

Papa Was a Jehovah's Witness

DONALD D'HAENE

TWO decades ago, I was among the first men to break the barrier of silence and come forward to speak openly about being sexually abused as a child. Since that time, more than a thousand victims have told me their individual stories. From them I have learned that, while each victim's experience is unique, we are united as comrades in a battle by the common experience of abuse by an adult. After more than a decade of sexual abuse, my siblings and I finally came forward and told ministers, police, doctors, and therapists. And we took the perpetrator, our father, to court. How this journey of revelation and recovery unfolded is a story that I have told in a memoir called *Father's Touch* (American Book Publishing), which tells the story of my father's physical and sexual abuse of me and my siblings, as well as my mother, and of my personal struggles with my faith and with my sexual orientation as we fought back

against the abuse.

We were Jehovah's Witnesses, and my father used our religion—its patriarchal structure and ideology—to manipulate and control the rest of the family. My father, Daniel D'Haene, was a man who lusted for power and craved complete control over those around him, especially his family, and he used the theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses to support this craving and to subject his children to years of abuse. Initially he instructed us that if we disobeyed him in any way, we would be disappointing God. Indeed, he assured us that his authority over us was God-given, a claim that *did* seem to be supported by our religion. All four of the children in my family—including my two brothers and one sister—were involved in the abuse over a period of thirteen years. It started with my older brother Ronny, three years my senior, when he was just six years old. This was in 1963, three years after I was born. I was introduced to my father's

D'Haene Family Values: From *Father's Touch*

Papa takes Ronny on a hunting trip. But Papa and Ronny aren't there to hunt. Papa stops on a country dirt road.

Papa whips out his thing.

"Okay, come on already."

"NO!"

"You do as I say, boy!"

Ronny is six feet tall now. No one, including his father, is going to make my brother do something he doesn't want to do. He not only rejects Papa, he threatens him.

"Don't you ever touch me or any of us kids again. If I find out you've touched Donald, Marina, or Erik, you're a dead man."

Nothing more is said. Papa never approaches Ronny again.

We finally tell our brother The Game has continued. Ronny is furious. He also feels guilty.

Ronny became the only one of us able to achieve some independence. He made sure he was rarely home. He wanted to believe Papa had stopped playing The Game with us after his physical threat and so he did. He naïvely thought there was a chance we could be one big happy family. The truth shocked him. Meanwhile, we had assumed that The Game had continued with him as it had with us. There was no reason to discuss it. Why would we want to?

Ronny knows he has to do something. He promised he would. But as he is a baptized

Christian now, he can't physically hurt his father. Instead he reaches out and cries for help. He decides to confide in the Elders of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Mama says, "Don't tell."

Papa says nothing, as though this disclosure is inevitable. God knows he plays The Game. Now God's Elders will find out. His silence at this major crisis is a brilliant and calculated turn.

Me, I am ecstatic. No more secrets and lies.

And Ronny? As the oldest son, the pressure on him is unbearable. He fears physical retribution from his father, not only for himself, but for us, too. But now he also has to deal with another unknown factor—how will the Elders react to the news?

He breaks down, confiding in the men of God, that our father has played with us sexually for years. Their reaction: a mix of detachment, curiosity, and confirmation.

* * *

Within the Witness society, spiritually weak males are suspect. Perhaps for only lacking faith. Where there is no sign of progress, there is genuine concern. During his fourteen years as a Witness, my father's involvement with Jehovah's Witnesses had been sporadic at best. The Elders "know" there is something wrong with him. Now they have the "evidence" on him.

Papa is called into a meeting with three Elders. Mama is angry with Ronny for breaking the silence. Her private humiliation is about to go outside her inner circle. The four of us are told we must testify before the Elders. Ronny is fifteen, I'm twelve, Marina is ten, and Erik is seven.

