

Children of Domestic Violence: A black and blue fairytale

Wednesday, July 3, 2013 - A Heart Without Compromise; Advocating for Children by Jerome Elam

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Jerome Elam



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WASHINGTON, July 3, 2013 — I awoke at midnight from the nightmare that had repeated itself so many times and stolen away so many of my nights. The storyline for the dream was one that had been etched in my mind in vivid detail since I witnessed an unspeakable act as a four-year old boy. In the dream I can still hear my mother's voice, pleading, "Not in front of the baby," but the sound that followed was the unmistakable contact between my father's hand and my mother's cheek. It was a sound that left wounds deeper than the bruises that had begun to constantly appear on my mother's body and would affect me my entire life.

The unbridled rage of my father knew no boundaries and passed like a summer storm through the lives of my mother and me, weaving a path of destruction. The tumultuous end to my parents' marriage was a prediction that required little insight or experience in the realm of relationships. However, the eruption of the physical violence that ensued at the inception of their imminent downfall became a tragedy that defied the breadth of anyone's imagination.

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The story of my parents' relationship begins when at the age of eighteen my mother escaped an abusive home to enroll in college. She hoped to fulfill her dream of being a nurse and to put some distance between her and her parents, but fate would soon intervene to change all that. During her freshman year she fell in love with my father who was twenty-two. She was swept off her feet by his romantic and worldly personality.

Their relationship began to change when my mother discovered she was pregnant and the weight of becoming a parent began to dawn on my father. It was the 1960's and the system of morals and values that existed within my parents' families was significantly influenced by the bygone decade of the 1950's. This meant that marriage between my parents was mandatory and that putting me up for adoption was not an option.

To give you a picture of their relationship, my parents' personalities existed in such dichotomy that the two could not have sat next to each other on a cross-country bus ride. If they had not fallen so deeply in love,

they could not have lasted ten minutes in a room together with such explosive personalities and such hot tempers. It became clear to me much later in life as to why my mother had fallen so hard for someone who was obviously her complete opposite.

My mother was beautiful and was constantly being courted by men since she was allowed to date in high school. The "hook" for my mother was that she had found someone as abusive and cruel as her own father, and her choice would only reflect a pattern of bad decisions based on the influences of her childhood. The two quickly married and my father joined the Army in order to help pay for the expense of my impending arrival and to support his new family. He was quickly deployed overseas, which in the end proved beneficial for my parents' marriage. The three years my father was gone kept my parents' marriage intact but only delayed the impending doom that was destined to happen.

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My father had made it a point to send money home to my mother on a regular basis with the understanding it was to provide for my care. A portion of the money was also to be placed in a savings account to pay the bills when my father returned and looked for a job. When he returned the money was gone, spent on my mother's various habits, one of which was her consumption of alcohol. After several months my father began to change as he became trapped in a relentless job search that proved unsuccessful.

The arguments between my mother and father became more frequent and they began a rapid descent into psychological and physical abuse.. It was as if all the love they had for each other had now been transformed into hate, and many times it was as if the argument was having them instead of them having the argument. During my mother's childhood, drinking and violence were a way of life. When my father first began hitting her she did not flinch. When the fights began to escalate and the beatings became more severe my mother sunk deeper into a bottle as her life spiraled out of control.

My father's violent behavior seemed so unpredictable at first, a random explosion of anger that would fill the room with a fear that would suck all the oxygen from a room as I struggled to breathe. The only recourse I had was to find a hiding place where I would cover my ears and try to block out the chaos around me. My first enclave of solitude was a closet where I would hide behind winter coats and my mother's shoes. My father soon discovered where I lay hidden as the sound of my four-year old heart breaking as I cried led him to me.

As any survivor of Domestic Violence will tell you there soon evolves a sixth sense that tells you when an episode of violence is fast approaching, although many choose to ignore it. I soon acquired this sense and after my hiding places began to dwindle, I escaped to nearby woods where I found a stolen peace that I knew would not last. I knew when I returned that the fight would be over and both my mother and father would be possessed by the amnesia that often grips the minds of the abused and the abuser, and I would be punished for making them worry. This is part of the madness that surrounds Domestic Violence.

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People often look at victims of domestic violence as if they have a choice in leaving or staying. For many years I blamed my mother for staying in an abusive relationship that caused me so much pain and heartache. As an adult, I realized that anger and violence were a lifestyle that had corrupted my mother at

her very core, and her lack of self-esteem and abusive childhood had trapped her in this way of life that she could not escape.

Anger is the drug that fuels violence, and when alcohol is added, the effects can increase ten- fold. As I became a target for my father's anger I too began to lock away these violent periods of my life as my memory of them remained hidden until my later years. The downward spiral of my parents' relationship came to a screeching halt when a handful of my mother's relatives who did not embrace the culture of violence that permeated our family collected my mother and me and took us to live with them.

