

## **REDEMPTION AWAITS – Katie's Story**

I had been hearing about *Mending The Soul* small groups and how they helped people to understand and heal from abuse, but I didn't think I needed to join one myself. I didn't think that what I had experienced even qualified as abuse. However, I knew that I needed healing and freedom in my life, so when my counselor suggested that I join a group, I did. When our group got to chapter 4, "Portrait of an Abusive Family," I confidently announced that I didn't need to read that chapter. I wasn't being arrogant... I really honestly didn't think that the chapter applied to me! Little did I know that this very chapter would forever change my view of my family and ultimately be the catalyst in my journey to WHOLENESS...

### **The perfect childhood? Or maybe not...**

I grew up in what I thought was the perfect Christian home. I was the baby of the family by many years. So I was virtually an only child, as my siblings were out of the house and married while I was still young. My family was very involved in our church. My parents knew and loved God, and spoke of Him freely. My mom introduced me to Christ and spent time teaching me truths from God's Word. She showered me with love and affection. Dad was the jolly type, never complained about anything, and did not like any form of conflict. We all spent a lot of time together, going on camping trips, rides around town, and walks around the block. It appeared that I was receiving everything I needed.

However, I had a huge gaping hole in my heart, even as a young child. I longed for comfort and nurturing. How could I feel neglected and lonely when I was constantly showered with attention? I was in desperate need of validation and to know that I was loved. One time on a family vacation, I asked my mom if she loved me. I must have hurt her feelings for asking, because she snapped back at me, "Of course I love you!" I never asked again.

Even though it appeared that my mom and I had a healthy mother/daughter relationship from the outside, something did not feel quite right. Whenever she would touch me or hug me, I would experience deep down feelings of "ick." I, of course, felt extremely guilty about these feelings, and wouldn't dare tell anyone about them, as that would be an outright betrayal to my loving mother. I mean, moms always know best, right? Mom had to be doing only what was loving and normal and good, right?

### **No Voice**

At age 7, I did try to communicate my discomfort the best that I could, but left the conversation feeling shameful and defeated. I asked my mom to please not touch my bottom... that I didn't like it. Mom responded with, "Adults ALWAYS touch children's bottoms. It's normal!" Shortly after our conversation, on tv, Bill Cosby patted a child's bottom as he got off of Bill's lap. Mom confirmed, "See? Even Bill Cosby does it!" I quickly learned that my "NO" didn't matter, and that I was obviously wrong for feeling the way I did. Over time, Mom became increasingly "too familiar" with my body, and her hands would frequently roam to inappropriate places. In addition to this, I even asked my mom on several occasions to please cover her inappropriately exposed body parts while we were at home. I was extremely uncomfortable with it, and my dad never said anything. Her reply to me was always the same: "You just need to accept me how I am."

So, because I learned early on that my voice did not make any difference, and because Mom “normalized” her behaviors, I kept silent. Little did I know that this silence would slowly begin to kill me. Repeatedly stuffing my healthy thoughts and feelings that something was not right took me to a place of numbness. I got to the point to where I no longer felt my normal, God-given “radars” that something was wrong. I learned to *endure* the inappropriate (and appropriate) physical contact from my mom, day after day, month after month, year after year. I would freeze up, go numb, hold my breath, and just do what I could to get through the moment. I knew that it would eventually be over and I could forget about it until the next time it happened. Maybe the “yuck” feelings would go away the next time she touched me. They never did.

Ironically, even though I was experiencing all of this, I still believed that my parents knew best. Here is an excerpt from a letter I wrote my parents when I was in 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade:

*“Dear Mom and Dad, I love you! I’m glad that we are Christians! I love God! Nobody’s perfect but you are the best Man and Women! I really think that you are really neat people! Thank you for being kind of silly, Daddy! ha ha And Mom for being really nice and taking care of me! I’m glad you are my parents!”*

## Too Close

In addition to being too physical, my mom was growing increasingly close with me emotionally as well. She relied heavily on me for support and comfort, talking to me as if I was an adult. I was an easy-going and loving child, and I wanted to please her, so I carried her burdens. She experienced severe depressions and frequent anxiety attacks. As a little girl, I did not understand what was wrong with Mom and why I couldn’t make her all better. There were no explanations offered by the adults in my life as to what was happening, yet I would be left alone with her in a dark room where she would cry for hours on end. Several times she thought she was dying (anxiety attacks), would tell me “goodbye for good”, and would be hauled off in an ambulance. I would be left there alone to cry for the mom that I thought I would never see again.

