

Ritual Abuse and Recovery: Survivors' Personal Accounts

PATRICIA L. PIKE and RICHARD J. MOHUNE, Editors

*Rosemead School of Psychology
Biola University*

In the Fall, 1992 issue, the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* presented several facets of the discussion regarding ritual abuse from perspectives in the mental health community. Since then the discussion has continued to develop both in the media circulated within the mental health professions and in the public audience media. Heated debate on several points continues among Christian mental health professionals as well.

The ultimate focus of our concern as therapists and counselors is helping people who are hurting. Although we must discuss particular psychological phenomena and specific therapeutic interventions, at the core of our discussion must be placed the person. However, accounts from clients' perspectives are not highly available in the debates on the topic of ritual abuse, except to those professionals who work directly with such clients. Therefore, the discussion is likely to be advanced by the accounts included in this article.

This presentation deviates somewhat from the norm for this *Journal* because the accounts are authored by individuals who are neither mental health professionals nor theologians. The two accounts included are not case studies because they have been written from the perspective of the abuse survivor rather than from the perspective of the therapist. However, both authors have obtained post-baccalaureate degree credentials and maintain professional careers. So the presentations are especially well-written and clearly articulated.

Noteworthy is the fact that these accounts were not easily obtained nor easily written. Although four people indicated a willingness to submit personal accounts, only these two were received in a period of 18 months. Both of the authors also indicated that they found it difficult to write their accounts. It

was difficult to put onto paper such intense experiences, and it was difficult to do so for a scholarly and potentially skeptical audience. However, both authors also indicated that they felt a responsibility to make their personal accounts available to this particular audience in the chance that more people like themselves would be helped. It is their sincere desire that God use this material to benefit his children and further his work in the world.

A Survivor's Account

Anne Hart

I am honored to be invited to write about my experiences and wish to thank the Editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* for this opportunity. It is said that religion is for those who wish to avoid hell; spirituality is for those who have been there. I fall into the latter category. I would like to share some of my background by way of introduction.

My family of origin is white upper-middle class, very well educated, apolitical, and overtly non-religious. The primary occupations are business, medicine, and government. I was educated in an elite Ivy League school and in Europe, earned a Masters of Science degree, and was a debutante with all the advantages that come with this type of social stratum.

I was married to an intelligent, highly educated and ambitious man, have two beautiful children and have worked consistently in the social service field for two decades. I have attended religious services in several denominations and have recently chosen to become a member of a mainstream Protestant church. Politically, I am a Democrat with a somewhat liberal orientation. I have never been hospitalized nor been prescribed medication for psychological reasons.

I am also a middle-aged woman who can remember only parts of my childhood. I have suf-

ferred from a lifetime of dysphoria, a polite term for absolute misery, both psychological and spiritual. Rather than a dark night, I struggled with a dark life of the soul. In view of my comfortable external circumstances, this angst made no sense to me.

At age ten, I searched out Holocaust literature to read because it matched the emotions of terror that I often felt, and gave an affective context for the frequent nightmares and strange pictures of torture and decapitation that presented themselves in my mind. There was no frame of reference for these things, so I ignored them as best I could. Fear of people combined with frequent illnesses provided ample solitude in childhood, during which time animals and books became my solace.

There were other oddities throughout my life, such as praying at night for long periods with my arms outstretched, extreme claustrophobia, panic when clothing was removed, sleepwalking, insomnia, inability to approach my bed, exceedingly low self-esteem, and depression. Several professionals were consulted when I reached adulthood. Each responded according to his or her discipline, and since my symptoms were idiosyncratic and relatively mild, I was given brief therapy and released from treatment.

There was still the inner sense of horror, despite the amelioration of immediate problems of daily living, as no professional reached near the deep hidden abscess. It was as if a topical medication had been applied, but the wound still oozed. I realized this, but could not articulate the problem well enough to be understood.

As spousal substance abuse became more apparent, I ventured into 12 step programs and began to find spiritual guidance of a gentle and non-dogmatic variety. Several years ago I sought out therapy with a licensed professional with experience in memory retrieval and sexual abuse treatment, since it was clear to me that the gaps in childhood memory (coupled with other symptoms, particularly the increasingly disruptive nightmares) might be related to childhood trauma.

With a non-invasive relaxation technique and the support of a skilled therapist, I have been able to tolerate the return of past events, and can understand why this painful information was not available to me until now. I could not have managed it before this time in my own life and in the history of the world which at last has articulated the dimensions of such abuse. Finally there was a context for my

unusual thoughts and feelings. Ritual abuse described quite accurately what I was remembering. The horror and shock nearly brought me to my knees with pain.

