

Johann Christoph Arnold

ESCAPE

for people who feel trapped in life's hells

ROUTES



Escape Routes

For People Who Feel Trapped
in Life's Hells

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The man who thinks only of his own salvation
is as good as a coal drawn out of the fire.

JAMES JONES, *THE THIN RED LINE*

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To the Reader

Call it life, call it hell: there's not a person I've met who hasn't been lonely, discouraged, depressed, or guilt-ridden at one time or another, if not sick, burned-out, at sea in a relationship, or just plain tired. Sometimes I know this because they have told me about their problems; sometimes I can tell just by looking in their eyes. (I've met people who were trapped in the most crippled frames, but whose eyes radiated love and freedom and joy; and others who, though attractive, looked haunted and weighed down by fear.)

It is possible to reach even the most burdened person – provided he or she wants help – but there are never easy answers. How could there be, when suffering is an unavoidable part of existence, regardless of age, social standing, or income bracket?

You might think a lot has changed since I wrote this book fifteen years ago. War, recession, major cultural shifts, and technological advancement have undoubtedly shaped our

lives, perhaps more than we realize. Still, I was surprised, going over the text for this new edition, how timely it remains. We're still human after all: we still face the same hells, and still need guides – such as the people featured in this book – who can help light the way to freedom and peace of heart. So in the end, apart from scratching a few dated references, I decided to leave the book as is.

Happiness is elusive – Hawthorne observed that chasing it is as frustrating as trying to catch a butterfly – yet there are few of us who do not feel entitled to it. And when we can't find it in this life, we still hope for it in the next. Faced with disappointments and pain, many turn to a religion that promises happiness in the hereafter. Personally, I cannot embrace a faith whose sole focus is the world to come. Like Rabbi Abraham Heschel, I feel that “the cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no cry for eternal life prior to our descending to the grave.” Nor do I believe that fretting about the future is likely to improve a person's chances of salvation. On the contrary, the New Testament makes it plain that our first and only task on earth is to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Isn't that more than sufficient work for a lifetime?

When I told Maureen Burn, a feisty ninety-six-year-old I know, about my plans for this book, she said:

A book on heaven and hell? I just don't know. I'm not sure it's a good use of one's time – to worry about the afterlife, and where you'll go when you die. It's probably unhealthy. There's plenty to do right now, here on earth. You can find joy in the present, real joy, through serving others – by helping them or easing their load. You can also look out just for yourself, though if you do you will always be grumpy. You will never be satisfied. Maybe that's hell. . . . Now, I suppose if I were concerned about the afterlife I would have something more to tell you, but I haven't.

I couldn't agree more with Maureen: there's no need to speculate about heaven and hell. As she herself implies, the dividing line between the two cuts through every heart, and every dimension of human life. That's what got me started on this book – the fact that all of us have known some form of hell in our lives, and that insofar as any of us find freedom, confidence, companionship, and community, we will also know happiness, and perhaps even glimpse heaven.

There was a more specific catalyst as well – the birth of my grandson Dylan. Every parent knows the feeling of relief when a healthy baby has been safely delivered, and my daughter felt the same when her youngest son was born. But she was also stunned to see that his upper back, chest, and left shoulder and arm were covered with

reddish-brown patches. Though the doctors said that Dylan was otherwise healthy and normal, they warned that these spots were likely to turn cancerous. In fact, the chance of melanoma was so high that surgery, skin grafts, and other risky, time-consuming procedures might be necessary. They said nothing about the social stigma of his physical appearance – the stares, the questions, the cruel teasing of peers – but they didn't have to. My daughter and her husband were already thinking of that.

In short, though proud and happy – and comforted by Dylan's infectious laugh – his parents were worried about the future, and emotionally torn. Why our baby?

Coming not long before Christmas, Dylan's arrival and the nagging questions raised by his condition got me thinking of another birth, and the message of the angel who announced it to the shepherds: "Fear not; I bring you tidings of great joy." Which reminds me of something else Maureen said about heaven and hell: "There's little point in fearing the future. Why not spend one's energy loving others instead? As the New Testament says, love casts out fear."