Papa confesses to the accusations. How could he not? Why would his four children lie? Why would Mother? Besides, his silence upon Erik's disclosure had been an admission of guilt two years earlier. His quiet admission of guilt now is really not that surprising. Perhaps his silence serves a purpose. Wouldn't a self-defensive posture or an antagonistic approach add to an already explosive situation?

My naïveté and innocence are thrown into the public arena for the first time. I feel like a witness for the prosecution. I'm excited that our secret is finally coming out. "My life will change for the better," I tell myself. "God's Elders will hug me and tell me God loves me just like Jesus did to his disciples."

We four children are called to the hall to tell the Elders about Papa's abuse of us. I am nervous but not frightened. After Ronny leaves the room at the end of the Hall, I am called in. I walk into a tiny room with five chairs. I sit before three men of God. I completely believe that these men are God's chosen Elders. I know Mama believes in them. Even Papa believes in them. I cannot, will not, lie to God's helpers.

touch at the age of three.

When Ronny began to put up resistance a few years after the abuse started, our father came up with another recipe. Shifting the metaphor from theology to play, he introduced each of us younger children in turn to what he called "The Game." His new strategy was to start the child playing The Game at an earlier age so that there would be no resistance. "Want to play a new game? All Papas do this with their kids," he explained. Our father cloaked The Game in an air of importance and secrecy, telling us, "It's our little secret. Mother would be jealous, so don't tell her." Since it was a game, there had to be an element of reciprocity and taking turns. "I'll do you and you do me," he would urge. "Isn't this game fun?"

This suggestion was calculated to turn us into co-conspirators, and it was successful on a number of levels. Since secrecy was an intrinsic element of The Game—talking about it would ruin all the fun!—this brought us into our father's conspiracy of silence. What's more, The Game itself was defined as part of God's plan for families—a secret game that every Christian father plays with his children. Why would we question our father's authority when God had made him head of the household? If we loved God, wouldn't we obey his servant's wishes?

In the ensuing years, our father used his fanatical interpretations of church doctrines on male authority, discipline, and obedience to perpetuate his crimes. When he was finally busted and

brought before church authorities and, much later, the criminal justice system, he mustered every excuse to justify his crimes. In letters, tapes, and testimonials, he tried to diminish his culpability by claiming that his wife wouldn't give him his marital due, that his faith in the Jehovah's Witnesses had confused him, that he was an alcoholic or a drug abuser, that we was possessed by demons or had experienced nervous breakdowns. To this day, he has refused to admit that the molestation of his children was calculated and premeditated.

THE WITNESSES AND THE D'HAENES

The Jehovah's Witnesses cite scriptures from the Bible to back all their beliefs, and in turn believe that every word of the Bible is directly inspired by God. While conceding that some parts of the Bible are symbolic, they take other verses quite literally. Thus, for example, when it comes to dealing with errant members, they follow the example of the first-century Christians as reported by the Apostle Paul: A member can be removed from the congregation for sinning and not repenting, and once someone is "disfellowshipped" all must ostracize this person until he or she repents. If a member does associate with the excommunicated, that person is to be ostracized as well. (However, in the late 1970's the Witnesses' Watchtower Society counseled members to have limited contact with an erring member if it concerned family matters.)

A common practice of the Witnesses is to berate someone pub-

"You realize how important it is to tell the truth? It is God's will that you do," one Elder tells me.

"Yes!" I promise.

"Describe the sexual acts with your father. What did you do exactly? How often? How many years?"

As odd as I feel, I am enjoying this attention. Thinking Donald describes The Game perfectly. I've repeated this monologue before. Explaining Erik's disclosure to Mama is a rehearsal for this revelation now. After all, she asked the same kinds of questions but when we told her, she cried. I am on a stage again, but this time God is listening. I know what I say has significance. Why, I do not know, but I know just the same.

No one asks me how I feel or how I felt. No one touches me. The questions are cold, blunt, and matter of fact. I haven't the nerve to ask questions. As always, Thinking Donald has no tears.

"Thank you. We'll call you back later." I am dismissed.

An Elder steps out of the small room. "Next, Marina."