As each traumatic event has been brought to conscious memory, I have felt as if I were dying. The feelings of terror and helplessness are experienced in the present, as if they were happening in the moment. Therapy has been akin to a weekly root canal, without anesthesia. It works best for me to bring each trauma into consciousness in completeness, with each detail and piece of the ritual, although at first that was not possible since I could only tolerate a few minutes of the pain in each therapy session. This meant that I would be left in "mid-memory," with no relief until the next session when the root canal of my psyche could be completed. However, once the whole event had been remembered, felt, and spoken, the corresponding symptoms would resolve. As time has passed, I have become stronger, and can now retrieve memories on my own at home, which helps to speed this long, slow, dreadful process.

I find it intriguing to read about my ritual abuse experiences in the abstract, as written by scholars and studied by clinicians. They were taught by survivors, who in the early 1980's walked as pioneers across this killing field of memory, and yet only a few writers give credit to their teachers. Many, in fact, are skeptical of the information gathered at great cost by survivors of severe human-induced trauma. However, I am interested in examining myself in light of this skepticism, as if I were an insect under my own microscope.

I am in the forefront of those who wish to deny the reality of these dreadful rituals and their social implications. To accept my experiences as true means that an entire civilized cultural perspective must be modified. I have clung desperately to a vision of human beings as basically good, well-meaning, benign, despite all indicators to the contrary.

However, it is difficult to deny my abreactions, another polite term for utter anguish and despair, of past trauma experienced as if it were in the present time. Furthermore, the many pathologies of my family of origin are now explicable. And most wonderfully, my symptoms are finally disappearing, including the phobias regarding Christian religious symbols and ceremonies.

By way of illustration, I would like to describe a recent series of events.

One Sunday in early January, I attended the 11:00 a.m. service at my church. I did not realize that a child was to be baptized that day. She was a sturdy, one year old girl, with huge blue eyes, sparse blonde hair, and a ready grin. She looked remarkably like me when I was that age. She wore a beautiful off-white lace dress, and cavorted happily among doting relatives with movie cameras.

The robed minister and deacon walked to the baptismal font in the back of the church and the child's mother held her firmly in a horizontal position. Water was sprinkled on her forehead. The minister said quietly, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The little girl giggled and replied, "Wa wa!" I was astonished at her lack of fear.

I began to feel a rising panic, with the odd thought, "She should be screaming by now." The family proceeded to the altar rail, the deacon brought a long white taper candle, which he lit and handed to the father. I began to hyperventilate with terror, certain that what would follow would be the end of the world. Inexplicably the minister blew out the candle, saying it was safer that way, since the baby was reaching out for it. The parents were enjoined to teach the child prayers and practices of Christianity. They turned, beaming, and the child was welcomed into the family of God. I fled, undone by inchoate emotions.

On Tuesday, I went to my therapist, explained my reactions and closed my eyes in that safe environment. The images began immediately. I reexperienced what can only be described as my own baptism into quite another religion. It was held, not in a church, but in a relative's basement. It was night, not day. I wore a garment, not of off-white lace, but of an obscene mixture of feces, urine and blood, packed and smeared from my head to my toes.

I was carried to the toolbench where gibberish was spoken by the four robed adults around me. Rather than water sprinkled, a small, black, wriggling cocker spaniel was held over me and disemboweled with a dagger-like instrument. The blood thinned the sewage on my body and it began to slide off. I reexperienced the odor. I gagged, wept and then retched. The long white taper was lit and ceremoniously held over me, wax dripping carefully onto each of my nipples. It was then inserted, still lit, into my vagina. In this way I was welcomed into the faith, and no doubt the congregants were

advised to teach me well. They certainly tried.

I left the therapist's office shaken, but determined that I would not let this memory prevent me from returning to church. There is an innate stubbornness and tenacity in each of us who survives such mistreatment.

Sunday came again and I went to the 11:00 a.m. service. I was not pleased to find that there was to be ANOTHER baptism that day. But it was quite a different experience for me this time. I sat peacefully through the same lovely ceremony, filled with joy for the baby, appreciation of the rite, unity with the purpose and awe for the beauty of the liturgy. My pain without memory had been transformed into memory without pain. This time I left filled with happiness.

It could be called a miracle. It could be explained as behavioral conditioning, accommodation, urban legend, etc., or it just could be that trauma therapy works. The unremembered event caused my adverse reaction during the first baptism, and by bringing the trauma to consciousness, the next baptism was not a negative emotional cue for me.

Other events that I have remembered are germane to this discussion because of the overt theological content. I will describe one more, not for shock value, but to indicate why I consider this an extremely difficult spiritual journey with ample instances of divine intervention. You see, I could not have borne these ceremonies, much less returned to them in therapy, without help on the spiritual plane. I would have died of heartbreak.

When I was three years old, I was taken again to the same basement. I was tied around my arms, torso and legs, onto a small wooden contraption, two boards fashioned into a cross, just my size. I was medicated and became quiescent. (My relative was a physician with access to medications and babies, since he was an abortionist.)

