

## Chapter 7 From Shame to Pride: Healing the Wounds of Sexual Abuse (synopsis)

This chapter gives an overview of the process of healing sexual shame and applies this process in particular to survivors of non-physical sexual abuse—that is, most of us, even those who have never before considered ourselves to be sexual abuse victims. If we want to make society safe for children’s sexual development, our first priority must be to heal the sexual shame of adults. Adults who do not recognize how they were emotionally sexually abused, and the impact that abuse had on their life, will unconsciously transfer their sexual shame to the children they care for, no matter how good their conscious intentions. So if we want to protect children, our most important task is to heal adults.

When a child is traumatized, the shock and inability to resolve the trauma can result in a wide variety of physical and psychological effects, as well as three long-lasting defenses: denial, dissociation, and, in the most severe cases, memory repression. Adult recovery from the symptoms and defenses of sexual abuse happens in three stages: *discovery*, *active healing*, and *integration*.

*Discovery* involves breaking through denial and dissociation to explore the memories of abuse, recover the resulting feelings of anger and emotional pain, and recognize how profoundly the abuse has impacted one’s life. *Active healing* involves claiming and integrating the power of one’s anger, releasing the negative emotions, reclaiming one’s boundaries, learning to emotionally nurture oneself, and—only when one’s emotional strength is fully recovered—forgiving the abuser. Because shame is a social emotion, shame can only be healed in a social context (a support group, for example). We cannot release our shame until we fully experience it in the presence of people who love us unconditionally. Healing may also involve learning for the first time how to be physically and emotionally intimate without surrendering one’s boundaries.

*Integration* involves exercising the power that comes from confronting and mastering one’s past. This is done by establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and by expressing one’s sexuality freely and responsibly. For adults who as children never had the opportunity to experience erotic friendships, the integration stage of healing may involve a long-deferred period of sexual experimentation, erotic self-discovery, and reconnection of one’s sexuality with one’s soul. This reconnection may result in a blossoming of the personality, new fulfillment in relationships, and a level of happiness the person may never have imagined possible.

Because religious organizations have played such a major role in the propagation of sexual shame and abuse, they have a special obligation to provide resources and opportunities for healing, not just for the laity but especially for the clergy and other church leaders. The concept of the clergy as “wounded healers” does not work unless they are actively engaged in healing themselves—otherwise they remain “wounded wounders.” Churches that shirk their responsibility to heal run the risk of losing all moral and spiritual credibility.