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THE RIGHTEOUS **HATE** WHAT IS **FALSE**.

—Proverbs 13:5 NIV

As a child, I loved to drag a large cardboard box from the garage into the house, climb in, and then cover the opening with a big blanket. The blanket was my protection. It meant that no one could get in and that I was safe. I would surround myself with stuffed animals and dolls to keep me company. We would read books, listen to music, or just hang out together. However, I couldn't hide in that box for long because the blanket cut off my supply of fresh air. I had to pull back the blanket now and then so I could breathe.

SOMEONE WHO NEEDED to Find the Right Road

Matthew 9:20–22, Mark 5:25–29, and Luke 8:43–48 all tell the story of a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had spent every cent she had on doctors, but they hadn't been able to heal her. In fact, she had just gotten worse. The constant bleeding meant debilitating weakness. Worse, it meant that she was ritually unclean, an untouchable social outcast. She couldn't maintain normal, healthy relationships, and so she suffered in isolation. She had no one to care about her or support her with compassionate understanding.

One day this suffering woman heard that Jesus was passing through her town. Everyone knew about the miracles He had been doing, and soon a great crowd gathered and followed Him. Most people wouldn't have known about the woman's condition unless she told them, so she was able to act as if everything was normal and mingle with the crowd.

Hiding among the swarm of people, the woman worked her

way closer and closer to Jesus, convinced that if she could just get close enough to touch His garment, she would be healed. Finally, she came up behind Him, reached out her hand, and touched the hem of His robe. Then, just as quickly, she melted back into the crowd. For twelve years, she had been faking it. And even though she now knew that her bleeding had stopped, she was afraid of what would happen if everyone knew that she had been unclean. She felt ashamed, embarrassed, and afraid. And so she hid and *held her breath*.

Jesus, however, wouldn't allow her to continue to hide. Knowing that power had gone out of Him, He immediately turned around and began looking for the woman so He could invite her to come out and *breathe*.

CAN YOU RELATE?

Before I began my healing journey, I was like that woman, holding my breath and hiding who I really was. Instead of speaking up, I tried to be someone else. I strove to be a superathlete with perfect grades and a big flashy smile. That was my cover, like the blanket over my box when I was a child. But even when I was in a crowd, I found myself alone and afraid. My mask made me feel a little safer, but as long as I wore it, I breathed the same stale notion that I would always be what my stepfather had made me.

I was relying on my false identity to change me from the outside in. I longed to become what others saw on the outside and liked. But becoming authentic can never happen that way. It has to happen from within. I needed to take off the blanket—and not just for a quick breather. I had to take it off for good. Finally I decided that I was going to find me. Little by little, I was going to get real. I was going to breathe.

When I began working on getting real, I can remember asking myself what I was looking for. At first, the only thing I knew for sure was what I *wasn't* looking for—anything fake. I hate fake. I never again wanted to be someone I wasn't. I wanted to be free to be who I really was when nobody was watching. However, I wasn't

sure how being me would affect others. I was afraid that if they saw the real me, they'd no longer like me. Yes, I wanted to be real, but the risk seemed too great.

Millions of people like the bleeding woman and me are alive today—and fighting to stay alive. Inside there's a constant battle raging between our greatest desire and our greatest fear. We want so much to just be real and lay ourselves out there, but we're ashamed and afraid of what others will think, so we shrink back. The pressure is always there to keep quiet and pretend that things are fine, all the while hoping that somehow, someone will see the real person deep inside and invite her to come out and breathe.

WHY WE HIDE

What's Inside

Every time my stepfather touched me, I felt as if I was losing a small piece of me. As I got smaller and smaller, our secret seemed to grow bigger and bigger. The silence was cramming all the small, shattered pieces of me into some secret, shameful box that I hoped no one would ever open.

I am not alone. Every day I meet or receive e-mails from people who have been sexually abused and have kept silent about it. When Ryan was six years old, a teenage neighbor boy molested him. Ryan kept this secret for years. Now he says, "One of the reasons I hid the abuse was because I was ashamed of my inner self, the part that no other person sees or knows except for God." Jackie never talked about the abuse she suffered at the hands of her teacher because she felt ashamed and alone and didn't think that talking about it would change that. Many survivors who have lived in silence falsely believe that talking about their abuse will not only do nothing to reduce their shame and isolation, but that it will actually make things worse.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse long to be accepted for who we are. As children, we never felt accepted because we believed something was wrong with us. We thought that something about us was bad and deserved punishment. Now as adults, it doesn't make

sense to us that someone would accept us just because we're not being abused anymore. So we decide to become someone else—someone others will accept, maybe even love. We figure that people will like a fake version of us, as long as it's what they want to see.

