

2012

## Journey Through Trauma

A. Kay Schaaf

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Schaaf, A. Kay (2012) "Journey Through Trauma," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 6: No. 2, 34-55.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol6/iss2/4>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

A. KAY SCHAAF

## JOURNEY THROUGH TRAUMA

**Abstract:** People who are not able to overcome the effects of childhood trauma often waste their human potential on substance abuse and illicit lifestyles; they end up in prison, uneducated, or develop self-destructive behavior. They often struggle with poor learning and social skills and are not able to be successful in life. However, some individuals do succeed. This study interviewed eight individuals who suffered childhood trauma and developed ways of overcoming that trauma to live prosperous, productive, and in many regards, full lives. The stories in this article were written to reveal and celebrate the success of each of these individuals as they moved through childhood trauma to normalized behavior. Adult participants expressed the need for support through spirituality in their lives, as it was lacking in their traumatic childhoods. Resilience can be cultivated in traumatized individuals if we embrace their reality by listening to and believing children's traumatic stories and if we share neighbor-love through God's grace by rallying non-judgmental, compassionate clergy, congregations, and community members.

**Keywords:** *Childhood trauma, maltreatment, results, resiliency, behavior, caregiver, spirituality, support*

### Introduction

Human beings strive to stay in control. People come to believe, in a way, that they can order their lives. I have been curious how an adult who was traumatized as a child can convey his horror to others. . . . How do you form something positive from a hard-to-fashion hunk of clay? (Terr, 1990, p. 112; 2008, p. 9)

It is estimated that every year in the United States alone 300,000-500,000 children are sexually abused (Beste, 2005, pp. 382-383). As many as 17.8 million children are often present and witness violence, resulting in child trauma (Adams, 2006, p. 334). Child neglect, defined as physical, medical, educational, and emotional neglect, is also categorized as abuse and is a criminal offense (De Bellis, 2005, p. 151). For example, in a study of 100 three- to five-year-old children, those who witnessed violence against their mothers demonstrated poorer verbal skills and abilities than those who had not witnessed violence against their mothers; witnessing such violence affected verbal and visual-spa-

Dr. A. Kay Schaaf resides in Monument, Colorado, and has been teaching adult learners in higher education for nine years. She is presently employed at Colorado Christian University, College of Adult and Graduate Studies. Kay is actively involved in prison ministry in Colorado and is a former correctional educator, teaching convicted felons at two Indiana correctional facilities for Purdue University.

tial skills through a moderating effect on the mothers' level of depression and intellectual quality in the home (Adams, 2006, pp. 336-337). It is hypothesized that poor cognitive development may be caused by adverse brain development due to child neglect (De Bellis, 2005, p. 150).

While the horrors of abuse of various kinds often find their way into the media and into research, this article shares the stories of eight individuals who overcame childhood abuse. We "privilege" their stories by presenting them first and then follow with theoretical and practical suggestions.

## **Michael**

Mom remarried an abusive man. He would get angry and beat his children and my mom's. (Michael)

Michael is a white male in his late 40s who was raised in upstate New York. He is a sensitive, devout Christian man who freely feels that opening his heart about his past childhood trauma and abuse can bless others.

### *Family System and Childhood Trauma*

Michael was four years old when his parents split up and his mother became single. But she was single only for a short time, and she eventually married an abusive man who would get angry and beat his own children as well as his stepchildren. This second marriage lasted until Michael was a teenager, but his attempt to escape the instability, poverty, and horrific beatings had already led him to alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, crime, and running in the streets. In his heart he knew it was wrong, but there was so much instability and lack of parenting in the home. Michael's need for a structured life led to unhealthy friendships. It was not until Michael was an adult that he found out the truth about his father, that he wanted to repair his marriage and family.

Michael discussed with me his disagreement with mother's transient behavior. "My mother decided when I was 15 she was going to move to Georgia [from New York]," he remembers. "I told my mother goodbye, quit school, got a job, lived in a trailer park, drug dealing and other crimes . . . using drugs daily."

When he was 17, Michael, along with his stepbrother, joined the Navy. He didn't know that harboring anger can result in an unhealthy

body, mind, and soul. And so the instability, insecurity, abuse, recklessness, and separation from family caused Michael to harbor emotions so intense that he was confused, frustrated, and rebellious. Laughing, Michael says, “I didn’t stay in the Navy very long. I kind of rebelled because I felt that the ones giving the [drug] test were alcoholics. . . . I knew they were alcoholics. I was angry and frustrated.” From the time he was 17 years old, Michael was plagued for years by very severe cluster headaches. But military personnel took little notice of his pain. Michael felt that because of childhood trauma, he led a purposeless, angry life, filled with selfishness, resentment, deception, disrespect for authority, and foolishness behavior. “Everything that I wanted was all dashed,” he says, “and more of the same adults making decisions that affected me negatively and I had a stomach full of it.”

Michael’s ability to be deceptive affected not only his relationship with his family but also eventually his enlistment in the Navy. He lied to his mother and told her he was on vacation when actually he was AWOL; eventually he was discharged from the Navy. “I wasn’t satisfied with this life,” he says. “I found that the people that I was most comfortable with had the same lifestyle. I realized I couldn’t really run away from who I was by changing my locations.”

Michael moved on again. But as life goes, one seldom learns from one’s first mistakes. “When I [relocated] I got involved in alcohol and drugs,” Michael admits. “And wherever you go there it is. So, I was struggling with the same frustrations.” He continued a transient lifestyle with no social life or support.