## Taken Advantage of

These patterns and scenarios went on for years. This whole “system” set me up to be taken advantage of. As I grew older, I carried myself in such a way that communicated to others: *“Say and do whatever you want to me! I won’t tell you ‘no!’”* As a 6 year old, my older brother, who I looked up to and admired so much, was sexually inappropriate with me. I stuffed this memory and dismissed it as him not knowing any better. My neighbor boy took advantage of me on numerous occasions, and several others benefited from my inability to say “no.” Boys at school would pull my pants down in front of everyone and laugh. Girls in my class came up with nicknames for me, making fun of my body type, which I just accepted as fact. I didn’t know that it was *not okay* for people to use me and make fun of me. When I was 8 years old, I had such paralyzing night terrors that my parents called on the pastors of the church to come and pray over me and our home. Yet no one thought to dig deeper and see what else might be happening in my life that would cause such nightmares because, after all, we were such a nice Christian family.

## A Cry for Help

As early as first grade, I struggled in my friendships at school, and many times was the “odd girl out” in a circle of three friends. I was extremely lonely, as I had no siblings at home, and my mom was my best friend.

She reinforced this by telling me that I was her best friend as well. Yet even in that relationship, I was suffocating. At age 12, I cried out to the only One who truly knew my pain: Jesus. Desperately needing a safe place to go and an appropriate source of comfort, I wrote a series of prayer letters to Him, even though I didn't know if He was completely safe or not. I hid them in the corners of my room, terrified that they would be found by my mom.

Here are some excerpts from a few of the letters written by a troubled 6<sup>th</sup> grader:

*"Dearest Lord, I feel all icky and awful inside. Lord, I don't feel good. Lord, You want me to be happy and free and not sad..."*

*"Lord.... help me to not have bad feelings about life's a drag and why have fun? **You want me to have an abundant life! If it's your will, please show it to me.**" (I will refer to this excerpt at the end of my story).*

*"Lord, I want to not have any cares in the world... Please help me to feel worthwhile and important and to not carry burdens. Please help me to feel bright and joyful and happy. Please help me to accept the things Mom does and says and Dad, too. Help me to rest and sleep well. Help me to have a super, new, and fresh day. I WANT TO BE HAPPY!!! I WILL!"*

I remember always feeling like I was a horrible child, evidenced by the following letters:

*"Lord, I feel like I'm sinful. Jesus, please cleanse me from all the filthy sins I've done...."*

*"Lord, please become real in my life tonight... Please!!! Lord!!! Please forgive me for anything at all I've done. Change my heart, O, God!!!"*

*"Lord Jesus, I want to be free and HAPPY!!!! I really don't have to feel icky, do I? Please forgive me for all of these things and Lord, anything that's on my heart, Lord, whatever it is... Let my life be one of happiness and loving and friends. Help me to not be fearful, Lord God Almighty. Please help my mind think: I WILL BE HAPPY!"*

The only place that I was allowed to have a voice and express my anger was with the Lord, as anger was neither modeled nor tolerated in my home.

*"Lord, I'm sickly mad at Mom. She's being GROSS!!! It makes me SICK!!!! Why does she have to do that? .... Please don't let her do it anymore."*

As you may see, I was extremely confused. I mean, on one hand, God's truths were preached in my home. I knew in my head that God loved me, but in my heart of hearts I believed that He was distant, mean, and that He hated me. When I was about seven years old, I vividly remember asking my mom if God was going to kill me. Her non-committal answer did not bring me any comfort. Many unanswered questions lingered for years: Where was God, and why was I SO MISERABLE? What was really the true source of my pain? Was I lovable? Did anyone care about me? What was this barrier I felt that kept me from feeling normal

and free? Why couldn't I laugh and play and run and dance like all of my peers? Weren't Christians, of ALL people, supposed to have JOY???

