

## James Dold

During my preteen and early teenage years, my two sisters, two brothers, two cousins, as well as my nephew, niece, and uncle all lived in a 4-bedroom house with my parents. Because there were so many children in the household, my mother became a full-time caretaker; hence, my father was the only one really contributing substantively to the household income. My parents received assistance from the state for having guardianship and custody over their grandchildren and my two cousins, but it was barely enough to get by.

Money was tight with that many kids to feed. To ensure we had Christmas presents every year, my parents would go to the local pawnshop and use their wedding bands as collateral for a small loan. It was tough, but they made it work. My parents' grit and unconditional love for all of the children in their care would eventually influence my worldview, and incite my passion of caring for others. However, what later became a guiding moral compass for me, at the time sowed anger, resentment, and a deep searching for love and belonging that I felt I was not getting at home. As a young teen, the difficulties of living in a low socio-economic environment, in which my parents were unable to meet my emotional needs because of work and having so many other children to care for, exacerbated the way I felt about myself; this in turn, negatively impacted how I felt about my parents.

For me, it did not matter that my parents were working as hard as they could to provide for all of the children in their care. They were trying to keep the family together and the children out of the child welfare system. I was left to my own devices in middle school, I felt empty and yearned for adult attention and affection, which made me vulnerable to exploitation.

My feelings of emptiness and anger were compounded by another complication—untreated trauma from childhood sexual abuse. When I was around five or six years-old, another child in the house sexually molested me; this sowed powerful feelings of guilt and shame in me. The child in question was not much older than I was, and in retrospect, had probably been abused as well. But for many years, guilt and shame boiled up inside of me, until one day, when I was about twelve-years-old, I finally built up the courage to tell my mother what had happened.

This made matters worse. After I disclosed the experience, my mother never made mention of it again. It made me feel like none of it mattered—what had happened, or the courage it took for me to finally tell her. This made me angry and resentful. Looking back now, it was a very difficult situation for my mother, or any parent for that matter, to be in. Both children were under the age of ten when the abuse occurred. But a twelve-year-old does not see morality in shades of gray; things are black and white, and the perceived response or lack thereof pushed me away from the attention and affection my parents did show.

My history of abuse, low socio-economic environment, lack of parental guidance and engagement, and the changes of puberty made me particularly vulnerable to exploitation. As I came into adolescence with a mixture of emotions and still struggling with anger and resentment toward my parents, I wanted to meet new people. A friend of mine introduced me to a nice, church-going lady in our neighborhood who took many of the kids on our block to church every Wednesday evening. This was my first real exposure to Christianity. I did not like church very

much, but I loved attending the youth group—mostly because of the girls. I went to different events with the youth group for about a year or so until I ended up meeting new friends who were a part of the Boy Scout troop associated with the church. I decided to join the Boy Scouts and I loved that too. I quickly progressed through the ranks, making my way up to Star Scout and becoming the leader of my troop. Most of the individuals associated with the troop were great people.

But sometimes wolves wear sheep's clothing. In my case, the wolf came dressed as a devoted wife and mother of another young Cub Scout from my troop. Emily<sup>1</sup> was about twenty-eight years-old with two children—a three and seven-year-old. I had just finished 7th grade and was thirteen when we met at a Boy Scout fundraiser. She and her husband took a particular interest in my cousin and me. We were both talkative and acted out. We were both searching for love and affection and we thought we could get it from strangers, and in the beginning, we did. We would often visit their house in the summer to help them clean up their yard and hang out. They seemed happy together and we were happy to be around them. But appearances can be deceiving, especially to children.

There was a lot of marital strife boiling beneath the surface that I simply did not recognize. Gradually, Emily started to take me out for fast food and laughed and played with me. It seemed innocent but as time went on, our time together became less and less appropriate. Of course, I did not see this. I was happy to be receiving attention, especially from an attractive woman. We would spend time together when her husband was not around. I became comfortable with and trusted her. I began to share some of my private feelings and personal thoughts with her; the rage and bitterness I had toward my parents; how I hated living in my house with so many people; the molestation that happened to me as a younger child. She did what every child predator does, she affirmed what I was feeling, and stoked the bitterness and resentment I felt toward my parents. From my perspective, she became my champion, she was the only person who understood what I was going through and the only person who truly cared. I became emotionally attached to her and even felt that I loved her.