Thin long nails were produced and placed in the fleshy part of my hands and feet, between the bones. It did not take much effort to press them through, and they were then driven into the boards with a small hammer. It was (although not as painful as one might imagine, due to the drugs and my high pain tolerance) excruciating in that I could not move without tearing my own flesh. I could not dig my fingers into my palms which formerly had served as my distraction in other rituals. Indeed, it was as if I were an insect, mounted on display. The feeling was intolerable.

The rest of the ceremony proceeded as usual, with a recently aborted fetus disemboweled over me, and pieces of the body and blood given to each congregant for communion. The experience was so terrible for me that I went away, left my body (as women are taught in Lamaze birth training) and found myself sitting on the lap of a man. He did not rape me. I was surprised.

He held me sorrowfully, gently and soothed me. I did not know his name. Then suddenly I found myself back in my body, bound, and pinned. It is beyond my ability to describe in written language the sensation of horror I felt upon returning to this situation.

When the same rite was performed two years later, I was again impelled to dissociate from my body due to the grotesque feelings. By this time, I knew the man's name was Jesus, and he was there, waiting to comfort me again. I was ecstatic to meet him again.

As theologians debate, clinicians scrutinize, and law enforcement seeks that shred of hard evidence, I rest assured that good will triumph. I don't pretend to understand these experiences. I just know that I had them and that Christ has taken what was meant for evil and sanctified it for me in some way. I realize also that His mandate to me is to love and forgive my enemy. The people who perform these atrocities are also His children and are most certainly lost sheep. I pray daily for their salvation.

But I pray far more for the children who are being abused tonight as I was many nights ago. I am grateful for a chance to bear witness to this evil, in hopes that in the future, children will be believed and protected when they tell.

Spiritual Healing of an Adult Ritual Abuse Survivor

Kerry Leigh Ellison

"Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption."

Ba'al Shem-Tov

For the past three years I have been actively healing from a childhood of sadistic sexual abuse and exploitation. My parents belonged to a child sex ring that pandered to people with "unusual tastes" including torture, necrophilia, and sexual murder. As part of the group activities, members participated in quasi-religious ceremonies. These ceremonies expressed a system of belief that

supports absolute sexual license. The rituals, which involve rape, murder, and cannibalism, also serve to alienate participants from the rest of society, creating dependence on the group and an utter terror of being discovered.

Like many children of war and victims of domestic abuse, I blocked these traumatic experiences out of my awareness. To remember then would have been unbearable, as well as extremely dangerous. Now, as an adult in my forties, I have had to face my past, to bring it fully into consciousness, in order to understand what was done to me. Along with my sister and other family members, I have begun to heal from this systematic damage. A crucial part of my healing has been my relationship with my pastor, who is also a clinical social worker.

My life before full memory returned appeared relatively normal. I am a married professional woman, the mother of two teenagers. On the outside, I had achieved what many people dream of: financial security, social respectability, and a stable family life. But my inner life was something altogether different. I have always known I was sexually abused as a child, but felt I should put the past behind me and live for the present and future. Still, I could not escape the ominous sense that there was a vast well of rotting gunk in my core. I was tormented by debilitating emotions that seemed to have no cause, intense loneliness and guilt, images of horrors that I immediately suppressed, hideous nightmares, an abject terror of my parents and their friends and—among many other symptoms—an antagonism towards authority figures which often sabotaged my personal and professional life.

When I finally decided to look at what lay behind those symptoms, I began experiencing detailed sequential and fragmentary memories of the missing portions of my childhood. I am fortunate that I found excellent professional help; my therapist is widely respected and does not use hypnosis or drugs. After an initial period of healing, during which I did not discuss my experience with family members or take in outside information about this form of abuse, my memories have been confirmed by several other victims of the same sex ring.

The sadism and organized sexual abuse were what presented to my conscious mind first. Although these memories were excruciating, they confirmed so much in my life and so many already conscious memories. I grew up hearing about

Machiavelli, Gilles de Rais and the Marquis de Sade. My father engaged in sadistic sex in our home and in groups; he also traded and prostituted my sister and me within his network of pedophiles and "incest is best" families. These people formed the core of my parents' social activities and now the bizarre conversations, unaccountable coincidences, and strange behaviors I had always remembered finally made sense.

When the memories emerged of what my father referred to as "fun and games,"—that is, dressing up in costumes and masks, desecrating churches, and performing obscene versions of religious ceremonies—my therapist advised me to seek spiritual counseling. "People with this in their background do much better if they work on spiritual issues along with the kind of work I can do with you," she told me.

I am forever grateful for that advice. I was the first person she had worked with who uncovered this particular form of extreme trauma. We were both fortunate that, when we reached out for help in this area, it was there.