The assembly line of D'Haene children continues into the back room. I sit on a chair in the main hall. To say I have no comprehension of what is happening to me is an understatement.

"Papa is bad and he's going to be punished," Mama tells me.

I'm involved in something very bad. I feel like I'm in a television courtroom drama and the show is long and boring. I can't turn the channel! Erik is sitting next to me waiting his

turn. I kick the legs of the chair in front of me, waiting and waiting.

Finally Mama is called in to answer questions.

"I did not tell anyone because I was embarrassed for the kids, for me, even for Daniel. What would you Elders think of us? I kept everything to myself for so long, I didn't know what to do or how to feel. I know that Daniel influenced me to keep everything quiet."

"It was very wrong of you not to report the situation to us."

"I truly feel horrible and guilty and pray God will forgive me. I am ashamed. Yes, at first I was shocked and angry at Ronny for telling and then I knew it was the best thing to do. But still I was ashamed and did not want many to know."

Within days, another meeting is called. Once again, I'm in the little room with the big men. This time Mama and my brothers and sister are with me. One of the men starts talking: "Your father will be disfellowshipped and your mother publicly reprovved for conduct unbecoming a Christian. When your father comes to meetings, he will sit at the back of the hall. You will sit with him and your mother. Remember, you must still honor your father as head of the household."

I am dizzy. Mother publicly reprovved. Sit at the back of the hall. Honor your Father. I can't hear the rest of what this Elder is mumbling.

I am happy. I understand Papa's excommunication will mean he is no longer a Jehovah's Witness. That makes sense. God's people do not play The Game with their children. They

also don't ask their children to lie about it to their Mama.

I am confused. How shall we "honor" our father? He never talks to us unless we play The Game. Does God expect my siblings and me to honor our father in some things but not in others?

I am sad. Mama's being punished because of my testimony. Why? I don't understand! Mama's hurting and Papa has something to do with it. I have something to do with my mother's pain.

How can I feel sad yet happy at the same time? The big secret is out, but a dark cloud continues to hover over us. I am afraid of these men, but God must have told them to do this.

As we drive home, Mama talks first.

"It's God's will. I made a mistake. I should have told the Elders."

Again Papa says nothing.

We're driving to the big four-bedroom house on top of the hill with the barn, silo, and chicken coop. Nothing's changed. People know and we're still living with Papa as one family. Will the abuse continue? I believe it will. I know it will.

On Sunday, we go to the congregation meeting and the public announcement is made.

"Daniel D'Haene is disfellowshipped for conduct unbecoming a Christian. Jeannette D'Haene is publicly reprovved. Now, let us stand and sing song number."

We're at the center of a sick kind of circus and yet no one looks at us. I don't understand why. I feel nothing. What am I supposed to feel?

lily who fails to show repentance for committing acts contrary to church doctrine. This denunciation can be part of the sinner's penitence, as an ex-member is permitted to continue attending meetings even after he's been disfellowshipped. The congregation is not allowed to acknowledge his presence and goes on denouncing him as if he weren't there. Once he repents, an ex-member can be reinstated within six months.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the world as we now know it is coming to an end. Only a few people will survive Armageddon, namely those who believe in its imminent reality, which is to say the Witnesses themselves. In this respect, the life of a Jehovah's Witness is comparable to that of someone on the Titanic in its final hour. Everyone knows that the ship is going down, but only some people have access to the lifeboats, of which there are too few, while the rest of the passengers face the prospect of certain doom. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe they have been chosen to bear witness to the truth of God's Plan, even as the rest of humanity drowns in ignorance all around them. This belief gives the Witnesses an inevitable if seldom acknowledged air of superiority. For my part, I always felt like an alien sent from another galaxy and dropped on earth. Why me? Why had I been chosen to bear this terrible Knowledge? Was I being tortured now as penance against some future reward? The sense of being a freak became at times overwhelming.