At the same time that I was growing emotionally close to her, the physical barriers began to erode, until one day she was touching me in inappropriate places and kissing me. Barely in the 8th grade, the adults in church and Boy Scout leaders began to take notice of the inappropriate behavior that was sometimes displayed in public. After a few weeks, church members finally began to speak up. However, it is hard to imagine a worse possible way for them to have handled the situation. Some members told Emily they thought the amount of time we were spending together was inappropriate. Emily used this to her advantage. She planted an “us against the world” idea in my mind. Here were these people who simply did not understand.

Her manipulations worked. I felt that they were trying to separate me from the only person who seemed to care about me. Soon after that incident, I left the Boy Scouts and stopped going to church. She did the same. No one called my parents. No one reported it to the police. It becomes quite easy to forget about issues when they are no longer in front of your face. For me, it was the beginning of one of the darkest times of my life. Over the next few months, I continued to spend more and more time with Emily. She continued to encourage the antipathy I

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<sup>1</sup> This is a pseudonym.

had toward my parents and reinforced the love and affection I had for her, my champion. I had trauma-bonded with Emily.

As a young boy without many material items, someone taking me to concerts and movies, finding me attractive, showing an interest in me, and providing what I perceived to be love, created what I can only describe as a psychological prison. About halfway through my 8th grade year, we had sex for the first time. I will never forget how nervous and scared I was the first time. I lay there motionless, not really knowing what to do or what to say.

Emotionally and psychologically, I was still a young boy, having just turned fourteen a few months prior. I continued to spend increasingly more time at Emily's house. She often requested small things of me; sometimes, it was to help her clean the backyard or the living room. She continued to drive a wedge between my parents and I, she convinced me that it was terrible that they forced me to live in the same house as someone who had molested me. The result was that I ran away from home my freshman year of high school and moved in with Emily who I felt loved me.

The lies I had been fed quickly unraveled from there, but only after I endured severe psychological torment. The love Emily first showed to me was slowly replaced by anger and mistreatment. It was sometimes emotional, sometimes verbal, and sometimes physical. I was called a "nigger" often as a means to degrade or punish me or inflict injury for some perceived slight. Sometimes the insults came from her, other times from members of her family. Emily's marriage was disintegrating and they needed someone to blame. I became an easy scapegoat because of my dark skin color and because I was living with but not a part of the family.

By that time, I functioned as their live-in servant. I went to school during the day and went straight back to their home afterwards. From 8th grade through my sophomore year of high school, I took care of Emily's kids, washed dishes, cooked food, mopped floors, and cleaned every room in the house, whilst being belittled and abused, emotionally, physically, and sexually. I became even more socially withdrawn. And that is how I became a victim of child labor exploitation and trafficking. I was psychologically and emotionally trapped; I would do anything for the only person I believed actually loved me. It was a pain and a prison I could not escape.

At my lowest point, I remember feeling broken and helpless. I thought about killing myself. There was a handgun inside Emily's closet. After an incident in which I was again denigrated, I went into the closet, took out the gun, and closed myself in. I was alone, breathing heavily, and sobbing uncontrollably. I remember quietly crying to God and asking what I had done to deserve this. I looked at the gun and put it close to my head. I imagined pulling the trigger to feel the escape from the hell that I felt inside. I imagined what it would be like to be free from the pain and from feeling like I was living every day just to be someone's servant. I cried awhile longer and put the gun back. I would continue living in this hell a little while longer.

My bond with Emily was slowly broken over time. She had begun to openly see other men as she and her husband began to separate. My return home was an even longer and more gradual process that was only aided by the passage of time. The more I was away from Emily, the stronger I became emotionally.

One thing that really helped me was joining the junior varsity football team at my high school. My innocence was gone and I had seen too much of the world at that point to be able to relate to kids of my own age. Playing football was a refuge from the hell I had been through.

After the season ended, the freshman football coach recruited me to join the wrestling team and I did. I loved it, it helped me get my life back. Instead of spending every waking hour after school cleaning or taking care of children, I started spending it on the wrestling mat or on the track, running laps. After Emily and her husband separated, still feeling a misplaced sense of loyalty and belonging to her, I lived with her at her parents' house for a brief time.

Eventually and near the end of my sophomore year of high school, I finally moved back in with my parents. They were relieved but I think they really struggled to understand and respond in a way that would have been helpful. I had lied to them about the circumstances under which I had left. I told them that I could not stand to live in the same house as my cousin and with so many people. I told them that it would be easier for me to live with this other family. At one point, my cousin, who was aware of my real situation, told my parents the truth of what was happening to me. I denied it vehemently. I was trapped in a psychological and emotional prison that I could not recognize. I did not understand that I was being exploited.