She recommended that I see a local pastor, and said she'd let him know in advance the basic issues I was dealing with. Knowing that many ritually abused people are unwilling or unable to enter churches, Father Paul suggested we meet at a local park.

At the time it seemed odd to me that he was so careful about the setting, after all, I wasn't exactly allergic to church. Hadn't I attended a Protestant Sunday school on my own as a child? (This was one of my small triumphs over my parents. Appearance was everything to them so when I said, "The other kids go, so why can't I?" they did not forbid me, although I was openly ridiculed for my interest.) Even more deeply, I have always known I had a special relationship with Jesus and that at age twelve I had made a private covenant with God; these were things that I knew I must never talk about or let show. It was also true that I've had this odd thing about not going to church ever since I was twelve and had to regretfully tell my Sunday School teacher that I could not be baptized or confirmed. A couple of weddings and funerals and a handful of services at synagogues were the whole of my adult experience with organized religion. Still, if it could help in my healing, I was willing to give this church guy a try. Just to talk.

The early November day was a rainy one and we ended up meeting at the church, after all. I walked

in, feeling emotionally numb. I would later come to recognize that I had spent much of my life trying to maintain this anesthetized state by holding down the painful associations, memories, and feelings that would have made living anything like a normal life, and certainly entering a church, impossible.

The very first thing Paul did was assure me that he knew that the kinds of things I was remembering did happen and that he admired me for having the courage to face my past and heal. His acceptance was like a rock to me. Here was a person who could hear me and not dismiss me.

In those early weeks, I was in psychological crisis, reeling under the impact of long-suppressed emotions, memories, and physical pain. At one moment I would blank out all feeling; at the next, I was awash in emotions of worthlessness, abandonment, and degradation. Sometimes I felt like a terrified four-year-old. At other times I knew I should kill myself so that the horrible pictures inside my head would not come into the world and pollute it. The dissonance between what I was experiencing and the commonly held view of reality was hard to cope with. Simply by listening to me and reassuring me that God cared about me in my suffering, Paul gave me the toehold I needed to begin spiritual work.

Initial Stage

At first, Paul's work with me was mostly emergency counseling. He functioned as a second therapist, hearing whatever presented itself when I walked in the door of his tiny study. A working alliance and deep trust was established from the start, in part because my own therapist trusted him, but primarily, I think, because Paul's own suffering and spiritual experience were parallel to mine, although not as extreme. He had also been sexually abused as a child. He had faced that past and transformed it into a positive force in his life. As a former prison chaplain he had already grappled with extreme evil, including sadism, and had insight into the personality structures of people like my parents. He was not afraid to look at my experience, to hear the horror and see the damage. He was able to be in that traumatized place with me, a witness to my pain and a constant reminder of the healing power of God's love.

It must have been hard for him. For every reassurance he gave, I had an entire litany of dismissal that I had learned from my parents. "God knows and loves you." "Yeah, sure! Your god is so puny.

Otherwise he would have stopped this. Evil is the only thing that's strong. It's so strong, you guys practice it. Look at the burning of the Wise Women in Europe, look at the Inquisition, look at how the priests kept a monopoly on the Latin Bible and charged poor people for prayers to get their loved ones out of Purgatory! That's evil. That's greed. Religion is a racket, just like my dad's racket, a way of trapping and controlling people. It's just another crime syndicate."

Paul did not try to deny the problems inherent in organized religion. "The Church is a human institution. It is not God," he told me. "Wherever there are human beings, there is the potential for evil. But that doesn't change the truth of what Jesus said and did and lived."

Determined to heal, I kept coming back. And Paul patiently hung in with me. He watched me descend into the child-like ego states that held my suppressed past. In his tiny, book-filled study, I disgorged memories of sadistic activities that would make the angels weep. He reassured me of God's love. He prayed for me. He told me that I was not evil and bad, as I'd been raised to believe, but that the things that were done to me were evil. He asserted over and over that I had free will. Yes, my parents had chosen to do these things, and chosen to use me as a tool in these things, but he challenged me to look at the places in my life where I had freely chosen. He also validated my private covenant with God.

Not only did Paul acknowledge that promise I had made at age twelve—not to do to others what had been done to me—but he accepted the experiences that I thought no one else could hear and still believe I was sane. Some of these transcendent experiences I had always remembered. Others emerged with the terrible memories. There were many of them; one of the first I told him about was the following:

It came at the end of a long night of sexual activity, perverted rituals, and sadism. I was about seven years old and being shown what would happen if I told on the group. Also, I believe, I was being punished for going to church with my friend. Earlier my father had built a little child-sized coffin in his workshop and now, in a dazed and drugged state, I was put into it. There was a hole in the ground where they said I was to be buried. I could feel the rough plywood interior of the box and I saw my parents' faces as the lid came down. "Let your precious Jesus

save you now," one of them said. The lid closed, my skull jarred as the box was nailed shut, I felt it being lifted up in the air and then set down, and I heard dirt being thrown on the lid.

