

Six Steps

How one woman recovered from sexual abuse.

Laurel Hall

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***Dedicated to survivors of abuse
everywhere.***

FOREWORD

One who has never experienced abuse of any kind cannot begin to understand the problems the victim experiences. At the age of four, I was sexually abused by a gang of neighborhood boys, abuse that continued for four years. I had no one to tell. At home there was physical abuse, beatings from my father's razor strap. From my mother there was emotional abuse. She never wanted children and didn't know how to mother. There were no hugs, no "I love you", no "I'm so proud of you", only resentment at having been burdened by four children she did not want. As a result I hated myself, thought myself ugly, worthless and unlovable. The secret I carried left me with the constant fear that others would find out, or, heaven forbid, already knew. I lived in that world for six decades.

Each type of abuse leaves its own scars. **Sexual abuse** filled me with guilt and shame. With no attention at home I was vulnerable to predators. I sought attention from whoever would give it. Older boys, whom I thought were "kind" to me, but were only interested in using my body to fulfill their own curiosities, made me feel special. I enjoyed their attentions, and, after a while, even the sex. Because of that I felt it was all my fault. I should have stopped it, but I was so terrified of my parents I felt I could not tell them. By the time I was eight years old I felt my sins were so great I was going to hell. I became afraid of dying, suffered anxiety attacks at

night which led to nightly beatings from my father. The dark secret I carried in my heart was a tremendous burden. If anyone found out they would be repulsed by my actions. I was filled with self-loathing, friendless, and lonely.

Physical abuse can leave permanent physical scars. Mine did not, but the beatings filled me with hatred and anger towards my parents. I did not like them and was embarrassed by them. I didn't like the house we lived in; to me, it was an ugly, loveless house filled with anger. I became every parent's worst nightmare: an angry, hostile child. What did I do to deserve this? And, if my parents knew my "secret", how much more anger would be unleashed on me?

Emotional abuse leaves hidden scars. No one knows what goes on in your home, but you. There are no bloody wounds, no physical scars, but there are scars that change a child's behavior, destroy esteem, and alter personalities permanently. The emotional abuse from my parents left me with low self-esteem, a feeling of unworthiness, not being "good enough. I developed no interpersonal skills, had no friends, and a complete feeling of inadequacy – "I could never be enough". I was a child no one wanted even as a friend.

As for God, I hated God. I felt He had abandoned me. How could He do this to me? No God of love would do this to any of his children - give them to parents who didn't want them, let

neighborhood boys abuse them, have kids ridicule them. This hatred towards God continued for years.

What changed my life? How did I get rid of the hatred, the pain, the anger? For me, recovery was a process of six steps, each discussed on the following pages. It took a lifetime, but the pain is gone and my sunset is beautiful.

Thoughts

Thoughts unuttered
in our hearts,
painful thoughts
which are a part
of our very being,
must be spoken,
must be heard,
another soul must
hear those words
for us to be free
of their power.
Unspoken, they fester
and become
an abscess deep.
One day, into
our conscious being
they will seep,
and bring us pain.

Laurel Hall

Step 1 Therapy

Being able to discuss your pain with someone is crucial to recovery. To completely recover from childhood sexual abuse is not easy. The feelings of self-loathing, guilt, shame, and embarrassment, are difficult to dislodge from the psyche. The feeling that it was “all your fault” is most challenging because you have to admit to the abuse, tell the truth, accept the fact that perhaps you enjoyed the attention and maybe even the sex. For me that admission was overwhelming and incredibly painful.

Therapy was the first step for me. When my husband suggested counseling, he asked me if I would go. I said I would, but in my heart, I didn’t think it would help. I had no idea what therapy was, but I knew my situation was so dire, I believed nothing or no one could help me. *I was wrong!* For the first time in my life I felt a spark of hope. Maybe I might even experience relief from my pain. As for fixing all my problems, I had my doubts.

In therapy I found a person (Rita) who listened to me, who understood my pain. No matter what I said, there were no recriminations. She never laughed at me or made fun of me. She tried to build me up. One day I wore a pink dress with pink earrings and pink lipstick. She told me how pretty I looked. No one had ever said that to me before. It made me feel so special. Rita was not a personal friend, but a professional with training to help victims

of abuse. She, herself, had been through analysis, had worked through all her personal baggage and was free to have a positive effect on my life.

During our sessions she helped me sort through my pain and the anger that consumed me. In her gentle ways she let me know I was “fixable”, that the anxiety attacks might always be with me, (they have been gone for years), and that although I had some personality disorders, I was not crazy.

