

THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

CLOTHED IN BONDS
OF CHARITY

By Beckie W. Kearl



STEPHEN SCHILDMACH

"Christ was a person of sorrows, acquainted with grief; so were these women recovering from abuse."

I HAVE ALWAYS been haunted by the stories of Holocaust victims: men brutal enough to victimize innocent men, women, and children; the tenacity of the survivors; the sick mind of the attacker. Never did I expect to experience the same repugnance about people within my own culture and my own religion. But it happened as I sat in a classroom at Brigham Young University during Women's Conference.

Women's Conference was the perfect Mother's Day gift, so I called my mother and suggested we go. Life has been hard for my

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mother, and I wanted to do something to cheer her up. About ten years ago, my mother's body seemed to fall apart. She became very ill and to this day has to be very careful about becoming overly fatigued. After reading countless books, seeing many doctors, having MRIs and counseling, my mother has a pretty firm grip on the reasons for her illness. For forty years, she had tucked away gruesome facts about her childhood, and they finally demanded attention: She was the victim of sexual abuse that began at age four. The perpetrator was her own faithful, church-going, bishopric-member, temple-attending father.

When Mother told me her sad childhood story, many things I had questioned my

whole life about her attitudes and reactions now had an explanation. No wonder she was scared of new people and going places alone. No wonder she kept to herself and found it hard to be close to little children; she rarely hugged or kissed us. No wonder she often felt like a victim in the presence of male Church leaders. It all, finally, made sense.

Hearing Mother's story drew me to her. I admired her tenacity, her devotion in raising nine children, and her dogged determination to learn new things and always better herself. It also made me cry for the little girl who thought she was bad and hated dolls. It made me take a closer look at a dead grandfather who had always been kind to me. I wondered what would lead such a man to do such acts to his innocent daughter.

I thought Mother's story was unique, a grotesque exception. Of course these horrors existed in the world, but rarely in Mormondom. Then I read *Secrets* by Blaine Yorgason and Sunny Oaks, a fictional novel based on true life stories of sexually abused LDS women. What was scary was that these women's stories, especially one by a woman who repressed her agony for many years like my mother, were mirrors of my mother's own story. I was in horror. Didn't these priesthood-holding, temple-going, perpetrators realize what they were doing? How could they even obtain a temple recommend with any amount of integrity? My only conclusion came from *Secrets*. When a father of three abused girls, and a member of a bishopric, was finally confronted and eventually put in jail, his reply was simply, "I love my little girls. . . . Those girls deserve some pleasure in their lives, and I've given it to them. We've enjoyed each other in very tender ways." I could spit on those words. My mother suffered for forty years in silence for those "very tender ways." She has nightmares, illnesses, and fears I can't comprehend, all stemming from those "very tender ways." (*Secrets*, Blaine M. Yorgason and Sunny Oaks, Deseret Book, 1992, 180.)

SECRETS made me realize that my mother was not the only victim in Mormondom. But when she and I attended the Women's Conference class on "Sexual Abuse within the LDS Church," taught by a professor of social work at BYU who had written a book twelve years ago to help victims of sexual abuse, I realized the scope of the problem. The book had been banned at the BYU Bookstore and Deseret Book, and she had not been allowed to speak about her book in her classes or on campus. "Now," she explained, with a half smile, "I

have written another book on abuse, and it and my first book are in the Church bookstores, and I have been asked to speak on campus about them and sexual abuse." She told us that if this change could continue for another twelve years, she thought we might get somewhere with addressing the problem of sexual abuse.

During the class, she asked all the women in the room with May, June, July, and August birthdays to stand up. She explained that this represented the ratio of LDS women who have suffered sexual abuse, one in three. She described the composite sexually abused LDS woman from her research of 101 women who feel they have been healed from their abuses. The average woman is thirty-seven, has three children, had fifteen years of schooling, and has a family income of \$3,000 a month. She has a husband who is supportive of her efforts to obtain help for her abuse, attends church four times a month, reads the scriptures and prays on a regular basis. This average LDS woman was abused by her father beginning at age four, and was abused 427 times over a period of four years. She has been through five professional therapists and involved in a support group, attending each of these once a week. This average woman's conscience healing began at age twenty-three and was completely healed by age twenty-eight.

