

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This is a book about incest recovery. This is a book about girl victims and women survivors, powerlessness and power, despair and hope, and growing up female in the United States. This is a book about being scarred for life but not damaged beyond repair.

As I wrote this book, I was aware that I have been influenced by many people—my clients in my private psychotherapy practice, professionals in the field, friends and family, and participants in my doctoral research on incest recovery. It's difficult to distinguish my original thoughts on incest recovery from the beliefs I have acquired from others. But then again, is there such a thing as "original thought"? In any event, this is an account of the evolution of my beliefs on incest recovery.

I became knowingly involved with incest survivors ten years ago when I worked with juvenile delinquent girls in a residential treatment agency. I couldn't help but notice that most of the girls sent away by Family Court had some history of sexual abuse. In particular, there seemed to be a high correlation between sexual abuse and the juvenile offenses of prostitution, running away from home, drug-related crimes, and truancy. I decided to look closer at this, and included questions about sexual contact between the child and a relative and the child and an adult as part of the intake process. I discovered that 90 percent of my female clients admitted to some sexual involvement with an adult—often a family member. Ninety percent may seem high; however, I was involved with a population of clients who came to Family Court with serious family problems. Although I believe that my 90 percent may be high, I also believe that Diana Russell's (1982) figure of 38 percent of girls being sexually abused by an adult before the age of eighteen is low.

Regardless of the exact figure, my work with court-adjudicated girls made me realize that the courts may very well have been sending

the wrong persons away to be rehabilitated. At that time, I decided to actively address the issues of sexual abuse in these children's lives. Through my work with sexually abused teenage girls I learned concretely what I had known intuitively—men are generally the perpetrators and girls and women are generally the victims of sexual abuse.

As I began talking about what I was noticing among my female clients in treatment, more and more women opened up to me about their own histories of childhood sexual abuse. I began to examine my own childhood and realized what I had viewed as predictable encounters with men were in fact sexual abuse. I began to understand how gender roles were conditioning girls to become victims and boys to become perpetrators. I also realized, much later, however, that talking about incest and childhood sexual abuse without talking about patriarchy and gender roles was not addressing the real causes, and in fact was like putting a band-aid on a hemorrhage. We may have been stopping the individual bleeding, but we were not stopping the onslaught.

To understand that the cause of sexual violence, including incest and other childhood sexual abuse, lies at the doorstep of patriarchy, we need to look at the statistics. Diana Russell (1982) learned from her research the following: 44 percent of women are victims of rape or attempted rape, one out of four women are battered in their primary relationships, one out of seven women are victims of marital rape, 38 percent of all women are sexually abused by an adult before the age of eighteen. These statistics may look shockingly high, but a close look at the research indicates that this may very well be the tip of the iceberg. For instance, in Russell's research methodology, the probability sample, women to be interviewed, were located through the telephone book; this excluded from the sample, from the start, women who were not listed in the phone book—women who were in battered women's shelters, or prisons, or drug or alcohol rehab, or psychiatric hospitals, or homeless shelters, or women who were too poor to have phones. There were women who were missed—many of them at high risk for sexual violence.

In viewing this issue from another angle, Neil Malamuth (1981) interviewed college men and discovered that 51 percent of those interviewed said they would rape a woman if they were sure they would get away with it. I remember my shock when I first read this study and discussed it with a colleague. He laughed at what he called my naiveté, saying, "You can't possibly believe that to be the reality,

because you know how adolescent males are—they like to brag about their conquests.” I somehow couldn’t be comforted by his assurances because they spoke of how boys are conditioned in this society; they are reinforced for sexual violence and their belief in their own sexual entitlement.

What was even more disheartening than the statistics was the fact that behind those statistics were people. As my work with survivors evolved through the years, as I began to work with adult women incest survivors through individual and group therapy, as I began to work with children who were referred to me because of their incest histories, these statistics began to have names and faces. These statistics were my clients, my friends, my family. These statistics were in fact all women, in that each of us is confronted with the reality that we are vulnerable to sexual assault.

We, as women, have a different experience than men. We are taught early that we risk physical harm if we “get out of line,” and we in fact risk physical harm even when we are “towing the line.” At her presentations on sexual violence, Judith Herman, M.D., often asks the audience (usually predominately female) to raise their hands if they have experienced the following: an obscene phone call, an encounter with an exhibitionist, an encounter with a masher. As the hands go up in the audience, there is usually uncomfortable laughter. Herman then goes on to explain that although the audience is laughing now, they were not laughing when it happened, that these “minor” sexual encounters are very frightening when they are happening. These “minor” sexual encounters serve a purpose in teaching women to know their place. In her *Work in Progress* (1984), Herman states: “Further, in the war between the sexes, I submit that these minor assaults are equivalent to cross burnings or to the discovery of a swastika painted on a building. They are ominous warnings of threats that we prefer to repress, the ultimate threat being the rape-murder. Taken together, the research findings and our gut-level feelings point to a conclusion that no girl or woman is currently safe from sexual assault, and to be female is to be subject to the possibility of a sexual assault.”

In working with incest survivors, I have not only learned of the effects of this childhood trauma, I have also learned of women’s strengths. The journey that began with my attempt to understand the trauma of childhood sexual abuse that my adolescent clients reported continued as I worked with adult women incest survivors and learned

of their strengths. Through this journey, I was influenced by Judith Herman, author also of *Father-Daughter Incest*, and Sandra Butler, author of *Conspiracy of Silence*. Their written work and their presentations helped me to begin to formulate a therapy that would help clients to heal from this trauma. In addition, the women who participated in my doctoral study on incest recovery helped to mold my work. Through my involvement with incest survivors I have learned of the strengths of survivors of childhood sexual assault, and I have learned through them that, yes, they are scarred for life, but they are not damaged beyond repair. We must focus on their strengths to enhance the recovery process. We must celebrate the scars and honor the survival skills that helped the child make it through her childhood.

I remember once being told of a "scientific" phenomenon that was illustrated in a story by Ken Keyes (1981). There is a group of islands off Japan where monkeys live, each island isolated from the others. On one of the islands, one monkey decided to wash its yam in the water before eating it. (S)he did that every day, and soon other monkeys on the island began washing their yams in the water before eating them. In time, all the monkeys on that island were washing their yams before eating them. Somehow, when the hundredth monkey began washing its yams, not only were all the monkeys on that island washing theirs, but the monkeys on all the other islands were washing their yams as well. This story was offered as an example of how one's action can change the course of events without any concrete interaction among individuals, that one becomes two, becomes four, and so on, ad infinitum. This story may or may not be true. However, I believe that the same dynamic exists today with women. In 1988, I stated in my doctoral dissertation that I had decided to research the area of incest recovery because there was little information on the subject. There was an enormous amount of literature on the trauma of incest but little on healing. In just the past two years, more has been published on incest recovery. It seems as if there were people throughout the United States, unbeknownst to each other, who began to research the question, Does one recover from the trauma of incest? Like the example of the monkeys and the yams, women are creating a collective energy to focus on the trauma of childhood sexual abuse and to empower themselves as survivors. And women are going beyond being survivors to become thrivers. We are changing our lives and the lives of the generations to follow. This book is about that process.