Therapy can be expensive. My husband was in college and I was making thirty-six hundred dollars a year teaching. We surely could not afford it. A professor told my husband about Family Service Bureau, at that time a program of the United Fund, (now the United Way). They had a sliding fee scale and we were charged what we could afford. For us it was three dollars a session.

Googling “sexual abuse therapy”, “emotional abuse therapy” or physical abuse therapy will reveal sources for help. Find someone in your area. If at all possible, get a therapist that has been through therapy as well. Don’t be afraid to ask. Those who have had analysis will respect you for asking and will not be embarrassed to admit it. Further, they will not be burdened by their past in working with you and your problems. Be aware, also, that counseling and therapy are different. Counseling is more surface oriented, helping you to deal with everyday problems. Therapy gets more to the root of the problem.

Therapy is a long process and digging through the pain can be painful of itself. The closer you get to

the source of your pain, the more you will want to quit. Don't give up. Keep going. It will be worth every tear you shed.

Unspoken

Inside us there's a person
just waiting to be heard.
We never let him speak to us,
No, not a single word.
For he may expose feelings
we'd rather never see,
even though it would
help us grow,
however painfully.

No, it's easier to bolt the door,
pretend he is not there,
walk away and leave him
as if we do not care.
Oh, foolish us, why is it
we walk in misery?
We ought to know
with "him" locked up
we never will be free.

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Step 2

Surrender

Surrendering to God was an important step for me. Due to the shame and guilt I felt, I needed forgiveness; I thirsted for God all my life. Searching in many ways – through books, religious movies, such as “*The Robe*”, attending many churches – when it came to God, there was a void in my heart. With age the need grew greater. Where was this God my soul desired? I could not find Him. Bible courses, spiritual retreats, small groups and more – for me, God was not there. As a result I hated Him and all He stood for. I felt He had abandoned me, thrown me under the bus, if you will. No matter how or where I searched, I could not find Him.

One year, after surgery, serious complications developed. In lieu of flowers a friend of mine came by and left some stationary, stamps, and a copy of Guideposts. Reading the little magazine opened my heart and in the recesses of my being came a feeling unknown to me. This was the beginning of the end of my quest, but recovery was slow and spiritual growth slower.

The void in my heart was still there, problems filled my days. Frustration grew until once again my life was a mess. Finally, one night, in desperation my soul cried out to God: “Okay God, if You are there, if there really is a God, I quit! My life is in shambles. Take my life and do what you will with it because I am just making a mess of everything.” I meant every

word. A calm and a peace fell over my heart as soon as those words were uttered. My life and priorities changed. Is that what it means to be “born again”? I don’t know, but for me it was a new beginning.

You may say “I don’t believe in God”. That’s okay. I didn’t either. He had failed me too many times. The Bible, to me, was just a story of events, a history if you will, of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Maybe true, maybe not.

Today, I feel there has to be something greater than me. It would be arrogant to believe that this body I live in, is all there is to life. If I am wrong, so what? I will have lost nothing. Give God a chance. What do you have to lose but your pain?

Arrogance

I wanted God to do things my way,
to show His face, to prove Himself to me.
I prayed and prayed and waited for His power,
that I might heal the sick and make the blind to see -.
Like Jesus did.

I wanted to be God, to be His equal,
not a mere human, no that was not for me.
But, He would not do things my way,
so I refused Him and all His words were lies to me.

There is no God, I cried,
who would let His people suffer.
There is no God, no there is only me.
Only me I can depend on
and in my blindness, I stumbled on in agony.

Hurt and heartache I brought upon myself,
Hate and tension through my being flowed.
No reason for living, continual strife,
Questions unanswered, what purpose this life?

The pain grew until I could stand it no longer.
Oh God, I cried out, You win, don't You see?
I've tried it my way, but my life is in pieces.
A shambles is all that I have left of me.

For the first time in my life that I can remember,
A beautiful calm fell over my heart.
Old hurts and hostilities, hatred and tension,
Were all wiped away and that was the start
Of my new life with Jesus.

Today, I know where I'm going and why I am here,
My life has new meaning, for Jesus is there.
This joy that is mine, this love that we share
Can be yours anytime, anyplace, anywhere.

Give up your struggles, your worries and strife.
Let the Lord in and begin your new life.

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Step 3 *Journaling*

Journaling help me to acknowledge my pain. Although I had surrendered my life to God, I did not know Him personally. I longed to feel His love, to know He was there for me, but nothing seemed to work. I felt my sins were so great, He didn't want me.

