

Images Are What You Make Of Them (Part 1 of 3)

A reprint from the July 1997 edition

I know that there are women who have molested, but most of my writing will focus on men since they are in the clear majority of offenders. In most cases, a simple substitution (she for he, her for his, etc.) will work without altering the point being made. This article will be the first of three installments discussing the topic of images.

Today is Father's Day. I've just finished letters to each of my grown children and now I am sitting here writing this column. Some might say "Get a life!" but to me it seems a perfect time to write.

A topic of some concern in many of the letters I receive is that of images. Some write letters pointing to a poor self-image that led them to abuse. Others indicate problems with fantasy—especially inappropriate fantasy [Part Two]. And still others write of an inability to connect with themselves as men [Part Three].

Every action is the result of answering a legitimate need. The real question must be: Is my choice of action an appropriate one? If every decision I made in my life had been appropriate, I would not be writing this column because I would not have molested young men nor would I have gone to prison. How is it that I could have chosen something so wrong and so damaging?

If you are waiting for a simple answer, forgive me because I cannot think of one. I will, however, share some thoughts that have made sense to me over the years. Perhaps you will find something that fits, perhaps not.

When I close my eyes it is not all that difficult to see images of myself as a young boy. An ugly duckling, I thought. Certainly not as good looking as some of my friends, but maybe they thought the same of themselves.

My athletic skills were passable but not outstanding in any one sport. I wasn't the first chosen or the last but deep down I wanted to be the first one chosen. Once off the playing field the team feeling would disappear and I was left alone, wondering what had happened. Where were the "friends" with whom I had just spent an hour or two linked by the quest for victory?

It is reasonable to state that they were still there. I had just not learned the communication skills needed once ball and bat were put away. This isn't a matter of blaming anyone or sending you a "poor me" message, just an observation I can now make from the distance time gives me. As a young boy, however, I was not capable of such a philosophical approach. It just hurt.

Some of you endured much abuse as children—sexual, physical or emotional. I cannot say my past was as difficult as yours but I don't need to. Things happen to all of us. But perceptions and images are formed to one degree or another that affect how we see both ourselves and others. Some of you might be able to recall a single destructive incident while others would point to a series of things. Neither you nor I, however, *deserved* to have things turn out the way they did, but then our victims certainly didn't either.

I am not a licensed therapist. My personal experience has shown me, however, that I abused my victims for one of two reasons. Either I felt powerless in my adult world and needed to have that power over children, or there ceased to be an age difference in our relationship because I chose to see my victim as an "intimate friend," capable of meeting my needs. At times it was a combination of both. Both images, however, were distorted.

There are some therapists in sex offender programs who see any attempt to look toward self rather than toward the harm done a victim as denial of that harm. They see an inmate's past as not being the issue. In other words, the focus of treatment is all too often restricted to achieving the means of preventing future abuse. I believe that treatment *must* include elements of both, for without looking to the healing of self, one will be locked in all of the psychological cubby holes that brought on abuse in the first place.

If a man cuts his hand to the bone and decides to put a Band-Aid on the cut rather than see a doctor for the stitches necessary for healing, how will that wound ever heal? How will that hand ever function as completely as it had before the cut? The man can avoid sharp objects or avoid careless behavior but he still walks through life unable to work at full potential. In my own mind I cannot understand the thinking that would promote anything less than the optimum of healing the wound *and* avoiding the behavior or situation that might cause such a deep wound.

For too many years, I carried a painful and distorted image of my youth. It was an image that justified my behavioral choices despite the effect those choices had on others. I saw my wife and children not so much as the wonderful gift from God they were (and are) but as a condition that just happened. To tell you the truth, I hate that last sentence because it is in such direct opposition to how I feel now.

"When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, think like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways aside (1Cor.13.11)" It has taken me years to accept the fact that I have the right to take my place among men. I am no longer the boy who stands at the edge of conversation among men and women. I am no longer the boy who hurts, just the man who remembers from time to time with great sadness. With God's grace, healing of that image is taking place. [Part Two will appear in the May edition.]

All things are possible with God!

A Call for Help

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