



Fathers

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ISSUE 2: FATHERS

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AWAKENED VOICES

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see. hear. heal.



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INTRODUCTION

As with our first issue, “Mothers,” we were determined to offer a balanced point of view. We knew we would hear about molesting fathers, and we did. Could we find other fathers –supportive fathers, fathers of survivors, fathers who faced sexual trauma in their own families and were brave enough to write about it?

This issue was originally published in a blog post format and was updated to this format in 2022.

CONTENT WARNING

The following issue contains material on the topic of sexual violence and other topics that readers might find difficult.

The intention behind this content warning is to prepare a reader so they can choose to bravely engage with potentially activating material, even if this doesn't always feel comfortable. May it also serve as a reminder that a reader can pause and take a break from reading. The stories will be here, ready when the reader returns.

An Open Letter to Versie Blackman, Sr. (& the bittersweet blessings of being a wounded healer)

VersAnnette Blackman

"It's bittersweet, this love I have for you. It mixes with the pain and creates beautiful art.

So many times I wish I could have saved you."
Daddy,

I write to you as a grown woman with the broken heart of a little girl. If you were alive to see me now I believe you'd be proud of the woman I've become. Did you know that all I ever wanted was for you to be proud of me? To approve of my choices? To accept and nurture me for who I was at the core?

Daddy in my reflection time now I realize that I was your sidekick. Remember our walks? Our really long, intriguing talks about life? I miss them so much. You carried on with me in conversation as if I was an adult. No wonder I'm such a deep, inquisitive thinker. You were my first teacher, and then you were gone. You left me when I felt I needed you the most – and this left me angry, bitter and particularly resentful and defensive towards men.

Ours was a complicated love. It's as if you gave me everything, yet nothing at all. You made sure I learned how to cultivate and use my gifts. I can still remember the day you told me I could read minds. And then we had to practice it for hours! You said I was a witch and that you were a

warlock. You explained things like Mental Telepathy and ESP. Boy was that scary! I was only eight years old...and I had no intention of being a creepy old witch. But as I've come along this journey I've come to understand what you meant that day. And I didn't realize there was such a thing as a "good witch.

Somehow you saw my spiritual gifts and knew there would be a bigger purpose for my life. You told me about the vibes I would read with my hands. You saw me as a healer. You intuited my potential and profound insight when I was just a baby. How did you know? How did you see me? How come nobody else did?

By the time I was eleven, I felt out of place. No one else in our family understood me. I was always teased and made fun of for being different, yet you embraced it and made me own it. Nobody would ever prepare me for the world the way you did. Remember you taught me how to drive the burnt orange Cadillac you said was mine? I was thrilled that by the age of twelve I had my own car!! My friends never believed me.

This was also the time I discovered poetry. I remember the tears when I read you my first poem and instead of complimenting me you criticized my writing. That stung, and it has

taken me years to recover. If my Daddy didn't think I was a good writer, then I just wasn't. I know now that you were just trying to make me better, but you forgot to allow me to just be me.

Daddy, didn't you know that Fathers have the ability to silence or amplify their daughter's voice?


You had a tough love way of nurturing my gifts. Even as I write this, my eyes well up with tears because I can still feel the hurt and fear of your disapproval rumble in my belly. You always knew how sensitive I was, and how much your harsh words made me feel bad. But you still said hurtful things. Calling me neckbone. Telling me to close my mouth before a fly gets in it. Telling me I had no rhythm. And when I sang, you made me practice over and over and over again until I hated the song and hated you for trying to force me to be pitch perfect when I just wanted to go play. You used to say that you would never lay a finger on me because you could "whoop me with your mouth." And you did.

Daddy, times have changed since the 80s. There is a word to describe the things you said: Verbal abuse. And the scars from verbal abuse don't disappear over time with cocoa butter. I hated every minute of your lectures

when I felt you weren't happy with me. My heart had a hard time processing your anger and bitterness. Daddy, why were you so mad all the time? I always wondered what I was doing wrong. Did you know I only wanted to make you happy? I felt this was my primary role as your daughter, especially when you and Mommy seemed to come apart at the seams.

It was difficult for me to see my hero fall. You started drinking, and everything changed. You hit Mommy. You yelled at us. You beat the boys. Mommy called the police a lot. And I didn't know what to do. All the good memories threatened to fade away. I felt myself disappear inside myself. I refused to let myself forget the things I loved most about you.