In writing this book, I am aware that my ideas are not new. Some of the most wonderful insights in it are as ancient as the Hebrew prophets. Others are drawn from the lives of real people I have known. (In general, where only a first name appears I have used a pseudonym.) No matter

their origin, all of them offer hope amid the pain and hardship that make up so much of daily life.

The joys of heaven are often overshadowed by clouds or hidden in the most unexpected places. Yet they are always there, ready to be discovered by the seeker who has eyes for them. And once he finds them, even the weariest soul will see that the agonies of searching were not without meaning.

J. C. A.

I

Loneliness

Without the correction, the reflection,
the support of other presences, being
is not merely unsafe; it is a horror.

GEORGE MACDONALD

Three weeks before Christmas, Wolfgang Dircks died while watching television. Neighbors in his Berlin apartment complex hardly noticed the absence of the forty-three-year-old. His rent continued to be paid automatically out of his bank account. Five years later the money ran out, and the landlord entered Dircks's apartment to inquire. He found Dircks's remains still in front of the tube. The TV guide on his lap was open to December 3, the presumed day of his death. Although the television set had burned out, the lights on Dircks's Christmas tree were still twinkling away.

It's a bizarre story, but it shouldn't surprise us. Every year thousands of people are found accidentally days or weeks after their solitary deaths in the affluent cities and suburbs of the Western world. If a person can die in such isolation that his neighbors never notice, how lonely was he when alive?

Forget about the Information Age: we live in the age of loneliness. Decades ago, single-person households were rare. Nowadays, they are increasingly the norm. In a world where marriage rates are dwindling, children are cautiously planned for (or avoided by contraception and abortion), middle age is synonymous with divorce, and old age means a nursing home, people are bound to be very lonely. Imagine: only a quarter of American households consist of a nuclear family. None of this is to say that all was well in previous decades – it emphatically was not. But it is probably safe to say that loneliness has never been as widespread as it is today. How many of your neighbors or colleagues do you really know as friends? How many people in your church are just faces? How often do you watch television because you lack companionship?

Speaking of TV, its ravages on social and family life are old news, yet the average American still watches three hours of TV each day. With that in mind, the usual excuses for not spending time with children, old people, or friends – “I’m

too tired, my life is too busy!” – start to sound laughable. Today there is much hue and cry about violence and sex on television. But isn’t the habit itself of watching hours of television daily, with little or no interaction among the viewers gathered around the screen, just as harmful to our families as whatever content we’re watching?

The rise of the Internet has not, as some hoped, ended our isolation. True, people use social media to interact with others daily, even hourly. Yet when it comes to building relationships between people, these social technologies may actually “reduce social involvement and psychological well-being,” in the words of one scientific study. It’s common sense. The time we spend online cuts down on the time we could devote to a spouse, a child, or a coworker who might be sitting right next to us. Even the best virtual exchange is disembodied and cannot possibly replace face-to-face interaction with flesh-and-blood friends. In short, while our dependence on technology may not be evil in itself, it is at best problematic. Though it conveniently solves superficial desires for communication, it waters the deeper roots of our isolation.

It’s not as if people were content to be lonely: despite the lack of community, many hunger for it – though instead of the real thing, they often settle for the spectacle of

commercialized pop culture. Marketers have long appealed to the powerful and unfulfilled need to “belong,” and play on it constantly in order to sell fake versions of togetherness. How often are such celebrations of “community” mere hype – gatherings planned to create artificially what doesn’t exist naturally in everyday life? What drives so many youth to drug themselves weekend after weekend and flee their parents’ homes in search of a place where everybody is their friend, if only for the duration of a party?

It’s true that in the last few years new kinds of community have arisen that we ought to take note of. One is the rise of support groups, which offer an emotional safety net for working through everything from addictions and other personal problems to events such as the death of a child or parent. Another is the grassroots movement that has emerged to demonstrate against inequality, racial injustice, and environmental destruction. Lost in the mainstream media’s version of these protests is the intense experience of building networks and communities that precede these gatherings. After all, thousands of people standing together to brave rain, tear gas, and truncheons are there for a reason.