### *Coping With Support*

During his journeys, Michael met a man who introduced him to Jesus; Michael told the man that he had the desire to get to know Jesus. The man gave him the book *Power for Living*, written by famous people who shared how they came to Christ. Michael took the book to his bedroom and was intently committed to change. But he was not able to find a church family or a support system. Michael had no support or mentoring at that point in his life. “The guy who introduced me to Jesus and his church actually smoked pot with me and drank. So I met his family and went to church a few times but it wasn’t [at] that church that I came to Christ.”

While Michael went to church, he still felt very alone because he did not fit in. Most of the people in the small singles group he joined had grown up in the church but were kind of wishy-washy in their commit-

ment to Christ. They would teach a really good Sunday school class and talk about God and then go and do things in the world. He had already lived in the world; he knew what that was like and had no interest in it. Michael just didn't fit in.

Through another acquaintance, Michael connected with a man who understood how much he liked to study Scripture. Michael and his new friend would stay up late studying various subjects, but they did not see eye to eye on some things. Eventually, Michael attended a Seventh-day Adventist Revelation seminar, met the pastor, and found that what they were saying in the Saturday services resonated with him as truth. "And the pastor and the evangelist took the time to sit down and answer my questions. . . . I was always being put off by other pastors. So I didn't really have support." Michael cleared his throat. "I didn't feel like I had support other than God behind the scene and circumstances until this time in my life. Pastors in the Adventist church have been a support to me. I've been able to build good friendships."

With this support and encouragement, Michael has been able to expand his horizons and is able to do Christian ministry, even with a financial sacrifice. He has been involved in prison ministry for over two years, with little financial support or resources. Michael could focus on getting more grant money for what he does, but he said that would take him away from focusing on his true calling—trying to custom-design a Christian prison ministry.

Michael's adjustment and "transcendence" from childhood trauma was gradual. "I can't leave out my wife," he is quick to say. "Eighteen years ago I was married. She has been a great source of stability and support to me in my growth." But when asked how this support system helped him move from trauma to leading within his family and community, he boldly replies, "God and God alone and God working through other people."

As Michael talks to convicted felons, he personally evaluates his own life as it relates to the questions in the lecture series. As he facilitates the discussions with the men in prison, he finds that he is ministering to himself as much as the lectures are ministering to the men. When the opportunity arises, he is able to share his testimony with the men, usually during a worship service. "[I share] little snippets as I hear God saying, now is the time to do this," Michael notes. "I see it as a divine appointment to share my testimony." It is unusual for someone like Michael to be involved in prison ministry since he has not been previously incarcerated.

Michael's work at the prison is lonely, difficult, and frustrating. It's very hard for him to find willing and committed people to help. He recently handed out five volunteer applications and has not heard back from even one person. "They won't even answer their phone," he laments. "They say they want to help, but they don't. So, I've gotten to the point that I don't want to fool around with people who are wishy-washy. I'd rather do it alone." Michael wants help with his prison ministry, but he wants help that God sends and not that he recruits.

For two years, Michael has not had a regular paycheck. "But I've acquired a house," he says. "It was a gift. It needs a lot of work. Heat bills are high because it was built in 1906. . . . Cold air comes right through." Michael has faith that God is taking care of his family's needs; therefore, he can't get hasty and say he wants to have a regular paycheck so he can increase his material wealth.

Michael finds ways to spend time with his family that do not cost money. "That's really meaningful. . . . Right now I have responsibilities at the prison, but I get to spend time with my children that people who have to work a 40-hour week don't get to spend. . . . I'm happy. I'm broke but happy." Michael expressed his thankfulness for God, his family, Christian fellowship, and his ability to walk through his childhood trauma to a normal, healthy life that is free from cluster headaches. Michael is content.

## Denise

I was terrified. He was always drunk. He beat my mom when she was seven months pregnant. (Denise)

Homelessness can lead to intense insecurity and loneliness, especially for an unwed mother. Add the lifestyle of a migrant worker and abandonment by your unborn baby's father and his family, and more fear and questions about purpose in life will arise. This is the beginning of Denise's story. She was the unborn baby.

### *Family System and Childhood Trauma*

Some children have the ability to grow up within a weak family system and become stronger through their trauma and abuse. Denise is a white female now in her mid-50s. As Denise speaks, she timidly exposes intimate details about her mother's background. Her mother worked in a factory when she was very young, lying about her age. Her mother was transient and eventually became homeless. "My mother was 21, pregnant, and homeless," Denise explains. "She eventually ended up

in a home for unwed mothers. She signed me away because back then she didn't have any place to go. Nobody in her family knew she was pregnant." But Denise's mother's aunt eventually found her. Young Denise eventually was reunited with her mother, who married an older man, an abusive alcoholic.

They lived in isolation in farming country in southern Indiana. Her stepfather was a farmer and farmed crops for other people. He was able to pay the rent and provide a small amount of food to sustain his growing family—and subsidize his alcohol addiction. They couldn't afford a car, so they were unable to go anywhere.

Denise's fear intensified with every drink her stepfather took. When he was out drinking on Friday nights, prowlers would harass the family by banging on their windows. "We were terrified," she says. When her mother told the stepfather about the prowlers, he thought she was lying:

So every Friday night for a long time we went through this trauma. There were men looking in the windows and beating on the doors. I can remember screaming and [my mother] getting a gun out and them running away. And it happened every week. Finally, my stepdad stayed home one night and saw we were telling the truth. But he didn't do anything. "What the hell do you want?" he said. And one guy answered, "Do you have a cigarette?" I'm surprised he didn't do anything, but he didn't.

