



Memory and the Power of Truth

By Ann Lehwald

My first job after grad school was with Baltimore County Protective Services for Children. I spent my days visiting families who had been reported for physical or sexual abuse of a child. This was the 1970's when sex abuse was still not discussed in polite company and even mental health professionals barely acknowledged the prevalence of incest.

She was about fifteen years old, the only daughter in a working-class family that was part of a community sustained by Bethlehem Steel Workers. It was a warm Spring day, so I sat on the porch with her and both her parents who were begrudgingly polite, but obviously resentful of my presence and what it represented. Her conversation with a guidance counselor had initiated a report of sexual abuse, which had been determined as founded. "I was only teasing her" the father vehemently insisted. "It's not like I took her clothes off". "I just grabbed her boobs." He added in a tone that suggested this was a common occurrence in most families. The teen dropped her eyes, tentatively asserting in a small voice, "I told you to stop. It isn't funny. It's

embarrassing.” The father dismissed his daughter as too sensitive and to my surprise her mother agreed. “Charlie just plays around like that. It’s not a big deal.”

After privately assuring the fifteen-year-old that she was brave to talk with her guidance counselor, I drove away feeling very unsettled and pondering if her parents really believed this was not a big deal. But an unspoken question was stuck in my throat. Did this really constitute abuse or were we being overzealous? I empathized with this teen, so I buried my doubt deeply with a plethora of other unanswered questions.

Years later even after hearing countless stories of childhood sexual abuse from so many of my clients, I still remembered that fifteen-year-old. Certainly, many of the transgressions shared with me have overshadowed her story in intensity and degree, but it always niggled at the recesses of my mind. I shared my thoughts with a colleague and friend. “Of course, it was inappropriate and needed to be reported, but I still wonder if it was too officious to found it as abuse. My uncle used to grope me as a teen when he was drunk at family parties. I know he did it to my cousin too.” I then recounted how my inebriated uncle would drape himself over me and grab my breasts in full view once even cornering me in the kitchen. My friend looked at me incredulously, her eyes wide. Quietly she said, “Ann, you’re a trauma therapist. If your client told you this happened in her teen years, I **know** you would call it abuse.” After a few silent seconds I stammered, “Yeah, I would. I have. Many times.”

At that moment I realized that what I saw in my client’s stories I had denied in my own. It was abuse and saying it aloud triggered emotions I had numbed. I could again feel the tension in my shoulder and legs as I would try to avoid him and the disgust and humiliation if I failed and he grabbed the evidence of my emerging womanhood. I felt the heat of my anger fanned by that one word – abuse.

Throughout my career I have been drawn to working with adults with a history of childhood trauma especially sexual abuse. I attended numerous seminars, read countless books, and became skilled in various modalities. For many years, despite no conscious memory, I held a visceral belief that something else had happened to me. Usually I dismissed the feeling, but in my braver moments I would contemplate why I reflexively winced or froze if my husband touched me a certain way. Particular words on a page or scenes from a movie could at times provoke anger, but mostly sadness. Occasionally, I gave voice to these musings with a therapist or a friend. I knew but didn’t know. Perhaps my conscious mind was not ready to know. But that’s how dissociation works.

And then a physical therapist massaged the tight muscles in my shoulder. My anxiety bubbled up. Over a period of months, memories stored in my body erupted into consciousness heightening the intensity of my anxiety. With every flashback of my uncle’s inappropriate touch at six years old, seven years, eight years, nine years, I could feel my breath quicken, my heart pound, my stomach clench, and my legs tense. Shame and fear, sadness and anger radiated through my body.

Only exposure can quench the flames of shame. So began the process of disclosing secrets I had kept even from myself – to my therapist, to my husband, and gradually to others. Confronting fear raises the fist of empowerment and eases rage into righteous anger.

It is now a clear, but dimmer memory. It is my truth.

Can dissociated memories be trusted? Perhaps not all the specific details, but the conscious awareness of being violated is real and the accompanying physical sensations and emotions are not delusions. Objectively, when I was honest with myself, I knew some of my behaviors and reactions were consistent with physical and/or sexual abuse. The character of my uncle and his drunken groping have been substantiated by others. Before I recovered my conscious memory, I intuitively sensed my truth. Now, I know it.

But I still wonder about that fifteen-year-old girl. Did she accept her parent's dismissal of her as too sensitive? Or did she hold tightly to her truth. I pray she chose truth.