But even though our façade helps win us the acceptance of others, we feel exactly the same inside. Contrary to what we believed, we do not feel better. We still can't accept ourselves, for we don't even know the real us. We long to know who we really are. It's an obsessive thought for us. A fantasy. But we find that we fear it just as much as we long for it. It seems easier to just keep faking it.

When I decided to get real, I took small, quick breaths of fresh air. A little trust here. A little openness there. I kept the blanket off just long enough to know that I was making progress. But as I kept on working at getting real, I began to realize that what I was looking for was a community where I could heal, where I could find acceptance, love, purpose, and hope. I was looking for a circle of inspiration.

When Jesus began His public ministry, He chose twelve men to accompany Him on His journey as He fulfilled God's purpose for His life. For three years, twelve of His disciples were closer to Him than His own family was, even though He knew that one day one of them would betray Him. When that day came, Jesus didn't hide His pain. He didn't fake it and pretend that everything was all right. In the garden of Gethsemane, He gave three members of His inner circle the opportunity to support and comfort Him in His suffering. Although His disciples failed Him that night, the fact that even Jesus needed the support of others shows us how important it is to have a circle of inspiration.

Creating your own circle can take a while. Most of the time, no one will know that you even need this kind of support until you speak up about it. Hence my passion and focus on empowering survivors to break the silence. It also takes time to build relationships by learning to trust again and allowing others to know you.

Your circle may seem small or even nonexistent at this point. You may still be holding your breath, too afraid to breathe. But that

can change. Just remember that, like Jesus, you get to choose the people you want to be in your circle. You're the only one who decides who will get to hear your story. Only you can determine who will have the high honor of getting to know the real you.

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I remember that in my teenage years—before the entire world knew that I had been sexually abused— I was very strategic about telling people my story. I thought it over very carefully before I told someone. I wouldn't tell just anyone. The person I allowed to know this part of me had to be someone very special, someone I could really trust.

We need to find people we trust—or people we can begin to try to trust—and share our story with them. This is where our healing journey begins and where our circle of inspiration starts to grow. So to begin to form your circle, start with someone you feel you can trust. Chances are, this person will be caring and compassionate, someone who is willing to reach out to you in your pain. That's why you feel you can trust them. Then find the courage to tell them a little bit of your story.

GETTING REAL ABOUT Sexual Abuse

Recently I received an e-mail that touched my heart. “When I listened to you speak,” Dawn wrote, “I felt the same way inside as I do when I watch a movie and something happens on the screen that seems so real. I realize that I've been holding my breath, and I finally begin to breathe again. It's a moment when it feels as if the truth is supposed to be out there in the open for everyone to see. Embarrassment or fear isn't able to creep into my mind because I'm not thinking about the people around me. I'm focused only on what's in front of me and what's inside of me.”

Like Dawn, many of the people who listen to me speak say that

they identify with me because they can tell that I understand their situation, whatever it may be. They can tell that I care about what they went through. Compassionate understanding is something I strive for in my everyday walk with others and something I want all survivors to experience. I long to see them in safe relationships where they are finally able to accept that healing and freedom is found in being real.

Even though I'm now at a point where I feel great about life and don't have to struggle every day with the pain of my past, I'm always conscious of my need for authenticity. To be authentic, I have to remember the abuse I suffered and allow myself to feel the heaviness of the pain. This doesn't mean dwelling on the past or reliving it for no reason. And it certainly doesn't mean wallowing in self-pity. The purpose of remembering is to show other survivors that I understand them and that they can trust me to relate to their pain. This means that I also have to talk about the awful reality of childhood sexual abuse.

By the age of eighteen, one in three girls and one in six boys will be victims of childhood sexual abuse. We are living amidst the rubble and shards of a sexually broken world, yet most people still deny the reality of the numbers of abused living among us. Unlike the survivors of natural or man-made disasters, survivors of sexual abuse seldom have heroes rushing in to rescue them. In fact, those who should be their protectors are often their abusers. And those around them either do nothing or tell them to *hush*. If they speak at all, it's to condemn the victim, not the perpetrator.

Sexually abused children seldom have the sympathetic ear of even one person, much less a group. They have no supporters to rally around them to help protect and preserve their bodies, minds, and souls. But, as this secret—the best-kept secret in our country—begins to be exposed, more and more concerned and caring people are reaching out and making a difference in the lives of survivors.

The tragedy of sexual abuse draws together survivors and the people who truly care about them. It unites those ready to begin healing from their pain and those who are willing to be part of their circle of inspiration. That circle begins with just two people: a survivor who

is willing to get real about his experiences and someone who cares enough to want to help him heal.

NEVER TURNING our heads or hearts from those who have been victimized marks the beginning of cultural change.

