



THE WOUNDED HEART

Hope for adult victims of
childhood sexual abuse

DR. DAN B. ALLENDER

foreword by Dr. Larry Crabb

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The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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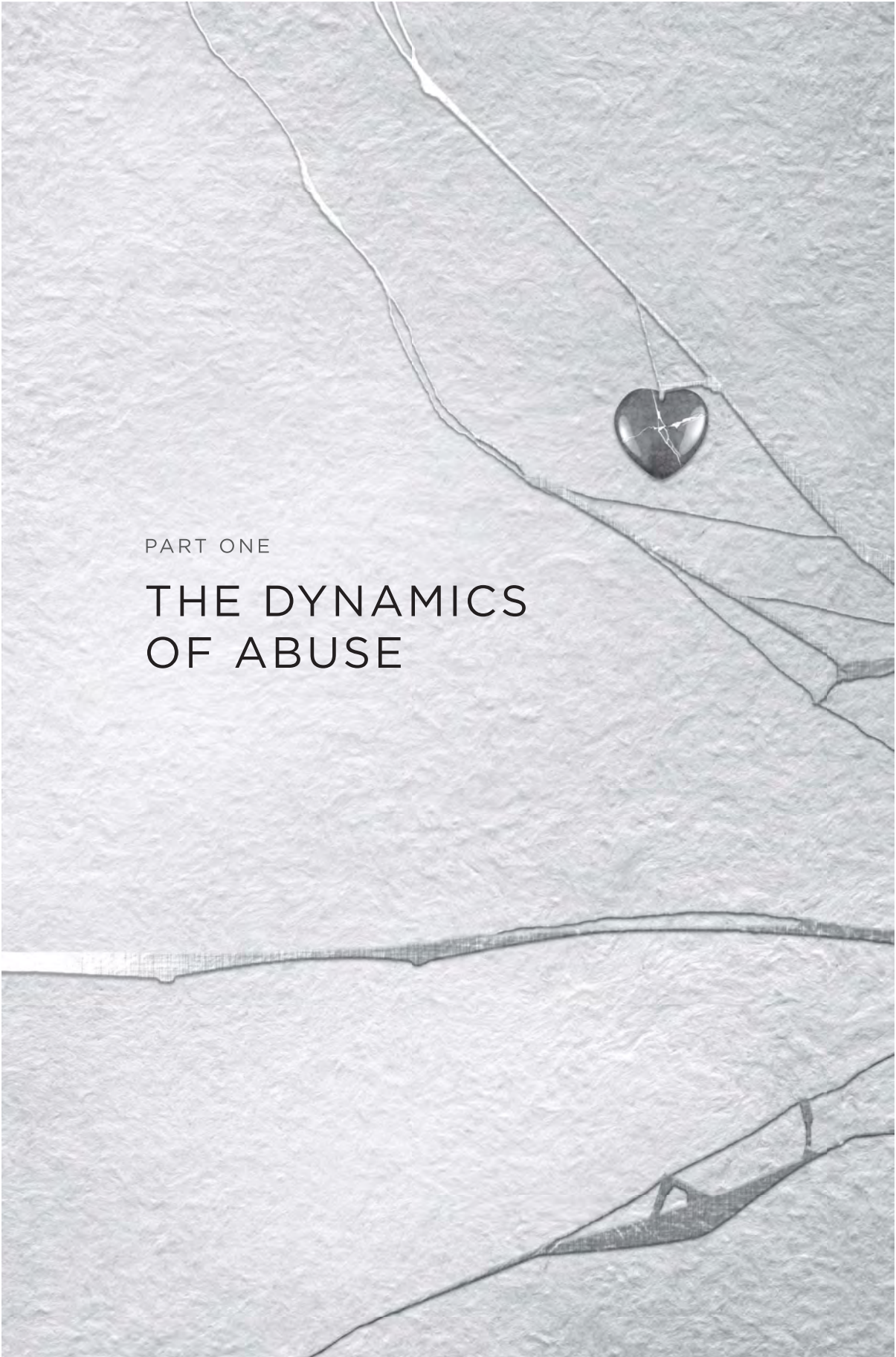
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PART ONE

