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When A Stone Is Not A Stone: Memories of Clerical Abuse

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Abstract

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Keywords

Clerical abuse, Catholic Church, PTSD, sexual abuse by priests, sex abuse crisis, recovered memories, child rape, BishopsAccountability.org, survivor literature, victim, survivor

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WHEN A STONE IS NOT A STONE: MEMORIES OF CLERICAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

From the fourth to the sixth grades, Charles V. Sords suffered traumatic sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. He suppressed these memories, yet the pain of what happened impacted every aspect of his life. As an adult, several strong, sensory experiences brought the truth of his childhood into focus. He confronted the Church—and the system that protected clerical criminals. This memoir is an account of childhood sexual abuse, the particularly shameful nature of being raped by priests, and how the Catholic Church’s method of handling this and similarly horrifying revelations has re-traumatized survivors.

KEYWORDS

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Most names and locations in this memoir were changed to make it not about “Me vs. Them” but to voice the anguish of those who are unheard, ignored, or silenced. Accordingly, “Fr. Allen” is not the priest’s real name, although he is appropriately listed by the Bishop Accountability website as a serial sexual predator.

MY ARMS flail as if to ward off something vile. We nearly spin off the road. I stop the car and jump out. Addie asks: “What’s wrong?” I can’t answer. I’m not really there on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, a fifty-something man. I am a ten-year-old boy in Father Allen’s confessional, the air heavy, spicy and sweet with incense. Though confused about what is going on, I know that it is sleazy—wrong.

Just before I skidded the car to a stop, Addie had opened a new jar of hand cream. A rich pungent odor filled the car and awakened feelings from more than forty years before. As I walk along the side of the road, inhaling crisp, clean winter air, dead, dry grass crunches under my feet, bare branches scratch empty sky over scrubby fields and sparse woods while Addie slowly drives alongside me.

I get back in the car. It’s 1998. My wife is concerned and confused. I bury the incident in a shallow grave.

“Not remembering” horrific things is a way of coping, staying sane. But the dead hand of the past will reach for me again and again: random images of events

with a murky sequence. Mental milestones are few. What occurred, from fourth through sixth grade, is hidden from me, except for some surreal scenes and a few anchor points in real-world events. During the ensuing years I piece together what I can.

Winter 1951: I'm in the fifth grade. It's dark and cold. The snow is already a foot deep. It's coming down hard. Dragging my empty sled, I start across Washington Boulevard, totally unaware of where I am. A car knocks me down, passing cleanly over my body and sled. The snow is soft, the car inching along, tires pass on either side of me, chassis high off the ground, and I am bundled up for the weather, so there are no visible injuries. Physically shaken but emotionally numb, I am just an observer, watching, not part of the drama. The driver stops and asks if I'm OK. I say: "Fine." I don't even think to tell my parents what happened. I "forget" the incident.

Fall 1952: A car knocks me off my bike. It feels like being punched in the gut and the face at the same time. The police report says, "The boy was treated at a local hospital and released with scrapes and bruises." I "forget" this incident, too, but what I deny, eats out a cavern that undermines my slender bridge to sanity.

Summer 1953: The bridge cracks. The dirt-floor garage reeks of cinders, spilled motor oil, stale exhaust, and urine. Where a car should be parked, I stand on two red-orange bricks, one stacked on top of the other. A rope hangs from a rafter and is tied around my skinny neck. The garage is stifling. I desperately want out—*out of this life*.

I kick away the top brick. The noose tightens. I panic. I feel unyielding pressure on my throat. I struggle for breath that won't come. I stand on tip-toes, pull myself up on the rafter, release the noose, and tear out of the garage. I tell no one about it. I am alive. I must be crazy. I'm not normal. I bury this, too.

The last half of grade school is a blur of illness and absence made endurable by escape into my own private world and voracious reading. I become obese. High school is study and work and band and academic clubs, keeping so busy there's no time to think or feel, coming apart inside, certain that I am damaged goods.

