. I feel a huge gap between myself and Janet and I feel myself distancing from her while I read the interview, partly I think, as a reaction to Janet distancing herself from the interview. She feels hardened and still very angry, only allowing herself to identify with her vulnerability in small bursts.

A recurring image for me as I listen to Janet’s story is that of being “stuck.” She feels stuck in her question of “why” which seems to keep her stuck in feelings of anger and betrayal. I wonder how she answers the question of “why” to herself; she repeatedly seems to wonder about her part in the abuse, but also seems to have difficulty staying with those questions. The theme of betrayal is clearly palpable in her story, as is her subsequent desire to protect others, especially her daughter.

**Second Listening: I Poem**

**Janet’s I poem.**

I don’t know if  
I’ll ever fully understand  
I was put in that same position  
I didn’t understand why  
I was put into that position.

I just blabbed it to her  
I didn’t know  
I freaked out
I’m pretty messed up
I’m diagnosed bipolar
I also have a panic disorder

I have really overcome

I do believe
I’ve gotten older
I’m not
I don’t think
I’ll ever be able to come totally to terms
  I’m ok
  I really am.

I don’t think
I know
I’ll never fully understand.
I think
I really do

I don’t understand
I really, really don’t.

I still am angry
I couldn’t even look
I never had

I really don’t think
  I think
I’ve come to terms
I mean
  I just can’t fathom

I can’t understand

I just
I felt so dirty
  what did I do?

Why?

I felt like everything was taken
  what did I do
    I must have done something
  what could I have done?

I’m angry
  I’m grateful
I know
I don’t know
I know
I’m real grateful

I started questioning
What did I do?
I want to say
I don’t think
I don’t

I still question things

I used to
I mean
I used to really

what did I do to deserve this?
what did I do?
Did I instigate this?

Did I?

I still feel that way
I blame her
I blame him
I don’t know
I said
I don’t know

I don’t
I mean
I think so
I think so

I don’t know why

My response to Janet’s I poem. What strikes me most about Janet’s I voice is the refrain, “I don’t understand” and “I don’t know why.” Janet’s I voice suggests that there are still plenty of questions floating around for her, most importantly of which is that of “why?” and the seemingly related question of her own role—“what did I do?” Janet appears to be quite cognizant of the power of these unanswered questions, as she alludes to a relation between them and her inability to fully come to terms. Janet
describes the actual sexual experience in only vague terms and her placement of herself in these experiences is one of passivity and without agency—“I was put into that position.” Her statements of extreme passivity alternate with those of musings of extreme agency (e.g., “What did I do?”), perhaps making a cohesive story of what happened and why difficult to ascertain.

It strikes me that Janet switches from first to third person in two important areas of her story. The first switch occurs when she speaks of the anger she still experiences: “There’s always going to be a bit of anger you hold onto. It’s not as severe as it used to be. I’m not hostile (laughter) inside anymore, but I still go through… I go through phases where I might go through months of not even thinking about it and then I might, it might just be something that stays heavy on me every day for six, eight months.” The switch to third person when speaking of the anger “you” hold onto combined with her laughter after the statement that she’s not hostile, suggests that she fears the power of her anger and is unconsciously taking steps to distance herself from it. She continues, “You know, it’s, it’s…you take an 11 year old child, and you take every ounce of innocence from them…you never, you really never get over that.” The use of third person here betrays her earlier statement that she has come to terms, and further implies that one—and she in particular—may never be able to fully recover. It is also interesting to note that this statement is one that brings tears to my eyes and allows me to see her vulnerability as a child, which is still underneath her hardened exterior; however, she seems to have trouble identifying with this vulnerability and thus distances herself with the impersonal “you.”

Janet also switches to third person when describing the process of wondering if she was to blame for what happened, suggesting that she needs to separate herself from
the notion of having responsibility for the abuse. “Right, you know, you start going through your mind, what could I have done? And then that’s when you start the blaming of yourself.”

Overall, Janet describes herself as someone who is protective and angry. She characterizes herself as harboring a lot of anger at and blame towards her uncle, her aunt, her step-mother and her father. She makes a link between what happened to her as a child and her tendency to be protective of her sister, her daughter, and her friends. Janet wavers between stating that she has come to terms with her abuse and stating that she doesn’t think she (or anyone) can ever fully come to terms. When reading Janet’s I poem, the most pervasive theme seems to be her (currently unfulfilled) desire to know “why,” noting that only when she receives an answer to that question could she fully come to terms. Janet (unlike Mary) does not seem to be identified with her experiences with her uncle. She describes the experience vaguely, superficially, and without much emotion; the “I” almost disappears in her description. She describes herself as someone who was “put into the position” of being abused; though she describes herself as passive in those experiences, her questions of “what did I do to deserve this?” and “what did I do?” serve as almost a refrain in her I poem.

**Third Listening: The Voice of Betrayal**

After doing the first and second listenings, the word “betrayal” kept coming to me. During the interview, I remember being struck by the sense that Janet’s strong feeling of betrayal was keeping her from coming to terms with her experiences.

My plan for locating Janet’s voice of betrayal, highlighted in the text in italics, included identifying the following: all statements in which Janet reports she was not
believed; statements in which Janet believes she should have been protected and wasn’t; and statements of harm being done to her. As with all of the women’s stories, the voice of self ("I") is underlined.

**Janet’s story told from the voice of betrayal.**

It had happened to my older sister and then I was put in that same position... I didn’t understand why I was put into that position after it had already happened. ( . . . ) It was something that really wasn’t talked about ( . . . ) when my older sister said something to my stepmother, it was, ‘You took it wrong, that’s not what happened.’ Total denial, ‘You can never tell your father’ type thing. And she’s the one who then put me in the position ( . . . ) it was, ‘you’re lying, blah blah blah.’ ( . . . ) My biological father died not believing any of that ( . . . ) why with my older sister to begin with, but then, put someone else in that position, in that predicament? I think Aunt Chelsea—Uncle Harold’s wife—often wondered... I really do, um, and that kind of makes me angry at her too because she should of ( . . . ) she had told my mother at one time that she wondered, but nothing was ever said to her ( . . . ) she’s still standing by him...that I don’t understand either. I really, really don’t ( . . . ) I still am angry at my stepmother—even though she’s dead—for the position that...and she knew...that’s just...she knew. But of course, her daughter—my step-sister—was never put in that position. It was only my older sister and me...so, she knew ( . . . ) She knew, but she never wanted to admit it ( . . . ) you take an 11 year old child, and you take every ounce of innocence from them ( . . . ) I felt like everything was taken ( . . . ) My anger of just not being believed, even though I was, but just the way she came at me and if anything did happen...what did I do, I must have done something, you know ( . . . ) Yeah one of the questions I’d like to have an answer to is not just why, but...what did it do for you? Because it ruined so many lives. What gratification was it for you? ( . . . ) He got by with it for years until his own daughter, you know, and, I wonder how many others ( . . . ) [my husband] had a couple of affairs...and, um, of course in my mind I believed, you know, once again that was my fault...you know. And, um...what it ended up...he was just a little piece of crap. Um...after all that, you know, Harold had done this to me... When my ex-husband was pullin’ his little shenanigans it was...oh boy, what did I do? Did I instigate this? Did I? You know, because...that’s what was thrown at me for so many years ( . . . ) I guess a part of me hated my father because he should have known ( . . . ) because my stepmother told him nothing that like ever happened. Um...I think he believed it too. But his choice was to...ignore it...he never admitted that he said never ( . . . ) I think more so by her than by him...because she knew... From my older sister and then from me. And...but, yet she would protect her own ( . . . ) She’s the one who set it up! ( . . . ) part of me thinks because Ray was on the road, you know, she figured she would just pawn me off somewhere so she wouldn’t have to deal with me for the whole summer ( . . . ) I blame her just as much as I blame him ( . . . ) She could have...as a parent, it was
her right to protect us. And all she did was protect her own. She never even tried (. . .) but, after...the huge thing that Sandra did and put me through all this (. . .).
The way Sandra came at me with, ‘what did you do?’ And, if something like that was to happen...she would never admit that it was even possible... that’s the same way she was with my older sister as well...she should have picked up. She knew that I was distant when I came back, but she had been so...you know, my older sister was when she came back...its just the way Sandra was, you know, and uh...then when I never wanted to go back…

Janet’s story told from the voice of betrayal reads as a story of herself as the betrayed one. Her voice of betrayal overlaps frequently with her I voice, suggesting that she not only felt betrayed as a child, but a sense of being The Betrayed One has penetrated her identity. Although Janet suggests that being betrayed by her step-mother (in the form of disbelief) paved the way for statements of self-blame and guilt, as The Betrayed One, she is able to eventually deflect all blame onto others. Although the blame—in all legal contexts and certainly in most others—does go to her uncle for the sexual activities, she seems to have taken her identity of The Betrayed One to heart, likely leading to a tendency to see everyone as a potential betrayer.

Janet’s voice of betrayal is interwoven with a feeling of confusion which contributes to her stuckness. She seems stuck on how anyone could possibly betray another and this, combined with her identity of The Betrayed One, seems to fuel her anger and resentment. (e.g., “I still am angry at my step-mother—even though she’s dead-for the position that...and she knew...that’s just...she knew. But of course, her daughter—my step-sister—was never put in that position. It was only my older sister and me...so, she knew”).

Fourth Listening: The Voice of Protection

After betrayal, the second word that was repeated over and over again in Janet’s story was the word “protect.” Janet’s voice of protection, identified in the text by bold
lettering, will encompass statements referring to Janet’s protection of others, others having been spared or saved, and allusions to how Janet tried to protect herself. The voice of self remains underlined.

Janet’s story told from the voice of protection.

Daddy um, immediately put his foot down (. . .) I thank God that I saved my younger sister… It didn’t happen to her. She didn’t have to endure it (. . .) I think I was more protective of my daughter and my younger sister—because she’s considerably younger than I am—because of what happened because I was so, you know, I mean, I wasn’t even comfortable—and this sounds terrible because I know my ex-husband never, ever, ever would have touched her—but I didn’t like leaving her alone with him. You know, and so it…she felt a lot of times, she felt like she was being smothered by me because of this (. . .) I still smothered her to no end, but it was just my fears for her. I never, ever wanted her to have to (. . .) She did everything in this world to protect her biological (. . .) it’s one thing I can say about my mother…she was always very supportive. And she still is (. . .) My step-father put a stop to it immediately. My step-father was extremely protective of myself and my baby sister (. . .) Finally it got to a point where my mother would intercept…and she was never one to go through our mail or anything like that, but when she saw what it was doing, she intercepted and she (. . .) and I’m grateful (. . .) so he never got a chance to get his hands anywhere near this child (. . .) I had to quickly get myself together… I started journaling a lot just about that because it was just…it got real, real bad. And that’s probably the most understanding that I’ve had through all of it (. . .) I really believe she would have said something to my mother. I really do…my mother would have never allowed it to happen (. . .) I...wish she could have been spared and saved. I wish we all could have been spared or saved, but, you know (. . .) I smothered her to death (laughter) (. . .) she never let anything happen to her but I’m extremely protective of my friends (. . .) she loves the fact that I’m protective but she hates the fact that I get to points where I’m just really, start, you know (. . .) looking back now, part of me wanted to protect [my mom] even (. . .) I think my step-father was more murderous than my mother. Um...but I do...looking back now, I wonder if that’s what I was trying to do was protect Momma. You know, from the wrath of Sandra and that side of the family (. . .) I was just trying to protect from her…I don’t know, maybe even just being hurt, I don’t know (. . .) After that happened, I tried to stay upstairs (. . .) If Chelsea was gone, I would go outside (. . .) I guess there is some satisfaction in knowing he will never touch another child again (. . .) Mother never pushed. Never (. . .) being as protective as I was...
As is clearly visible by the large amount of underlining above, Janet’s I voice and the voice of protection are frequently aligned in her story. In coming to terms, Janet appears to have taken on the role of the protector—with her family, friends, and daughter—and clearly identifies herself as such. (E.g., “But I thank God that I saved my younger sister[…] I think I was more protective of my daughter and my younger sister—because she’s considerably younger than I am—because of what happened because I was so, you know, I mean, I wasn’t even comfortable)[…] I wonder if that’s what I was trying to do was protect Momma. You know, from the wrath of Sandra and that side of the family.”) It is as if Janet’s response to having been betrayed as a young, vulnerable child was to become the protector she never had. Her identity as the betrayed one lends itself easily to a response of becoming the protector.

Janet’s I voice and voice of protection again overlap when she speaks about how she protected herself, both during the actual sexual experiences and ever since in the process of coming to terms. (E.g., “I started journaling a lot just about that because it was just…it got real, real bad. And that’s probably the most understanding that I’ve had through all of it”).

Unlike some of the contrapuntal voices in the other participants’ descriptions—particularly in Mary’s case—there are no overlaps between Janet’s contrapuntal voices. The lack of overlap between the two voices seems to be reflective of the way in which Janet has made a very clear division in her life between betrayal and protection; she believes that some people in her life lie on the side of betrayal (such as her step-mother and father) and some lie on the side of protection (such as her mother). This way of dividing people into two very distinct, opposing categories seems to have helped Janet
make sense of her experience; it happened because people in her life (her father, step-
mother, aunt, and uncle) are betrayers, and betrayers are guilty and bad. This leaves the
remaining people in her life as good protectors. Although this way of coming to terms
has served Janet well in some regards (after all, she did raise a successful daughter and, in
her own right, she has also been successful), it also seems to leave her feeling anger and
resentment towards the betrayers of the world; this way of understanding also doesn’t
seem to have gotten rid of that small voice which surfaces from time to time and asks her
what her own part was in the experiences.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Janet tells her story as a woman who believes she was put into an abusive
situation. She has struggled over the years to understand why she was put into that
position, why her uncle did what he did, and what he got out of the experience. Janet
feels very angry and betrayed by several people in her life, including her uncle, aunt,
step-mother, and biological father. Janet harbors a lot of anger at her betrayers and
appears to live with a dichotomous world-view, as demonstrated by the contrapuntal
voices in her story: the betrayers and the protectors. She appears to identify herself
strongly with the side of the protectors, believing that she has protected her sister,
daughter, mother, and friends. Janet seems to struggle to show the vulnerable side of
herself and of the 11 year old girl she was who had all of her innocence taken away from
her. Her anger and her repeated refrain of the question “why” leads me to believe that
Janet is still in the process of coming to terms.
Tabitha’s Story

First Listening: The Plot

Demographical information. At the time of the interview, Tabitha was in her mid 30s, married, and working in the IT field (for which she attended a technical college). She has two young daughters. She was born and raised in Australia.

My summary of Tabitha’s story. Tabitha was sexually abused by her father for about ten years, beginning at about the age of eight. Tabitha states that she initially dealt with the sexual abuse by “forgetting” it. Tabitha only remembered her sexual abuse when she was about 22 after a man she worked with made a pass at her and triggered her memories; Tabitha now operates under the motto of “remember, remember, remember.” After remembering the abuse, Tabitha began having emotional difficulties, locking herself in her house, leaving her job, and eventually going to see a sexual abuse counselor. Tabitha decided to confront her father because she was worried about him having contact with her nieces. Tabitha ended up losing all contact with her family because of her confrontation; she states they have all taken his side.

Tabitha has spent a lot of time interacting with other survivors, joining groups, starting a website, writing poetry, and speaking out against sexual abuse. She has approached the police to report her abuse, but has not yet been able to officially make a report. Tabitha relates that she is in a good marriage and also has a close male friend, with whom she has a tumultuous relationship. Tabitha reports difficulty trusting men, including the male therapist she has recently begun to see. Tabitha indicates that she was fearful of her father and spent a great deal of her childhood hiding and attempting to avoid being alone with her father; the reason she was able to survive the abuse was
because she protected her sister from it. Tabitha states that, as a child, she thought the abuse was normal; she viewed her father as “normal” and also recalls many positive memories from her childhood. Tabitha denies having any sexual difficulties or problematic thoughts about her body as a result of the abuse. Tabitha saw a counselor who ignored her history of abuse and she believes this was a mistake on the therapist’s part which set her back in dealing with the abuse. Tabitha is diagnosed with epilepsy and correlates the stress that she sometimes has regarding her abuse with making the epilepsy worse. Tabitha understands herself as a “survivor” and never uses the word victim to describe herself.

Tabitha’s description of the sexual experiences.

I was abused in my childhood, from about 8 years old (...). at the age of about 22, um, uh, I had an incident with an older male who I became friends with. Um, it wasn’t an abusive incident or a sexual incident but it was enough to remind me about what had happened in my childhood. At that point in my life, I got panic stricken, um, to the point of no return. I started locking myself in the house, I started doing all sorts of weird stuff and I really didn’t understand what I was doing. At this point, I didn’t believe that I was abused (...). I don’t have… I have no feelings about when it was happening... actually when I was being abused. But around it, I had a lot of fear of him. I needed...and I still know because I do it now... I needed, uh, to stay away from him... when I walked into the room I needed to stay away from him. I wouldn’t walk into a room if he was in the room. I wouldn’t go out with him. So like...I would set it up so I was not going out with him... I would make sure I didn’t go out alone with him. So, my whole life sort of revolved, at home, around not doing that. Around... staying away from him. Every time I was with him I was basically abused... so I had to stay away... and I had to stay close to my mother. So the whole thing was stay close to my mother and my sister... umm, and that would be ok. Um... Yeah, he wouldn’t abuse me when they were around. So I was safe when they were around (...). my thoughts were, I could handle the abuse and I could handle what was going on—and it went on for say, ten years—is I protected my sister, my twin sister from the abuse (...). Also, wanting to run away... what could I do... there was no child helpline or that kind of thing... I had no options of child help lines (...). I knew it was wrong, but also, I thought every other child was having this issue. Um, because I’ve been dealing with it so long, um... it was normal to do this (...). I was living as well. So, in here, in doing all that... that was a small part of my life. Ok, so that was a small part. And then I could go out and have
fun. I do have memories of having fun...and being with my sisters...having a normal childhood...running parallel...I’ve got two things running parallel...my normal childhood, which I only remembered...and then...when, when I started dealing with stuff, I’m now remembering the bad childhood ( . . . ) And also, the details of the abuse...um...they were completely forgotten...and if I ever touched the memory, the fear of the memory was too much. Like it’s too much for you to deal with that...whatever that is. So, I won’t touch that memory. Like, whenever I would touch it, it would be too much...like touching hot fire in your body, so you know it’s there and you don’t want to remember. Ok? ( . . . ) I’ve only got very few memories of the abuse and I haven’t got enough memories ( . . . ) I didn’t feel that he was going to kill me or anything, but...because I was so unaware of what he could do that sort of protected me too...I hid a lot.

Tabitha’s description of how she has come to terms.

And what I did was, I forgot it. Um, basically I forgot it and that’s how I dealt with it for many years ( . . . ) at the age of about 22, um, uh, I had an incident with an older male who I became friends with. Um, it wasn’t an abusive incident or a sexual incident but it was enough to remind me about what had happened in my childhood. At that point in my life, I got panic stricken, um, to the point of no return. I started locking myself in the house, I started doing all sorts of weird stuff and I really didn’t understand what I was doing. At this point, I didn’t believe that I was abused. Uh, I had no belief of it ( . . . ) I lost my job because the male that had made advances towards me, they weren’t going to get rid of him at the job, so I had to leave the job. And, uh...so, yeah, I went to a...I was lucky enough to find a sexual abuse counselor and, um, who was also a survivor of sexual abuse herself and, uh, I started healing from that point ( . . . ) And, I also met my husband at that stage, who had been a great help, who was stabilizing, able to take me to therapy and understand, help me at that point. At that point I confronted my father ( . . . ) I did counseling with that particular counselor for, say, a couple of years. Um...and then I joined a group with about ten survivors of all sorts of the same, what do you call it, same situation as myself and we basically met about ten times, once per week. I did all those ( . . . ) I have approached the police twice...um, to report ( . . . ) And I did tell my mother when I was about 15 or 16 and she did nothing ( . . . ) I made it normal. Um, in my life...to do all of this. You can’t live with this, if it’s sort of not normal ( . . . ) it’s sort of, when I was dealing with it...and when I decided to block it out. It was like, forget it, forget it, forget it...inside your head. It got to the point of, whenever the issues came up, it was “forget.” Just forget. Forget. It was constant. And if you say something enough in your head, you will do it. And...for some reason, I’ve got now to say, “remember, remember, remember” ( . . . ) I’m not...um...you know, because it didn’t really have a...the way you rationalize it is that oh, it’s not having an impact on my life, you know, this type of stuff. Rather than the actual horrendous impact that it had. Um...um...you know, and just rationalizing everything ( . . . ) Um...um...and, the anger I had...the anger I had towards him. Um...but...which is (unintelligible) to the
point where I feel sorry now, uh, for him. And that that’s helped me let go of a lot of that hate (. . . ) You say to yourself, well…how can that be true if you don’t really remember, umm…and, so…there’s other things…other memories I specifically remember that I know are true and there’s other things that may or may not be true. So…it’s really hard to sort of understand it and to put it all together…and, I don’t know, I don’t really know how it all works, um…and, uh…yeah, so…um, clearly, clearly I have gotten more memories and certainly within the past four years, um…and I think I specifically get it when I meet men…when I get reminded ( , , , ) in the healing thing, I’ve also put up that website that you saw. I’ve gone on the Internet, ok. The Internet is brilliant for this. I went on the Internet a while ago and found like four online support boards and met so many wonderful people that this…similar things have happened to…and I shared my story. I’ve put up my website and I do poetry and art…and the poetry has really helped because that gets it all out, so…I’m lucky enough to be able to write about this and that’s why you see this site because hopefully other people like yourself and I have been approached by other Red Cross people and other survivors, priests, you know I get regular emails through that site and survivors, um…you know, just wanting contact, wanting help. Um…and so that has helped me…putting out that site was a major mark for me. Um…and then, also, I help also at an art event as well…and that’s a public thing and I go out there and I speak…um…I speak ( . . . ) when I was initially talking, even the word…even the word was frightening…even the word…even the fact that, (sigh) this could have happened was frightening and there was no way I was going to speak about it ( . . . ) I won’t take garbage from people now. Um…if somebody tells me that, um, I’m garbage or something I’ll come back and tell them I’m not. If someone tries to put me down or something…so, my self esteem has increased and that type of thing ( . . . ) I am a crime victim, I understand that, but I’m not and I don’t feel that way and if I felt that way about that, that I’m this crime victim and stuff like that, then I wouldn’t be able to do what I do. So…you can look at it in a negative way that way and not deal with it and some people do it that way. Or do it the other way and say what it is and say how…what it is…is…that my father abused me and that’s his fault and his problem and that had nothing to do with me. I just happened to be born in that family and he abused me and…I’m a good person, I’m not at fault and I’m a good person. Regardless ( . . . ) Um…I’ve never used the term victim. I certainly felt like a victim for some time, but once I started…and…certainly the female therapist, the good one didn’t use the word victim…and she was very positive. That was another thing she did—she was very positive about what I was doing and what type of victory I would have over my father if I sort of confronted him and how victorious and courageous I was in doing this ( . . . ) I don’t, you know, I…I use the word survivor because that is what…that is how I am. I know there are stages of this and one day—I don’t know when—I’ll sort of move forward on this, but at this point I’m sort of talking to as many people as I can and do my bit.
Tabitha’s description of how her understanding has affected her identity and relationships.

I knew that I was not ready for the group, because I was falling apart in the, um, therapy room. I was falling apart, virtually falling apart, my whole started falling apart (laughter) (. . .) Within a couple of years I had confronted and lost my family (. . .) It was a relief to find others and I got matched up with another survivor of this…um and I met her for coffee say, about five or six times. Um, and I met others over the phone at that time (. . .) I spoke to all of my sisters and unfortunately two of them were abused as well. Um, I did speak to one…both of them a little bit…but they were not in the…position to talk to me. They’re not like me. They don’t want to deal with it. They want to forget about it (. . .) basically I’ve been cutoff from the family (. . .) I’m out of the family now…which I’m happy about. I’ve got a twin sister. The only thing I’m upset about is I have a twin sister who has taken his side. The family has taken his side (. . .) Um…I don’t, basically, let people get close to me. I’m fortunate that I can talk about it and that I can deal with it, but, in regards to males…um…I’ve got a male friend who, um, I have a very up and down relationship with, but we’re still in—well, friendship, it’s not a sexual relationship, it’s a friendship—it’s very up and down. Uh…most of the time I want to leave in relationships, just as I wanted to leave home (. . .) Some men are ok. I really can’t sort of understand it. I think it’s the more they remind me of him, the more it clicks in. I’m not sure what it actually is about the relationship, whether it’s everything. I have had very successful working relationships. I’ve had a successful male working relationship which went really well, which didn’t cross onto exploding and yelling and what have you. And, um, say…say that sort of worked when I have working relationships. And I have fine relationships with women (. . .) and I’m now with a male counselor. Male therapist. And…uh…to be honest, it’s frightening. It’s frightening. (Laughter) The ones…the females were not frightening. This is frightening. To the extent that I will not go into his office now. Um, I cannot get in his office without wanting to walk out…I’ve virtually walked out, I mean, I have walked out on him…numerous times. I’ve screamed at him numerous times. And, uh, umm…and now I’m fine…I’m just doing all the counseling on the phone because there was no point. There was no point to me going there, setting an appointment for ten minutes then scream at him and walk out. No point. (laughter) (. . .) I have no basis on males, growing up. I have no brother, I have only sisters. I can form a very close relationship with females, but I’m working on it with this male counselor (laughter) (. . .) I had to do…I had to protect myself as well as my twin sister (. . .) It was generally my fault and my…his…his…um, because he was a very domineering personality they also put on me a lot of bad thoughts in my head about how bad I was and what I was…you know, lowered my self esteem to extreme points, so I had to build up that self-esteem to actually be able to confront him and that’s really hard to do when you come from being abused its just a lot of hard work (. . .) Um…I felt, um, I felt a real connection to him and I don’t know why and I tried to get out of there
because he was a male therapist. I can’t tell you. I rang them up twice, and asked please can you put me with a female, I mean, I knew what I was going in there for and I didn’t want to speak to a man…about this stuff, I couldn’t speak to a man. I don’t want to speak to a male…that’s disgusting (…) when the abuse is happening, you are sort of being abused and you are alone…you are alone, by yourself…and, so…it’s very hard to break out of that (…) myself now compared to then…I’m a completely different person…um…um…I was very quiet back then and now I’m not…uh…I thought I was a very closed person and now I’m not. Um…and I’m definitely more artistic, um…uh…and sort of expressive compared to that. And, also…a lot more of, I won’t take garbage from people now. Um…if somebody tells me that, um, I’m garbage or something I’ll come back and tell them I’m not. If someone tries to put me down or something…so, my self esteem has increased and that type of thing. So that’s all come about by that…um…um…you know, I was very quiet and very reserved, very quiet. And, uh I think that was…an effect of what the abuse was doing there (…) I had all of that to see and I just felt that I couldn’t…I had to have a man to help me out of it. And there was a lot of, you know…get married and this man would save me, so I’m looking for men to save me (laughter)…a woman can’t save me, but a man certainly can (…) it’s very important to have people you can talk to about that. But I also have people on the email too…I’ve got a very wide support base, compared to other survivors (…) and just be aware that because what happens is that, when you meet a guy, you automatically go, ‘Is he going to do this to me?’ (…) I’m even amazed sometimes…males in general, so I’ve just…I just have to just be careful of that. So, um…certainly I’ve got a fear of men and I only just realized that. Um…and…uh…you know, just if people (unintelligible)…and I’m trying to deal with that. This guy I’m just seeing how it goes and what have you, so…um. I’m just praying that he is not another abuser (…) And I’ve actually accused him of being a pedophile…my counselor…I’ve accused him often. I’ve said, ‘I think you’re a pedophile’ (laughter) (…) I’m making sure that this guy is or is not a pedophile so that all the other survivors in this area won’t come to him. I’ve told him what I’m doing and it’s sort of even come down to that. What I’ve done is I’ve recreated the situation here.

My initial response. What strikes me first is the way in which I feel that Tabitha tried to keep me out of the interview. I felt, in talking to her and in reading the interview, that she was quite uncomfortable talking about specific topics (e.g., the actual abuse) and quite comfortable talking about others (e.g., the ways in which she has reached out to others, created websites devoted to the topic, etc.). It is clear that Tabitha has done a lot to try to heal from her abuse, but I wonder how “healed” she is. Again, this shows my own assumption and bias that to be “healed” means something in particular. I am
especially concerned that she seems unable to talk about the specifics of the abuse, noting that she “won’t touch” those memories. I am left wondering if to heal (or to come to terms, as I’m calling it) has to include being able to speak about it. I do, however, feel proud of Tabitha for all she has accomplished and for her desire to help others share their stories. Though we were raised in different countries, Tabitha and I appear to come from relatively similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Our family structures differ, as she has several siblings that are around her age and I do not. I find myself wondering about how the different family structures have influenced our ways of coming to terms.

There are several clearly recurring themes in Tabitha’s story, including: fearing men, speaking out against abuse, forgetting and having only vague memories, and being a survivor. Tabitha’s story seems to fit perfectly into Philips and Daniluk’s (2004) theory of a progression of identity from victim to survivor; Tabitha has clearly taken on the role of the agentic survivor who seems to find solace in helping other survivors and speaking about abuse. Tabitha seems to agree with Philips and Daniluk’s position that one moves from survivor to then a more multifaceted, integrated identity of which “survivor of child sexual abuse” is only one aspect as she states, in her own words, “I know there are stages of this and one day—I don’t know when—I’ll sort of move forward on this, but at this point I’m sort of talking to as many people as I can and do my bit.”

**Second Listening: I Poem**

**Tabitha’s I poem.**

I could go on for years
I know
I was abused in my childhood
I forgot it
I forgot it
I forgot it
that’s how I dealt with it.
I had an incident
I got panic stricken
I started
    I started doing
        I really didn’t understand
I was doing

    I didn’t believe
I was abused
    I had no belief of it
        I lost my job
        I had to leave the job
I went
I started healing

I went
I was not ready
I was falling apart

    I was falling apart.

I confronted
    I confronted
        I confronted him
I had confronted and lost my family.
I did counseling
I joined a group
I did all those
I met her
I met others
I had
I just was having issues
I just went to that counselor

I delayed
    I delayed
I did too

I am very lucky
I told my husband
I was going
I told him

I spoke
I did speak
    I did speak
I told her
I felt
I was concerned
I did that

I have approached
I reported
I came
I went
I reported.
I’m not sure
I didn’t
I want to make a statement.

I’m out of the family
I’m happy
I’m upset
I wanted
I still feel
I still feel

I’m thinking
I was dealing with the abuse
I can talk about it
I can deal with it

I want to leave
I wanted to leave
I can’t
I just can’t
I don’t know

I just have trouble
I really can’t
I think
I’m not sure.

I’m now with a male
I will not go
I cannot
I’ve virtually walked out
I mean
I have walked out
I’ve screamed.

I’m fine
I’m just doing
I still feel
I need to keep doing
I’m still making appointments
I think it’s good
    I think it’s good
    I don’t know
I think it’s good
    I mean
    I think so
I’m not sure
    I’m truly not sure.

I know
    I think
        I had no concept
I can
    I might
        I broke down
        I didn’t know
I sort of narrowed it down

I told
I said
I was abused
    I never told

I’ve got
I don’t
I have no feelings
I was being abused
I had a lot of fear
    I needed
I still know
    I needed.
I walked
    I needed.

I wouldn’t
    I wouldn’t
I would set it up
I was not going
I would make
I didn’t go out
I was
    I was basically abused
I had to stay away.

I had to stay close
I was safe

I handled it
I could handle
   I could handle
I protected.

I had to
   I had to
      I had to protect myself
I protected everyone
      I actually did
I was dealing.

I don’t know what could I do?
I had no options
   I was running.

I did tell
I was about 15
I don’t know
   I really don’t know.

I made
I was living
I could go out
I do have
I’ve got
I only remembered
I started dealing
I’m now remembering
I was dealing

I decided to block it out
I’ve got now to say, “remember, remember, remember.”
I won’t touch
   I would touch it.
I imagine
   I don’t know

I say
I’m not affected
   I might have issues
I don’t have that
I’m not
I don’t
I actually don’t
I don’t
I don’t actually
I don’t
I haven’t even really thought of it
I don’t
I haven’t had any

I didn’t get
I didn’t have any
I didn’t do anything
I didn’t
I haven’t
I didn’t

I nearly fell apart.

I was going to leave
I could see
I’m with now
I’ve told him off
I didn’t actually even tell
I confronted it.

I do
I do this
I was seeing
I was still

I left home
I still came back
I still see him as normal
I still saw him
I saw him

I finally started
I finally had to tell
I reported them.

I also rationalized
I can’t deal with
how bad I was
what I was
I don’t think
    I really didn’t like
    I really hated
I can’t explain
the hate I had
the anger I had
    anger I had
I feel sorry now.

I don’t know
    I just don’t know
I’m trying
I’m still doing
I get close
    I don’t know
I just think
I really don’t know
    I don’t know
    I don’t know

I also have
I’ve only got
    I haven’t got enough

I don’t know
I’m not sure
I know
    I can’t remember
I can take a guess
    I can’t remember
    I can’t really remember

I went
I thought
    I thought
I don’t know
    I thought

I felt
    I felt a real connection
I don’t know why
I tried to get out
    I can’t tell

I rang
    I mean
I knew
I’ve been saying
I’ve really been hounding
I’ve told

I don’t know

I am now
I would say.
I’m able to talk
    I’ve been dealing.

I’ve also put up
I’ve gone on the Internet
I went on the Internet
    I shared

I’ve put up my website
I do poetry and art
I’m lucky enough to be able
I have been approached
I get regular emails
I help
I go out there
I speak
    I speak.

I remember writing
I hope Dad doesn’t…
I was actually quite brave
I hope Dad doesn’t
    I’ll get him.

I’m now 36
I’m a completely different person
I was
    I’m not
I thought
    I was
    I’m not.

I didn’t really have
I was so young
now I do
    now I do
    I’m older
I wasn’t aware
I didn’t feel
I was so unaware
I hid a lot
    I did
I hid
    I found him
      I heard him
        I have one memory
          I’m sure
I hid
    I don’t remember.

I couldn’t
I wanted someone to help me
    I did it all myself
      I did protect myself
        I did it to the extreme
          I did it.

I’m using
    I told him
I’m doing
    I’m holding that against him
I’m doing
    I’m just sort of in that position
      I’m sort of in a good position.

I am a crime victim
    I understand
I’m not
    I don’t feel that way
if I felt that way
I’m this crime victim
I wouldn’t be able
    I do.

I just happened
I’m a good person
I’m not at fault
I’m a good person
I’ve never used victim
I’ve never used the term victim
    I certainly felt like a victim
I’ve spoken
I couldn’t
I’ve read and heard
I ask them
I’m sharing
I’m very good
I’m actually published

I said
I don’t know how many
I’ve helped

I am

I’ve seen

I’ve got a fear
  I only just realized
I’m trying to deal
I’m just seeing
  I’m just praying
  I’m truly praying

I’ve actually accused him
  I’ve accused him
I’m thinking
  I’m protecting
  I am
  I’m making sure.

I don’t know
I really
I’ve done

I’m hiding out
  I’m hiding out

I won’t go.

I don’t know
I don’t know

I’m going to have to go
I have to
I think
I actually have to
  I know
I haven’t
I didn’t.
I’m sort of happy  
I think.

**My response to Tabitha’s I poem.** The first thing I notice after creating Tabitha’s I poem is that it is longer than the other participants’ and I found myself having difficulty cutting much out. After wondering about the reasons for this, I came to the conclusion that Tabitha simply used more I statements than the other participants; Tabitha’s way of coming to terms has a lot to do with her own agency, as if she could erase her past by being in charge of so much now. Her position of extreme agency thus results in more I statements. Despite having more I statements than any other participant and, overall, speaking more, I notice myself feeling less while reading her I poem. While reading her I poem I’m reminded of the interview wherein there was a palpable anxiety, which seems to also permeate her I poem, and this seems to lessen the evocative impact of the poem.

Overall, Tabitha speaks of herself as a doer; being a doer and someone who is capable of being agentic seems to be her way of coping with the abuse. Because Tabitha seems to be trying, desperately, to portray herself as able and agentic, her statements of inability or uncertainty paint a stark contrast.

Tabitha makes a shift from first to third person in just a few areas of her story, which indicates to me that those particular areas are still difficult for her to speak about. The first shift occurs when she tells me that she is unwilling to speak about the details of her abuse, “So, I won’t touch that memory. Like, whenever I would touch it, it would be too much...like touching hot fire in your body, so you know it’s there and you don’t want to remember. Ok??” It is clear here, by both her distancing to third person, her switch to a metaphor, and also by the anxiety-ridden “Ok??” afterwards—to be sure I understood
not to go there—that, despite all of the work she has put into being a survivor, this is still, understandably, a very troubling topic for her.

Tabitha again switches from first to third person when speaking about how she has had to distance herself from her parents. Despite reporting that she is “happy” about the fact that she is now “out of the family,” her switch to a more impersonal point of view (i.e., “you”) here suggests otherwise: “And, it is very hard if you ever want to get away from your parents, it is very hard because you have to not only split from your parents, you have to split from your siblings. You have to do all sorts of things to get away, and um…they try all sorts of things…things and letters.”

**Third Listening: The Voice of Avoidance**

Reading through Tabitha’s story, the word “avoidance” kept popping up for me, both in terms of content (i.e., one part or voice within Tabitha seems to want to “forget” or avoid) and in Tabitha’s style of speaking. I located the voice of avoidance—highlighted in italics—in Tabitha’s stories in statements made about forgetting, disbelief or denial, physically leaving others or places, and statements alluding to others avoiding the topic of sexual abuse. Additionally, I included all portions of Tabitha’s story where she avoids speaking about her abuse. As with the other women’s stories, Tabitha’s voice of self is underlined.

**Tabitha’s story told from the voice of avoidance.**

*I forgot it. Um, basically I forgot it and that’s how I dealt with it for many years* . . . *I started locking myself in the house* . . . *At this point, I didn’t believe that I was abused. Uh, I had no belief of it* . . . *I had to leave the job* . . . *She didn’t deal with the sexual abuse and that was very, very bad* . . . *she sort of brushed it aside, if you know what I mean. So, I delayed. I delayed it all by going to that particular counselor. And because she brushed it aside, I did too* . . . *So there was that sort of delay. That sort of delayed it all* . . . *[My sisters] are not like me. They don’t want to deal with it. They want to forget about it* . . .
family here got threatened by them because of it because they didn't want the niece to know (. . .) I don't, basically, let people get close to me (. . .) I have a very up and down relationship (. . .) it's very up and down. Uh...most of the time I want to leave in relationships, just as I wanted to leave home (. . .) I just can't seem to [have relationships with men]...I don't know (. . .) I will not go into [my therapist's] office now. Um, I cannot get in his office without wanting to walk out...I've virtually walked out, I mean, I have walked out on him...numerous times (. . .) I'm just doing all the counseling on the phone because there was no point. There was no point to me going there, setting an appointment for ten minutes then scream at him and walk out. No point. (laughter) (. . .) Um, she brushed it off. Not me. She brushed it off. The therapist brushed it off. Um, so...I told the therapist that I said that...that I was abused by my father and that was all that was said. Never brought up in any of the further sessions. Never dealt with. I never told her any sort of significant data or the length of time (. . .) I don't have...I have no feelings about when it was happening...actually when I was being abused (. . .) I needed, uh, to stay away from him...when I walked into the room I needed to stay away from him. I wouldn't walk into a room if he was in the room. I wouldn't go out with him. So like...I would set it up so I was not going out with him...I would make sure I didn't go out alone with him. So, my whole life sort of revolved, at home, around not doing that. Around...staying away from him. Every time I was with him I was basically abused...so I had to stay away (. . .) Not being in [my therapist's] office (. . .) wanting to run away (. . .) [My mother] did nothing. So, um...she didn't do anything...when I decided to block it out. It was like, forget it, forget it, forget it...inside your head. It got to the point of, whenever the issues came up, it was "forget." Just forget. Forget. It was constant (. . .) the details of the abuse...um...they were completely forgotten...and if I ever touched the memory, the fear of the memory was too much. Like it's too much for you to deal with that...whatever that is. So, I won't touch that memory. Like, whenever I would touch it, it would be too much...like touching hot fire in your body, so you know it's there and you don't want to remember (. . .) I didn't actually even tell her what had happened to me (. . .) I wouldn't have been aware because the memories had been forgotten. I'm not...um...you know, because it didn't really have a...the way you rationalize it is that oh, it's not having an impact on my life, you know, this type of stuff (. . .) I left the family, 20-something, something like that...for those years, but I had left to another state...so I was away for three years in another state, so I didn't travel back (. . .) [My father] was there, I wouldn't make conversation with him...um, this is...I just wouldn't make conversation. I haven't seen [my parents] for 8 to 10 years (. . .) I also have this thing of not being able to remember as well, and that's really hard because you can imagine, um, I've only got very few memories of the abuse and I haven't got enough memories (. . .) I can't remember which one and I can't really remember the conversation (. . .) I don't sort of tell many men (. . .) I tried to get out of there because he was a male therapist (. . .) I didn't want to speak to a man...about this stuff, I couldn't speak to a man. I don't want to speak to a male...that's disgusting. That's like...and I tried to get out (. . .) [Therapists] can make people go away and not deal with this. They can just
make people go away ( . . . ) You don’t even want to write it down, you don’t even want to say it, let alone someone writing it in notes ( . . . ) there was no way I was going to speak about it ( . . . ) just people will say, move on...people just move away...just, they don’t want to know about it, you know ( . . . ) I was so unaware of what he could do that sort of protected me too...I hid a lot. That was another thing I did, I hid. So, um...if I found him coming in the house, if I heard him...I have one memory of hiding, but I’m sure I hid other places, but I don’t remember ( . . . ) now I’m hiding out at home. I’m hiding out at my home. I won’t go anywhere near [my therapist].

Looking at the overlaps between Tabitha’s voice of self and her voice of avoidance, we see that avoidance has clearly become one of her strategies of choice in coming to terms. She seems quite cognizant of her avoidance; in fact, her descriptions suggest that she goes about avoiding in an active way, rather than the more typical passive avoidance. In each of the examples below, the intersection between Tabitha’s voice of self and voice of avoidance suggest a level of active ownership:

- “I don’t, basically, let people get close to me.”
- “…most of the time I want to leave in relationships, just as I wanted to leave home”.
- “Um, basically I forgot it and that’s how I dealt with it for many years.”
- “I’ve virtually walked out, I mean, I have walked out on him...numerous times”
- “So, I delayed. I delayed it all by going to that particular counselor.”
- “when I decided to block it out. It was like, forget it, forget it, forget it...inside your head. It got to the point of, whenever the issues came up, it was ‘forget.’ Just forget. Forget.”