My husband and I joined a local congregation and became involved in church life. It was not easy, for my husband was by no means "religious". He distrusted all churches and had little use for them, but he attended for my sake.

The atmosphere, the feeling of oneness, the warmth and friendliness of the people was wonderful. I knew I wanted to belong, to be a part of this family. We signed up for the classes necessary for membership. Ground rules allowed us to believe whatever we wished and to express our beliefs without recrimination, but we had to allow others the same privilege. These sessions were exciting and we eagerly looked forward to the next meeting.

One Sunday, the minister, announced a retreat just for women. Eagerly, I signed up thinking something magical would happen to help me find God, to *really* find God. How disappointed I was to learn that the minister only brought a few books for us to read with discussion afterwards. I selected a book, *God Calling*, written anonymously by two women during the early nineteen thirties. They

decided to take God at his word: *If two or more of you are gathered together in My name, I will be there too.* This book was God's answers to them. While reading the book the thought came to me that if God spoke to two women, perhaps He would speak to one lone woman in search of Him. That was how I began my journaling.

Arising early in the morning I would go outside on the back porch with my spiral notebook. I would write my prayers in the notebook and then wait for God's response. I wrote the thoughts that entered my mind. I tried not to be judgmental or question them. I just wrote. Whether what I wrote was God speaking to me or not, I don't know, but I believe it was. These mornings were my special time with God and continued for years. Journaling gave me a special peace I had never known. As time went by I would read back over my journal and see the changes that had occurred in me and my life.

Today, I do not believe God stopped talking to Man two thousand years ago. Perhaps, Man just stopped listening to God. Maybe, Man thought he was unworthy for God to speak to him. The Bible was written by men, some say inspired by God. Why were the prophets of old better than we are today? Cannot we be inspired by God? Why should my journal, or yours, be any less?

My Lord, My God

You fill my life with sunshine
though the days are cold
and the trees are bare.

The clouds cover the earth
and rain falls from the sky.

Yet you are there
to bring me warmth,
to fill my life with joy.

Abundant life,
Your gift to me.

In the recesses of my being
I search for you and find you
waiting for me.

The joy of knowing You,
of having Your love,
trusting, sharing all that I am
with You,

I know You will not
reject me.

How can I tell others
what I have found?
How can I share with them
what I know?
How can I put into words
this indescribable joy.

As a child on Christmas morning arises early
and eagerly runs to open his gifts,
so I come to You.

I know You will be there to greet me.
How can I share this feeling,
this joy that dwells within?

How can I make them thirst for You,
to turn away from sin –
a life without You?

You are my Lord and my God.
I come before you,
naked and unashamed of what I am.
I know I fail You daily,
yet You always accept me.
You are always honest with me.
How can I be
less honest with You?

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Step 4 *Self-Love*

Discovering I was loveable helped me to heal. For years I hated myself. I didn't like who I was or what I looked like. There was nothing about me I liked. Even though I had been married for years I didn't feel my husband really loved me. (You'll have to read *Providence* to understand this.) I didn't believe him when he said he loved me because I didn't love myself. We had made a commitment when we married and we kept it.

Lacking self-love is a lonely existence. If you cannot love yourself, you cannot love others. You cannot be a friend to another if you cannot be a friend to yourself. As you grow older it is more and more difficult to love who you are, the person you have become. I felt my parents did not love me. If they didn't love me, how could anyone else? Self-hate took the place of self-love.

How did I learn to love myself, to like the person I was? It was because of a little girl, our first grandchild. At first sight, I fell in love with her. She was born in a small town and I was able to go into the nursery and be with her as the doctor examined her. There she was, all red and screaming, with golden ringlets and blue eyes. I held out my little finger and she grabbed it and held onto it during the entire examination.

As our relationship grew, she loved me unconditionally. A bond formed between us. No

one had ever loved me like that. Because of that little child, I knew I was likeable, and more than that, loveable. This little girl filled my heart with joy and happiness. She would share with me her most priceless possession – her “blankie” and her toys. We often played for hours and it was my special time with her. I had never known what it was to like yourself, to love yourself and to be happy with whom you are. This wonderful child gave me that gift.

When she was four years old, I was looking at her, listening to her childish chatter, when I thought to myself: if she were abused today as I was years ago, it wouldn't be her fault. It was then I knew I was not to blame. This discovery released me from the guilt I had carried all these years and was a giant step in my healing process.



Children

Thank you, Lord, for children
You sent to bless our lives;
To give our life new meaning
which we could n'er derive.