The good fathers don't have to work hard to convince this cradle-Catholic altar boy that to be saved I must become a priest, make perpetual vows, and gain a plenary indulgence, wiping away all past guilt. So, after high school, I join a religious congregation of men, live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and go through "formation" to become a priest. For ten years, my existence is one of desperate peacefulness: Loving the holy rituals, meditation, and the life of the mind. Troubled with sexual thoughts, I confess them and am absolved.

My spiritual director hears me say: "I am hanging from a window high up in a building, and God is closing the window on my fingers." He asks: "Why don't you let go?" With deep shame I look at him and say: "I'm not sure there is anyone there to catch me." He says: "Sooner or later, most theology students have that feeling. They get over it." I don't.

My brothers in the community are a diverse and friendly lot, but something gnaws inside me, so I stay aloof, apart, alone. In college, I am in fragile health. Failing eyesight prevents me from reading for more than twenty minutes at a time. Still, I'm thought to be a scholar.

If it is possible to become more numb than numb, I get there in November 1963 when President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.

In graduate school in Washington, DC, I study hard and learn pastoral counseling in theory and in practice as chaplain-in-training at St. Elisabeths Hospital and through other assignments. As sacristan, I take care of vestments, chalices, and other ritual items. It's a privilege, but I am not comfortable in the chapel and sacristy. I feel nervous, get cold sweats. Could it be the presence of something holy and awe-inspiring or something else? I don't know.

In the spring of 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King is murdered. A major section of Washington, DC becomes a charred wasteland. Walking through the smoke, from 9th and F Streets, NW, through the riot zone up the long North Capitol Street hill, I am an observer in a clerical suit and Roman collar. No one bothers me. Occasionally a gas station goes up with a whoosh and a blast of searing heat.

Later, from the college porch, I watch flames rise high above DC, like Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind* during Sherman's March to the Sea. But this is DC, not a movie. The acrid smoke is not a special effect. The rage of the Black community is an explosive response to the hate-motivated killing of a spiritual leader, a man committed to non-violence. Something about that rage rings true deep inside me.

Finishing my Master's thesis on Clement, Bishop of Rome around the year 96 CE, it strikes me that being an expert on first century Christianity is not going to help me do much for real people. I don't become a priest. After teaching in an inner-city high school for a year, I leave religious life.

That fall, Robert F. Kennedy is killed. I stand along the route to Arlington Cemetery and decide to grow a beard—to remember. I get a civilian job at a defense agency, running the Summer Aide Program but leave when my boss asks me: "What are we going to do with the niggers today?" Pulling up stakes, I move to another agency as a management intern, learning administration, honing analytic skills, and working on Equal Employment Opportunity matters, something of a crusader.

One day, at home in apt #403, an envelope appears in my mailbox. It should go to apt #103. When her door opens to my knock, I meet Addie, a candy striper at Columbia Hospital for Women and a recent transplant to DC. Addie is open-hearted, beautiful, fun, and the one I want to grow old with. I know that right away. We date and hang out with friends for months, but Addie doesn't know I am serious about her until the night I propose under the cherry blossoms at the Tidal Basin. I'm not good at emotions.

We get married twice: once in Chicago for her family, once in DC for our friends. Life seems to go pretty well. Then, in 1974, Addie asks: "How long will you keep going to the office so early and staying so late?" I tell her that with Watergate and the war and the political situation the way they are, it's going to be a while. Addie comes back with: "I have a proposition for you. You can keep your old job or your new wife, but not both." We transfer to Seattle, Washington.

From DC to Seattle to Chicago to Toledo to DC again, we are on a strange journey, part quest, part exile, and much confusion. Though managing to get things done in a series of jobs, I often shoot myself in the foot and am unemployed twice for two years at a crack. People consider me an intellectual, not given to displays of emotion, yet rage can explode through my calm façade when I sense abuse of

authority. I internalize most anger, but can overreact. I join or lead efforts to counter injustice to others but can't put myself forward for my own sake or even for my family.

We have a daughter and a son. I hardly ever see them. What should be a source of joy terrifies me. I blame poor role models, but what really tears me apart is an unacknowledged fear that I will do to my kids whatever disgusting things—still buried—had happened to me. A fraud, I can't afford feelings, can't register how desperately lonely Addie is, how much she loves me, what she puts up with.