Violence gripped Denise's household. One time her mother and stepfather got into an intense argument when her mother was seven months pregnant. "I'll never forget this," she says. "I was a little girl. It was real traumatic. He beat the hell out of her. He blackened her eye and hit her in the stomach. The baby didn't move for a couple of days." The doctor threatened the stepfather with a jail sentence if the baby died, but she was born okay. Denise's mother had persistent trouble coping with the housework because "[she] was like a little kid." She "employed" Denise to perform the bulk of the chores. But her stepfather was never satisfied with Denise's hard work and would badger her with unkind words and did not give her credit for any of her sacrifices.

Denise did not date or go to proms. Social life was limited to church on Sundays and the county fair once a year. "[At church] I never fit in and, to be honest, I was just going to meet boys because I didn't go anywhere else social." Seeing hypocrisy within the congregation dampened her faith in organized religion, but she did believe in God. Her alcoholic stepfather was the biggest hypocrite of all, commanding church attendance but abusing and traumatizing his family at home. As for the county fair, Denise could not wear shorts like the other girls.

“I’d wear a dress with Mom and Dad drinking lemonade in the farm show.”

Denise’s mother’s shame was constantly present within their household. Denise lacked maternal support (something she tried to compensate for when she herself became a mother by spoiling her own daughter in later years). Disappointment increased as her stepfather displayed dissatisfaction with her school work. She became reserved, lazy, and indifferent in her attitude toward school and life in general. Denise continued to live in a perilous, unprotected, poverty stricken, violent alcoholic home until she was 18 years old. She felt terrified, manipulated, and controlled by her stepfather’s alcohol addiction.

During the summer before Denise finished high school, she visited her aunt, her mother’s sister, in a distant city. She made secret arrangements, without her parent’s knowledge, to move in with her aunt after she graduated from high school. “I couldn’t wait to get out of there,” she says.

After moving in with her aunt and uncle, Denise got hired at a small factory that produced radios and stereo components. “This was my first time to try to do anything,” she says. “I always thought I was capable, but I went into that factory and I didn’t know anything.” She lacked social skills and did not know how to relate to the other women, who were much older than she was. “I felt like it was a job for stupid people that they didn’t know where to put me. . . .” After a long pause, Denise finished her thought. “The ladies would giggle at me.”

### *Coping With Support*

Denise did not have a support system within her small family nucleus, but support eventually came from the older women at the radio factory. She got really close to them; they became mentors to her. “There were, in fact, several ladies that I was like their second daughter, you know,” Denise remembers. “I really liked them. Even my boss treated me in a fatherly way.”

She was open and honest with her coworkers, sharing about her past childhood trauma and her violent alcoholic stepfather. “I [was] with them for years,” Denise says of this support network. “I ended up working [at the radio factory] for 33 years. I saw some of them retire and some of them die. I still visit with some and see others around town.”

Because of the continual extended family support system at work, Denise has been able work through her trauma to lead a reasonably normal life. She values her independence, continues to work hard and



has become self-sufficient. Gaining self-respect through frequent motherly support from her female coworkers, Denise has become compassionate towards people who are less fortunate than she is. Her social skills improved over the years and Denise learned to communicate well enough with the opposite sex to develop a healthy relationship with one of her coworkers, who she later married.

After two years of marriage Denise became pregnant. Unfortunately, shortly after her daughter's birth the doctors told her the baby was very ill and had a rare genetic condition. "The people at work were my support system. I just handled this thing right away. I had to deal with it, because there's nothing more important than your child."

Denise believes that she had the ability to adjust to this trauma because of the women at work who were her support system. "I just thought that when you have a baby you should know. . . . I just had this grandiose idea that I was going to be a good mom."

Denise is adamant that her ability to be resilient and move through her childhood trauma to normalized adult behavior has given her the compassion needed to be supportive to others in need. She has strong family values and enforces freedom of personal choices and religion. Denise is determined to keep her family safe, promoting sobriety and family fidelity.

## Lee

My father was ashamed of my disability. I was an unwanted child.  
(Lee)

In introducing me to his heroic journey through childhood trauma, Lee wanted me to know that he is "first and foremost grateful for his belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, though life has not always been this way. However, today it is." Lee, a now middle-aged white male, was conceived in the back of a taxi cab in an unguarded moment of passion. His father later made it clear that he was an unwanted child. Tearful, lonely memories of a painful past became reality as Lee gently confided details that most would only confess to their closest friends.

### *Family System and Childhood Trauma*

Lee was labeled as a "mistake" by his father, who always blamed Lee for having to marry his mother.

My parents tried to make the marriage work. It didn't. . . . Until the age of four, I spent most of my time on my bed or in my crib on my back because of the pain that I had in my stomach. My grandfather came to [our house] to check on us three grandkids. My father had just finished beating me and my grandfather went to my bed

and he rolled me over and he noticed this huge lump in my stomach and it was getting bigger by the second.

Lee's grandfather immediately rushed him to the hospital, where it was discovered that he had a hernia that had erupted. After the long and complicated surgery was completed, Lee's grandparents took him back to their farm to live with them. This arrangement lasted for about two years.

An important detail in Lee's story is that his father was a World War II veteran, a reality that took a toll on his father both mentally and emotionally. During his time in the war, and later at home, his father drowned his sorrows and pain in alcohol.

I guess my dad was an alcoholic. Anyway, my father did not drink all of the time when I was there, anyway, until the end of my stay, which was on a Friday night. And my father went out and got very drunk and was arguing with my mom. The next thing I know my dad pulled a butcher knife from the drawer in the kitchen and proceeded to stab my mom. And as he drew it back I stepped in the middle and I kind of received the knife.

