

Interview on Childhood Sexual Abuse with Tom, a survivor

Hello, my name is Josie and I would like to welcome you back to Trauma Talks, Rising from the Ashes a podcast series brought to you from the UB School of Social Work Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. This series provides an opportunity for individuals to share their witness of how strength and resiliency have allowed them to rise from the ashes. Trauma talks follows people who have both worked within the field of trauma, as well as those who have experienced trauma. Here we will reflect on how trauma informed care can assist those who have experienced traumatic events to embrace a new life of wholeness, hope, strength, courage, safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Today I am sitting here with Tom. Tom is a survivor of clerical sexual abuse as a child. On behalf of the Institute we would like to thank Tom for being here today and sharing your story with us. So now I'm going to let Tom begin by giving you the audience a sense of what happened.

1:10 **Tom:** Thanks for having me, I really appreciate this. What happened to me when I was an altar-boy in second or third grade, I was molested by a priest. This process of him, leading up to the actual most traumatic abuse, took place over some time. Church calls what he did at the grooming, and it began after every mass. He would share the remaining wine with me. I could recall a time where he would get really close to me from behind so that his front was to my back. This made me feel very uncomfortable, but he also had a way of speaking to me that made me feel very comfortable and safe at the same time. And I began sharing more of my life with me, and I began to appreciate our time together. Overtime, we began to spend time together in his sitting room, in a private room, and he gained my trust. Very much so, it felt as though he was a grandfather to me. The first time that he made me feel very uncomfortable was when I was sitting on his lap and he got an erection, and his response to that was "this is the spirit of God ruling up in me." And those activities, it went further. To me giving him oral sex, to him inserting his fingers inside of me. And ultimately, he raped me. I mean, to this day, I can feel that experience in my entire body. I can feel his hand on my throat, on my mouth, I can feel his cheek next to mine. He said to me in those moments, "this will all be over soon, my son." Now it's almost forty years later, and I am really just beginning to deal with that trauma in a healthy way, and start building my life.

3:01 **Josie:** And so, after you experienced this trauma, especially that it had led to being raped by this man that you had trusted, what happened after that? Were you able to reach out to anyone to be able to tell them that that had happened?

3:19 **Tom:** Those experiences had happened outside of the school, and I remember one day a different priest had walked up the side of the stairwell where I was, and when I saw him, my body pressed itself up against the wall. That other priest's presence made me feel like this thing that was a secret that I knew was wrong and evil, prompted me to speak to another nun and my mother. The conversation didn't go over very well. Ultimately, I was told that I was an imaginative little boy, and that I was making all of this stuff up. After the meeting my mother had, she came out of the room incredibly angry and slapped me. The ride home was one of the worst scoldings I had ever had. My mouth was washed out with soap, and I found myself curled up underneath my bed contemplating suicide. I did not want to be alive in those moments. Those moments truly altered my life, and the way I was able to relate to my mother and my family, to

my environment.

4:26 **Josie:** Thank you so much for being so honest and sharing this experience with us. You mentioned having these feelings of wanting to end your life and of feeling depressed. How did those continue to progress throughout your childhood?

4:42 **Tom:** Isolation sort of became part of my childhood. I was a loner. I don't know if I understood depression in that time, but the thought of suicide, the thought of killing myself became a default reaction to situations. It's nothing I had ever attempted, but something I had to navigate.

5:04 **Josie:** How about your experiences after the abuse, and after reaching out to the nun and your mom? What were your relationships like with other authority figures, or your peers, or teachers?

5:17 **Tom:** I never trusted authority after that point in time. I think that I always was looking for ways to see what they said and what they did were different. I became much more confrontational, much more always trying to tear down the authority figure, proving that what they are saying is just a lie. I'm sure that was a form of self-protection. So I was always trying to test those boundaries. I had an unusual way of how I interacted with the world in the sense that I was far more mature than I was. So when I was 12 I was acting or thinking with the maturity of a 20 year old. I thought that because I had sex that smoking and drinking was cool. It opened myself up to further sexual abuse by kids in my neighborhood. I didn't understand at the time but it was kind of the only way that I could get a sense of attention, because after I went to my mother and the nun about the abuse that had happened to me, I never served another mass with him, that was the end of our relationship, which was deeply confusing to lose something special in my mind, even though something weird was really happening, but I didn't understand. So since that specialness and connection with him was cut, I would always be trying to find that connection in other ways.

6:46 **Josie:** As you're talking, I can hear that your experiences leading up to telling your mom, telling the nun, leading up to the abuse, and then all of the experiences that happened after that, I hear themes that relate to what we call the Five Themes of Trauma Informed Care. Trauma informed care asks individuals, service providers, or communities to not ask, "What's wrong" with the person, but to move towards what has happened? So Falloot and Harris talk a lot about the five guiding principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment as tools that can provide a more trauma informed practice, trauma informed approach. It really thinks about what happened to a person. And so, the first principle is safety. Safety can be physical safety, emotional, spiritual, and so I am wondering what was the effect of trauma on your sense of safety on your emotional, spiritual self?