I can still feel the excitement and anticipation from when I used to wait in the window every day at 5 o'clock to see you come walking up the street to our building. I was always thrilled to see my Daddy! I couldn't wait to sit in your lap, get a bouncy ride and listen to your stories at the Furniture store. Remember that time you took me to work with you? Seeing you make furniture was such a joy for me. You were a true artist and craftsman. Whether you were playing your guitar, writing and singing new songs, rehearsing 'The



ackman Ensemble' to exhaustion, cooking up a fabulous meal of Creole/Cajun cuisine, telling me stories, making Mama those leather chairs for our dining room, and even making me new outfits for my Barbie dolls... everything you did was with a spirit of excellence.

Much of who I am as an artist, creator and warrior woman is because of you. Because of you, I am very much at home with a microphone in one hand – and a pen or paintbrush in the other. Because of you, I listen to hear what people are saying even when they aren't talking. I am strong, independent and ridiculously determined. Because you insisted I read the dictionary and let me play your extensive album collection, I have an insatiable hunger for stimulating conversation and an eclectic taste in music. Seems I come alive when I hear live jazz bands, folk rock, country, gospel, r & b and of course soul. As much as I hated when you made us perform in front of house guests, I find myself quite comfortable singing, speaking or reading my poetry in front of huge crowds of people. Wow, Daddy. You really did something good.

The day you died I was sitting in the salon getting my hair done for my high school graduation photos. I had just visited you in the

hospital the day before, and I remember stroking your curly hair which had turned completely white and feeling so guilty for not having spoken to you in five years. I fell asleep at the salon and had this dream that I was falling off the edge of a cliff. I jolted up only to receive a call from my mother telling me to come home as soon as I was done. I learned later that you died in the exact moment that I was dreaming.

It's bittersweet, this love I have for you. It mixes with the pain and creates beautiful art. So many times I wish I could have saved you. I wish you could see your beautiful grandchildren. I wish you could read the many poems I've written, or hear me tell stories about us. I still celebrate your birthday in my own quiet way. I miss you so much and wish you'd have quit drinking long enough to see the sunshine after the storm. But you know what Dad? I can finally fully and wholeheartedly forgive you now. Because I know that wounded people inflict wounds on the ones they love most– even when they don't mean to. I also know that you gave me everything you had in you to give.



ISSUE 2: FATHERS

Victor*Veronica Wanchena*

I did not settle for survival. “

He was born weak, innocent, dependent and vulnerable just like every other human person that has ever come into the world. He was somebody’s baby boy. He was named and baptized. He was born to a dirt-poor immigrant family. They lived in a tarpaper shack in a small coal-mining town in Montana.

62 years later he died in a hospital here in Minnesota. He had shriveled and shrunk with heart and kidney disease and cirrhosis of all his major organs. This was after having numerous heart attacks and 6 years of complicated medical issues, mostly stemming from decades of severe alcoholism and heavy smoking.

The life that man lived between his entry into and departure from this world is one that profoundly wounded, terrorized, scarred and damaged many people. His violence and abuse left me broken, mentally staggering and painfully crazed.

His drunken rages terrified family, friends, neighbors and strangers. His lordship over my physical and emotional existence was fierce, cruel and completely devastating.

That was my father. He was lord and master of my existence until he died when I was sixteen

years old. He beat me, he raped me, and mocked me. He sold me as a child prostitute to strangers in spooky hotel rooms. He and his evil cameraman friend made pornography with me and other children that had been brought to the hotel by other men.

He hated me. He was ashamed of me for existing, it seemed. He told me that if he had a dog with face like mine he would shave its ass and make it walk backwards. I believed him. You would not believe how many dogs asses I looked at throughout my childhood, trying to figure out what I looked like. That was the mirror he held up to me. Since he had driven me insane, I honestly thought that is what I looked like. And it devastated me beyond belief.

He threatened me with death so often and so viciously that I began to wish that he would just make good with his threat and get it over with. The torture of wondering if I would be killed each day was almost worse than being alive.

That I survived a tumultuous, premature and dangerous birth circumstance was the first miracle of my life. That I survived the next 16 years of being his daughter and victim was a hundred thousand miracles. That I have had the courage and fortitude to spend several decades

recovering my life from the ashes it was in when he died is several million more miracles.