When Lee was later questioned by the local authorities, his mother insisted that he say that he was playing with the knife and fell on it. She did not want anything to happen to his father. "Needless to say, I went back to my grandparents and that was pretty much the end of the story," says Lee. "My grandparents and me. I was raised by my grandparents."

Lee's parents eventually divorced, which was unacceptable in the 1960s and 1970s. His brothers were sent to a children's home in Indianapolis and Lee's one sister joined him at his grandparents, while his other sister was adopted by his great-grandparents. Having divorced parents brought shame to Lee and, because of his insecurity, he was the object of one bully's attention.

At the end of fifth grade I had determined to myself that he had picked on me for the last time. And that summer, because my grandparents had a farm . . . I baled hay. I became very physical. So, [at school] I let the bully get my cookie in his hands and as soon as his hands were occupied I blacked out. I guess I hurt the boy pretty bad.

At the age of 13 Lee found out about football. He could "legally" take all his aggressions and anger out on the playing field. He took pleasure when he could hurt the guys. Lee was a good football player, which allowed him to go to college and get a good college education. Lee learned from his college football coach that when you play with passion and put that passion to work, "you'll be able to make it both on the football field and [in] academics." In tribute to that coach Lee says,

“I owe it to Mr. S. and everything because he gave me stability.” Other guys with similar backgrounds became Lee’s friends, and as they talked together, Lee says, “we would start to learn to cope and in college I took a lot of psychology classes because one of my majors was business. . . . I learned a lot about how manipulation works and [how to] pretty much get what you want.”

The neglect, rejection, and instability that Lee experienced in his family home resulted in feelings of shame and insecurity. He became reckless and angry; this anger turned to irresponsible behavior and the abuse of others. His separation from his family, especially his brothers and sister, led to confusion and frustration. Because of the rejection from his father, Lee harbored resentment against authority and self-medicated through alcohol and sexual promiscuity. He conceded that he was foolish and led a purposeless life.

I will never forget the time my son was born. Notre Dame was playing Duke University in 1978. And my wife looked over at me and says, “Why are you crying about the game?” And I said, “Honey, I’m not crying about the game. I’m crying because I’ve never known or been taught to be a father and now I need to know somebody to help me, teach me.”

Lee made it clear that he was not a good guy—he went to church and drank on the weekends. But one “good guy” commitment he made (never forgetting that his brothers had been sent away to the children’s home) was that when he got married and had children, his wife would never work, and she would always be there for his children, and he would always be their father. And so it was. Lee graduated from college, got married, and worked in the construction business, something he had dreamed of doing.

However, the dream was shattered when, in 2002, Lee was accused of stealing money from the construction company he worked for. Consequently, in 2007, Lee was sentenced to 19 years in prison. Lee’s wife of 27 years asked for a divorce when she heard the sentence.

### *Coping With Support*

The Department of Corrections requires inmates to be psychologically evaluated. Lee’s examination revealed that his major problems in life had started when his father stabbed him and he was coerced to tell the local authorities that he had been playing with a knife.

While in prison, Lee was fortunate to become involved in an independent Christian ministry. He got to know who God really was by reading the Bible and understanding His Word. He learned in prison

that he cannot do anything about the past or the future; he can only concentrate on the present. He still lives this way. Lee says that God said to him, “You know what? I gotcha. And why are you worried about tomorrow? I’ll take care of tomorrow. You’re supposed to take care of today.”

In a discussion of his work in prison ministry, Lee says that the kids who are left behind (when a parent goes to prison) need to know there’s a big guy ready to give them a helping hand. If they just need to go to a ball game or to a park, they need to know they have somebody they can count on. And the spouse left behind needs support too.

I went to prison and I think God sent me to prison for a purpose. He said, “I’ve got you now.” He wanted me to cry out to him like Job did and say, “God, help me! God, what have I done?” I learned to know who God was.

Lee wanted me to know that he believes our society today is failing in the prison system; once you are in prison, you are just a number. Very few people get involved in faith-based prison ministries. Most prisoners end up reoffending when they are released. They lack purpose and the means to an end. They lack a support system and people who believe in them as human beings. The program that Lee is now involved in reports that the recidivism rate among those touched by the program has dropped from 57% to 38%. “That’s because it makes you think . . .” says Lee. “It helps you think before you act.”

Lee’s priorities in life are his faith, family, compassion and giving back. He finds stability in Christ, giving Christ to prisoners, and connecting with people of like minds in faith, family, and parenting.

## **Leney**

The trauma that affected me was incest. It began when I was two and ended when I was 12. (Leney)

Leney is a 54-year-old white woman who lives in the Midwest. She sat calmly and still as the words of childhood trauma tumbled freely from her lips. Her ability to travel through her trauma is nothing short of a miracle. Yet Leney was able to open up to me about some of the sensitive details that have molded her life into what it is today: the ability to help others who have gone through similar childhood trauma to lead lives of normalized adult behavior.

## *Family System and Childhood Trauma*

Leney grew up in the country in the Midwest. She had a close, loving

family and parental ties, was close to her church and pastor, and felt loved and safe. Yet the unpardonable childhood trauma that affected Leney was incest.

Naturally, this greatly affected her attitude and caused negative thoughts towards men. “I am leery of most men,” she says. “I think they mostly look at women as sex objects.” She was, and still is, an emotional eater, resulting in weight gain and a heavy-set build, what Leney refers to as her “body armor.” This body armor has been her protection against men and against feeling alone, scared, and fearful.