THE DYNAMICS OF ABUSE



CHAPTER 1

THE REALITY OF A WAR

Facing the Battle

AT TIMES, I WONDER if every person in the world, male and female, young and old, has been sexually abused. No doubt the nature of my work biases my perspective, perhaps severely. As a psychologist and a counselor trainer, I'm invited to enter into the lives of countless individuals: people who are your next-door neighbor, your kid's Sunday school teacher, your pastor, your physician, and—this one will hurt—your wife or husband. For so many of them, a history of sexual abuse lingers like a chronic toothache, so familiar that it is no longer recognized, dulling the senses but not interfering with the capacity to perform the routine tasks of life. In most cases, you would never suspect who has been abused. If asked directly, many would not recall past abuse; others would lie to avoid the shame of admitting that they were victims of one of the few crimes where the victim feels more shunned and rejected than the criminal.

Sexual abuse is a difficult subject. More than most subjects, it provokes a horribly uncomfortable sense of shame, in both speaker and listener. In

many groups, the person who admits to a history of past abuse becomes a lightning rod for the fear and rage of those with similar but unadmitted struggles. It is really easier for abused persons to deny the past, ignoring the memories, the pain, and the current struggles that may be related to the abuse.

I recall the plaintive words of a young woman who was facing memories of abuse perpetrated by her father, a respected pastor: “I’d rather be dead than face the truth of the memories. If I admit the memories are true, I’ll be totally abandoned by my parents, family, and church. If I continue to live a lie, I’ll slowly rot from the inside out, pretending all is well when I know I’m a zombie.” Her choices were clear: Lie, and die slowly; or talk, and be immediately cut off. It sounds tragic to put it this way, but in her mind, living (that is, admitting all that was true) required that she forget her only hope of life: the support of family and friends.

Her plight is not uncommon. It seems that whenever a woman or man who has been abused enters into the horror of his or her past, a terrible price must be paid. This situation is like that of a friend of mine whose wrist was broken when he was a young child. Due to the neglect of his parents, the bone never properly healed, but it did mend. The bone attached itself in a manner that allows him to function adequately until he attempts to bend his wrist. It is healed, but at the cost of his never being able to play any racquet sport in the way it was intended to be played. He copes well, but the effects of his parents’ neglect are ever with him. If he wanted to restore his wrist, he would need to have the bone rebroken and endure a lengthy recuperative process, putting a sizable burden on his family for a time. *Why bother when he has learned so effectively to cope with the wound?* A similar question rages in the minds of many abuse victims.

The process of entering the past will disrupt life—or, at least, the existence that masquerades as life. The ease of quiet denial that allows the person to be a pleasant but vacuous doormat or an articulate but driven Bible study leader will be replaced by tumult, fear, confusion, anger, and change. Marriages will need to be reshaped; sexual relations may be postponed while the partners devote themselves to prayer and fasting. The fabric

of life will need to be unraveled piece by piece as the Master reweaves the cloth to His design. The process would be difficult even in an ideal world with supportive partners, friends, and churches. In many cases, the external battle is dramatically difficult because others would prefer the nice woman remain sweet, the competent woman remain in control, and the happy-go-lucky woman remain the life of the party. When change is bumpy and messy, particularly if it impels others to change, it is viewed with suspicion and rancor usually reserved for the worst heretics. But what is viewed as the greatest heresy is usually the thing that calls those committed to comfort to deepest change.

One might wish that the process of sanctification was merely a stroll down a gentle country lane. In fact, the path is through the dark valleys and into the seemingly impenetrable darkness that eclipses the light of the Son of God. The horror of change is that it appears to involve a death that resurrection cannot restore. Therefore, the only apparent hope is to live in denial and to believe that God wants us to be complacent, spiritualized automatons. I view this as a diabolical cover-up, a lie of such proportion and feasibility that it seems eminently reasonable. After all, what can be done about a pain of titanic dimension that seems to only get worse to the degree it is touched on, let alone plumbed to its depths? The litany of voices that clamor to sing “leave well enough alone” are legion, and their degrees, life experience, and cautious reason serve as a numbing influence that dulls the throb in the soul and the pounding of the heart.