The speaker said she was doing more research on victims of sexual abuse within the Church, and if anyone was willing to participate, she should leave her name with her. Almost all of the women who sat with me, short and tall, old and young, headed toward her with their name slips. It began to slowly sink in that these women were different from me, although it was not apparent by looks. My stomach was sick. I was in shock as I watched them (along with my mother) throng the speaker. All these women had experienced horrors I couldn't even imagine. I listened to their questions and concerns.

I was nauseated. I was angry. I was in pain for these beautiful, normal-looking women. These were women who baked casseroles for new mothers, who sacrificed to come to the conference by finding child care, preparing meals, and arranging rides to piano lessons. These were women who loved a new dress and a night out as much as I did. But they had suffered unspeakable atrocities. How could they function? As they departed the classroom, they congregated in small groups, and I heard bits of their stories.

One woman had come a long distance from a rural town. She was in tears. She looked at the group of women and asked,

"Where can I go, what can I do? I am at my wits' end. I'm on fourteen different medicines including Prozac and Valium. I am suicidal. I'm the oldest of ten Mormon children, my dad was the bishop, I've tried to do everything right, and now nothing helps."

Our speaker knew of pain such as this woman's. Before she ended the class, she gave her phone number and told the women they could call anytime, and she would try to find them help. She also offered her book at no charge.

But more important, these women understood each other's pain. It was a new dimension of sisterhood for me. I walked out of the Harris Fine Arts Center and onto a grassy quad with my mother and several other abused women who were still deep in conversation, exchanging book titles and counselors' names. The woman from the rural town continued to weep. These women rallied around her and told her she was okay. That it was okay to feel so awful. That she wasn't terrible because she was relying on medicine. But they all strongly suggested that she needed counseling, that she could not do it alone.

Then a bright, smiling woman came up close to this weeping woman. "I was on all those medicines too," she said. "I didn't know where to turn until I started to get counseling. I'm off my meds now. I wake up free and alive and thirsting to drink in the wonderfulness of life. I'm reading, I'm losing weight, I'm happy. I'm well." Her face was animated, and then tears came. "Can I hug you?" the smiling woman asked the weeping woman. The crying woman nodded. These two women embraced, both weeping.

The wretchedness of their sobs seemed to be reaching out from the very center of their beings expressing their shared agony, an agony of lost childhood and innocence, of fright, of being smothered by an ugly monster. At the same time, there was strong warmth, compassion, and sisterhood. Christ was a person of sorrows, acquainted with grief; so were these women.

Time stood still. Tears filled my own eyes, and my soul felt as though it was soaring above the newly budded spring trees and the bright red and yellow tulips surrounding us, flying as high as the crisp, snow-capped mountains that towered above us. I thought of the conference's theme, "clothed in bonds of charity." These women were living that theme. I wanted to freeze the love I felt and hand it out to everyone, everywhere.

Where there could have been bitterness, anger, and resentment towards life, here was hope in its finest form. ☐



FROM THE NAMELESS FALLS AT MILE 109

In the thrash of
sprawling over raw
stone and toppled
timbers, grit and
dust streak the meringue
whipped from the near
tributaries
hurled down hill so hard
their gasps choke to
bubbles finer
pressed than sand. Copper
soaking under
the lips of these
currents leaches just
enough to keep
the river milk
green a few thousand
years more. Among
pines, a doe guides
her fawn, stretching for
buds to browse, her
breath at nostrils
twitching needles un-
noted in river's
arguments with
itself over ob-
stacles down hill—
all this scoffing
time—all this,
unframed, unsigned.

—R. S. CARLSON