For Tabitha, the active ownership (i.e., her awareness) of her strategy of avoidance is likely due, at least in part, to her extensive treatment (including both individual and group psychotherapy). Tabitha locates the origination of the voice of avoidance in her childhood as she hid from her father: “That was another thing I did, I hid. So, um...if I found him coming in the house, if I heard him...I have one memory of hiding, but I’m sure I hid other places, but I don’t remember.”
The voice of avoidance showed up quite explicitly in the content and language of Tabitha’s story, but it also revealed itself in a more subtle way: the way in which she told her story. Throughout the interview I felt as if she was trying to avoid specific topics, including the details of the abuse; and, more generally, I felt as if she was trying to avoid having me speak during the interview, perhaps as a strategy to retain control over the topics of the interview. This was most clear in the passage below:

S: And also, the details of the abuse…um…they were completely forgotten…and if I ever touched the memory, the fear of the memory was too much. Like it’s too much for you to deal with that…whatever that is. So, I won’t touch that memory. Like, whenever I would touch it, it would be too much…like touching hot fire in your body, so you know it’s there and you don’t want to remember. Ok?
R: Ok.
S: Ok??

Here Tabitha states explicitly that she doesn’t want to touch the details of the abuse; sitting in the room, listening to her speak, there was not only an explicit request to avoid the topic, but there was also clear notes of anxiety in her voice—it became higher in pitch, quicker, and had an almost pleading quality to it, as she seems to warn me to steer clear with her repetition of “OK??” at the end of the exchange. The voice of avoidance here felt less owned, despite her overt avoidance, and more of a visceral reaction to a topic still clearly frightening to her. Her reaction here was a stark contrast to the overall story that Tabitha seemed to be portraying: one of a strong woman, a survivor who seems to center much of her identity on the strength of overcoming and helping others to do the same. This passage was a clear indication to me that there was more than just one voice speaking here, and this other voice was one of vulnerability. Although not directly related to this contrapuntal voice, it is also interesting to note (and likely significant in
regard to her experience of her body) that in the above passage Tabitha describes her experience of fire “in” her body rather than “on.”

The voice of avoidance shows itself strongly as Tabitha recounts her relationships with men. Avoidance has played a large part in relationships with men and, most recently, in her relationship with her male therapist. Again, she is aware of the strength of the avoidant voice in this relationship, but seems to have difficulty finding another voice.

Fourth Listening: The Voice of Engagement

After the first two readings, I became struck by the strength of Tabitha’s voices. Her voice of self was widespread and active and even her story of avoidance involved a great deal of ownership and strength. Her voice of avoidance, especially prevalent as a child when the abuse was occurring, appeared to turn into its opposite—a voice of engagement as she attempted to heal from the abuse. I decided to use the fourth reading to follow this seemingly opposite, yet equally strong, voice of engagement. I located Tabitha’s voice of engagement—highlighted in bold in the text—in her decisions to seek out connection with others, to share her story and become involved in the sexual abuse community, and to form relationships with others. Her voice of avoidance remains italicized and her voice of self is underlined.

Tabitha’s story told from the voice of engagement.

I went to a… I was lucky enough to find a sexual abuse counselor and, um, who was also a survivor of sexual abuse herself and, uh, I started healing from that point (…) I had approached her because there was a pamphlet on the bench saying that there was groups for sexual abuse survivors, so I rang her up and I went and had the initial interview (…) At that point I confronted my father (…) So I confronted him at that time and basically lost my whole family. Within a couple of years I had confronted and lost my family (…) from there I did counseling with that particular counselor for,
say, a couple of years. Um...and then I joined a group with about ten survivors of all sorts of the same, what do you call it, same situation as myself and we basically met about ten times, once per week. I did all those. It was a relief to find others and I got matched up with another survivor of this...um and I met her for coffee say, about five or six times. Um, and I met others over the phone at that time (. . .) I did mention to that counselor when I was 19 or 20 I just was having issues and I just went to that counselor and I did mention to her about sexual abuse (. . .) I am very lucky because I told my husband sort of, straight away, because I was going through too much drama, he would have noticed anyway. So I told him straight away and told him that if he wasn’t prepared to help me, or whatever, that there was you know, no chance of anything (laughter) (. . .) I did speak to another niece as well who lives in the area and, um, uh...I told her because she had a baby and, uh, I felt that she had to know (. . .) I did that as well (. . .)

I have approached the police twice...um, to report. The first time I reported, um...I came in on the wrong day. Um...so, I went on, like a Sunday (. . .) Um, the second time I reported, probably two years later (. . .) so since sort of dealing with the whole family part…I’m out of the family now, really the only relationship I wanted was my twin sister (. . .) I’m fortunate that I can talk about it and that I can deal with it (. . .) I have a very up and down relationship with, but we’re still in—well, friendship, it’s not a sexual relationship, it’s a friendship—it’s very up and down (. . .) I’m now with a male counselor (. . .) I’m just doing all the counseling on the phone (. . .) I still feel I need to keep doing that a lot until I’m still making appointments (. . .) I was going to go to counseling anyway, I mean I was going to get help (. . .) I can form a very close relationship with females, but I’m working on it with this male counselor (laughter) (. . .) I did tell my mother when I was about 15 or 16 (. . .) there was no way I was going to leave this lady (. . .) I finally had to tell that I reported them and if they came anywhere near me that, uh, they would, you know, they would, um...um...you, know...I would get the police on them. And the reason I did that...if I hadn’t done that—and I’m glad that counselor was there—if I hadn’t done that, my kids would have been abused, if you know what I mean (. . .) I had to build up that self-esteem to actually be able to confront him (. . .) I would go back to visit my mother only, um, so I was visiting my mother only (. . .) I was going back to visit my mother only...I loved my mother (. . .) I went to the first four sessions (. . .) I felt a real connection to [the male therapist] (. . .) I knew I needed some help (. . .) I’m able to talk to you because I’ve been dealing with it for so long (. . .) I’ve had people just say stuff, like, or ask details...I’ve had people also want to tell me what happened to them and stuff...and, also...while I’m thinking of it...um...in the healing thing, I’ve also put up that website that you saw. I’ve gone on the Internet, ok. The Internet is brilliant for this. I went on the Internet a while ago and found like four online support boards and met so many wonderful people that this...similar things have happened to...and I shared my story. I’ve put up my website and I do poetry and art...and the poetry has really helped because that gets
it all out, so…I’m lucky enough to be able to write about this and that’s why you see this site because hopefully other people like yourself and I have been approached by other Red Cross people and other survivors, priests, you know I get regular emails through that site and survivors, um…you know, just wanting contact, wanting help. Um…and so that has helped me…putting out that site was a major mark for me. Um…and then, also, I help also at an art event as well…and that’s a public thing and I go out there and I speak…um…I speak. Um…about what happened to me to varying degrees to reporters and, um, uh…I haven’t been on television, but to radio people. Um…and in those I will always say for the people who are hopefully listening that they are not alone ( . . . ) so I’m looking for men to save me (laughter) ( . . . ) I think you certainly got to have people supporting you. And I don’t think if I didn’t have those people…I wouldn’t be able to talk on radio, if you know what I mean. Because when you do that…it’s very important to have people you can talk to about that. But I also have people on the email too…I’ve got a very wide support base, compared to other survivors ( . . . ) It’s um one of the most courageous things even to go into a therapist’s office to sit down and say it ( . . . ) I’ve spoken to hundreds of survivors…I couldn’t tell you how many stories I’ve read and heard about it, so…and that’s all helping me. Um…it’s all helping me because I…I ask them, ‘how have you done this?’ So I’m sharing with other people, just as you would if you had cancer ( . . . ) also I moderate a forum too. Um…and uh I get messages through there and help people through there. As I said, I don’t know how many people I’ve helped ( . . . ) I’m going to have to go back [to the male therapist’s office].

What first strikes me about Tabitha’s voice of engagement is the almost frantic kind of “doing” quality that it has. Tabitha’s voices of self and engagement intersect frequently throughout her story, mostly when speaking about the therapeutic and “healing” activities with which she has engaged; but just as her voice of engagement has a doing quality, so too does the way in which she speaks about her engagement in therapy. Because of the strong doing quality, the way she describes her engagement in therapy has a superficial feel to it, almost as if “doing” something—anything—is a way to exert control over her situation and feel as if she was healing.

Um…yeah…so, from there I did counseling with that particular counselor for, say, a couple of years. Um…and then I joined a group with about ten survivors of all sorts of the same, what do you call it, same situation as myself and we basically met about ten times, once per week. I did all those.
Tabitha seems to have taken up the task of coming to terms, of healing, by engaging with various survivors groups and in this research in whatever way she can. It is almost as if her voice of engagement becomes equated with a voice of healing for her.

I’ve had people also want to tell me what happened to them and stuff…and, also…while I’m thinking of it…um…in the healing thing, I’ve also put up that website that you saw. I’ve gone on the internet, ok. The internet is brilliant for this. I went on the internet a while ago and found like four online support boards and met so many wonderful people that this…similar things have happened to…and I shared my story. I’ve put up my website and I do poetry and art…and the poetry has really helped because that gets it all out, so…I’m lucky enough to be able to write about this.

Again, although Tabitha has clearly done a lot of work in the service of healing herself and others, it seems to have a sort of frantic quality that belies the strength she portrays. It seems that she is still desperately searching for someone to hear and understand her and, although it comes across as frantic, her continued efforts show a sense of hope that is refreshing and healthy.

Tabitha’s voices of avoidance and engagement seem to make themselves heard an equal amount in her story and, unlike some of the other participants, she seems to be aware of and own both contrapuntal voices. The two contrapuntal voices alternate in her story, frequently coming right after the other. The alternation of these two voices suggests a desire to engage with herself, others, and the world and a concurrent fear of doing just that; this movement of going towards and then away is seen most clearly in her current relationships with her male friend (e.g., “I have a very up and down relationship with, but we’re still in—well, friendship, it’s not a sexual relationship, it’s a friendship—it’s very up and down.”) and her male therapist (e.g., “I felt a real connection to him […] I tried to get out of there”).
Tabitha’s voice of avoidance is more prominent in her story during and immediately following her abuse, while the voice of engagement has become more prevalent with time (e.g., “I’m able to talk to you because I’ve been dealing with it for so long...when I was initially talking, even the word...even the word was frightening...even the word...even the fact that, (sigh) this could have happened was frightening and there was no way I was going to speak about it”). Avoidance in both her discourse and her behavior was perhaps the best initial way in which she could protect herself, and with time and therapy it is as if she has swung in the exact opposite direction to protecting herself by speaking out—but only in ways in which (and topics about which) she feels comfortable.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Tabitha describes her story as one of survival. She describes how, initially, her strategy to deal with the abuse was to “forget” and to avoid it. An incident with a male coworker was enough to “remind” Tabitha of her sexual abuse with her father. She then went into counseling with several therapists, joined a survivor’s group, and ultimately created a website for other survivors to share their stories. Tabitha contacted the police about her abuse and has done her best to protect her sisters and alert the rest of her family about what happened between her and her father. She now has no contact with her family and believes that this is for the best. The voices of avoidance and engagement seem to dance around one another in Tabitha’s story, as she tells of her desire to flee from situations and people (especially men) as well as her belief that to heal is to share and engage with others; these two voices seem to be best exemplified in her relationship with
her therapist, wherein she clearly wants to feel connected, but at the same time is pulled to disengage.

Anne’s Story

First Listening: The Plot

Demographical information. At the time of the interview, Anne was in her mid-thirties, married, and pursuing a graduate degree in psychology. She has one son. Anne was born and raised in a city in Pennsylvania.

My summary of Anne’s story. Anne was involved in two separate incidents of sexual abuse. When she was about 8 years old, she and a male friend one year younger than she were asked by a young man to perform oral sex on him. She and her friend Will had already been experimenting with their own bodies prior to this incident, which Anne feels was “innocent” and “playful,” but took on a bad, scary feeling when the young man became involved. She tried to protect Will and eventually told the man that they could not engage in those behaviors any more.

Anne’s other incident of sexual abuse occurred when she was about 10 years old; her brother—four years her senior—asked her to sit on him. Anne’s brother, who also routinely physically abused her—but whom she also adored--died just a few years later in a motorcycle accident. Anne believes that her childhood sexual encounters influenced the way she experienced her body. She describes her younger self as dissociative, uncomfortable in her body, and without desire; she attempted to avoid the gaze of others at all costs. Anne began a process of self-reflection at the age of 19 when she took her first psychology class. She describes her process of coming to terms as going from fear, to intellectual reflection, and eventually to bodily reflection. Anne eventually told her
family about her sexual abuse, with the goal of getting past the event. Though she characterizes coming to terms as an ongoing, active process, Anne is now in a healthy relationship, feels more comfortable in her body, and feels as if she has a good, spiritual relationship with her brother.

**Anne’s description of the sexual experiences.** Anne described incidents with two individuals: a neighbor and her brother. For purposes of readability and clarity, these two incidents will be described separately.

**Anne’s description of the sexual experience with her neighbor.**

There were two, two pieces of my sexual abuse. Um…one of them is more complicated than the other. The…the first one that happened to me…and it kind of happened alongside the other one was with a guy who was in our neighborhood. He was significantly older than I was (. . .) He was older…probably around 18 or 19 and we were probably around…I was probably around 8 and Will was about 7. And, uh, we…Will and I were like trying to figure out…you know, like what are our bodies doing…what do you have, what do I have kind of stuff. It was really innocent…just like playful. But then it took on this other quality when this, you know, older kid or, you know--man for us--got involved (. . .) he saw us, um, and kind of singled us out (. . .) went and showed us, like, you know dirty magazines and stuff. You know, asked us to do things that were…for us…really uncomfortable. Um…and, you know, it was the two of us together and so that made it kind of weird because we were looking at each other and we already kind of felt ashamed because we were kind of trying to discover each other and like, it was kind of like a ‘show me’ kind of thing, but I think the climate of that set this tone for us that we had already been doing something wrong…and so, you know, I think that may have influenced when we were, you know…we felt it definitely changed when this older kid was showing us these magazines and asking us to do things.

Um, and he…you know…you know, we…tried to protect each other. Um, and so…I would say that I would do something so that Will wouldn’t have to (. . .) And this went on for a little while. Uh…when we got to a place ….I’m trying to determine what exactly happened…but we, um, decided this was too difficult…too scary or something and we said… ‘Hey, listen, we’re not doing this anymore.’ And I think it was primarily me who said that. Because we were scared (. . .) Yeah…we can’t do this anymore. Um, and then, he, uh…ended up coming back like later on…you know, a couple of years later and asking if…um--he wasn’t asking, he actually singled me out and he took me behind my garage and said, ‘if you don’t do this then I will hurt your family.’ And…I said, ‘no.’ And that was it.
[Will] does remember the part with me...the, just like...being naked in the woods. Like, what do you have, what’s going on? That was just like a 'show me' sort of thing. It took me a while to figure out what was different about what we were doing because at the time it was all together...there was some quality about it that was a badness to it, you know, and I think it had to do with, you know, just a gender thing. If we were two girls or two boys it might have been different...but somehow in the neighborhood it was just like Will and Anne, you know, already at the bus stop it was like hard enough to have a friend that was a boy, so that was cultural...you know, but we were able. Like, he remembers you know, us kind of looking at each others bodies and trying to figure out stuff. And the difference between that and what happened. Um...with this guy Sam, who was the neighbor ( . . . ) it was clear that there was, like, this, like...going too far, you know and this was not ok what he was asking us to do. And it was us. There was an 'us' quality to it. Which made it really difficult in some ways because I don’t know if we would have made the same decisions or followed it in the same way if it would have been either one of us on our own ( . . . ) he probably saw us down there, you know, showing each other...or just running around naked for God’s sakes (laughter). And he took the opportunity ( . . . ) He just asked us to perform oral sex with him... And that was it. So... it had an increasingly fearful quality and I felt really protective of him...of Will ( . . . ) it’s like, [Sam] knew what we were doing and we thought...oh there’s something wrong with us for doing that and he saw some kind of badness in us and just asking us to go further with it ( . . . ) what Will and I later talked about as being really kind of innocent discovery, and it was safe...but also weird you know because we were different you know people and we were friends, but it was just, you know, just knowing each other’s bodies and...you know, most of it was just like...but we...it was...just kind of figuring that stuff out...versus with this other piece that came in...um, yeah. And it...yeah. That was what it was...he’s like, 'ok, you guys want to see?'...‘you want to see more about this?’...and ‘I’ll show you these pictures in exchange for this.’ And we didn’t know...so.

Anne’s description of the sexual experience with her brother.

Um...the other part, which is much more complicated is...was my brother. He was four years older than me. Um...and he was, he was probably about 14...I was about 10...um. And he, you know, there was one particular instance where he...um...he asked me to sit on him. And...um...without my underwear. And he, um...the really difficult part of it was that my mom came in. And...Yeah...or, no...it was actually...well, she had thought we were rolling around, but she had found my underwear at the bottom of the bed. And...you know, she didn’t ask any questions, she didn’t do anything, she didn’t say anything. So those were the two different instances that happened to me. The reason that it’s even more complicated with my brother is that he died when he was 19 and I was 15 ( . . . ) And as far as I can remember it was only this one time that it had happened. The abuse part...the physical abuse part...the physical abuse was a lot longer. He used to beat the crap out of me for a really long time.
Anne’s description of how she has come to terms.

I just...I didn’t know how to handle any of this and it really influenced maybe sort of a dissociative sort of...body awareness for me ( . . . ) I was an undergrad and I took my first psych class with [a professor] and (laughter) and I was like, phenomenology and all this stuff started...I developed like a whole style of trying to approach all this stuff ( . . . ) I was about 19 when I was taking her class, which was the same age [my brother] was when he died...and I was really forced to encounter a lot within my self and I went to therapy for the first time then and, you know, had to navigate a whole set of...like a new relationship to myself, which primarily started on an intellectual level and gradually regressed into more of the feelings regarding it ( . . . )

I was noticing, you know...we would go to the park and [my cousins] would just plop down in my lap and I was like thinking, ‘how amazing is it that they can be so...just...expressive with their bodies’ and it really choked me. I was, like, ok...I’ve never been able to do that...I’ve never been able to flop down in somebody’s lap for as long as I can remember. There’s always been like a physical distance between me and...especially men, but pretty much everybody. Um...but that started to unfold in the process of therapy and trying to figure out what this meant and how do I deal with this with my brother not being around...I can’t confront him, I can’t talk to him...I eventually told my parents what had happened and they had no idea ( . . . )

It took me a while to figure out what was different about what [Will and I] were doing because at the time it was all together...there was some quality about it that was a badness to it, you know, and I think it had to do with, you know, just a gender thing. If we were two girls or two boys it might have been different...but somehow in the neighborhood it was just like Will and Anne, you know, already at the bus stop it was like hard enough to have a friend that was a boy, so that was cultural...you know, but we were able. Like, he remembers you know, us kind of looking at each other’s bodies and trying to figure out stuff. And the difference between that and what happened. Um...with this guy Sam, who was the neighbor ( . . . )

Well, developmentally it’s taken on different components. When I first started the project of self-reflection...it was when I was 19...regarding my brother—that piece, incidentally, was completely...it was lost to me, it was gone—uh... Not the stuff with Sam. That was there, I remembered that...it was over a longer period of time and it wasn’t so...um...just...I couldn’t blow over with it...because he was a stranger or something and I could talk to Will about it, so there was an avenue to explore it...um. And, I knew certainly vocationally, you know, that once I started taking psych classes and having all of this information that I needed to try to figure out what this was. So that changed it. And like I said, there was an intellectual kind of part of that, but then, the longer I spent in therapy, the more I was able to approach it in terms of ‘what are the implications for this?’( . . . ) this piece with Will and Sam...it went from just feeling like I had done something really...into when he approached me again and
asked me to continue and I said ‘no’ feeling, you know, afraid for my family...because he was huge. He haunted me. And he had tremendous power, you know, for a while. And...his threat was taken very seriously by me. He didn’t ever do anything, but, um, I didn’t know that he wouldn’t, so...I was kind of, just really worried for a long time, that he would hurt somebody I loved (...)

this feeling like I had done something wrong, um, I was able to kind of talk about with Will later...you know, and we were able to work it out together and we’ve been friends the whole time, so we’ve been able to try to make sense of it together...which has been really important (...) so it has changed quite a bit to like that feeling of just huge power and influence and fear...to...um, reflective, intellectual reflection, to...um, a really bodily feeling reflection...especially when I look at kids who are free to express themselves. Like, wow, that’s so beautiful...a real, punch in the belly feel...like I wish I could have that (...)

[The sexual abuse with my brother] wasn’t easily accessible until I started unpacking the other abuse too. Like, there was physical abuse which was overt because...I mean, I was sent to the hospital a number of times. And then...there was really a tough quality about me that was very much instigated by that. But what I didn’t realize or...what I wasn’t able to approach was that he had done that as well (...) primarily I was also so angry with my parents for not protecting me...on a number of different levels (...)

I really went into psychology, like, trying to figure out these things...make sense of them and make use of them (...) And now I’m in therapy with a male for the first time and it’s been extremely helpful...and I probably wasn’t ready at all before...so...it’s uh, it’s good (....)

One of the things that I did encounter...and this may seem kind of abstract...but before I got married I went to a shaman and I had a soul retrieval kind of ceremony and, uh, it’s...I had no idea what to expect, but I was just feeling like I wanted to figure out who I was (...) I encountered my spirit animal, which is a wolf; and...uh...and I kind of went through and saw different pieces where I had been fragmented in this really, incredibly intense three-hour period that felt like five minutes. I went and encountered these places, particularly regarding bodily fragmentation around sexual abuse that helped me...you know...kind of...figure out a way to bring that back and work with it and incorporate it in a way that wasn’t just kind of split off or...which was really helpful (...)

I had no desire to ask Sam why he was doing it because he wasn’t in my life...he was a stranger...that seemed pretty obvious. But with John, it was part of a whole system of things that, you know...if you...I would have loved to have asked him. What I found out later on from my aunt that he had told her once that he was really sorry for what had happened...for how much he had kicked my ass...and it sounds weird, but that meant a lot to me to hear that (...) Um, and it was complicated because my brother was my hero...like...it wasn’t like...simple. I mean, I adored him. You know, I wanted his respect, I wanted his approval and, you know, he was my older brother and...I...wanted his approval more than anyone’s. So...it was complicated.
I...have a different understanding now of [my brother]. Because I have...I'm in my 30s...I have the perspective of someone in my 30s and able to see, you know, what it’s like to grow up...what happens, you know...what happens at home and how he was the way he was. And also, just spiritually...I have a really good relationship with him now ( . . . ) I’ve been able to kind of work with, not just his memory, but more like in an active sense...his, you know, spirit. And my spirit. I’ve been able to make amends ( . . . ) so I understand a lot more now. And completely forgive him. It’s just really nice. And, it took a while after that to come through me...because I couldn’t will it to come from me...it’s not a matter of will.

And, it’s uh...and with my body, you know, it’s an active process...an ongoing process. It’s something, you know, that I have to work on all the time because there will be instinctual kind of fidgety things that happen and then I, um, sometimes I’ll have to notice that and soothe myself and notice where that’s from and...also be able to transcend it so that I can really be in a relationship with other people without being this sort of weird skittish thing...um. So...yeah. I was just going to say, [my son] Aidan, has really helped that for me, in terms of me...being able to be embodied and expressive ( . . . ) retrospectively, really empowering too because I got to find my way through that and be embodied with Aidan through breast feeding and it was really visceral and powerful and um...I don’t want to say I was asexual but like, being a mom was kind of a vehicle for me to kind of reemerge into my body and be loving and caring and uh...and expressive in that way. Um...and that was really beautiful. Um...and that helped me also kind of reclaim my sexuality.

That was not a blaming thing...it was something that I felt like I needed [my parents] to know what had happened. Um...and I also needed them to know that I had moved on from it and, you know, it was only something I could do after I had sort of worked through that process because it would have been really difficult in my relationship with them to kind of go there with them with the anger I had felt. So I had to move past that in order to be able to approach them in a way that was going to still maintain our relationship but still let them know that this had happened and...that they should know.

I felt, um...I felt, well it all came...the...the memory itself was, um, vivid. Um...and I felt really...betrayed [by my brother] and angry and helpless and....and I was really well held by my therapist in those moments so that was really good. As I said, it’s ongoing, you know...trying to go and descend into those places is really a challenge...and it came when it did because it was time for it to come ( . . . ) The reason that that piece was so resistant is that, I...I didn’t want to unsanctify...you know, his memory. He was something that I felt I needed to preserve and protect. Umm...but. Only after I had done some of that work was I able to have that memory.

That word [abuse] is helpful to a degree. Um...it is...you know...it’s a word. And it’s not, you know...the stuff that was easily identified by me as abuse was the stuff with Sam. You know, because he was not involved in my life. What was not as easy to identify was because I was so...um, there was so much more involved, uh...was with John, you know. It was extremely complicated.
And it was really abusive ( . . . ) there’s something about…all of the sexual stuff that just felt, so…you know…there was some quality to it that made it not ok. And…you know, I don’t know why I would have such, you know, strong identification with just the physical abuse as opposed to...you know, why that in particular…it’s a good question. I don’t know. Uh, yeah. There’s something different about it.

**Anne’s description of how her understanding has affected her identity and relationships.**

In terms of how it influenced me and my relationship with other people…it, um, I was very skittish and very tough really early on. I mean, a part of that was, just, the physical abuse that I received by him. But also just a very suspicious kind of, wary, um when I started developing and menstruating…I was terrified…I was really on guard with any male person…uh, I was…you know, I felt really transparent and uh, like people could see through me. And I just felt like a spectacle. Um…And so, I would really avoid the gaze of any male…to the point of absurdity ( . . . ) I just felt always really uncertain about my body and just about my femininity….like I didn’t have a really firm sense of that ( . . . ) I had my first boyfriend and I lost my virginity when I was 15, I…I, uh… wasn’t there…I didn’t like show up and it probably wouldn’t have happened if I knew anything about…if I was kind of embodied ( . . . ) And that’s how my relationships got started…like, you know, being involved in, um…me trying to help people and feeling sorry for my boyfriends which was just awful and then eventually getting involved in an abusive relationship to me with a really jealous guy that I dated for like three years ( . . . )

I also needed to figure out how to have a relationship with my parents that was authentic and real and not just angry and see-ya…and, yeah, that was hard….really hard and complicated and a lot of therapy (laughter) ( . . . )

Um…it’s been a lot of work since then to kind of recognize those pieces and bring them back into myself and acknowledge them and work with them. I’m still doing it.

I wasn’t really able to have an orgasm or meaningful sexual relationships at all and they were really dissociative. And the act of intercourse…and, you know, I didn’t like to be looked at…I didn’t like to be watched or noticed. I, you know, for a long time…wore like ace bandage like sports bras to flatten my chest…so it really had a pretty deep influence on my sexual unfolding…I didn’t want to have any overt, you know, kind of…I didn’t want anyone to notice my womanhood, or my sexuality at all…and that was a really big thing ( . . . ) I had a really skittish existence for a while…trembly. And tough. Thick, you know ( . . . )

one of the things that happens for people who have been sexually abused…especially women…when they give birth they sometimes re-experience some of that stuff…and it happened for me too. It was really hard to feel that hopeless in the act of delivery and childbirth ( . . . )
I really, you know, being able to share this stuff with my husband and be able to really have a safe relationship with him and have him be really respectful and treating me with a lot of dignity and care has been really important too…and so…that’s been transformative, just having a partner who is really kind and a good person has been really helpful.

**My initial response.** My first thought after the first reading for plot was amazement at just the sheer amount of content in Anne’s story; of all of the participants, Anne is clearly the one with the most psychological education and likely the one with the most experience in therapy, which, when combined, seems to equate to a richer story—or perhaps an increased ability to convey such richness. Although I was excited about the chance to explore her story, I was also intimidated by the level of complicated feelings.

Several recurring themes stand out to me from the first reading, including an intense focus on initial feelings of disembodiment and not wanting to be seen with a move towards feeling more embodied as she came to terms. I also notice that Anne has focused and spent a great deal of time and effort on coming to terms, not just with her sexual abuse, but seemingly with her family life as well. Clearly, the notions of transformation and healing are important to Anne.

Along with an importance on embodiment, Anne also emphasizes spiritual healing and she is the only one of all five participants who speaks of forgiveness towards her abuser. After this initial reading, I get the sense that Anne has come to terms more fully than the rest of the participants; she seems more at peace with her past and with herself.

**Second Listening: I Poem**

Anne’s I poem.

I was probably
I think
  I think
I would say
  I would do I’m trying.
I think
  I said, ‘no’
I was
I was
I don’t know.
I can
I was
  I mean
I was
  I was.
I felt
  I just felt
I would
  I would
I wouldn’t.
I just felt
  I felt
  I just
I didn’t know how.
I had
  I lost
I was-- I wasn’t there.
I didn’t
I knew
I was
  I felt sorry.
I was--
I developed
I was
I was
  I was
  I was
I went.

I realized
I was
  I was
    I was
      I was.

I’ve never been able
  I’ve never been able
How do I deal?
I can’t
  I can’t
    I eventually told.

I’m
  I am
    I’m tired.

I had
I was
I think
I don’t know
  I don’t know
I guess
  I don’t know.

I felt
  I think
I was
I remembered.

I couldn’t
  I could
I knew
I needed
  I said.

I was able
  I understood
I had
  I said ‘no.’

I didn’t know
  I was
I had done
I was able.

I didn’t realize
I wasn’t able
I think
I was also so angry
I mean
I was
I had a lot of anger.

I didn’t feel
I understood
I felt
I needed
I also needed.

I’ve been
I don’t know
I did encounter
I got married.

I went
I had
I had
I was just feeling.

I wanted
I was
I was
I committed
I went
I found
I encountered.

I had been
I went
I got
I’m still doing it.

I wasn’t
I didn’t like
I didn’t like
I didn’t want
I didn’t want
I had
    I had
        I had no desire.

I adored him
I wanted
    I wanted
        I…wanted his approval.

I really tried
    I tried
I wouldn’t lose him.

I started therapy
I…have a different understanding
I have
I’m
    I have
        I have.

I was
    I’ve gone way past.
I’ve been able
I’ve been able
    I understand a lot more.

I have to
    I’l have to
I can really.

I was
I had
I think
    I didn’t know
        If I had known.

I was asexual
    I was
I don’t know
    I guess
I really
    I felt
I needed
    I also needed
I had moved on.
I could
I had
    I had
    I had to move past.

I mean
I felt
    I felt
    I felt really
I was really well held.

I said
I felt
I had done
I was.

I didn’t want
I didn’t want
I felt
    I needed.

I had done
I was
    I was
    I needed.

I’ve been able
I didn’t know
I remembered
I mean
I had
I would have.

I don’t know
I just remember
I matured
I was
I think
    I hope
I’ve been able
    I’ve also been able
I wanted
I felt really strongly.
My response to Anne’s I poem. Creating Anne’s I poem solidified my initial hypothesis that she places a great deal of importance on transformation, healing, and coming to terms. I’m struck by the amount of “I was” statements in her poem, suggesting that, unlike some other participants—particularly Mary—Anne makes a distinction in her past and present identities, in who she was during the abuse and who she is now. For example, in the stanza, “I realized/ I was/ I was/ I was/ I was/ I was” she spoke five sentences in a row of who she was; just two stanzas later, she voices three sentences in a row describing who she is. Anne’s repeated differentiation between her then self and her now self implies that she has done a great deal of work on coming to terms, on changing her identity.

The work Anne has done in coming to terms since her abusive experiences seems to have left her with an identity of someone who feels more capable and who understands much more about herself, as demonstrated in the stanza, “I was / I’ve gone way past. / I’ve been able/ I’ve been able/ I understand a lot more.” In addition to feeling more capable, Anne’s I poem shows us that she now also seems to know more about what it is that she wants and needs and, moreover, to retrospectively know more about what it was that she needed and wanted as a child.

Although Anne seems more in touch with herself, her feelings, and her healing than most of the other participants, there are points in the interview where her language reveals a distancing. She frequently uses the phrase “you know” during the interview, which mostly seems to be a part of her way of speaking, but the frequency of the “you knows” increased in several important--and likely troubling--areas of the interview. For example, when speaking about her relationship with Will prior to their neighbor’s
involvement she says, “...really kind of innocent discovery, and it was safe... but also weird you know because we were different you know people and we were friends, but it was just, you know, just knowing each other’s bodies and... you know, most of it was just like...” The increase of the filler phrase “you know” in examples like this suggests increased anxiety and perhaps a distancing.

Anne self-identifies in both of the instances of abuse (i.e., with her neighbor and with her brother) as a passive victim, as both times she uses the phrase “happened to me,” solidifying her lack of responsibility. Anne, understandably given her extensive training in psychology, uses the phrases “I feel” and “I felt” more than other participants; however, she describes feelings of badness, guilt, and dirtiness about the abuse at a distance, using the word “there” rather than “I felt.” For instance, Anne states, “Yeah….there was guilt. There was a badness. There was...uh...the word ‘dirty’ became a part of it.” Anne distances herself from these difficult feelings perhaps because she has worked hard to move past them, to heal, or perhaps she still has difficulty incorporating them into her identity.

**Third Listening: The Voice of Disembodiment**

Although all participants touched on how their experiences of abuse impacted their relationships with their own bodies, Anne’s story focused on this more than all others. Since-- according to previously cited research and my own intuitions and experiences--I believe this is a prevalent and important aspect of sexual abuse, I decided to choose embodiment as Anne’s first contrapuntal voice; because Anne’s experiences of abusive childhood sexual experiences seemed to inhibit her ability to fully be in her body, I chose to name this the voice of disembodiment. I chose to include all statements Anne
made in reference to discomfort about or in her body, experiences of dissociation (especially during sexual acts), and an inability to experience pleasure from touch or sexual interaction. The voice of disembodiment is highlighted in italics and, as before, the voice of identity is underlined.

Anne’s story told from the voice of disembodiment.

I felt really transparent and uh, like people could see through me (. . .) I would really avoid the gaze of any male...to the point of absurdity (. . .) I would like go behind buildings so I wouldn’t have to like see him or like be seen by him. And he like saw me and was like, “what are you doing?” (laughter) But I just felt always really uncertain about my body and just about my femininity....like I didn’t have a really firm sense of that (. . .) I just...I didn’t know how to handle any of this and it really influenced maybe sort of a dissociative sort of...body awareness for me. Um, I...would, you know, when I had my first boyfriend and I lost my virginity when I was 15, I...I, uh...I wasn’t there...I didn’t like show up and it probably wouldn’t have happened if I knew anything about...if I was kind of embodied (. . .)

I was noticing, you know...we would go to the park and [the kids] would just plop down in my lap and I was like thinking, 'how amazing is it that they can be so...just...expressive with their bodies’ and it really choked me. I was, like, ok...I’ve never been able to do that...I’ve never been able to flop down in somebody’s lap for as long as I can remember: There’s always been like a physical distance between me and...especially men, but pretty much everybody (. . .) especially when I look at kids who are free to express themselves. Like, wow, that’s so beautiful...a real, punch in the belly feel...like I wish I could have that (. . .)

I wasn’t really able to have an orgasm or meaningful sexual relationships at all and they were really dissociative. And the act of intercourse...and, you know, I didn’t like to be looked at...I didn’t like to be watched or noticed. I, you know, for a long time...wore like ace bandage like sports bras to flatten my chest...so it really had a pretty deep influence on my sexual unfolding...I didn’t want to have any overt, you know, kind of...I didn’t want anyone to notice my womanhood, or my sexuality at all...and that was a really big thing. Um...so I had to figure out how to...be embodied again...have a new relationship with myself and be touched by other people, even small things would take on a quality of like, ‘what the hell?’ you know. I had a really skittish existence for a while (. . .) it’s uh...and with my body, you know, it’s an active process...an ongoing process. It’s something, you know, that I have to work on all the time because there will be instinctual kind of fidgety things that happen and then I, um, sometimes I’ll have to notice that.
My first thought after reading all of Anne’s statements of disembodiment is that, oddly, there are no statements referring to her bodily response (or lack thereof) during the actual sexual experiences. But then, I think, perhaps the absence of such a voice is the epitome of disembodiment and a reflection of just how disembodied she was, or possibly still is. I imagine that, as a child, Anne’s voice of disembodiment was a creative and adaptive solution; it served her well during experiences of trauma and allowed her to continue to live a relatively “normal” life despite such abnormal (i.e., traumatic) circumstances. As an adult, however, such disembodiment might limit her level of intimacy and relatedness.

For Anne, the voice of disembodiment doesn’t just speak up during sexual acts as one might expect; rather, it is pervasive, stretching from her inability to be free with her body to her desire to be so disembodied that she’s invisible, hidden from the gaze of others. For Anne, coming to terms with her childhood sexual abuse had a lot to do with becoming re-embodied. Anne describes the changes in her understanding not in terms of words she uses to identify herself (e.g., survivor, victim, etc.) but in her mode of understanding (e.g., intellectual versus bodily reflection). For Anne, noticing her disembodiment and working to change it is the last step in coming to terms: “Yeah, so it has changed quite a bit to like that feeling of just huge power and influence and fear…to…um, reflective, intellectual reflection, to…um, a really bodily feeling reflection…especially when I look at kids who are free to express themselves. Like, wow, that’s so beautiful…a real, punch in the belly feel…like I wish I could have that.”
Fourth Listening: The Voice of Empowerment

There was something about the way Anne spoke during our interview such that the words “transformation” and “healing” kept coming to my mind. Of course, the fact that she is studying to become a psychologist may have also influenced the popping of these words into my head, but there was also a clear, palpable feeling I got from her of having spent many years gaining strength and transforming herself. It took me several days of rereading her story to decide on the word “empowerment” to encompass the storylines of strength, healing, and transformation that are present. Anne’s voice of empowerment is identified in bold. Her voice of disembodiment remains italicized and her voice of self is underlined.

Anne’s story told from the voice of empowerment.

we, um, decided this was too difficult...too scary or something and we said... 'hey, listen, we’re not doing this anymore.’ And I think it was primarily me who said that ( . . . ) And...I said, ‘no.’ ( . . . )

I developed like a whole style of trying to approach all this stuff ( . . . ) I was really forced to encounter a lot within my self and I went to therapy for the first time then and, you know, had to navigate a whole set of...like a new relationship to myself, which primarily started on an intellectual level and gradually regressed into more of the feelings regarding it ( . . . ) Um...but that started to unfold in the process of therapy and trying to figure out what this meant and how do I deal with this ( . . . )

I eventually told my parents what had happened ( . . . ) I’m the designated talker ( . . . ) When I first started the project of self-reflection...it was when I was 19 ( . . . ) And like I said, there was an intellectual kind of part of that, but then, the longer I spent in therapy, the more I was able to approach it in terms of ‘what are the implications for this?’... in terms of how I understood myself and other people and my relationship with men, in particular, and how had that influenced my relationships....and, it sort of all spirals from there ( . . . )

this feeling like I had done something wrong, um, I was able to kind of talk about with Will later...you know, and we were able to work it out together and we’ve been friends the whole time, so we’ve been able to try to make sense of it together...which has been really important. Yeah, so it has changed quite a bit to like that feeling of just huge power and influence and fear...to...um, reflective, intellectual reflection, to...um, a really bodily
feeling reflection…especially when *I look at kids who are free to express themselves.* Like, wow, that’s so beautiful…a real, punch in the belly feel…like *I wish I could have that.* I really went into psychology, like, trying to figure out these things…make sense of them and make use of them. Because *I felt* like I needed to do something with this stuff…and, um, my kind of spinning with it wasn’t enough. So, um…*I also needed to figure out* how to have a relationship with my parents that was authentic and real and not just angry and see-ya…and, yeah, that was hard….really hard and complicated and a lot of therapy (laughter) (. . .)

One of the things that *I did encounter*…and this may seem kind of abstract…but before *I got married I went to a shaman and had a soul retrieval* kind of ceremony and, uh, it’s…*I had no idea what to expect,* but I *was just feeling* like I wanted to figure out who I was and were I was going (. . .) *I went and, I found* that there was…there was um…*I encountered my spirit animal,* which is a wolf, and…uh…and *I kind of went through* and saw different pieces where *I had been fragmented* in this really, incredibly intense three-hour period that felt like five minutes. *I went and encountered these places,* particularly regarding bodily fragmentation around sexual abuse that helped me…you know…kind of…figure out a way to bring that back and work with it and incorporate it in a way that wasn’t just kind of split off or…which was really helpful. *I got a tattoo* of my wolf. (laughter). It was really visceral…this shaman knew everything. She didn’t know anything about me…but she knew everything. It was extraordinary. Um…it’s been a lot of work since then to kind of recognize those pieces and bring them back into myself and acknowledge them and work with them ( . . .)

*I have a different understanding now of [my brother].* Because *I have…I’m in my 30s…* I have the perspective of someone in my 30s and able to see, you know, what it’s like to grow up….what happens, you know…what happens at home and how he was the way he was. And also, just spiritually…*I have a really good relationship with him now.* My brother, who is still my brother even though he was 19 and I have gone way past that…so…it’s weird. It’s, you know…*I’ve been able to kind of work with,* not just his memory, but more like in an active sense…his, you know, spirit. And my spirit. I’ve been able to make amends ( . . .) so I understand a lot more now. And completely forgive him. It’s just really nice. And, it took a while after that to come through me…because I couldn’t will it to come from me…it’s not a matter of will ( . . .)

Aidan, has really helped that for me, in terms of me…being able to be embodied and expressive ( . . .) But also really…retrospectively, really empowering too because I got to find my way through that and be embodied with Aidan through breast feeding and it was really visceral and powerful and um…I don’t want to say I was asexual but like, being a mom was kind of a vehicle for me to kind of reemerge into my body and be loving and caring and uh…and expressive in that way. Um…and that was really beautiful. Um…and that helped me also kind of reclaim my sexuality ( . . .) being able to share this stuff with my husband and be able to really have a safe
relationship with him and have him be really respectful and treating me with a lot of dignity and care has been really important too...and so...that’s been transformative, just having a partner who is really kind and a good person has been really helpful ( . . .)

I felt like I needed them to know what had happened. Um...and I also needed them to know that I had moved on from it and, you know, it was only something I could do after I had sort of worked through that process because it would have been really difficult in my relationship with them to kind of go there with them with the anger I had felt. So I had to move past that in order to be able to approach them in a way that was going to still maintain our relationship but still let them know that this had happened and...that they should know ( . . . ) it’s something that I’ve been able to...to...to work with. And that I’ve also been able to be transformed by. I wanted to...do this with you because I felt really strongly that, you know, there are possibilities for healing here. And...that it’s ok. That it can be ok.

In her story, Anne lays out a path towards healing or, empowerment, as I’m calling it: “Yeah, so it has changed quite a bit to like that feeling of just huge power and influence and fear...to...um, reflective, intellectual reflection, to...um, a really bodily feeling reflection...”

The overlapping between Anne’s voice of empowerment and her I voice tells the story of a woman who is strong, able, and active in her healing. The I statements within her voice of empowerment are action oriented (e.g., doing, getting, going, figuring out). Her identity within the voice of empowerment sounds certain and strong, like a woman who knows what she needs and feels (e.g., “I felt like I needed them to know what had happened. Um...and I also needed them to know that I had moved on from it”).