In 1995, more "stuff" comes loose inside me. Suicidal again, I see my briefcase spiraling down from DC's Taft Bridge and imagine myself making the same one-way trip. Addie says that I come home from work, step into the bedroom to change, and emerge as someone else: Sometimes dark and brooding as if I have fallen into a deep hole, sometimes cold and distant, sometimes brittle with artificial cheerfulness.

Diagnosed as clinically depressed, dragging myself through the motions of being a good husband and father, pouring my energy into work, I explore a new world with new friends—marginalized people who accept me as I am and are committed to wholeness for themselves and for others. During this time, I blame my parents for what is wrong with me. Who else could have messed me up so badly that I run from being a natural man? For good Catholics, sex is forbidden before marriage. After that, it is mandatory. For me, sex is either spiritual or soiled. Emotions are dangerous.

In 2001, Addie suggests that, to relieve stress on us all, I move out. I rent rooms near my day job on Capitol Hill, and open a part-time body-work-therapy practice to help people release kinks that block the flow of their natural life force. Helping them to heal, I am being emotionally healed, but my body needs a new aortic root and valve. That is how, in June of 2006 I wake up in Hopeless Hospital's Cardiac Intensive Care Unit.

As I emerge from the nothingness of anesthesia, it's dark in the ward, except for a dim light over the computer station where the night nurse pecks at a keyboard. Strange, there seems to be a cocktail party going on. Loud, inane chatter and braying laughter come from a nearby nurses' station, but I cannot make a sound: Something is jammed down my throat—and my hands are restrained.

I thrash around. "Stay still," hisses the annoyed nurse, "or the ventilator will come out." No one said anything about something being shoved down my throat or having my hands tied to the bed. Hospital staff had said repeatedly that I would wake up in my room, sore from surgery, but remembering nothing that happened. They lied. I wake up not in my room but in Holy Innocents Church, held down, with something lodged in my throat. This time it is not just the memory of incense, intense as that had been. This time it feels really, really real. I feel trapped, betrayed, and enraged by my utter impotence. The next morning the day nurse tells Addie: "Your husband had a difficult night."

Addie and others support me as I recover physically. Emotionally, I am a wreck. In August, my regular psychiatrist says the ICU incident has *re-traumatized* me: We both know the original problem is what happened at Holy Innocents. I can't concentrate, can't sleep, don't eat, binge drink, don't exercise, don't see my family, go through the motions at my day job, withdraw from normal life, and plunge into

darkness. I say: “I’m working things through. When I’m finished I’ll turn out to be a nice, normal, straight guy.”

Then, in the spring of 2007, co-teaching a men’s workshop at a villa south of Rome, my life is in the toilet. Accumulated stress, uncertainty, and the need to be a spiritual and earthy teacher exhaust me. The day I have to squire some guys to the Vatican, I drown in a sea of ecclesiastical excess and the sick paradox of mutilated male nude statues which attest to the confusing sexphobic Roman Catholic mindset that drives some believers and pretenders to rape little boys—like me.

Merde!

That does it: In July 2007 I retire early, losing a million dollars in actual and projected income. While recovering from open heart surgery and barely coping with the pain of betrayal, I bear the emptiness of absence from my family, from my life. It’s like *Long Day’s Journey into Night*: shades of grey, with jagged slashes of pure black.

Vivid, gut-wrenching flashbacks assail me.

The confessional is small and windowless. Airborne dusty, flaking soundproofing material assails my nose and mouth with a stale taste of decay. The priest’s cubicle contains a large wooden chair with a thin loose cushion. A single naked bulb sheds dim light so the priest can read his prayers when no penitents are making confession. Fr. Allen has me in the priest’s section. There are no others around. The smell of incense is strong. I can’t breathe. I gag. I wish I were dead as Fr. Allen’s penis rams my mouth, my throat, again and again. How he gets me there or in the sacristy or the janitor’s room or the priests’ house doesn’t matter, probably some combination of shame and guilt and the “privilege” of doing something “special” to atone for the heinous sins that he says I, a child, have committed. I have to do what Fr. Allen tells me—as often as he wants it. There is nothing else I can do.

