

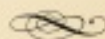
# Voices of Truth

Out of the Darkness, Into the Light

A courageous woman in  
her eighties reveals many personalities born of  
childhood trauma, then comes to terms  
with her life and herself.

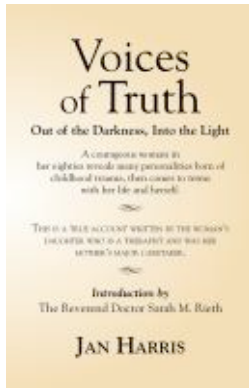


THIS IS A TRUE ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY THE WOMAN'S  
DAUGHTER WHO IS A THERAPIST AND WAS HER  
MOTHER'S MAJOR CARETAKER.



*Introduction by*  
The Reverend Doctor Sarah M. Rieth

JAN HARRIS



*An experienced therapist caring for a disabled parent gradually learns of her mother's dissociative disorder and extensive childhood trauma. Healing occurs between age 83 and 87 as, with loving care and a gifted outside therapist, 10 different parts of her mother's personality emerge, tell their stories and struggle to come to terms with each other and the consequences of childhood trauma. A well researched case study as well as a memoir with profound spiritual meaning.*

# Voices of Truth

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# **VOICES OF TRUTH**

**BY**

**JAN HARRIS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

By

Dr. Sarah M. Rieth

A phone call changed my life for the better by bringing me into two rich and enduring relationships and stretching the bounds of my knowledge, skills, understanding, compassion, and faith.

A colleague knew of my work as a therapist with adult survivors of child sexual abuse and contacted me to see if I might be open to seeing a woman in her 80's who was a childhood sexual abuse survivor. The request also included my traveling to meet the potential client in her home. I responded that I was interested in learning more. My colleague arranged for me to contact the potential client's daughter, Jan.

Jan and I spoke on the telephone and arranged to meet along with her mother Vera's previous therapist to see if it might be a good fit for me to meet with Vera. Barbara, the previous therapist, and Jan both told me of the history of Vera's dissociative episodes and how the diagnosis of multiple personality disorder was made. As well, at that meeting we ascertained the possibility of a fit and arranged for me to make an initial visit to see Vera. That was the beginning of a rich and, at times, very challenging journey of three and a half years, learning, supporting and loving Vera on her healing journey in the last years of her life.

At that time, in 1987, the field of study about multiple personality and other dissociative disorders was emerging from its formerly exotic connotations into a body of work and understanding that was both clinically sound and actually made sense in relation to persons who have survived profound

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trauma early in life. For Jan, Vera's diagnosis of multiple personality was the enzyme that made the muddy water clear. It made sense of how she had known and experienced her mother's complexity and dissociative episodes.

I have come to understand the development of multiple personality disorder and other dissociative disorders within a person as a sign of God's presence amidst great evil such as childhood sexual abuse. The dissociation creates an internal buffer that keeps the person from experiencing the full impact of the abuse when it is occurring and often for many years afterward. It thus serves as a layer (or many layers) of protection until a person is ready and supported enough to begin the courageous journey into uncovering what happened and what have been the consequences of the abuse in her life. I agree with what Jan says in her book, that full integration of the parts is not as likely as is finding ways to make peace with the parts and each to have its place within our lives. This kind of healing is no more exotic or different than the healing journey any other person takes in psychotherapy, coming to terms with the various contradictory aspects of our personalities and living as a whole person with our own multiplicities and complexities.

I was the beneficiary of the hard, loving, and informed work by Barbara and Jan that led to Vera's diagnosis. I have no doubt, and was convinced early on in my weekly meetings with Vera, that she was indeed a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I am convinced—I deeply believe—that Vera had neither psychosis nor dementia. I do believe that her parts became more evident and switching personalities became more obvious as she became ill and experienced more pain in the last years of her life. For Vera, this may have reactivated the pain she felt as an abused child. I concur with Jan that as Vera began to experience people who understood and accepted her deep truth, and the

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fullness of her personhood, she became more willing to risk disclosing what had been coerced into secrecy. It is impossible to know whether or not Vera's capacity to manage and conceal her various parts was in any way diminished during her last years when she began to lose other, physical capacities, or if this possibility along with her experience of safety in being more fully known worked together in a divine alchemy for her healing and wholeness.