The sad but honest truth is that even when we do care, we so often come up with all kinds of reasons why we can't reach out.

"It's too big of a problem; I can't put a dent in it."

"I don't know how to even begin."

"What will people think of me if they see me hanging out with her?"

"It's too time consuming."

"My nails are drying."

"The playoffs are on TV."

But let's get real. If we do nothing, this evil will survive. In reaching out, you're not only fulfilling a great need in someone else's life, you're also sparking a movement. I have found that for each person I encourage, another encourager is born. As more and more people walk with a survivor on the road of healing, that survivor in turn will reach out to others.

Never turning our heads or hearts from those who have been victimized marks the beginning of cultural change. Together, we can make a huge difference by refusing to keep the secret that is shattering relationships. To me this is a revolution: survivors removing the cover, stepping out of the box, and getting real by relating to people who are willing to come alongside them in their pain and be part of their healing process.

THE REST of the Story

Although everyone around Jesus denied touching Him, He kept looking for the woman. Finally, she came forward. Trembling with

fear, she fell down before Him, took a deep breath, and spoke up.

When the woman found enough courage to stop hiding just for the moment it took to reach out for healing, God changed a situation that had been a problem for years. Sometimes when we've tried everything we know to heal our own pain but fail, we're tempted to give up. But if we have faith in Him and ask Him to help us, He has the power to heal us.

The bleeding woman knew that this was true, and when she acknowledged the truth about herself, Jesus also told her the truth—she was His daughter and she didn't need to hide or pretend any more. “‘Daughter,’ [Jesus] said to her, ‘your faith has made you well. Go in peace’” (Luke 8:48). The woman got healed by her faith, but she got real by getting into a relationship with the One who could help her.

It's easy for survivors to believe that they are terrible, rotten, unclean people. But that's not the way Jesus sees it. To Him, there's no such thing as an unclean person; there's just someone who needs His healing touch. Whoever He touches becomes clean. When Jesus called the woman “daughter,” He showed that He is willing to be in relationship with the least, the last, and the lost—the very people that society often considers unclean. He is not only willing to be in relationship with them; He loves them as His own.

We only find out who we really are in relationship to others. This means that if we want to find our real selves, we have to stop holding our breath so we can tell others the truth about us and what we've been through. Are you tired of hiding? Of faking your way through life? If so, it's time to get real. It's time to find and embrace your true identity—the true you, the person God made you to be. Jesus is inviting you to remove the blanket, step out of the box—and breathe!

A Life Letter

Dear Fellow Survivor . . .

I am a victim of childhood sexual abuse.

Sometime in my late thirties, I began to acknowledge that some of the memories of childhood lingering in the recesses of my mind were connected with sexual abuse. Once I recognized it for what it was, all the pieces of the puzzle of my life began to fit together, and it was easy to see how it had affected who I had become. I realized that the aftereffects of these traumas had led to major life decisions that left me broken, wounded, and empty inside. At the same time, I looked around and discovered that God had already placed in my life people who could, and would, help me heal. They became my circle of inspiration.

A group of women forming a prayer group invited me to join them. As we prayed together and got real with one another, my prayer partners acted as a sounding board, held me accountable, and prayed with me for answers. Eventually I felt safe enough to share some of my experiences with my husband. By providing me with healthy nurturing, protection, and support, he is playing a very important role as I work through my most painful memories, which I am just now remembering. In this stage of healing, I have also added a therapist to my circle to provide crucial, professional guidance.

Repressed memories have come forward within the safety net of my circle. I tell you this not to frighten you, but to show you how much deeper the healing can go when you have others supporting you and encouraging you. Ironically, moving forward in life entails looking back. It means processing what's taken place in the past in order to improve the outcome of the future. Any good business analyst does this to grow a company. He pulls together a group of experts to discuss how every detail of their operation affects the outcome. This is even more crucial for growing a person, especially for overcoming the deeply rooted pain of sexual

sin. I see my circle of inspiration as my “analysts.” I confer with them and discuss the details of my past with them as we work together toward a new improved me.

This new person isn’t some stereotypical image of what I should be like. This person is the one God knit together in my mother’s womb, the one whose days are written in His book of life (Psalm 139). This person is the one He created me to be, in all the fullness and freedom He intended, unpolluted by the sin committed against me. Now, more than ten years into my healing journey, I am closer and closer to being the real me—all because I refused to allow the life-altering experience of childhood sexual abuse to dictate my future in the way that it had shaped my past.

Look around. Who do you love and trust? Who has God already placed in your life as your circle of influence? Nurture those relationships. Spend time with those people. Be real with them. Share with them where you’ve been. Allow them to be a part of where you want to go. And may the Lord bless your journey.

—Cynthia