What is the point in pursuing firm hope and lively joy? The answer is simple: to live out the gospel. The reason for entering the struggle is *a desire for more, a taste of what life and love could be if freed from the dark memories and deep shame*. No one leaves the lethargy of denial unless there is a spark of discontent that pierces the darkness of daily numbness. To live significantly less than what one was made to be is as severe a betrayal of the soul as the original abuse.

Our motivation to change, however, is more than just dissatisfaction with an empty life; we are motivated by the goal that draws all believers. The apostle Paul talked about the endpoint as a crown of righteousness (see

2 Timothy 4:8). Paul was willing to be poured out like a drink offering, to fight the good fight, and to finish the race, because he knew his hunger for the Lord's appearing would be rewarded with the prize of the Lord's commendation. To be greeted by the Lord with the prize of His "well done" embrace was a reward that supplanted the ordinary concerns for comfort.

The person who desires to deal with the wounds of past abuse will not feel courageous, nor will there be the immediate exaltation of starting out on a new journey; the bonds on the soul will not be quickly freed or broken. What, then, is the reason for moving toward the goal of God's embrace? Again, the answer is *a hunger for more*. God has made us with a natural desire to be as He is: alive, righteous, pure, passionate, loving. *To honor what God has called us to be is the reason a man or woman chooses the path of change.*

The tragedy is that the adult who wants to deal with his or her past sexual abuse must be willing to confront an internally and externally fierce battle fought by Christians against other Christians.¹ This sad state of affairs makes change, when it occurs, a supernatural victory of no small proportion. It is imperative that the man or woman who has been abused enters into the battle armed with both *an awareness of the cost* and *a deep conviction that life lived in the mire of denial is not life at all*. If the Lord Jesus came to give life, and life abundant, then a life of pretense involves a clear denial of the gospel, no matter how moral, virtuous, or appealing that life may seem.

What needs to be faced, if one is to enter the fray with the hope of change? In simple terms, one must face that there is a war, one must recognize the enemy, and one needs to know why the battle is to be fought. There is a war. One enters it when one acknowledges the reality of the past abuse.

THE REALITY OF A WAR

A problem cannot be resolved until it has been faced. A major shift occurs when words are given to what is known to be true: *I have been sexually abused*.² The enormous battle in labeling the truth is difficult to imagine.

A woman I worked with for over a year recently joined an incest survivors' group. She was reluctant to do so even though our work had concentrated on the effects of the abuse. She confessed that the difficulty was in admitting to herself that her only reason for joining the group was because she had been abused. Even though our conversations over the past year were largely about her past abuse, and even though she had always had clear memories of the events, she had avoided fully acknowledging that she had been abused.

I had always been amazed at the reluctance to face the data head on until I had an encounter with a good friend. I had been involved in working with abused people for over a year when I conducted a seminar on the topic. At the seminar, I was asked by several people if I had ever been abused. My answer was always *no*. The good friend who heard me teach asked the same question. I answered in the same manner. He probed and asked if I had ever been in a situation where I felt sexually uncomfortable, awkward, or debased. My answer was so quick it surprised me: "Well, of course." He asked me the details, and in moments, I recalled forced masturbation at a camp I had attended as an adolescent, a homosexual invitation I turned down in Boy Scouts, and a sexual assault that occurred at a football camp. He looked at me with stunned sorrow and said, "Doesn't that fit your definition of sexual abuse?" I was dumbfounded. It was not that I had entirely forgotten those events, but I would never have allowed them to be labeled with a word that might open the door to further exploration. *There is a deep reluctance to begin the process of change by admitting that damage has occurred.*

A woman recently came to see me for the sole purpose of determining whether she had been sexually abused. She was well-educated, bright, and competent. Many knew her as a no-nonsense, reasonable woman. She shyly informed me, after explaining her purpose in seeking help, that for fourteen years she had been taken to a nudist colony by her parents. Each summer the clothed community was invited to attend a nude beauty pageant. During the pageant, she was forced to pose in various positions, some pornographic, for an entire evening. Her soul died. She was

mortified in being associated with her parents' nudity at home and at the colony, but even worse, she despised that annual evening when hundreds of men would gawk and slobber over the sight of her developing body. Again, I was stunned. Could she really be asking if she had been abused? Was the record not a thousand percent clear?