Vera's healing journey led her out of darkness into the heat and beauty of light. This journey in the last years of her life authenticates the great truths that our aging does not preclude our being able to grow and change and that a person's pain, extreme conflict, and ambivalence within are indeed a place for divine healing and revelation of one's belovedness. Vera had the courage and enough hope and faith to take on the hardest of life's journey: she contended with evil, and she defeated its destructive influence in her life.

It is life changing for anyone who learns of a loved one's experience of sexual abuse. We have choices. We may choose to believe the person's truth, entering into an unwanted journey of bearing witness to evil and suffering in order to stand with and support our loved one. We may be so uncomfortable and distressed by the person's story that we push away from the story and, sometimes from the person and her supporters. We may also choose actively to resist the person and her story, telling ourselves and the survivor that all of that is in the past, or that it happened a long time ago, or that she must forgive and forget.

I have known many good and well-meaning people who do not believe that the sexual abuse of children is something that really happens. This is an understandable, albeit misinformed and widespread belief which emanated from Freud's time and

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continued until the 1970's,<sup>1</sup> when psychiatrists were confidently taught, and tried to believe...that intrafamilial childhood sexual abuse (incest) did not actually occur, but might be mentioned at times by female patients "who mistook their oedipal longings and fantasies for realities"<sup>2</sup> and that incest was an extreme rarity.<sup>3</sup> This kind of misinformation has supported the view held still by many that if child sexual abuse happens, it doesn't happen in our family or neighborhood or church. It is only since the landmark Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 that mechanisms were developed for reporting, responding to, and treating child abuse. It was in the early 1980's that the American culture began to hear the voices of courageous survivors of childhood abuse and learn of their suffering when the abuse took place and throughout their lives. Most survivors of childhood sexual abuse, including Vera, try to put it in the past and move on with their lives. And yet the scars and impact of the abuse live on within the person. The past is active in the present even when the person is trying to squelch

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Courtois, *Healing the Incest Wound" Adult Survivors in Therapy: (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988)*

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, Jean, "Credibility Problems in Multiple Personality Disorders Patients and Abused Children", in *Childhood Antecedents of Multiple Personality* Richard P. Kluft, ed: (Washington: American Psychiatric Press, 1985). 2 Here Goodwin is citing the work of JM McDonald, *Rape: Offenders and Their Victims.* (Springfield, IL, Charles C. Thomas, 1971)

<sup>3</sup> Courtois, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Courtois, *Ibid.*



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it or may not even be conscious of it. While living a full life as a widely-loved and respected community leader, Vera successfully squelched the past and maintained the coerced secretive loyalty to her abuser until it was safe for her no longer to do so.

Any part that I had in helping Vera from what seemed like disintegration to a deeper level of wholeness, meaning, and integration was only with the help and vigorous, faithful love of Jan who consciously and intentionally took on a calling to understand and to care for her mother in the last years of her life and to help her find her way amidst the various voices and parts of self. I witnessed some of Jan's challenges in caring for and arranging for the care of her mother. She is a remarkable woman of love and courageous faith for not taking an easy road and always striving to be on the high road of truth, love and healing.

Like Jan, each of us has a vocation to hear the voices of truth in our world, and especially the voices of those who have suffered at the hands of evil. It is a vocation that theologian Nelle Morton called "hearing into speech",<sup>4</sup> that is, to care deeply and listen with openhearted loving kindness to enable persons who have been silenced through abuse and degradation to tell their stories and give voice to their suffering. This hearing into speech changes the lives of both conversation partners: the one who is at last speaking her own truth without fear of shaming, rejection or further abuse, and the one who has the privilege to hear and hold the story and the person's suffering within, to lighten the burden, bear witness, and authenticate God's presence and care. And just as the sexual

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<sup>4</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*: (Boston, Beacon Press, 127-128)

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abuse of a child is life- changing for her or him, so it is life- changing for us as we encounter the evil and suffering embedded in the survivor's life and especially so when the person's experience of abuse has been concealed for decades.