My father's name was Victor, which I dreaded and feared almost as much I did him. The Miriam Webster Dictionary says this about that word/name:

Full Definition of VICTOR

: one that defeats an enemy or opponent

— victor adjective

Origin of VICTOR

Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Latin, from *vincere* to conquer, win; akin to Old English *wīgan* to fight, Lithuanian *veikti* to be active

First Known Use: 14th century

Synonyms

beater, conqueror, master, subduer, trimmer, vanquisher, whipper, winner

Antonyms

loser

Here I am now, a woman of peace and strength, blessings and great joy. Definitions, Origins, Synonyms and Antonyms are swirling around in the spaces of my mind and heart as I write this article about a man whose force ended up working against him and for me. I laugh at the word that I once dreaded and feared.

I have written and published 5 books on the details of my experience of wounding and healing from abuse and neglect. But my greatest achievement is that I have a life that I love and enjoy now! I did not settle for survival, I wanted thorough healing and to live like other people live who were not so damaged so early.

Sometimes I think that I now have a greater capacity for joy than if I had never been so deeply hurt, simply because contrast has created a depth and vividness of sensation as my consciousness has awakened through healing.

It would betray my heart if I didn't include in this article about my father that I have come to forgive him. I have forgiven him in order to free myself from the poison of hatred and resentment. I have forgiven him because it does not nourish my soul or give me joy to harbor even justified rage and despising.

This forgiveness has come after the necessary years of expressing all those things. Finally, I became tired of my hatred, and it tired me out. Refreshment came with letting go.

Who is Victor now?

A Father's Support

Katie Doefhoff

"They are breaking stereotypes by showing emotions as men, providing the strength and support a survivor needs to see."

As a clinician working in the fight against sexual violence, I began my career with a skewed expectation of what my work would look like. I assumed that my clients would primarily be female survivors of sexual assault. I bought into the myth that I would not be working with many males, as they are often, but not always, the perpetrators. I feared that as a female I would not be able to connect with any male clients.

Within my first month as a staff therapist, my perceptions were proven very wrong. I began working with childhood survivors of sexual abuse, and parents whose children had been abused. It had never occurred to me that I would be working with entire families, not just the survivors. I doubted whether I could support a parent, let alone a male parent. What I have learned since beginning my work with fathers is that their children are surviving and healing because of their support.

As it stands today, most perpetrators are males, and are typically someone known, or close to, the survivor. The break in trust that occurs during sexual abuse is one of the most traumatic

and vulnerable aspects of the hurt. Repairing the trust and restoring power and control is a central focus of healing work for survivors. When survivors have a model for healthy trust in relationships, they are in an environment that promotes healing and growth. Who better to provide an example of trust than a supportive father?

Once a survivor's trust and body has been violated by a male, a father has the opportunity to provide support and rewrite the survivor's experience of interaction with males. Sexual abuse is a crime about power and control. When sexual trauma occurs, that power and control is taken away from survivors in the most vulnerable way possible. A father can provide a positive example of unconditional positive regard, support, and validation that helps restore the survivor's power and control.

In my time working as a therapist at Zacharias Sexual Abuse Center, I have had the privilege of working with several amazing fathers. Their unwavering support and belief provided by these fathers has made a significant difference in the healing work of their children. Each of the fathers I have worked with has provided dedication and commitment to their child's

healing by receiving support for themselves, and by being involved in the services their children are receiving. When sexual trauma occurs, its effects ripple throughout the family. Survivors who see that their fathers not only believe them, but are also doing all that is in their power to support them, have a solid foundation to build on. They can begin to rebuild their worldview, begin to trust again, and learn that not all men are bad.

I have worked with fathers who have been able to show their vulnerability and emotions, and show their children it is okay to experience those emotions. I have been so amazed at these fathers' abilities to show that strength does not mean showing no emotion. They are modeling for survivors, showing them it is okay to experience a range of emotions, and that being vulnerable does not mean you are not healthy and strong. They are breaking stereotypes by showing emotions as men, providing the strength and support a survivor needs to see.