When she was 12 years old, Leney told the perpetrator that it was over. She told him that if he ever touched her again she would scream from the rooftop so everyone in the world would know about it. And in that moment, she learned that when you stand up for yourself, and when you speak the truth, things change.

Though Leney was very young at the time of the crime and didn’t have the vocabulary to explain it, somehow she knew that what was happening to her was happening for a reason. She knew that someday she would understand what the reason was and that she would be able to “turn a very negative into a very positive.” Leney feels that her life is good right now. She is able to “feel” more and is secure in who she is.

Leney confesses that she tends to withdraw when she is hurting. As a result of this insecurity and being out of her protective childhood home, when Leney entered college right out of high school, she was intimidated by the new environment and was very unsure of herself. “So I didn’t stay long,” she reflects. “I later went back to college here locally but I did not finish my degree. I got married instead.”

Leney’s life is presently in transition. She got divorced recently after 28 years of marriage. Facing insecurity and the switch from being married to single have not been easy, but finally she is getting to the place where she can “breathe again. The marriage was not good.”

### *Coping With Support*

Leney says that it is not easy for her to go to someone for support when she is hurting. She met her therapist when she was in her late 20s. She had not told anyone about the incest until then. This therapist, who is now one of Leney’s best friends, helped her face that closed door inside of her and let her know it was safe to walk through. “The main thing,” says Leney, “is those people [who] believed in me. They saw something then and now in me that I can’t see in myself. Their support in who I am gives me the courage to keep walking.”

Although Leney's parents were an integral part of her support system, she now is coping with caring for them as they face major health issues in their mid-80s. This has been a difficult transition for Leney, as safety within her family was her ultimate support system.

Leney places great value on family, friendships, spirituality, God, and nature. "Traditional church was not speaking to me," she says. "I recognize now what I needed was spirituality rather than rules." She believes in providing a safe place for people to worship freely, whether they believe in Buddha, angels, meditation, or soul retrieval. Forgiveness, faith, and pursuit of one's passions help in the healing process. Leney considers talking, mentoring, and most of all love to be the ultimate influences in her adjustment to normalized behavior. She was nurtured through a safe place, comfort, and acceptance, but most of all through love—this includes being held and physical contact. Because of Leney's desire to help others, her calling turned a negative into a positive. Without the trauma and incest, she said she would not be who she is today.

I wouldn't—couldn't—have the compassion I have without experiencing those feelings, the dark night of the soul, myself. And knowing how important it is for someone to believe in you; to know it's going to be okay; to know you're going to get through it.

People having faith in Leney encouraged her. She was so encouraged, in fact, that she entered her community, helping others who were traumatized as children. In 2003 she opened a center that gives healing through freedom in spiritual life, therapy, and an environment where people can be "absolutely safe and know they are loved." Now Leney is thankful for what happened: "Not the kind of thankful that I wish I could go back and do it again. At a very deep level I get it."

When I ask Leney how she feels that her experiences have helped those with whom she comes in contact and how she is able to influence these people and their lives, she replies, "One word—love. I can see who they are just like the people who have seen who I am; who they are not, just their fears and insecurities. They ultimately want love. So, I guess it's love and acceptance."

## **Gabriel and Scarlet**

Pretty much all our lives our dads have been alcoholics. (Gabriel)

Alcoholism is a loathsome disease. It not only destroys the individual alcoholic's mind, body, and spirit, but infects family, friends, and society as a whole. It is an addiction that causes trauma, violence, embarrassment, neglect, insecurity, divorce, and poverty. When Gabriel

and Scarlet met in their early 20s, they had no idea that they shared the all-too-common thread of alcoholism. Both of their fathers were alcoholics; their lives were saturated with the effects of substance abuse. Partners for over four years, Gabriel and Scarlet support each other by understanding their traumatic backgrounds and abuse. In addition, they concentrate on the maintenance of the vigilance that it takes to sustain daily normal behavior.

### *Family System and Childhood Trauma*

Scarlet was six years old when her father's motorcycle accident occurred. As a result of the accident, he became an emotionally and verbally abusive alcoholic. He would drink all day long. Without the physical, financial, and emotional support of a father-figure in her life, Scarlet, along with her mother and older sister, were responsible to care for themselves. "That made the three of us close," Scarlet says. "But that excluded my dad. We had to stay home. He didn't want anyone near us. He wanted us all to himself. I don't think he wanted to lose us."

Gabriel's parents were divorced when he was around six or seven, which was when he realized that his father was an alcoholic. He said that his parents were always fighting, and that his mother had to do everything.

He was a very bad alcoholic. I remember the day he left. I was standing in front of the front door of the house that my mom and he had owned, and I was pleading with him not to go. And he just brushed over me as I was crying and he just walked out of the door and I didn't see him for a long time after. And you know, me and my mom, we struggled.

Gabriel was 13 years old when he got his first job working for money "under the table." He did what he could to help his mother out. Gabriel really did not get to live a normal life as a child because there was always the underlying need to help out in the household; he assumed the role of the man of the house.

At present, Scarlet's only family support now rests within Gabriel's extended family. Gabriel is just glad that Scarlet is able to come into this support group: "She needs it more than I need it. Her father still tries to provoke her. He doesn't need to do that. He gets her all upset and crying and stuff like that. I'm done playing games."

Scarlet's co-dependent mother continues to defend her father. Although Scarlet is close with her sister, who is three years older, her sister also defends their father, which leaves Scarlet as an outsider. Scarlet's embarrassment and repulsive feelings towards her father grew as she matured. When her sister went off to college, Scarlet was left

home to cope with her father's abuse. He would drink all day and get very talkative about things that did not make sense. "I guess that was really embarrassing for me," she says, "and I never wanted anyone to come over."