## **Barely Surviving**

By age 16, I was a mess, but still did not have the insight to know why. I could barely function, I cried all of the time, and I became suicidal. My mom was my best friend, so we continued in our "close" and "special" relationship. I was entrenched in bulimia, along with excessive exercising, and soon diagnosed with clinical depression, anxiety, and OCD. With no questions asked, I was put on heavy medications to sedate and stabilize me, and sent on my way. I desperately needed help and intervention, but because our family system looked so healthy and normal on the outside, and because I could not verbalize the covert abuse going on, life went on as it always had. My mom was even supplementing me with her own sedating medications on the side, in additions to the ones that were prescribed to me.

Mom used my new depression to connect with me on yet another level, as "I was the ONLY ONE who understood her," she would now say, and that "she couldn't talk to ANYONE else." She would talk to me about her problems, her depression, and her deepest fears. At family events, she would pull me away from the group and isolate me, so that she would have my undivided attention. She'd take me into a bedroom, close the door behind us, and have "heart to heart talks" about whatever was on her mind. Even my family began to normalize these behaviors, and when asked where my mom was, they would say, "Oh, she is just in the room with Katie."

No one was reaching out to help me, and I didn't have the insight to know that I needed help. Adults in my life (mom included) tried to encourage me to wear more fitted clothes... that the huge, baggy ones just weren't attractive. I didn't care. Plus, I didn't have the insight into my situation to communicate to them that I was trying to hide (in my clothes) from my mom. Due to all of the attention and comments that Mom would make to me about my body, I didn't want her or anyone else looking at me. My reason, as I would tell anyone commenting on my clothing, was that "I just want to be comfortable. Besides, I hate for anything to touch my skin."

My secret struggle with bulimia continued, and I was continuing to spiral downhill. I was trying so hard to be the perfect human being, and couldn't understand why I couldn't feel happy. I was terrified of messing up or hurting anyone. I was a people pleaser, completely out of touch with my own needs and emotions. I lived for and served everyone else. On the outside I was fun and happy, but it was just a show, as on the inside I was miserable. To make matters worse, I felt personally responsible for my mother and her every emotion.

I longed to be loved and comforted in my aching soul, but couldn't communicate it. I reached out for help the best that I knew how to my high school youth pastor, whom I deeply trusted. Before long, he too took advantage of my vulnerability and made sexual advances towards me. College was a blur, yet somehow I survived it, even though it too had its fair share of unfortunate encounters with sexual predators. The following years would prove to be ones of broken relationships, self-hatred, low self esteem, disturbing thought patterns, and a fractured view of God.

## An Established Pattern

As a young adult, without even realizing it, I picked up on and practiced my mom's example of how to do relationships. According to her model, you choose one person to be your best friend, and then you look to that person to meet your every need. That person becomes your sole confidant, source of affirmation, comfort, and security. You call, spend time with, give gifts to, and shower that one person with all of your attention. When something is wrong between you and that person, it is the end of the world until it is made right again.

I didn't understand why my mom had a difficult time holding onto female friendships. I was baffled as to why I had a series of broken relationships myself. However, throughout it all, Mom and I remained tight. She knew my every thought, feeling, emotion, struggle, comings, goings, and I knew hers as well. I continued to tolerate her roaming hands. Even though I had had the desire to be a wife and mother since I was a little girl, this dream was now squashed, as I felt like I was only good for what I could give others, and that no man would just love me for who I was. During my twenties, I ended up in the mental health ER because I felt like I could not face one more day in the hell I was living in.

## On the Road to Healing

I started going to counseling off and on for several years in my late 20's. This was very helpful, as it provided temporary relief for me and the safe haven that I so desperately needed. My counselor lovingly taught me how to identify the lies that I believed and to replace those lies with God's truth. However, there was still a missing piece to my puzzle, and we both struggled to get to the root of my pain. Whenever she questioned me about my family, I always answered her very positively and warmly in regards to my upbringing and my relationship with my parents. This was baffling to her, as she would later tell me, because my struggles and my words were not matching up. She suggested that I join a *Mending the Soul* group.

