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*Connecting the Past and the Present:
Healing Abandonment and Abuse through Awareness*

Many people I work with in therapy or in my writing-as-healing classes discover stories that surprise them—stories about the mistakes they felt their parents made, power imbalances in the family, or stories about physical or sexual abuse. The darker stories are often a surprise: when writers sat down to write, those issues were not directly on their minds, but deep, revealing stories erupted from the pen.

Though they were unexpected, for some they were a relief. People who have been in therapy have had the same kind of experience—the subject matter in the forefront of the mind is not the material that “accidentally” arises during the session. The therapy session begins with a particular subject in the present—for example dissatisfaction at work or trouble in a relationship, but often travels back in time with associations to parents, school, or past relationships.

It has become a cliché to talk about “dysfunctional” relationships and families, but most people do not have perfect families, and many have had to struggle with a range of problems—alcoholism, abuse—physical, sexual, or emotional, eating disorders, and depression, to name a few. No one likes to be reminded of the past but when it keeps coming up, we are pushed to learn new responses as we search for more peace and positivity in our lives.

The past is not dead—it’s not even past.

William Faulkner

Different kinds of abandonment

For people who have been abandoned, either literally by actual physical absence, or emotionally—a parent can be in the home and not there for us—the abandoned child syndrome may remain years later, showing up through insecurities and fears, clinging behaviors or its opposite: walls to intimacy. The abandoned child inside the adult can create havoc such as alcohol abuse, repeating their own abandonment by abandoning children, or refusal to have children out of fear of repetition. Depression, lack of energy and creativity, anger, and trying to fill up the emptiness may be manifestations of these issues. When the abandoned child is feeling its pain and loss, the rest of the adult person is unable to find emotional balance. New skills are needed to help sort out the confusion, and to create new, healthier patterns. Part of the healing may include grieving and anger, as those repressed feelings are released. But it is equally important to look at strengths: how well you are doing and what you want to contribute to the world as well as the positive side of parents and caretakers. Most people do the best they can. Healing is a process of peeling the onion, so to speak. Revealing one layer after another, with time for rest and integration, leads to inner peace, resolution, and forgiveness.

Here are some suggestions:

- Write about parallels between the past and the present. Become more aware of old patterns finding their way into your current life.
- List all the ways you feel you were abandoned. Don’t worry if the list doesn’t make logical sense or is too long or short. Just write what you feel and remember.

- Look at photographs of you and your family from those time periods as a way to help you remember details. Becoming more aware of the past can help you sort issues in the present.
- Write an “unsent letter”—do not send it!—to your mother, telling her all the ways you appreciated her.
- Now write an “unsent letter” listing the ways she let you down. DO NOT send unsent letters in the exercise—these are just ways for you to help yourself to heal.
- Do the same for your father.
- Write about your intentions for today, this week—what do you want to change? What are your goals in your life now?
- What are you doing well now, and how is it different and better than what you or your family might have done in the past?
- What are your strengths? Name 10 things your friends would say are your best traits.
- Write about how you are your best friend. How you take care of yourself and like yourself.