The priests’ sacristy is a large, cold, sterile room with a terrazzo floor. Saffron-colored light seeps in through south-facing tinted windows. Tall closets flank a vesting case with wide drawers for ritual garments. There is a kneeling bench and a chair for prayer and meditation. Solid oak doors isolate the sacristy from the body of the church, from the passage leading to the boys’ sacristy, and from the door to the outside world. I am bent over the vesting case. My hands are held down by one or two of them. I am anally raped. Maybe they take turns. Intense pain spears me. I am held down on the kneeling bench and forced to fellate them. Like in the confessional, only worse. No one outside the sacristy hears anything. I am alone with criminal perpetrators. I struggle, but there is nothing I can do to stop them.

The janitor’s room is under the sacristy. A single entrance from the passage between the church and the grade school leads down a few steps and through a heavy metal door. In fall and winter, the janitor’s room is oppressively hot, with only an arched opening between it and the boiler room. The room is Spartan: a locker, a desk, a swivel chair with a ratty cushion, and a metal-framed cot with a thin, soiled mattress and pillow, perhaps an army blanket. I am held down or tied to the cot and raped orally and anally. I am terrified. I am not sure how many of them participate. I am not sure what else they do. I don’t remember how often it happens. There is nothing I can do.

The priests’ house concentrates the negative energy of the parish compound. One day, while the priests are “entertaining” themselves with me in what I

characterize as their basement “rec room,” old Monsignor Joseph comes down the stairs, looks at me, looks at the priests, looks back at me, and says:

Spawn of Satan. How could you seduce these holy men? If you ever tell anyone about this, I will ruin your parents.

I know that, as a powerful man in my working-class ethnic neighborhood, he *can* do that. He puts an end to *my* sexual abuse by the priests, but no one stops Fr. Allen and his posse from abusing others until much, much later.

I had buried all those memories and my fear and rage and every other emotion for half a century. But now, with all this tearing me apart, I have about as much control of my life as a fish on a stringer. *Something has to change*. So, in the fall of 2008 I face the sacrosanct monster: I call the Bluff City Diocese Office of Victim Assistance, looking for information and closure.

A sympathetic man answers the phone and tells me I am “brave to have come forward.” I complete and e-mail a form: “Please deal with those who abused me,” I beg, “Take steps to avoid future clergy abuse, make whole those who were abused, and give me information about what actually happened to me at Holy Innocents—and about the perpetrators.” The diocese directs me to its website and policy statements.

The next substantive correspondence is from the general counsel of the diocese: I can ask for financial settlement but there is a “procedure” to follow which includes meeting with diocesan officials in Bluff City. Feeling like one of the three little pigs invited to dinner with the big bad wolf, I engage a forensic psychiatrist to evaluate my experience and my mental state. The report takes months to complete. When I finally e-mail it to the diocese, the director of the Office of Victim Assistance responds tersely: “I hoped this was dead.”

The required meeting with the diocese takes only one hour. The general counsel, the head of the Office of Victim Assistance, and a high-priced attorney from a crack corporate law firm represent the diocese. Addie, my experienced and ethical attorney, and I are on my side. The forensic psychiatrist has diagnosed me as having Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, major depressive episodes, hyper-vigilance, anhedonia, and other emotional problems that hamstring occupational, sexual, social and other aspects of my life. Her report concludes:

There is virtually no area of Mr. Sords’ life that has not been altered and negatively impacted by his childhood sexual abuse. He has suffered severely in the aftermath of the abuse.

The diocese decides my allegations are “credible” but require an interview with an investigator chosen “solely at the discretion of the diocese.” I will never see any report generated. The bishop’s decision will be final. There can be no appeal. My interview is a seven-hour interrogation by a retired federal agent, a practicing Catholic who has no prior experience with, or apparent understanding of, sexual abuse.