A woman who was sexually abused by her father, uncle, and grandfather agreed she was harmed by their behavior but was reluctant to call it sexual abuse. Her father and uncle forced her to have oral sex with them. Her grandfather would exhibit himself in front of her. She said with great sincerity, "If I had been raped, I would call it abuse, but all they did was what a dozen other men have done to me over the years, so why should I call it abuse?"

What is sexual abuse? It seems that many people operate on the principle that whatever happened to them is not abuse, but if it had happened to someone else or if it had been a bit more extreme, then it would have been abusive. One man literally said, "My mother was always parading around the house without any clothes. She would often ask me to fasten her bra or check her legs for bruises. I know it was inappropriate, but how could that be abuse?" Because of this kind of confusion about what constitutes sexual abuse, it is imperative to have a clear definition:

Sexual abuse is any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, or psychological) between a child/adolescent and an adult when the child/adolescent is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or any other person.

Sexual abuse may be committed by a person under the age of eighteen when that person is either significantly older than the victim or when the perpetrator is in a position of power or control over the victimized child/adolescent. When the sexual abuse is perpetrated by an adult or older child who is a blood or legal relative, it constitutes incest, or intrafamilial sexual abuse.

There are two broad categories of abuse: sexual contact and sexual interactions. *Sexual contact* involves any type of physical touch that is

designed to arouse sexual desire (physical or psychological) in the victim and/or the perpetrator. Physical touch can include at the most severe level forced or nonforced intercourse, oral or anal sex (24 percent of victims³); at the severe level forced or nonforced manual vaginal stimulation or penetration, breast fondling, or any form of simulated intercourse (40 percent); and at the least severe level forced or nonforced sexual kissing, touch of clothed breasts, buttocks, thighs, or genitals (36 percent). The categories imply a continuum of severity, but *all inappropriate sexual contact is damaging and soul-distorting*. Significantly, 73 percent of the least severely abused victims report some damage, and 39 percent report considerable to extreme trauma as a result of the past abuse.⁴

Sexual interactions are far harder to acknowledge because they do not involve physical touch and therefore do not seem as severe. Many times they involve a subtle sexual invasion that leaves the victim wondering if it occurred or if it is a by-product of her own distorted imagination. Interactions can be categorized as visual, verbal, or psychological. Visual sexual abuse involves interactions where the child is forced or invited to watch sexually arousing scenes or pictures or is observed by the perpetrator in a state of undress that is arousing to the adult.

One client's father used to leave pornographic literature in the bathroom before she would take a shower. After she had begun to bathe, he would enter the room and retrieve his magazine, lingering for a moment to observe his daughter's teenage form silhouetted behind the shower door. This was not an inadvertent mistake; the pattern was confirmed in other visual intrusions.

One young teenage boy returned home each day with a mixture of trepidation and excitement, wondering if his alcoholic mother would be drunk and naked or partially unclothed, lying on the living room couch. Each time he swore he would not look, but his teenage curiosity and growing sexual responsiveness to visual cues betrayed him.

A parent or adult who finds arousal in watching a naked child or introducing a child to sexual stimuli (through pornography or exhibitionistic sexual exposure) has without a doubt sexually victimized that child.

Sexual verbal interactions can be equally abusive. A good friend of mine casually discussed her father's lifelong habit of talking about her body as if he were expressing interest in her grades. Every day he visually scanned her developing body as if he were looking for evidence of head lice. He measured her skirt, checked out her hair, evaluated and judged her boyfriends, and most embarrassingly, commented on her body in front of her dates. His vilely endearing term for her was T.T. No one knew what it meant for years, but she knew he was referring to her breasts. Such repeated verbal degrading obviously constitutes emotional abuse, and it should not be ignored, as it also violates the young girl's sexual identity.

Verbal sexual abuse can also come in the form of suggestive or seductive interactions. A woman recalled her disgust in being around her grandfather. Every time he saw her, he would wink and chuckle. Her internal discomfort was viewed as disrespectful by her parents and as a symptom of craziness in the young girl. That lasted for thirty years, until I probed for other interactions with her grandfather. It finally came to light that he would wait until no one else was around and then say, "You are so sweet I could eat you. Come here, honey, and let me taste your lips." Was he a silly old man, innocent but slightly inappropriate? Or was he a sexually suggestive abuser who used words as the stimulant that increased his perverse sexual arousal? One indication is that he spoke like that only when he was alone with his granddaughter. His other grandfatherly embraces went unnoticed because they were innocent enough apart from his suggestive remarks that highlighted his lengthy hugs or kisses. Nevertheless, every time he touched her, she felt disgust and tightness.