For Anne, it seems that her voice of empowerment is only able to speak after becoming re-embodied; her two contrapuntal voices are necessarily linked. (e.g., “so I had to figure out how to...be embodied again...have a new relationship with myself and be touched by other people”). Although Anne’s contrapuntal voices are interlaced, the only sentence in which they distinctly overlap (i.e., the one sentence that is both bold and
italicized) is the following: “especially when *I look at kids who are free to express* themselves. *Like, wow, that’s so beautiful…a real, punch in the belly feel…like I wish I could have that.*” In this sentence, Anne seems to reach that “bodily reflection” that she previously spoke about; she not only intellectually understands the influence that the sexual abuse had on her body, but she *feels* it in her body, “a real, punch in the belly feel.” It is this moment of bodily awareness that seems to lead to her empowerment.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Anne’s voices tell the story of a woman who experienced two separate abusive relationships as a child. She describes the first, with a neighbor, as turning an innocent childhood discovery (with her friend Will) into a bad and dirty experience. Anne describes the sexual experience with her brother as complicated, due to the fact that she admired and loved him and because he also routinely physically abused her. Together, Anne’s experiences of sexual abuse (and the physical abuse from her brother) gave rise to a voice of disembodiment, to a girl who was uncomfortable in her body and unable to experience pleasure from bodily experiences. Through her engagement in psychology courses, psychotherapy, and other alternative forms of healing (e.g., a spiritual encounter with a shaman), her voice of disembodiment gave way to a more empowered voice, which sounds strong, knowledgeable, and sure of herself. In addition to engagement with various healing practices, Anne also reports a “good relationship” with her brother, whom she has since forgiven; she is the only one of the participants who clearly articulates forgiveness as a key component to her coming to terms. Though she expresses that her healing and coming to terms is an ongoing process, Anne appears more “healed” than all of the other participants.
Sasha’s Story

First Listening: The Plot

Demographical information. At the time of the interview, Sasha was in her mid-thirties, separated, and studying to be a social worker. She has one step-child. She was born and raised in a city in Pennsylvania.

My summary of Sasha’s story. Sasha was “raped” at the age of 12 by a schoolmate (age 14), a popular boy. She told her grandmother immediately; her parents were contacted and then the police. The case went to court and a classmate who witnessed the event testified on her behalf; the boy received “only” probation, about which Sasha has always been upset. Other kids teased Sasha and generally blamed her for the event.

Sasha moved to another school district shortly after the incident, which she describes as providing some “resolution.” However, she was still afraid of others finding out about the rape and said that it affected her--primarily in terms of lowered self-esteem, flashbacks, and nightmares--until about 2004 when she married. Sasha eventually told a friend about her experience (after the friend told her about a similar experience first); she stated that this sharing of similar experiences was very helpful, along with having supportive (which she seems to equate with non-blaming) parents and “dealing” with the experience immediately (telling her grandmother, having the police involved, going to the hospital, being provided a counselor).

The early sexual experience made Sasha initially view her body differently in that she didn’t want to look at herself and she felt “defiled.” She believes the experience has made her have “trust issues” and has affected her in many other ways, including
influencing her career choice of social work. Sasha has not had further contact with her abuser (aside from a couple of instances from afar). She has been married once and is currently separated. In general, her understanding has shifted from a “Why me?” stance to “not taking it personally,” and understanding that “bad” things can happen to “good” people, but also noting that she should try to prevent future similar occurrences by not being alone and being more perceptive.

**Sasha’s description of the sexual experience.**

I was 12 and um I was raped by a schoolmate and…um…it was after school. And…uh…my parents worked, so I had to walk to my grandmother’s house and I told her what happened. She called my parents at work and they came and the police were called. They came and took a statement and then I had to go to the hospital and they did the rape kit and everything (. . .) They didn’t actually witness the rape, but they were there when I kept saying “no” and you know, “let me go home.” (. . .) I’m expecting him to walk off with them and then I said oh no oh no he’s not leaving. I’m just standing there, I’m thinking to myself, I’m saying to myself I got to keep walking to grandma’s, I can’t stand here. And I’m thinking, that’s not going to look too good if I’m saying no and still standing there, they might think I was just saying that in front of them. And when I started to walk off that’s when it happened. Yeah, I was real fortunate that it was two classmates that heard me repeatedly tell him no, that I had to go home.

**Sasha’s description of how she has come to terms.**

Umm…I would say over time, um, I began to understand that…um, not to take it personally (. . .) as I’ve gotten older, um, I realized things weren’t my fault (. . .) I think if it would have took longer I would have had a harder time. Actually, throughout the years I had flashbacks, nightmares….but I think it would have been a lot worse if I didn’t have that counseling (. . .) I felt like when I went back to school like I was getting blamed and it was hard because it was just kind of, I felt alone (. . .) But overtime I thought I had dealt with it, but overtime, um…I actually was having nightmares and flashbacks (. . .) I think three or four months and then we moved. And that gave me some…that gave me resolution in the fact that I was separated from that environment and those school mates, but I still often thought about and kind of relived the whole thing in my head (. . .) Um…but I don’t think—I think even in my twenties, it wasn’t until maybe my…let’s say right before my father died—2004—that, um, the rape when I was 12 had actually stopped affecting me so much (. . .) I think one thing is that I had gotten married and I think I had felt secure (. . .) I think I had difficulty at that time because I kept asking myself, why did that happen and why did it happen to
me (. . . ) It was difficult because I had trouble coming to terms with it and letting it, uh, let go so I could come to some type of resolution and start to heal. It kind of um, I kind of held onto it for some years. I think I may have been um 14 before I really started to really let it go (. . . ) Later I did, I just...um...I thought that like sometimes bad things happened to nice people, to good people and some things you can't prevent (. . . ) I think even now I'll still be struggling with that [the idea of fault], it will still be painful (. . . ) I think because I knew from that time it made a big difference in me coping and healing from the rape. Because my parents and my counselor made sure from the beginning I knew it wasn’t my fault. That made a big difference (. . . ) So I just said, I’m just going to avoid everything altogether and not say anything and just deal with it myself. But it’s just so much more healing when you can talk to a fellow peer that understands or something that’s been through, unfortunately, been through the same, you know, thing (. . . ) I want to help other little girls or young teens so they don’t go through what I went through or they understand (. . . ) That’s the key and then I think having someone to talk to who has been through a similar experience...I think that helped me...

Sasha’s description of how her understanding has affected her identity and relationships.

although as a child, um, it has affected my self esteem and confidence (. . . ) Um...and relationships with others...it affected just like, trust issues. That was a big issue. Trust. Um...and maybe, I would say probably, the stability too...um, especially with, um, dating (. . . ) I felt like when I went back to school like I was getting blamed and it was hard because it was just kind of, I felt alone. And I felt very confused. So even though I had the counseling, I had a lot of conflicting feelings and emotions (. . . ) And then after that happened, it completely changed everything. I would even say my view of the whole world—I know I looked at my classmates differently, but also kind of looked at the whole world differently after that (. . . ) I started thinking that the world and people in general are not nice, they are not all nice people (. . . ) I think recently...that trust issue again and what are their intentions and do they wanna hurt me...and, um, I thought it was interesting too, because sometimes I’m afraid to be alone because of that (. . . ) you just have to, um, try your best to just heal from it and try to prevent it from happening again, basically not being...try to keep yourself out of that situation and away from those types of people—you have to be more perceptive...and it’s like you have to try to not be alone (. . . ) I think I was naïve in trusting too much in people and thinking too much of them and...um, maybe I should have had my guard up a little bit (. . . ) I had bouts of depression after that and this would always come up with it. I started getting counseling for depression at 15 and this would come up (. . . ) I think when I started going to the new school, I felt like I’m different because of this experience (. . . )Like, you’ve been defiled (. . . ) at the time I just felt like I wasn’t like the rest of the girls, even though some of them weren’t virgins anymore. Even some of them had children at a young age...
were girls in the school that were 14 or 15 that had babies or were pregnant, but I was kind of afraid that no one was gonna want to be with me or they were going to look differently, or are they gonna think it was my fault. I was so worried what others were gonna think. I felt differently about myself, like, but I couldn’t understand it. I felt…um…(sigh). I don’t know how to describe it. I liked myself still, but I didn’t…I felt uncomfortable looking at my body in the mirror or being in the shower, I kind of felt, well, defiled ( . . . ) I went a good 10 to 15 years…maybe mid to late 20s I finally started opening up ( . . . ) I could talk about it, not be ashamed, and I could talk about it and be understood and it didn’t just happen to me

My initial response. My first thought is that I’m not as involved in Sasha’s story as I was in some of the others, which is especially interesting considering that Sasha mentioned several times in the interview that she felt that others weren’t taking her seriously and subsequently wishing that others were more sympathetic. I found my own biases coming into play here as I was silently comparing her single instance of abuse to that of, say, Tabitha’s ten year long abuse (with a trusted family member) and coming to the conclusion that Sasha’s simply wasn’t that serious. I was glad to be aware of this bias and attempted to keep it in check for the remainder of my analysis; I did wonder, though, as I continued with the analysis if there was also a vibe that Sasha was giving out--either explicitly or implicitly--that contributed to my diminishment of her experience.

What stands out most to me as I read Sasha’s story is the idea of blame, a concept that seems central to many women’s stories of abuse. Sasha’s focus on blame encompasses a fear that others will blame her and a subsequent desire to want others to be more sympathetic towards her, thus demonstrating that she is unworthy of blame.

Something else that stands out to me in Sasha’s story is a dichotomous understanding of the world and others: people are either “nice” or “bad,” and part of Sasha’s initial difficulty coming to terms with her experience is that a bad thing happened
to her, a nice person. It seems that this dichotomous world view, which she seemed to revise later in life, is part of what she was referring to when she called herself naïve.

I sense that, understandably, Sasha is holding a lot back in telling her story. For example, she mentions “conflicting emotions” several times in her story, but then seems to avoid responding to my follow-up questions. The same holds for when she says that she feels guilty: she mentions it but then backs away.

Sasha is the only one of the five participants who uses the word “rape” in her description of the sexual experience. Though unclear what exactly makes this term the best description for her, it is interesting to note that she is also the only participant whose sexual experience is extrafamilial. She also seems to be the one who is most clearly aligned with a victim identity.

**Second Listening: I poem**

**Sasha’s I poem.**

I would say  
I began to understand  
I’ve gotten older  
I realized.

I was 12  
I was raped  
I think  
I think  
I had flashbacks  
I think

I had a really hard time  
I felt like  
I was getting blamed  
I felt alone  
I felt very confused  
I had a lot of conflicting feelings

I guess
I thought maybe
I can’t remember
I thought
I was separated
I still often thought
I was really surprised

I was like really surprised

I started thinking
I was like really naïve
I would be like really shocked
I had trouble
I couldn’t understand
I continued
I was really apprehensive
I was embarrassed
I thought
I was stupid
I was afraid
I don’t think
I think
I think
I think

I sort of don’t know
I think
I thought
I’m afraid to be alone
I think

I’m afraid of being alone
I’m afraid of something

I was alone.

I can’t believe
I wasn’t thinking
I have to get to grandma’s
I was trying to go to grandma’s
I didn’t see
I just wanted to get to grandma’s
I remember telling
I remember being scared
I was going to get in trouble
I didn’t do anything wrong
I didn’t do anything wrong

I don’t know.
I think
I understood
I told her
    I was hurting
I remember
    I don’t remember
I think.
I had to keep telling the story
I remember
I was kind of surprised
    I remember
        I remember
I think
I kept asking
I was a nice girl
I had trouble
I kind of held onto it
    I may have
I really started to really let it go
    I kept asking like, why me?
I thought
    I think
        I think
            I think maybe
I’m not blaming myself
    I’m just thinking
I was naïve
    I should have
I have to be careful
I’ll still be struggling
I knew
    I knew it wasn’t my fault
I could have talked
I had to keep it to myself
    I couldn’t
I had to hide it
    I felt alone.
I was being attacked
I had flashbacks
I felt alone
I felt like I’m different
I remember
I was upset
I have to tell
I was thinking
I was worried
I didn’t understand.

I remember being 12
I have to explain
I don’t even remember
I don’t even think
I don’t really remember.

I was shunned
I was this horrible person
I still liked school
I just hated
I would see him
I hated
I just kept looking
I couldn’t believe.

I remember
I forgot
I had gotten so upset
I forgot
I hadn’t thought.

I wasn’t like the rest of the girls
I was kind of afraid
I was so worried
I felt differently about myself

I couldn’t understand it
I liked myself
I felt uncomfortable
I kind of felt, well, defiled

I always wanted to hurry
I was going through
I was so happy when we moved
I was worried too
I was relieved.

I didn’t have to rehash a
I wanted to talk about it
   I couldn’t
I felt like
   I couldn’t talk about it
I didn’t want anyone to know
   I was afraid
   I just won’t say anything
I didn’t want to relive
   I’m just going to avoid.

I finally started opening up
   I was surprised
I was relieved
I could talk about it
   I could talk about it
I wasn’t thinking why me
I used to wonder
I was afraid
   I was afraid to tell
I really appreciate
I can still talk about it.

I was shocked
   I didn’t understand
I kept telling him no
   I couldn’t understand
I’m just thinking
   I was just so, like, shocked.

I told her
I wasn’t expecting
I understand things now.
   I was just so naïve.

I was thinking
I went
I want to help other little girls

I think
   I think
I knew
I said something right away
   I didn’t want
I got to grandma’s
I said something
I don’t remember
I think I did.
I don’t remember
I said rape
   I think
      I don’t know
         I might have said.

I’m expecting
I’m just standing there
I’m thinking to myself
   I’m saying to myself
I can’t stand here
   I’m thinking
I’m saying no
I started to walk off.

I was real fortunate
   I think
I was so relieved
I knew it wasn’t easy
I appreciate that
   I don’t remember
      I think.

I know
I was actually afraid
   I think
      I can’t remember
         I don’t even remember
I remember
   I can’t remember
      I think maybe
         I don’t remember.

I just cannot believe
I was thinking
   I was thinking
I saw him
   I remember being scared
   I think
I hope that it helps.

**My response to Sasha’s I poem.** My initial reaction to Sasha’s I poem is a sympathetic one. After my first cursory reading for plot, I felt distanced from Sasha and
found myself diminishing her experiences, but after creating her I poem I feel almost the opposite. I feel pulled toward understanding her as a victim, which seems to be due to the way in which she tells her story and her sense of self throughout.

Sasha describes herself in mostly passive terms, with the verbs of thinking, feeling, and remembering predominating; this isn’t necessarily negative, as she seems to be more in touch with her feelings (especially during and immediately following the abuse) than most of the other participants. However, there is a quality to her passivity that I imagine could render her stuck. Additionally, Sasha’s sense of self appears to frequently be based on events happening to her (beyond the rape), with few agentic statements to balance it out.

Sasha starts off her story with certainty “I was 12/ I was raped,” but as the story progresses, she becomes more uncertain with “I think” quickly followed by “I don’t think” and “I don’t remember” immediately trailing “I remember.”

**Third Listening: The Voice of the Victim**

Doing the third listening, especially for Sasha, I began to struggle as a researcher, mostly because--despite having read that contrapuntal doesn’t equal conflictual--I was interpreting the search for contrapuntal voices as a search for conflicting voices and on the surface Sasha doesn’t appear conflicted; to be sure, I believe there is more confusion and conflict than Sasha presents, but in an attempt to perform a close reading and to stay true to her story, I chose not to stray too far from her own words. Ultimately, I chose the voice of the victim as the first contrapuntal voice, mainly because I was so struck by my gut feeling that Sasha is stuck in identifying as a victim.
I located the voice of the victim in Sasha’s story—identified in the text in italics—where she reports being affected by something or someone (i.e., not having control, being subject to), when she uses the word rape or force, when she reports feeling victimized by others treating her poorly, and when she speaks of others not taking her seriously.

Perhaps more so than some of the other voices I located in this research, it felt difficult to pin down exactly what constituted the voice of the victim; ultimately, it came down to defining victimhood primarily by a stance of passivity or absence of control. As before, the voice of self is underlined.

**Sasha’s story told from the voice of the victim.**

*it has affected my self esteem and confidence ( . . . ) things weren’t my fault ( . . . ) understanding why things happened as a child ( . . . ) it affected just like, trust issues ( . . . ) I was raped by a schoolmate ( . . . ) they did the rape kit and everything ( . . . ) [my therapist] didn’t make me feel like anything was my fault ( . . . ) [the boy’s family] kept lashing out and saying things in court that were very hurtful ( . . . ) the kids on the school bus taunted me, they teased me, they said it was my fault ( . . . ) I felt like when I went back to school like I was getting blamed . . . why did my school mates treat me that way, why didn’t they understand ( . . . ) I couldn’t understand why…harmful or mean things would be said…or actions like that would be, um, done to people ( . . . ) I was like afraid of relationships and what people thought of me ( . . . ) that they would blame me, or they would say I was stupid or it was my fault, or—just put everything off on me ( . . . ) that would have me have flashbacks too ( . . . ) what are their intentions and do they wanna hurt me ( . . . ) a fellow actually grabbed me just like he did ( . . . ) I can’t believe this is going to happen again ( . . . ) I remember telling her…”grandma something happened”…”something bad happened” ( . . . ) I didn’t do anything wrong, I didn’t do anything wrong ( . . . ) I told her I was hurting ( . . . ) I was….thought like with cases like that judges were more sympathetic ( . . . ) like no one is taking it seriously how he hurt me physically and emotionally ( . . . ) why did that happen and why did it happen to me ( . . . ) why did it happen to me. And why don’t they care, why don’t my schoolmates care, why didn’t he care? ( . . . ) why me, why did it happen to me? ( . . . ) you can’t prevent ( . . . ) I’m not blaming myself but I’m just thinking of other options that maybe could have prevented that ( . . . ) he was taking advantage of me and you know ( . . . ) I knew it wasn’t my fault ( . . . ) I knew it wasn’t my fault ( . . . ) I couldn’t…continue to talk about it as needed. It’s like I had to hide it ( . . . ) felt like I was being attacked ( . . . ) I think that impacted why maybe I had flashbacks so much ( . . . ) it wasn’t my fault ( . . . ) you’ve been defiled ( . . . ) I was shunned and I was this horrible person ( . . . )
what is he gonna say, what is he gonna do, why does everyone keep siding with him? (. . .) no one was gonna want to be with me or they were going to look differently, or are they gonna think it was my fault (. . .) that only affected me the first year (. . .) I couldn’t… I felt like I couldn’t talk about it (. . .) “he forced himself on me” (. . .) I’m just standing there (. . .) why did that happen, like still rehashing the same questions.

Understandably, Sasha’s sense of self seems to be quite aligned with the voice of the victim, especially when speaking about the experience of the rape and her peers’ reactions to it. However, the voice of the victim surfaces time and again long after the rape when she repeatedly questions “why me?” The victim’s voice, though reasonable given her story, also seems to leave Sasha stuck, quite literally looking over her shoulder and asking, “what are their intentions and do they wanna hurt me?” For years following the rape, Sasha seems to be stuck in herself, in her own thoughts and feelings, assuming a largely passive and victim-oriented stance to the rape. As I mentioned previously, Sasha is the only one of the participants who used the word “rape;” she seemed to be the most clear about the sexual experience having a negative, forceful, and malicious connotation and I imagine using this word also contributes to her understanding of herself as a victim.

Fourth Listening: The Voice of Agency

As a researcher (and therapist), I wanted to find a part of Sasha that had agency, that felt in control, strong, and capable. Part of choosing this voice seems to come from my desire to find ways in which Sasha is moving on from the experience; again I find my own preconceptions revealing themselves, this time revealing that my understanding of “to move on” equates with a switch of voice from victim to something else (i.e., someone with agency, à la Philips and Daniluk, 2004). I was also interested in seeing what, if any, ways Sasha saw herself as having agency prior to understanding herself as a victim (i.e., not immediately seeing herself as a victim).
Because at first read (or, rather, at fourth read), I had not yet heard much from the voice of agency, I decided to look liberally for such voice, perhaps in ways in which I hadn’t thought of before. Thus, the list below is what I followed when looking for the voice of agency in Sasha’s story:

- The notion that Sasha has done and/or is doing something to “deal with” the rape.
- Telling others about the rape and sharing her story.
- Saying “no”
- Having a sense of resolution or closure from the event.
- Actively changing her worldview.
- Statements in which others are implying that she had some control over the rape.
- Sasha’s ideas of what will prevent being raped in the future.
- An active decision to avoid dealing with the rape.

The voice of agency is highlighted below in bold print; the voice of the victim is represented in italics and the voice of identity is underlined.

Sasha’s story told from the voice of agency.

I realized things weren’t my fault ( . . . ) and to better have, um, coping skills to deal with it and to get past it and not to continue to take it into adulthood ( . . . ) I had to walk to my grandmother’s house and I told her what happened ( . . . ) I kept saying “no” and you know, “let me go home.” . . . overtime I thought I had dealt with it ( . . . ) that gave me resolution in the fact that I was separated from that environment and those school mates ( . . . ) I know I looked at my classmates differently, but also kind of looked at the whole world differently after that ( . . . ) I had gotten married and I think I had felt secure ( . . . ) it was really hard telling it in court too…telling it in front of everybody ( . . . ) his attorney asking, well what did you have on? ( . . . ) I kind of held onto it for some years. I think I may have been um 14 before I really started to really let it go ( . . . ) try your best to just heal from it and try to prevent it from happening again, basically not being…try to keep yourself out of that situation and away from those types of people—you have to be more perceptive…and it’s like you have to try to not be alone ( . . . ) if I just would have took another route because the way I walked to my grandmothers house
... if I would have taken a route with a lot of houses then it would probably not have happened. And I’m not blaming myself but I’m just thinking of other options that maybe could have prevented that. And maybe not... I think I was naive in trusting too much in people and thinking too much of them and...um, maybe I should have had my guard up a little bit. I have to be careful and, watch who I’m around and where I am. I think because I knew from that time [that it wasn’t my fault] it made a big difference in me coping and healing from the rape. I think if we would have known we could have talked about it. So I said, just to avoid any type of negative criticism or judgment, I just won’t say anything. So I just said, I’m just going to avoid everything altogether and not say anything and just deal with it myself. I could talk about it, not be ashamed, and I could talk about it and be understood and it didn’t just happen to me. Not that I felt that I was being punished...but I wasn’t thinking why me anymore. I said, Oh wow that happened to me too. I can still talk about it, feel comfortable talking about it. I’ll have to go to school and deal with his friends. I went into social work. I want to help other little girls or young teens. It’s important that you have to validate yourself...you cant define yourself by what boys think of you or your schoolmates...you have to build your own self-esteem or confidence...and not base what you feel about yourself by what they think. And um, you cant um, let them manipulate them to where physical harm is happening to you. You gotta be able to protect yourself or know how to you know have that voice. I knew there would be consequences I’m not going to like, but I have to say something. I’m always glad of that—I said something right away. I didn’t wait until the next day or you know any type of time period. Soon as I got to grandma’s I said something. I’m saying no and still standing there, they might think I was just saying that in front of them. And when I started to walk off that’s when it happened. For me is dealing with it right away.

With my liberal guidelines in locating the voice of agency in Sasha’s story, I was able to find an agentic woman underneath an ostensibly passive identity. Much of Sasha’s voice of agency is evident in her saying “no” to the boy during the rape and then immediately telling her grandmother what had happened. Perhaps not as present as the voice of the victim, her agentic voice serves an important purpose here and is part of what she is most proud of, “I’m always glad of that—I said something right away, I didn’t wait.” With time and suggestions from others (lawyers, classmates), Sasha’s voice
of agency seems to dissipate. It becomes evident again strongly towards the end of her story, but in the third person as she takes an educative role in telling others girls how to come to terms, “you have to build your own self-esteem or confidence” and “you gotta be able to protect yourself or know how to you know have that voice.” Sasha seems more comfortable with her voice of agency when it’s being used in the service of advice for others.

There is only one statement in Sasha’s story in which the voices of self, victim, and agency coincide: “I’m not blaming myself but I’m just thinking of other options that maybe could have prevented that.” This statement seems to be the crux of what I see as contributing to Sasha’s difficulty in coming to terms with the rape. This statement is reflective of her simultaneous “not” blaming of herself while also wondering what she could have done to prevent the situation. The notion of both being a victim (“not blaming myself”) and having agency (“could have prevented it”) leads to a confusion of identity and, particularly for Sasha, seems to be followed by a litany of what she wasn’t/should have been/etc.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Sasha describes her story as an instance of rape by a schoolmate. She reports that she immediately recognized the sexual experience as rape, told her family about it, and took legal action against the boy. She reveals that she suffered from lowered self-esteem and taunting from school mates as a result of the rape. Sasha’s identity, or I voice, is largely passive and closely aligned with the voice of the victim. Issues of blame are central in Sasha’s story, and she portrays her worldview as very clearly dichotomous, separating the good people from the bad people. Despite an outward identification with
victimhood, there are important instances wherein she displays an agentic identity, including when she said ‘no’ during the rape, when she told her parents, and in her desire to educate and help other girls heal from similar experiences.

Discussion

This final section will revisit where the project began--with the literature in the field, using it to illuminate some of the more interesting findings. Salient similarities and contrasts across participants will also be explored, as well as implications of the results, limitations, and suggestions for future directions in this area of research.

The Plots

Because of my difficulty in recruiting willing participants, the overall plots are more diverse than I originally imagined they would be: in terms of duration, relationship with abuser, specific sexual acts, age at time of abuse, and so on. The diversity of experiences which these five women shared with me remind me of one of the first articles I read for this project: Haugaard’s “The Challenge of Defining Child Sexual Abuse” where he writes, “there is no consensus about the definition of […] the term child sexual abuse” (2000, p. 1036). The range of plots that were described, all of which fell under the participant’s self-applied label of “sexual abuse,” beautifully illuminate Haugaard’s point.

The Negative Effects, Revisited

Although not the focus of this research, it seems worth discussing the relationship between the negative effects the women in this study reported and those that the literature describe. All five participants reported an abundance of negative effects similar to those discussed in the literature review. In accordance with Fondacaro, Holt and Powell’s
findings, there was a high level of psychiatric disorders, in that all five women reported previous (or current) treatment for either clinical mood or anxiety disorders. Several of the women also reported: difficulty trusting (Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000); various sexual difficulties (Linden & Zehner, 2007); feelings of shame and self-loathing (Philips & Daniluk, 2004); and feelings of rage (Painter & Howell, 1999). Of particular interest is that Mary, the participant who felt most ambivalent about her experiences, seemed to exemplify this quotation I included in the literature review from Forward and Buck (1988): “[T]hose victims who may be sexually responsive and orgasmic (and many are) still carry a tremendous sense of guilt and loathing toward their bodies and their sexual feelings” (p. 24). Mary continues to carry a large amount of guilt and self-loathing because, as she put it, “I was craving the attention, I was craving the affection and everything like that…” She continues to struggle: with initiating sexual activity; feeling positive about her body; and accepting, initiating, and enjoying affection (especially in public).

Although all five participants have clearly suffered negative effects as a result of their sexually abusive experiences (in combination and confluence with a number of other factors, including temperament, family dynamics, others’ responses to the abuse, etc.), I found that the level of the previous and current suffering, once again, varied widely. Leachy et al.’s (2003) finding that clinically distressed adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse identified confusion as a major feeling of the experience versus nonclinically distressed survivors who “clearly faulted the perpetrator” is also relevant to the women in my study. Once again, Mary, the participant who expressed the most ambivalence and confusion regarding fault also appeared to be the most clinically
distressed, as she had a number of suicide attempts and hospitalizations (as recent as within the last five years). I would also venture an educated guess that Sasha, the only participant who used the word “rape” to describe her experience (i.e., the one who most clearly faulted the abuser), may have been—according to the information she provided me—the least clinically distressed of the group.

**The Voices of Identity**

Returning again to the literature with which I began, I recall Philips and Daniluk’s (2004) conclusion that women who were sexually abused as children tend to feel as if they have a “contaminated” identity, marked by feeling invisible, shameful and self-loathing. Although words and phrases such as “defiled,” “soiled,” “dirty,” and “dirty inside” (spoken by Sasha, Mary, Anne, and Janet respectively), suggest “contaminated” identities, the I poems created from these women’s stories paint a more multifarious picture. Their voices of identity tell of women who describe themselves as curious, certain, knowing and not-knowing (at the same time!), caretakers, protectors, angry, passive, and agentic…just to name a few. Each women’s story—a product of its own particular context—yielded a different I poem, shattering the stereotype that there is one particular identity which adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse take on. Reading these women’s I poems and then returning to Philips and Daniluk (2004), I recognize the importance of their idea that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse have shifts in identity; where they missed the target, I believe, is by suggesting that there is one particular progression—from victim to survivor to a more “multifaceted, integrated” identity. As the I poems suggest, identities do shift, but in a flux and flow, forward and
backward movement, rather than in a straight line; “it’s an active process…an ongoing process,” as Anne puts it.

The voices of identity across participants ranged from one which was still closely intertwined with her childhood identity during the abuse (Mary) to one which was markedly transformed (Anne), with several somewhere in between. All of the women identified themselves as being in an ongoing process of coming to terms, suggesting that sexual abuse is an experience with not only lifelong effects on mental health or relationships, but also on one’s own identity, which may change with new developments in the process of coming to terms.

All five I poems produced evocative images of women who have wondered why, who doubted themselves, who struggled, who changed in some way, and who want to understand. The I poems serve as a window into how each participant understands herself, something which has not, to my knowledge, been the focus of any previous research.

**The Contrapuntal Voices**

Like the voices of identity, the contrapuntal voices across participants varied much more than I had initially expected. Although there was a tinge of all ten contrapuntal voices (i.e., the two per participant that I located, combined for a total of ten) in each woman’s story, two different contrapuntal voices predominated for each participant. To recap: for Mary it was guilt and innocence; for Janet, betrayal and protection; for Tabitha avoidance and engagement emerged; for Anne it was disembodiment and empowerment; and for Sasha victim and agency were the most prominent. Although I reminded myself repeatedly that the contrapuntal voices need not
be conflictual, they often ended up being just that; perhaps this is suggestive of the nature of having experienced childhood sexual abuse, but I like to think that it is simply reflective of being human, and having, at any given time, a multiplicity of conflicting feelings.

One can see how traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization--the traumagenic dynamics that Finkelhor and Browne (1985) outlined—are reflected in at least some of the contrapuntal voices that I located. Betrayal, for instance, features prominently for Janet as one of her contrapuntal voices. She felt betrayed not only by her uncle (the abuser), but also by her step-mother, father, and aunt for what she viewed as their role in her being “put into that position” and for their response of disbelief.

Sasha’s voice of the victim also has its roots in the traumagenic dynamic of powerlessness. The powerlessness she clearly felt as her body was invaded and which was reinforced by the response of blame from her peers as well as the legal system has not only “affected” Sasha, as Finkelhor and Browne (1985) suggest, but it has become a part of her, a voice that expresses her powerlessness or victimhood in a pervasive and insidious way. As with the battered women in Leisenrig’s (2006) study, the voice of the victim is both enabling and constraining for Sasha; it deflects responsibility and therefore guilt, but continues to leave her in a dynamic of powerlessness.

The relationship between the two contrapuntal voices also varied across participants, with Mary’s two voices (guilt and innocence) overlapping the most and Janet’s (betrayal and protection) not coinciding at all. For Mary, the degree of overlap between her two voices seems related to the degree of confusion she feels; she is not
guilty or innocent, but rather, she’s guilty and innocent. For Janet, just the opposite is true; her way of coming to terms has been to view her experiences through the lens of clearly distinct categories and feelings: One is either a betrayor or a protector, guilty or innocent.

For some, particularly Anne, one voice seemed to follow on the heels of the other; when one subsided the other emerged (i.e., only after she dealt with her disembodiment did empowerment surface). For some, one voice was much stronger than the other (e.g., Sasha’s voice of victim versus that of agency), while for others both voices were making themselves heard equally (e.g., Tabitha’s voices of avoidance and engagement).

**Reflection on the Process**

I sat down, years ago now, with scores of articles and books about sexual abuse, trying to narrow down the focus of my research; I was surprised about how clean all of the books and articles made the topic seem, how simple and straightforward: girl (or boy) gets sexually abused, girl (or boy) goes through specific stages of dealing with said abuse, and girl (or boy) either emerges—healed--or is left damaged in some way, forever. The articles and books of course mentioned how terrible sexual abuse is and how difficult it is to heal from, but I found very little that explored the subtleties of abuse: decisions to tell or not, feelings of shame but also pleasure, decisions to even use the word “abuse,” repetitions of similar actions or seeking out similar partners.

During this research, when I got lost in the participants’ stories or when I got lost in the (at times very difficult) job of analysis, I had to remind myself of those early moments of frustration at the simple picture portrayed by current research. Therefore, as I look back now and attempt to summarize my research, I ask myself if I’ve
accomplished my overarching goal, which was to complicate the subject of sexual abuse. Although I think that, overall, I did reach this goal, there were certainly moments in most of the women’s stories where they did not consciously or overtly describe their experiences in a multifaceted way (e.g., using the word “rape” or describing an experience in other absolute or singular terms). I cannot help but presume that my desire to prove that this topic is multifaceted and complicated (based on my own history) had some impact on my findings that sexual abuse is, indeed, a complicated topic.

Although I believe I accomplished my overarching goal, I do need to look at some of the more specific hypotheses I made early on. It is interesting that I found myself stuck trying to choose two specific contrapuntal voices to look for across all five participants; only after months of being stuck did I realize that I was trying to do exactly what had been so frustrating to me and part of what had inspired me to take on this topic. In those months of being stuck I tried, in vain, to not just find any two contrapuntal voices, but two specific ones: the participant and the victim, or some slight variation thereof. That was me trying to use my experiences--my fifth voice--as a frame of reference for my participants. As I look back to the questions I posed early on in my description of what I anticipated studying (p. 24-25), I realize that I did not find the answers. I initially proposed to study the movement of identity from participant to victim, wondering specifically about the how, when, and what of such a shift in identity. I don’t have the answers because I didn’t find this shift, at least not repeatedly.

A shift from participant to victim was evident in Mary’s story. For Mary, the shift to thinking about herself as a victim occurred only long after the experiences ended (she says, “it wasn’t until I got older that I realized what it was. So…and that I came to
terms with…that it was abuse”). Although it remains unclear to me how it was that her understanding of the experiences shifted to “abuse,” it does seem that by the time her brother returned when she was in her twenties, she had moved from a willing participant to an angry stance, as she states, “I opened the door, I was about ready to slam the door back in his face again…” Perhaps it was the fact that her brother had “upped and went away” with “some girl”—she assumed—that aided in her recognition of the ways in which he had abused her, as opposed to how he had provided her with much needed affection. To me, Mary’s shift in identity looks like a tennis court. Her identity is the ball, and it is easily hit from side to side, participant to victim, guilty to innocent; and Mary is a professional tennis player—she’s great at returning the ball to the other side, meaning, she continues to see herself as both participant and victim and perhaps more importantly, as both guilty and innocent.

**Implication and Importance of the Results**

For both clinicians as well as family members or friends who have loved ones who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, the main implication of these results is the understanding that no two people experience childhood sexual abuse in the same way; the way in which it influences one’s identity, relationships with others, mental health, and predominant ways of understanding oneself all vary. This means that, as already suggested, coming to terms with sexual abuse is a complicated and ongoing project that is intimately intertwined with how a woman understands herself. Because each woman comes to terms in her own way—having experienced the abuse in her own way—close attention should be paid to her experiences, the particular words she uses to describe it and the particular voices that emerge from her storytelling.
Best (1997) notes, “therapists may urge patients to ignore doubts and ambiguity when acknowledging their victimization” (p. 14). In my own experience, I have found that some therapists--especially those entrenched in the type of excessive reliance on victimization discourse that, as outlined in the literature review, Agustin Malón (2009) speak of--are quick to interpret all experiences that can legally be characterized as “sexual abuse” as subjectively abusive to the patient; this results in automatically referring to the patient as a “victim” or “survivor.” It is these seemingly small leaps wherein the therapist uses her or his own point of view as opposed to listening closely and allowing the patient’s point of view to emerge, which can ultimately lead to alienation.

Another implication, evolving straight from the previous one, is worded beautifully by Malón (2009), “Call attention to the great diversity of situations, experiences, and implications (Baurmann 1983) which are now encompassed—without any shades of gray—by the one-dimensional phrase ‘child sexual abuse’” (p. 87). There is a wide range of experiences which we legally and informally refer to as “sexual abuse” and it is therefore important to be open to the wide variations which are encompassed within this vague phrase. I have cringed throughout writing the past 133 pages where I have repeatedly used this phrase, each time not knowing exactly to what I was referring, or perhaps using it twice in one page and referring to quite different experiences each time. Thus, the title of this project: “Coming to Terms with Abusive Childhood Sexual Experiences” is not only a reference to the informal “coming to terms” or healing, (moving past, moving beyond) but it also refers to the idea that the terms which we
currently utilize are not sufficient, not descriptive enough to capture the range of the
diverse experiences.

**Limitations of the Research**

I hope that the results formulated in this project encourage you as reader to begin
to think more deeply about women’s (and men’s) experience of sexual abuse. If you are
a clinician, I hope that this serves as a starting point for you to be curious about any
current or future patient’s experiences of sexual abuse and to be open to the multiplicity
of voices within all of their stories.

It has been surprisingly easy, and frustrating, to find flaws in my research once it
is near completion. If I were able to do this project over again, knowing what I do now, I
would have made several changes right from the start. Following Brant and Tisza’s
(1977) research (which I unfortunately found only after data had already been collected),
I would have used the phrase “sexual misuse” rather than sexual abuse on the recruitment
flyers; this would have likely yielded a sample of participants with more ambiguous
feelings about their abuse, which was my initial interest, and something on which I would
like to focus further research. Thus, the wording I used from the outset created a
circumscribed group of respondents (i.e., those who were already sure of their “terms”) and also set the tone for the interview, that I was interested in stories of “abuse.”

Another limitation with this study, as with many qualitative studies, is that it
explored the stories of just a handful of participants. In an ideal situation, I would have
had the time and ability to interview many more participants (without sacrificing the
quality and depth of the interviews), which likely would have yielded a better sense of the
range of voices that typically emerge following experiences of childhood sexual abuse.
Although the small number of participants in this study does not allow me to reach any conclusions that could be said to be representative of the general population, that was not part of my goal. My main objective was to complicate the notion of coming to terms with childhood sexual abuse, and that was accomplished, even with only five participants. Because I – wisely, I believe-- decided to allow the range of contrapuntal voices to emerge from the participants’ own stories rather than from my imposition, the voices do not congeal nicely into a small number of themes or distinct conclusions; anyone reading this with a background in “hard” science, or even a preference for quantitative research, would likely identify this as another limitation.

Another limitation of the research is the context in which the data were collected. The participants were asked to share details of painful and intimate experiences with me--a complete stranger--in one single conversation; surely if they were asked to explore such experiences over time with a trusted other, different stories and voices would have emerged.

Suggestions for Further Research

As previously stated, I am interested in conducting further research on women who are unsure of the terms of their experiences, those who—like Mary—are more ambivalent in their current understanding which, given my love of psychoanalysis and interest in inner turmoil, would be immensely fascinating to me. I view this research as a starting point, as an invitation to explore the multiplicity of voices that emerge in coming to terms (i.e., in both understanding and defining one’s experience and also healing from traumatic experiences), not as a definitive or conclusive study. Therefore, further research with more participants, a greater range of participants in terms of demographics
(age, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation, etc.), and also including men would all be useful to further this area of study. Because it seems that at times one voice emerges following the extinction or diminishment of another, it would be especially interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to follow the ongoing process of coming to terms and, as a result, the ongoing flux and harmony of voices.

Conclusion

As promised, this was a study of sexual abuse. Perhaps your thoughts associated with this term have changed since the start of this dissertation. I wonder if you now think of Mary’s confusion between guilt and innocence, or how she felt special when sharing a secret moment with her brother, or her inability to ever give birth. Or if you recall how betrayed Janet feels, or her refrain, “I don’t know/ I don’t know/ I don’t know why.” Perhaps Tabitha’s story of survival, and her psychological shift from “forget, forget, forget” to “remember, remember, remember” comes to mind. You might also think of Anne’s recognition of her disembodiment, that “punch in the belly feeling” that later gave way to a more empowered sense of self. Or maybe you find yourself thinking of Sasha’s agency as she said “no” or her tendency to wonder of others, “What are their intentions and do they wanna hurt me?”

Perhaps by now you have moved from these women’s stories to a story closer to your own life: a patient, a friend, maybe even yourself. Whomever it is that you think of when you hear the words “sexual abuse,” my hope is that the stereotypical assumptions of what “victims” of sexual abuse endure or feel have been successfully challenged. I hope that these women’s stories have complicated the notion of what it means to have experienced “sexual abuse” and what it means to be a “victim” or a “survivor.” And I
hope that they have demonstrated the importance of listening to not only the range of voices among those that have experienced abusive childhood sexual experiences, but also to the range of voices within each individual.
References


Volunteers Wanted for a Research Study

Name of Study: Coming to Terms with Abusive Childhood Sexual Experiences: A Qualitative Research Study

Purpose of Study: To investigate how women come to terms with abusive childhood sexual experiences.

For this research study, you will be asked to participate in one interview (approximately 1 to 2 hours), during which you will be asked to describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your experience of childhood sexual abuse.

To participate you should be...

- Female
- Over the age of 18
- A survivor of a sexually abusive childhood experience with a family member.

For information or to participate, contact the researcher:

Melissa Geib, M.A.
Psychology Department, Duquesne University
412-478-2206
Melissa.L.Geib@gmail.com
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Coming to Terms with Abusive Childhood Sexual Experiences: A Qualitative Research Study

INVESTIGATOR: Melissa Geib, M.A., 908 Center Ave. Verona, PA 15147 412-478-2206

ADVISOR: Russell Walsh, Ph.D. Psychology Department Phone: 412-396-5067

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the experience of coming to terms with childhood sexual abuse. Specifically, you will be asked to describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your experience of childhood sexual abuse, which will include how your understanding has changed over time and the influence of this understanding on your sense of self and your relationships with others. You will be asked to allow me to interview you. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. These are the only requests that will be made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: Participation in this study should not provide any more foreseeable risks or dangers than is associated with everyday living. However, if a participant
does become upset by recalling her experiences, a member of staff at the Duquesne University Psychology Clinic will be available during and immediately following the interviews for psychological support and will be able to provide a list of referrals to local counselors. Participants will make a significant contribution to the knowledge base of the field of Psychology, and may benefit from reflecting on their own experiences.