A woman who helped organize one such protest told me, “The feeling of solidarity and community among us was

incredible. Even though most of us were strangers, we cared and looked out for one another. Our aim was a nonviolent one, putting into practice the teachings of Gandhi and King. There was a sense of joy and expectancy.” When thousands of people from all walks of life come together to share a vision after years of creative networking, I feel great hope for the future. Still, such hopeful signs are far too rare to solve the epidemic of loneliness that is the special curse of our society today.

The word *epidemic* isn't just metaphorical. In fact, studies suggest loneliness is so hazardous that people who are physically healthy but isolated are twice as likely to die during a given decade as those who live surrounded by others. What is the cure? Surely there must be more to our cravings than can be answered by the simple presence of others around us; who hasn't felt lonely in the middle of a crowd? Indeed, that secret sense of isolation is the worst kind. Kierkegaard, by way of example, writes in his *Journal* that though he was often the life and soul of a party, he was desperate underneath: “Wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me. But I went away . . . and wanted to shoot myself.”

Such desperation is a common fruit of alienation from our true selves. If it seems an exaggeration, recall your own

adolescence. How often were you insecure or lonely, unable to measure up to all those people who seemed to have everything – people who were smart, fit, and popular? And even if you were well-liked, what about your hypocrisy, your deceit, your guilt? Who hasn't known the weight of these things? Multiply self-contempt a million times, and you have the widespread alienation that marks society today. What else is it that stops strangers from acknowledging each other in the street, that breeds gossip, that keeps coworkers aloof? What else is it that destroys the deepest friendships, that divides the most closely knit families and makes the happiest marriages grow cold?

Given our human imperfectability, all of us will disappoint or be disappointed at some juncture; we will hurt others and be hurt; we will be mistrusted, and we will mistrust. But all this does not have to be. We may justify the walls we throw up as safeguards against being used or mistreated, but that does not mean that they really protect us. If anything, they slowly destroy us by keeping us separated from others and encouraging pessimism. They result in the attitude summed up by Jean-Paul Sartre, who said that “hell is other people.”

Few of us would admit sharing this sentiment. Dostoyevsky, a notable exception, half-jokingly said that though he loved humanity, he couldn't stand individuals.

But all too often, our actions unwittingly mirror exactly that view. How many of us *really* love our neighbor, rather than merely coexist? How often do we pass someone with a smile on our face, but a grudge underneath – or at least a quiet prayer that if he stops to talk, he won't go on too long? And doesn't this lack of love contribute to alienation on a broader social level? Entire sectors of society have been made to despise themselves: the jobless and the uneducated, immigrants and people with disabilities, survivors of child abuse and the chronically ill.

There is another kind of alienation, and that is the feeling of disconnectedness from the world we live in. Strangers to creation, we have succeeded in conquering nature to such a degree that we have completely distanced ourselves from it. In fact, our technological know-how has made us so arrogant that we have tampered with earth's biological and ecological order, and are rapidly destroying the very planet we claim as our own.

How far we have fallen from our real destiny! If only we were able to break down a few of the barriers that separate us, we might not resign ourselves so quickly to the idea that they are an unavoidable fact of life but open our hearts to the richness that human experience affords – both in the sheer miracle of our individual existence, and in the joy

of meaningful interaction with others. Further, we might catch a glimpse of what it really means to be a part of this universe – this great community that includes everything from the tiniest clusters of quivering microbes to the unimaginable vastness of spinning galaxies and stars.

Thinking further along these broad lines, one might wonder whether loneliness doesn't have significance even beyond our physical world, affecting not only the human sphere, but the divine as well. Is it possible, for instance, that God created us to fulfill his longing for community – that is, because he was lonely? It may be that as much as we human beings need fellowship with God, he too needs fellowship and desires to be worshiped by us.

As it is, most of us rarely contemplate our place in the cosmos – or even in the human family at large. And the price we pay is not only continued isolation and loneliness. Gradually sliding away from those around us and into our own private worlds, we fall prey to greater and greater self-centeredness, egocentricity, and – in the worst cases – even insanity. As my grandfather, writer Eberhard Arnold, put it in a 1927 essay:

Each of us suffers from separation and isolation. We are sick and dying, diseased to the core. But before we can attain health we must diagnose our illness – and recognize the extent to which we ourselves are the cause of our pain.