Knowing Vera and Jan has been one of the great gifts of my life. They gave me the priceless gift of trust and loving kindness as they allowed me to enter into their lives and home. Their gift has enlarged me as a person and has strengthened me as a pastoral psychotherapist and priest of the church.

## **HARBINGERS**

There were five chaotic years when Vera was gradually changing and I did not understand what was happening to her. I never accepted the diagnosis of her physician (Alzheimer's Disease) or the pronouncements of others about her condition. She had suffered a series of spinal compression fractures due to osteoporosis and then survived a nearly fatal case of cerebral, tubercular meningitis which may have caused some mild cognitive impairment. She later sustained hip and wrist fractures from a fall in her living room. But even prior to the meningitis, there were alarming incidents of totally uncharacteristic behavior for Vera.

The first of these disturbing incidents occurred at a family gathering when a child was being emotionally abused by his parents. The normally mild, soft spoken Vera suddenly began yelling at the parents to stop their obnoxious and hurtful behavior. Just as suddenly, she developed total amnesia, did not know who or where she was and could not care for herself.

The guests departed immediately, leaving me to cope with her condition. I put her to bed as one would a child and she immediately fell into a deep sleep which lasted for the next ten hours. Upon awakening, she was herself again and remembered nothing of what had happened. I had called her doctor who said to let her sleep and he would see her the next day. He pronounced her in good health and found no evidence of any physical cause for the episode.

Each summer, our family had moved from a village home to a summer cottage on a heavily wooded hill far from the noise of traffic and machines. Vera loved its quiet beauty and closeness to nature but one year she didn't want to go, saying she didn't

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like it up there. By this time I had moved from the city to live with her as she did not always seem capable of caring for herself. There were times when she was fine but the changes were unpredictable. With some trepidation, I moved us to the cottage. For a few days, she was angry and spoke to me in a voice I did not recognize, saying: "We are not getting along well, are we?" This was something Vera would never have said. Many months later, I realized that had been my first encounter with Susan. Vera soon returned to her usual self and settled into the glorious summer ambience of the sanctuary she had always loved.

One day she and I went to the hardware store to buy some Murphy's oil soap. I found the item, brought it to the checkout counter where she waited, and asked her if it was the kind she wanted. She pounded her fist on the counter and shouted "No, no, no". After some futile attempts at conversation about the soap while the horrified clerk looked on, I realized that she was not present in the here and now, but was responding to something inside herself. I quickly paid for the soap and we left. Again, she had no memory of the incident.

In a similar episode, she and I were walking on our front sidewalk. A neighbor woman came by pushing a baby carriage which contained her infant. We admired the child and were chatting with the woman when the baby started to cry. My mother shook her fist and yelled at the child to be quiet, something Vera, who loved and understood children of all ages, would never have done. Months later as I looked back on this embarrassing and mystifying event, I realized that she was trying to silence the crying children within her own body.

One communion Sunday in church, Vera, suffering from back pain, was unable to walk to the altar to receive the bread and wine. The minister brought the elements back to us in the

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pew. Vera received the bread into her mouth, and then violently spit it out. The minister moved on quickly and mercifully.

Caring for her was becoming more difficult and exhausting. She complained that the house was not clean enough. She swore frequently and loudly. Minor chips in the paint on the front porch were dirt to her. She became so upset that I had the porch repainted. She was offended by the cat licking his hind quarters during his daily bath. She screamed, swore at the cat and threw a heavy tape recorder from the table beside her. Luckily, she missed the cat. The swearing was totally uncharacteristic for Vera who never said anything stronger than “damn” and that only under the most trying of circumstances. Now she took the name of the Lord in vain in every other sentence. At these times I searched desperately for any sign of Vera by looking into her eyes and calling her name but she was gone, leaving no trace of her former self.