**COMPENSATION:** Participants will not be compensated nor will participation entail any monetary cost by participants.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All material identifying you or anyone you talk about will be de-identified and never appear on any research instruments or in the data analysis. All transcriptions will be de-identified and the audio-tapes will be destroyed immediately following transcription. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's home.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time and to withdraw your data if you wish.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Melissa Geib, the Principal Investigator (412-478-2206), Dr. Russell Walsh (412-396-5062), or Dr. Paul Richer, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board (412-396-6326).
Appendix C: Coded Transcripts

Mary’s Coded Interview

R: Alright, just put this in the middle of us. This is what I’m going to give you...
S: Ok…
R: This is what I’m going to read to you and you can read it to yourself and you can start wherever you want after reading this and eventually we’ll get to whatever important things we have to say.
S: OK.
R: So I’d like you to describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with childhood sexual abuse. I want you to please include how this understanding has changed over time and the influence of this understanding on your sense of self and your relationships with others. So I know that’s a vague, broad question. So you can start wherever you’d like.
S: Hmm. Well it’s taken me a long time to come to understand um the abuse because it was really...at the time I didn’t see it as abuse…I saw it as affection that I was not getting at home from parents that didn’t know how to show affection. So, it was really hard to say it was abuse…it wasn’t until I got older that I realized what it was.
So...and that I came to terms with...that it was abuse.
R: mm hmm.
S: And, um, so for the longest time I sort of like blanked it out or put myself to where it was…I didn’t…want to come to terms with what it really was.
R: Right.
S: So…and now that I have I blame myself a lot for what it was because...it was...I was craving the attention, I was craving the affection and everything like that, so...I let it go on.
R: mmm hmm.
S: So...and now that I have I know that...I know that it was wrong...so...and my sense of self-worth and everything was really—is still out of whack because of it. I mean that’s why I feel that I’m still not...how can I say it...still not worthy of the right kind of person. So..
R: Ok... Can I just back up a little bit...how old were you whenever you were...when it began?
S: I was 8 years old at the time.
R: Ok, you were 8...and how long did this go on for?
S: Um...until I was about 13 years old.
R: Who was it...it was a family member?
S: My brother.
R: Your brother, okay. How old was your brother whenever this started?
S: He was five years older than me.
R: Five years older, ok...so he was about 13 whenever this started—until he was about 18.
S: Yeah...so he was experiencing his sexual...at the time...I guess...
R: Yeah, I guess that was sort of puberty age whenever it was first beginning for him.
S: right...he was experimenting with me at the time. So...
R: Yeah.
S: Like I said, it was just… I don’t know… I guess we were both looking for affection from one another because we weren’t getting it from the source we needed it from.

R: Yeah, you said earlier… from your parents… so you were… you were raised by your mom and dad, were they both—

S: Well, when I was five our parents got divorced.

R: Ok.

S: But, see, my dad was not his dad… so he was actually my half-brother.

R: Ok, half-brother, same mom different dad?

S: Yeah, same mom but different dads… so… and… she wasn’t there a lot for us. She was working a lot trying to make things so we could stay… I guess together, I don’t know. But, and I sort of had to grow up to be the adult, too, because I had to take care of my sisters. My brother was more or less the reckless one— he got in trouble, he did whatever he wanted to do, so…

R: It’s this same brother that was the reckless one?

S: Yeah… my mom’s son. My dad’s son went to live with my dad.

R: Ok, so you and your brother stayed with your mom and then you have sisters too? Are they younger than you? That’s kind of how it sounded.

S: Yes. So I had to take care of them. I more or less became the extra mom…

R: Yeah, you’re the oldest girl…

S: Yeah… so, I had to take care of the house, make sure they were taken care of and everything like that… plus go to school, make sure my stuff was taken care of too.

R: Right.

S: And I guess, him seeing that… I sort of more or less became the adult for him too and he became the adult… but not the adult… I don’t know.

R: Yeah, it’s confusing.

S: It is! That’s why I say, I don’t know what his role was in it and what he saw me as… but it was like every time when we were alone… he was always, he always found time to make sure, you know, there was affection. There was the sexual things and everything like that.

R: Hmm.

S: And I mean, yeah, we needed it… I guess because we needed each other… because we couldn’t get it anywhere else…

R: Affection?

S: Right… but I could see how wrong it is and how… because now I look for that stuff now (tearful)…

R: That kind of affection

S: Yeah… and sometimes it just hurts… (unintelligible, tearfulness)

R: Yeah…

S: so I don’t know (tearful)

R: It sounds like it was and still is extremely confusing to try to figure it out.

S: It is, it is, so I don’t know… (tearful)

R: It’s ok, it’s alright.

S: Like I said, it’s hard because I was married too and we had a hard time with it.

R: mm hmm. When did you get married?

S: Well, we were together for ten years. But we were married, literally, for only a month. (laughter). So… that was the hard part. But he had cheated on me.
R: Ok.
S: So, I guess that was his idea (unintelligible). But I guess he couldn’t get over the fact that I still had problems with...(sigh)...sometimes the affection and things like that, whereas the sex—I had no problem with the sex, I wanted the sex, sometimes the affection was the problem.
R: And when you say—I know these things are hard to put into words—when you say affection, what kinds of things do you mean? Can you identify what you mean by that?
S: Well, holding....the comfort...like afterwards...
R: After sex
S: Yeah...and just like, the cuddling, stuff like that.
R: so you didn’t want that, that was not...
S: yeah. Not...even like being out in public, a lot of guys, they don’t like that stuff like the hand-holding, stuff like that. He did. I couldn’t stand it.
R: You were the one who didn’t like that.
S: Yeah, I couldn’t take that...nowadays, now, ok...I can take it every once in a while.
R: Ok, it’s a little better, but it’s still...
S: Yeah, it’s still hard...especially like in large crowds and things like that. Because then I think everyone’s looking at me and ...I think I’m being singled out for something.
R: Uh huh.
S: So (laughing).
R: You think you are being singled out whenever you are getting affection.
S: People will see that I’m getting affection.
R: So people see the affection and for some reason they single you out..
S: Yeah, because I would get it back then and I see it as something that’s wrong because we always did it behind closed doors.
R: You and your brother.
S: yes...because to me it was something, you know, we had to hide it.
R: Like a secret?
S: Yeah, so that’s how I saw it.
R: And you, you mentioned a couple of times that there was a lot of affection...you mean, a lot of this kind of cuddling, holding, that sort of thing?
S: It was and it wasn’t. I mean...it was something like, you know, we would pass each other and we would you know, slip our hands...in that context...you know, or, you know...we would touch each other on the hip or something like that...something that no one else would see that we would know about
R: Ok...some gesture, something that you knew...
S: That we knew that no one else would know.
R: Ok.
S: yeah, and then, you know, maybe like have a cigarette together. You know, he started me smoking, things like that, um, you know, a beer, sipping a beer together because we started drinking together (laughter) you know, that kind of things, you know, or staying up late watching a horror movie together, you know, having the bowl of popcorn on my lap so instead of going for the popcorn, he would...do something else (laughter)
R: Go for something else...
S: It was, something like that, so...
R: Right, so things that would look ok to outsiders who didn’t know what was going on, but to you, you knew it indicated something more…another level of a relationship there…
S: Exactly, right. You know, and that was the thing. So, but I mean…now that I know it was wrong, but still to a part of me…on another level, I still say…yeah, it was wrong…but, yeah we were giving each other something that nobody else was giving us.
R: yeah, mm hmm, so part of you says, “that’s wrong,” but part of you says, “it was needed…I didn’t have it anywhere else.”
S: It kept us from going, maybe crazy, maybe…emotionally blind to other people…or not caring about people…however you want to say…like nowadays like I want to help people. If I would have been, like, how, say…be emotionally blank, like I see how my sister is—she doesn’t give a damn about anyone but herself—you know…if I see that…if I would be like that instead of wanting to help people, wanting to care about people, yeah…crying when I see like the commercials for these animals and things like that, stuff like that. And the earthquake victims…wanting to donate the money and things like that…and donating my help and stuff like that. I’m thinking, how can people not feel? And I see her and she doesn’t give a damn—it’s all about I want, I want, I want. I’m thinking, you don’t care? Maybe that’s because you have no emotions…you are what…I tried to give you the emotions and you didn’t want them. Because I was…I had tried to give her what we had…but on a level of not what—the sexual…the hug, you know.
R: ok, you tried to give your younger sister um, affection that you weren’t getting from mom or parents, but without the sexual part of it that you had with your brother.
S: Right, you know…hugs, say the hair ruffles, the pat on your back when they did good…things like that. But, it didn’t seem like it did any good. I guess they needed it from the parent…I don’t know. Whereas I got it, like, I guess from (unintelligible)
R: Well, there’s a couple of things there. It sounds like, one, you kind of framed what happened as being, um, necessary for your emotional development and, um, has kept you like connected, I guess, in a sense—to other people, like that way.
S: I guess. Because I tried, like I said, I did a lot of reading, I did a lot of research myself on it, like I said, I blame myself a lot too. I mean, oh I blamed him a lot too…oh, I still hate him a lot for it…because I blamed him, I blamed myself…I still won’t talk to him. Because he denies it ever happened now.
R: ok.
S: And…so that’s why I hate him for it…because he won’t even acknowledge it. And…
R: so if he were to acknowledge it, you might not…hate him. It’s the fact that he is disowning that whole experience.
S: Yeah.
R: Years of experiences.
S: Yeah. And later on too.
R: Yeah.
S: Because when he came back around too, in the picture, he tried again.
R: Oh. When was that…how many years…
S: That was back when I was in my twenties.
R: Ok..
S: Because he went away for some time because he got in trouble with the law...because once we stopped when he was back...eighteen...he got in trouble with the law, disappeared out of my life completely...didn’t even say goodbye...I didn’t even know what happened, I thought he just...upped and went away with some girl or something like that. Because no one ever said anything, mom never said anything about it...anything like that.

R: Just disappeared one day.

S: Just disappeared one day...and then when I was in my twenties all of a sudden he just showed up out of the blue the one day. At the front door.

R: Did he--

S: Didn’t know he knew where we moved to or anything like that...I opened the door, I was about ready to slam the door back in his face again...

R: so it sounds like you were already angry by that point

S: Yeah

R: In your twenties when you saw him.

S: yeah, because I had gone through that by that time...you know, putting it behind me and then coming back to face with it because my mom had found a boyfriend and he started doing it...

R: Oh, ok...

S: So, I had to go through it all over again...in my teens again...of, the abuse with him..

R: And that was your mom’s boyfriend at that time?

S: yeah, he put me through it...and everything like that. Touching me and things like that...and...I just couldn’t deal with that.

R: yeah.

S: So, and if I would have said anything to her...she would have just said, “he wouldn’t do that to you”...or “you’re egging him on.”

R: so she wouldn’t have acknowledged your side or believed you

S: Right, she wouldn’t have believed it...so I wasn’t even gonna go there with that. And, so when he showed up everything just sorta blew up at me...and he couldn’t figure out what I was so upset about. And he finally cornered me the one day, and I said...it all just came out and I just let it all out...I mean, everything, and he finally cornered my mom’s boyfriend...and said, “if you ever touch her again, you ain’t gonna have anything left to touch her with. And then you can explain to mom why you have nothing.”

R: So you told your brother about what your mom’s boyfriend was doing...

S: yeah, but he wouldn’t tell mom either because then he would have to explain to mom why he was threatening him.

R: Hmm...why he was so upset about it? Meaning that it was because you were his?

S: Yeah, but also because he was my big brother, but...us...

R: Right, so there was more to it than just that...

S: Right, there was just so much more to it...or why I was even talking to him about what was going on and not her...and...so...but, then he, he even made promises that he wasn’t leaving again, that he was sticking around and then he disappeared again...and it just all started up again...then I left again. So...

R: You left that time?
S: I left. I was just like, I’m done, by that time I met my soon-to-be husband. My mom was pissed at me then.
R: when you left?
S: Yeah…because I was taking care of her.
R: Oh, ok…
S: I was making good money; I was taking care of her. I was paying the bills…
R: Mmm hmm. You were taking care of her, sort of like you were…
S: I was taking care of her, I was taking care of the kids, my sisters, by the time…everything, you know, so…it was just…but I mean, I had to go through everything all over again, him leaving again, what her boyfriend was doing to me, so I mean I just had to go get my head back on straight again. And then I had to deal…and then, meet my husband…which he helped me through everything.
R: Oh, ok. How did he help you?
S: Well, he let me talk it out to him…he didn’t hold anything…he didn’t hold like, say, a grudge or anything…he didn’t like hold it against me…he didn’t blame me…he didn’t say it was my fault, you know…he didn’t say it was like, I egged it on or I asked for it to happen or anything like that. He was like, it just happens sometimes, there’s no…reasoning or anything like that.
R: right.
S: it just happens. He says, you know, you both needed affection, it just went a step farther, he should have known better, he was older than you. He should not have taken it to the sexual level. You know, the hugs were fine. But…
R: When…how, um…trying to get the wording straight…when did he start taking it to the next level? Was that something that happened immediately…was there this sort of affection before taking it to the next level, or…how did that…what was the course of that?
S: I know when I was in third grade we started with the hugs. And I guess it was before I turned 8 because I remember it was summer vacation…I was…it was when…I can remember the day clearly…my mom and sisters went out, I stayed home because I wanted to read a book because I remember I was sitting down, I was laying downstairs on the floor in the living room…I had cartoons or something on, but I was reading my book. I was on my stomach on the floor, my legs were up, I was kicking my legs and I was reading the book. All of a sudden the door opened and he walked in. I was wearing shorts and I guess, like, one of those like tube top type things that were really in the fashion back then (laughing)…
R: You even remember what you were wearing…
S: yeah…and he’s like, ‘hey short stop’ or something like that…and I’m like, ‘hey’…and he’s like ‘where is everyone,’ and I’m like…”out.” He’s like, ‘oh what are you doing?” I’m like, ‘reading.’ He’s like, ‘oh ok.” He’s like, ‘what’s in the kitchen?” I’m like, ‘I don’t know, go see.’ (laughing). He’s like, ‘oh ok.’ He walked by and then all of a sudden next thing I know, he’s bending down and hitting me on my butt. And I’m like, ‘stop it!” He’s like, “no!” I’m like ‘yeah, I’m reading here,’ ya know. And then he starts tickling me because I’ve always been ticklish on my sides. He’s like, ‘no ones around’…he’s like, you know, it’s…”we can be affectionate now.” I’m like, ‘I wanna read George, leave me alone.
R: Mm hmm.
S: I’m like, ‘I want to finish this.’ He’s like ‘come on, let’s play.’ I’m like, ‘no.’ So all of a sudden he’s down on his knees and he’s over me… and I always had my hair long and everything and he’s holding my hair back and then next thing I know, he’s got his um, like his ear and his mouth… his nose and his mouth up on my ear and my thing…and he’s like, ‘what do you got on?’ I’m like, ‘nothing.’ He’s like, ‘yes you do.’ I’m like, ‘no I don’t.’ He’s like, ‘what did you do, take a bath?’ I’m like, ‘no I didn’t take a bath’ (laughing). He’s like, ‘you were in mom’s perfume weren’t you?’ I say, ‘no I wasn’t in mom’s perfume’ … I’m like, ‘you know I’d get my ass smacked if I was in mom’s perfume.’ He’s like, ‘you were in mom’s perfume.’ ‘I was not in mom’s perfume… I know better than to be in mom’s perfume.’ All of a sudden, he said, he’s leaning down on top of me (quieter)…and I’m feeling him…and I’m like, ‘what are you doing?’ He’s like… he’s like… ‘I need you.’ I’m like, ‘what do you mean you need me?’ He’s like, ‘I need you.’ And he’s like, ‘we’ll go upstairs.’ I’m like, ‘mom and everyone will be home soon.’ He’s like, ‘I don’t care.’ I’m like, ‘George, no.’ He’s like, ‘I don’t care, let’s go upstairs.’ So he got up on his knees and he pulled me up. Next thing I know I’m in his arms and he’s carrying me up the stairs. And somehow we’re up in his room. The door’s locked. He’s got me undressed… his clothes were off. And he’s touching me. And then he’s laying on the bed and he’s like, ‘touch me’. And I’m like… He’s like… ‘just touch me.’ And I mean, he’s like… ‘it’s alright, you can touch me.’ I was shaking and I’m shaking my head and… he’s like, ‘you see what you do to me.’ But I was so curious too, at the same time. Because I never, ever seen anything like that before. (silence) And somehow he had me get on top of him. And I passed out. I know I was in pain and I passed out.

R: You lost consciousness?
S: yeah, I mean… I mean, I was screaming in pain and I passed out. I mean, when I woke up he was cleaning me up, there was blood on the cloth. And he was saying, ‘he’s sorry, he’s sorry, he shouldn’t have.’ He didn’t know it was going to be like that (sigh). I mean, and he’s kissing me… and he’s holding me and he’s like, I promise you it won’t happen again. And then I find out later… I… much, much later… I won’t ever have children because of it.

R: He had damaged something.
S: Yeah.

R: And you can never have children.
S: Because of that first time.

R: You were only, you were 8 at that time?
S: Yeah. (heavy breathing). Yeah, so that’s why a lot of hate there, with him.

R: Ok, so it’s not only that he sort of, that he got in trouble and left and the confusing feelings, but also the fact that you can never have children.

S: yeah.

R: Yeah. That’s understandable hatred.

S: Yeah, the one thing I’ve always wanted.

R: Mmm. Yeah, it sounds like you were a little mom, even at 8.

S: Yeah… [God]… blessed me somehow, but not in another way. So.. (silence) (Unintelligible).

R: I’m sorry?
S: I said, it’s just not fair.
R: Yeah. Yeah, you’re right…it’s not fair. Something was decided at such a young age…8. You can never have children.
S: Yeah. I keep telling myself, maybe in another lifetime. (silence) I deal with this, I deal with my depression, too.
R: yeah.
S: So, I can deal with it (laughing)
R: Yeah. You certainly have, for a long time.
S: yeah, I have. But everyday is another day.
R: Yeah. For better or worse, every day is a new day.
S: and everyday I wake up…it’s a good day (laughing).
R: Yeah…a lot of people don’t get that today, so (laughing). So after that, you said he was apologetic
S: He was, because he didn’t know…
R: Right. He knew more than you, presumably, but he probably didn’t know that that was going to effect…
S: I assume he read it in books or magazines or whatever, so…
R: And he promised it wasn’t going to happen again…but, it did…
S: Yeah. Yeah, every chance we had, being alone it would turn into something. I mean, he was in his sexual…however you want to say it (laughing)
R: Yeah…his height, 13 to 18…that’s…
S: Yeah…so.
R: And you, it sounds like…and I know this is kind of…difficult to remember or know what you were thinking or feeling at the time…many years ago, but it sounds like when you were describing that…you had some sort of sense that it was…wrong, or bad…or I don’t know what word to use…you sort of said, it sounds like you were initially reluctant or hesitant to go through with this. I know you said, “but at the same time you’re also curious.”
S: I was curious, because it was something totally new; something different… I mean…who isn’t, when you’re seeing something that you’ve never seen before. It’s like…seeing a painting for the first time that…no one else has ever seen before. And you want to… (sigh)…look at it, and experience it…and, see every detail of it for yourself.
R: Yeah.
S: So, it’s like…what do you wanna…you do wanna touch it, but you don’t at the same time because you don’t want to mar it, you don’t wanna…ruin it. (laughing). So…it just seems…I don’t know, cause children, I know when I was a child, curiosity is…that was my biggest thing. Because like I said, knowledge. All I wanted to do was read back then, to get my knowledge. I read everything, so, seeing that…had to, seeing anything. Because I used to sit under our willow tree back then, just thinking about things. Looking at leaves, looking at blades of grass, and wondering what it would be like to watch it grow.
R: Hmm. Wow.
S: you know, thinking about like…when the dinosaurs walked the earth, what it looked like back then. You gotta imagine that…what the sky looked like back then, the stars, how many stars were back then.
R: Sounds like you were a very inquisitive…person…child. Thinking a lot, wondering a lot.
S: yeah. And you couldn’t ask the questions back then, because my parents…
R: About sex? That sort of thing?
S: Right…I mean, even just asking about, like, my grandparents. My grandparents were dead before I was born.
R: Oh, ok.
S: So I couldn’t talk about them. I don’t even know anything about my great-grandparents. I don’t know a thing about any of them.
R: Ok, not just a “taboo” subject like sex, but it sounds like anything…lots of things were not discussed.
S: About my parents before they were married…why my parents got married…if they were in love…you know, just that they…as soon as my one sister was born, they got divorced. They hate each other…you know, they can’t even stand to be in the same room…when I got married, it was like, I wanted them both to walk me down the aisle. My mom was like, well I ain’t going to the wedding if I have to do that…if he’s going…it’s either, I’m gonna walk you down the aisle, or he is walking you down the aisle…it’s not going to be both of us. And I’m like, it’s my wedding, it’s what I want, isn’t it? Not what you want, not what he wants, but what I want is what we’re going to do.
R: Their needs took precedence.
S: exactly, you know. So I had to bend to them, as usual.
R: And yet, you said, um, after your…how many years younger is your sister…
S: Three years below me and then five years below you.
R: Ok, so three and five. And then you said when you were about five or so, your parents got divorced? Is that right?
S: Yeah.
R: And then, you stayed with your mom, did you have contact with your dad? What was the situation with him?
S: yes. Actually, um, since I was five years old, my dad said…well my parents said to me and said…ok, pick who you want to live with, me or your mom
R: And you were five?
S: Yeah.
R: So, already, not only at your wedding however many years later, but also when you were five you had to decide…
S: I had to decide for us three girls…I had to pick who we wanted to live with.
R: Oh, ok…so you weren’t even just picking for yourself, but also for your sisters. Your daughter…or (laughter) your sisters. I think I keep referring to them as your daughters because of the way you mothered them. Your sisters.
S: I had to pick for all three of us who we wanted to live with.
R: Ok.
S: I mean, this is how my family…this is how screwed up our family is. And then, you know, so if I would have said my dad, then my mom would have hated us. So, I picked my mom thinking, ok, you know…at least you know my dad has to pay her to keep us. This is at five years old, I’m thinking all this stuff.
R: Thinking through all of the consequences of your decision, or what’s gonna happen.
S: Yeah. I had to make this decision at that moment…not knowing all this stuff…and they still had to go through the divorce proceeding first…still had to meet the judge and
everything like that. I had to go up for the judge and still say, I want to live my parents...my mom. And he had to ask me, are you sure this? What you want to do even though your dad...Yeah.

R: I think the rules may have changed a little bit (laughing). I don't know if a five year old could decide that now.

S: Yeah.

R: Right, so you chose your mom. You stayed with your mom and then, did you visit with your dad?

S: Yeah, he had visitation rights. We got to see him every other weekend. He had to pick us up everything other weekend.

R: Ok, so your sisters have the same father then? You all three have the same father.

S: Yeah, we all three had the same father.

R: It was your brother that had a different father. So, he didn’t go with you when you went to visit with your father.

S: No, we had our other brother when we saw him.

R: Right...his dad...that was his dad.

S: And actually, he killed himself when I was in...when I was 13.

R: Your brother? Wow.

S: My dad’s son, Mark.

R: How old was he?

S: He was 18...

R: Ok, so he was about the same age as your other brother...they were pretty similar in age.

S: yeah, actually he had a son and a wife when he died...his son was a year old when he died. Actually...that was something that I still have problems with. Because I don’t think he killed himself. I think he was killed. But...nobody wants to listen to what I say. (sigh). So..

R: Yeah, no one wants to listen to what you say. You voiced the concern earlier about your mom wouldn’t believe you if you had said something...

S: Well, they say he killed himself with a rifle down on the railroad tracks in Sharpsburg...and I had talked to him the night before about...they said they found him in the morning...the morning after I had talked to him. And, we were talking about his son’s birthday coming up...his first birthday coming up. His wedding anniversary coming up and everything that went on...and he was happy, you know...everything coming up...his new job that he was going to be starting and everything like that...because we had always been close and everything...and...with me and my depression, he did not sound like he wanted to kill himself or anything like that. I didn’t know. I know the signs because I had tried a couple times to kill myself.

R: Prior to that? You were 13 at this point?

S: I was 13 at that point.

R: And you had tried to kill yourself prior to that?

S: yeah.

R: Ok.

S: So, I mean...we knew each other pretty well and...

R: So he didn’t sound the way you would think someone would sound the way...
And he knew that I knew...he knew better than to try to hide something from me, so...and, no, he, like I said...we were joking...we even joked about something else. Actually about my one sister because she was complaining about being on the phone with him because she wanted to talk to him and he says, 'well tell her to go dry up and suck on a lemon' (laughing) and I says 'no you tell her that one because I get my teeth rammed down my throat' (laughing). So, we were joking about that one and um, he says 'ok, I'll tell her when I get done talking with you.' I says, 'ok you tell her that one' (laughing). I says, just make sure I'm out of the house when you tell her. (laughter) I says 'ok well I'm gonna go get my cigarettes' and I says 'ok Mike, I love ya.' I says 'I'll talk to you tomorrow'...he says, 'yeah I'll talk to you tomorrow.' I said, be sure you give Aaron a big kiss for me.

R: That was his son?
S: yeah...he says, 'you know I give him a big kiss every night from you., I says, 'ok'...so, I give my sister the phone and I says, 'I'm goin to get my cigarettes I'll be back in about a half hour'...I says, 'don't you give him no hard time either' (laughter). And, so I didn't think anything of it and the next thing I know, in the morning, well actually in the afternoon at school, I'm getting pulled out of school—out of class—and I'm being told this...and I, I mean I start freaking. I'm like, no, no, no...and they're like, what do you mean no? And I'm like, no—there's no way. And they're like, well you're shocked. And I'm telling my dad 'no' and my dad's not listening to me and I'm like 'well, did you talk to the police?' 'Did you see if his fingerprints are on the gun?' On the trigger and everything like that? And I'm like, 'where was he found?' He's like, well he was found in Sharpsburg and I'm like, 'the cops are dirty in Sharpsburg and you know damn well that'. I'm like, 'they didn't even check to see if his fingerprints are on there, they are just makin it look like it.' I'm like, and 'you know damn well he doesn't even live in Sharpsburg, he lives up in Millvale.' I said, so why would he be in Sharpsburg, you know.' I says, so don't even gimme this.' So...his mom and sister came from New York for the funeral. I couldn't even sit...I had to sit like three cars back...couldn't even sit in the limo. So, I was more or less like, the step...step. So, but...R: Oh, so that's another big thing. Whether he killed himself or was killed...that's another big trauma.

S: Yeah.
R: So you said, um, so you had tried to kill yourself prior to that age...you mentioned you were depressed, so you felt depression prior to the age of 13. When did that begin? Can you identify when you...
S: I would say about 11...it started with depression.
R: Ok.
S: yeah, so I've been ill with my depression since about 11 years old. I think I started with trying to kill myself about...yeah, about 12...I think I first started taking pills about then, yeah. My first suicide attempt. I always come out.
R: Ok, ok..you always manage to find your way back out of depression.
S: Yeah, especially the one...the last one. I made it. [God] won't let me get past it! He stops me every time. I'd taken all my pills...I was out for a week.
R: How long ago was this?
S: Uhmm 2005. Yeah, 2005. No…no, no, no, no 2007. 2007 I'd taken all my pills…was living by myself, put on my dress I wanted to be buried in, laid down on my bed, swallowed all my pills, passed out. The next thing I know, I woke up a week later.

R: Hmmmm. In a hospital?
S: No! In my bed!
R: In your bed? Oh, ok…so no one had found you…no one had noticed…you were just…you went unconscious for a week and came back, all on your own?
S: Yeah…He wouldn’t let me!
R: God you mean, wouldn’t let you die
S: Yeah…apparently I had a purpose somewhere.
R: You mentioned earlier about this feeling and it seems kind of relevant here…this feeling of still not feeling worthy…it sounds like this is something that’s been going on…even in your comment, “God thinks you have a purpose,” but it doesn’t sound like you necessarily believe you have a purpose.
S: (laughter) Yeah, I don’t think I do. But apparently He thinks I have, because I have yet to see what the purpose is.
R: You have yet to see what the purpose is.
S: yeah.
R: What do you do for a living?
S: Actually, right now I don’t do anything.
R: What kind of things have you done? What kind of jobs have you had?
S: Actually, I’ve done a lot of retail management, production management, food service management (laughter). I’ve always worked from the bottom on up…
R: Worked your way up?
S: Yeah, I mean…even in retail, I’ve started out as a cashier and worked up to management. Production, working from the bottom on up. Food service (laughter). Flipping burgers, you know, making sandwiches, cleaning dining room and working my way up to, you know, management. It’s just something…I have a knack with people, things like that. Um, I would love to get into…community service, um…
R: Yeah, you mentioned helping people before.
S: Um, even…especially like, giving around, on a task force…cleaning up neighborhoods…things like that. Helping…helping the neighborhoods, things like that.
R: Mm hmm.
S: Because I see so much potential…especially in like the area, down around in the uptown section…and, just, the garbage. And it just makes me sick that this stuff…it could be so much better.
R: yeah.
S: Not that, you know, it’s just an eye sore. It’s just. And we let it go. Like, yesterday I was walking and I had so many people stop and ask me for change and I finally got to the point where I’m like, you know what, I’m no better off than you are—how about if you spare me some? And the one lady says, you don’t have to get smart. And I says, ‘I’m not getting smart, but you are asking me for change…do you know how my situation is?’ I says, ‘I’m no better off than you and you’re asking me for something…I’m not any better off than you are.’ I says, ‘do you know if I live on the streets? Do you know where my bed is?’ I says, ‘so how can you ask me for something?’ I says, ‘do you know if I have a job?’ I says, ‘do you know if I’m on welfare?’ I says, ‘so you can’t be asking
someone for something if you don’t know what their situation is.’ I says, ‘so don’t.’ I says, ‘especially in today’s economy, you can’t be asking someone for something that they don’t have.’ I says, ‘with everyone losing jobs today, cut backs the way it is’…I says, ‘uh uh.’ I says, ‘we need to be helping each other, not hurting each other.’ And that’s what I want to see. (Laughter).
R: Ok, well that sounds like a purpose
S: (laughter). Yeah, maybe that’s my purpose.
R: yeah, it sounds like a bit of a purpose.
S: (laughter)
R: How far did you go in school?
S: High school.
R: Ok, you graduated high school?
S: Yeah. Actually, I had um a scholarship….but, it didn’t cover everything and my sisters wanted to go to school. And I knew, with everything we couldn’t afford to send me and my two sisters all to school. So I opted to go to work right out of school. And I figured, well if I went to work, then I could go to work and then maybe go to CCAC, something like that down the line a little bit and then, once they got—they could do what they wanted to do. Well, once my sister graduated she went to school (sarcastically) half a semester…dropped out! We paid all this money…pissed me off.
R: You gave up your opportunity so that..
S: I gave up my opportunity for her, yeah. My other sister. Ok, she graduates. Ok, she’s going to go to school. She enrolls and everything...gets all this money, all the grants. What does she do? She gets pregnant. (laughter). I’m like, ooookkkk…there goes another one wasted. I’m like, ok I’m going to go to school now…we can’t transfer the credits into my name (laughter). I’m like, ok, fine. I’m like, I’ll apply the grants. No, you make too much money! (sigh). Ok, fine.
R: A whole lot of obstacles.
S: I say, I’ll just take a class. A class I can’t take because it’s at the same time I’m working! (laughter) it’s the only time it’s offered. So I’m like, I’m screwed (laughter)
R: So its back to working your way up, huh. Your sisters…this seems implicit in what you were saying, but I’m not sure. The sisters…this relationship you had with your brother, that did not happen with your sisters?
S: no.
R: Just you.
S: Just me. No. He had nothing to do with them, actually. He really wanted nothing to do with them two. I don’t know why, it’s just…I mean, he was, I guess, friendly with them…but he wasn’t to the point where, buddy buddy with them or anything like that. It was like a chore to him if he had to take them places or anything like that.
R: Ok.
S: I know my one sister, she was in…she had to join girlscouts. And when he started driving, he had to pick her up and take her to girlscouts. And it was like, what do you mean I gotta take her or pick her up…can’t she walk? Can’t she get a ride from somebody else? (whispering) I’m like, just do it, ok. (laughter)
R: Ok, so he really didn’t have either the chummy relationship or the sexual relationship that he had with you.
S: right.
R: Ok. And what about you...you said at one point, um, by your twenties when he had come back, that you had had to go through this again with your mother's boyfriend...and, so, when would you say this sort of...your thinking about what had happened really changed? It sounds like initially there was confusion, you know, it's kind of not right, but it's also...curious, needing affection...so when did it change to this position now of I hate him?  
S: Hmmm.  
R: Although it sounds like you’re still able to recognize, or you still recognize some...I hesitate to use the word benefits...but benefits or good things that came out of that relationship?  
S: Yeah.  Well yes and no.  I mean I still...there’s a lot of hate, I mean, tons and tons of hate.  I mean, he taught me a lot of things that (laughter)...lot of sexual things (laughter) I might not have ever learned (laughter).  
R: Definitely advanced your knowledge in that area.  
S: Oh yeah (laughter).  So...because.  Learning some of those things really...I don’t know if they outweigh the bad.  That’s the only thing.  
R: And the bad...what is...I mean, I have my own idea of what the bad is, but what is bad for you?  
S: Not being able to have children.  The abuse.  Just the...the mental anguish itself...that I put myself through everyday.  
R: Yeah.  
S: I mean, I can probably say, you know, I shouldn’t have to put myself through it because I know I shouldn’t blame myself for it, but I do...because I shouldn’t blame myself.  
R: Yeah.  
S: But I still do.  
R: So you know on one level you’re not to blame, but on another level you still blame yourself.  
S: Yeah.  
R: What is it....when you blame yourself what do you say to yourself?  I mean, is there a reasoning behind this blame, like, umm...  
S: Because, well, like I say, you know how they always say it takes two?  You know, also, you know, a lot of times...a woman raped is not consenting even though she got off on it because it still stimulates her no matter what because of it...  
R: Right, it’s pleasurable sexually  
S: Right.  
R: because it just is...that’s biology, physiology, whatever...  
S: exactly.  But, you know...because at times, yeah, I mean I welcomed it.  And I shouldn’t have because I didn’t know it was wrong.  And so, me, that’s what I’m blaming myself for (tearful)  
R: For welcoming it.  
S: Yeah (tearful).  Because I didn’t know it was wrong.  
R: It sounds like—and I could be wrong...it sounds like at that point, this word abuse that we use now didn’t apply then.  
S: No.  
R: When you were 8 to 13, the word abuse isn’t what was coming to mind.
S: No…because there was no one telling you it’s wrong…there was no one saying, this shouldn’t be happening. There’s no one saying, well, no one should be touching you at this time. You know, no one should be doing these things to your body because you’re too fragile, you’re too young…it isn’t until you get older that these things should be happening.

R: Right, it sounds like, especially in your family not a whole lot was said.

S: Right, nothing was said. No one even talked to about like when your menstrual cycle started…it wasn’t until my stepmother, when I started bleeding, she says, oh no one ever old you about this, huh? I’m like, no. She’s like, oh we need to start talking about this then. And I’m like, talking about what? Am I hurt? Is something wrong, do I need to go to the hospital? She’s like, no no this is something every woman goes through. And she’s like, I’m surprised you haven’t had it before now…you know, you’re 17 years old.

R: Oh, so it didn’t start until you were 17?

S: Yeah, because of the damage that I had…that, you know.

R: Right, ok.

S: My sister…they started younger but because of my damage I didn’t start until then. You know, going to the gynecologist…I didn’t know anything about it. They didn’t tell me I was going to have one…they didn’t even think I was going to have one. My mom didn’t even take me to one. And that’s when my stepmom found out that I was damaged.

R: Oh, ok. And then, did you tell her, or how did that happen?

S: No because they couldn’t even tell her that there was damage…because it was the doctor privilege. I was still considered a minor, but still they couldn’t tell her…because I was still--

R: You were old enough to keep that information confidential.

S: Yes.

R: And so, did you ever…you never told anyone?

S: I didn’t tell them until I was over the age of 21.

R: And then you did tell your…

S: I told my stepmom who I swore to secrecy about it. So…because I never wanted anyone to know about it. So…and she kept it secret.

R: She did…ok.

S: She’s like, yeah if I tell your dad, your dad’s going to go ballistic. Even though…he still…he still probably would have went ballistic about it. But knowing him, just the way he felt about my mom’s son…he would have went ballistic on him.

R: Ok. And then…so you don’t have any relationship with your brother at this point?

S: No…none whatsoever.

R: Yeah…you said he denies it.

S: He denies everything.

R: He denies it happened?

S: Yeah.

R: Ok, so at one point you obviously addressed it to him…or something like that.

S: Yeah, actually the one time he came…well, when my mom was really ill…because I went back and started taking care of her…she had Alzheimer’s. He came around to say goodbye to her…and his wife tried to get us to talk. She didn’t know what was going on.

R: Oh, ok…she just knew that you weren’t talking…she didn’t know about
S: No, she thought she was going to be smart...trying to get us to sit down and talk...and I told her in no uncertain terms, you need to keep your nose out of things where you don't belong unless you want to find out things that you don't know about your husband. And she's like, what don't I know? And I says, 'well why don't you ask him and when he tells you, then you can find out.' I says, 'otherwise, keep your nose out of things.' I says, 'when he's ready to tell you, he'll tell you.' I says, 'otherwise just go talk to your mother-in-law...if she knows who you are...’ I says, 'go back to where you live. Mind your own business.' I says, 'I bet that started a whole different kettle of worms for her...and him.’ I hope it did. Because...she didn't need to be sticking her nose in where it didn’t belong. Because he knows what he needs to say and what he needs to do. If he doesn't have the guts to say it, then he doesn’t need to be coming around.

R: What is it that you would like him to say?

S: He wants to apologize...and I need him to acknowledge it.....instead of denying and just walking away and saying, I’m nuts, I’m crazy and it never happened. That’s what hurts...that I’m deluded...you know, I know damn well what happened...it can’t be in my head...I know that.

R: Was there a time that you struggled with that? Not knowing whether or not that was the truth of what happened?

S: Yes. Oh yeah! Oh yeah...big time. Except for when he came back and did that...I know damn well. Because at first, I did, I really did have a hard time. But when he came back and confronted my mom’s boyfriend I knew damn well it was true.

R: Because of the way he was acting...you knew something else was behind that.

S: Yeah. (silence) because he wasn’t possessive of anyone else but me.

R: Mm hmm.

S: And I still have the gift he gave me. Well, I had it.

R: what gift was that?

S: He brought me back a necklace with my birthstone and his initial.

R: Ok. This was when he came back when you were in your twenties?

S: (nod)

R: Ok.

S: Yeah, cause his middle initial and my first initial is the same...and our birthdays are the same month.

R: Ok, same birth stone.

S: so...we’re just ten days apart. But no one would understand it but me and him.

R: So another sort of secretive thing that an outsider wouldn’t think much of; but you two would know it means more.

S: Yeah.

R: It sounds like that...that sort of...at that age, at that point...that that sort of secretive thing was nice in a way, or something that was wanted...some sort of specialness or something there.

S: yeah. (silence)

R: You’re shaking your head...still so many mixed feelings?

S: It’s just so hard because I still sort em out myself...and I still try not to think about a lot of it and...I do at times because a lot of times the rage boils up and the sorrow boils up and...I find myself crying a lot.

R: yeah.
S: When a lot of times I just want to scream and yell and I want to hit him.
R: Mm hmm.
S: I just want to confront him and...
R: It sounds like you really want to be heard at least, make some sort of impact...
S: Yeah, because I don’t think he realizes what he did...you know. And, how much damage he has done...just even by denying it. That’s the worst problem.
R: Ok...because, you said, it makes you feel deluded.
S: Yeah...and it even makes me feel dirtier.
R: Hmm, dirtier...how so?
S: because...by...with him not acknowledging it, it makes it feel like I was a whore, or I was someone that...soiled myself to get what I needed. That I asked for it. That I needed it more than he wanted to give it. You know. Sort of like, I paid for it...where he didn’t want to give it.
R: Mm hmm. By denying it he’s really denying that there was consent...that it was mutually rewarding...and probably initiated by him but then mutually rewarded and...
S: Yes. Or more...enticed by him.
R: Enticed, ok. He at least piqued your curiosity and...
S: yeah.
R: made the intiation. You were...you, um, you mentioned you were married once. You were together for ten years and then married for a short time. Was that the only time you were married?
S: (nod) Yes. I haven’t been able to find...I mean, I’ve had a lot of relationships, but nothing has lasted long other than that.
R: That was the longest. So...I know you mentioned that it’s difficult with the affection...not actual sex...but affection, um, is very difficult for you.
S: Yes.
R: Are there other ways in which you think these early experiences impacted your relationships with other people?
S: Sometimes expressing myself with them too, it’s like...being subservient with them, um, not knowing how to be aggressive...umm, because you want...sometimes they want you to be...want you to be the one making love to them...and it’s hard to.
R: Mmm hmm. So, it’s hard for you to initiate that...
S: Yeah...so. I don’t know. It’s just really, really hard sometimes because I find myself just like, I find myself being back...being 8 years old again, sometimes. Being that small child...at times. I mean, yeah, I can sometimes put it behind me, but there’s times when...(sigh)...I don’t want to say this. When I’m the shy person, where I just want them to be the aggressor, or I want them to take the advantage because that’s...how I was back then.
R: Your brother was the aggressor. Like we were just saying, he’s the one who enticed...
S: Initiated, yeah
R: initiated the experiences.
S: Yeah. You know, so. I guess it’s easier for me that way.
R: Yeah. It’s certainly more familiar, it sounds like.
S: Yeah.
R: And are you currently in a relationship?
S: No.
R: Ok.
S: No, not at all. No all I seem to do is butt heads with people.
R: Butt heads with people?
S: Yeah. Because like, when I talk to someone, they want to give arguments and I give arguments back. And they say I give attitude and I’m like, well you give attitude, so why can’t I give attitude back (laughter).
R: mm hmm.
S: And I’m like, ok, so when do you want to ask me out and they’re like, I’m busy, and I’m like, well you’re too busy then don’t ask me…don’t talk to me then. (laughter). I’m like don’t start talking to me if you’re too busy to ask me out. I don’t know I guess it’s just like, I guess I want everything here and now. I’m too impatient sometimes. So.
R: And, what about, um, your feelings about your body? Has that ever been an issue because of this, or, does it come up for you?
S: Yes. I’ve always been overweight, so, but I’ve always found men that like my body like this. But to me, I’ve never liked my body like this. I always feel like there’s nothing to like about it, but, I don’t know (laughter). What do I want to say…uh… I always want to see myself thinner, but I can never get myself to that point. No matter how much I try to diet, try to exercise, everything like that, it’s just like…it’s there. I can lose so much and that’s just the way it is. You know. I can lose ten, twenty pounds and that’s all the farther that will go, so. Then I’ll gain the ten, twenty pounds back. Then I’ll lose it again. It’s like a yo-yo.
R: There’s a range it tends to stay in.
S: And I can’t get past it, no matter what I do, whether I eat the right thing or not. If I cut down at all, it doesn’t matter, my body just yo-yos. Because I’ve cut out sweets since November and I’ve lost three pounds, that’s it. I’ve been walking for the last couple of months and have still only lost three pounds…except for last month with the snow, I mean, come on! (laughter)
R: Yeah it was hard to get around.
S: I mean, I was walking stairs in the building I live in. I live four flights, I walk up and down the four flights…three pounds is not a lot to lose (laughter). But, it’s hard. I don’t know what to do. So. It’s just the way my body is I guess, my metabolism. I’ve always been overweight.
R: So even as a kid…
S: even as a kid, I think the lowest I’ve ever been was a size 14 at one point, but that was because of certain drugs I was doing (laughter). I was doing a lot of caffeine, a lot of speed, I was doing some cocaine at the time, I wasn’t sleeping, I wasn’t eating, so…yeah. I was down to a size 14 and I looked good. But as soon as I stopped all that, I packed on the pounds.
R: Yeah. So is your history with drugs long?
S: No, actually. That was the only time. I did it in high school, I did it that time, like I said. I’m not one that does a lot of stuff like that. I don’t need to do that stuff. My mind is my drug. I mean, I can find other things to keep me going.
R: yeah, it sounds like ever as a young child, wondering about blades of grass or the stars in the sky, you had a very rich inner world.
S: I mean, I write, I read, you know. As a child I used to read the phone book (laughter). My parents thought I was nuts, you know. I was reading at a third grade level at the first grade...my parents thought I was nuts. (laughter). So...my weekend is twenty-two books.