In 2010, in an e-mail, the diocesan review board, another player in the procedure, writes that they are “unable to corroborate” certain aspects of the report, pointing out that one of the alleged perpetrators could not have participated because at the time of the alleged abuse he was in another city—that is *only a short*

drive from Holy Innocents! The e-mail also says one of the other alleged perpetrators denies ever meeting me, that Fr. Allen “has been dealt with,” and that the other “alleged perpetrators” are dead. The e-mail does not mention the confessional or the janitor’s room, but it verifies that the sacristy is exactly as I described it. The e-mail details, *exhaustively*, the investigator’s “proof” that there is not, and never was, a rec room in the priests’ house exactly as I described it.

It’s not surprising there was no rec room “exactly” as I described it! Under the pressure of interrogation, I was trying to describe events I had avoided remembering, let alone describing, for almost sixty years. I was pressed for details: What did the room look like? What were the furnishings? What color were the chairs? What style?

In retrospect, I realize I described perfectly a rec room I had known since childhood—*my Uncle Vincent’s!* That’s the way recovered memory works. The traumatic feelings of pain, shock, fear, and revulsion are seared into my psyche. The chair colors are not. I get no opportunity to explain that or to challenge anything about the report. I never get to see “the report.”

At this point, the diocese decides that since there was no rec room in the priests’ house, the whole story may be “fabricated.”

Fr. Allen had been at Holy Innocents in the 1950s, though, and I was likely Fr. Allen’s first victim, but not his last. He was moved around within the diocese for many years, serving in parishes, schools, and youth ministry. He and others were accused of molesting children in several of those posts. He was transferred out of state to another diocese. At some point, he was tried by an ecclesiastical tribunal, and perhaps around 2007 removed from the ministry, “sentenced to a life of prayer and penance.” The diocese could not tell me his status, insisting “it is not our responsibility.”

No further information will come from the diocese. I can’t afford a private investigator. The state’s statute of limitations for this kind of civil/criminal matter has long expired. I sign a settlement agreement. The diocese admits no guilt but gives me a small amount of cash to share with my attorney and denies me the right to pursue any legal action against the diocese in this matter “even if the allegations are later found to be true.” I am drained and disappointed in the Church I once revered. I never gain the information I seek, but I stood up to the soulless monsters. And that is something.

So, we come to the beginning of the end—or the end of the beginning.

I remember now at least some of what happened to me in the 1950s. I know a little about why I spent most of my life being a ‘droid. The predators’ actions caused me to feel like a slut, damaged goods. Shame, guilt, and Msgr. Joseph’s curse kept me silent even after my parents had passed beyond his reach. All that time, the denied, forgotten, and buried memories undermined my life. Tender feelings made me vulnerable. Dark emotions could be dangerous to others. Denial, containment, being a ‘droid seemed the only way to safeguard myself and others.

Now, that is changing.

I still have grainy black and white times, always will. But when the dead hand of the past reaches for me, I can sense it coming and take action. I acknowledge my rage and can defuse it or direct its awful energy into healthy channels for myself or

others. I can hope that bullies, perpetrators, and their enablers can stop the evil they do and perhaps find ways to become whole themselves.

I can celebrate other emotions too, and enjoy connection, affection, and passion. There are some Technicolor memories, now, and I can make more of those. Enjoying life! What a concept!

On the beach at Fire Island, I show my partner a small, shiny black stone. He holds it up to the light and says: “It’s not a stone....Look at the way the light shines in it.” The “stone” is sea glass, a fragment that has been scoured by waves and sand. It’s not a stone, it’s a precious gem.

My parents and I were never “damaged goods.” The curse never was just a curse. It was part of a cover-up that has continued for centuries.

Sometimes a stone is not a stone at all.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Charles V. Sords served a variety of problem-solving or management roles in non-profit, for-profit, academic, and federal executive or judicial branch organizations and conducted training in the US, Canada, and Europe for forty years. He is now a board-certified polarity practitioner in Washington, DC using healing touch, mindfulness, and other Western and Eastern medicine modalities to unblock and balance the energy flow for clients he sees in private practice or pro bono. For ten years he was a member of a religious community of men. He holds a Master's degree in theology from the University of Notre Dame with a dual focus on the early church and pastoral counseling. He feels great disappointment—and worse—when in a Roman Catholic edifice, ceremony, or the company of those who support the church's status quo. His greatest joy rests in family and personal relationships and helping other victims become survivors.

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