

An Unfinished Book

By Karen

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I love to read books where I can't guess the ending and I find myself staying up half the night to finish a book! There's something about the anticipation, the wondering, and the guessing what is going to happen that intrigues me. Although I love books like that, it's only been recently that I've started being comfortable not knowing the ending to this journey I am on. It's only been recently that I've started anticipating the growing and changes in my life. So, since I don't know the ending to this journey I'm on, I can only share this part of my journey already traveled. This journey has only been possible and continues to only be possible through God and His redemptive healing and growth in my life in spite of the actions of others.

On the surface we were a happy Christian family who went to church, didn't fight, succeeded in school, and went out of our way to help others. What no one saw was a family without emotion, a family who taught anger was a sin, a family who was scared of questions, a family who only had surface conversations, a family where children didn't talk, and a family who hid beneath a fake surface image. I learned early not to ask questions because they irritated my family, I learned early to listen to the tone of voices and know when to hide, I learned early that pastors are always right and whatever they want you must give them, and I learned early to raise myself. I was raised hearing suggestive and dirty jokes from my dad, hearing that I was stupid, hearing that what I'd learned was worthless, and hearing that men wouldn't like me. I still hear those things if I am with my family. On the surface we are a happy Christian family, but the reality is that I grew up in an abusive, dysfunctional church-going family.

As I've looked back, I sometimes wonder why no one questioned when I was the first one at school and the last one to leave. I wonder why no one questioned why a little girl would choose to sit in the corners instead of the middle of the room. I wonder why no one questioned why a little girl would beg to not go home when sick at school. I'll never have the answers to those questions; I've just learned that how I was raised literally set me up for further abuse later in life.

In my junior high years we moved and I tried to adjust to a new church and new school. I met a youth pastor who told me things I'd never heard. He told me I was smart, that he liked how I thought in Bible studies, and that I was someone he valued. I became their main babysitter and fell in love with their children. Their children became my kids and when they moved away and then back it caused emotions I didn't know how to deal with so I shut them inside as I had all my life. They once again moved away while I was in college and I struggled to find my place in the church without them.

I graduated from college and that weekend a professor tried to kiss me and I had no idea what to do. I ran in the house and my parents never said a word, so I never said a word. You see, I had grown up hearing that women always “asked for it,” “it was always their fault,” and “men are just like that.” So, I blamed myself and shoved it deep inside.

Three years later, the youth pastor and his wife asked me to visit and asked me to move there. Someone wanted me! This man and his family wanted me. I’d missed the kids so much, I got a job, packed up a truck, and my parents drove me there.

I thought I had a great life! What I didn’t know was that I had a numb life! I had a life based on lies I’d been taught! About two years after moving I started talking to this pastor about my family. I started sharing things no one knew, things no one was supposed to talk about, things I reluctantly shared because I was learning to trust at a deeper level. I finally dared to share what no one knew about my professor and my pastor told me it wasn’t my fault, that the professor had been wrong, and that he would help me find healing. I entered into weekly counseling with him and I fell in love with him as he told me I was beautiful, smart, and someone important in his life and the life of his family. I trusted him more than I trusted my family. I trusted him enough to share that I had never kissed a guy. One day when I was working in the church office he pulled me into his office and said “I’ll teach you to kiss” and started kissing me while telling me how to touch him. My body responded and it felt good, I liked it. I was flattered, excited, and scared at the same time.

That started six years of being told I was special and no one was as important to him mixed with kisses and fondling under my blouse and teaching me how to make him feel good. I was afraid to make him angry or disappointed because in those times his touches hurt and left bruises. He brought me roses, he bought me gifts, he told me he loved me, told me I was special. I was part of their family and they were part of my family.

Woven through all of the times of feeling special and loved, he let me know he had the power to ruin my life and make it so I couldn’t attend church. I knew I had to act as if everything was fine; I kept going to dinner with them; I kept having them over for dinner; I kept working with them in the church. I knew I had to keep doing those things or he would ruin my life. I believed him! I’d grown up being told that pastors are always right, and he told me this was right. I’d grown up knowing that what a pastor wanted I was to give him, and he said he wanted this. He convinced me I wanted his touches, he convinced me I asked for his kisses and touches, he convinced me that I made him act like he did around me. He’d isolated me; he’d made it impossible to tell anyone; he’d randomly show up at my house; he’d used what he knew about my family and betrayed my love and trust.

I don't think I'll ever forget the last times he showed up at my house. He'd pin me on the couch, he'd pin me against the wall and rub against me, and he shoved me down on my bed and said "I can have you anytime, men are stronger, and I can take you anytime I want." He walked out laughing and I again sat in the bathroom throwing up over and over. Somewhere in this time I found myself begging God to move me. Something in me knew I needed to get away but didn't know how to get away. About a year later a job offer came out of the blue and I moved. By the time I arrived in my new state I had taken all the memories and shoved them deep inside never to be remembered, or so I thought.

I spent five years not knowing why pastors scared me, why I was scared to be involved in a church, why I was scared of friendships. The pastor of the church I was attending started touching me on the shoulder and wanting to meet in his office. I refused, but didn't know why. All I knew was that he gave me the creeps. One evening he showed up at my house and I refused to let him in, although I didn't know why. About that same time, my former pastor, my abuser, called and said "I'm sorry, please forgive me." I didn't know what he was talking about, why he was crying, or what to do. I went to visit my relatives and due to family pressure agreed to visit this pastor too. I refused to stay at their house, although couldn't explain why. When I got back from this vacation it was as if my mind exploded. Memories hit me fast and furious and I started remembering everything this pastor had done and said. I started talking to a counselor as the memories hit and she listened and gave me words for his betrayal: clergy sexual abuse.

For two years I remembered and dealt with remembering. He wrote me two letters reminding me I'd asked for it and it was my fault. I still believed him even while I was remembering until I met Jan and she started helping me see the lies my life was built on and the lies this pastor was hoping I would still believe. God put her in my life to give me hope, to encourage me, to challenge me to seek professional help, and to become a dear friend and sister.

God moved me again, and in that move blessed my life with less responsibility in my job and a gifted, safe psychologist. God blessed me with a psychologist who believed me, understands clergy sexual abuse, makes me laugh, and challenges me to keep facing my fears and keep growing as a whole person. These last two+ years of therapy have been the most difficult and best thing I've ever done. There are nights I cry myself to sleep, wake up in the middle of the night crying, and wake up in the morning crying. There are times it hurts so much I'm not sure I can keep growing. But I am learning from my psychologist to look at life now, to look at me now, to work on relationships now in order to take away the power of the past.

There are days when I know that I no longer live a life based on lies and I am happy with this journey. I am learning to stand up for myself, I am learning to like myself, I am

learning to be an adult, I am learning healthy boundaries, I am learning to leave dysfunction of my family and live a healthy life. God has led me to a church where I no longer worship the pastor, but respect him. I am making friends, and have recently chosen true friendships over manipulative family members. I even have two friends who are pastors and I'm not afraid of who they are, I count them as good friends.

I still hate the past; the past still hurts more than I have words for. But God has put a psychologist in my life that I trust and who I believe cares about me, yet with healthy boundaries. God has put friends and new family in my life that care about me, who love me, and who I care about and love very much. Most important of all, I believe, I know Jesus and my Abba love me and care about me. Years ago I would never have dreamed I would say that, but now I can say that with all my heart and mind.

I said I like books where I don't know the ending. I don't know the entire ending of this journey, although sometimes I wish I did. The only thing I know about the ending is what I have started to believe when my pastor says heaven will be so wonderful it will overshadow the memories of evil.