What happened next is hard to categorize. Was it an hallucination, a compensatory fantasy, an actual spiritual event? As a person engaged in healing, I have stopped worrying about definitions and learned simply to listen to what God was trying to tell me through these experiences.

In that box I was in a state of utter terror and traumatization. I knew I was going into the earth and that I would run out of air and suffocate. I felt I could die from fear alone. So I did what I could: I moved as far over in the box as possible and silently called out; "Jesus, be with me. Be with me! Oh, God, don't let me be alone in this box!" My experience is that the box became filled with light and warmth. Suddenly I was no longer afraid or in pain, the unbearable anguish was gone. In its place was the most loving presence, the greatest joy and acceptance. This presence breathed into me with the sweetest breath. I felt as if my body had fallen away from me, was burnt away with a cleansing fire. I knew that I was safe and saved.

My next conscious memory is of my uncle holding me. He opened my eyelid with his thumb. Someone shone a light in my eye and said, "She's coming around." I was given some kind of injection. My uncle spoke into my ear, telling me over and over that this is what happens to people who tell and that if I ever told they would bury me alive again and never dig me up. "I got you out, Kerry," he said. "I saved you. Now you owe me your life." I could lie in my uncle's arms, the terror and pain and degradation of my physical life washing through me, and know that he was lying about at least one thing. He hadn't saved me. Someone else had, and I was never going to let my uncle know my secret.

What would the average pastor have made of this? I have no idea. I was extremely fortunate in that Paul accepted what I said without dismissing me. He himself had had direct personal experience of the Transcendent, an experience which saved his life and propelled him into his vocation. We could compare the actual physical sensations of being in that presence. For the first time in my life I had confirmation of my secret experience of God.

Paul challenged me to find the meaning behind it. "God was there," I replied. "God wasn't powerless. It's just a different kind of power. Not the kind

of power they meant." Little by little I began to see the role of love in my whole life. Despite my upbringing, I had acquired knowledge of love directly from its source; I had been able to build on that so that I could nurture my younger sister and, in time, make free-will choices that took me further and further from my parents and their way of life. There was a foundation to build my marriage on and from which to develop into a loving, if damaged, mother. God does care.

These moments of illumination were far apart and imbedded in weeks of agonizing work. I often wondered why Paul hung in with me. Despite his demanding professional life, he counseled me weekly for an hour and a half, gratis. He listened to my agony over the things I had witnessed and participated in. He heard, over and over, my parents' doctrine on the power of evil and the shallowness of God.

At first I could not control when memories and associations would be triggered. After several months I was able to get the flashbacks under control, or at least limit them to my therapist's office (they had begun at home). For the most part, Paul and I worked on the aftermath of these new memories, dealing with the moral issues raised by my discovery that I had been involved in the sexual abuse, torture and murder of other human beings. (The adults in the ring forced us children to engage in all these acts with them. It was part of the conditioning and made us feel irredeemable. Over and over I was told, "See, you are one of us. God hates you. Only satan wants you now." Paul was the first person to tell me, "You are a child of God. God loves you. Nothing can ever take that away from you.")

From the beginning, Paul prayed with me at the close of each session. I wonder now if he realizes how much he gave me by doing this. At first he prayed for me. Gently and in time, he invited me to speak, too. I did, and discovered that my internal conversation with God had voice, could be projected beyond my body, could be joined with other voices. This may seem obvious to everyone else in the world, but for a person who had had to protect her connection to God with decades of silence, it was a profound breakthrough.

Unmaking

In my first days of crisis, two crucial things happened. The first was that, when I was still dealing only with the sadistic abuse, I made a binding

promise. It took concrete form when these words came out of my mouth: "I will not allow what my parents did to me to come between me and my husband, me and my children, or me and God."

Shortly thereafter, desperately searching for some kind of context in which to fit the bizarre activities of my parents and their friends, I opened my old Sunday school Bible and read the 36th Psalm. Here was a perfect description of my parents (certainly they did not fear God, but believed "their iniquity cannot be found out and hated" while they plotted mischief on their bed). The psalm expressed my great joy at the spiritual protection and nurturance I had received when I took "refuge in the shadow of thy wings." And it ends with the heartfelt plea for the humility and courage to continue in relationship to God. Someone four thousand years ago wrote from a struggle much like my own. I was not alone after all.

Because I felt such confidence in my commitment to healing—and because I know that, as Alice Walker puts it, "Resistance is the secret of joy"—I walked forward towards those things that frightened me most. Although they'd tolerated my interest in Protestant Sunday school, my parents had forbidden me to take communion or to attend Catholic or Episcopal services. Fine. Then I would do so, and see just what it was they wanted to keep from me.