R: Your weekend? Wow. Ok, you really are a reader...that’s a good hobby. You do have a quest for knowledge.

S: I do, I mean, this is just werewolves this weekend. So. (laughter).

R: Um, you mentioned at one point that you were, I guess it was your husband who you were with, he had helped you a lot get through this...he helped you to speak? It sounds like he was non-judgmental.

S: Yeah, especially when my nightmares came...and stuff like that.

R: Ok, and have you ever been in counseling...in therapy at all?

S: Actually I just got into my therapy and stuff like that now...cause I had my breakdown not too long ago. Because I used to put everything back behind walls and stuff like that, I was dealing with a lot of other things too...stress and everything like that. I felt it coming on...and I knew what was going on, so...I went and got myself help.

R: Ok, good.

S: before anything happened, before I tried to end it again. I really was afraid this time, because last time after I woke up, I really was afraid this time that I wouldn’t wake up...because this time I had another means of doing it...that was sure.

R: More lethal.

S: yeah, it was, very more lethal. And this time no one would have found me...so.

Yeah, so.

R: Then I’m glad you sought help. It sounds like depression has been an ongoing thing since you were a child.

S: It has been and I got the medicine I needed this time, so that...I’m working through it. I have people I can talk to, so. Like I said, now I can get my sleep and stuff like that...and not be troubled as much...and they are finding the right combination of drugs for me again, which is good. (laughter). But I also use humor a lot too, so.

R: yeah, it sounds like you have a good sense of that...

S: Yeah, I do. I try not to let a lot of things get me down...like I said, I try to blow a lot of things off...and, the anger I have...I’m really afraid to let my anger show. Because I don’t know how deep it really does go...and if I were to confront him, because like with my husband, I had to step back the day he confronted me on...when he told me he wanted a divorce and why, because he did it to me in the kitchen...and on the counter there was a butcher block and knives and when he told me he cheated on me and he was leaving me for another woman and I was in the range of a butcher block of knives, I could have killed him that day. And, for me to walk away from that butcher block of knives took a lot of me, a lot in me, and he doesn’t realize how much it took because all I saw was red. Because I had trusted him (tearful), especially when he told me it was going on for three years and that he had married me a month beforehand...that he had agreed to marry me, knowing that he was fooling around on me...and he could have walked away from that marriage that day...and not go through with it, is what hurt the most. So..

R: so, there’s a lot...any person would be angry about that, but it sounds like you’ve got a lot of things to be angry about, so you’re not quite sure the extent of how deep that anger is—
S: exactly, and that’s why *I’m afraid to show my anger* …
R: right, because it may be so deep that you can’t control it.
S: Exactly.
R: it becomes uncontrollable.
S: exactly.
R: Yeah.
S: So…that’s why I say, if *I were to ever see my brother, I’m afraid that he may not survive.*
R: That that anger would be unleashed?
S: Yeah.
R: So it sounds like that’s your--right now anyway-- that this has really been an ongoing process…dealing with this—
S: It is.
R: It still is and right now the predominant feeling it seems like is anger.
S: Oh yeah. It is. But there’s, you know, it’s a lot of hurt…there’s a lot of anger…there’s a lot of sorrow. *Lot of punishment there too* (laughter)
R: To yourself?
S: Yeah…a lot of redemption still going on. Yeah. I know that’s what He [God] wants to hear (laughter)
R: If He can forgive, so can you…
S: Yeah, I know…for the longest time I didn’t think He existed…He proved otherwise to me (laughter).
R: When you woke up, after that week? Or was it prior to that?
S: Actually prior to that. (sigh). Well, I lost faith in Him really a long time ago because he let someone, someone I cherished like a child, passed away when she was three years old. And I told Him to take me instead and He wouldn’t. Because she was just a baby, she had her life to live.
R: Yeah.
S: And He wouldn’t (laughter). My little angel.
R: You said you love children. I’m so sorry that you can never have them.
S: She was my half-sister.
R: ok.
S: She had brain tumor and brain cancer…*another one I blame myself on.*
R: You blame yourself for that?
S: Yeah.
R: How did you manage to make that your fault?
S: (laughter) Um, we…I was watching her, babysitting her actually and I was letting her jump on my step-mom and dad’s bed…and um, she fell off and hit her head. And if she wouldn’t have fallen off and hit her head, she wouldn’t have gone to the hospital and they wouldn’t have found out she had…the stuff going on. That’s why I said I blame myself (laughter).
R: At least there’s some laughter, some indication that you know it’s not your fault.
S: yeah. But it took her a year and a half of suffering through chemo and everything and, promises of her coming home and her living and everything like that. That she’d be fine, losing her hair, blowing up like a balloon, and then finally dying. Then not being able to go to her funeral because they thought I wouldn’t be able to handle it.
R: Oh. Sometimes, like your ex-husband said, sometimes things just happen—like he said about your experience—that don’t seem to have very good reasoning or fault or anything like that.
S: yeah. I mourn her in my own way. She’s a part of me, literally (laughter). They both are…Mark and Caitlyn.
R: Mark was your brother?
S: Mark was my brother. Caitlyn is part of me too. I’ve got their tattoos (laughter).
R: Oh, ok..that’s a good way to remember.
S: got their heart and their angel wings on the back (laughter). Always with me.
R: Well, was there anything else that you wanted to say?
S: No, I think that’s about it.
R: Ok, I don’t think I have any more specific questions for you, but I want to make sure I gave you the floor…if there was anything else that you wanted to add. You’ve been extremely helpful…and I really…
S: I hope it helps someone down the road…that they don’t see themselves as a victim, that…like I did.
R: Like you did? And it sounds like…
S: I still do.
R: And sometimes you still do. It sounds like you are moving past the victim…
S: Yeah, I’m trying to…it takes a while to work past being the victim, but…
R: Right. And it sounds like, at first, when you were a kid, like you said,…this word abuse wasn’t really around so you weren’t really a victim at that point…
S: No, you didn’t know…yeah. Because you don’t see it…you never heard of it back then, you didn’t know it wasn’t wrong because there was nobody telling you these things…and, you know, even back then you didn’t hear about, you know, like the priests touching you, everyone was, you know, held in respect…and it wasn’t like, you know, ok, well, are they supposed to be doing these or…someone putting their arm around you, dropped down a little bit lower, you never knew what was right and what was wrong back then because it wasn’t talked about. So, and I think that’s one of the things that needs to be talked about more these days…what is right, what is wrong, what is appropriate touching, what isn’t. Nowadays a lot of it is talked about, but it needs to be talked about in the younger classes.
R: Right, like you were only eight when this happened.
S: Right, well, when did we have sex-ed, junior high? That’s the first time I did have it. It was junior high when we had it…we had sex-ed and um, driving. We had those two electives, not really electives, but those two classes.
R: Right and by then you had been quite experienced in the sex-ed part…
S: (laughter) Big time.
R: Yeah, a little late for that.
S: yeah, so.
R: Well, I know that to me you’ve been extremely helpful…and I think it will help people. Yeah, it’s something that doesn’t seem to get talked about a lot, especially people like you who have very confusing, conflicting…wanted it, but bad at the same time…that doesn’t seem to get talked about a lot.
S: Yeah, it doesn’t.
R: I think it’s something that people need to have access to. How old are you?
S: I’m 43.
R: And you’re from [Northeastern City]?
S: Yeah, I am. It’s something that’s really difficult at times. Especially visiting the areas that we did…do things at…
R: Mm hmm.
S: even some of the things that are no longer here…places that we went and saw and did things at…
R: It’s hard to get away from the memories.
S: yeah, like West Park…you know, even though its not there no more, but still the area is there.
R: Yeah…
S: It’s just weird. Even the zoo. The zoo has always been there (laughter). [Amusement Park]. I mean, come on now.
R: so you have a lot of memories from experiences with him.
S: exactly and just imagine what it would be like for a kid nowadays. West Park, I remember going to West Park all the time. The mall when they had the ice skating rink (laughter). That was where the food court was now.
R: It sounds like, when you think back about those memories…what feelings do you have when you think about that?
S: Those were good memories because it was something…
R: Yeah, there seemed to be a smile on your face when you were thinking about it…
S: yeah, because it wasn’t like, you know, bad memories. It was good memories because we were getting out, we were doing things, we were having fun…we were enjoying.
R: Mm Hmm.
S: Something that…nobody could take away from us.
R: So that was also a good part…that no one could take it away.
S: Yeah, it wasn’t sexual, it wasn’t anything like that…It was just…fun. So…that was the thing.
R: Yeah.
S: it wasn’t like, molesting…it wasn’t abuse, it wasn’t anything like that…it was just a brother and sister more or less having fun, doing something that they would actually do together. That was the thing.
R: Like a normal brother and sister.
S: yeah, without anything else going on. But yeah…because I remember him trying to teach me how to roller skate and ice skate and things like that (laughter).
R: Yeah.
S: taking me putt-putting and bowling and…taking me on my first rollercoaster ride…that was at [Amusement Park] and we were on the [roller coaster]. We were on the back of the [roller coaster] and we were on the one hill and I flew up (laughter). I thought I was flying out (laughter)! But yeah.
R: Well I really appreciate you sharing all this with me. It must be immensely difficult. I really appreciate it.
S: No problem.
R: It’s a very difficult subject to talk about, I’m very aware of that. You’re really brave and in one little way you are serving a purpose right now. I know your purpose is much larger than just this, but you are serving a purpose by helping other people.
S: I hope I can.

Janet’s Coded Transcript

R: I’m going to give you this piece of paper. It has two sentences on it…a question for you to answer. I am going to read along with you and I just want you to respond to this statement and then after that you can go where you want to. I may interject with some specific questions at some point, but mostly I’m just going to respond to you and ask you questions about what you have said. Ok?
S: Ok.
R: Ok, so this says that I would like you to describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your experience of childhood sexual abuse. Please include how this understanding has changed over time and the influence of this understanding on your sense of self and your relationships with others.
S: It took a long time for me to come to terms.
R: Ok.
S: Um, I don’t know if I’ll ever fully understand why…um. A lot of what took me so long to understand was that it had happened to my older sister and then I was put in that same position. And, so there was…I didn’t understand why I was put into that position after it had already happened. Um, but, back then it was something that really wasn’t talked about…um, and when…it was my biological father’s brother—my uncle.
R: Your uncle, ok.
S: And, um…when my older sister said something to my step mother, it was, ‘You took it wrong, that’s not what happened.’ Total denial, ‘You can never tell your father’ type thing. And she’s the one who then put me in the position.
R: Ok…your step-mother?
S: Yes. And I was much more outspoken than my older sister. I had gone to spend the summer with my biological father and step-mother.
R: You didn’t live with them full-time?
S: No. In fact, he wasn’t…he was only there one weekend out of that summer. He was traveling. Um, when I came back and I just blabbed it to her, it was…and I didn’t know this had happened to my older sister…it was, ‘you’re lying, blah blah blah.’ It took me about five years after that to finally say something to my mother. And that was when Uncle Harold and his wife were coming through. This was in Wichita, Kansas and this was when they wanted to stop and visit with us and I freaked out. By that time, my mother had remarried and um, the man I call Daddy is my step-father—
R: The man your mom remarried.
S: Yeah. And Daddy um, immediately put his foot down…well, Uncle Harold still showed up and my reaction to all that is finally what opened doors for me to go into some counseling. Even though it wasn’t straight up exactly what had happened, because…my mother being the great Catholic she was had us go to a priest (laughter).
R: That’s one form of counseling…
S: Which I did not agree with. So it wasn’t actually that in particular addressed, but around it…um, through all this and my mother finally saying something to my older sister, it came out that he had messed with her.

R: Oh, ok.

S: And, what had happened with that. Um, my biological father died not believing any of that…even though Uncle Harold is now in prison for molesting his own child.

R: Ok

S: And that happened before my biological father died…but he still never believed. Um, that it happened. And I think that’s when I finally…that started giving me some closure to what happened…was when his daughter finally, you know, spoke up…and I guess she went through this abuse for quite a few years. Um, she is real screwed up because of it…um, I’m pretty messed up too (laughter). I’m diagnosed bipolar, I also have a panic disorder, um, used to have severe agoraphobia…not now. It took me a lot of years to overcome, so I have really overcome that a lot...um, I do believe that that has contributed to my diagnosis. Um, quite a bit. As I’ve gotten older, this has affected my relationships a lot, um, my ex-husband is the only man I have ever been with. I’m not one that’s ever enjoyed sex…to me it was always a punishment and it will probably always stay that way because of what’s happened. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to come totally to terms with that…and I’m ok with being alone, I really am. (Laughter). But I thank God that I saved my younger sister.

R: Ok. So this didn’t happen to her.

S: It didn’t happen to her. She didn’t have to endure it. My older sister just made the comment to Mother and let her know, she never sought any sort of counseling or anything. How she’s dealt with it…or even if she has, I don’t know. She’s not an open person…at all. But it took a long time…and I think everyday is still a struggle.

R: yeah.

S: yeah. I don’t think you ever fully come to terms…but I know I’ll never fully understand.

R: And you said, in part, the understanding is about why it happened?

S: You know, why with my older sister to begin with, but then, put someone else in that position, in that predicament? I think Aunt Chelsea—Uncle Harold’s wife—often wondered…I really do, um, and that kind of makes me angry at her too because she should of...

R: She didn’t do anything to stop it.

S: Right…she didn’t know it was happening to their daughter, um, but she had told my mother at one time that she wondered, but nothing was ever said to her. You know, it was after that when they had children…Abby. And of course Aunt Chelsea still stood by him, even though he’s in prison for the rest of his life, she’s still standing by him…that I don’t understand either. I really, really don’t.

R: yeah, that’s difficult.

S: I think I was more protective of my daughter and my younger sister--because she’s considerably younger than I am—because of what happened because I was so, you know, I mean, I wasn’t even comfortable—and this sounds terrible because I know my ex-husband never, ever, ever would have touched her—but I didn’t like leaving her alone with him. You know, and so it…she felt a lot of times, she felt like
she was being smothered by me because of this. And, so my mother once again suggested I go back to counseling. Of course, I did NOT go to a priest.

R: (laughter).

S: But my daughter and I did get into some counseling and...um, it didn’t help matters; I still smothered her to no end, but it was just my fears for her. I never, ever wanted her to have to...

R: Go through what you did.

S: She never did. She’s now married and has given me three grandkids...she has healthy relationships, healthy mind, thank God. The anger, in time, goes away...as far as the act itself. I still am angry at my step-mother--even though she’s dead--for the position that...and she knew...that’s just...she knew. But of course, her daughter—my step-sister—was never put in that position. It was only my older sister and me...so, she knew.

R: Her biological daughter wasn’t...

S: She knew, but she never wanted to admit it. She did everything in this world to protect her biological...it got to I couldn’t even look at him because he and Harold were almost identical. My biological father, I never had much of a relationship with...

R: Your biological mother raised you, until she married your step-father, who you call Dad?

S: Yeah...um, it’s one thing I can say about my mother...she was always very supportive. And she still is. Um...

R: She’s still living?

S: Yeah. Um, every now and then she’ll ask me if I’m still in counseling, if I’m still trying to deal...and I really don’t think there is much more counseling that can be done. I think I’ve come to terms as much as any person can ever come to terms with this.

R: Ok, so it sounds like it’s something that, in your opinion, beyond even really comprehension to where you can only understand so much.

S: Right. I mean, you can never know what’s going on in another persons mind, to make them want to touch anybody, but to make it their own blood, you know, just...I just can’t fathom. You know, I can’t understand that. I just, you know, for so many years I felt so dirty. And, so sick. And, what did I do? You know, why am I being punished? What did I do?

R: You saw it as a punishment. Immediately. Even now, sex is sort of a punishment to you?

S: right. And that’s what it was, a punishment to me. Then there was a lot of guilt, you know. And, of course, the anger. There’s always going to be a bit of anger you hold onto. It’s not as severe as it used to be. I’m not hostile (laughter) inside anymore, but I still go through...I go through phases where I might go through months of not even thinking about it and then I might, it might just be something that stays heavy on me every day for six, eight months. You know, it’s, it’s...you take an 11 year old child, and you take every ounce of innocence from them...you never, you really never get over that.

R: You felt like your innocence was taken.

S: I felt like everything was taken.

R: You felt like everything was taken.

S: Everything. My anger of just not being believed, even though I was, but just the way she came at me and if anything did happen...what did I do, I must have done something, you know...
R: You must have done something to encourage it or something like that?
S: Right, you know, you start going through your mind, what could I have done? And then that’s when you start the blaming of yourself…and…my mother asked me one time if I ever wanted to go visit him…in prison. There have been times I’ve wanted to. But I think all it would do is just mess me up even worse. Um, because I’m angry…and I want to go at him…you know. So, no, that wouldn’t be a good thing at all. Um,
R: Did you end up, that time whenever he was coming through that spurred your anger and thinking about things and then going to counseling…did you see him at that point?
S: No, no. My step-father put a stop to it immediately. My step-father was extremely protective of myself and my baby sister. Um…but, no I have not seen him since it happened.
R: Ok.
S: So it’s been 32 years…and, you know, I’ve seen pictures from my step-mother and her sick, twisted mind used to just send us pictures of family get-togethers and stuff and would make sure she had pictures of him in it. Finally it got to a point where my mother would intercept…and she was never one to go through our mail or anything like that, but when she saw what it was doing, she intercepted and she…and I’m grateful. She finally told me about ten years ago, you know, that she had intercepted the pictures. Now, Abby, my cousin I had met.
R: His biological son—I mean, daughter? Your Uncle’s biological daughter?
S: yeah.
R: Ok.
S: I met her actually a number of times and, um, always liked Abby. Um, after everything came and he ended up being sentenced to prison, she just kind of really reclused…she quit talking pretty much to anybody. She was hospitalized a number of times. Um, what she’s doing now…I know that she’s still real messed up, but I don’t know where she is or what she’s doing. Um, I know she doesn’t have anything to do with her mother because of her standing by Uncle Harold. Um, he and Chelsea ended up having seven kids…and there were two girls and five boys. Abby was the oldest and the, um, other daughter was the very youngest. Chelsea was pregnant with her when Harold was going through court…so he never got a chance to get his hands anywhere near this child.
R: That’s good.
S: Yeah, I’m real grateful for that. Everyday you have to question why. You know, like I said, there will never be a 100% understanding, even if he answered that…there still would never be, you know.
R: and that’s part of…I remember you said there were times you said you thought about going to see him…I’m assuming one of the things you would ask is why…
S: Yeah, why would you touch anyone? He was married. Chelsea’s a beautiful woman. I just, I know that there’s pedophiles and a sickness…it just doesn’t make it right, it doesn’t make it ok. You know, um. Yeah one of the questions I’d like to have an answer to is not just why, but…what did it do for you? Because it ruined so many lives. What gratification was it for you? You know, I just…
R: Yeah. And it was immediately after it happened that you told your step-mother. So there wasn’t, you sort of directly went and told her?
S: Well, I was, um…I had gone to he and Chelsea’s house…
R: Right. Visiting for the summer…
S: Yeah, well I was at Sandra and Ray’s (that’s what I call my biological father).
R: ok.
S: Sandra’s my step-mother. I was there for the summer, but I went to Harold and Chelsea’s for three weeks.
R: Oh, ok.
S: And then when I came back I immediately told her and…you know, so of course, at first I didn’t tell my mother.
R: Right…you said it took a long time.
S: Not until he was planning on coming through. I don’t know where in his mind he even thought, you know, I guess because no one ever said anything to him he thought that he had gotten by with it. Which, in a way, he did. He got by with it for years until his own daughter, you know, and, I wonder how many others. I do wonder that. You know, I have other cousins, um, like I said, it’s not something to, um, discuss (laughter). In fact, most of them on my biological’s side I don’t see a whole lot. Um, my mother is in contact with the two…two of my cousins, um, they are much older than I am. And um, then my brother is in contact with the boys from my biological’s sister, my Aunt Karen. But as far as get-togethers-no, not on that side of the family; we do it on the good side of the family. (laughter)
R: (laughter)
S: Um, but I wonder if it happened to Rachel and Hillary. You know, and if it ever did and they discussed it with my mother or something, she would never let anyone know. Which is good, you know, but I’d like to know that. And he’s going to die in prison one day.
R: He got sentenced to life?
S: Life, with no possibility of parole. You know, they have him with all the good little sex abusers and rapists, so I’m sure he’s enjoying prison. Um, he’s maybe getting a lit bit of what he gave. You would think that would give me satisfaction, but it doesn’t. You know, because that’s just sick. Death will give me satisfaction.
R: his death?
S: Yeah, yeah (laughter)
R: (laughter) I was hoping you meant his and not your own, just checking.
S: And his death may even give…I can’t say it will give closure, I don’t know if there will ever be closure. Because you’ll never get answers. You know, I, I feel I’ve given closure as much as I possible can with it, but….and then there’s times the door is just wide open. You know, when I…
R: Yeah, you used that phrase before. Times when you don’t think about it for a while and then something happens and the door is open.
S: Yeah, I had a real bad breakdown a year and a half ago and for some reason all of that came flood-gating in…along with everything else. Um, I guess it was since then that I really have come more to terms with this. You know, I had to quickly get myself together, you know, I…you can’t, believe me it doesn’t happen quickly. They are still trying to get my medications right. We think we’re getting there. But I, I started journaling a lot just about that because it was just…it got real, real bad. And that’s probably the most understanding that I’ve had through all of it. Um, I’ve since, of course, got rid of that journal; I burned it. But before I burned it, I go back and read them
because I get insight of wow, did I really write that? Is that really, you know? I think I saw more strength then than I’ve ever had…and I think that’s the only reason I can be here today.

R: Yeah, clearly you must have done a lot of work. Anyone who is even willing to show up here has done a lot of work.

S: Yeah, so.

R: You were, I’m assuming by your comment, you were 11 whenever this happened?

S: (nod) My older sister was 14 whenever it happened to her.

R: Ok.

S: Um

R: And how many years older is she than you?

S: Six.

R: Ok.

S: So…I guess that she, it’s not something…she’s not a real open person at all. I know that she’s been married twice, divorced twice. I don’t know if that has anything to do with it…you know, if that’s a direct…

R: Right.

S: Um…I can, one thing I can say is that, this was not a direct result of my divorce…the direct result of that was that I married an abusive alcoholic.

R: Ok.

S: So that was, you know, ‘course…I’m a little slower than others…it only took me 14 years to realize (laughter)

R: (laughter)

S: But…at the beginning of the marriage…before his drinking and everything had gotten to its max…

R: Mmm hmm

S: There was a lot of shaky ground…um…and I think because I was still trying to come to terms with what had happened. Um…and I wondered, you know, he had a couple of affairs…and, um, of course in my mind I believed, you know, once again that was my fault…you know. And, um…what it ended up…he was just a little piece of crap. Um…after all that, you know, Harold had done this to me…I started questioning everything that had happened in my life. Was it my fault? Um…that really opens the gate of that…of you wondering…is it my fault? What did I do to deserve this? Instead of…these are facets of life and these are things that you are going to go through…and I want to say normal people, but I don’t think that there’s such a thing, that, you know, it happens to everybody. You know…things happen to everybody.

R: right.

S: It’s not…I don’t…I still question things, but not as deep as I used to…I mean, I used to really, you know, because everything…for a long time, reflected back into that, you know, what did I do to deserve this? You know. When my ex-husband was pullin his little shenanigans it was…oh boy, what did I do? Did I instigate this? Did I? You know, because…that’s what was thrown at me for so many years…and…consequently after that happened, I never went back to visit with my step-mother and my biological father.

R: Ok.

S: Um…I saw him two other times from the time I was 11 until he passed away back in 1999. That was it, just those two times. Um, (coughing), um, the last time I saw him he
had come to my work and, like I said, he and Harold looked exactly alike… I didn’t even know Ray was in town. And, um, course my older sister stayed in contact, pretty close contact with him, and… he was there visiting with her…and she told him where I worked and, so… then I came out from the office and, um, --I was managing a Shoney’s Restaurant—and I came out of the office to change out the cash drawers cause shift was changing..  
R: mm hmm.  
S: He was sitting by the register and I thought…I really thought it was Harold…the whole drawer dropped and everything. Um, when I… came to grips with what was goin on and it was him…I, um, completed one of the reports and he smiled at me and said, ‘Don’t you remember who I am?’ And I said, ‘yes I know who you are.’ And I grabbed my reports and went to the office and left through the Emergency Exit. That was the last time I saw him.  
R: Mmm.  
S: Um, when he was dying…my brother told me that he had asked for me. Well, I asked for him for many years…um…but I was also going through a lot and I didn’t go. Um, Harold tried to get out of prison to go to the funeral. He was never permitted to go to any…when his mother passed away—grandma passed away—he couldn’t even go to that. I guess the prison wasn’t willing to risk him being around children or anything. It wasn’t a matter of the money and the family paying for the sheriffs and all that. Um…I guess a part of me hated my father because he should have known.  
R: he should have known?  
S: mmm.  
R: You told him at some point, is that right?  
S: yeah  
R: And he didn’t believe it you said.  
S: because my step-mother told him nothing that like ever happened. Um...I think he believed it too. But his choice was to…ignore it. It will go away. I asked my brother one time what he thought of—because my brother is aware of what happened—my brother and I are extremely close—  
R: Ok  
S: Um..  
R: And how old is he in relation to you, your brother?  
S: He’s four years older than I am…  
R: Ok.  
S: Um…my brother had an accident when he was 22 that’s left him paralyzed from the chest down. He’s one of the most phenomenal people you’ll ever want to meet. Um, through many fences getting torn down…he drives…you know, with the clamps and stuff. He and his wife own a telecommunications company. They just adopted two kids. They are older—one’s eight—excuse me she is 11; she came to them when she was eight…she had been repeatedly sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriend. Um, screwed up little kid….most precious thing you’ll ever want to meet though. And, um, her mother—while—um, she was in foster care with my brother—her mother got pregnant with this man who she wasn’t even supposed to be around and of course they took that child immediately so my brother and sister-in-law adopted both of them. Um, but I asked my brother, once, what Ray’s reaction was to Harold when he was found guilty with
Abby and had to go to prison...and...um, he...well, first, he said that he didn’t understand what was goin on, but he didn’t believe a word that that damn liar Abby had said. Well when everything was proven and it came down to it and he got sentenced to prison...Daddy said, ‘damn him.’ And...that was it. Like I said, he never admitted that he said never. My older sister stayed in pretty close contact with my biological. And I didn’t...I never could understand how she could. You know, um,

R: Yeah, it sounds like you felt, by both your step-mother and your father...you felt very betrayed...I guess is the word that’s coming to mind.

S: I think more so by her than by him...because she knew...

R: Yeah...she knew directly from you.

S: From my older sister and then from me. And...but, yet she would protect her own.

R: Yeah.

S: You know, and that...

R: And so he...you went to visit your biological dad and step-mother...and then, did they sort of send you to Harold and his wife...or you went, you kind of wanted to go visit them...or how did that even happen?

S: Before I even went...um, I got to Sandra and Ray’s...she had told me that Harold and Chelsea had asked if I would come for a couple of weeks...and that Harold—cause he had his pilot’s license—that he and Chelsea could pick me up...and, you know, I’d go and then he’d fly me back. Well, I was all excited about the airplane...and, had my older sister been open with...my mother...this never would have happened. Because they had to get permission from her because I was goin into another state. So that’s how that all came about.

R: Ok, right. So if your step-mother, sister, someone would have said, “No, don’t go with him.”

S: (nod) My older sister had...at the time she was 17...she had already graduated from school and she was living with a great-aunt in Florida to go to college...so, I don’t even think she knew that I was goin to Harold and Chelsea’s. Because I really believe she would have said something to my mother. I really...my mother would have never allowed it to happen.

R: And prior to that...so she hadn’t told your mom...your biological mom...about what happened.

S: No, not until I...came out with my mother, saying something to her and then my older sister spoke up. But she had already spoke up to my step-mother.

R: Right, so your step-mother didn’t stop you from then going to visit Harold.

S: No. She’s the one who set it up!

R: Right, ok, so that’s what you mean by ‘putting you in that situation’? She set up the whole visit...even knowing that he had done this to your sister.

S: Right. You know, I—part of me thinks because Ray was on the road, you know, she figured she would just pawn me off somewhere so she wouldn’t have to deal with me for the whole summer. That’s what I...

R: That’s what you felt like.

S: I still feel that way. I blame her just as much as I blame him.

R: Yeah. It sounds like you are very angry at your step-mother.

S: She could have...as a parent, it was her right to protect us. And all she did was protect her own. She never even tried. She died a very lonely person. Lonely, bitter.
Her own daughter wasn’t even around when she died. You know. I don’t know what ever happened…why it came to that.

R: The daughter? That she, at that time, protected anyway.
S: Yeah. Her biological daughter. So that’s why I said…I don’t know if you ever really totally come to terms or understand. You just kind of get rid of the anger in time.
R: Mm hmm.
S: I’m sorry (tearful).
R: It’s ok…it’s completely understandable.
S: (laughter)
R: So, anger…that was the predominant feeling…that’s what was…
S: At first it was the guilt.
R: Ok.
S: The…the guilt.
R: The guilt.
S: Then the anger.
R: Then the anger, ok.
S: Yeah.
R: So it sounds like at first there was this—which to some degree you still do now—this sort of, what did I do? Or why do I deserve this? What did I do to deserve this?
S: Yeah
R: And then it sort of focused or shifted to…being angry at other people. Harold…and his wife clearly, or I mean, your step-mother…
S: Sandra, yeah. I would have loved to see her reaction when she found out about Abby. I’m sorry that it came down to…it happening to Abby for anything to finally be done to him. You know, I wish she could have been spared and saved. I wish we all could have been spared or saved, but, you know.
R: And you have one younger sister…and you said because of what you had spoken out about…this never happened to her.
S: Right. There’s 14 years between Rita and I.
R: Oh, ok.
S: And I’ve always been very protective of her. And my daughter as well.
R: You just have one daughter?
S: Just one child. One daughter. Yeah. She just keeps pushing out kids. She and her husband both were only children and, um, you know I always joked with her—ok, you got a spare, you can quit now. But, they actually…once my youngest granddaughter Paige starts kindergarten—she just turned a year—when she starts school they want to have two more. I’m praying they change their mind between now and then. I really am.
R: (laughter)
S: But…it’s great that she got to have the normal childhood and healthy relationships.
R: Mm hmm. It sounds like you must have done a good job with her…she’s…
S: I smothered her to death (laughter)
R: (laughter)
S: It was no wonder she wanted to go all the way to Florida to go to college (laughter). And she did. She went to the…she and her husband both went to the University of Florida.
R: Ok. And you said…you’re from Kansas?
S: Right.
R: Witchita, that’s right?
S: yeah. Just about everybody is in Florida now. My mother, my baby sister, my daughter. They all eventually matriculated. Started out with one aunt and then went everybody…everybody went there…yeah. And that’s good because they all…my baby sister lives three blocks this way from my mom. My daughter lives four blocks the other was from my mom so they all…real close. My brother lives in Georgia.
R: Ok.
S: You know, my daughter and my baby sister are real close. They were brought up together, and…you know, as they got older my baby sister would go and pick up my daughter…oh we’re gonna go, blah blah…next thing I know they’re walking around the mall and…(laughter) I hear little reports. I’m like, okkkk. But she never let anything happen to her.
R: Yeah. It definitely sounds like this desire to be protective is a result of what happened earlier in your life.
S: But it’s gone on through…you know…with friends I’ll…I have acquaintances…I have very few close friends. And that’s by choice. I just…I have a natural ability to not trust…because of what happened. Um, but I’m extremely protective of my friends too. Um…and if I just even think something is going to, you know…and my one friend, Sheri, is like..you gotta stop (laughter). And, you know, she loves the fact that I’m protective but she hates the fact that I get to points where I’m just really, start, you know…she never let anything happen to her.
R: Well, it sounds like you’re giving other people what you wished you had gotten as this 11 year old…someone to intervene, someone to protect..
S: I think so too. I think so too.
R: You said it was…you said it was about five years…something was five years before you told your mom…before Uncle Harold was going to be coming through…
S: right. Ok…um, I don’t know why…
R: That was going to be my question. I wonder if you had ever wondered why…
S I have…and I, I think…looking back now, part of me wanted to protect her even. You know…but, after…the huge thing that Sandra did and put me through all this…I was afraid, you know, that Momma would feel the same way. And I should have known better, you know. Because when it came out, you know, it…I think my step-father was more murderous than my mother. Um…but I do…looking back now, I wonder if that’s what I was trying to do was protect Momma. You know, from the wrath of Sandra and that side of the family. You know, um…she was close to my, um, biological’s other brother…Uncle Timmy and Aunt Polly and it’s there daughters—Rachel and Hillary—that I talked about
R: Ok, cousins
S: Um…but I guess I was just trying to protect from her…I don’t know, maybe even just being hurt, I don’t know. Uncle Timmy believed it as soon as he heard about it. He believed it. Um, he pretty much didn’t have anything to do with Harold. But, after he got arrested, you know, he definitely…and it wasn’t long after that that Uncle Timmy passed away. Aunt Polly passed away just before he did. He had one sister left, Aunt
Karen…um, she wrote to him. She visited him twice a year. She said it was her brother…and, um. And she loved him…she didn’t love what he did, but she loved him. She never questioned him…you know. No information was ever given about him unless directly asked. You know, my brother told me that. And, um, but I can see Aunt Karen, you know, standing by her brother. You know, she’s just that type of person. Somebody asked me one time if I could stand by my brother. And I answered that I could never imagine my brother doing anything like that…I’m not even going to answer a question like that. It’s too sick. You know, anybody…and the only person who can answer something like that is someone who is going to believe that they are capable of that. And…that’s the one thing I know my brother would never be capable of. (sigh) I hope some of what I told you can help.

R: Yeah, I think so.
S: Is that pretty much what you needed?
R: yeah. It sounds like, and I think you implied this, but…Well, you said your initial reactions, as a child, to this were guilt—and wondering why and then you felt anger later.
S: (nod)

R: Ok.
S: The way Sandra came at me with, ‘what did you do?’ And, if something like that was to happen…she would never admit that it was even possible…but if it did, then it was my fault. Basically I guess I just…humped all over him or something, that’s what she was…
R: that you initiated it.
S: Right. And that’s the same way she was with my older sister as well.
R: Ok. And your older sister immediately told her as well? After it happened?
S: Yeah. Yeah.

R: Can I…however much you’re comfortable with telling me, but…how did it even happen with Harold? Were you put alone in some context or how did it even…occur?
S: the house they lived in was a two level…like a split-level…(coughing)…and where I was staying was down in the bottom level and, you know…
R: And you were by yourself…well, your younger sister wasn’t even born yet..
S: Yeah she wasn’t even thought of…
R: yeah, she’s 14 years younger…so you were the only one visiting them…
S: right…
R: None of your siblings…
S: Right. It was a big open space, like a big play room. Looking back now. But it had a TV and stuff in there, and then…the room that I was sleeping in. And…the first time it happened, Chelsea was there…she was upstairs cooking. He came down the stairs and, um…he had me come sit on his lap…and he started touching me. And, I mean he didn’t even bother with the chest…he immediately started touching down here. After that happened, I tried to stay upstairs.
R: Ok…avoid the situation.
S: If Chelsea was gone, I would go outside. Um…and then one night…I had already gone to bed and he came in and got me and carried me upstairs to their bed. Chelsea wasn’t there. Her…I don’t know if it was a friend or a cousin of hers…something had happened and she was taking them to the hospital and that’s where it happened. And, um, it happened two more times before I left.
R: Ok. Ok. And then, you told her...uh...you told your step-mother when you got back after visiting with them?
S: Yes.
R: Ok.
S: When Harold and Chelsea flew me back...they stayed overnight that night and then they flew back the next day. And it was the second they were out of that house...I told her. That started the whole, you know...screamin and hollerin.
R: so you were 11...you were old enough...you knew something was wrong with that situation such that you should tell someone?
S: Oh, yeah I knew something was very wrong.
R: And you tried to avoid being in the situation where that would occur...you stayed outside or near your aunt...
S: (nod) I guess there is some satisfaction in knowing he will never touch another child again.
R: Mm hmm. Yeah. No one else has to suffer...at least by his hand and body.
S: But so few are...because they, you know, kids are afraid to say anything...not going to be believed or now it's everything is a media circus...you know, it...it goes on so much that you don’t even know about. You don’t hear about...and not just from family members...
R: Right.
S: You know, from...and the schools. Neighborhoods...it’s just...I think more with family members gets by than outside the family people because...you know, kids will pretty much speak up if it’s a neighbor or someone like that that’s messin with them, but not too much a family member...
R: Yeah. And even with you...it was part of...this was your biological father’s side who you didn’t have much contact with...that allowed you to tell your step-mom as soon as they were gone.
S: And I should have told my mom. She went through a phase of blaming herself...she should have picked up. She knew that I was distant when I came back, but she had been so...you know, my older sister was when she came back...its just the way Sandra was, you know, and uh...then when I never wanted to go back, Mother never pushed. Never. And uh...
R: So there were opportunities to go back...to visit your biological father...right, and you never took any.
S: Nope, like I said...I only saw him a couple times after that. And, uh...
R: It sounds like, you, you wouldn’t hesitate to use the word “abusive” to what happened to you...that was an abusive experience...
S: Extremely. Extremely.
R: You said it took everything away.
S: (nod) Yeah. Part of my mind, too (laughter)
R: Yeah.
S: I mean, I know that my...mental disability is not all because of this.
R: Right.
S: Largely contributive of mine is also chemical imbalance, so...you know, I can’t blame it all, but I can blame a lot of the panic disorder. Um...because I started...I didn’t realize
back then what it was…the anxiety, and…at that young age you can’t even really describe it.

R: Right, you don’t have the words.
S: And then when I…I’m trying to think… I was 20…no, I was in my early 30s when I had gone to the doctor and they were getting really bad. I sat down eating dinner one night and I thought it was my heart, you know. So…she put me on a beta blocker and they put me on this monitor…um, once my heart beat started double beating, I pushed a button and it recorded. And, we did that and she sent me with that to a cardiologist to immediately started taking me off the beta blockers…I had to slow, taper with that. And, uh, prescribed me Xanax…which I guess because of being married to an alcoholic, drug-addict, I’m not a drinker and I don’t…do drugs…um, and I told my doctor I didn’t want to take the Xanax. I ended up just taking two, and um…the first one I took was when I was having a real bad anxiety attack and it knocked me out for almost nine hours. Can’t do that when I had a child…and, being as protective as I was. Then…that was the first sign of, of…totally started me on the diagnosis and everything. Um…I knew I was depressed, but…in my head everybody’s depressed (laughter). You know, and everybody around me is crazy, what’s going on. And it took…it took a lot of time to finally come to terms with a lot of that…with my…nobody wants to admit that they’ve got anything wrong. Um, I tried…after all that happened, to still…have a normal childhood. I was much …I enjoyed volleyball and I cheered and I marched with the band. Outwardly it looked good…but I was real screwed up inside…you know, all through middle school and high school. And um…when I finally did tell my mom…a weight was lifted…course it came back on when she took me to a priest (laughter)

R: (laughter) And you, you mentioned, the part of it affecting your sexuality…I mean, sex is a punishment…something to be avoided, something you are glad you don’t have to deal with now. It’s in a related way…but feelings about your body…did that? At first you said you felt dirty, I think.

S: Dirty.

R: Ok.

S: Very dirty. And it was…more than just, a physical dirty….inside felt so dirty.

R: Ok.

S: As I got older, I…started feeding that…dirty. My weight at one time had gotten up to 428 pounds.

R: Right, you mean literally feeding the dirty.

S: yeah. I try not to do that now.

R: Clearly you don’t weigh 400 pounds now, so it sounds like you’re doing a good job.

S: Um…I don’t feel that dirty on the inside anymore…but it’s something that took a lot of years. A lot of years…

R: Yeah.

S: (stomach rumbling) Coffee has effected my stomach…(laughter)

R: (laughter)

S: I drank coffee this morning which I don’t do much of…I, um, was in the hospital for a few days last month…chest pains…they diagnosed me with stable (unintelligible) angina so I’m on a cardiac diet…didn’t sleep real good last night, so I decided to have a cup of coffee this morning and it tears my stomach up, so.
R: Yeah. Well, uh, what you’ve told me has been very helpful. Anything else that you want to say or add? You’ve done a great job. I just wanted to let you make sure you told your story.
S: I hope it helps.
R: I think it will. It’s a topic that’s important to me and I hope somehow more research is done.
S: I hope it will be healing.
R: I hope so…it certainly has helped me and I hope it helps you.
S: this is a big step…I’ve never…I’ve never openly talked to a complete stranger.
R: Yeah, it’s a bit different than counseling to meet a stranger once and open up. Well, you did a wonderful job. Very coherent and open. I do think that telling, I mean as a therapist myself, I hope that telling your story and being able to actually get out there and do that is a huge step along the way that…
S: I hope so.
R: The way you say it, it sounds like it’s never completely done…but this is a big step.
S: right. Yeah.
R: I thank you very much.
S: Thank you, I hope I helped you.
R: yeah, that’s important to you to help and in some way save or protect other people from having to go through what you have, so I think so.
S: I hope so too.

