



Making Distinctions

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During early counseling for my childhood experiences of sexual abuse, there were tough truths. One was that my mood was suddenly crashing—and my mental clarity suddenly blurring—simply because a single image could trigger an overwhelming emotional memory. My therapist suggested a phrase to reverse the trigger: “This time is not that time.” The practice proved astoundingly helpful, drawing me out of the past like a lifeline, but I was still mad. I had run from the past madly and thought I was finally, but I had not escaped after all.

Reaffirming what is past and what is now continues to help me function to this day. A phrase that characterizes my own journey over the past thirty years is “Healing comes from making distinctions.” I repeat this line regularly to other survivors of child sexual abuse. It is cornerstone in my book, *Restoring Sanctuary*, from which this essay is somewhat drawn.

Making distinctions has been a way for me to resolve terribly painful questions. For years, I believed I had caused predators to lose control. I confused my own self with the culprit. That falsehood was an impasse to healing. A bright line of distinction had to be drawn between an adult’s force and a child’s dependence. I needed to accept a distinction between loving and grooming. I was capable of the former, my abusers expert at the latter. I was learning that there was nothing indistinct about recovery.

All survivors of abuse grapple with shattered relationships. Because my abusers were Roman Catholic priests, my trust in the Church was broken as a child. Catholic religious and laity alike publicly seemed to agree victims should “just get over it,” as if any of us can heal by our own power without God’s graces on God’s timing.

Forgiveness had, anyhow, seemed too close to enabling in my Church for me to trust it as a concept. The important distinction for me was between forgiveness and surrender. My recovery was more about surrender to God than about forgiving anyone. Surrender was even harder than forgiveness. There is the typical resistance of the human psyche to surrendering to our Creator, and my mind had reasonable cause to object. What I knew of surrender abusers had taught me early. Surrender was terrifying, painful, confusing. It created shame. It felt like annihilation. Looking back, it was not just like a death. Parts of me really had died

A key distinction involved a truth about God’s peace. I felt like I had earned my fragile peace. The price had been all the losses I had sustained and all my years of arduous recovery work. But, God’s peace is not an earned thing, it is a gift. Without that distinction, I remained blinded by thinking I was working instead of receiving. Believing that distinction, I was going to receive the incredible gift in my recovery—a spontaneity I lost as a child.

Now I see more clearly how, back then, God was un-teaching me. I had to see the false truth peddled by the predator priests who trafficked in deception as distinct from His truth. It would free me to receive simple and freeing and life-giving Truth. Surrender to God proved to be not just an abstract concept but a very real, concrete state of recovered human psychology.

Making distinctions has fostered my own healing. It put the reality of surviving sexual abuse by priests when I was a child into the greater picture of the good, right order in an adult’s vibrant spirituality. The insights have inspired something else. I can appreciate pain of priests who are confused for predators, or doubted as predators, or mocked publicly as predators. They, too, are victims of the deception of predators and the so-called forgiveness of enablers.

Making a clear distinction between their pain and mine makes compassion for these men safe. This is just another sign that God has given me, in exchange for my broken heart, a forgiving willingness. This great thing has been accomplished not by my own power or will, but through His patient graces. It is a tilting dance with grace that has continued to strengthen my ability to manage dark emotional tsunamis that still crash unexpectedly into my life.

Making distinctions, it turns out, creates opportunities to choose. The Creator of my psychology understood this, as I discovered in Deuteronomy 30:15. God says “I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil.” Then, for a few verses God describes how choosing one brings destruction and estrangement, and choosing the other brings, well, life.

Some translations of these verses are pretty doomsday. Regardless, what I read was a call to proclaim oneself. It was a call for me to choose my identity. I could choose against the evil in my childhood and its lasting effects. I could choose whatever slim goodness could be found in the moment instead of the many, many kinds of death available to dull psychic pain.

Free choice is something denied the child who is being abused by anyone, including a predator priest. Each time I chose now, I am choosing to be open to God being the Author of my life. Or, better, I am letting Him edit my wounds. That familiar haunting depression, the doubt about how to live, those toxic temptations of shame—victory in these and many struggles had long eluded me. Now, they fell subject to moment-by-moment decisions between life and death, light and darkness.

With a God-based paradigm, I promise you I do not get every choice right. I may always struggle with effects of child abuse. My willingness to accept and forgive may not always lead to acceptance and forgiveness in my heart. Love may continue to be fraught with reasonable doubt. Nonetheless, what matters is that my life is opened and can be quickened by grace. My living has become the continuous turning point, day by day, grace by grace.