

The Third Floor Window: A True Story of Secrets, Survival and Hope, describes the author's struggle with the long term effects of childhood sexual abuse and her discovery of God's healing love.

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The Third Floor Window
A True Story of Secrets,
Survival and Hope

Colleen Spiro

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Introduction

Sometimes the greatest blessings come when we least expect them.

I had originally set out to write a book about child sexual abuse. I am an incest survivor. I was sexually abused by my father when I was a little girl. I was violated in a deep and personal way. The sexual abuse stole my self-respect, my childhood and my innocence. It scarred me for life. You may not see my wounds, but they are there. And they will take a lifetime to heal.

I don't think I had allowed myself to face that fact until the recent clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. I was stunned by my strong feelings of anger and grief. I immediately identified with the victims. I felt their pain. And I felt betrayed.

I felt betrayed by the priests who molested the children and by the church leaders who covered it up. And I was shocked that so many people understood so little about sexual abuse and its devastating effects.

I decided that I wanted to inform the world about what it is like to be a survivor of child sexual abuse. And I hoped that sharing my experience would comfort other survivors who would recognize themselves in my story and maybe feel less alone. I wanted to speak out for those who yearn to be heard but cannot speak. I wanted to be their voice.

I expected that it would be painful to write this book. Reliving my past and digging up feelings long buried was going to hurt. And how does one make sense out of something that can't make sense?

Yes, I expected the pain. And I was confident that God would give me the graces to get through the writing and the remembering. But as I wrote, I was surprised to

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discover a new story emerging that I didn't know was there. It was a story of hope.

There was no getting around it as I read and re-read some of my reflections. What had started out as a story of what it is like be a survivor of child sexual abuse, turned into more than that. It turned into a story of living with hope. A story of death leading to new life.

Somewhere along the line, God had given me the grace to choose hope and love over bitterness and despair. The abuse was not the end of the story. While there is much pain in my life, and I need to acknowledge it and be aware of it, there is much to hope for and celebrate as well.

There is life.

Now I feel a strong desire to do more than survive. I want to live. I want to live life to its fullest. I want to tap into that abundant life that Jesus tells us about.

Suddenly I feel relieved of a heavy burden. I feel released from the shame of the abuse. I have told my story. The secret is out. No more hiding. The darkness has lifted. I can stand in the light of truth.

I heard somewhere recently that the best argument against truth is silence. If I want the truth of child sexual abuse to be told, then I cannot remain silent. For the first four decades of my life, I could not tell my story. Now I can't seem to shut up about it.

Instead of playing it safe, I now want to take risks. Instead of withdrawing to protect myself, I want to reach out and touch the world.

These are blessings that I never expected when I set out to write these reflections. It will no doubt take me the rest of my life to figure this all out and live it. But oh, the joy of the journey.

And so I pray that I continue to choose life. I pray that more of my days are spent living than just surviving.

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And I pray that in reading my story, you too, will
come to see the story of hope in your own life.

Hear The Children Cry

A little girl has been raped. She has been held captive for years by her father, the child molester. This little girl just wants to play with dolls and watch cartoons. She just wants the people she loves to love her back. She has no understanding of the word rape or what it means. She has never heard of sex, or intercourse or fondling or incest. She has no vocabulary to describe what her father is doing to her, no vocabulary to describe her feelings. Except maybe fear. She understands what it means to be afraid. She gets scared of the dark sometimes. But this fear does not come from an imagined monster in her closet. This fear is real. There is nothing imaginary about it at all.

This little girl is raped week after week, month after month, year after year. And then she grows up and she is old enough to put into words the feelings that have been tumbling around inside of her all of these years, and she has a smidgen of understanding of what happened to her and why she is unable to trust and to love and why she is needy and insecure and scared all the time, and she is still afraid, but she finally musters up enough courage to say the word incest out loud. Finally, after all these years, she speaks.

And what do people tell her?

Why can't you just forget about it and put it in the past? Why are you whining about something that happened so long ago? Everybody has problems. Get over it.

Get over it?

I would never think of telling a Holocaust survivor to *Get over it*. I would never think of telling an adult woman who had been raped to *Get over it*. I would never

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think of telling someone who was involved in a war to *Get over it*. I would never think of telling anyone who was a victim of a horror too terrible to contemplate to *Get over it*.

Does the horror of child sexual abuse not seem horrible enough?

Sometimes I think that it is a miracle that I can trust at all. Because when someone says something like *Get over it*, I usually withdraw into myself. I close up and pull the covers over my head, walls around my heart and don't let anyone get in close. For a long time.

Recently someone I know told me that, until he heard some personal witnesses speak of their experience of sexual abuse, he had no idea that child sexual abuse was this widespread or this evil. And that it often involved rape! He said no one talked about it. But we did talk about it. I had talked about it with him for years. But he wasn't listening. He didn't hear me.

That is the crux of the problem. No one hears the children crying.

I have a deep need to find meaning in my suffering. I know about redemptive suffering, how God can transform suffering into eternity, into glory, into something good. Seems kind of pie in the sky though unless I can translate it into my everyday life.

I am driven by the feeling that if one person is helped by my suffering, if one victim is helped by my telling my story, then it might all seem worth it. My telling of the story which is so hard to do might be worth the effort and the fear and the shame I feel at times. And then if it helped one person, maybe it will help another and another and another... and why should I stop? I feel better knowing my pain helps ease another's pain. It is like balm for my wounds.

Colleen Spiro

I am haunted by the fact that I know children are being sexually abused right now as I write this and I cannot help them. I cannot stop it. And I am haunted by the fact that other survivors are out there and need someone to listen to them and I feel so helpless. All I can do is tell my story. Which seems like such a small thing.

But maybe it isn't a small thing.

So I tell my story and I keep my eyes on God. That is where I find the true meaning in my suffering, the meaning that beats out all other meaning. In my suffering I find God. Through my suffering I experience the presence of God. The love of God.

And that is what really keeps me going. That is really what makes it all worth while. God calling me to tell my story and God helping me tell my story and God healing me through telling my story. And God healing others through telling my story.

That is why I keep telling it. That is where I find meaning.

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