8:02 **Tom:** I don't think I've ever really felt safe. It took me a long time in my life to really ever feel comfortable in my own skin. I was always either running away from dealing with this through drug abuse or getting myself into relationships with women who would treat me with disrespect. And then I'd have thing longing of, "why don't they love me? Why don't they care for me? Why am I not getting their attention in the way that I need it?" So, it's taken me a long time

to feel safe in my own environment. Later on in my life, in my thirties, I found it very difficult to ground, to stay in one place. I moved many, many times, always looking for a place to feel safe. 8:54 **Josie:** And then the next principle is trust. Now I know you referred to talking to trusted individuals about what happened. You also spoke about the trust between this person who then was your abuser as well. I'm wondering how those breaches of trust have affected you as an adult, your personal life, family relationships. What has been that experience for you?

9:23 **Tom:** It has been a long time coming for me to trust myself. In those times of people calling me a liar has put me in a process of not trusting my own decision making. As an adult, that has led me to three very strong nervous breakdowns. To the point of me being so confused in making a decision about my life, and if it's wrong, and brought me to a place of shaking and completely running away from a healthy situation that I was in, or that I was building. The idea of trust, there is triggers in me that make me feel a sense of distrust. Certain smells or sounds have affected my relationship with my sister, as a matter of fact. For whatever reason, the sound of her heels and the smell of her perfume brought me back to a place of pure mistrust. And, what I have learned about trust is that I can respond to these feelings, or I can react to them. When I react, I want to run. When I respond, I've learned to sit and feel that trust, and not to project it on to whatever is happening, and to let that trust, distrust, really take inside of me, until it is able to dissolve. Through that process, I've learned to trust more completely.

10:51 **Josie:** And you've mentioned that you've been, that in more recent years you've begun to heal and cope with what has happened in a more healthy way. And, the next principle that Harris and Falot talk about is choice. So I'm wondering, in the course of your healing process, what types of choices did you make, how did that start, and what did that look like for you?

11:15 **Tom:** The process of my healing actually began at the height of my self-abuse. I was abusing drugs and alcohol at a higher rate all throughout my teens my twenties and all the way into my mid-thirties, and I dove into a pool that I thought was 9 feet deep, but really it was 3 feet deep so after a helicopter ride and a night in the hospital where they had to put my head back together with fifty stitches, I was directed towards a yoga/chiropractor. And that began my healing process. I don't know if I really had a choice in that matter, it really just sort of happened. Some of the things I really took more of a choice in was getting myself more in the theater, getting myself more working with children. Theater was a tremendous healing choice for me, I did improvisation theater — comedy, dramatic, musical, it just put you in a situation where you need to drop whatever you're thinking and get on board with the idea that was presented to you. And, it's a very fast moving process that took me out of my thinking mind and more into my responsive mind, hyperaware of what's going on in a moment and responding to it. And uh, it was incredibly beneficial to me. I did choose to work with children. I spent the better part of six years working with children all under the age of 12. Fantastic experience. I found out I am highly sensitive to the needs of children. I can respond to them in such a way that makes them feel safe and comfortable, and I think in retrospect that working with kids for several years now, I was really proving to myself that I can work with kids on a comfortable level. You know, that was a major element that I had to heal inside of myself. There was always a voice inside of me saying, "Would I do this to someone else? Am I capable of doing to someone what someone did to me?" The answer to that was no! One thing that I really want to bring to light is, I've shared my abuse with people in the past, and have been asked some unusual questions like "are you gay?" or "how

do you feel about homosexuals?” And I am a straight man who is quite comfortable with homosexuals. Being a victim of childhood sexual abuse is in no way susceptible to making you a certain sexual orientation. Those are not my experiences, nor are they what others who have had similar experiences as me, have shared with me.

14:09 **Josie:** There are labels that people have used for those individuals who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, labeling it as, “you’re bound to becoming a pedophile” or “you’re bound to adopt a certain sexual orientation,” rather than looking at other factors that play into individuals choices and who they are as people.

14:33 **Tom:** Yes, it’s impossible for me to relate to how someone can sexualize a child. I cannot comprehend it. I can comprehend what it takes to be able to heal from one of those things. Those abuses take place in an instant, and it truly effects the entirety of someone’s life, and their sense of being.

14:59 **Josie:** And in more recent years, what kinds of interventions or healing rituals have you been utilizing in terms of seeing any type of therapist or utilizing anything of that nature?

