

Family Secrets and Shame Bound Systems

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In my recollections, entitled *Boundaries? What Are They?*, I alluded to a spontaneous and incredible disclosure of a family secret. My parents cannot escape their own judgments of feeling that they must be responsible if something terrible happened to me. Because of their belief systems, something terrible does happen to me. I am left alone in my process of discovery. No matter how often I reinforce that I want information in order to hear, not to blame, they either can't or won't be forthcoming.

On a trip with my father to bury his brother, I was witness to a violation of personal boundaries that transcended death. It was such an explicit imposition of personal wishes upon another, that I called it to my father's attention in hopes that he would better understand other of my family experiences.



Some of my flash backs are of sexual abuse in the cellar of an uncle's home. I had suppressed these memories for much of my life. I had heard allusions as a child to this man's alcoholic behavior, his legal commitment and institutional death. Yet, nothing was openly stated. It was one of those things we just did not talk about.

There is no way that I could have anticipated that I was about to discover a specific sexual abuse secret in my father's presence. I was invited to go to dinner with a childhood girlfriend of my father and her present husband. In the conversation, it appeared to me that she might be abusing prescription medication. I began to talk indirectly and then specifically about my involvement in the twelve step programs. She showed interest so I went deeper into my process.

My father was getting uncomfortable with the conversation. Then we discussed some related subject involving a rape situation. Now my father was really uncomfortable. He began to deflect the dialogue and attempted to change the subject.

I'm not sure how long this went on, but I was about to cease and desist, feeling that maybe I had gone too far. I did not foresee that she was also aware of how my father wanted to avoid any sensitive subject. One of his denial-directed comments lit a short fuse for her.

Suddenly, she turned her head to my father and forcefully said to him, “Your brother-in-law raped me when I was fourteen.” His face went white. His shoulders slumped. His head dropped. There was absolute silence. I sat there stunned by the exchange. Then, as he regained his composure, but without eye contact, he spoke.

“Yes! They did things like that.”

“They?” she queried.

“No! I meant to say he.”

The exchange was awkward. She did not pursue the discrepancy, nor did anyone else. We all changed the subject and gradually regained a sense of gratitude for being together. Yet, I did not let the event go without questioning once we were alone in the car after dinner.



Not before or since, has my dad ever disclosed or elaborated on the events of that night. In his shock, he told me that he was aware of the behaviors of two of his brothers-in-law. He said that he was so fearful that others knew the same things and talked about them, that he was ashamed to walk downtown. Yet, it was not in his comprehension that the same man who secretly abused his girlfriend would have done the same to me.

One of my mother’s responses was that nothing could have happened to me because she always knew where I was. She contended that I was never out of her sight. That was the end of that subject. I do not know if my father ever shared the New York experience with her. Years later, my mother commented that she would kill the uncle if he was still alive, but he was dead. I am still left on my own to deal with my feelings, strangers at SIA more supporting than my family of origin.

In watching the physical manifestations of my father to this announcement by his old girlfriend, Marilyn Mason’s writing about facing shame and its multi-generational aspects came to mind. Her models of shame-based versus respect-based systems came alive vividly. The impact of this even was similar in power to the first time I sat in a SIA meeting and could not complete a reading of the characteristics of a survivor due to my sobbing.

Sometimes, grace enters the picture. I had a powerful dream. I was in an L-shaped room. On the walls were photos of my abuse. Much of it was unknown to me at that time. I was staggered by what I had suppressed. My abusers sat in the shadows in a line of chairs, heads hung in shame. I ranted and raved at them. Then, I stopped. The pictures on the walls began to dissolve. The abusers began to dissolve. I was left in a moment of peace.

It was almost two years later before grieving surfaced around my abuse issues. As TV programs began to expose abuse in a variety of settings, I would occasionally stumble into a night of triggered psychodrama. The almost incapacitating aspects of discovery and release of anger and grief had passed. Yet, there are some soul sickening moments that still grab me by the throat. I find a place to rock and sob.

Then, I hope that it is the last time.