A friend came with me the first time I attended a service at Paul's Episcopal church. The experience was an excruciating series of sights, smells and sounds that triggered a maelstrom of emotions and associations. The hardest moment was when the children were brought in for communion. Escorted by their teachers, they walked up the central aisle, looking around in awe and wonderment. I gripped my friend's hand. "No! Don't let them die. Don't bring them in here!" my inner voice screamed, even though I knew that I was sitting now among good people and that the children were not to be sacrificed. The faces of the children whom I had seen killed rose up in front of me along with the smells of their terror and blood and bodily functions. I breathed slowly and told myself over and over, "This is Paul's church. It will be okay. He won't hurt the children." Watching communion was nonetheless a living nightmare, caught as I was between the twin worlds of the here-and-now and of the traumatic past.

After this experience, I was determined to confront and conquer the negative associations the

church held for me, unmaking the experiences of my childhood. Paul and I did this by scrupulously walking through each part of the service. He took me up to the altar and I looked for the place where they put children inside during services. There was none. I touched the chalice and paten, telling Paul about what I had drunk and eaten from similar objects, and how my parents and their friends had secretly defiled all these things he considered holy. Paul explained to me that no one could take away the sacredness of objects dedicated to the service of God, because that sacredness came from the reverence of the people who love and serve God. Intricate details of satanic practice flowed from me, backwards talk, unholy scripture, on and on. Once again, I can only stand in awe of Paul's stamina. We learned to keep these sessions to a limited time and to allow for plenty of integration, and prayer afterward.

I became an enthusiastic participant in religious practice. Each time I celebrated a good Eucharist, I felt I was unmaking the rituals of my childhood. Ritual speaks to our very core and it speaks through all the senses. As a child, I had been taught kinesthetically, by being made to participate in repeated ceremonies. Now I felt that by doing the rituals right and with my full heart dedicated to the Good, I was unmaking the deeply ingrained lessons of my childhood. The relief, the freedom, the ability to understand myself as good, to declare out loud and in church and in unison with others that I chose to do God's will, was a source of great strength.

It is for good reason that those who exploit children use quasi-religious practices to alienate them from God and humanity. The satanists I knew are clever people. Love is the answer to the damage done by sex rings and cults. Church is one of the few places where survivors and victims might be believed and helped. My abusers did everything they could to make sure I did not turn to God. It delights me that they failed.

Baptism

Although Paul accepted my direct spiritual experience as baptism by spirit, I wanted to be baptized in the church. I wanted to counter the ceremonies of my childhood that had been done to make me feel my soul was bound to evil. I wanted to speak my promises to God out loud, in public, with my whole heart and in full consciousness. Getting ready for this took over a year.

First, I had the unmaking to do, which we did lit-

tle by little as the desire or need for it arose. Attending services still triggered memories at times; baptisms were agony for me. In private sessions, Paul and I explored the triggers, which were sometimes words, gestures, or specific objects. I found that usually I needed to re-experience the traumatic memories associated with the trigger, and address the needs and feelings of the child-like part of my being, before I could feel safe enough to establish new associations and understanding.

One area of great concern for me was that, whether I chose to participate or not, my body and now my mind knew things that no human being was meant to know. I know what it is to molest a child, to torture a small baby, to kill another human being, to ingest all manner of things. God doesn't want us to do these things; it runs counter to the plan for life on this earth. Within me is a detailed knowledge of ways to dispose of bodies, ways to cause dissociative splits in small children (so they won't "remember" their abuse), and a pharmacopoeia of traditional and modern drugs that are used to induce trance-states, memory-loss, loss of motor control, and loss of inhibitions. I know how to locate and abduct people whose disappearance will not be reported and how children, including myself, are prostituted to pedophilic priests to gain access to churches. It was my parents, my uncle, and their friends who taught me these things and with whom I identified, at least in part, throughout my childhood.

Yet it was into this hell that God came and sustained me. If God can accept and love me, there is hope for anyone. Like many Vietnam vets and Holocaust survivors, I carried a tremendous amount of survivor guilt. In the process of seeking God's forgiveness, I came to understand that forgiveness is truly there for everyone.

What an incredible revelation to understand my perpetrators for the weak and pitiful creatures that they are. Surrounded by love, through Creation and from their children, they chose to seek power by exploiting the very ones they were given to nurture and by causing the suffering and death of fellow human beings, "the ultimate power trip." It is ironic that these acts drove them further and further from the true source of joy and strength. My father had told me once that, just in case God really was in charge, he could always seek absolution at the end, as if it were a visa stamp on his passport to the afterlife. Now I came to understand that God's forgiveness requires certain positive steps from all of

us, not the least is a true reckoning of our actions in this world.