Actual seductive verbal interactions are easier, in most cases, to discern. To be invited to take a shower with dad, or go down in the cellar with your brother, or take a long walk in the woods with your uncle when sexual cues are emitted or past sexual abuse has occurred clearly are abusive encounters. Verbal abuse is a powerful and deep wound. *Sexually abusive words produce the same damage as sexually abusive contact.* Yet the potential

for minimization or feeling weird for being damaged makes the potential for change even more difficult for those more subtly abused than for those more severely abused.

A final category of interaction is psychological sexual abuse.⁵ There is an obvious overlap between visual and verbal sexual abuse and psychological abuse. Psychological sexual abuse will occur through verbal or visual means (usually both) but will involve more subtle (nonspecific, more mood-generating) communication that erodes the appropriate role boundaries between a child and an adult. For example, a mother who seeks advice or solace from a teenage son about her sexual struggles with his father has stepped across the line between honest sharing and pandering. To pander is to act as a go-between in love intrigues, to act as a pimp. A pimp solicits sexual involvement for his own benefit. A father who uses his daughter as a surrogate wife or confidante has bound his daughter's heart to him in a subtly sexual way.

The damage may not be overt, and in fact, the daughter may feel so special that she would defend to her death the appropriateness of her father's interactions. It is nevertheless abusive. In the same way, a mother who talks about her son as being her "man," her "companion," or her surrogate "husband" has set up a dynamic of competition with her adult husband and a sense of sexually bonded uniqueness for the son that violates the natural boundaries between mother and son.

Whenever a parent or caregiver uses a child to fulfill overt sexual desires or more subtle longings related to the adult's sexual identity, abusive dynamics will be unleashed in that child's soul. *The fact that sexual abuse can be subtle ought not cloud our perspective that it is equally abusive and damaging.* The very nature of satanic harm is that it is perpetrated by the father of lies who masquerades as an angel of light. Whether the perpetrator is acting under direct satanic sway or indirectly in the way that all sin can be ultimately tied to Satan's province, a certain degree of deceit and subtlety can be assumed in all sexual abuse.

TYPES OF SEXUAL ABUSE: CONTACT AND INTERACTION

Contact

- **VERY SEVERE:** Genital intercourse (forcible or nonforcible); oral or anal sex (forcible or nonforcible)
- **SEVERE:** Unclothed genital contact, including manual touching or penetration (forcible or nonforcible); unclothed breast contact (forcible or nonforcible); simulated intercourse
- **LEAST SEVERE:** Sexual kissing (forcible or nonforcible); sexual touching of buttocks, thighs, legs, or clothed breasts or genitals

Interactions

- **VERBAL:** Direct solicitation for sexual purposes; seductive (subtle) solicitation or innuendo; description of sexual practices; repeated use of sexual language and sexual terms as personal names
- **VISUAL:** Exposure to or use for pornography; intentional (repeated) exposure to sexual acts, sexual organs, and/or sexually provocative attire (bra, nighties, slip, underwear); inappropriate attention (scrutiny) directed toward body (clothed or unclothed) or clothing for purpose of sexual stimulation
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL:** Physical/sexual boundary violation: Intrusive interest in menstruation, clothing, pubic development; repeated use of enemas. Sexual/relational boundary violation: Intrusive interest in child's sexual activity, use of child as a spouse surrogate (confidant, intimate companion, protector, or counselor)

WHO ARE ABUSERS?

The abuser can be anyone. He can be your father, your pastor, your brother, your seventy-year-old next-door neighbor. Often, a victim has had so many abusers that it seems as if he or she sent a serial letter inviting them to join in the debauchery of abuse. It is not unusual to see a client who has been abused by several family members, a neighbor, boyfriends, a teacher, a counselor, or an employer.⁶

The abuser may be a man or a woman. It is far more common for a young girl to be abused by an adolescent or adult male, but it is inaccurate to presume that men do not abuse boys or women do not abuse girls and boys.⁷