Yes, there has been struggle
and tension days galore;
But, oh the joyful times we've shared
are worth any pain we bore.

For we have set new values and
life is not just things;
Laughter, love, and sorrow
are more meaningful it seems.

We share them now with children
and by what we do and say,
we influence their tomorrows
as they influence our todays.

And for better or for worse,
our lives go hand in hand;
As they live their tomorrows
with our footprints in the sand.

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Step 5

Forgiveness

Forgiving my abusers allowed me to move forward. Filled with self-hate, anger, and hostility, it was impossible for me to forgive anything or anyone, including myself. Constantly judging others, feeling self-righteous in my actions - that was me. Where did my forgiveness come from? How did I learn to forgive, truly forgive? From a little boy.

Because of the sexual abuse I experienced as a little girl, I never liked boys. Matter of fact, I disliked them intensely. All I could think about was what those boys did to me, to my life. I soon learned we were going to have a grandson. I was apprehensive of my feelings as we awaited his birth. How could I ever love a little boy?

When he was born, my world was turned upside down. Looking at him, his innocence, his beautiful face, made me realize he wasn't to blame for what had happened to me. He wasn't "one of those boys". I couldn't hate him. It wasn't his fault. And because of him, I saw other little boys, including those that had abused me, differently. I was able to forgive them and once I forgave them, I was able to forgive myself, my parents, and all the kids that had made fun of me.

Forgiveness broke the chains of hate and anger that had bound me for so long. I was finally free. The abuse no longer had power over me. The physical and emotional abuse I suffered no longer

inflicted their pain. I have heard about parents whose child was murdered and how they forgave the killer. I never understood. Now, I do. Without forgiveness, we cannot move forward. Without forgiveness we cannot love. The pain will hold us back and fester in our hearts forever.

How do you forgive your abuser? I don't know, but it *is* necessary. *The forgiveness is really for you*, to free you from the pain in your heart. Your abuser was a broken person, probably one who had been hurt all his life. Perhaps seeing him in that light will help you to forgive.

He is My Lord

The more I learn of Jesus,
the more I want to know.

He holds my hand,

He understands,

He cares for me, I know.

He is my Lord.

His way is Love.

He gives me peace.

From the prison

of my past

I am released.

He filled my life,

He washed my soul.

and with his gentle touch

He made me whole.

He is my Lord.

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Step 6 *Providence*

Writing my story, *Providence*, for me, was the final step. I was able to write about the pain I had endured objectively. That isn't to say it was not painful, but I was finally able to put the pain, hurt, hate, and guilt, on paper for the world to see. I no longer had a deep secret, nor did I believe it was my fault. I no longer felt hatred for my abusers, my parents or the kids who made fun of me. Forgiveness gave me the power to move on.

Writing *Providence* had a cathartic effect on my life, and I thought by publishing it, my story might help others. Survivors of abuse are everywhere. Some are stuck in pain, as in quicksand sucking them deeper and deeper into the mire, and they have difficulty forgiving themselves or their abusers. One cannot be healed without first forgiving those who have caused such pain.

I might add I could not have written this book without completing the first five steps. It would have been far too painful, too embarrassing, and filled with hate and anger. Over the years, during the healing process, I wrote my poetry. Many of my poems were filled with pain, and I shared them with no one for years. I was too ashamed, too embarrassed. I still believed the abuse was my fault. I have woven them in here as I felt appropriate.

Recovery is a process and one must be proactive in his own recovery. It doesn't happen all at

once, and it may take years to be free of pain. But, you must take the first step. I did not formulate these steps in the order they occurred. It just happened this way. Whether you need or these steps, or if they will work for you or not, I don't know, but for me, the pain is gone. I wish you freedom from your pain, peace and joy in your life.

Morning

The night time is over,
The shadows are gone.
The darkness has ended
With this new dawn.

Give me your burdens,
Be free from despair,
And walk in the sunlight
Just knowing I'm there.

My presence is with you
To lighten your day.
I'll guide you and keep you
I'll show you the way.

Chorus

It's morning, beautiful morning,
It's morning, rise up and shine.
It's morning, beautiful morning,
It's morning, with this new dawn.

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about the Author



Laurel Hall was born and raised in New England. She attended college in Texas receiving her BS in Chemistry and Mathematic and Masters in Education. She taught high school mathematics for twenty three years and currently resides in Colorado with her husband. She is the mother of two daughters and the grandmother of three. Hall is the author of *Providence* and *One Soul's Journey*. To learn more about Laurel Hall and sexual abuse, visit her website: www.thisnewdawn.com