15:14 **Tom:** I think the past fifteen years of travel, working with children, meditation, yoga brought me to a place where I was able to go back into the church where these things had happened. I think that was a choice of mine that came about after I was crying by this church in my late forties. And, when I went inside, the priest that was there knew, I believed, what he had to do, and that was to be a sounding board for me. And he allowed me to really let go, to sob, to yell to swear at him, to accuse him of stuff that he did not do. Through that process, the church helped me to see a therapist. I took my time in finding a therapist who I knew would be helpful to me. Ultimately she was a women in her sixties who had been doing this type of work for several decades and instantly I trusted her by her ability to really listen to me. It was one of the first times in my life where I felt that I can really express myself honestly. Someone JUST listening, and I think that’s what many of us need is someone to simply listen to us, what we’ve been through, where we are at, and to help us taking the next step up.

16:26 **Josie:** When you’re talking about confronting the church and interacting with a therapist reminds me of the principle of collaboration. Which really speaks to the sense of teamwork, and shared decision making and progress. I was wondering if you could speak a little more of your experience with collaborating in terms of what happened to you as a child in terms of confronting the church, and what type of work you've done in that regard?

17:09 **Tom:** In terms of what happened with the church, the collaboration was really by circumstance. I found myself back in Buffalo several years ago, needing to confront these deep seeds that have tripped up my life many times. And so, I was able to work with the church, and with the therapist work through all of the confusion on why I hated my mother so much. Of why I wasn't able to make choices in my life. At the same time I was working with another therapist doing EMDR which is a type of therapy that uses sound, vibration, rhythm, light to bring you back to the times of the trauma. One week when I would be going to these types of therapies, I found myself reliving moments, and I was driving in my car and found myself to be driving with my lips squeezed tight, more or less just re-experiencing the feeling of being raped. I was able to

go talk to a therapist about it the next day, and talk to her about how I felt about my mom. It just so happened that I was living with my mom at the time, so she was allowing me, in her late 80's, to be a small child again at the time. Several times over that year I broke down, and she held me in her arms and sobbed. And she treated me the way I needed to be treated forty years earlier. She took responsibility for it and her actions. So that collaboration of having a talk therapist, having a tool to relive the trauma, and having my mom right there to embrace me so I could let go of forty years of confusion, of anger, of hatred, of a riding of emotions that are almost undefinable. So that was sort of a collaboration of circumstances that happened.

19:18 **Josie:** That's really powerful, thank you. The last principle is empowerment. When you talk about the labels or stereotypes that people attach to individuals who have experienced childhood sexual abuse that made me think of dis-empowerment. And so, I am wondering what your experience has been in the work to feel empowered and a sense of autonomy and growth and your vision to use your story to move forward.

19:47 **Tom:** Yes, in terms of using my story to move forward, I am doing this particular talk with you so that ultimately people will see that victims of sexual abuse are not taboo, they are not hidden. I've noticed that for generations, my mother's generation, avoided any talk of sexual abuse. My sister's generation talks about it, but doesn't really confront it. My nephew who is in his twenties, when he saw the movie Spotlight, called me up right away and said "I know this happened to you, tell me all about it." So, I've seen that change through generations. Right now one of the things I've gotten myself involved with is advocacy for laws in New York State, and speaking publicly about my sexual abuse. The laws currently in New York State do very little to protect children who are abused, currently statute and limitations end age 23, and for myself, it took me until my late forties to really think about these things normally. When I was a young child, I didn't have the tools to say, "I was just molested," I might've said "I was just hurt" or "so or so is not treating me very well." So, I'm working towards changing things to protect a whole generation of children. The more we as adults are able to speak openly about sexual abuse and sexuality, and allow children to understand what their boundaries are and how important it is to allow them to mature into their sexuality as opposed to have it hidden from them, or forced upon them.

21:33 **Josie:** For those who are listening to this podcast and are victims of sexual abuse in some way, or are providers for people who are experiencing childhood sexual abuse, do you have any additional thoughts on your experience or anything you've learned through healing, or something providers can keep in mind when they're working with individuals based on trauma?

21:55 **Tom:** As far as recovering from sexual abuse goes, it is a long and winding road. And, the sooner you start speaking up about it, the sooner you start acknowledging it, the sooner you start exploring all of the things you have to unravel to start healing, the better it is. That journey that you're about to go on will be very different than you expect it to be. It is as enlightening as it is challenging. As far as us adults go, it's really our responsibility as adults to see children for who they are, and hold space for them so that their innocence can be preserved for them as long as they can. Children don't have a real reason to lie about things like this. And if you see a switch in your child's behavior, if you see them closing down, allow them this time and space to express themselves freely as they can. For the sense of providers, doing your own interwork, I think is the

most important work you can be doing to help victims of trauma to work as a therapist. It is important to do that work so that when you are listening to someone, you're listening to them purely their story, their circumstances. As opposed to listening to them through your own lenses and projecting back upon them, yourself.

23:22 **Josie:** Thank you so much Tom, on behalf of Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care, I wanted to say thanks again for taking the time to speak with us today so honestly and sharing your story of strength and healing. It's really been an honor.

23:40 **Tom:** Thank you.