Every day I have the honor of working with these dedicated men. I am continually amazed by the love and support they provide for their families and for the survivor. They are meeting their children's needs as best as they can, and in doing so, are continually providing a trusting and

healing relationship for the survivor to grow. In working with these fathers, I am glad to have had my expectations and perceptions change, and I hope to continue creating a space that fosters growth and support for fathers who are themselves growing and supporting.



things i learned in march

Mar Curran

1. my father could lift me up and put me on his shoulders

my father can't lift me up and put me on his shoulders

my father can't fit me on his shoulders

i'm grounded

feet stay planted

no going out all weekend

no digging out on your knees amongst the weeds

no second story high second landing

shit

janie says we're all low this winter

my dad tells me to take better care of myself

i take better care myself

better take care myself

2. take care

can't let go of it

that rot seeps in

got floorboards in your childhood home?

i got more literal

the older i get the more childish i am

meaning i cry louder and stand my ground

so you can put me to bed less easily

but you can tell when i'm lying.

i lie down.

3. men smell blood like sharks

some men eat sharks

i'm a vegetarian living in the midwest

i ate 'em all



keep moving just to stay alive
do sharks ever find their passion?
are they just moving 'cause it's a thing to do?
4. i was wanted
not from want
i don't want anything
problem and solution
5. there's a thing i won't say here out loud
and my god, does it make me happy
to not hear you too
6. moratorium on morgues and sing alongs
heard my song on the radio
it told me keep singing
i don't like my voice but
the silence is what swallows you whole



I'm Not Yours

R.K. Riley

I'm not yours
 you can't make it so
 try as you might
 shoving yourself in night after night
 tracing your name in red against my angel skin so white
 over and over
 it still won't work right
 what you want
 what you need
 isn't something you can see
 or touch
 or feel
 or steal
 it lingers deep
 in a quiet, soulful place
 that no violent grasping can erase
 you taste it, I know,
 with each insistent, relentless kiss
 that burns less sweet than it once did
 but it eludes you time and again
 what makes me gentle
 lets me win
 I'm not yours
 you can't make it so
 you'll never taste it, hold it, know
 what I would have given if freely chose
 my love for you



sweet and small
presented grace, acceptance, all
my heart breaks clean and true
you wouldn't,
couldn't,
hear me call
your name amid the raucous screams
demanding pain and penance paid
for every wound and warrant laid
I'm not yours
you can't make it so
tremble no more
let it all go
there is no more
I'm nothing left
an empty, hollow vessel bereft
no longer a prize to possess
just an ashy shadow remains
an echo lost on deaf walls
I'm not here anymore
all goodness gone
I'm not yours
you can't make it so
struggle no more
sleep, my daddy, sleep
let the angels sing you sweet and low
sleep, my daddy, sleep
please,
let me go.
I'm not yours
you can't make it so.

Hush

R.K. Riley

hush now
 don't you cry
 says the father to his child
 his lips against hers tightly pinched
 let me kiss you, open up
 so I can taste the nectar of innocence
 and lust
 hush now
 says the father to his child
 reach your hand but not for mine
 for that place where pleasure and power
 intertwine
 hush now
 says the father to his child
 let me cut you, down, down deep
 so your blood can bloom and flow
 against skin so white, new fallen
 snow
 hush now
 says the father to his child
 spread your legs, spread them wide
 lie still, be quiet
 let me fall into you
 the healing rain of your essence
 slain
 hush now
 says the father to his child
 it's all over now, I promise
 child of mind
 it's over now
 but that was a lie.

Journal Entry


Jeff King

April 1, 2012 is a date that will resonate with me for the rest of my life. My family and I had just returned from a week-long spring break trip to Florida. We were getting ready to get back to our regular work and school schedules the following day. It was at that point that our world was turned upside down.

I was grilling dinner and my wife was going through the typical bathing process with our daughters, Grace (3 ½) & Quinn (1). Suddenly, my wife called down to me to come upstairs. Being in the middle of bringing dinner into the house, I responded that I'd be there in a minute. My wife repeated that I needed to come upstairs and hear what Grace had to say. I headed up and what I was about to hear would shake my world to the core. My wife asked my daughter to tell me what she had just told her. My daughter proceeded to share in great detail an incident in which my father (her grandfather) sexually abused her during the trip we had just returned from. As my daughter finished the story, my mind went into severe "flight" mode, and without thought, the words "no", "no" slipped from my mouth. In response my daughter replied "yes he did!" At that moment, I knew I had to remove myself from the situation, and I stepped away.