As a young boy, Gabriel's experience was much like Scarlet's. He did not want to bring anybody home to his house because he, too, felt embarrassed, especially when his parents would get into big fights. Gabriel also experienced similar feelings of isolation in his youth.

Young Scarlet, feeling rejected and alone, dealt with her anger silently. She still has bouts of anger. And she still has no support from her mother, who works most of the day. Gabriel understands that Scarlet does not feel bad for her mother. "I love her mom to death," Gabriel laments. "She's an awesome person . . . , but she gets walked all over by him and there's no reason for it."

Gabriel and Scarlet experienced a normal stage of dating and did not bring up underlying problems or childhood trauma. But their paternal connection revealed its ugly head when Gabriel's father came over disheveled, high on drugs, and emaciated from years of alcohol abuse.

When Scarlet entered high school, she joined groups like track and band, which got her away from home for short spurts of time, but she was not allowed to go out with friends. She had to be careful to come home from school right after her activity was over. There was little joy in these school activities because of the constant fear of what she would be confronted with upon returning home. "My mom would go to work and during the day he said he was going out and looking for a job," Scarlet remembers, "but we knew he wasn't because he would come home and he would be drinking and pass out." Scarlet was always scared of what would happen when she got home from school.

Homework was not affected by Scarlet's father's alcoholism; since she had a very limited social life, she had time to do homework, though she did not "do good in high school." She was awkward, afraid to meet people, and did not want to bring anyone home because she was embarrassed of the condition she would find her father in.

He would be drinking all day long, and when I'd come home . . . I tried to get away as much as possible. I used band to get away and when I'd come home then he'd want to talk to me and talk to me. And he'd go through my room and destroy things sometimes. He'd get really mad at me about the most ridiculous things.

Unlike Scarlet, when Gabriel entered high school, he never had a problem with social life. Not wanting to sound conceited, Gabriel said he was always pretty popular and was voted most irresistible in his sen-



ior class. It is obvious, with his kind eyes and winning smile, that he easily made friends. “I just had a good social life and was always hanging out with friends. But,” he admits, “I think it led me to partying and stuff I shouldn’t be doing.” Gabriel started living the fast life, indulging in alcohol, drugs, and sex. This led to paths that he should not have gone down, paths of self-destructing and illegal behaviors. His focus turned to making more money, and he lost interest in academics in high school. His mother had him arrested more than once.

### *Coping With Support*

When Scarlet was a child, her support system came sometimes from her sister but for the most part from within herself. She did not reach out to others and, until meeting Gabriel, she was basically self-motivated, coping alone with her anger, embarrassment, and internal conflicts that were the results of having an alcoholic father. Gabriel, in contrast, received counseling from the age of 12 or 13 years old. “I have a support system,” he meekly commented. He attended groups such as Alateens and learned about the disease of alcoholism. He encountered other young people who had been in similar situations and people whose trauma was much worse than his own. Counseling helped him to express his feelings. Counselors and doctors listened to him:

I don’t know if it was nurturing as I look at my mom as the nurturer. She’s always been there to hold me when I’m crying. . . . I can’t thank her enough for it. I can look at [my father] and tell him I’m not angry. And I’ve told him that before.

Scarlet boasts about Gabriel’s mother, who has been able to help Scarlet through difficult times because she has not had the opportunity to get counseling. “She’s just amazing and never gives up on me! She’s so smart,” gushes Scarlet. “She makes me feel so much better. She’s been my counselor.” Scarlet’s own mother can’t produce the same results because, like she said, her mother is still “hooked,” whereas Gabriel’s mother is “disconnected” from her alcoholic ex-husband.

Gabriel has been blessed with another major support, his “uncle” (actually a long-time friend of his mother), who has filled the aching void of a missing father:

When I was a kid that was the best thing in the world. He’s always been the dad I never had. He’s always given me good advice and I listen to him. It sucks that I care more about him than my own dad. I think that’s still one of the only things that I may struggle with thinking about that. But I don’t know what else to say. My dad was never there . . . he was just a donor to me pretty much.

I think I am resilient. I look at the jobs I’ve done and all the different places I’ve worked and I think, man, oh man! My mom has

done a good job of putting me through counseling.

Gabriel understands that his father has a disease, is an alcoholic. He has forgiven his father, and accepts that he will likely never change.

Scarlet assured me that her journey through childhood trauma has definitely given her compassion for other people. She is very caring and is involved in social projects at college and in the community. “I like to be there for people, sometimes too much, even within my family. I always want to take care of people and please people. I don’t like letting people down. I have self-respect.” Counseling would have helped, but she never had the opportunity. Gabriel’s mother is now Scarlet’s counselor and nurturer. “She’s everything to me. I’m grateful.”

### **Neighbor-Love: God’s Grace, Religious and Spiritual Support**

According to Christian tradition, God’s grace frees us to love God and neighbor. Recognizing the socially mediated dimension of God’s grace heightens our sense of obligation toward our neighbor. . . . What specific forms of neighbor-love can best respond to the needs of [trauma] survivors? (Beste, 2005, p. 98)

Child abuse can leave a victim feeling spiritually deprived, as noted by Franz (2002): “There can be profound spiritual damage . . . where the abuser and the victim are both religious. If the victim prayed to God for protection, and the abuse continued, the victim may see God as uncaring” (p. 5). Nearly all of the participants in this study see spiritual support as highly important. Franz supports this view:

The goal of churches should be to guide their parishioners to the answers to [their] questions, allowing victims to share their stories—and their pain. . . . The church is a place people should be able to go for healing—all people—regardless of who they are or what they have suffered. . . . [Churches should hold] seminars informing parishioners, staff, [and hold] forums so victims can be heard. (2002, pp. 9-11)

Unfortunately, most of the participants reported that they did not have a belief system to rely on during their childhood.