At other times, she was childlike, sweet, loving and eager to please. She said “I love you” to all of us who cared for her. I had been forced to hire aides to stay with her while I pursued my career as a therapist. I was afraid to leave her alone due to her erratic behavior. But I had no help on weekends and holidays and fatigue and anxiety were taking their toll on me. A kind neighbor offered to share my burden. It was a religious mission for her to help others in need. After spending some time with Vera, she said to me: “Do you realize there is more than one person here?” I knew immediately how right she was. She had been married to a man who had DID and recognized the symptoms. I knew about the disorder but had never worked with or known a person who had it. In my mind, it was a rare and exotic condition that would certainly never occur in my family.

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The kind neighbor, Barbara, in addition to her special sensitivity to my mother's personality changes, was an artist. Although not trained as an art therapist, she was capable of working with Vera to identify her various parts. Using markers and large paper, Barbara drew the interior of a house divided into rooms and some part of Vera (we were not sure who it was because Vera did not know about all the parts of herself) identified the members of her inner family.

Barbara drew them as they were described and established, in most cases, their ages and place in the power structure of her inside family. This long, arduous process often took place while I was away at work but on the weekends I was able to observe the art sessions.

Vera's inner family consisted of at least three children, two girls, several boys and six adults. One of the adults was identified only as "the big fat man". None of the children were named. The other adults were referred to by name: Mrs. Clean; Father (described as the most powerful); Susan; Nancy; and Ethel.

Vera, the essence personality, formed an attachment to Barbara and confided to her many of the hurtful events in her adult life, expressing feelings that had previously been dissociated. Thus her therapy had begun. She was 83 years old.

Barbara showed great patience and determination in her work with Vera who signaled the traumatic events she wanted to disclose with telegraphic speech. For example, one day she kept repeating the word "sack", spoken with both angry and hurt feelings, but no further information was forthcoming. In her next session, she expanded it to "dirty old sack". Barbara drew pictures of different kinds of sacks and after a few more sessions, Vera communicated that the sack contained dirty laundry. Finally, we learned that the dirty laundry belonged to a

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woman whom I remembered as the wife of a fellow army officer in Vera's husband's unit. When he came home on leave before going overseas in World War II, my father brought this couple with him and Vera had to entertain them. That in itself was inappropriate, but the most devastating discovery for Vera was finding her husband and the woman in some kind of romantic embrace in the barn. The ultimate humiliation was this woman's expectation that Vera would do her washing and ironing which Vera had done without complaint.

After this, Vera began to criticize one of the aides who was quite aggressive and insensitive I had been concerned about this aide's rude and rough behavior for some time and asked Vera if she would like me to fire her. Vera was enthusiastic about the idea and I did it in her presence, asking her to help me with it. She was not able to help at all but seemed immensely relieved as if she had received some restitution for the maltreatment she had received from her husband and his army wife friend.

Another contributing factor to the doctor's inaccurate diagnosis was that Vera suddenly stopped reading. She had always read extensively, several books a week plus magazines and newspapers. One of the times when I asked what was bothering her, she answered: "Read about it!" Several times after that, I observed her reading out loud the headlines of the newspaper if she could see it from where she sat. She also showed me that she could read, but chose not to, by reading aloud and perfectly several pages of a book. I was puzzled at the time but later realized how much media attention had recently been given to the sexual abuse of children which had probably brought on flashbacks for Vera as she read about it.

In October of 1987, Barbara left the area and The Reverend Doctor Sarah Rieth, a highly qualified therapist as well as an

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Episcopal priest, took over weekly therapy sessions with Vera which continued until Vera's sudden death in 1991. Vera mourned the loss of Barbara and the reduction of her sessions from daily to weekly, necessitated by the distance Sarah had to drive to reach our home, but she soon developed a good working relationship with her new therapist. Between the weekly sessions, I kept notes on daily happenings and consulted by telephone with Sarah as needed. I also wrote weekly letters to Sarah describing Vera's behaviors and verbalizations. This material has been preserved and forms the basis of the story which follows.

I will present Vera's parts in the order they became known to me and then attempt to describe the dynamics of her inner family and the progress she made toward resolution of trauma before her death.

As Vera's daughter, I was not a neutral observer, was profoundly affected emotionally by her struggles and sometimes mired in transference and countertransference issues. Fortunately, I had considerable self awareness from my therapy training and Sarah was a tremendous help to me. She actually had two clients, me and Vera.