This is where my healing really took off! I went into the group with the expectation that I would address the sexual mistreatment I had encountered from the males in my life. However, God used this experience to ROCK MY WORLD and open my eyes to a whole world of untouched brokenness from my past. The light bulb finally went on! Puzzle pieces began falling into place. Layer by layer, all of the unhealthy familial patterns, behaviors, and abuse were uncovered. I was finally able to make connections between past and present, especially in the area of my own patterns in relationships. God opened my eyes and gave me the courage to see things for what they were in my family system. It was incredibly shocking, painful, and even devastating. I got to know the "Grieving Process" up close and personal, as I went to the depths of grief over my losses. So much of my life had been a lie... a false spirituality... with adults in my life claiming God's truths on one hand and then abusing in the next breath. This was probably the hardest part for me: accepting that things like this DO happen in Christian families who profess to know and follow Christ, and yes... they DO (and did!) happen in Katie's family. However, only now that I was accepting these truths would I truly be able to move towards freedom and find true healing.

## Restoration and Wholeness

In my previous letters to Jesus, I was begging God for an abundant life. He is finally answering those desperate cries offered so many years ago and is now showing me what the abundant life looks like! God IS

good, He IS faithful, and He IS trustworthy. Even though I did not grow up with a healthy source of comfort, I am learning that Jesus is my Comforter. I have experienced many long and lonely nights where I have cried myself to sleep and no one else knew. But, it was okay. No one else needed to know, because Jesus knew, and that was enough.

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all **comfort**, who **comforts** us in all our troubles, so that we can **comfort** those in any trouble with the **comfort** we ourselves have received from God.” (2 Cor. 1:3-4)*

After I take the brunt of my pain to HIM FIRST, then and only then do I sometimes call my friends and let them carry the leftovers of my burdens. This is the complete opposite of what was modeled for me, so I have had to learn this the hard way.

Great healing has occurred since I joined that first *Mending The Soul* group, and I am happy to report that the Lord has not wasted my pain. Like Joseph said, *“(Man) meant evil against me, but **God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result...**” (Gen. 50:20).* The journey has not been easy, by any means, but it sure has been worth it! I'd like to share a couple of outward examples of inward change: First of all, I was able to get off of my heavy meds that I had been on for 17 years. (I carry no signs of depression, OCD, or anxiety any more!) In my particular case, the medication had been numbing the symptoms of my wounded soul, and they were no longer necessary. Just weeks after that, I confronted my mother (with my father present) of the offenses and how they affected me, which is something that I never thought I would have the courage to do. I ended my time with my mom by expressing concern for her and challenging her to seek out her own healing in whatever had caused her own unhealthy patterns and destructive behaviors.

God, in His goodness, has blessed me with two more miracles that I want to mention. Even though I was sexually abused, God has restored within me my ability to enjoy appropriate touch. In fact, touch is one of the primary ways that I feel loved. If that's not a miracle, I don't know what is! The other miracle is that He is continuing to restore my broken view of Who He is. I am learning to run to Him more and more and rest in His safe arms.

I'm still in the process of healing. It will be a lifelong journey. Sometimes I get discouraged that I am not further along, but I cling to the promise that *“He who began a good work in Katie will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6)* I will always be a work in progress, but I am thankful that I am not where I used to be! I am so thankful that we have resources like *Mending the Soul* available to be a catalyst in our journey to healing.

My childhood was not terminal, and yours doesn't need to be either. There is hope! You, too, can walk in a new freedom that you may not even know exists yet... the freedom and hope found only in the healing power of Jesus. The Lord turned to me, heard my cry, and literally pulled me out of the slimy pit I was in, out of the mud and the mire. He has set my feet on a rock and given me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of PRAISE to my God (*Psalm 40:1-3*). He is my Prince of Peace, my ONLY SOURCE OF CONSISTENT COMFORT, my Rock, my Strength. He is JEHOVAH RAPHA, my GOD WHO HEALS me!!!