Beste (2005) asks some important questions and offers her perspective:

How do Christians make sense of God’s loving presence in the context of the horrific suffering experienced by victims? How do we Christians understand our obligations to . . . victims, particularly those who have extreme difficulty trusting God’s love and acceptance? . . . Survivors tend to perceive God as distant, judgmental, harsh and/or ashamed of them. But God’s grace is mediated through acts of neighbor-love both within and beyond Christian communities. . . . Christianity involves God graciously offering God’s very self (in and through Christ) to humanity. This divine gift is crucial because it offers every person the opportunity to say “yes” freely to God’s self-communication and enter into a relation-

ship with God. . . . The Church is the enduring presence of grace to the world. . . . Interpersonal support and love is absolutely essential for healing—particularly those chronically abused as children. (pp. 90-95)

Spiritual communities need to provide a safe facility, with an “open door policy,” which is attractive and available to today’s youth. Less discrimination against today’s youth within churches and religious organizations and more intergenerational acceptance may be needed, with less looking on the outward appearance and more looking at the heart. In addition, spiritual communities need to share the importance of internal value systems with youth. Collaboration with various secular and non-religious trauma facilities needs to be strengthened. Churches need to improve their understanding and respect of diverse cultural and religious traditions and worldviews, and their religious beliefs concerning childhood trauma victims. Victims and their families need to know that somebody cares—especially from within the religious and spiritual communities and their leaders. This can help restore victims’ sense of hope and self-worth (Franz, 2002, p. 13).

### **Embracing Reality: Listening and Believing**

Disclosure conferred benefit only when a listener was empathetic, respectful, and affirming. (Thomas & Hall, 2008, p. 161)

The stories above are told by eight adults who were traumatized and abused as children. Unfortunately, for lack of opportunity or availability of a listening, empathetic parent, teacher, professional, or member of the clergy, they were not able to tell their stories when they were young. Beste (2005) explains why this matters:

To listen and believe survivors’ accounts . . . can be excruciating, for it conflicts with our most comforting assumptions about the world and God. It disrupts our sense of well-being, comfort, and security. To embark on a journey with survivors involves a willingness to be challenged in our view of ourselves, our world, and even our beliefs about God. (p. 111)

I wonder if the study participants’ lives would have been different if they had had the opportunity to tell their stories as children.

“Traumatic events effect great damage not so much because of the immediate harm they cause but because of the lingering need to reevaluate one’s view of oneself and the world” (Condly, 2006, p. 211). Beste (2005) concurs:

Trauma literature consistently finds that the dynamics of traumatization render an individual incapable of transcending the totalizing effects of trauma and its post-traumatic stress symptoms on one’s own. Intervention from a third party is crucial to break the traumatic cycle created by the dynamics of perpetrator and victim. (p. 94)

Severe emotional and behavioral effects of childhood trauma were experienced by all eight participants. But how can adults determine if a child is being abused or neglected? What signs can one look for without causing the child more trauma or stress? Most children are prone to curiosity and have vivid imaginations; they also have a knack for creative storytelling. Nevertheless, adults should be aware of the signs of possible child abuse and trauma revealed in children's stories. Stories should not be overlooked, even if they border on excessiveness and extreme exaggeration.

Multiple lists of signs of abuse or trauma are available for professionals and laypeople. These lists include:

1. Repeated injury to a child with unconcern on the part of the parent(s), or with unlikely explanations.
2. Aggressive behavior that implies a child's cry for help.
3. Neglected appearance.
4. Overly critical parental attitude.
5. Withdrawal, depression, and self-injury. (Hoff, 2009, pp. 382-383)

Terr (2008) suggests that if a child is inclined to storytelling, that the adult or professional who suspects abuse can also apply his or her own storytelling techniques. For example, the adult listening to the child can suggest a game of storytelling and start a story so that the child can fill in the blanks. This can encourage the child to be more open, participating in "play" but revealing truth within the tale (pp. 46-47, 243-244, 252).

Beste (2005) encourages adults to care enough to expose and prevent abuse:

Appreciating how our own freedom bears the stamp of the guilt of others in a way which cannot be eradicated equips us to understand better why it is so difficult to overcome indifference, and it makes us critical and cautious (rather than complacent and optimistic) about any constructive steps we may take to prevent abuse. (Beste, 2005, pp. 97-98)

But "in spite of the most adverse circumstances, some children manage to survive and even thrive, academically and socially, into adulthood" (Condly, 2006, p. 211). Each story and trauma is different. Neglect, abandonment, poverty, and substance and physical abuse are observable experiences. But when a child does not know how to speak up and report the hidden sexual assault or emotional abuse she incurred, the trauma becomes less obvious. All the stories must be told; all the voices must be heard. A young boy who was shunned and abandoned by his father, partly due to his physical disability, ended up with feelings of rejection, self-loathing, and shame. Another boy, born

addicted to heroin in a drug-infested family, led a life of abandonment, anger, reckless behavior, corruption, and eventual incarceration. A young girl suffered the abuse of incest from the age of two until she was 12. These eight stories, shared by adults, described childhood trauma and the results of the trauma. The stories also reported how these eight survivors rose through support and resiliency to have normalized adult behavior.