Tabitha’s Coded Transcript

R: Here we go. I would like you, um, to, describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your experience of childhood sexual abuse and I would like you to please, as you do so, um…I would like to please include how this understanding has changed over time and the influence this understanding has had on your sense of self and your relationships with others. I know that’s broad…
S: Yeah it is. I could go on for years with this…and I know we’ve only got limited time. Look, um…to sort of um give you some background. I was abused in my childhood, from about 8 years old. And what I did was, I forgot it. Um, basically I forgot it and that’s how I dealt with it for many years.
R: Right.
S: Then, um…at the age of about 22, um, uh, I had an incident with an older male who I became friends with. Um, it wasn’t an abusive incident or a sexual incident but it was enough to remind me about what had happened in my childhood. At that point in my life, I got panic stricken, um, to the point of no return. I started locking myself in the house, I started doing all sorts of weird stuff and I really didn’t understand what I was doing. At this point, I didn’t believe that I was abused. Uh, I had no belief of it. And, um, my relationship at the time…my six year relationship with a male, uh, fell apart. Um…uh, I lost my job because the male that had made advances towards me, they weren’t going to get rid of him at the job, so I had to leave the job. And, uh…so, yeah, I went to a…I was lucky enough to find a sexual abuse counselor and, um, who was also a survivor of sexual abuse herself and, uh, I started healing from that point.
R: Ok.
S: Yeah, so…um…there I had, I had approached her because there was a pamphlet on the bench saying that there was groups for sexual abuse survivors, so I rang her up and I went and had the initial interview and from the interview I knew that I was not ready for the group, because I was falling apart in the, um, therapy room. I was falling apart, virtually falling apart, my whole started falling apart (laughter). I can’t tell you what that was like. And, I also met my husband at that stage, who had been a great help, who was stabilizing, able to take me to therapy and understand, help me at that point. At that point I confronted my father, and, uh, also…the reason I confronted my father was my nieces, I had nieces who were around him. So I confronted him at that time and basically lost my whole family. Within a couple of years I had confronted and lost my family. Um, yeah, so from there I sort of had my own children. Around that time, um, uh…unfortunately, um…I had my first seizures. I’ve got epilepsy as well. Stress from this can, can have an issue with the epilepsy. So I always have to be careful between stress from the abuse and the epilepsy. And the panic attacks. Um…yeah…so, from there I did counseling with that particular counselor for, say, a couple of years. Um…and then I joined a group with about ten survivors of all sorts of the same, what do you call it, same situation as myself and we basically met about ten times, once per week. I did all those. It was a relief to find others and I got matched up with another survivor of this…um and I met her for coffee say, about five or six times. Um, and I met others over the phone at that time. Um…also, I didn’t mention, before I sort of, um…that guy sort of approached me, I had had about 18 months counseling with another counselor. She didn’t deal with the sexual abuse and that was very, very bad. I did mention to that counselor when I was 19 or 20 I just was having issues and I just went to that counselor and I did mention to her about sexual abuse, but she sort of brushed it aside, if you know what I mean. So, I delayed. I delayed it all by going to that particular counselor. And because she brushed it aside, I did too. Whereas if I had gone to a sexual abuse counselor or somebody who knew the issues, it would not have been, you know, pushed aside. So there was that sort of delay. That sort of delayed it all. Yeah, so, the groups. From the groups I had a long…a long, um, break. Um, for about seven years. Um, uhhhhh….um, everything, everything is generally fine in my marriage. I am very lucky because I told my husband sort of, straight away, because I was going through too much drama, he would have noticed anyway. So I told him straight away and told him that if he wasn’t prepared to help me, or whatever, that there was you know, no chance of anything (laughter). And he still came. He was still ok with that. Um…yeah, so that went along ok. I had children, um, and I was, um, got very triggered around having children and also had my first epilepsy seizure. Um, I spoke to all of my sisters and unfortunately two of them were abused as well. Um, I did speak to one…both of them a little bit…but they were not in the…position to talk to me. They’re not like me. They don’t want to deal with it. They want to forget about it.

R: Ok.

S: Um, basically I’ve been cutoff from the family. Um, I did speak to another niece as well who lives in the area and, um, uh…I told her because she had a baby and, uh, I felt that she had to know. And, my family here got threatened by them because of it because they didn’t want the niece to know. But as far as I was concerned, she was the mother of a young female daughter and had no knowledge and should be told that her
grandfather was a pedophile. So, I did that as well. Um...then, from there...this is like a long period of time...

R: ok--
S: Basically, that’s probably taken five years to do all of that. I have approached the police twice...um, to report. The first time I reported, um...I came in on the wrong day. Um...so, I went on, like a Sunday and they had no specialists there and they turned me away. Um, the second time I reported, probably two years later. The guy didn’t want me to make a statement for some reason, I’m not sure. He seemed to think it would take too long and I didn’t have any interview time or something like that and they turned me away again. I’ve now received another, um, telephone number to call if I want to make a statement. Um...yeah, so since sort of dealing with the whole family part...I’m out of the family now...which I’m happy about. I’ve got a twin sister. The only thing I’m upset about is I have a twin sister who has taken his side. The family has taken his side...um...because of varying reasons. And, um...(sigh)...uh, really the only relationship I wanted was my twin sister, um...and I still feel that one day, maybe when he dies—he’s still alive and living around the corner—I still feel that she may decide to...to seek counseling, or...so I’m thinking that that relationship may still be ok.

R: Right.
S: Um, in regards to your relationship question. Um, you said about...what sort of effect it has had on my relationships?

R: Right.
S: Um, uh...all of my coping mechanisms for when I was dealing with the abuse, um...kick in to play. Um, a lot. Um...I don’t, basically, let people get close to me. I’m fortunate that I can talk about it and that I can deal with it, but, in regards to males...um...I’ve got a male friend who, um, I have a very up and down relationship with, but we’re still in—well, friendship, it’s not a sexual relationship, it’s a friendship—it’s very up and down. Uh...most of the time I want to leave in relationships, just as I wanted to leave home. Sometimes...um...uh, it just reminds me so much of when I came into this relationship that was very frightening, very frightening...I can’t...just, frightening. The comparison to my relationship with my father is huge and...also...yelling at him and that’s really bizarre. And, uh, that’s sort of my relationships there. Um...I just can’t seem to...I don’t know. I just have trouble, um, there. Some men are ok. I really can’t sort of understand it. I think it’s the more they remind me of him, the more it clicks in. I’m not sure what it actually is about the relationship, whether it’s everything. I have had very successful working relationships. I’ve had a successful male working relationship which went really well, which didn’t cross onto exploding and yelling and what have you. And, um, say...say that sort of worked when I have working relationships. And I have fine relationships with women.

R: Ok...ok.
S: Women are fine, generally. They are fine. I have no thoughts of wanting to run away or scream at women (laughter). So, it’s pretty much...had problems there. Um...and, uh...I...I have had, uh...women and I’m now with a male counselor. Male therapist. And...uh...to be honest, it’s frightening. It’s frightening. (Laughter). The ones...the females were not frightening. This is frightening. To the extent that I will not go into his office now. Um, I cannot get in his office without wanting to walk out...I’ve virtually walked out, I mean, I have walked out on him...numerous times. I’ve screamed at him
numerous times. And, uh, umm…and now I’m fine…I’m just doing all the counseling on the phone because there was no point. There was no point to me going there, setting an appointment for ten minutes then scream at him and walk out. No point. (laughter). I still feel I need to keep doing that a lot until I’m still making appointments. I think it’s good. I think it’s good. I don’t know exactly what it’s doing, but I think it’s good. (laughter). Poor guy. I mean...(unintelligible).

R: They are trained--
S: Um…was there any more to that question?
R: No--
S: That’s the background on what’s sort of happened to me. And, um, my family…of which is no…of no consequence now.
R: Right. You said, you were um, 8 whenever it first began…was that right?
S: Um, um…I think so. Um…it…I’m not sure. I’m truly not sure. I know it was after five…between 8, 9, 10 or 11. I think year six is when you were 11. I had no concept of...so…that’s the best I can get it…and, maybe in the future I might be able to narrow it down…
R: That’s fine…it’s very understandable to not know exactly. Time doesn’t even make sense when you have a normal childhood, let alone those sorts of things going on…
S: Yeah. I’m actually lucky to even know that sort of thing. When I first got asked that question—I’ve been asked that question before—I broke down. Um because I didn’t know…but that’s what I sort of narrowed it down to.
R: And you said that you, um…you very initially started by saying that you dealt with it by forgetting it and then it was later on when you finally did get to work with this specialist that things started happening. Um, but you did mention that prior to that, you saw that first therapist it was kind of brushed off…
S: Um, she brushed it off. Not me. She brushed it off. The therapist brushed it off. Um, so…I told the therapist that I said that...that I was abused by my father and that was all that was said. Never brought up in any of the further sessions. Never dealt with. I never told her any sort of significant data or the length of time…but, uh…surely, for me looking back now…and that was, uh, many years ago...had I had, you know, a specialist sexual abuse counselor who would have picked up on that and sort of taken me...in that direction…it would have helped me out a lot more. But eventually the guy, um, doing what he did to me at work...um, caused me to, um…caused it all to pop up anyway. It was going to happen. I was going to go to counseling anyway, I mean I was going to get help…if not at that time, it would have been two years later.
R: Something was bound to trigger it at some point.
S: Yeah.
R: Do you recall—and if you don’t, it’s completely ok—do you recall when you were a child, when this was actually occurring, if you remember any feelings, any thoughts that you had at that time? Can you remember?
S: I’ve got asked that. You know, um in this specific instances…or the life in general? In general, um…I don’t have…I have no feelings about when it was happening…actually when I was being abused. But around it, I had a lot of fear of him. I needed…and I still know because I do it now…I needed, uh, to stay away from him...when I walked into the room I needed to stay away from him. I wouldn’t walk into a room if he was in the room. I wouldn’t go out with him. So like…I would set it up so I was not going out with him…
would make sure I didn't go out alone with him. So, my whole life sort of revolved, at home, around not doing that. Around...staying away from him. Every time I was with him I was basically abused...so I had to stay away...and I had to stay close to my mother. So the whole thing was stay close to my mother and my sister...umm, and that would be ok. Um...Yeah, he wouldn’t abuse me when they were around. So I was safe when they were around.

R: When other people were around?
S: Right. I only have female, sisters...I have no brothers. Um...so I have no basis...this is another thing about the male relationships...I have no basis on males, growing up. I have no brother, I have only sisters. I can form a very close relationship with females, but I’m working on it with this male counselor (laughter). Not being in the office.

R: At least you keep talking to him--
S: And also, um...now, how I handled it in myself is that...if um...my thoughts were, I could handle the abuse and I could handle what was going on—and it went on for say, ten years—is I protected my sister, my twin sister from the abuse. So, um...I had to...I had to do...I had to protect myself as well as my twin sister. So...that’s how it was sort of working. And also my nieces as well. So...if I protected everyone else from him...um, which I actually did do quite successfully, then that was ok. And everything was ok. So...sort of like I was dealing like that. I don’t know if you can understand that.

R: That makes sense. Protecting everyone else...some form of trying to get what you didn’t get. Something like that?
S: yeah. Just, um. It’s kind of hard to explain. Also, wanting to run away...what could I do...there was no child helpline or that kind of thing...I had no options of child help lines. The thought of going to, like...like I was running, trying to run through what I could do. I thought to go to my sister...my elder sister to move out of the house, but it never happened. And I did tell my mother when I was about 15 or 16 and she did nothing. So, um...she didn’t do anything...so, um...it’s basically that...basically didn’t help me.

R: It didn’t change anything when you told her?
S: No.

R: And so you have your twin sister and you have one older sister...
S: Two older sisters. So I have one that is eight years older than me, one that is six years older than me, and my um twin sister is older than me, and then I’m the youngest.

R: Right, ok.
S: Yeah, so four girls, no boys, and my mother and father.

R: And your mother and father, you lived with both of them...they were together?
S: Yeah, they were there.

R: And your sisters as well...I know you said you were trying to protect your twin sister....so this did happen to your older sisters?
S: One of them...my oldest sister...the other one, um...um, she denied it. I don’t know...look, I really don’t know there...maybe, maybe not. Definitely my twin sister and definitely me and one niece, that I know of...and also...um...a family....somebody that...this is something that I will get back one day...somebody came to me as a child, maybe in my teenage years and said that Dad had done something to them...so it was outside the family too.
R: Ok. And it sounds like, from what you’ve said to me…you said you were going through these scenarios of what you could do…no helpline, your older sister…
S: No, there was no Internet. There was nothing.
R: Right…and so it sounds like, even at that time as a child, you were…it sounds like you were very…uh…aware, that something was not right about what was going on, or something was…you were avoiding…there was a sense of badness to it right from the start?
S: There was. I knew it was wrong, but also, I thought every other child was having this issue. Um, because I’ve been dealing with it so long, um…it was normal to do this. Um…and that’s how it sort of…how it came about. Um…I don’t know. I made it normal. Um, in my life…to do all of this. You can’t live with this, if it’s sort of not normal. Um…and, uh…that statement might sound harsh. I was living as well. So, in here, in doing all that…that was a small part of my life. Ok, so that was a small part. And then I could go out and have fun. I do have memories of having fun…and being with my sisters…having a normal childhood…running parallel…I’ve got two things running parallel…my normal childhood, which I only remembered…and then…when, when I started dealing with stuff. I’m now remembering the bad childhood. So…um…it’s sort of, when I was dealing with it…and when I decided to block it out. It was like, forget it, forget it, forget it…inside your head. It got to the point of, whenever the issues came up, it was “forget.” Just forget. Forget. It was constant. And if you say something enough in your head, you will do it. And…for some reason, I’ve got now to say, “remember, remember, remember.” That’s how it’s gone for me. And it’s actually very frightening to remember. So…it’s…that’s…that’s basically how it was working in my head.
R: Right. Ok. Yeah, I like what you just said. So, it was initially forget, forget, forget. And now it’s remember, remember, remember.
S: And also, the details of the abuse…um…they were completely forgotten…and if I ever touched the memory, the fear of the memory was too much. Like it’s too much for you to deal with that…whatever that is. So, I won’t touch that memory. Like, whenever I would touch it, it would be too much…like touching hot fire in your body, so you know it’s there and you don’t want to remember. Ok?
R: Ok.
S: Ok?
R: Yeah, that makes sense.
S: Ok. So I imagine like…I don’t know. It’s something that just sort of happened. So that’s it there.
R: Right, right. Um…what about…feelings about your body…has that been at all an issue because of this?
S: Um…no. Um…I didn’t get anything. I don’t sort of get anything…um…uh…about that. I’m lucky in that…I’m not, sort of…um…how do I say this…I’m not affected in any sort of way. A lot of people think that I might have issues with my sex life…I don’t have that. I’m not, I don’t. I actually don’t. I’m one of the lucky people that don’t. I know many survivors have, but I don’t. And I don’t actually have any sort of issues with my body…um…from this. At all. That’s a good question, but I don’t. I haven’t even really thought of it. I don’t sort of…I haven’t had any sort of anorexia or eating disorder or I didn’t get any self-injury. I didn’t have any…the sort of classic things of wanting to
do something to my body. I didn’t do anything like that. I didn’t get into drugs. You know, I haven’t…dipped into alcohol or anything to take away…that actually takes away that kind of stuff. I didn’t try to abuse my own body or anything like that.

R: Right, ok. Um, I was thinking something while you were talking and it’s slipped my mind. Um…you…it sounds like what was, or at least one of the things that was most helpful for you in coming to terms was finding this second therapist that you went to, this sexual abuse specialist…

S: Yeah, and um…she was a survivor herself and she was ahead of me, if you know what I mean. She openly…she openly admitted that she had been abused, which I nearly fell apart on. I was in this room with therapists actually, two sexual abuse specialist therapists…um, that I paid money for. And, uh, I was just lucky to find this…they are very hard to find. Um…and…uh…they just asked me, um, were asking me initial questions for the group and immediately…it was immediate…thank goodness in life, you know, that I found this sort of lady. Um…and…uh…and then she….there was no way I was going to leave this lady, um, because she had all the answers to this for me. In that, I could see by the way she talked and what she did and how she…how she approached it as well, um…compared to the therapist I’m with now…and I’ve told him off for it. How she approached things…um…especially made it easier, and…you know, and…um…I didn’t actually even tell her what had happened to me, but it was just all of my coping mechanisms and panic attacks and how I confronted it, what I do, what’s going to happen in the family, what would happen if I do this, what would happen if I do that. When I was seeing her I was still (unintelligible)…when I left home, I still came back. Which you do, because they are your parents, he is your father. He is my father and I still see him as normal, um…so, even though he abused me I still saw him as a normal father. So, other people would see him as a pedophile, I saw him as a normal father. And, it is very hard if you ever want to get away from your parents, it is very hard because you have to not only split from your parents, you have to split from your siblings. You have to do all sorts of things to get away, and um…they try all sorts of things…things and letters. I got letters and letters and, um…and birthday presents and more letters…even years later, until I finally started stopping them and I finally had to tell that I reported them and if they came anywhere near me that, uh, they would, you know, they would, um…um…you, know…I would get the police on them. And the reason I did that…if I hadn’t done that—and I’m glad that counselor was there—if I hadn’t done that, my kids would have been abused, if you know what I mean. What I would have done is, oh this is all normal and I’ll take my children up there and he would have got them, if you know what I mean?

R: right.

S: Um, so, but…I wouldn’t have been aware because the memories had been forgotten. I’m not…um…you know, because it didn’t really have a…the way you rationalize it is that oh, it’s not having an impact on my life, you know, this type of stuff. Rather than the actual horrendous impact that it had. Um…um…you know, and just rationalizing everything. You know, I also rationalized a couple of reasons why I can’t deal with…oh, mom wasn’t giving him enough in regards to sex…or it was my fault, that was the first thing…it was my fault that he was doing this, um…um…and that type of thing. It was generally the my fault and my…his…his…um, because he was a very domineering personality they also put on me a lot of bad thoughts in my head about how bad I was and
what I was…you know, lowered my self esteem to extreme points, so I had to build up that self-esteem to actually be able to confront him and that’s really hard to do when you come from being abused its just a lot of hard work. I don’t think one particular counselor can do it…you have to do it constantly.

R: Right, and it was…so, initially whenever you were going back to visit with your family, you felt like he was sort of a “normal father” in terms of…I guess what I um, what I get from that is…that children, um, regardless of it their parents are abusive in any way, there is some sort of pull to go back to them and that it is something you actually have to fight against, to um break.

S: Yeah, it wasn’t a fight because I really didn’t like him…I really hated him…but, um, I can’t explain the sort of hate I had towards him. Um…um…and, the anger I had…the anger I had towards him. Um…but…which is (unintelligible) to the point where I feel sorry now, uh, for him. And that that’s helped me let go of a lot of that hate…um, uh, uh…the…when I was going over there, initially after I left the family, 20-something, something like that…for those years, but I had left to another state…so I was away for three years in another state, so I didn’t travel back…um…I would go back to visit my mother only, um, so I was visiting my mother only. He was there, I wouldn’t make conversation with him…um, this is…I just wouldn’t make conversation. Uh…and too, when I bought a birthday present for him and it was only forced because if you didn’t buy a birthday present you were told off—I never would have bought a birthday present. Uh…I never wrote “love, Tabitha” on the bottom…it was always “Tabitha”…so, I never loved him. Um…so, there is another issue there. I just remembered that now. Um…that was the, when I was 17 or something. Uh, so, it sort of was always there in…. I was going back to visit my mother only…I loved my mother….she was there, the only mistake she made in all this was not, um, not doing anything for me. Um. And now, after all of the confrontation, I don’t have my mother. I would attend neither of their funerals. They are both older than 70 and they are both alive. Um, and I haven’t seen them for 8 to 10 years.

R: Ok.

S: And they haven’t seen my children. And neither would they.

R: And how many children do to you have?

S: Two. Two little girls.

R: Girls?

S: Yeah, I got lucky because if I had boys, I don’t know how it would go…truly, every man…uh…every man is um, uh…ummm…I just don’t know how…I’m trying to think whether, um, whether it’s what they say, what they do, um, you know, personality. And I’m still doing this. And my male therapist now reckons it is when I get close to them. I don’t know…I just think it’s like…I really don’t know what it is….because some of them are fine. Um…I don’t know. I don’t know.

R: It sounds like this, um, I’ve used the phrase “coming to terms” with or understanding, it sounds like this is something that is really an ongoing thing for you…even the remember, remember, remember thing…it sounds like this is…you know…not your entire life, but…

S: Yeah, the memories. I also have this thing of not being able to remember as well, and that’s really hard because you can imagine, um, I’ve only got very few memories of the abuse and I haven’t got enough memories. So, for example, um…I mentioned this other
girl…a girl that came up and told me, ok… I think I know where she told me, I don’t know who it is… um, I’m not sure who it is. I know it would have been one of my best friends, but I can’t remember which one. I can take a guess, but I can’t remember which one and I can’t really remember the conversation. You say to yourself, well… how can that be true if you don’t really remember, umm…and, so… there’s other things… other memories I specifically remember that I know are true and there’s other things that may or may not be true. So… it’s really hard to sort of understand it and to put it all together… and, I don’t know, I don’t really know how it all works, um…and, uh… yeah, so… um, clearly, clearly I have gotten more memories and certainly within the past four years, um… and I think I specifically get it when I meet men… when I get reminded, um, yeah… so… so when I make specific… specific… whether it’s just the generic man, or a man… because I don’t do this with all men. I don’t sort of tell many men. Yeah, you know… I don’t know what it is, but that’s what I do.

R: How long have you been--- out of curiosity— how long have you been seeing your current, male therapist for?

S: Umm… generally 2009. Um… he… went to the first four sessions and really I thought he was, um… uh… um… (sigh)… I thought he was (sigh)… I don’t know… immediately sitting down, I thought he was probably the biggest jerk in the world. Um… I felt, um, I felt a real connection to him and I don’t know why and I tried to get out of there because he was a male therapist. I can’t tell you. I rang them up twice, and asked please can you put me with a female, I mean, I knew what I was going in there for and I didn’t want to speak to a man… about this stuff, I couldn’t speak to a man. I don’t want to speak to a male… that’s disgusting. That’s like… and I tried to get out, but this is free counseling that I’m going to and they said, oh no my postcode is in this postcode, you are allotted a male, so I thought, ok… yeah that’s what they said to me, which is really rude… and I have complained to the boss… and, uh… so because I just had an epilepsy seizure… I had that back in January 2009 and I didn’t know what it was at the time… I just thought it was a really bad panic attack that I had been hospitalized for… I knew I needed some help; I was really bad, um… and… uh… they diagnosed me about six months later with um epilepsy, umm… and, uh… put me on medication for that… at that time, um, they said to me that… um… I have to keep away from stress… um… and this is probably stressing me out too much. So, I’ve got a brain injury and the epilepsy comes from a brain injury. What happens is if I get too stressed… and have a lack of sleep, I, I have the possibility of having a seizure, but I don’t get them very often. I don’t get hospitalized. I’ve only been hospitalized twice. I’m trying to figure out if something specific is making this happen or general things. I’m with a specialist neurologist, so he’s helping that as well. Yeah, so… is that? Is that ok? I went away on a tangent there (laughter)

R: You’ve done very well. What would you say… you’ve been with several therapists? What would you say to… to, counselors or psychologists or therapists who don’t know much about sexual abuse… um… what would you say to them is helpful for you as a person who has dealt with that in the past?

S: OK… well I’ve been saying it to my male therapist actually… he’s got no experience on this and I’ve really been hounding him on his experience… (unintelligible). I’ve told him, oh you’ve got no experience, this is what you do with me. First of all, first of all… very important, and I don’t know… it’s so important because they can make…
can make people go away and not deal with this. They can just make people go away. If a person comes in and they want to deal with this…don’t sort of dismiss them and immediately, like immediately, tell them…immediately about privacy and, um, how everything is private and…um…to the point of no return how it’s private. Um…um…uh…uh, where I am now…um at that place, I have hounded him on his privacy, um the privacy of what he is sort of doing because it’s not private in that center. The previous lady sat there and sort of told me that, told me exactly about privacy, how she was keeping it, she was keeping notes but here is how your privacy is kept. Because it is so hard to deal with this, you don’t want everyone to know, you just want the person that you are talking to to know. You don’t even want to write it down, you don’t even want to say it, let alone someone writing it in notes. It’s so frightening; you don’t even want to think about it…you don’t want somebody writing it down and showing it off in blogs. Just the privacy and also, you know, don’t abandon them…don’t do that.

I’m able to talk to you because I’ve been dealing with it for so long…when I was initially talking, even the word…even the word was frightening…even the word…even the fact that, (sigh) this could have happened was frightening and there was no way I was going to speak about it.

R: So even the phrase, “sexual abuse” or something like that…

S: Yeah, yeah, even thinking about it was hard. It’s just too frightening. Speaking about it to anyone was too frightening, because you had no one to speak…and still, there’s not a lot…sometimes people when you speak to them…I’ve had friends disappear…umm…uh...just people will say, move on...people just move away...just, they don’t want to know about it, you know. This is…I’ve got epilepsy...so I’ve got this and epilepsy and as soon as I say something about epilepsy, people…it’s so supportive compared to this…it’s like, you know…like, oh my God, you know…I’ve had people just say stuff, like, or ask details…I’ve had people also want to tell me what happened to them and stuff…and, also…while I’m thinking of it…um…in the healing thing, I’ve also put up that website that you saw. I’ve gone on the Internet, ok. The Internet is brilliant for this. I went on the Internet a while ago and found like four online support boards and met so many wonderful people that this…similar things have happened to…and I shared my story. I’ve put up my website and I do poetry and art…and the poetry has really helped because that gets it all out, so…I’m lucky enough to be able to write about this and that’s why you see this site because hopefully other people like yourself and I have been approached by other Red Cross people and other survivors, priests, you know I get regular emails through that site and survivors, um…you know, just wanting contact, wanting help. Um…and so that has helped me…putting out that site was a major mark for me. Um…and then, also, I help also at an art event as well...and that’s a public thing and I go out there and I speak...um…I speak. Um…about what happened to me to varying degrees to reporters and, um, uh…I haven’t been on television, but to radio people. Um…and in those I will always say for the people who are hopefully listening that they are not
alone because that’s how it makes you feel, that you are alone…because when the abuse is happening, you are sort of being abused and you are alone…you are alone, by yourself…and, so…it’s very hard to break out of that, so…So that’s where I’m up to at the moment. And I’m actually writing books about it at the moment, so I’ll be getting those published soon.

R: wow, you’ve done a lot of work on--
S: the writing started as part of this because the main counselor that I went to…the specialist sexual abuse counselor, um, she suggested journals…writing journals…and just writing what was in your head and that’s what was doing…I think one of the things in my childhood I did too and I remember writing in journals and saying, “Oh I hope Dad doesn’t…you know” I was actually quite brave, writing about it in my journal. You know, I hope Dad doesn’t get my nieces. And, you know, then I’ll get him or something like that, so…

R: Well, you’ve certainly done a lot of work.
S: Yeah, this has taken a long time. So it started at 19 and I’m now 36 and, um, uh…it’s uh…um…myself now compared to then…I’m a completely different person…um…um…I was very quiet back then and now I’m not…uh…I thought I was a very closed person and now I’m not. Um…and I’m definitely more artistic, um…uh…and sort of expressive compared to that. And, also…a lot more of, I won’t take garbage from people now. Um…if somebody tells me that, um, I’m garbage or something I’ll come back and tell them I’m not. If someone tries to put me down or something…so, my self esteem has increased and that type of thing. So that’s all come about by that…um…you know, I was very quiet and very reserved, very quiet. And, uh I think that was…an effect of what the abuse was doing there.

R: Ok. You said, let me go back, I think you said at one point, some of your initial thoughts you recall from back when it was happening was, why is he doing this to me? And what did I do, sort of thing.
S: Yeah, definitely “why.” I don’t think…there was not really… I didn’t really have an understanding of what he could do, because I was so young, now I do…now I do…but because I’m older and aware, but back then I wasn’t aware of anything…and what he could do. I didn’t feel that he was going to kill me or anything, but…because I was so unaware of what he could do that sort of protected me too…I hid a lot. That was another thing I did. I hid. So, um…if I found him coming in the house, if I heard him…I have one memory of hiding, but I’m sure I hid other places, but I don’t remember. Was that your question? Sorry

R: Yeah, that was it. You have certainly come a long way from hiding, talking to me.
S: Yeah…this is another thing. Um…and maybe why I couldn’t talk to men was because I wanted someone to help me out of it. Uhhh…though I did it all myself and that was actually quite surprising…and I did protect myself really well…I did it to the extreme extent. I did it, looking back now, I did really well…um…the thought of having like a savior in a man because, um… it was…um…all the stuff on the TV and stuff, women are now more…um…uh, the stuff on the TV and the stuff on kids may be exposed to, my mother was very like a housewife and dominated by him…he was into drinking and domestic violence, so I saw that as well…um, so…I had all of that to see and I just felt that I couldn’t…I had to have a man to help me out of it. And there was a lot of, you know…get married and this man would save me, so I’m looking for men to
save me (laughter)...a woman can’t save me, but a man certainly can. And no I’m not in
an abusive situation, that certainly comes up a lot. I’m not sure about other survivors, but
maybe if I had...I didn’t have anyone...I didn’t have like an Uncle Bob or anything to
sort of look up to or care for me and be a mentor and a possible other father figure...I just
had this horrendous father figure.

R: You managed to find a good relationship, someone who was willing to take all that
comes with this?
S: I’m lucky. I’m very lucky in life at the moment to have...um...my husband and um
my male friend...uh...they are both very invested in me. Um...and, uh...I’m actually—
even though I’m harassing him to death—I’m lucky to have the male counselor (laughter)
R: (laughter)
S: I shouldn’t say it because I’m using it against him. In the last couple of weeks I told
him that he doesn’t have experience in this stuff, but all I’m doing is I’m holding that
against him...it’s really bizarre what I’m doing...what’s sort of happened there.
Um...yeah, so...I’m just sort of in that position now. I’m sort of in a good position...and
that’s allowed me to do all this. That support...otherwise, I would be...it would not be
good. Yeah...it would be very hard. I think you certainly got to have people
supporting you. And I don’t think if I didn’t have those people...I wouldn’t be able
to talk on radio, if you know what I mean. Because when you do that...it’s very
important to have people you can talk to about that. But I also have people on the
e-mail too...I’ve got a very wide support base, compared to other survivors. Other
survivors might not have this, or even their husband...their husband may not want to
know about it.

R: You’ve used this word survivor...that’s the word you use to refer to yourself and to
other people like you...
S: Yeah...Yeah. Um...yeah...um...that’s certainly the term that’s used when I speak to
other people. Some people want to say victim and...(laughter)...that’s not me...so, I
actually, um...someone wanted to make a documentary and include me in there and I had
a lot of say about her using the word “victim” because...I am a crime victim. I
understand that, but I’m not and I don’t feel that way and if I felt that way about that, that
I’m this crime victim and stuff like that, then I wouldn’t be able to do what I do.
So...you can look at it in a negative way that way and not deal with it and some people
do it that way. Or do it the other way and say what it is and say how...what it
is...is...that my father abused me and that’s his fault and his problem and that had
nothing to do with me. I just happened to be born in that family and he abused me
and...I’m a good person, I’m not at fault and I’m a good person. Regardless.

R: And that’s, because I was...in doing a lot of research, that’s something that’s really
stuck out to me the choice of using survivor versus victim and the different connotations
that go along with that...
S: I’ve never used victim. Never. Um...I’ve never used the term victim. I certainly felt
like a victim for some time, but once I started...and...certainly the female therapist, the
good one didn’t use the word victim...and she was very positive. That was another thing
she did—she was very positive about what I was doing and what type of victory I would
have over my father if I sort of confronted him and how victorious and courageous I was
in doing this. And it is very courageous...it’s like...I just can’t (laughter) explain it. You
are going against the whole of like...society tells you that this is probably one of the most
dreadful things… I’m sure there might be more, you being a psychologist, but this could be one of the most dreadful things that could happen to you. Society is telling you that this is the most dreadful thing… and people (sigh)… are just like… um… people’s reactions! It’s um one of the most courageous things even to go into a therapist’s office to sit down and say it. Some of them are unable to say they were abused, but to even sit down… to try and find help for it is one of the most courageous things you could ever do in your whole life. I’m lucky I didn’t have my abuser saying anything like that to me, but if you had your abuser sitting there harassing you, telling you not to tell anyone or something, that would have to be the most courageous thing you could ever do in your whole life. I couldn’t imagine that, you know. The only thing… I’m lucky because I’m female. I’ve met male survivors… I can’t imagine what… because it’s not even known in society that males can be abused and have been abused… that would have to be worse.

R: Right, feel even more alone—
S: Yeah, yeah, so. Because it’s males. That’s sort of how I feel on the word survivor. I don’t, you know, I… I use the word survivor because that is what… that is how I am. I know there are stages of this and one day— I don’t know when—I’ll sort of move forward on this, but at this point I’m sort of talking to as many people as I can and do my bit. It’s really tiring. I’ve spoken to hundreds of survivors… I couldn’t tell you how many stories I’ve read and heard about it, so… and that’s all helping me. Um… it’s all helping me because I… I ask them, ‘how have you done this?’ So I’m sharing with other people, just as you would if you had cancer.

R: I was looking at your website again last night, thinking about talking to you today, looking more thoroughly and I read some of the poems and they are very beautiful and very moving.
S: Yeah. I’m very good. I’m actually published (laughter). Um… (unintelligible)… a lot of the actual data are on there… some of them are only minor. I haven’t actually got my story on here, not the detail. It’s only in the poems and the poems can be taken any way… I think it’s about five years worth of blog entries and stuff. It’s been up for five years. Some of them are other people’s poems and some other people’s stories are very frightening. I moderate them for when they go up and, uh… about 50% are mine and about 50% are other peoples who are anonymous because of the privacy sort of thing. Um… yeah. All that type of thing. And, um, my name does not appear on there, so if one was to do a Google search and find it quite easily enough… it’s been hacked. I get abusive messages… I get messages from… um… I’ve gotten ridiculous pedophile messages. Um… um, also I moderate a forum too. Um… and uh I get messages through there and help people through there. As I said, I don’t know how many people I’ve helped. It’s been over a long period of time.

R: Well, is there anything else you want to say? I don’t have any specific questions for you, you did a great job of giving me a picture of your story and how you have dealt with it, but I wanted to leave it open to see if there was anything else you wanted to add.
S: Yeah… just, uh… in regards to this male therapist. Um… because it’s actually quite surprising because a lot of survivors won’t go to a male, but I am. Um… for male therapists who want to help, OK, who want to help… be careful of every action in the room, every word that is spoken to a survivor, a female survivor… uh… every sort of threatening message… every word they say… like, um… don’t you know, don’t bring up personal sexual topics, um, until the survivor is ready… yeah? Um… um… and
just be aware that because what happens is that, when you meet a guy, you automatically go, ‘Is he going to do this to me?’ It’s just…this is what I’ve seen. You start comparing and you start thinking it’s just another guy on the list…and just be aware of that…or that’s certainly what I think and I have heard other survivors that say that about males in general and, uh, and just be aware of that. Um…you know, I imagine there is other reactions, but that’s sort of been my reaction that kicks in immediately. I’m even amazed sometimes…males in general, so I’ve just…I just have to just be careful of that. So, um…certainly I’ve got a fear of men and I only just realized that. Um…and…uh…you know, just if people (unintelligible)…and I’m trying to deal with that. This guy I’m just seeing how it goes and what have you, so…um. I’m just praying that he is not another abuser. I’m truly praying that because I can’t figure it out. I just can’t figure it out and if you think I’ve just put myself in that situation, if that’s what I’ve done. And I’m just trying out that situation and seeing what happens, so, uh…we’ll just see (laughter). (unintelligible). I’ve got more experience dealing with this and I’ve told him that. Um…that’s probably…it. Um…yeah, but, you know, I’ve been told about male therapists that they have to be there so that females can feel trusting again towards a male.

R: Yeah…it sounds like you are in…you said there was something in you that there was some sort of connection and you are continuing with it in a form that is more safe for now.

S: I do like him. He is, I think, a nice guy. But, you know, unfortunately things have kicked in, like…uh…I’ll give you one example. The, um, receptionist told me and it was only quick…told me, ‘Oh, he’s a nice man.’ And she was probably, um, being nice in saying, but that…in itself caused me so much dilemmas because all of a sudden it kicked in…he’s a nice man, my father was a nice man…he’s a pedophile. And I’ve actually accused him of being a pedophile…my counselor…I’ve accused him often. I’ve said, ‘I think you’re a pedophile’ (laughter).

R: Yeah, it’s funny how you can sort of believe it and laugh at it at the same time (Laughter)

S: (Laughter) Yeah, sometimes that’s how I’m thinking. (laughter). Truly…things have gotten down to I’m protecting the area where I am…I’m making sure that this guy is or is not a pedophile so that all the other survivors in this area won’t come to him. I’ve told him what I’m doing and it’s sort of even come down to that. What I’ve done is I’ve recreated the situation here. And other female therapists that I’ve gone to have said that I’ve just got to get out of it. And one of them suggested…this is ridiculous suggestion from an experienced therapist, telling me that if you want a relationship with a male, why don’t you go and have a relationship with your father, like some sort of friendship with my father, my abuser. I just about…that was someone with 20 years experience. That’s ridiculous. Put that down as a “no” (laughter). When I came home, I told my husband and…uh…he just sort of said to me, he said, ‘Over my dead body.’ (Laughter) And I never went back to her, so…that’s obviously a no, no. Don’t ever force…you can’t force them away from abuser, but to actually say go back and have a relationship after I’ve been gone for so long, it’s ridiculous. It’s ridiculous. Any person would know that, without any sort of training. I don’t know if she did it to get me out, if she didn’t like me.

R: Yeah, it sounds like that wasn’t the right time to make that sort of comment to you.
S: (laughter) She was never going to be my...she was actually recommended to me too. So, yeah.
R: Well, it sounds like you are trying with your male therapist and it sounds like...you are very honest, you will sort of say, ‘I think you’re a pedophile’ if that’s what you are thinking.
S: (laughing)
R: That’s how therapy should work.
S: I really...(laughter) that’s basically what I’ve done and now I’m hiding out at home. I’m hiding out at my home. I won’t go anywhere near him, but it’s ok...I don’t know...I don’t know whether...eventually I’m going to have to go back, because it’s a free service and I have to keep on their quarterlies and I think I actually have to attend the counseling, you know, to get the free counseling. Um...uh...because I know, um, when I haven’t rung them up...made a booking...they take me off their list pretty quickly and they will just put someone else on. And, um...I’m a...it’s not just like marriage counseling, it’s um...trauma counseling. So, it’s attached to...um...a local hospital and, uh, here you get free counseling through medicare, like medical assistance. If I didn’t, I’ve gotten quotes of, um, specialists um, sexual abuse ones and they were like $150 per week...and I couldn’t afford that. I’m sort of happy with him, I think it might be good.
R: can I ask you how many years of education you have? Just for demographic purposes.
S: Yeah, I’m well educated. I did year 12 and then I did...now you wouldn’t know this, but it’s a system TAFE and I did three years there, in information technology and that’s my field. Information Technology...I think you call them technical colleges and I went to a technical college that’s well known here. Not a university, but that’s sort of what I am. And then I’m very experienced in what I do, so.
R: Right, ok. I know nothing about that field, but I suppose that helps with your website, that knowledge.
S: Yeah, that’s why I did it. I was at home and wanted something to do...and saw that other people...there are other survivor websites out there...that one there, my one is probably one of the largest personal ones. There are forums that are much larger, but that one is sort of one of the larger ones that I’ve seen. There are other smaller ones and group ones, but there is certainly a network of survivor sites online, but, again, it’s a matter of chance that you actually find them and have the courage to actually be able to post on there. Um...so...you know.
R: Well, I thank you very much. I really appreciate it. Have you said enough?
S: Yeah, that’s fine, that’s fine. Thanks so much.

Anne’s Coded Transcript

R: Yes it’s recording. So, I’m going to give you this. And you can just sort of read it to yourself while I read it to you and then just start wherever. I may occasionally jot down some notes so I can come back to some things that strike me. So, I would like you to please describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your experience of childhood sexual abuse and I would like you to please, as you do so, include how this understanding has changed over time and the influence this understanding has had on your sense of self and your relationships with others.
S: Ok, yeah. Um…well…there were two, two pieces of my sexual abuse. Um…one of them is more complicated than the other. The…the first one that happened to me…and it kind of happened alongside the other one was with a guy who was in our neighborhood. He was significantly older than I was…and you know, when I was growing up there was my friend Will who was one year younger than me and his mom used to watch me and so we were best friends…we hung out all the time…we would get on the bus together…and they would tease us, like, there’s your girlfriend, there’s your boyfriend…but Will and I were as close as anybody. And, this guy who lived…I don’t know…one block, kind of away, um, saw us as an opportunity. He was older…probably around 18 or 19 and we were probably around…I was probably around 8 and Will was about 7. And, uh, we…Will and I were like trying to figure out…you know, like what are our bodies doing…what do you have, what do I have kind of stuff. It was really innocent…just like playful. But then it took on this other quality when this, you know, older kid or, you know--man for us--got involved.

R: You said 18 to 19?

S: He was probably that age…in between like 17, 18, 19…in that age range. Um…and he saw us, um, and kind of singled us out…from like all of the people in the neighborhood. There was a really close group of kids that all played together, um, but we were the youngest…um, and…you know…went and showed us, like, you know dirty magazines and stuff. You know, asked us to do things that were…for us…really uncomfortable. Um…and, you know, it was the two of us together and so that made it kind of weird because we were looking at each other and we already kind of felt ashamed because we were kind of trying to discover each other and like, it was kind of like a ‘show me’ kind of thing, but I think the climate of that set this tone for us that we had already been doing something wrong…and so, you know, I think that may have influenced when we were, you know…we felt it definitely changed when this older kid was showing us these magazines and asking us to do things. Um, and he…you know…you know, we…tried to protect each other. Um, and so…I would say that I would do something so that Will wouldn’t have to.

R: Right.

S: And this went on for a little while. Uh…when we got to a place ….I’m trying to determine what exactly happened…but we, um, decided this was too difficult…too scary or something and we said…‘hey, listen, we’re not doing this anymore.’ And I think it was primarily me who said that. Because we were scared.

R: To this older guy you said that?

S: Yeah…we can’t do this anymore. Um, and then, he, uh…ended up coming back like later on…you know, a couple of years later and asking if..um--he wasn’t asking, he actually singled me out and he took me behind my garage and said, ‘if you don’t do this then I will hurt your family.’

R: Mmm hmm.

S: And…I said, ‘no.’ And that was it.

R: Ok.

S: Um…the other part, which is much more complicated is…was my brother.

R: Mm hmm.

S: He was four years older than me. Um…and he was, he was probably about 14…I was about 10…um. And he, you know, there was one particular instance where he…um…he
asked me to sit on him. And...um...without my underwear. And he, um...the really
difficult part of it was that my mom came in. And...
R: During that?
S: Yeah...or, no...it was actually...well, she had thought we were rolling around, but she
had found my underwear at the bottom of the bed. And...you know, she didn’t ask any
questions, she didn’t do anything, she didn’t say anything. So those were the two
different instances that happened to me. The reason that it’s even more complicated with
my brother is that he died when he was 19 and I was 15.
R: Oh. How did he die?
S: He was in a motorcycle accident...not wearing a helmet and being 19 and maybe
knowing that he could die or not...I don’t know. But I never had a chance to deal with
that with him. And as far as I can remember it was only this one time that it had
happened. The abuse part...the physical abuse part...the physical abuse was a lot longer.
He used to beat the crap out of me for a really long time. Um...which was, you know,
kind of the backdrop of that. Um, so...um. In terms of how it influenced me and my
relationship with other people...it, um, I was very skittish and very tough really early on.
I mean, a part of that was, just, the physical abuse that I received by him. But also just a
very suspicious kind of, wary, um when I started developing and menstruating...I was
terrified...I was really on guard with any male person...uh, I was...you know, I felt
really transparent and uh, like people could see through me. And I just felt like a
spectacle. Um...And so, I would really avoid the gaze of any male...to the point of
absurdity. There was, you know, my brother’s best friend Anthony who I was always
close to and he would have his friends around and I would like go behind buildings so I
wouldn’t have to like see him or like be seen by him. And he like saw me and was like,
“what are you doing?” (laughter) But I just felt always really uncertain about my body
and just about my femininity....like I didn’t have a really firm sense of that. And I felt,
you know, I got big boobs really early on (laughter) so it was hard.
R: (laughter)
S: I just...I didn’t know how to handle any of this and it really influenced maybe sort of a
dissociative sort of...body awareness for me. Um, I...would, you know, when I had my
first boyfriend and I lost my virginity when I was 15, I...I, uh...I wasn’t there...I didn’t
like show up and it probably wouldn’t have happened if I knew anything about...if I was
kind of embodied. You know, uh...so...it was, you know, I felt sorry for him (giggling).
It was terrible, like meeting at an amusement park...and, like, you know. And that’s how
my relationships got started...like, you know, being involved in, um...me trying to help
people and feeling sorry for my boyfriends which was just awful and then eventually
getting involved in an abusive relationship to me with a really jealous guy that I dated for
like three years. And then, uh, I was an undergrad and I took my first psych class with [a
professor] and (laughter) and I was like, phenomenology and all this stuff started....I
developed like a whole style of trying to approach all this stuff, which was
compounded by, you know, I was like 15 when my brother died and everything and from
there on. I was about 19 when I was taking her class, which was the same age he was
when he died...and I was really forced to encounter a lot within myself and I went to
therapy for the first time then and, you know, had to navigate a whole set of...like a
new relationship to myself, which primarily started on an intellectual level and
gradually regressed into more of the feelings regarding it. Um, one of the things that
I realized when I, you know, I was in [Northwest city]...and, you know, I was meeting with my...these really cute cousins of mine that are like really young, I was noticing, you know...we would go to the park and they would just plop down in my lap and I was like thinking, 'how amazing is it that they can be so...just...expressive with their bodies' and it really choked me. I was, like, ok...I've never been able to do that...I've never been able to flop down in somebody's lap for as long as I can remember. There's always been like a physical distance between me and...especially men, but pretty much everybody.