Our thoughts are repeatedly bound up within ourselves; fundamentally, we are able to see only our own point of view. We constantly call attention to ourselves, and fight for our own advantage, for our own small existence.

The sickness of the world lies in this isolation of the accentuated ego. An individual who feels no pain but his own cannot identify with the world's suffering. He cares only for himself, fights only for his own existence, and seeks only his own improvement and happiness. In this way, he increases the suffering of others. He is a parasite that endangers the whole. He has severed himself from the reality and unity of life. He has cut himself off from the whole, and must finally perish.

In a culture like ours, where the most outrageous behavior is defended as an individual right, and the "virtue" of self-esteem is celebrated to the point of silliness, my grandfather's words may seem overly harsh. But we do not have to look far for examples that attest to their truth. Egocentricity has always driven those who believe they control the world, from Nebuchadnezzar to Nero to Nixon. The phenomenon is not limited to the powerful, of course, but is visible in anyone, no matter how ordinary, whose arrogance or selfishness cuts him off from those around him. We all know such people; we are probably all like them to a greater or lesser degree.

One person whose thoughts on this topic have especially intrigued me is David Kaczynski, a social worker from Schenectady whose older brother Ted is best known as the Unabomber. In 1995 David and his wife, Linda Patrik, grew suspicious that his brother was the man behind a murderous campaign of letter bombs that had perplexed authorities for most of two decades, and the author of an unsigned manifesto that ran in the *Washington Post* and railed against government, technology, and environmental destruction. He turned Ted in to the FBI.

Though David has no doubt that he was right in putting his brother behind bars (Ted is now serving eight life sentences) he insists that his brother's actions were a fruit of illness, rather than evil itself. That view remains subject to debate. But in exploring it – and in agonizing over what could lead *anyone* to the sort of desperation that drove Ted to lash out against society as he did – David has come to feel that loneliness played an undeniable role:

My brother's life and his message, of course, disintegrated into a tragedy – a tragedy for the people he harmed, and a tragedy internally in that he began to disintegrate mentally. I think the root of his problem was to live in a world where he saw things going terribly, terribly wrong while feeling utterly helpless to do anything about it.

Ted felt that as a society we have lost a sense of the bigger picture, or of even questioning the bigger picture of who we are. . . . We no longer live in a natural landscape, we live in some strange kind of world that is dominated by TV screens and radio signals, and it feels kind of scary, kind of dangerous when you think about it. . . .

It's been a real, lifelong source of despair for Ted that we have lost so much of the intimacy that once marked human society—in terms of community, and in terms of acknowledging and honoring the spirit that lives in every individual person. He believed that we were becoming more and more like the machines that we have created.

Ted started drawing away from my parents in the early '80s, which almost corresponds with the time when he apparently started to plant bombs or mail bombs. The last time I saw him was in 1986. I visited him at his property in Montana. He had already killed by that point; of course I did not know that.

Whether he isolated himself because he was ill, or whether he became ill because he was so isolated, is a chicken-and-egg question. But I believe the one thing that could have healed him would have been to be part of a community. My brother had a tremendous sense of hopelessness, despair. A sense of community might have softened the pain for him and relieved the tremendous desperation he felt about his powerlessness to correct the wrongs of the universe.

2

Against Despair

Hell is yourself, and the only
redemption is when you put yourself
aside to feel deeply for another person.

T E N N E S S E E W I L L I A M S

Just as loneliness arises out of our alienation from self, from people we meet, and from the world around us, so also the process of healing must touch all these areas of our life. Paradoxically, the deed we dread most, unveiling our hidden self with its loneliness and failings to another person we trust, is usually the one that brings people right to the door of freedom. The positive results of sharing are often instantaneous: walls crumble as we realize that we are not alone in our feelings of isolation or guilt. Simply realizing that another person cares about our burdens can release us to see beyond them.

Take the journey of Terri, an army veteran I first got in touch with through an Internet posting. Wasting away from what she believes to be Gulf War Syndrome, Terri wrote that she had contacted Dr. Kevorkian about arranging to “die with dignity.” I e-mailed her to tell her that because of her suffering she clearly had a lot to give to the world. We began to correspond. A piece at a time, Terri told me the story of her life.