My mother and I eventually ended up living with her parents where I was subjected to daily beatings from my grandparents that often drew blood. They would often make me choose the implement that would be used to discipline me. As a form of rebellion I would often select the most painful to show them that although they may leave scars on my body, they would never break my spirit.

The challenges in my life would only grow exponentially from this point as my mother would marry for a second time, and I would become a victim of child abuse at the hands of her second husband. My escape from all this came at the age of seventeen when I joined the United States Marine Corps and never looked back. It was at that point that I dedicated my life to defending those who could not defend themselves.

My mother would go on to divorce and marry a third time. When my mother divorced my father he was banned from my life until I sought him out at the age of 26. On his fourth marriage at the time, I tracked him down. I had the hope of any survivor of child abuse that I would find someone who would just hold me, tell me they loved me and say they were sorry for what happened to me. My dreams would come crashing down however as this fantasy was eclipsed by disappointment and heartbreak as he turned out to be the opposite of what I expected.

I finally found the healing I so desperately needed in my life at the age of 44, when my children were born. I had spent over twenty years working with a gifted therapist to find the healing in my own life that I needed to prepare myself for being a father. No one can ever put into words the transformation that your heart experiences when you become a parent. For me, it was as if I had only been using a small percentage of my heart, and from the day they were born every inch of "real estate" that comprised my heart was invested in loving my children. As I look through their eyes I have seen the unimaginable burden I was made to bear as a child and the undeniable responsibility that I have as a parent, and nothing will ever distract me from my duty as a father.

The United States Department of Justice reports that Domestic Violence is one of the most severely underreported crimes in this country. The National Institute of Justice and the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention tell us, "Only approximately one-quarter of all physical assaults, one-fifth of all rapes, and one-half of all stalking's perpetuated against females by intimate partners are reported to the police," and that, "One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centers for Injury Prevention and Control report in their findings, "An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year." The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports, "Almost one-third of female homicide victims that are reported in police records are killed by an intimate partner." The costs of Domestic Violence are

staggering and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centers for Injury Prevention and Control studies have revealed, "The cost of intimate partner violence exceeds \$5.8 billion each year, \$4.1 billion of which is for direct medical and mental health services."

They also have found that, "Victims of intimate partner violence lost almost 8 million days of paid work because of the violence perpetrated against them by current or former husbands, boyfriends and dates. This loss is the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs and almost 5.6 million days of household productivity as a result of violence."

The effect on children is just as horrendous. [Break the Cycle](#) states that, "Witnessing violence between one's parents or caretakers is the strongest risk factor of transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next." J.L. Edelson reports in the publication, "The Overlap Between Child Maltreatment and Woman Battering," that, "30% to 60% of perpetrators of intimate partner violence also abuse children in the household."

The change that will bring an end to Domestic Violence in our lifetime begins with each of us because it is what we teach our children about violence that will determine how the next generation treats the scourge of Domestic Violence. We cannot allow their world to be colored by the haze that teaches an indifference to violence, and we have to protect them by removing them from environments that breed this tragedy. We must also protect victims and give them the shelter and support they need to escape Domestic Violence. Further, we have to strengthen and aggressively enforce laws that protect and defend all victims.

As for me, my nightmares have all but stopped, but I will never forget the sound that echoes in my memory of a four-year old's first experience with Domestic Violence. If you are a victim of Domestic Violence there is help available by calling the The National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233, The National Teen Dating Abuse Hotline at 1-866-331-9474 or The National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673. Please get help now, if not for your own sake then for the sake of your children. The endless fight to heal my broken heart as a result of the Domestic Violence I experienced as a child has consumed the majority of my adult life. My experience has driven me to protect those who cannot protect themselves and to work as hard as I can to be a voice for the voiceless. Please join me in my battle to prevent even one more child from being sentenced to a life of reliving the pain as a child of Domestic Violence.

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Raised
in
the
south,
I joined
the



Photo: D Sharon Pruitt/Wikimedia

United States Marine Corps at the age of seventeen

and spent the next eight years seeing the world. After my enlistment was finished I attended college and graduated to work in the Biotechnology sector.

I have struggled against many things in my life including childhood sexual abuse and somehow I found a way to survive. Writing is my passion and it keeps me in touch with the wealth everyone holds deep inside their hearts and minds.

I am married with two beautiful children, and they have made my life complete. I have written all my life and enjoy creating lyrics as well as novels. I enjoy spending time with my children and teaching them about music, art, nature and the value of family.

[Contact Jerome Elam](#)



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