"We are in the world but not of the world," the Witnesses are fond of saying. The everyday world in which others are immersed is something separate, temporary, illusory. Holding such a view, the Witness organization is loath to become involved in civil affairs; problems within the congregation are handled internally by a local body of Elders. Thus when it came to the attention of the Elders of our church that my father was sexually abusing the entire family, there was no talk of contacting the police, reporting our disclosure to the Children's Aid Society, or the like. Instead, the Elders met and held what had many of the trappings of a court trial, allowing each family member to tell his or her story, albeit under conditions that did more to intimidate the children than to encourage their honest testimony.

The church's separation from worldly affairs led to an unspoken taboo against outside interference and also a desire to remain "innocent" of the world. This created problems in how the Witnesses dealt with our particular case. In general, if someone has clearly broken a civil law, the Elders encourage him or her to go to the appropriate law enforcement officials. For example, a murderer had recently been encouraged by the Elders to confess his guilt to the police. But it appears they applied a double standard in our case. While recognizing the seriousness of his incestuous behavior, the Elders did not encourage Daniel D'Haene to turn himself in to the civil authorities.

This murder case—and the fact that our case followed closely on its heels—undoubtedly worked against us. One of the Elders handling our father's case, Elder Surin, was married to a relative of the murder victim. So here were four physically healthy children coming before him to testify against their father. We were seen not as victims but as participants in a series of sinful acts. And we were alive; what right did we have to complain? Such

was the depth of ignorance of sexual abuse within the Witness society of 1973. (Still, Elder Surin wasn't completely naïve. He later told me, "I warned my wife to keep our children away from your father.")

The case was conducted by the Elders as a trial of sorts. Each of the children was questioned individually by the Elders in a highly structured format that didn't really allow us to tell our story. In the end, the Elders' decision was to disfellowship our father—a severe punishment from the standpoint of his immortal soul, but scarcely satisfactory for those of us who still had to live with this man. They also reprovved our mother—who had known about the situation for two years (courtesy of my younger brother)—for not having reported it to the church authorities.

I wished at the time that someone would take us away from my father, but the Elders' judgment seemed final and irrevocable. I was twelve years old and scarcely understood the legalities of the situation. If anything, the whole family now suffered from guilt by association with our excommunicated father. A condescending attitude from certain ministers—God's chosen Elders—fed the feeling that a kind of negative energy was descending upon us from God. One traveling Witness overseer told me that from the moment he heard about our father's crime, he vowed never to touch another glass or cup in the Aylmer Kingdom Hall—because it was tainted by "your father's touch."

For a while at least, father was chastened by the Elders' decision—or at least by the fact that the secret was now out. "We have to stop," he said to us at one point. But even at age twelve I found that statement laughable. "We" have to stop? The implication was that we had been consensual sex partners. His excommunication had him sufficiently worried that he decided to lay low for a while, but I guess we all knew that eventually he'd be back. The abuse soon resumed and continued for another three years, ending only in 1976 when our parents got divorced.

WHY VICTIMS DON'T TELL

Even today, as we watch the Catholic priest scandal unfold and legions of boys come forward to report abuse that occurred years ago, most victims of sexual abuse—especially males—are reluctant to tell what happened to them. Why should this be the case? Since 1982, the year in which I and four other victims charged our abuser in court, scores of men have confided their history of sexual abuse to me. Yet few have gone public with their story.

A more pressing question is why victims don't report the abuse while it's going on. For boys at least, perhaps the most common reason is the culturally imposed shame they experience when the contact is homosexual. While most victims are not gay, the very fact that they were targeted for abuse somehow raises questions about their masculinity. Beyond that, victims of sexual abuse, however innocent of wrongdoing themselves, are often made to feel like "damaged goods" by the larger community. Thus, for example, after hearing about our case an otherwise sympathetic minister recommended that I change my name, "because there is a bad sound to it now. It's connected to the abuser. People will think of him, not of you as his victim."