I began—and continue—to pray heartily for the redemption of the perpetrators. Not only are they the most damaged people I know, but it is only through change on their part that this kind of evil will ever really end. If one victim escapes from a cult or a sex ring, it is a triumph; if a perpetrator leaves, it is a miracle. If enough perpetrators leave, and admit to the world what they have done, the house of cards will collapse. The one thing that evil cannot tolerate (besides laughter) is the light of day.

Part of my preparation for baptism was wrestling with the words of the service itself. Baptism in the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*, begins with an examination in which the candidate is asked to renounce satan and “the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” I had no problem with this, renouncing satan was exactly what I wanted to do. What I had trouble with was the wording of the Baptismal Covenant itself, a question and response declaration of the articles of faith of the Nicene Creed.

I wanted to speak my faith. But could I call God “Father Almighty” when my experience of “father” was one of exploitation and abuse and my experience of God something quite different and without gender? Could I state that I believed in “the holy catholic Church” when my experience of organized religion was so problematic? Did I know or care whether Jesus was seated at the left or right hand of God?

My pastor assured me that I’d grow into these words, that I’d understand the meaning on many levels in time, and that for now I should take them on faith.

Here he and I parted ways. I’d been made to mouth too many lies in my parents’ “church.” I would only speak my own heart to God. I would only say the truth as I knew it. “Write it down,” Paul counseled. “Write your own covenant and let’s see what it says.”

So I did. To the question, “Do you believe in the Holy Father?” I replied, “I believe in the Holy parent, creator of life, the source of love.” In response to the question “Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” I wrote from my own experience, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, greater than our understanding, surpassing human experience. I believe in the Holy Spirit as manifested to me through the miracle of life, through the healing power of love, and through

my personal salvation.” I went on to proclaim my free will choice to “follow the teaching of Jesus Christ, to love our Creator with all my heart and all my soul” and to consecrate my life to the good, inviting the Holy Spirit to use me to God’s purpose.

Both Paul and the bishop approved and on December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, I was baptized by Paul in a crowd of friends and well wishers, my husband and children standing beside me. I dedicated my baptism to the children who had died and to those still caught in the cult.

Consolidation

What followed was a long period of consolidation, in which I explored and expressed my new found connection with the church. I began to enjoy my participation in the church community. For periods of time, I could see myself as a member of the group, instead of the eternal outsider who would be condemned if people knew the truth. I volunteered in several capacities and began to pay back in small part for the great amount of time and love that had sustained me through the early part of my recovery. I learned to sing and lifted my voice as I’d never been able to do. Damage from repeated chokings and the fear of speaking out had locked my voice up since early childhood: now it was free.

Paul and I still met weekly to work on the difficult issues of my healing. I searched for my own, personal spiritual practice. I found Paul’s practices awkward; they felt imposed. I realized that my understanding had to grow now from the inside out, from my core relationship with God into my daily life. I also discovered that the disciplines I’d already chosen and that had shaped my adult life—my child-oriented profession, my marriage, motherhood, and the sustained work of healing from trauma—were potentially spiritual practices in themselves, disciplines that took on spiritual dimensions as I integrated my prayer life and my daily life.

Separation

Groups of people tend to function in similar ways. As time went on, I became increasingly uneasy with the hierarchy of the church, a hierarchy whose potency was denied by Paul when I pointed it out to him. I could not help but see how Paul played a role not unlike the satanic priest of my childhood. I realized that I was projecting relationships from my past onto the present, but at the same time I had to listen to my own discomfort with

the organized part of organized religion. My personal relationship with the Creator *had* to come first, yet if I left the structure of the church, what was to keep me from spinning off into some self-indulgent fantasy? What could I hold on to?

Attending services became more and more difficult for me. Communion continued to trigger memories and associations. Whereas once I welcomed the confrontation with the satanic practices of my childhood, now I wondered why I put myself through this ritual every week. A dear friend and abuse survivor helped me to understand that it was Jesus who had turned human sacrifice upside down and did it backwards, to free us all from the overt practice and that this is what the Eucharist celebrates. Still, every time I took communion, I heard the words "blood" and "body," "eat" and "drink" far more often than the word "love." Was this really what God wanted me to do, to regularly repeat this ceremony of sacrifice? Why did I feel more and more that I was participating in a rote way, as I had as a child, and that God was calling to me through the windows and through the doors?

In our private talks, I argued more and more with Paul. This patient man had seen me through so much. I was no longer passing on my parents' line; now I questioned Paul's authority, the authority of the church, the role that the religious organization played in his life and in the lives of the priests that my father had seduced. I was determined to force my way through this impasse. I wanted to resolve these disquieting feelings and achieve a comfortable relationship with the church. "Take it to God," was Paul's advice. I did.