Her parents were both alcoholics, and her mother, unable to cope with four young children, left the family when Terri was five. Her childhood was a nightmare of molestation at the hands of her father and older brother:

I was raised in a fundamentalist church. When I went to my pastor and opened up about being molested at home, his response was that he was sick of my family and our problems. I remember sitting at the altar in my church, crying night after night.

As young as I can remember, I have always felt an attraction to those of the same sex. I was always a tomboy – you wouldn’t catch me playing with Barbie dolls. As a teenager I felt guilty about my lesbian orientation, since my church told me I would go to hell. I longed for someone I could talk to who would understand me. But there was no one to trust, so I had to keep these feelings inside. Throughout my teen years I struggled mercilessly over my thoughts and

how bad a person I was to think in such a way. How could God love me with the feelings I had?

She left home when she was fifteen “because I just had to get away.” Then came a string of tragedies. Terri’s close friend took her own life in front of her eyes. Her stepsister, whom Terri admired and who had intervened to protect her from abuse at the hands of her brother, was kidnapped, raped, and murdered. An uncle she loved and respected died. Terri says she “snapped” and tried to kill herself by overdosing on Quaaludes and Tylenol. She spent six months in a psychiatric ward.

Terri married twice, but neither marriage was a happy one. Both her husbands were substance abusers; both were a lot older than she was and physically abused her. In addition, her marriages never fulfilled her need for love, partly because of her own actions:

Besides, even though I was married, in the back of my mind I really wanted to be with a woman. There were times that I went to bars to pick up other women in one-night stands. I was severely depressed and tried to kill myself numerous times.

During Terri’s second marriage, the pattern of physical abuse, bar pick-ups, and depression got worse. Finally she separated from her second husband, and decided to go to

nursing school. But first she joined the military to take advantage of the GI Bill.

Already when I enlisted there had been talk about war in the Persian Gulf, and I knew I would probably end up there. Sure enough, as soon as I finished my training I found myself on the plane for Saudi Arabia.

Our squad leader informed us that we would be joining a convoy into Iraq. We were already out in the desert when they told us we'd be burying bodies. I was shocked. That had not been part of my job description – I was a truck driver, not a grave digger. But orders were orders. Two guys in the refrigerator truck were sent to pick up American casualties, and the other four of us went to collect the Arab dead.

We had to drive along the road from Kuwait to Basra, the “highway of death” as we called it. When we got into Iraq there were bodies everywhere. I have never in my life seen so many dead people at one time. Not even on TV. We were in the midst of the dead. Some were on the ground, others were in their vehicles. They were oozing blood from the nose or mouth. Some were oozing a yellow-green fluid.

We were responsible for burying the dead bodies of Iraqi and Kuwaiti soldiers. But we also came across women – mothers who were holding dead children. It was our task to remove the children, sometimes babies, from their mothers and bury them.

There were soldiers with heavy equipment digging mass graves, and we were instructed to put the bodies in these holes. In the beginning they gave us rubber gloves, but when we ran out of gloves, we used our bare hands. We wore the same body suits for four weeks. Sometimes it was so hot we stripped to our shorts and T-shirts.

In some cases I had to enter burned vehicles to retrieve the bodies. To this day I can still smell the odor of burned flesh. I'll never forget reaching for the head of a charred Iraqi soldier. Upon slight touch it fell off the body, tumbled to the ground, and broke into small particles, almost dust. I was horrified. The men watching laughed.

One day Terri and a fellow soldier took a truck to another unit. In the middle of the desert he stopped the vehicle and assaulted, stripped, and raped her.

I don't know why I didn't shoot him right then. I wanted to. But I had to get back into the truck with him. I couldn't stand there in the middle of the desert and wait for the Iraqis to come and kill me.

When I got back to our base, I told my squad leader what had happened. He did nothing. I wrote up a statement of charges against my attacker, but no one ever did anything about it. In the end I was told that the burden of proof was on me. The soldier could have accused me

of engaging in voluntary sexual behavior, and then I, as a married woman, would be charged with adultery.