At that time, there was very little written about what was then called Multiple Personality Disorder and no guidance on treatment methods so what follows I think of as an adventure in wonderland but at the same time a profoundly enlightening experience.



## **MRS. CLEAN**

### **Keeping Up Appearances**

It is easiest for me to think of Vera's parts as an inner family. There were parent figures and children. During her final years of illness, pain and traumatic memories, most of her parts surfaced on any given day, sometimes in rapid succession. Some of her parts made brief appearances but were not deeply involved in her current massive struggle to express feelings, reveal the secrets, and put her life in perspective.

Mrs. Clean was not the first part to be split off from the core personality but she was the first to be recognized by us as a distinct entity, different from Vera, and to be named by her. Mrs. Clean was a married adult with a stern and angry demeanor. Her purpose in life was to keep the children quiet, to prevent them from telling secrets or expressing feelings and thus to preserve the balance of the inner system which had allowed Vera to function so well throughout her life. It was Mrs. Clean who shook her fist and yelled at the crying baby.

Her manner with the inner children was abusive. She yelled, swore, and called them names: "I see you hiding behind that door. Damn it, you stupid thing. You goddamn idiot. I hate you. I hate the children. Get out of here. Shut up."

She whistled incessantly and tunelessly to drown out their voices. She called them "bugs" and threatened to slap or kill them. The children misbehaved terribly in response to her threats, acting out their fear and rage, but did not reveal any secrets. Mrs. Clean also expressed anger toward Vera whom she accused of being "a doormat" who didn't make anyone behave. If Mrs. Clean saw any part of the inner family threatening to

change it by expressing feelings or telling secrets, it was her job to punish that part.

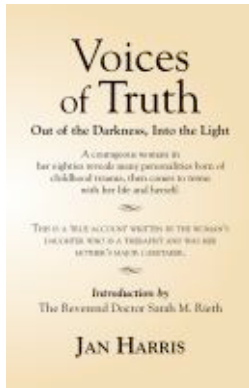
Mrs. Clean was preoccupied with keeping everything free of dirt, neat and in order. It was she who threw a heavy tape recorder at the cat for licking its anal area and complained loudly about the smallest speck of dust or dirt. Everything in the house had to be immaculate and in perfect order. There was to be no immorality, no sinfulness, no shameful behavior in her family. She often said in reference to "the big fat man" whom the children feared: "He's a nice man. You damn fool; I know his mother and father." It seems probable that the parents in Vera's inner family were modeled after the parents in her family of origin as she experienced them in her early childhood.

Her therapist, Sarah, was able to help Mrs. Clean and Vera to become more fully aware of and to communicate with each other. Mrs. Clean got very tired trying to control the children during Vera's sisters' daily visits and became cross and profane, or whistled at them which caused her sisters to leave rather abruptly. Mrs. Clean would then say: "If they don't like it, they can go to hell".

Through the therapy sessions, Mrs. Clean began to let the children speak and even developed some understanding that they had been mistreated: "That's a terrible thing to do to a little child". But she blamed the children for the sexual abuse, yelling at them and calling the little girl "a goddamn idiot." She was persuaded to let Vera handle the children when Mrs. Clean was tired. When that happened, the children behaved very well and the caretakers got a much needed respite. On one occasion, Mrs. Clean had persecuted the children all day. Vera finally told her to go to work teaching school and she left. That night, Vera awoke from a sound sleep and asked: "Did you bring a book home with you?" Mrs. Clean was back.

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Mrs. Clean's feelings were hurt and she was afraid of dying. She said: "I can't go home because nobody wants me. Someone is going to die. I want to be with the baby Jesus." We reassured her that she would not die and was an important part of Vera's inner family. Cleanliness and order were valuable characteristics needed in every family. There were certainly times when the children should not talk about their sexual abuse by "the big fat man" because listeners might be too disturbed and not understand. Mrs. Clean needed a lot of therapeutic work to distinguish those times when she needed to let the children talk from those times when she needed to help them be quiet. She did learn to temper her anger and abusiveness somewhat, and to let Vera take over more often. The children then began to emerge and express themselves more clearly.



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