All of the adults interviewed described their ability to move through the trauma they had experienced in childhood and the effects it had on themselves, their families, and the communities in which they lived. Participants openly described their support systems and their ability to move through the trauma, with resiliency, to normalized adult behavior. All of them have been able to turn their painful and negative past into a positive experience, one that includes the ability to give back to various communities that they deem less fortunate than themselves.

Participants spoke positively of support systems that helped them move through childhood trauma and its effects. The support systems were comprised of individuals—not necessarily their primary caregivers—who took on the role of caregiver to assist and motivate the participants on their difficult journeys through childhood trauma.

## Conclusion

Resilience . . . most of us have the potential for it. . . . Cultivating it is a crucial part of development for everyone. (Solomon, 2012, p. 23)

The emotional telling of the stories was recorded in this study to preserve the bravery and resilience of each individual. All participants described their ability to move through childhood trauma, the results of the trauma, and to their present lives of normal adult behavior. But how do we—or should we—relate to people who are hurting? What does this mean for leaders? What do these stories say to church leaders? How often are children of abuse identified?

The foremost response of Christian leaders to the trauma of abuse must be compassion. Leaders should emulate Jesus' response to the deep needs of people: He looked on the multitude with compassion, regarding them as sheep without a shepherd. The multitude today still needs compassion.

Another consideration is best articulated by George R. Dodson (1911). Though written more than 100 years ago, his words still ring true:

[Plato's] conclusion, his mature conviction, was that humanity's most urgent need is for adequate leadership. . . . The moral and religious leader has work to do, a work which he can hope to per-

form successfully only as he is a man whose habit of mind is comprehensive and synoptic, and whose ideal and constant effort is to see life sanely and see it whole. And it is of the most profound and even vital significance for all who are set to be leaders, and not the least for the ministers of liberal churches. (pp. 81-82)

It is important to note what fosters resilience in survivors of childhood trauma or abuse. Each participant in the study confirmed the impact of three of the four resilience factors or patterns of resilient behaviors identified by Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, and Baysden (2000): (a) a caring adult role model; (b) the impact of school or some form of persistence of education, whether self-educated or by a system; and (c) a strong sense of spirituality and moral purpose in life (p. 388). The last of these, a strong sense of spirituality, is addressed by Annette Jerome (2011) in her compelling article, *Comforting Children and Families Who Grieve: Incorporating Spiritual Support*. She quotes Wilder and Weidmann to sum up the value of spirituality in resiliency: “Spirituality is more than merely an exercise that improves one’s life, but one that sustains it” (p. 194). Beste (2005) expounds further on the value of spirituality in resilience:

Adults who were abused as children testify to the fact that persons are dependent upon the support and love of others to heal and realize their freedom to relate positively to themselves, others, and God. These experiences of healing, acquiring a new life-giving identity, and feeling liberated to love freely and be loved can be understood within a theological framework as effects of grace. . . . And yet many Christians assume and behave as though persons, given God’s grace, can overcome difficulties on their own. . . . God calls us to love our neighbours because such love is needed to mediate divine grace. (pp. 95-97)

Responsible Christian mentoring of abuse survivors cannot be overlooked (Wakeman, 2012). What’s the Christian leader’s best response? “An initial step is to acknowledge, apologize, and repent for past failures to provide a safe haven for violated children and women, a sanctuary in which justice and healing could have been sought” (Beste, 2005, p. 98). This is a good starting point for leaders who want to help survivors to navigate the life-long process of moving through childhood trauma.

## References

- Adams, C. M. (2006). The consequences of witnessing family violence on children and implications for family counselors. *The Family Journal*, 14(4), 334-341. doi: 10.1177/1066480706290342
- Beste, J. (2005). Recovery from sexual violence and socially mediated dimensions of God’s grace: Implications for Christian communities. *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 18(2), 89-112. doi: 10.1177/0953946805054806

- Condly, S. J. (2006). Resilience in children: A review of literature with implications for education. *Urban Education, 41*(3), 211-236. doi: 10.1177/0042085906287902
- De Bellis, M. D. (2005). The psychobiology of neglect. *Child Maltreatment, 10*(2), 150-172. doi: 10.1177/1077559505275116
- Dodson, G. R. (1911). The synoptic mind: An ideal of leadership. *The Harvard Theological Review, 4*(1), 80-103.
- Franz, T. (2002). Power, patriarchy and sexual abuse in churches of Christian denomination. *Traumatology, 8*(1), 4-17. doi: 10.1177/153476560200800102
- Hoff, L. A. (2009). *People in crisis: Clinical and diversity perspectives* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jerome, A. (2011). Comforting children and families who grieve: Incorporating spiritual support. *School Psychology International, 32*(2), 194-209. doi: 10.1177/0143034311400829
- Montgomery, D., Miville, M. L., Winterowd, C., Jeffries, B., & Baysden, M. F. (2000). American Indian college student: An exploration into resiliency factors revealed through personal stories. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 6*(4), 387-398. doi: 10.1037//1099-9809.6.4.387
- Solomon, A. (2012). *Far from the tree: Parents, children, and the search for identity*. New York, NY: Scribner.
- Terr, L. C. (1990). *Too scared to cry*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Terr, L. C. (2008). *Magical moments of change: How psychotherapy turns kids around*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Thomas, S. P., & Hall, J. M. (2008). Life trajectories of female child abuse survivors thriving in adulthood. *Qualitative Health Research, 18*(2), 149-166. doi: 10.1177/1049732307312201
- Wakeman, B. E. (2012). A Christian perspective on mentoring. *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies, 29*(4), 277-292. doi: 10.1177/0265378812457752