Um...but that started to unfold in the process of therapy and trying to figure out what this meant and how do I deal with this with my brother not being around...I can't confront him, I can't talk to him...I eventually told my parents what had happened and they had no idea.

R: You mentioned before you Mom saw the underwear...she didn't say anything...she didn't...
S: Yeah...my family doesn't talk so much. **I'm the designated talker.** (laughter)
R: You're the designated talker (laughter). Ok.
S: So, um...there's one in every family (laughter). That's my department. Which I am really getting annoyed with lately because...it's become more and more difficult to get people to talk who need to be talking. And I'm tired of it. But, just this whole process, you know, of me having...I had a very different childhood from my older sister. You know she was two years older than John and then I was four years younger than him, six years difference. And, you know, the kind of life that she has is very different from mine, so I've been realizing just, like, throughout my life, what's different here. Why are you the way you are and part of that is just her being the oldest and being in charge of us, but also having to experience very different childhoods in the same family.

So...um...yeah. I'm trying to think where else to go...
R: That's Ok. I think you said his name was Will, your friend. So that...so you said you were a year older than he was.
S: Right.
R: And you two were friends. When did you start...
S: His mom started babysitting me when I was two and he was one, so...
R: Ok, ok.
S: We were friends for a long time. We're still friends. So...
R: And so you two were exploring with each other before this neighbor started....
S: Yeah, and we talked about in terms of--and, he doesn't remember a lot--of what happened.
R: Right.
S: He does remember the part with me...the, just like...being naked in the woods. Like, what do you have, what's going on? That was just like a 'show me' sort of thing. It took me a while to figure out what was different about what we were doing because at the time it was all together...there was some quality about it that was a badness to it, you know, and I think it had to do with, you know, just a gender thing. If we were two girls or two boys it might have been different...but somehow in the neighborhood it was just like Will and Anne, you know, already at the bus stop it was like hard enough to have a friend that was a boy, so that was cultural...you know, but we were able. Like, he remembers you know, us kind of looking at each others' bodies and trying to figure out stuff. And the
difference between that and what happened. Um...with this guy Sam, who was the neighbor.

R: And you said it was sort of after it started with the neighbor Sam that gave this whole kind of thing a 'badness' feel? Like that kind of framed it all in a sense of badness or something?

S: Yeah...there was guilt. There was a badness. There was...uh...the word 'dirty' became a part of it. And...

R: At that time as it was going on, when you were that age, it had that sort of connotation?

S: Oh yeah...it was clear that there was, like, this, like...going too far, you know and this was not ok what he was asking us to do. And it was us. There was an 'us' quality to it. Which made it really difficult in some ways because I don't know if we would have made the same decisions or followed it in the same way if it would have been either one of us on our own.

R: Right, it's hard to know...

S: So...yeah.

R: And, um, how did this Sam person...he just sort of came up to you one day? How did it happen?

S: Will's house is here...and Sam's house is right over here and then there's this valley kind of thing and we all would hang out in these woods right here...and we would all play down there. And we would just...we had clubs and teepees and stuff down there...um, you could see from where his house was up on the hill all the way down and that's where we would play. And, so...he probably saw us down there, you know, showing each other...or just running around naked for God's sakes (laughter). And he took the opportunity. Um...and, you know, I don't know why it is that pornography is always in woods under some rocks somewhere (laughter)?

R: (laughter)

S: There's just something so...wilderness...or something but, um...we were so curious and we wanted to like...and, it just went to a whole new level. Um (sigh)...and...I guess I should tell you what he asked us to do...I don't know if you want to know that.

R: It's really up to you...how far you feel comfortable taking it...

S: He just asked us to perform oral sex with him...

R: Mm hmm.

S: And that was it. So...

R: Um, and...you made a comment about how this went on for a while and eventually you were the one--you were the talker, again--who made the decision to stop it...or...

S: Because it felt...it had an increasingly fearful quality and I felt really protective of him...of Will. Again, it may not...you know, it's hard to say what would have happened if it would have been either me on my own or Will, which is weird to think about...it's like, he knew what we were doing and we thought...oh there's something wrong with us for doing that and he saw some kind of badness in us and just asking us to go further with it.

R: So he saw some sort of vulnerability that was already there?

S: That we felt like, 'oh, maybe we shouldn't be doing this' or, you know...somehow all of it got grouped together...um, so that he was able to take advantage of...what I think, you know,...what Will and I later talked about as being really kind of innocent discovery,
and it was safe…but also weird you know because we were different you know people and we were friends, but it was just, you know, just knowing each other’s bodies and…you know, most of it was just like…but we…it was…just kind of figuring that stuff out…versus with this other piece that came in…um, yeah. And it…yeah. That was what it was…he’s like, ‘ok, you guys want to see?’…‘you want to see more about this?’…and ‘I’ll show you these pictures in exchange for this.’ And we didn’t know…so.

R: And….I guess, um, taking them one at a time…the episode with Will and Sam and then your brother, separately. So, is there a sense in which your understanding of what transpired there has changed over time… and…how?…in what way has it changed?… S: Well, developmentally it’s taken on different components. When I first started the project of self-reflection…it was when I was 19…regarding my brother—that piece, incidentally, was completely…it was lost to me, it was gone—uh.

R: with your brother?
S: Yeah. That came later.
R: Ok.
S: Not the stuff with Sam. That was there, I remembered that…it was over a longer period of time and it wasn’t so…um…just…I couldn’t blow over with it….because he was a stranger or something and I could talk to Will about it, so there was an avenue to explore it…um. And, I knew certainly vocationally, you know, that once I started taking psych classes and having all of this information that I needed to try to figure out what this was. So that changed it. And like I said, there was an intellectual kind of part of that, but then, the longer I spent in therapy, the more I was able to approach it in terms of ‘what are the implications for this?’… in terms of how I understood myself and other people and my relationship with men, in particular, and how had that influenced my relationships…and, it sort of all spirals from there. Um….but, you know, this piece with Will and Sam…it went from just feeling like I had done something really…into when he approached me again and asked me to continue and I said ‘no’ feeling, you know, afraid for my family…because he was huge. He haunted me. And he had tremendous power, you know, for a while. And…his threat was taken very seriously by me. He didn’t ever do anything, but, um, I didn’t know that he wouldn’t, so…I was kind of, just really worried for a long time, that he would hurt somebody I loved.

R: Right, of course.
S: So from…the relationship with him himself changed….um, you know, this feeling like I had done something wrong, um, I was able to kind of talk about with Will later…you know, and we were able to work it out together and we’ve been friends the whole time, so we’ve been able to try to make sense of it together…which has been really important.

R: Yeah.
S: Yeah, so it has changed quite a bit to like that feeling of just huge power and influence and fear…to…um, reflective, intellectual reflection, to…um, a really bodily feeling reflection…especially when I look at kids who are free to express themselves. Like, wow, that’s so beautiful…a real, punch in the belly feel…like I wish I could have that.

R: Ok. And then…um, with your brother…how has that…understanding changed over time.? You said it wasn’t even there for a while…
S: It wasn’t easily accessible until I started unpacking the other abuse too. Like, there was physical abuse which was overt because...I mean, I was sent to the hospital a number of times. And then...there was really a tough quality about me that was very much instigated by that. But what I didn’t realize or...what I wasn’t able to approach was that he had done that as well.

R: Mm hmm.

S: And I think primarily I was also so angry with my parents for not protecting me...on a number of different levels.

R: Yeah, on the physical level, too?

S: I mean...he would get in trouble, but they didn’t like take care of him...and they didn’t take care of me. Um, my mom took a full-time job...a week after I was born. She was...you know...pretty much...she was there, but she wasn’t. My sister was often in charge of us and my dad was working; we were on our own, you know. And I had a lot of anger about that for a long time just because I, you know, didn’t really feel connected to my mom and I didn’t feel like I understood like all these things that were going on with me. So, it was hard, you know...and especially after he died...it was...it kind of, I really went into psychology, like, trying to figure out these things...make sense of them and make use of them. Because I felt like I needed to do something with this stuff...and, um, my kind of spinning with it wasn’t enough. So, um...I also needed to figure out how to have a relationship with my parents that was authentic and real and not just angry and see-ya...and, yeah, that was hard...really hard and complicated and a lot of therapy (laughter). Really good therapists, too, you know. You know, mostly women...

R: On purpose?

S: Yeah, you know, there’s gotta be some reason for it. There were, uh, three different, um, women therapists that I’ve had who were extremely powerful for me and had different influences on my life at different times. And now I’m in therapy with a male for the first time and it’s been extremely helpful...and I probably wasn’t ready at all before...so...it’s uh, it’s good. I’ve been um, you know, in terms of healing stages along the way...I don’t know if we’re there yet...

R: Yeah, that’s fine.

S: One of the things that I did encounter...and this may seem kind of abstract...but before I got married I went to a shaman and I had a soul retrieval kind of ceremony and, uh, it’s...I had no idea what to expect, but I was just feeling like I wanted to figure out who I was and were I was going before I committed—(laughter)

R: (laughter)

S: So...I went and, I found that there was...there was um...I encountered my spirit animal, which is a wolf, and...uh...and I kind of went through and saw different pieces where I had been fragmented in this really, incredibly intense three-hour period that felt like five minutes. I went and encountered these places, particularly regarding bodily fragmentation around sexual abuse that helped me...you know...kind of...figure out a way to bring that back and work with it and incorporate it in a way that wasn’t just kind of split off or...which was really helpful. I got a tattoo of my wolf. (laughter). It was really visceral...this shaman knew everything. She didn’t know anything about me...but she knew everything. It
was extraordinary. Um…it’s been a lot of work since then to kind of recognize those pieces and bring them back into myself and acknowledge them and work with them. I’m still doing it. You know.

R: And this, you mentioned a couple of times, and I guess I would know this…the little bit I know about you…it sounds like this has really been a bodily thing for you…the sexual abuse was a very…very bodily…I mean it is bodily, but it really had a bodily impact for you…

S: Right. I wasn’t really able to have an orgasm or meaningful sexual relationships at all and they were really dissociative. And the act of intercourse…and, you know, I didn’t like to be looked at…I didn’t like to be watched or noticed. I, you know, for a long time…wore like ace bandage like sports bras to flatten my chest…so it really had a pretty deep influence on my sexual unfolding…I didn’t want to have any overt, you know, kind of…I didn’t want anyone to notice my womanhood, or my sexuality at all…and that was a really big thing. Um…so I had to figure out how to…be embodied again…have a new relationship with myself and be touched by other people, even small things would take on a quality of like, ‘what the hell?’ you know. I had a really skittish existence for a while…trembly. And tough. Thick, you know.

R: And, you uh, you said with your brother…what was difficult was that he died and you were never able to confront him…so, confrontation or something like that is important or plays a crucial role in healing…?

S: Or just being able to make sense of it later on. I had no desire to ask Sam why he was doing it because he wasn’t in my life…he was a stranger…that seemed pretty obvious. But with John, it was part of a whole system of things that, you know…if you…I would have loved to have asked him. What I found out later on from my aunt that he had told her once that he was really sorry for what had happened…for how much he had kicked my ass…and it sounds weird, but that meant a lot to me to hear that…

R: That he had been sorry?

S: That he had told someone else that he was sorry for what he had done to me. Um, and it was complicated because my brother was my hero…like…it wasn’t like…simple. I mean, I adored him. You know, I wanted his respect, I wanted his approval and, you know, he was my older brother and…I wanted his approval more than anyone’s. So…it was complicated. And when he died, I…I really tried to become him for my parents. Like I tried to…make up for it somehow…and like become him so I wouldn’t lose him…and all that kind of came crashing down when I was about 19 and taking classes…and then I started therapy, and, you know, became quite suicidal for a little while. Um…it was, it was really hard. I…have a different understanding now of him. Because I have…I’m in my 30s…I have the perspective of someone in my 30s and able to see, you know, what it’s like to grow up…what happens, you know…what happens at home and how he was the way he was. And also, just spiritually…I have a really good relationship with him now. My brother, who is still my brother even though I was 19 and I have gone way past that…so…it’s weird. It’s, you know…I’ve been able to kind of work with, not just his memory, but more like in an active sense…his, you know, spirit. And my spirit. I’ve been able to make amends. And…just don’t have the benefit of embodied (laughter) kind of language to do that…but, maybe, you know, it’s in some ways even deeper than that…so I understand a lot more now. And completely forgive him. It’s just really nice. And, it took a
while after that to come through me...because I couldn't will it to come from me...it's not a matter of will.

R: So, it sounds like you have a good relationship with him now.

S: Yeah. Yeah. And, it’s uh...and with my body, you know, it's an active process...an ongoing process. It’s something, you know, that I have to work on all the time because there will be instinctual kind of fidgety things that happen and then I, um, sometimes I’ll have to notice that and soothe myself and notice where that’s from and...also be able to transcend it so that I can really be in a relationship with other people without being this sort of weird skittish thing...um. So...yeah. I was just going to say, Aidan, has really helped that for me, in terms of me...being able to be embodied and expressive. Um, one of the things that you should know....this is, one of the things that happens for people who have been sexually abused...especially women...when they give birth they sometimes re-experience some of that stuff...and it happened for me too. It was really hard to feel that hopeless in the act of delivery and childbirth. And so, I had to contend with some post-partum stuff after that, that I think in part that was just related to medicalization of childbirth and ridiculous things that they do that I didn’t know about and would have made different choices if I had known. But that was part of it...a revisiting of it and in that moment a sort of helplessness.

R: So it was particularly a feeling of helplessness while giving birth?

S: Yeah, like there is something that is happening to you...that you know, you don’t really get a say.

R: Yeah...you’re not in control.

S: But also really...retrospectively, really empowering too because I got to find my way through that and be embodied with Aidan through breast feeding and it was really visceral and powerful and um...I don’t want to say I was asexual but like, being a mom was kind of a vehicle for me to kind of reemerge into my body and be loving and caring and uh...and expressive in that way. Um...and that was really beautiful. Um...and that helped me also kind of reclaim my sexuality.

R: Yeah.

S: After that I was able to kind of emerge from that.

R: Yeah, so sexuality is a very embodied thing, so through this embodied experience with Aidan you were able to—

S: Yeah. It was good (laughter). So...being able to have, you know, a good experience.

R: Right. Ok. Are there other things that....other ways in which a process of change has happened for you?

S: Um...I don’t know, just being married for a really long time I guess (laughter). I really, you know, being able to share this stuff with my husband and be able to really have a safe relationship with him and have him be really respectful and treating me with a lot of dignity and care has been really important too...and so...that’s been transformative, just having a partner who is really kind and a good person has been really helpful. So...

R: I just remember, you said that...eventually you told your parents what had happened, particularly about your brother and your experience with him?

S: Right. That was not a blaming thing...it was something that I felt like I needed them to know what had happened. Um...and I also needed them to know that I had moved on from it and, you know, it was only something I could do after I had sort of
worked through that process because it would have been really difficult in my relationship with them to kind of go there with them with the anger I had felt. So I had to move past that in order to be able to approach them in a way that was going to still maintain our relationship but still let them know that this had happened and...that they should know.

R: And the anger? That was because they hadn’t protected you?

S: That’s it. There were ways in which they could have really alleviated some of those things...um...and it wasn’t a mystery...I mean, they knew about the physical abuse because they had to take me to the hospital, so they were there for that...but it could have been explored a bit more. A lot more (laughter). And, and...for whatever reason they weren’t able to do that, so...

R: And your...um...you said that it was later on when you remembered or could easily access what had happened with your brother and that is complicated I’m sure by the fact that he was your hero...what kind of feelings or thoughts did you have, sort of, initially, if you can remember whenever you could first sort of access that memory?

S: I felt, um...I felt, well it all came...the...the memory itself was, um, vivid. Um...and I felt really...betrayed and angry and helpless and...and I was really well held by my therapist in those moments so that was really good. As I said, it’s ongoing, you know...trying to go and descend into those places is really a challenge...and it came when it did because it was time for it to come. But it was definitely difficult for me to know how to...how to encounter him again because I felt estranged from his memory again.

I had done a chunk of work and I was like, ‘oh great...here I go.’ Now there’s that and what else is there? I didn’t want to have to keep re-losing him. You know.

R: So that came after your work of starting to regain him? After he had died?

S: Yeah. Ok...there’s more, you know (laughter). The reason that that piece was so resistant is that, I...I didn’t want to unsanctify...you know, his memory. He was something that I felt I needed to preserve and protect. Umm...but. Only after I had done some of that work was I able to have that memory...and also...and understand that, from the place from where he was coming from and where I was coming from and what that did...and it also had the, you know, the implications for my parents and my family. So it opened up a whole new...new constellation of things to work with. So...

R: And, this is kind of a leading question (laughter). And so you...you understand these experiences now as...abusive...that is, that word fits with—

S: Oh yeah. That word is helpful to a degree. Um...it is...you know...it’s a word. And it’s not, you know...the stuff that was easily identified by me as abuse was the stuff with Sam. You know, because he was not involved in my life. What was not as easy to identify was because I was so...um, there was so much more involved, uh...was with John, you know. It was extremely complicated. And it was really abusive and, you know, it really set up a whole structure for me that I needed to work with...um, the way that I’ve been able to make sense with some of that proactively is as a healer using the things that happened to me to try to help other people in finding their own words, whether its “abuse” or just abject pain around people that they love and who have hurt them. And...what that means in terms of what they say to themselves and stuff like that. So...
R: Yeah, so you seem to be making a clear distinction there that you could easily identify what happened with Sam as abusive, primarily because he was a stranger, because you didn’t love him?
S: Right.
R: Whereas you loved and looked up to your brother?
S: Right. I was clear about the physical abuse, but what wasn’t as clear was that he had also abused me in that way, so…
R: And, what…I don’t know how to phrase what I’m trying to say…the physical abuse, uh, was clear in a sense that it was abusive and this sexual component was not as clear. Can you try to say more about what it was that made that less clear?
S: I just didn’t remember.
R: Right, the simple act of not remembering. (laughter). Well, not remembering, it’s not simple at all (laughter).
S: (laughter).
R: Repression and all of that is not simple (laughter).
S: I didn’t know. I, uh, I…there’s a reason why I remembered the physical abuse…it was over a long period of time and it was really traumatizing and really hurtful… I mean, I had to deal with that, but, um…there’s something about…all of the sexual stuff that just felt, so…you know…there was some quality to it that made it not ok. And…you know, I don’t know why I would have such, you know, strong identification with just the physical abuse as opposed to…you know, why that in particular…it’s a good question. I don’t know. Uh, yeah. There’s something different about it.
R: And that was, I think…by the ages, that was…somewhat overlapping or after what happened with Sam? That happened first?
S: Yeah…that had gone on when we were a lot younger. I just remember, you know, it was prepubescent…I was…I matured really early, but, uh…um, yeah. There was something about the ages of like 7, 8, 9…in that area for me, but I hadn’t begun to, you know, to menstruate or anything like that…which was hard. You know, becoming a woman was really difficult. Um…so…being the only girl in the all boys soccer team and they all got to change their shirts in public. I was just really upset about that (laughter), so…those distinctions were hard for me. So…
R: Well, anything else you want to say?
S: No, I think…that’s a lot probably (laughter).
R: (laughter). Yeah, it is…much more for you than me, I’m sure.
S: I hope it…it’s something that I’ve been able to…to…to work with. And that I’ve also been able to be transformed by. I wanted to…do this with you because I felt really strongly that, you know, there are possibilities for healing here. And…it’s ok. That it can be ok. Um…
R: And, like you said, it’s a process? Something that is ongoing?
S: Yeah…right, right.
R: Ok, I think that’s good. Thank you.

Sasha’s Coded Transcript

R: Ok, I’m just going to put this right there. I’m just going to read this same statement that I’ve given to you and I want you to follow along with me and then whenever you are
ready, you can start wherever you’d like. So I want you to describe how you have come to understand or come to terms with your experience of childhood sexual abuse. And, while doing so, I want you to include how this understanding has changed over time and the influence of this understanding on your sense of self and your relationships with others. OK?

S: Ok. Umm…I would say over time, um, I began to understand that…um, not to take it personally and although as a child, um, it has affected my self esteem and confidence…um, as I’ve gotten older, um, I realized things weren’t my fault…and, um…but the love and support of friends and family helped me come to terms with, uh, understanding why things happened as a child and to better have, um, coping skills to deal with it and to get past it and not to continue to take it into adulthood. Um…and relationships with others…it affected just like, trust issues. That was a big issue. Trust. Um…and maybe, I would say probably, the stability too…um, especially with, um, dating. So…

R: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit, um, as much as you feel comfortable with telling me, about your, um, experience as a child. How old were you? Who was this experience with? That kind of stuff? A little bit of a background.

S: I was 12 and um I was raped by a schoolmate and…um…it was after school. And…uh…my parents worked, so I had to walk to my grandmother’s house and I told her what happened. She called my parents at work and they came and the police were called. They came and took a statement and then I had to go to the hospital and they did the rape kit and everything. I had a counselor—she was great. Um, she was very, uh, understanding…uh…very caring, very kind. Uh, she didn’t make me feel like anything was my fault. And um…

R: Was that immediately…when did you start seeing the counselor?

S: Yeah…it was within the week or…it was very soon…which I think is what helped me get through it a lot better. I think if it would have took longer I would have had a harder time. Actually, throughout the years I had flashbacks, nightmares…but I think it would have been a lot worse if I didn’t have that counseling. I had a really hard time though because when we did go to court, um, the family—they kept lashing out and saying things in court that were very hurtful. They were calling me a liar, even though there was proof—the hospital and all—actually there were witnesses, schoolmates that were there. They didn’t actually witness the rape, but they were there when I kept saying “no” and you know, “let me go home.” They actually…what was great was that one of my schoolmates actually came to court and testified on my behalf. I was surprisingly shocked…um, but I think why I had a hard time, um, because the only thing they did to him—he was 14---

R: Right, I was going to ask that. So he was 14 and you were 12—

S: Yeah, he was popular. The only thing they did to him, they gave him probation. We were at the school bus and they made him ride another school bus. But then the kids on the school bus taunted me, they teased me, they said it was my fault that he couldn’t ride the school bus. So…I felt like when I went back to school like I was getting blamed and it was hard because it was just kind of, I felt alone. And I felt very confused. So even though I had the counseling, I had a lot of conflicting feelings and emotions. A lot of guilt and shame and, um, just very alone. And then, um, there was another thing…. (sigh)…but that bothered me that the kids on the bus treated me that way and
then he only got probation. I guess, my mother or father and I thought maybe he would get some juvenile detention time for that because he was found guilty. I can’t remember, I was going to say something… But overtime I thought I had dealt with it, but overtime, um… I actually was having nightmares and flashbacks, um, even after we had moved. Because we moved, I think at the end of that school year, which was only like a few months because the school year was ending—I think three or four months and then we moved. And that gave me some... that gave me resolution in the fact that I was separated from that environment and those school mates, but I still often thought about and kind of relived the whole thing in my head.

R: And when you say the whole thing, not just the actual incident, but the fact that the kids were teasing you, blaming you—

S: Yeah. There was a lot of questions, like why did my school mates treat me that way, why didn’t they understand. Especially like some of the females. Like I was really surprised, some of the young girls, and some of them were my age 11 and 12 and I was like really surprised that they um kind of sided with him or the younger guys. But then, as I got older, I realized it was kind of like a popularity thing, you know.

R: What was your relationship—if any—with, uh, the boy prior to this incident?

S: Um… it was pretty much in school and on the bus. He was like one of the… um… I guess someone like a class clown sort of guy. He would sort of be on the bus or in the hallways telling jokes or getting a lot of attention, well-liked by a lot of the, you know, boys and girls. I was one of the ones who would sit there and laugh like everyone else. And then after that happened, it completely changed everything. I would even say my view of the whole world—I know I looked at my classmates differently, but also kind of looked at the whole world differently after that.

R: In what way? What changed about your outlook?

S: I started thinking that the world and people in general are not nice, they are not all nice people. I always thought everyone was good and people don’t hurt people. I think I was like really naïve and so when things would happen I would be like really shocked. I would really be shocked. And I had trouble, um, understanding and dealing with things that I couldn’t understand why harmful or mean things would be said or actions like that would be, um, done to people. Especially when I thought, like, you like me and I like you… we’re friends or associates, I didn’t know the term associates then, I thought well, we’re all friends and I didn’t realize until later that you aren’t actually a friend unless you’re spending time together and getting to know each other, it takes years and that doesn’t really—schoolmates aren’t friends.

R: Yeah. You are using schoolmate in a very particular way—like people you rode the bus with were schoolmates.

S: Yeah… so… the other thing was, once we moved and I continued with uh junior high school or middle school, I was really apprehensive of like, I would say everyone, but more so the males and I was like afraid of relationships and what people thought of me and if they were going to find out what happened to me before I moved there…

R: You didn’t want them to find out.

S: No, I was embarrassed and I thought it would be the same thing, that they would blame me, or they would say I was stupid or it was my fault, or—just put everything off on me. So I was afraid of, um, anyone finding out… but no one did. Um… so it was… it was still hard. And then… like going to school and trying to fit in and you have the guys are
always touchy-feely…and then \textit{that would have me have flashbacks too}. Um…but I don’t think—I think even in my twenties, it wasn’t until maybe my…lets say right before my father died—2004—that, um, the rape when I was 12 had actually stopped affecting me so much.

R: Do you have a sense of what it was that stopped it from affecting you so much?
S: I think one thing is that \textbf{I had gotten married and I think I had felt secure}, but, um…I sort of don’t know because we’re separated. And then, um, I think recently …that trust issue again and \textit{what are their intentions and do they wanna hurt me}…and, um, I thought it was interesting too, because sometimes I’m afraid to be alone because of that. I think that’s why…why the rape was so easy for him to do that because the other children started walking up this way towards their homes, but going to my grandmother’s house \textit{I had to walk}…oh no, he actually lived that way too….\textit{I had to walk} this direction and—

R: so this happened like after school?
S: Yes
R: Ok…so you started walking one way and he followed you?
S: Instead of going the opposite direction where all the other children lived. Like we lived in the same vicinity. So it’s like, um, I’m afraid of being alone because I’m afraid of something like that happening again. Which, actually something like that almost happened in my 20s. \textit{I was alone} and \textit{a fellow actually grabbed me just like he did}, but a neighbor came out and scared him away. All I kept thinking was, \textit{I can’t believe this is going to happen again}. Fortunately it didn’t.

R: Yeah. So that incident, when you were 12…he grabbed you and forcefully pulled you…?
S: Yeah. But I wasn’t thinking then because, um, \textit{I remember thinking I have to get to grandma’s, I have to get to grandma’s}. And, going to her house, there’s like a park with a lot of trees and everything, and, um, I remember thinking afterwards, \textit{I think the police or the counselor was questioning me as to why did you continue to go that way instead of back towards this way where there was more houses and I thought about and I said, well I was trying to go to grandmas}. And they said, If you would have gone this way---and I didn’t see anyone home, there wasn’t anyone outside, and \textit{I just wanted to get to grandmas}. So that was kind of conflicting emotions too because I was like, are you understanding me or \textit{are you attacking me too}, like the kids at school?

R: So there was a sense, right away, that you went to your grandma’s house immediately and told her. What did you tell her had happened?
S: Um, \textit{I remember telling} her…”grandma something happened”…”\textit{something bad happened}” and \textit{I remember being scared that I was going to get in trouble}, but I said, \textit{I didn’t do anything wrong, I didn’t do anything wrong}. I said that a boy I went to school with, I don’t know if I said raped—\textit{I think I did, I think I understood that by that age}—and I told her what he did…and, um…I \textit{told her I was hurting}. And she was…upset.

R: You were physically hurting at that point?
S: Mmm hmmm.

R: And…I \textit{remember} she got upset and then she said that she was going to call my mom and dad and then they got there really fast and then…I \textit{don’t remember} if she called the police or if she waited until they got there and they called the police together. Because I think she wanted to wait until they got there so they would all be there together. So…that
was hard too because I had to keep telling the story over and over again…my grandmother, then my parents, then the police officers and it was really hard telling it in court too…telling it in front of everybody…and the judge was really cold. I remember my father saying, um, he wanted… he wouldn’t be like this if it was his daughter. I was kind of surprised as a child…because I was...thought like with cases like that judges were more sympathetic. But he was really, like, he was really cold. I just wanted to get it over with and then, and they just did probation, he didn’t do any juvenile detention and I was just…that really um…that was shockingly painful…because I just kept thinking like, um, ok the kids at school—like no one is taking it seriously how he hurt me physically and emotionally. So that was hard.

R: And he didn’t get much punishment.

S: No, like a slap on the hand.

R: So there was something you mentioned before that, uh...I think you used the phrase “conflicting emotions” a couple times—and there was some sense, right away you knew what had happened was “bad”—you said, grandma something “bad” happened—and your next thought was, “but I didn’t do anything wrong.” There was—or continues to be…conflicting emotions about that?

S: (Nod) Yeah, I remember in court they um—his attorney asking, well what did you have on? I remember telling him that I just had on jeans and a t-shirt or just a regular shirt and it was like he was trying to, trying to say that I had, uh,...something to do with instigating that happening. But I remember, um, my parents saying well that’s his job because they have to make sure everyone is telling the truth. So that was hard too.

R: so it sounds like, in many different ways, from the kids on the school bus to the police or the counselor and the judge…all seem to be questioning a little bit what, I guess what your part was? And that seems to be difficult for you. And unfair to you because it didn’t seem warranted?

S: Exactly. Right.

R: And when you say “held onto it,” um, can you explain what you mean by that—

S: I kept asking like why me, why did it happen to me? R: And what answers did you come up with in your head about that?

S: Later I did, I just...um...I thought that like sometimes bad things happened to nice people, to good people and some things you can’t prevent and you just have to, um, try your best to just heal from it and try to prevent it from happening again, basically not being...try to keep yourself out of that situation and away from those types of people—you have to be more perceptive...and it’s like you have to try to not be alone...I think that was one of the key things too.
R: Yeah, you…I think before you used the word “naïve” to describe how you were before…you have a sense that you were naïve at that point? Like you think this wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t naïve?
S: Um…sometimes I think if I just would have took another route because the way I walked to my grandmothers house I think it was dangerous because it was just so wooded of an area on that side and I think maybe if I would have taken a route with a lot of houses then it would probably not have happened. And I’m not blaming myself but I’m just thinking of other options that maybe could have prevented that. And maybe not…I think I was naïve in trusting too much in people and thinking too much of them and…um, maybe I should have had my guard up a little bit and…so maybe in that sense naïve.
R: It sounds like, um, switching a little bit, but it sounds like you had somewhat of a good relationship with your grandmother, your parents, that this all came out so quickly…you told them and you said you told them, something about a support network—they have been supportive and that’s helped you be able to let go of some of this stuff.
S: Yeah, they have always been supportive, like, um, they never ever made me feel like it was my fault. And they never yelled or finger pointed or anything ever about it. So that helped me heal also. And then tried to explain to me that um you know that he was taking advantage of me and you know, I have to be careful and, watch who I’m around and where I am….so I appreciated them explaining things. The counselor she just did such a great job, she was great.
R: How long did you see her for?
S: I’m not sure if it was a few weeks or a month. I don’t think any longer than a month, but the short time I did see her, she was very effective.
R: Mm hmm. Was that the only time you were ever in counseling for dealing with this?
S: Um, for that yes, but I had bouts of depression after that and this would always come up with it. I started getting counseling for depression at 15 and this would come up.
R: Ok. It seems like one of the…important things for you has been to know that it wasn’t your fault…this issue of fault and blame and that sort of thing seems to have been very central to your experience of this. That other people, your parents, the police, the judge, not find you to be at fault for what had happened. And that’s…it sounds like that has pretty much been stable throughout…ever since you were 12 that, in a sense you recognize that this wasn’t your fault.
S: Yes, that was important. I think even now I’ll still be struggling with that, it will still be painful.
R: so the fact that you are…um…pretty strong in your understanding that it wasn’t your fault has lessened the pain for you?
S: Definitely…I think because I knew from that time it made a big difference in me coping and healing from the rape. Because my parents and my counselor made sure from the beginning I knew it wasn’t my fault. That made a big difference.
R: Yeah. What were your…I remember you said you felt after this happened, very alone. You were saying your schoolmates didn’t seem to be understanding much and you felt very alone in many senses…how were your relationships with other people in general after this happened? I know you said trust has been a big thing.
S: I think maybe if I could have talked to someone else who had been through this or a good friend, but the fact that I knew it wasn’t my fault…and my parents…and I
couldn’t…continue to talk about it as needed. It’s like I had to hide it. And um, I felt alone because um, too, just felt like I was being attacked—this is your fault, this is your fault by the schoolmates. So how they made me feel, not being able to talk about it to either a close friend or someone else who had a similar experience made me feel alone. And, um, that was hard. And I think that impacted why maybe I had flashbacks so much I think and why I felt alone. Because I think when I started going to the new school, I felt like I’m different because of this experience. Although there were other girls who had gone through that but I didn’t know and they didn’t know I had gone through it and I think if we would have known we could have talked about it and I think it would have made a big difference. And you don’t feel ashamed either. I think that’s odd, you can know something is not your fault, but you can still have other emotions…you can still feel guilty and ashamed and still feel alone.

R: So you, like you said before, it sounds like you were very, from the very beginning you knew it was something bad, something not your fault so you told your grandmother and got court proceedings started, but at the same time you mention feelings of guilt and shame and it sounds like even something that confuses me too, but it sounds like it still confuses you know how you can know something is not your fault yet still feel guilty and ashamed about something.

S: Yeah, I think what was interesting too…I remember at that age, I remember being 12 and I was upset because when I grow up and get married I have to tell my husband what happened and he’s…um, I think I was thinking he would understand, but then I was worried about him looking at me differently. So I think then I didn’t understand that as a teenager, as an adult when I got married that they would understand it wasn’t my fault and he wouldn’t hold it against me. I remember being 12 and thinking I have to explain this to him. That worried me also.

R: So even at 12 you were worried about what your future husband might think about you and might look at you differently.

S: Yeah. (laughter). Like, you’ve been defiled.

R: Defiled, ok. Tainted in some way.

S: Yeah.

R: These feelings of guilt and shame, are they still present or are they—

S: I don’t know. I think after that I may have only seen him once after I moved, so I don’t even remember what he really looks like anymore now. If I was to see him or he was to see me, I don’t even think we would recognize each other, fortunately. And as far as the schoolmates, I don’t really remember too many of them either.

R: You said you moved just a few months after this occurred?

S: Yeah, at the end of the school year.

R: So after you moved, well after the incident, before you moved, did you have any contact, any interaction with this boy?

S: Um…well, it was odd because the bus…the bus would let us off still close stops, so we would actually see each other and there was a few incidents where he was pointing to me and saying, that’s the girl who said I raped her and told on me, and people were looking and talking. I remember a schoolmate putting her arm around me, saying let’s hurry up and get home. Like, everyone in his circle, I was shunned and I was this horrible person. And I just, um, I still liked school but I just hated getting on the school bus because that’s when I would see him. But I don’t ever remember seeing him in the
hallways of school...there was different buildings, it was a huge school. Yeah that was---uh, I hated just seeing his face when we would get off the school bus at the end of the day.

R: what did you feel then?
S: it was anxiety and panic, like, oh my god what is he gonna say, what is he gonna do, why does everyone keep siding with him? I just kept looking at him and couldn’t believe he wasn’t in juvenile hall...I couldn’t believe he was just out walking around. And because of all this anxiety, I think...I don’t know if I...if this is accurate or not, but I think maybe the last two months in school I remember my mom taking me to school and picking me up. Yeah, she did because my grandmother, not the same grandmother, but my father’s mother, she was picking me up and taking me to school the last month. I forgot all about that. Yeah, because I had gotten so upset that they were picking me up and taking me to school. Even though he wasn’t on the same bus anymore. Oh wow. I forgot about that. I hadn’t thought about that in years.

R: So clearly the whole experience was impacting you right after? You were anxious.
S: Yes.

R: what about, um, your feelings—I know you said you felt alone, guilt, shame, what about feelings about your body or sexuality in general, those kinds of things....how has the experience influenced your feelings about that stuff?
S: Um...at the time I just felt like I wasn’t like the rest of the girls, even though some of them weren’t virgins anymore. Even some of them had children at a young age...there were girls in the school that were 14 or 15 that had babies or were pregnant, but I was kind of afraid that no one was gonna want to be with me or they were going to look differently, or are they gonna think it was my fault. I was so worried what others were gonna think. I felt differently about myself, like, but I couldn’t understand it. I felt...um...(sigh). I don’t know how to describe it. I liked myself still, but I didn’t...I felt uncomfortable looking at my body in the mirror or being in the shower, I kind of felt, well, defiled. And just like seeing myself it reminded me I guess of the incident somehow. It was awkward. Um...

R: I guess that’s changed since? You don’t feel that way anymore?
S: Fortunately that only affected me the first year. I always wanted to hurry up and get dressed.

R: Mm hm.

S: It was just so painful, I was going through so many things like that and then to have the kids like make fun of me or just be cruel was um...it was um...it was so painful. I was so happy when we moved.

R: because you got to start all over? Sounds like you kept that experience a secret in your new life when you moved?
S: Fortunately, because I was worried too because I was worried that maybe he would be related to someone in that area or they would know. I think they asked me what school I was coming from and I told them and no one ever found out, so I was relieved because I didn’t have to rehash anything. So that was great. It was like a new beginning.

R: And so things started getting better from there? After you moved?
S: Yeah. I think the only thing was that, from time to time, when I wanted to talk about it, when it did like bother me...I couldn’t...I felt like I couldn’t talk about it because I didn’t want anyone to know.
R: Well, um, I know it’s a difficult question to answer, but do you have a sense of what it is that you didn’t want them to know…or why it is that you didn’t want any other people to know?
S: I think I was afraid of them judging me or making fun of me or both. Or saying it was my fault. So I said, just to avoid any type of negative criticism or judgment, I just won’t say anything. Or even, anyone saying well tell me what happened…I didn’t want to relive, or explain it, like….you know, well, and then being young, like some kids will say well how did he do this or…they would ask details, not thinking, not being tactful about it. Oh my goodness, why do you want to know that, or, it just drags up a lot of, um, painful um triggers. Painful memories. So I just said, I’m just going to avoid everything altogether and not say anything and just deal with it myself. But its just so much more healing when you can talk to a fellow peer that understands or something that’s been through, unfortunately, been through the same, you know, thing.
R: I’m assuming or I’m guessing that you’ve done that since then? Talked to people who have also gone through similar experiences?
S: yeah…I went a good 10 to 15 years…maybe mid to late 20s I finally started opening up. I was surprised of how many other women who, in their childhood, were raped also. It was alarming. If it wasn’t a schoolmate like me, then it was a family member or close friend. It was so many and some of them happened several times and um…I was relieved in a sense that….uh…I was relieved in the sense that I could talk about it, not be ashamed, and I could talk about it and be understood and it didn’t just happen to me. Not that I felt that I was being punished…but I wasn’t thinking why me anymore. It shouldn’t, but it happens a lot.
R; Yeah, I think you said one of the main ways, that your understanding of the event has changed is that you don’t wonder why anymore, you don’t take it personal anymore, in the sense that these things happen and that it was you for no particular reason.
S: Right. I used to wonder when maybe I was 12 that, unless maybe they don’t do that because of the under 18 thing, if they had me talk to other girls, if there was a group of other girls to talk to, if I would have healed better. In addition to talking to a counselor. But being able to talk to the other girls in my 20s, it kind of um, it kind of made up for that. Because it was like better late than never, kind of…it was late in the coming, but it helped.
R: Ok. How…in what way did you do that? Was it online, or informal, or a group?
S: No…I was with a friend and they just started talking about it and I said, Oh wow that happened to me too. And I said, I’m so glad that you are sharing that with me because I was afraid to tell you and I’m glad you felt comfortable talking to me about it…and I really appreciate you feeling open enough to talk about it. I said, for years it’s bothered me and I appreciate as an adult, dreading it, holding onto pieces of it all these years, I can still talk about it, feel comfortable talking about it to someone who understands and won’t make me feel bad about it.
R: what were some of the things your other classmates were saying or doing that made you feel bad about it?
S: Um, I was shocked because some of them were actually calling me a liar
R: Saying it never happened at all?
S: Umm…I think they were saying that it was more so that he was led on, or more so consensual which I didn’t understand because there were two schoolmates there when I
kept telling him no and they ride the school bus with us so I couldn’t understand because those two schoolmates were there. They were like quiet on the bus, the one stood up for me in court, but on the bus they were quiet. And then there was a lot of laughing and pointing. Um…I remember one girl saying, I don’t know why you would try to talk to her anyway, she’s too young. I remember her saying, wow what is that supposed to mean. I remember telling another girl, I don’t understand why she would say that, she’s only one year older than me! I remember saying that (laughter).