When our mission in Iraq was done, we headed back to Saudi Arabia. On March 20, 1991, I returned to the States. The war was over, but my own battle was just about to begin. I developed an infection and felt sick during the two-day trip back to Saudi. I was vomiting and had a rash as well as cramps. I began to break out in strange rashes all over my body and lumps on my legs and arms. When I first heard the term “Gulf War Syndrome” I realized that I wasn’t alone. Other people who had been in Desert Storm were also experiencing rashes, achy joints, and nausea, and they, too, were being told it was “stress.” This was a relief to me, but it also fueled my anger.

Terri believes that the strange symptoms that have completely disabled her are a result of experimental vaccinations and exposure to chemicals and radiation in the Gulf. She was sent from hospital to hospital and underwent various tests. At the same time, she was suffering from nightmares and flashbacks. She made several suicide attempts and ended up back in a psychiatric ward.

It got to the point that I decided I wanted to die with dignity, and I wrote a letter to Dr. Kevorkian. I heard back from his assistants, and they were going to discuss it with

me. But that was just when Kevorkian himself was going to trial, so nothing came of it.

Terri received a general discharge from the military, and has since then become an advocate for Gulf War veterans. But it hasn't been an easy journey, as her health continues to decline. One important step in her search for peace has been recognizing that God loves the wounded in spirit just as much as he loves those who seem to be whole, and acknowledging that he must have a purpose for her life. It has been a difficult step, for it has meant facing the roots of the despair and hurt that once led her to contemplate suicide: her alienation from others, especially those who had hurt her. She says she now realizes that, "in most ways I have shut out the majority of the people in my life."

Terri started by working through her "forgiveness issues" – restoring her relationships with those who had been close to her. She began to reach out to her estranged family. Amazingly enough, she even contacted her father, who had physically and sexually abused her as a child, and wrote him a letter asking his forgiveness for the hatred she had harbored toward him up till then. She says that although he never responded, her act of forgiveness lifted a weight from her own life.

After several months of corresponding with me, and with a woman in my church who was able to help her over

a severe bout of depression, Terri and I met in person. We talked about the children in Iraq, millions of whom still suffer terribly in the aftermath of the war. Terri was horrified and depressed when she learned how much the people she'd been taught to call enemies were hurting. These thoughts wouldn't leave her, and after several months she decided to travel to Iraq on a tour with Veterans for Peace. Travel took a lot of courage on her part: confined to a wheelchair, she's also still afflicted with nightmares and flashbacks. For the first part of the trip (as she told me later) she was miserable.

But the journey proved to be a moment when her healing deepened, changing the course of her life. While visiting victims of US bombing, Terri met a woman whose child was killed in an American air raid. Terri asked for forgiveness for her part in the war. The woman dropped to her knees beside Terri's wheelchair and kept repeating, "Of course you're forgiven . . . of course you are." In Terri's words, "When I asked that woman to forgive me, that was the turning point in my life." A few weeks earlier she had written:

I think back to a couple of years ago and how bad I wanted to die. I saw no good in my life and no worth in my living. Today, I know of God's hope and my worth in this life. I want to live my life to its fullest, while trying to be a light for others who need to see the love of God.

Reading these words, we might think that Terri's story has a happy ending – and in a sense it does. But she knows that her struggle is not over. Like every one of us, she must daily renew her decision to fight her demons and work toward wholeness, both within herself and in relation to others. A disease of the spirit won't simply go away and stay away. But we can choose to turn the battle against it into a positive one – even into a source of strength.

It is often the achingly lonely person who revolts against injustice and seeks new ways. “If change is to come, it will come from the margins,” comments Wendell Berry. “It was the desert, not the temple, that gave us the prophets.” It should be enough to think of all the giants of history who found their calling in solitude – Elijah in the wilderness, Zoroaster among the animals, Muhammed in a cave, and Gandhi, the withdrawn law student. These men did not fit into the society of their day and must have often longed for the comradeship of others. Paradoxically, their solitude energized them as they blazed new trails toward truth and justice. In their lives, loneliness resulted in a burning zeal – a fire that has illumined every generation since.

