

Pathways of pain and hope: recovery from abuse

Fragments of Home: Piecing life together after childhood sexual abuse, by Monique Lisbon (Melbourne: Acorn Press \$29.99 incl. CD-ROM)

reviewed by Barry Rogers

READING *FRAGMENTS OF HOME: Piecing life together after childhood sexual abuse* recalled for me a close friend, then in her 30's who had returned to playing piano as part of her interest in worship music. During a time of prayer and praise she'd had a flashback: of being on a Melbourne beach in the 1950's as a four year old, with her parents, and being digitally raped by a stranger. Her parents, on the beach, had not known what had occurred in the shallows; and my friend had repressed the incident for decades. Her music provided a pathway for both recalling the trauma and engaging with healing. Monique Lisbon's intensely personal, and moving account in *Fragments* of her own experience includes heartfelt, powerful music prefacing each chapter, in accurately framing the loss and trauma she experienced when sexually abused by her father from an early age through into adolescence.

Therapy is often a long journey for survivors of sexual abuse; in Ms Lisbon's case this included ongoing supportive counselling; twelve years with her first psychiatrist; nine months with the second; and during her twenties, recurrent hospital stays. Her criticisms of the mental health system are in some ways understandable, given a long and difficult pathway to healing. Counsellors who regularly engage with CATT teams and other mental health support agencies on behalf of their adolescent clients know that hospital-based care can be essential at times; and diagnoses are not always clear without client consent to treatment protocols. And sexual abuse outcomes invariably include mental debility, with some difficulties in diagnosis being part of the pathway for treating adult manifestations of child/ adolescent sexual abuse, for example, the ongoing debate (British Journal of Psychiatry) around diagnosing clients presenting with schizophrenic behaviours on what has emerged first for many: sexual trauma, or schizophrenia symptoms. Yet her focus on trauma therapy is important.

The second psychiatrist (a Shoa survivor) specialized in trauma had picked up on her childhood experiences of being dumped by waves at the beach, which she had linked with the schema of a 'wave' encapsulating "...the shame of my childhood [which I feared] would swallow me up. There was only so much humiliation I could take... and then eventually I would die." And so for her the 'wave' schema became a helpful way of looking

of 'mind-rape' that is much harder to overcome than any physical violence. My father saw my body as so much his own property that he felt no qualms in openly devouring it with his eyes and words in front of his wife." (pp. 92/114). Pastoral care staff and church communities especially will find her personal story beneficial in raising awareness of the impacts of family-based sexual abuse.

Group therapy is often advised for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The accompanying *Group Facilitator Handbook* includes twenty sessions that culminate in a shared meal, review of outcomes and a com-

pletion certificate for participants. It includes a multi DVD resource set with one reprising sixteen songs written and performed by Ms Lisbon, for example, *Little Girl*, identifying the internalized pain of abuse: 'Little girl/ How do you see him now - Behind the lies of love? Tormented soul/ Still wrapped within his arms/ Your heart still bleeds red tears...' The other DVD presentations for group review have Ms Lisbon narrating segments of the *Fragments* book about her journey in facing trauma and experiencing healing, interspersed with her music/lyrics. A set of participant exercises includes activities to release tension. Some, for example 'Wrapping'; 'Lung loosening'; and 'Nostril breathing' may need to be used with care depending on participants' histories of assault, as these exercises involve external action on the body. Having a female and male facilitator in groups is also advisable, to allow for safe, healthy adult role models for participants.