The answer was direct, swift, simple and not at all what I wanted to hear. I'd grown so much in the church, so much by confronting the past. I had thought I was making a cozy little place for myself in this congregation. Now I had to allow myself to not attend, to step beyond the community, to stop holding on to Paul's hand, to see what was there when it was just me and God.

I expected terror, loneliness, and loss. What I found was a sudden, powerful, personal, and immutable Presence. This was the Dear One, the one I'd always known. Here, with me. Now. Without intermediary. The Voice in my ear. The Breath on my cheek. The Light that surges through the core of my being and pours from my hands with a sensation like the letting down of mother's milk. I was not alone, I never had been, and now the dialog

between us began in earnest.

Throughout my life, the natural world has sustained me. As a child, I'd turned to the sky and trees outside my window as a source of hope. It was often in the out-of-doors that God spoke to me. Observing nature had taught me about the beauty and rightness of the Creator's plan, even while—within human constructed edifices and in human devised ceremonies—I'd seen that plan defiled and denied. Now, although the Presence was with me everywhere, I felt drawn to the natural world again, drawn to witness and celebrate the intricacy and perfection of the created world. In the woods, at the ocean, in my garden, I found my spiritual food.

Once outside the confines of the congregation, I also began to draw sustenance from a wider community of people of faith. Throughout much of my healing, I have cherished a long-distance friendship with another survivor of ritualized abuse; together we had struggled with the uses and misuses of Christianity, the widespread and often secretive traditions of "left-handed" spirituality, and the challenges of our spiritual lives. We support each other as we work to integrate and grow with our difficult burden. Now, I find there are many others who share my intimate experience of the Divine, even if our paths are quite different. Native American spirituality, Buddhism, Judaism, Evangelical Christianity, Catholicism, mainstream Protestantism: in all these traditions I found people who have shared with me—in person or in print—an intimate experience of God. I now see myself as part of a strong, tough network of people of faith who pray and work for the healing of our world.

Some of the most fruitful conversations for me have been with other survivors of trauma who have chosen to heal spiritually as well as emotionally. Many of us had profound experiences in early childhood when we turned beyond humanity for help. Our original traumas may differ widely, but the issues we confront are very much the same.

There were dangers as well as opportunities for me in stepping away from church. Being inspired spiritually does not make a person immune from human frailties; I met wounded healers who acted out their dysfunctions within a so-called spiritual context. I also found that if I disclosed my childhood experiences to others, they might be moved as much by morbid fascination as by actual caring or spiritual friendship. Fortunately, I have friends and family who have helped me keep my balance,

and my experience with satanism in childhood has given me a certain degree of discernment. Nonetheless, I came to see that the only truly trustworthy spiritual relationship is with God. And I began to appreciate the roles and the boundaries that organized religion attempts to establish for us in our vulnerability.

Although the intense period of our work together is passed, Paul and I still meet to talk about spiritual issues and the church and community projects we are both involved in. At this point, I certainly do not feel that I've arrived at some spiritual goal. I know that I am engaged in a difficult and rewarding journey. I have come a long way in healing from the severe trauma of my childhood; many more steps lie ahead.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened to me if I had not been believed and supported in working through my traumatic past. As it is, I am blessed with a courageous pastor, and a therapist, husband, children, and friends who stood by me as I struggled with the darkest expressions of human nature. Although I continue to work on healing, I now experience professional productivity, marital happiness, social confidence, and an internal peace that I could not have imagined three years ago.

In *Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway wrote, "The world breaks all of us and afterwards some are strong in the broken places." We have a lot to learn

about how that positive healing happens. Hiding from the reality of extreme abuse may be more comfortable than confronting it, but—just as my earlier, anesthetized state left me unable to heal—so denial of the practice of evil will not help our broken world. Instead, as we move forward to uncover and confront the damage in ourselves and in humanity, we may discover that the truth of our spiritual lives provides the greatest potential for healing and for hope.

EDITORS

PIKE, PATRICIA L. *Address:* Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639-0001. *Titles:* Dean, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University; Editor, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*; Associate Professor of Psychology. *Degrees:* PhD in Psychology, University of Hawaii; Doctoral specialty in Professional Psychology, California School of Professional Psychology—Los Angeles. *Specializations:* Developmental psychology, cross-cultural psychology, administration.

MOHLIN, RICHARD J. *Address:* Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639-0001. *Titles:* Dean of Administration, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University; Associate Editor for Administration, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*; Associate Professor of Practical Theology. *Degrees:* MDiv, Gordon Conwell Seminary; MEd, Loyola University, Chicago; LLD. *Specializations:* Seminars and therapy for SRA survivors, biblical models for marriage and family therapy, emotions of Jesus, integration of psychology and theology.