As I developed a plate of armor around my heart and became emotionally stronger, I came to realize what Emily had done to me and what she had stolen; my innocence to be sure, but also precious time. More than two years of my adolescence were taken from me. When I should have been out playing ball in the streets, exploring new feelings with girls, and discovering who I was, I was instead quietly toiling away in abusive anonymity, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of young children. Traffickers and abusers take the most precious thing we are given as children—our love—and they turn it against us. They use the idea and promise of love, to get children to do what they please. In my case, it was living in a state of domestic servitude and frequent sexual exploitation.

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Coming out of my situation, my perspective on the world and on life was radically altered; I did not know how to be around kids of my own age and I struggled to leave behind a very painful chapter of my past. No one really knew what had happened to me. So, when I would act out in class, or do or say outlandish things, people simply presumed I was a bad kid. But the truth was I was hurting. I fought to understand what I had just lived through and why it had happened. There were the continued distractions of high school sports that kept me preoccupied, but there was nothing to heal the emotional and psychological wounds I had, and no one to tell.

Once I was living back with my parents, I started hanging out with other teens in my neighborhood. I engaged in delinquent and self-destructive behavior like drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, shoplifting, fighting, and causing whatever other mischief I could. In school, I always managed to do reasonably well in my studies. Transitioning back into a normal teenage life was hard, but the wonderful teachers and coaches I had made it easier. They became my true champions. They saved my life, though many of them could not have known it. To them, I am eternally grateful. My high school friends were also pillars of strength for me, and helped save me too.

By the end of my junior year in high school, I had cut off all contact with Emily, my former abuser, though she regularly tried to communicate with me. I was able to have a relatively normal senior year of high school, save for my continued immature behavior. I started my first healthy romantic relationship with a girl at my school and went on to become the Captain of my varsity football and wrestling teams. I was given the Coaches' award in both sports and, after winning a regional wrestling championship in my weight class, I was named "Athlete of The Year" at my high school. My old high school wrestling coach used to say, "It's not where you start, it's where you finish." I started high school in a really isolated and wretched place, but hope, love, friendship, and others' belief in me, allowed me to win back part of my adolescence.

I wish I could say that after I graduated from high school everything awful went away and life magically got better, but trauma does not work that way. It impacts us in ways we cannot even imagine. Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse or statutory rape often respond either by becoming hypersexualized or developing a severe aversion to intimate contact. I had difficulty in trusting adults and girls of my age. It took me a long time to finally develop healthy relationships—platonic and romantic—with women. Into my mid-twenties, I found it difficult to come to terms with what I had experienced. I kept it secret and hidden away from the world. But it festered and ate away at me. I often worried that Emily might be doing the same thing to another young boy and I beat myself up over not having the courage to go to the police. Telling your story to the police is a terrifying prospect for survivors, especially for boys who are taught not to be victims. When a woman sexually abuses a boy, men usually respond with a remark or joke: "Where was she when I was his age?" A cruel double standard about victimization exists, which minimizes and ignores the rape and abuse of boys when the perpetrator is a woman. I went to college and then law school, keeping what had happened buried.

A mentor from my undergraduate years encouraged me to file a report with the police and I did. Unfortunately, at that time, the state of Nevada had a 3-year limit of reporting for child survivors once they turned eighteen. In other words, once I turned twenty-one without having reported the crime, there was nothing the police could do. I really grappled with what to do next and decided to work to pass the 2013 Nevada bill AB 146, which criminalized the involuntary servitude of a minor. The new law made it easier for prosecutors to prove a child labor trafficking case where the circumstances clearly demonstrate a strong power imbalance, a particularly vulnerable child, and an exploitative situation. The bill passed unanimously with accompanying support from the Attorney General's Office and the entire law enforcement community.

The passage of the law was a vindication that what I had lived through was not meaningless. I went on to help pass 40 new laws to combat human trafficking. Today, I still advocate for children and fight for those whose life circumstances have left them devoid of hope. It is an important thing, hope. It is what allows us to turn tragedy into triumph. It is what brings us from our darkest place to our greatest glory. Hope transforms us and it helps us transform the world and the lives we touch along the way. I am still healing from what I lived through. And the truth is that I will never be who I might have been had none of it happened at all. I also am who I am today because of what happened to me.