In sum, as Terri discovered, recovery from the twin scourges of loneliness and despair is not found by seeking to receive affection, but by active loving. When we love, the pangs that come at friendless times do not necessarily

disappear, but their pain no longer torments us. Perhaps that's why there's an awe-inspiring quality to the loneliness of people who were so convinced of a cause that they were willing to die a solitary death. Their way of living and dying shows how little the cure for our affliction depends on what happens to us, since our fulfillment comes from choosing to love. Vincent van Gogh, who knew intimately both the agony of isolation and the joy of creative action, put it best:

Do you know what makes the prison of loneliness and suspicion disappear? Every deep, genuine affection. Being friends, being brothers, loving, that is what opens the prison, with supreme power, by some magic force. Without these one stays dead. But wherever affection is revived, there life revives.

3

Rescuing the Past

Agony, which is not denied to any man,
is given to strange ways in children.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

My childhood in rural South America was marked by poverty and hard work, but also by an invincible sense of happiness and the security of knowing that my parents loved me. My father was strict, yet one of the warmest and funniest men I've known, and aside from that, he seemed capable of everything – taming a wild horse, making furniture, building violins and guitars from scratch, and tending a garden that was the envy of our neighbors. My mother, a teacher, was equally firm, gifted, and warmhearted. But her defining trait was her energy. Even with seven growing children in the house, she found time to knit, make gifts

(usually preserves of berries she picked herself), and visit sick and elderly neighbors.

Though my parents both faced plenty of trials before I was born (after fleeing to England from Nazi Germany, they were classified as enemy aliens and forced to leave that country as well), I myself had a happy childhood. In fact, until I was about twelve, I never imagined that life could be better anywhere.

Adolescence changed everything. To begin with, I had medical and dental problems that kept me from participating in sports and set me apart socially from my healthier peers. Then, when I was fourteen, we moved to the United States, and my life as an outsider really began.

As if the jump from rural South America to New York wasn't enough, there was the language barrier. I knew German and Spanish, but hardly a word of English. Like many immigrant kids, I found that my accent and clumsy grammar were easy targets at school. I lacked confidence, and the prospect of a simple conversation was enough to unnerve me. The only boy in a family of seven, I always felt that I was the odd man out, even though my sisters were admirably kind to me. On top of that, throughout my high school years my father's work often took him away, sometimes for long periods of time. Not surprisingly, I was desperately lonely.

Obviously, there are worse things than such adolescent angst. There are millions of people who grow up without the security of two parents; millions more who endure neglect and abuse. Still, my work as a counselor has taught me that the degree of hardship a person experiences as a child may not correspond with their woundedness as an adult. Further, because its nature and intensity may not always be apparent, the emotional suffering of another should never be trivialized.

It is often claimed that children are resilient, and this is basically true. As Dorothy Day once noted, their capacity to forgive outshines that of most adults:

One thing children certainly accomplish, and that is . . . they go on loving. They may look at the most vicious person, and if he is at that moment good and kind and doing something that they can be interested in or admire, there they are, pouring out their hearts to him.

Nevertheless, children have no immune defense against evil, and even the smallest germ of pain, hatred, or horror may infect their entire development and sense of self for years. Childhood is the first great battleground between heaven and hell, and its victories and losses tend to shape us in ways that later experiences will not. More simply put, a great part of coming to terms with ourselves as adults is coming to terms with who we were as children.

Psychologists and therapists speak of discovering one's "inner child," and in general, this is accepted as an important, positive, worthy pursuit. But what if your inner child is broken, wounded, or smarting? What if you're like Scott, a young man I know whose childhood was hell?

My father, while physically present, was always – and still is – a complete stranger. I realize that this situation is by no means an uncommon one in today's society. Yet that doesn't make its lifelong effects any less real.

My earliest memory is of a physical and verbal fight between my parents. I must have been three or four years old. Because I "mumbled" – something that infuriated my father – I internalized everything I felt. Every time I spoke he'd shoot back at me: "I don't have time to sit here and listen to you mumble, go away and come back when you can talk so I can hear you."

I became reclusive, distant, and introverted, spending hours by myself, fantasizing. At school, even my little brother would defend me by fighting off other kids, because I would just cry and try to run away. I physically recoiled at the slightest hint of confrontation, often curling up with my head in my hands.

Punishment was unpredictable and harsh. For example, at dinner at a neighbor's house I goofed off. Long after I'd forgotten the incident, my father took me on a walk. We

Shucks.

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