R: it sounds like it’s frustrating for you to even think about it.
S: I’m just thinking about the girls that sided with him, it just always blows my mind.
R: Girls that sided with him in the…in calling you a liar or somehow thinking it was consensual? That’s how they sided with him?
S: Yeah, just various things. Oh…well, someone else said, well you shouldn’t have said anything because now he can’t ride the bus with us. And I was just so, like, shocked because that was a female too. I was more so expecting like, ok the girls aren’t going to say anything at all or be neutral, but when they said this to me, I was just kind of like, wow. Like they should understand or if they are afraid or don’t want to say anything, they are going to be neutral. But to attack me, I was just floored.
R: It sounds like that…whenever you decided to tell your grandmother and have all this stuff happen, it almost sounds like it didn’t really occur to you that people could respond to you in this way, this accusatory way.
S: I told her, oh, well I’ll have to go to school and deal with his friends, but I wasn’t expecting any of the girls to side and I was just shocked. Shocking and painful. Well, at the time it was. I understand things now.
R: It’s not as painful now?
S: No, it’s like a child’s view of the word is totally different and me personally, I just looked at the whole world as everyone is good and everyone is nice. And I guess I was thinking too, like when bad things happen or accidents, um…the person was treated bad or…I was just so naïve.
R: Like that only bad people deserve to have bad things
S: Yeah, basically.
R: Yeah. Makes sense when you’re 12…
S: Yeah (laughter).
R: Is there, is there ever a time when the experience didn’t automatically register as bad to you?
S: No. It was always bad.
R: It sounded like it, that wasn’t something that has changed. Ok. It sounds like, um, a lot of what has changed for you over time is kind of your feelings about, maybe your worldview in general…that sometimes bad things happen to good people or something like that, rather than your feelings about the experience…you’ve changed your worldview and that makes the experience less difficult or have less power over you or something like that. If that makes sense.
S: Yeah. I was thinking too maybe that’s why I went into social work. Because I would talk with girlfriends and I would say that I want to help other little girls or young teens so they don’t go through what I went through or they understand.
R: what would you want them to understand?
S: That, um, it’s important that you have to validate yourself…you can’t define yourself by what boys think of you or your schoolmates…you have to build your own self-esteem or confidence…and not base what you feel about yourself by what they think. And um, you can’t, let them manipulate them to where physical harm is happening to you. I think that’s why a lot of these things happen, like these rapes, and date rapes, and…it seems like these things are happening younger and younger…like with me 12, 13, 14, 15.

R: It’s so…you imagine it’s happening in part because girls that age tend to define themselves based on what boys or other people are thinking about them, not what they are thinking of themselves.

S: mm. hmm. And just like be knowledgeable period too. I think. That, you know, just to be able to talk to your parents or if it’s a single parent home too, or whoever you’re living with, grandmother or kinship or whoever you are being raised by. If not be able to talk to them, then someone, you know, so…you gotta be able to protect yourself or know how to you know have that voice. I think. Of too, like what if I had never said anything. What if I would have just went home to my grandmothers and never said anything either?

R: Yeah, I was actually kind of wondering in my head, it sounds like it wasn’t even something you thought much about, you just told her. Was there ever, when you were walking home to her, were you debating in your mind, what should I do now?

S: No. It was automatic. I knew there would be consequences. I’m not going to like, but I have to say something. And um I just think it’s important like other girls when this happens they don’t just, you know, not say anything because then you are carrying that inside you and then more so it impacts the self-esteem, confidence, guilt…it impacts all those negative emotions and then it goes right into adulthood, so. Yeah I’m always glad of that—I said something right away, I didn’t wait until the next day or you know any type of time period. Soon as I got to grandma’s I said something.

R: And then, I think you told me but refresh my memory, your grandmother then called your parents and she told them?

S: She started to tell them and then they said, we’re going to need you to tell us what happened in your words. So…

R: And you said you don’t remember if you used the word rape at that point—

S: I don’t remember, I think I did, I don’t remember if I said rape, but I think I did. I don’t know. I might have said, “he forced himself on me.”

R: And, from what you’ve told me before, you said a couple of classmates were there and they heard you saying no. So even with him at that time you were vocal about “no” that there was…in some way he was forcing you.

S: Yeah, that’s what was great because there was a male and a female classmate there and they were there the whole time. They said ok, we’re gonna go home. I’m expecting him to walk off with them and then I said oh no oh no he’s not leaving. I’m just standing there, I’m thinking to myself; I’m saying to myself I got to keep walking to grandma’s, I can’t stand here. And I’m thinking, that’s not going to look too good if I’m saying no and still standing there, they might think I was just saying that in front of them. And when I started to walk off that’s when it happened. Yeah, I was real fortunate that it was two classmates that heard me repeatedly tell him no, that I had to go home. At least one of them did come to court. I was afraid that neither one was going to come. I think
one of the officers told us that one of your schoolmates agreed, or the mother gave permission for your classmate to come. I was so relieved. It took like um a weight off of me. And I was just so appreciative that this classmate stood up because I knew it wasn’t easy because they were friends, I don’t know if they were friends to the point where they hung out together, but they were friends in school.
R: the classmate that stood up for you?
S: yeah. And I’m pretty sure the mother had something to do with it, like asking what happened, you need to say something or you need to speak up. So I appreciate that. But if I would see them today I would tell them again but that was a long time ago but as an adult thank you, thank you so much. I mean I would never forget what you’ve done for me.
R: It sounds like they were like a, I don’t know, validating your blamelessness in this. Validating the fact that you were not guilty by hearing you say no to the boy.
S: We thanked them in court but I don’t know I would just say thank you again even though it’s years later, you don’t know how much that meant and still means, you know. Because he was only 12 when he did that for me. I don’t remember…I think the girl was in our grade too, but the boy that raped me, he was the 14 year old. Yeah he didn’t know that was the defining, one of the defining moments of my life—him standing up for me. Because I know that wasn’t easy. He was fortunate because I don’t remember…when we were in school or on the bus, I don’t remember any of the kids teasing him. He was quiet after that, he was really quiet, but he didn’t get taunted like I did. I was actually afraid for him too, but he was ok I think.
R: And that was so…you must have been very thankful—a defining moment of your life?
S: Yeah. I think his name was Teddy or something like that (laughter). He was a nice kid. I can’t remember the girl though. I remember her standing there, I don’t even remember her face. I guess maybe because she didn’t do anything, she didn’t, she stayed out of it. I guess I kind of, part of my memory kind of faded her out. I have to admit though because I was hurt, I remember asking the police officer, um, so and so is not coming too? I remember saying that to him. I remember being hurt. Maybe that’s why I can’t remember. Yeah I think maybe there was only so much I could take and maybe my brain blocked some of those things out that weren’t so important. Because I used to talk to her everyday too and, um, I don’t remember her face or her name. Yeah I don’t remember the officer saying anything else, I just remember him saying she wasn’t coming to court but the other kid was. I don’t remember him saying why or anything.
R: You mentioned that, uh, after your grandmother called your parents and then the police became involved, that you went to the hospital and they did a rape kit and all of that. So there was evidence from that? And you were physically harmed from the experience.
S: Yeah, there was some bruising and some scratches, but nothing like, um, really bad or really alarming. Basically it looked like some defensive marks. They could tell like I was trying to…
R: Struggling.
S: There was a struggle. That’s why I thought…there was just so much against him that’s why I just cannot believe he just got probation.
R: It sounds like that kind of further, furthered your just confusion about the world at the time anyway. Ok, you were a good girl, you were a good person and you had this bad
thing happen to you and then on top of that, this person who did something bad was now not really being punished. So it seemed like the world didn’t really make sense at that point.

S: Yeah, it didn’t. It was more confusing. Like, wow, what kind of world is this? Is everybody confused? This is supposed to happen, not this! Bad people go to jail (laughter). Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, bad people go to jail. So I… I don’t know…I think I was thinking he was going to go to Shuman Center. I think that’s where I thought he was going to go. That’s not what happened.

R: And then you said you only saw him maybe one other time after that. So you don’t really know what came of him.

S: I saw him a few times, like um, at the bus stop from a distance. But then after I moved I think I may have saw him once from a distance and after that, never again, fortunately.

R: So it sounds like this sexual relationship, or whatever was just this one isolated incident, um, and then after that you didn’t continue to have much of any interaction, let alone any kind of relationship or anything like that.

S: Right.

R: Is there anything else that seems important to you, that you wanted to mention or talk about in the process that you have done over the past, uhh, 23 years? That you think was important or anything else you wanted to add?

S: I think one of the big things is when something tragic or traumatic happens when you’re a child, I think the key thing for me is dealing with it right away and when they… I remember being scared, like what am I going to do now and will they….some lady who came to me said we’re going to give you someone to talk to, is that ok with you? And I was so happy and because they did that I think that helped a lot. And because my parents were supportive, but, I think as a child when things like that happen it makes a big difference. That’s the key and then I think having someone to talk to who has been through a similar experience…I think that helped me…I mean, it took years, but I think that helped me become resilient where I’m not like, at 35 still like, Oh my god why did that happen, like still rehashing the same questions.

R: Ok, so it sounds like it took a process of several years in order to come to whatever understanding that you have now about the whole event. Like I said, about the world really in general too, not just his event. It sounds like for you, that change in perception about what happened and the world has been better for you… it’s better now, or it serves you better now.

S: Yeah, yeah.

R: Were you living in a suburb of Pittsburgh, or the city?

S: In the city, but now in the suburbs.

R: And at that time, were you living with your parents?

S: Yeah. Both my parents worked, so right after school I had to go to my grandma’s until they got off work.

R: And they were married?

S: Yes.

R: And you are currently separated?

S: Yeah. I’m still legally married, but I’m separated.

R: And when did you get married?

S: 2005…I was 31.
R: And when did you get separated?
S: Just a month ago.
R: Ok, so that’s very recent then.
S: Yeah, it’s hard.
R: So that’s some new challenges.
S: yeah, I have a good support system though. My father is deceased, but my mother and my brothers.
R: You have younger brothers? So you’re the oldest? How many brothers do you have?
S: Three.
R: And they’re all younger.
S: Yeah (laughter).
R: You have any children?
S: my husband has a six year old son, so I’m a step-mom.
R: Ok. Anything else?
S: No, I don’t think.
R: No, ok. Well, thank you very much for talking today.
S: No problem, I hope that it helps.
R: I’m sure that it will.
Appendix D: Full I Poems

Mary’s Full I Poem

I didn’t see it as abuse
I saw it as affection
I was not getting [affection]

I got older
I realized what it was
I came to terms

I sort of like blanked it out
I didn’t…want to come to terms
I have
I blame myself a lot
I was craving the attention
I was craving the affection
I let it go on.

I know
I know that it was wrong
I mean
I’m still not…how can I say it…still not worthy

I was 8 years old
I was about 13 years old
I guess
I said
I don’t know
I guess
I was five our parents got divorced
I guess
I don’t know
I sort of had to grow up
I had to take care
I had to take care
I more or less became the extra mom
I had to take care of the house
I guess
I sort of more or less became the adult

I don’t know
I say
I don’t know
I mean
I guess because

I could see how wrong
I look for that stuff now
I don’t know
I don’t know

I said
I was married
I guess
I guess
I still had problems
I had no problem with the sex
I wanted the sex
I couldn’t take [affection]
I can take it every once in a while

I think
I think
I’m being singled out
I’m getting affection
I would get [affection] back then
I see it as something that’s wrong
I saw it

I mean
I mean
I know it was wrong
I still say
I want to help people
I would have been, like, how, say…be emotionally blank
I see how my sister is
I see that
I would be like that
I see
I’m thinking, how can people not feel
I see her
I’m thinking, you don’t care?

I tried to give you the emotions
I was
I had tried to give her
I guess
I don’t know
I got it
I guess
I guess
I tried
I said
I did a lot of reading
I did a lot of research
I said
I blame myself
I mean
I blamed him a lot too
I still hate him
I blamed him
I blamed myself
I still won’t talk to him
I hate him
I was in my twenties
I didn’t even know
I thought
I was in my twenties
I opened the door
I was about ready to slam the door back in his face again
I had gone through that
I had to go through it all over again
I just couldn’t deal with that
I would have said anything to her
I wasn’t even gonna go there with that
I said
I just let it all out
I mean
I was even talking to him
I left again
I left
I was just like
I’m done
I met my soon-to-be husband
I was taking care of her
I was making good money
I was taking care of her
I was paying the bills
I was taking care of her
I was taking care of the kids
I mean
I had to go through everything
I mean
I just had to go get my head back on straight again
I had to deal

I know
I was in third grade
I guess
I turned 8
I remember
I was
I can remember the day clearly
I stayed home
I wanted to read a book
I remember
I was sitting down
I was laying downstairs
I had cartoons
I was reading my book
I was on my stomach
I was kicking my legs
I was reading the book
I was wearing shorts

I guess
I’m like
I’m like
I’m like
I’m like

I know, he’s bending down and hitting me on my butt
I’m like
I’m like
I’m reading here
I’ve always been ticklish
I’m like
I wanna read George, leave me alone
I’m like
I want to finish this
I’m like
I always had my hair long

I know, he’s got his um, like his ear and his mouth
I’m like
I’m like
I don’t
I’m like
I didn’t take a bath’
I say
I wasn’t
I’m like
I’d get my ass smacked
I was not in mom’s perfume
I know better

I’m feeling him
I’m like
I’m like
I’m like
I don’t care
I’m like
I don’t care
I know

I’m in his arms
I’m like
I mean
I was shaking
I’m shaking my head

I was so curious too
I never, ever seen anything like that before
I passed out
I know
I was in pain
I passed out
I mean
I mean
I was screaming in pain
I passed out
I mean,
I woke up
I mean

I find out later
I won’t ever have children
I’ve always wanted
I said
I keep telling myself
I deal with this
I deal with my depression
I can deal with it
I have

I wake up
I assume
I mean
I was curious
I mean
I don’t know
I know
I was a child

I said
I wanted to […] read
I read everything
I used to sit
I mean

I couldn’t talk
I don’t even know
I got married
I wanted them both
I’m like
I want
I want is what we’re going to do.

I had to bend to them
I was five years old
I had to decide for us
I had to pick
I had to pick
I mean
I would have said my dad
I picked my mom
I’m thinking all this
I had to make this decision

I had to go up
I want to live
I was in
I was 13
I still have problems
I don’t think
I think
I say
I had talked to him
I had talked
I didn’t know
I know the signs
I had tried a couple times
I was 13
I mean
I knew

I said
I says
I get my teeth rammed
I’ll tell her
I get done talking
I says
I says
I’m out of the house
I says
I says
I’m gonna go get my cigarettes’
I says
I love ya

I says
I’ll talk to you
I said
I says
I give my sister the phone
I says
I’m goin to get my cigarettes
I’ll be back
I says

I didn’t think
I know
I’m getting pulled out
I’m being told
I mean
I start freaking
I’m like, no, no, no
I’m like, no
I’m telling my dad ‘no’

I’m like
I’m like
I’m like
I’m like
I’m like

I said
I says
I couldn’t even sit
I had to sit like
I was more or less
I would say about 11

I’ve been ill
I think
I started
I think
I first started
I always come out
I made it
I’d taken all my pills
I was out for a week
I’d taken all my pills
I wanted to be buried in

I woke up a week later
I had a purpose somewhere
I don’t think I do
I have yet

I don’t do anything
I’ve done a lot
I’ve always worked from the bottom
I mean
I’ve started out
I have a knack with people
I would love to get into
I see so much potential

I was walking
I had so many people stop
I finally got to the point
I’m like
I’m no better off than you are
I says
I’m not getting smart
I says
I’m no better
I’m not any better
I says
I says
I says
I says
I says
I says
I says,
I says
I says
I says
I says
I want to see
I had um a scholarship
I knew
I opted to go to work
I figured
I went to work
I could go to work and then maybe go to CCAC
I gave up my opportunity for her

I’m like
I’m like
I’m going
I’m like
I’m like
I’ll apply
I’ll just take a class
I can’t take
I’m working
I’m like
I’m screwed

I don’t know why
I mean
I guess
I’m like
I mean
I still
I mean
I mean
I might not have ever learned
I don’t know

I put myself through
I can probably say
I shouldn’t have to put myself through
I know
I shouldn’t blame myself
I do
I shouldn’t blame myself

I say
I mean
I welcomed it
I shouldn’t have
I didn’t know it was wrong
I’m blaming myself
I didn’t know it was wrong

I started bleeding
I’m like
I’m like
I had
I didn’t start until then
I didn’t know anything
I was going to have one
I was going to have one
I was damaged

I was still considered a minor
I was still
I didn’t tell
I was over the age of 21
I told my stepmom
I swore to secrecy
I never wanted anyone to know about it

I went back and started taking care of her
I told her
I says
I says
I says
I says
I says
I says
I says

I bet that started
I hope it did
I need him to acknowledge it
I know damn well
I know that
I know damn well
I did
I really did have a hard time
I knew damn well it was true

I still have the gift he gave me
I had it
I still sort [mixed emotions] out myself
I still try not to think about a lot of it
I do at times
I find myself crying
I just want to scream
I want to hit him
I just want to confront

I don’t think
I was a whore
I was someone
I asked for it
I needed it
I paid for it

I haven’t been able to find
I mean
I’ve had a lot of relationships
I don’t know
I find myself
I find myself being back
I mean
I can sometimes put it behind me
I don’t want to say this

I’m the shy person
I just want them to be the aggressor
I want them to take the advantage
I was back then.

I guess it’s easier
I seem to do is butt heads
I talk to someone
I give arguments back
I give attitude
I’m like
I give attitude back
I’m like
I’m busy
I’m like
I’m like don’t start talking
I don’t know

I guess it’s just like,
I guess
I want everything
I’m too impatient

I’ve always been overweight
I’ve always found men
I’ve never liked my body
I always feel like there’s nothing
I don’t know
I always want to see myself thinner
I can never get myself to that point

I try
I can lose so much
I can lose ten
I’ll gain the ten
I’ll lose it again.
I can’t get past it

I eat […] right
I cut down
I’ve cut out sweets
I’ve lost three pounds
I’ve been walking
I mean
I mean
I was walking stairs
I live four flights
I walk up
I don’t know what to do
I’ve always been overweight.

I think
I was doing
I was doing a lot
I was doing some cocaine
I wasn’t sleeping
I wasn’t eating
I was down
I stopped all that
I packed on
I did it
I did it that time
I said
I’m not one
I don’t need to do that stuff
I mean
I can find other things

I mean
I write
I read
I used to read
I was reading
I do

I mean
I just got into my therapy
I had my breakdown
I used to put everything back
I was dealing with a lot
I felt it coming on
I knew
I went and got myself help

I tried to end it
I really was afraid this time
I woke up
I really was afraid
I wouldn’t wake up
I had another means

I got the medicine
I needed
I’m working through it
I have people
I can talk to

I said
I can get my sleep and stuff like that
I also use humor
I do
I try not to let a lot of things get me down
I said
I try to blow a lot of things off
I’m really afraid to let my anger show
I don’t know how deep it really does go
I were to confront him
I had to step back
I was in the range
I could have killed him
I saw [...] red
I had trusted him
I’m afraid to show my anger

I say
I were to ever see my brother
I’m afraid that he may not survive
I know
I know

I didn’t think He existed
I lost faith
I cherished
I told Him to take me

I blame myself
I was watching her
I was letting her jump
I said
I blame myself

I mourn her in my own way
I’ve got their tattoos

I think that’s about it
I hope it helps someone
I did [see myself as a victim]
I still do
I’m trying to
I think

I’m 43
I am
I mean
I remember
I remember
I thought I was flying out
I hope I can
Janet’s Full I Poem

I don’t know if
I’ll ever fully understand
I was put in that same position
I didn’t understand why
I was put into that position

I was much more outspoken
I had gone to spend the summer
I came back
I just blabbed it to her
I didn’t know
I freaked out

I did not agree
I think that’s when
I finally
I guess she went through
I’m pretty messed up
I’m diagnosed bipolar
I also have a panic disorder
I have really overcome

I do believe
I’ve gotten older
I’m not one that’s ever enjoyed sex
I don’t think
I’ll ever be able to come totally to terms
I’m ok with being alone
I really am.

I thank God
I saved my younger sister.
I don’t know
I think everyday is still a struggle

I don’t think you ever fully come to terms
I know
I’ll never fully understand.
I think
I really do
I don’t understand
I really, really don’t

I think
I was more protective
I was so
I mean
I wasn’t even comfortable
I know my ex-husband
I didn’t like leaving her alone

I go back to counseling
I did NOT go to a priest
I did get into some counseling
I still smothered her
I never, ever wanted

I still am angry
I couldn’t even look at him
I never had much of a relationship
I can say about my mother
I really don’t think
I think
I’ve come to terms
I mean
I just can’t fathom
I can’t understand that

I just
I felt so dirty
what did I do?
why am I being punished

I’m not hostile
I still go through
I go through phases
I might go through months
I might
I felt like everything was taken
I was

what did I do
I must have done something
what could I have done

I’ve wanted to
I think all it would do is just mess me up
I’m angry
I want to go at him
I’ve seen pictures
I’m grateful
I had met
I met her
I know
I don’t know
I know she doesn’t
I’m real grateful

I said
I just
I know that there’s pedophiles
I’d like to have an answer

I just
I was
I had gone to he and Chelsea’s house
I was at Sandra and Ray’s
I was there for the summer
I went to Harold and Chelsea’s

I came back
I immediately told her
I didn’t tell my mother
I don’t know

I guess
I wonder how many others
I do wonder that
I have other cousins
I said
I don’t see a whole lot
I wonder if it happened
I’m sure he’s enjoying prison
I can’t say it will give closure

I don’t know
I feel
I’ve given closure
I had a real bad breakdown
I guess it was since then
I really have come more to terms
I had to

I started journaling
I’ve had
I’ve since
I burned it
I burned it
I go back
I get insight
did I really write that
I think
I saw more strength
I’ve ever had
I think

I can be her
I guess
I know
I don’t know
I can
I can say
I married an abusive

I’m a little slower
I think
I was still trying to come to terms
I wondered
I believed

I started questioning
What did I do
I want to say
I don’t think
I don’t
I still question things
I used to
I mean
I used to really

what did I do to deserve this
what did I do
Did I instigate this
Did I

I never went back
I saw him two other times
I was 11
I saw him
I said
I didn’t even know
I worked
I was managing
I came out of the office
I thought
I really thought
I…came to grips
I, um, completed
I grabbed my reports
I saw him
I asked for him

I was also going through a lot
I didn’t go
I guess
I guess
I think he believed it too

I asked my brother
I asked my brother
I said
I didn’t
I never could understand
I think

I even went
I got to Sandra and Ray’s
I would come
I’d go
I was all excited
I was goin into another state
I don’t even think
I was goin to Harold and Chelsea’s
I really believe
I really do

I…came out with my mother
I still feel that way
I blame her
I blame him
I don’t know
I said
I don’t know

I’m sorry
I would have loved to see
I’m sorry
I…wish she could have been spared
I wish we all could have been spared
I’ve always been very protective

I always joked
I’m praying
I really am
I smothered her
I know
I hear little reports
I’m like, okkkk

I have acquaintances
I have very few close friends
I just
I have a natural ability
I’m extremely protective
I just even think
I’m protective

I get to points
I’m just really
I don’t
I mean
I think so
I think so
I don’t know why
I have
I think

I was afraid
I should have known better
I think
I wonder
I was trying to […] protect
I talked about
I guess
I was just trying to protect

I don’t know
I don’t know
I can see Aunt Karen
I could stand by
I answered
I could never imagine
I’m not even going to answer

I know my brother
I hope
I told you
I guess
I just

I was staying
I was sleeping
I mean
I tried to stay upstairs
I would go outside
I had already gone to bed
I don’t know

I left
I told her
I knew something was very wrong
I guess there is some satisfaction
I think more

I should have told my mom
I was distant
I came back
I never wanted to go back
I said

I only saw him
I mean
I know
I can’t blame it all
I can blame
I started
I didn’t realize
I’m trying to think

I was 20
I was in my early 30s
I had gone to the doctor
I sat down
I thought
I pushed a button
I had to slow
I guess
I’m not a drinker
I don’t…do drugs
I told my doctor
I didn’t want
I ended up
I took
I was having […] anxiety
I had a child
I knew
I was depressed

I tried
I was much
I enjoyed volleyball
I cheered
I marched
I was real screwed up

I finally did tell
I got older
I…started feeding that…dirty
I try not to
I don’t feel that dirty

I drank coffee
I don’t do much
I, um, was in the hospital
I’m on a cardiac diet
I decided to have a cup

I hope it helps
I hope it will be healing
I’ve never
I’ve never openly talked

I hope so
I hope
I helped you
I hope so too

Tabitha’s Full I Poem

I could go on for years
I know we’ve only got limited time
I was abused in my childhood
I forgot it
I forgot it
that’s how I dealt with it

I had an incident with an older male
I became friends with
I got panic stricken
I started locking myself in the house
I started doing all sorts of weird stuff
I really didn’t understand
I was doing

I didn’t believe
I was abused
I had no belief of it
I lost my job
I had to leave the job
I went
I was lucky enough to find a sexual abuse counselor
I started healing

I had approached her
I rang her up
I went and had the initial interview
I knew that
I was not ready for the group
I was falling apart
I was falling apart
I can’t tell you

I also met my husband
I confronted my father
I confronted my father
I had nieces
I confronted him
I had confronted and lost my family
I sort of had my own children

I had my first seizures
I’ve got epilepsy
I always have to be careful

I did counseling
I joined a group with about ten survivors
I did all those
I got matched up with another survivor
I met her
I met others
I didn’t mention
I sort of
I had had about 18 months counseling
I did mention
I just was having issues
I just went to that counselor
I did mention

I mean
I delayed
I delayed
I did too
if I had gone to a sexual abuse counselor
I had a long

I am very lucky
I told my husband
I was going through too much drama
I told him
I had children
I was

I spoke to all of my sisters
I did speak to one
I’ve been cutoff from the family
I did speak to another niece
I told her
I felt that she had to know
I was concerned
I did that

I have approached the police twice
I reported
I came in
I went
I reported
I’m not sure
I didn’t have any interview time
I’ve now received another
I want to make a statement.

I’m out of the family now
I’m happy
I’ve got a twin sister
I’m upset
I have a twin sister
I wanted
I still feel that one day
I still feel that she may decide

I’m thinking
I was dealing with the abuse
I don’t, basically, let people get close to me
I’m fortunate
I can talk about it
I can deal with it

I’ve got a male friend
I have a very up and down relationship
I want to leave in relationships
I wanted to leave home
I came into this relationship
I can’t
I just can’t seem to
I don’t know
I just have trouble
I really can’t sort of understand it
I think
I’m not sure

I have had very successful working relationships
I’ve had a successful male working relationship
I have fine relationships with women
I have no thoughts
I have had

I’m now with a male counselor
I will not go into his office
I cannot get in his office
I’ve virtually walked out
I mean
I have walked out on him
I’ve screamed at him

I’m fine
I’m just doing
I still feel
I need to keep doing that
I’m still making appointments
I think it’s good
I think it’s good
I don’t know
I think it’s good
I mean
I think so
I’m not sure
I’m truly not sure

I know it was after five
I think year six
I had no concept
I can get it
I might be able to
I’m actually lucky
I’ve been asked
I broke down
I didn’t know
I sort of narrowed it down

I told the therapist
I said that
I was abused by my father
I never told her
I had
I was going to go to counseling
I mean
I was going to get help

I’ve got asked that
I don’t have
I have no feelings
I was being abused
I had a lot of fear of him
I needed

I still know
I do it now
I needed
I walked into the room
I needed to stay away
I wouldn’t walk into a room
I wouldn’t go out with him
I would set it up
I was not going out with him
I would make sure
I didn’t go out alone with him
I was with him
I was basically abused
I had to stay away
I had to stay close to my mother
I was safe

I only have female, sisters
I have no brothers
I have no basis
I have no basis on males
I have no brother
I have only sisters
I can form a very close relationship with females
I’m working on it

I handled it
I could handle the abuse
I could handle what was going on
I protected my sister
I had to
I had to
I had to protect myself
I protected everyone else
I actually did do
I was dealing

I don’t know
what could I do
I had no options
I was running
what I could do
I thought

I did tell my mother
I was about 15
I have one
I’m the youngest
I don’t know
I really don’t know
I know
I will get back one day
I knew it was wrong
I thought every other child
I’ve been dealing with it
I don’t know
I made it normal
I was living as well
I could go out and have fun
I do have memories of having fun
I’ve got two things running parallel
I only remembered
I started dealing with stuff
I’m now remembering the bad
I was dealing

I decided to block it out
I’ve got now to say, “remember, remember, remember.”
if I ever touched the memory
I won’t touch that memory
I would touch it
I imagine
I don’t know

I didn’t get anything
I don’t sort of get anything
I’m lucky in that
I’m not, sort of

I say
I’m not affected in any sort of way
I might have issues
I don’t have that
I’m not
I don’t
I actually don’t
I’m one of the lucky people
I know many survivors have
I don’t
I don’t actually have any sort of issues
I don’t
I haven’t even really thought of it
I don’t
I haven’t had any sort of anorexia
I didn’t get any self injury
I didn’t have any
I didn’t do anything
I didn’t get into drugs
I haven’t
I didn’t try to abuse my own body

I mean
I nearly fell apart
I was in this room
I paid money
I was just lucky
I found this sort of lady
I was going to leave
I could see
I’m with now
I’ve told him off
I didn’t actually even tell her
I confronted it

I do
I do this
I was seeing her
I was still
I left home
I still came back
I still see him as normal
I still saw him as a normal father
I saw him as a normal father
I got letters

I finally started stopping
I finally had to tell
I reported them
I would get the police
I did that
I hadn’t done that
I’m glad that counselor was there
I hadn’t done that

I mean
I would have done
I’ll take my children up there
I mean
I wouldn’t have been aware
I’m not
I also rationalized
I can’t deal with
how bad I was
what I was

I had to build up
I don’t think
I really didn’t like him
I really hated him
I can’t explain
hate I had towards him
the anger I had
anger I had
I feel sorry now, uh, for him

I was going over there
I left the family
I had left
I was away
I didn’t travel back
I would go back to visit
I was visiting my mother
I wouldn’t make conversation
I just wouldn’t make conversation
I bought a birthday present
I never would have bought a birthday present
I never wrote “love, Tabitha”
I never loved him

I just remembered
I was 17
I was going back to visit
I loved my mother
I don’t have my mother
I would attend neither of their funerals
I haven’t seen them

I got lucky
if I had boys
I don’t know how
I just don’t know how
I’m trying to think
I’m still doing this
I get close to them
I don’t know
I just think
I really don’t know
I don’t know
I don’t know

I also have this thing of not being able to remember
I’ve only got very few memories
I haven’t got enough memories
I mentioned
I think
I know where she told me
I don’t know who it is
I’m not sure who it is
I know
I can’t remember
I can take a guess
I can’t remember
I can’t really remember

I specifically remember
I know are true
I don’t know
I don’t really know
I have gotten more memories
I think

I specifically get it
I meet men
I get reminded
I make specific
I don’t do this with all men
I don’t sort of tell many men
I don’t know
I do

I went to the first four sessions
I thought
I thought he was
I don’t know
I thought
I felt
I felt a real connection to him
I don’t know why
I tried to get out
I can’t tell you

I rang them up
I mean
I knew
I was going
I couldn’t speak to a man
I don’t want to speak to a male
I tried to get out
I’m going to
I thought
I have complained
I just had an epilepsy seizure
I had that back in January
I didn’t know
I just thought
I had been hospitalized
I knew
I needed some help

I was really bad
I have to keep away from stress
I’ve got a brain injury
I get too stressed
I have the possibility of having a seizure,
I don’t get them very often
I don’t get hospitalized
I’ve only been hospitalized twice
I’m trying to figure out
I’m with a specialist

I went away on a tangent
I’ve been saying it
I’ve really been hounding him
I’ve told him
I don’t know
I am now
I have hounded him
I would say.
I’m able to talk to you
I’ve been dealing with it

I was initially talking
no way I was going to speak
I’ve had friends disappear
I’ve got epilepsy
I’ve got this and epilepsy
I say something
I’ve had people just say stuff
I’ve had people also want to tell me
I’m thinking of it

I’ve also put up that website
I’ve gone on the internet
I went on the internet
I shared my story
I’ve put up my website
I do poetry and art
I’m lucky enough to be able to write
I have been approached
I get regular emails through that site
I help also at an art event
I go out there
I speak
I speak

I haven’t been on television
I will always say
I’m up to at the moment
I’ll be getting those published
I went to
I think
I did too

I remember writing in journals
I hope Dad doesn’t…you know
I was actually quite brave
I hope Dad doesn’t get my nieces
I’ll get him

I’m now 36
I’m a completely different person
I was very quiet back then
I’m not
I thought
I was a very closed person
I’m not

I’m definitely more artistic
I won’t take garbage from people
I’ll come back
I’m not
I was very quiet
I don’t think
I didn’t really have an understanding
I was so young
now I do
now I do
I’m older

I wasn’t aware
I didn’t feel
I was so unaware
I hid a lot
I did
I hid
I found him
I heard him
I have one memory of hiding
I’m sure
I hid other places
I don’t remember

I couldn’t talk to men
I wanted someone to help me
I did it all myself
I did protect myself
I did it to the extreme
I did it
I did really well
I saw that as well
I had all of that to see
I just felt
I couldn’t

I had to have a man to help me
I’m looking for men to save me
I’m not in an abusive situation
I’m not sure about other survivors
I had
I didn’t have anyone
I didn’t have like an Uncle
I just had this horrendous father figure

I’m lucky
I’m very lucky in life
I’m actually
I’m harassing him
I’m lucky to have the male counselor
I shouldn’t say
I’m using it against him
I told him
I’m doing
I’m holding that against him
I’m doing
I’m just sort of in that position
I’m sort of in a good position
I would be
I think
I don’t think
I didn’t have those people
I wouldn’t be able to talk on radio
I mean
I also have people on the email
I’ve got a very wide support base
I speak to other people
I actually
I had a lot of say

I am a crime victim
I understand
I’m not
I don’t feel that way
if I felt that way
I’m this crime victim
I wouldn’t be able to do
I do

I just happened
I’m a good person
I’m not at fault
I’m a good person
I’ve never used victim
I’ve never used the term victim
I certainly felt like a victim

I started
I was doing
I would have
I sort of confronted him
I was
I just can’t
I’m sure
I’m lucky

I didn’t have my abuser saying anything like that to me
I couldn’t imagine that
I’m lucky
I’m female
I’ve met male survivors
I can’t imagine what
I feel
I don’t,
I use the word survivor
I am

I know there are stages
I don’t know when
I’ll sort of move forward
I’m sort of talking
I can

I’ve spoken to hundreds of survivors
I couldn’t tell you how many
I’ve read and heard
I ask them
I’m sharing with other people
I’m very good
I’m actually published

I haven’t
I think it’s about five years
I moderate them
I get abusive messages
I get messages
I’ve gotten ridiculous pedophile messages
I moderate a forum
I get messages

I said
I don’t know how many people
I’ve helped
I am
I’ve seen

I think
I have heard other survivors
I imagine
I’m even amazed
I’ve just
I just have to just be careful

I’ve got a fear of men
I only just realized
I’m trying to deal
I’m just seeing how it goes
I’m just praying
I’m truly praying
I can’t figure it out
I just can’t figure it out
I’ve just put myself in that situation

I’ve done
I’m just trying out
I’ve got more experience
I’ve told him
I’ve been told
I do like him
I think

I’ll give you one example
I’ve actually accused him
I’ve accused him
I’ve said
I think you’re a pedophile
I’m thinking
I’m protecting
I am
I’m making sure

I’ve told him
I’m doing
I’ve done
I’ve recreated the situation
I’ve gone
I’ve just got to get out of it

I just about
I came home
I told my husband
I never went back to her
I’ve been gone

I don’t know
I really
I’ve done
I’m hiding out
I’m hiding out
I won’t go anywhere near him
I don’t know
I don’t know

I’m going to have to go back
I have to
I think
I actually have to attend
I know
I haven’t rung them up
I’m a
I didn’t

I’ve gotten quotes
I couldn’t afford that
I’m sort of happy
I think

I’m well educated
I did year 12
I did
I did three years
I think
I went to a technical college
I am
I’m very experienced

I do
I did it
I was at home
I’ve seen

Anne’s Full I Poem

I was growing up
I don’t know
I was probably around 8
but I think the climate of that set this tone
I think that may have influenced
I would say
I would do something
I’m trying to determine what exactly happened
I think it was primarily me
I said, ‘no.’
I was about 10
I was 15.
I don’t know
I never had a chance to deal
I can remember
I was very skittish
I mean
I received
I started developing
I was terrified
I was really on guard
I was
I felt really transparent
I just felt like a spectacle
I would really avoid the gaze
I would like go behind buildings
I wouldn’t have to like see him
I just felt always really uncertain
I didn’t have a really firm sense
I felt
I got big boobs
I just
I didn’t know how to handle
I had my first boyfriend
I lost my virginity
I was 15
I wasn’t there
I didn’t like show up
if I knew anything
if I was kind of embodied
I felt sorry for him (giggling
I dated
I was an undergrad
I took my first psych class
I was like
I developed like a whole style
I was like 15
I was about 19
I was taking her class
I was really forced
I went to therapy
I realized
I was in [Northwest city]
I was meeting
I was noticing
I was like thinking
I was, like
I’ve never been able
I’ve never been able to flop down
I can remember
how do I deal with this
I can’t confront him
I can’t talk to him
I eventually told my parents
I’m the designated talker
I am really getting annoyed
I’m tired of it
I had a very different childhood
I was four years younger
I’ve been realizing
I’m trying to think
I think
I don’t know
I don’t know why
I guess I should tell you
I don’t know
I felt really protective
I think
I later talked
I first started the project
I was 19
I remembered that
I couldn’t blow over
I could talk to Will
I knew
I started taking
I needed
I said
the longer I spent in therapy
I was able to approach
how I understood myself
I had done something
I said ‘no’
I didn’t know
I was kind of, just really worried
I had done something wrong
I was able to kind of talk about
I look at kids
I wish
I could have that
I started unpacking
I mean
I was sent to the hospital
I didn’t realize
I wasn’t able to approach
I think
I was also so angry
I mean
I was born
I had a lot of anger
I didn’t feel
I understood
I really went into psychology
I felt
I needed to do something
I also needed to figure out
I’ve had
I’m in therapy with a male
I probably wasn’t ready
I’ve been
I don’t know
I did encounter
I got married
I went to a shaman
I had a soul retrieval
I had no idea what to expect
I was just feeling
I wanted to figure out
who I was
were I was going
before I committed
I went
I found
I encountered my spirit animal
I kind of went through
I had been fragmented
I went and encountered these places
I got a tattoo
I’m still doing it
I wasn’t really able
I didn’t like to be looked at
I didn’t like to be watched
I didn’t want to have any overt
I didn’t want anyone to notice
I had to figure out
I had a really skittish existence
I had no desire
I would have loved to have asked
I found out later
I mean
I adored him
I wanted his respect
I wanted his approval
I…wanted his approval
I really tried to become him
I tried
I wouldn’t lose him
I was about 19
I started therapy
I…have a different understanding
I have
I’m in my 30s
I have the perspective
I have a really good relationship
I was 19
I have gone way past
I’ve been able
I’ve been able to make amends
I understand a lot more
I couldn’t will it to come
I have to work on
I’ll have to notice
I can really be in a relationship
I was just going to say
I had to contend
I think
I didn’t know
if I had known
I got to find my way
I don’t want to say
I was asexual
I was able
I don’t know
I guess
I really
I felt
I needed them to know
I also needed them to know
I had moved on
I could do
I had sort of worked through
I had felt
I had to move past
I mean
I felt
I felt
I felt really
I was really well held
I said
I felt estranged
I had done a chunk of work
I was like
I didn’t want
I didn’t want to unсанctify
I felt
I needed to preserve
I had done some of that work
I was coming from
I was so
I needed to work with
I’ve been able to make sense
I was clear
I didn’t know
I remembered
I mean
I had to deal with that
I don’t know why
I would have
I don’t know
I just remember
I was
I matured really early
I hadn’t begun
I was just really upset
I think
I hope
I’ve been able
I’ve also been able
I wanted to
I felt really strongly

**Sasha’s Full I Poem**

I would say
I began to understand
I’ve gotten older

I realized

I was 12
I was raped
I think

I had flashbacks

I think

I had a really hard time
I felt like

I was getting blamed
I felt alone
I felt very confused
I had a lot of conflicting feelings

I guess
I thought maybe
I can’t remember
I thought
I was separated
I still often thought
I was really surprised
I was like really surprised

I realized
I was one of the ones
I would even say
I looked

I started thinking
I was like really naïve
I would be like really shocked
I had trouble, um, understanding
I couldn’t understand why
I continued
I was really apprehensive
I was embarrassed
I thought
I was stupid
I was afraid
I don’t think
I think
I think
I think
I sort of don’t know
I think
I thought
I’m afraid to be alone
I think
I had to walk
I’m afraid of being alone
I’m afraid of something
I was alone
I can’t believe
I wasn’t thinking
I have to get to grandma’s
I was trying to go to grandmas
I didn’t see
I just wanted to get to grandmas
I remember telling
I remember being scared
I was going to get in trouble
I didn’t do anything wrong
I didn’t do anything wrong
I don’t know
I think
I understood
I told her
I was hurting
I remember
I don’t remember
I think
I had to keep telling the story
I remember
I was kind of surprised
I just wanted to get it over with
I remember
I remember
I think
I kept asking myself, why did that happen?
I was a nice girl
I had trouble
I kind of held onto it
I may have
I really started to really let it go
I kept asking like, why me?
I thought
I think
I think
I think maybe
I’m not blaming myself
I’m just thinking
I was naïve
I should have had my guard up a little bit
I have to be careful
I appreciated them
I had bouts of depression
I started getting counseling
I’ll still be struggling with that
I knew from that time
I knew it wasn’t my fault
I could have talked
I had to keep it to myself
I couldn’t
I had to hide it
I felt alone
I was being attacked
I had flashbacks
I felt alone
I felt like I’m different
I remember
I was upset
I have to tell
I was thinking
I was worried
I didn’t understand
I remember being 12
I have to explain
I don’t even remember
I don’t even think
I don’t really remember
I was shunned
I was this horrible person
I still liked school
I just hated
I would see him
I hated
I just kept looking
I couldn’t believe
I remember
I forgot
I had gotten so upset
I forgot
I hadn’t thought
I wasn’t like the rest of the girls
I was kind of afraid
I was so worried
I felt differently about myself
I couldn’t understand it
I liked myself
I felt uncomfortable
I kind of felt, well, defiled
I always wanted to hurry up and get dressed
I was going through so many things
I was so happy when we moved
I was worried too
I was relieved
I didn’t have to rehash anything
I wanted to talk about it
I couldn’t
I felt like
I couldn’t talk about it
I didn’t want anyone to know
I was afraid
I just won’t say anything
I didn’t want to relive
I’m just going to avoid
I finally started opening up
I was surprised
I was relieved
I could talk about it
I could talk about it
I wasn’t thinking why me anymore
I used to wonder
I was afraid
I was afraid to tell
I really appreciate
I can still talk about it
I was shocked
I didn’t understand
I kept telling him no
I couldn’t understand
I’m just thinking
I was just so, like, shocked
I told her
I wasn’t expecting
I understand things now.
I was just so naïve
I was thinking
I went into social work
I want to help other little girls
I think
I think
I knew
I said something right away
I didn’t want
I got to grandma’s
I said something
I don’t remember
I think I did
I don’t remember
I said rape
I think
I don’t know
I might have said
I’m expecting
I’m just standing there
I’m thinking to myself
I’m saying to myself
I can’t stand here
I’m thinking
I’m saying no
I started to walk off
I was real fortunate
I think
I was so relieved
I knew it wasn’t easy
I appreciate that
I don’t remember
I think
I know that wasn’t easy
I was actually afraid for him too
I think
I can’t remember
I don’t even remember
I remember
I can’t remember
I think maybe
I don’t remember
I just cannot believe
I was thinking
I was thinking
I saw him
I remember being scared
I think
I hope that it helps.