My father and I shared a close relationship throughout my adult life, and we were like best friends. He was my mentor, friend and biggest fan. He was nothing short of a hero to me. Additionally, he was the first person I turned to as an adult for advice and direction when confronted with life's many obstacles, challenges and questions. Naturally, my daughter's disclosure was an incredibly tragic moment for me and my family. How could this be? It took me months to get my mind around the possibility of this being reality. As I gathered information and took a step back to think things through, it became clear to me that this in fact was possible and did happen.

The days and months that followed my daughter's disclosure were the hardest. In the days that followed, I confronted my father in an effort to understand what happened and why. In those exchanges I was never able to get what all victims and their families hope for: Understanding. My daughter was not talking much more about the events, and my wife and I were on pins and needles, fearful that we might say or do something that would hurt her worse. We had no confidence in our ability to handle the situation. Fortunately, I had become aware of the



Z Center in Gurnee a year prior, having attended a fundraising event. I reached out for help and the benefits of the relationship that my family and I established with the center from that point on cannot be expressed in words.

I began working with the center as part of a parent support group. Later, I worked one on one with counselors. These experiences allowed me to share my story with others, allowing me to lean into my emotions, feelings and internal wounds. Through these meetings I was able to grieve, vent and express my feelings in a safe environment void of judgment. I learned techniques and approaches for dealing with my feelings and how to work with my daughter to help her in her own healing process. Specifically, I learned that listening and continuing to provide my unconditional love to my daughter were the best support I could lend.

As time has continued to move forward, so too has my own healing process. A big part of my healing has been watching my daughter work through her trauma and become the happy, healthy, energetic little girl that we previously did not see. My father is no longer part of my life, however I've allowed myself to grieve the loss of the relationship that I had with him. This was

critical to confront as avoiding it was causing me to experience deep seeded feelings of anger, which were impacting my relationships with those that mattered most to me, my immediate family. I've found peace with myself and my father.

While it's hard to sum up the top lessons and pieces of advice that I've gained over the last three years, I have three main suggestions for any father going through a similar experience:

1. Take care of yourself first – We're taught from a young age to take into account others before ourselves. I was no different. However, in dealing with trauma events, stress levels are at a peak. If you don't take the time you need to breathe, process and reflect, you will be no good in helping your child or other family members.
2. Be present – As fathers, our minds are often racing thinking about all of the things that we need to do or are responsible for. Work, bills, family care, and other duties can cause us to lose sight of priorities, making them overwhelming especially in a time of trauma. Try to be in the moment and present in everything you do. That little bit of time you take to listen to your child can make all the



difference not only for you, but them as well.

3. Lean into your pain – Sexual abuse causes trauma and pain to the victim, however don't underestimate the severity with which it impacts surrounding family members. Feelings of rage, anger, sadness and guilt were all present for me throughout my own experience. I had to lean into those feelings and feel the hurt before I could work through them towards healing. It's hard work and requires incredible energy, but it is the best path to healing.

In closing, I wouldn't wish this situation on anyone and would have preferred not to have had to experience it. However in retrospect I feel I am a better father today than I was before as I've learned so much more about myself and my daughter through this trauma. I hope that my experience may lend some confidence and support to anyone confronted with the sexual abuse of a child. My hope is that you will find peace in your situation and find the courage to support your child endlessly. While it may not seem possible at time, a return to happiness and brighter days is attainable.

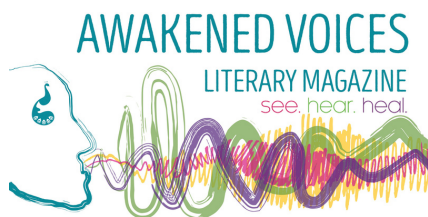


ISSUE 2: FATHERS

AWAKENINGS

Awakened Voices is a literary program of Awakenings, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a physical and virtual artistic space in which to promote the healing of survivors through the arts and engage in an open dialogue that furthers awareness and understanding of sexual violence. Please consider helping us spread our message of healing by sharing and supporting Awakenings.

Awakenings' mission is to provide survivors of sexual violence with a trauma informed, inclusive art-making experience that encourages healing.



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Join our core squad of Awakenings' supporters and join Judith's Circle. By committing to making a monthly donation of any amount, you are directly impacting a survivor's healing process. Your contribution directly supports our artists and Awakenings' ability to provide trauma-informed, professional arts experiences like this for our survivor artists. Join the Circle at www.awakeningsart.org/donate



JUDITH'S CIRCLE