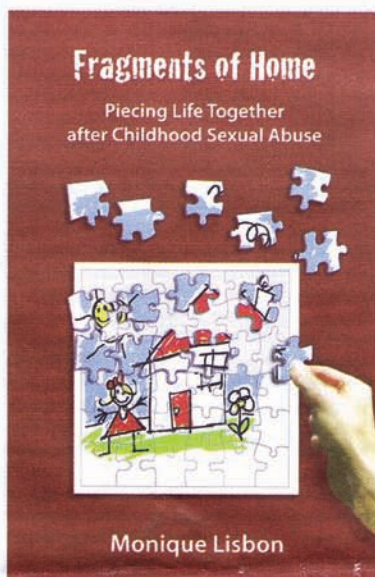
The *Fragments Handbook* acknowledges the importance of training for facilitators and that opening people's experience and promoting awareness of the loss and trauma through sexual abuse are 'whole brain' activities where music, journaling, and artwork are important healing activities. The mention of Dan Siegel's work in the select bibliography is encouraging; and his current focus in therapy on Interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) and mindfulness could be added to training. Child psychiatrist, Bruce Perry's work (for example, *The Boy who was raised as Dog*, and other stories from a Child Psychiatrist's notebook - *What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing*) is also relevant for facilitators supporting abuse survivors who are accessing medical,

work on post-traumatic growth by Professor Stephen Joseph among others, and the strengths-based therapy approaches of Positive Psychology also have a key part to play in later stages of therapy; I have used these with good outcomes for young women, who like Ms Lisbon had very difficult experiences in surviving and thriving as adults. For facilitators' guided reading, Joseph's very readable book, *What doesn't kill us: The new psychology of post-traumatic growth* would be helpful together with grief counselor and trainer Mary Beth Werdel's book with Robert Wisk: *Primer on post-traumatic growth*.

Without detracting at all from the *Fragments* program, suitable group formats for males are also needed, given that one in six males have been abused in childhood or in adolescence. Males will require some distinctive approaches to therapy; but there are few men's and boys' programs currently available. Richard B Gartner's work, for example, *Abused as boys* and online support materials for men such as im6.org (Jim Hopper) are helpful resources here. Trainers and facilitators will also find helpful (if disturbing) program insights in Anders Nyman's and Borje Svensson's book, *Boys: sexual abuse and treatment* (Jessica Kingsley 1997).

Honouring the stories of those who have been abused requires holistic support incorporating group therapy; individual trauma therapy/ counselling; medical and mental health support; and where required, legal and institutional support. The *Fragments* set of resources will prove beneficial for church communities in raising awareness about the ongoing negative impacts of childhood and adolescent sexual abuse, and of how to support and refer for better care of church members. And churches with an established, professional counselling service could also consider using the *Fragments Handbook* format for establishing therapy/support groups for abuse survivors.

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differently at surviving her sexual abuse history and in reframing her life.

Later chapters in *Fragments* provide realistic, and at times raw insights into her variable experiences with church support. There is also a re-emerging awareness of God being present in the midst of suffering and trauma, energized by her music. For Example, in songs such as the powerful, *So many times*: "...My battered God is on his throne/ His wounds are there for all to see/ What does it mean for him to bear/ All the suffering held in me?/ A hundred times, a thousand times/ My soul will call your name a million times/ For all the times and ways..." and she identifies, even in the face of her father's denials of abuse a painful healing spiral of forgiveness as it shifts and changes in this stage of her story: "Doubt and denial are legacies of abuse when it is perpetuated by a trusted caregiver: a form

and other support networks. And Australian therapists Kate Ollier's and Angela Hobday's helpful range of activities (over 100) in *Creative Therapy: Adolescents Overcoming Child Sexual Abuse* (2004) could also assist group work with younger members.

Monique Lisbon's group program is presently being incorporated into a facilitator training unit via Stirling Theological College (Churches of Christ); and so her emphasis on appropriate training is important. Group facilitators could consider undertaking brief training via Victorian CASA/ Centre Against Sexual Assault. CASA is a long-term provider of individual and family support, as well as undertaking research on sexual abuse and assault. Its website includes a good range of accessible, brief resources. The Australian Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health (University of Melbourne) has helpful guidelines for treatment of adults with trauma and post-traumatic stress that can also inform work with survivors of sexual abuse. The more recent