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Peg McEntee: Broken by abuse, men begin to mend

By peg mcentee

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It took John Walker more than 60 years and the death of his parents to unearth and confront the sexual and psychological abuse he had endured as a child.

Today, the retired physiology professor is a hospice volunteer, tending to the dying so a weary caregiver can take a break for a few hours.

It's like that with many men in Jim Struve's therapy group.

Kirk's poetry, long a chronicle of pain and shame, has lightened with his realization that he's actually a good man. Art has moved to the Northwest, is out of therapy and in a new job he loves.

Each of the men in Struve's therapy group, finding help after years of suffering, has opened their lives to things they never thought they would or could do.

Now 79, John once was a stone man, raising his son and daughter with little emotion save anger.

"I didn't cry from the time I was 8, and my dog died, until I was in my 60s," he told me. "No one could make me cry. Being stoic is just a euphemism for being shut down."

During therapy, however, he realized he had "been an orphan at 4 or 5," not knowing that his perceived attachment to his parents didn't exist. His, he said, was the "mythological perfect family."

"When this first came out for me, I looked for resources but found nothing," John said.

He finally found a provider, Adults Molested as Children (AMAC), and then joined in a weekend retreat led by therapists with MaleSurvivor, a nonprofit therapy and advocacy group.

"Boy, was that an eye-opener," he said. Gradually, his nightmares and suicidal thoughts subsided.

"Now I can laugh and cry. Tears of joy and tears of sadness," John said. "I lead what I consider to be a joyful life



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compared with what it used to be.”

Art, now living in the Pacific Northwest, said his dad was “a violent alcoholic ... I got beat up a lot. Home was not a safe place.”

But a few years ago, Art — who had seen his father only twice in 26 years — went to a family function and saw him again. For hours, his father didn’t appear to even recognize him.

Finally, the old man looked at Art and said, “I know who you are.”

All the work he’d done in therapy allowed Art to “remove any negativity, remove his ability to have an effect on me.”

And, he thought, “you’re the guy who created fears and phobias.”

When I asked Art how he was doing, he paused. “I have to be careful about how I answer that. When you have fears, you react in a certain way. There are patterns of behavior that are normal to you.”

That said, he feels “good about life. I’m taking a big risk, but I’m where I should be. As I feel my security, get into a home and make some friends, I think I’ll be better.”

Kirk and I met in a coffee shop late last week. Six months ago, he wouldn’t speak or give his name when I was meeting with the therapy group. He still sees Struve, but his memories of years of abuse, some self-inflicted, no longer control him. He’s president of a company and holds two bachelor’s degrees, an MBA and a law degree. In this, he’s like many men who try to bury their suffering with high achievement.

When he told me he still had trouble forgiving himself, I asked if that was a function of having assumed the burden of what had been done to him.

“My experience was, the things that happened, things that went wrong, even those beyond my control, were still my fault,” he said. “So somehow it was my responsibility to make everything perfect, even things beyond my control, which obviously is impossible.”

The first step to recovery, Kirk said, is “forgiving not the perpetrator, but forgiving the victim. It sounds counterintuitive, but it’s a very real problem.”

He added: “I became my own perpetrator. I relived my mistakes, I relived that abuse over and over in my head for 30 some-odd years. Jim points out, when an animal makes a mistake, it pays the price once. Human beings pay the price over and over and over and over again.”

Kirk’s marriage of 21 years ended two years ago, but he is still close, and getting closer, to his three sons. He’s in a new relationship as well.

“One of the very difficult things for me, and other survivors, is that it’s hard for us to believe someone could know about our past, our struggles, our recovery, and still love us,” he said.

There was a time, early in therapy, that Kirk began to feel emotion again after spending all those years suppressing them. He actually carried a sheet of paper listing emotions so he could figure out which one he was feeling.

Not long ago, he took a step he’d never dared to: He gave the police the name of his abuser. The statute of limitations on that man’s crimes has tolled, but they were grateful for the information.

“It can feel at times you’re not fixable. Times when you feel, it’s never going to change. You think, ‘I’m broken, I’m unfixable.’”

“That’s completely not true,” Kirk said. “With the right people and some patience, you can get that.”

In one poem, he described his abuse, shame and guilt as a gift.

But he ended with this: “I no longer accept the gift and embrace the child it destroyed.”

Peg McEntee is a news columnist. Reach her at pegmcentee@sltrib.com.

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Joining Hands in Healing

As part of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, the Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center will hold its Joining Hands in Healing, an interactive dialogue with male survivors, their loved ones and audience members on April 20 from 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the Episcopal Church’s Wasatch Retreat & Conference Center, 75 S. 200 East, Salt Lake City. MaleSurvivors and the Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault are co-hosts.

Note to readers • Over time, Peg McEntee has met with male survivors of child sexual abuse who gather at the Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center for group therapy. Most of the men, and their psychotherapist Jim Struve, told their stories openly and often tearfully. Her first three columns appeared last Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and can be found at sltrib.com/mcentee.

Where to get help

Utah Statewide 24-hour Rape Crisis and Information Hotline • 888-421-1100

Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center 24-Hour Crisis Line • 801-467-7273

Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center • 801-467-7282

Utah Providers for Survivors Network • accessed through yahoo.groups.com

Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault • 801-746-0404 and www.ucasa.org

MaleSurvivor • www.malesurvivor.org

1in6 • www.1in6.org

Rape Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) • www.rainn.org

Big Voice Pictures • www.bigvoicepictures.com