As the current crisis in the Catholic Church will reveal, a powerful institution can stand as a formidable barrier to the disclosure of unpleasant little secrets such as sexual abuse. In our case, even after the situation had come to the attention of our mother, the family was reluctant to rock the boat by setting in motion the Wit-

Donald D'Haene writes a regular column, "DISHing with Donald," for Scene Magazine in London, Canada. He is also an actor who is currently appearing in Moon over Buffalo.

nesses' top-heavy judicial apparatus. To report our abuse would have involved the Children's Aid Society, which would have removed us from our father's reach—but where would we have ended up then?

Finally, there's no guarantee that a satisfactory outcome will be reached once one goes public. Nine years after our foray into the Jehovah's Witnesses' system of justice, we brought our father to a criminal court and expected to have a chance, at last, to testify publicly and tell our story to a judge. But we never got that chance because the prosecutor arranged a plea bargain with our fathers' lawyers before the case went to trial. So while we did get a conviction and our father was sentenced to two years in a reformatory, it seemed a Pyrrhic victory by the time our ordeal had ended.

One point we had tried to make was that our father was a sick individual who needed to be isolated from society and treated for mental illness. In a final statement, the judge acknowledged that our "childhood must have been a hell on Earth," but he also found that our father "is not now, in my opinion, in need of rehabilitation or reformation and is not now a danger to any member of the public." The judge said he based this on a psychiatric report that "shows clearly that there is no overt sign of mental illness." And so, even as the rest of us were going through a victim recovery process that would entail years of therapy, sexual confusion, and terrified flashbacks, our abuser was deemed perfectly sane and given no therapy. A final irony was that the judge cited the Watchtower Society, as he called it, as a factor in his lenient verdict. While acknowledging "that perhaps the Society should bear some part of the blame for the continuation of these activities after 1973," the net effect was that the church was serving yet again as a shield for our father's sins.



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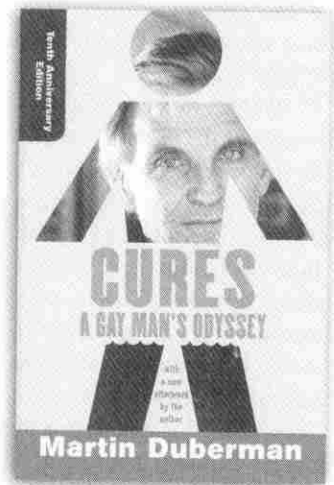
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ESSAY

Sexual liberation? Adults only, please

BILL ANDRIETTE

THE past 25 years have seen recurring panics over the sexual danger posed by men to children and adolescents, with a range of themes—allegations of "Satanic" abuse at daycare centers, horror stories about kiddie porn and child prostitution and Internet stalkers and, most recently, sexual abuse by Catholic clergy. Often these dangers turn out to have been hugely exaggerated, sometimes purely fanciful, like so many "recovered memories" that fall apart when held to standards of evidence, as happened in the daycare scandal. But these earlier panics seem like random cherry bombs compared to the firestorm that has broken out over the Catholic Church.

WHY THE HYSTERIA?

The priest-sex hysteria illustrates and contributes to trends that have been underway in the West for some time. The Catholic Church, its power waning, remains symbolically potent around the globe—one of the founding institutions of Western culture

going back to ancient times. The Church asserts an ontological status and custodianship over souls, and its theology was once obligatory and universal. The Protestant Reformation broke this monopoly and gave rise to a secular society in which the Church was forced to contend with competing power centers and ideologies. In the pedophile priest scandal, secular forces from outside and dissenting ones seeking liberalization from within are now targeting the Church with the most potent demonology it has faced since the Reformation. To be sure, the evidence revealed in court thus far has not lived up to the media's lurid promises. But given the peculiarly intense moral and litigious climate of the U.S., the spark of scandal could ignite into something of historic significance for the Church and for Western society.

The priest-sex panic is comparable to the hysteria over alleged black male rapists in the South following the Civil War. Smarting from defeat, Southern whites demonized black men as a sexual danger to white women. The reign of lynching helped break the back of black communities and served to emasculate black men at