

## The Realization

Sitting in the bar, I was discussing what had happened earlier that day with Paul, a close friend of mine. We had been at a party earlier when John, a friend of ours, was yelling at his kids. John kept saying he thought that anyone under the age of ten should be shot. Repeatedly he stated that his father "beat the crap out of him" for the same things his children were doing. The only reason his children could get away with this kind of behavior was because of the current laws against child abuse. After at least 10 minutes of his vicious remarks, I couldn't listen any more. I surprised myself. I spoke up. "Having a rough childhood doesn't give you the right to treat your children the same," I said. John replied, "You don't understand. I'm not treating them like my father treated me. My kids have it easy." I said that I did understand and what he was doing to his children was as bad as what happened to him. This was in front of thirty friends who were at the party.

Paul thought I was wrong by getting involved. He believed only the parents have the right to decide about the treatment of their children. He said that by intervening, I infringed on John's rights as a parent. While parental rights are a concern of mine, I believe that there are times when children need to be protected, even if it is from their parents. Perplexed by his opinion, I decided to tell him about my childhood...

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It's an average day, I am 16 and in my sophomore year in high school. Lying in my bed, I am awakened by the sound of my door-knob turning. I quickly glance at the clock. It's 6:00 a.m. As I hear my door creak slowly open, I envision the gates of hell opening, a demon escaping and rushing forth.

My mother never enters my room on these days. She says the same thing every time: "Joe, would you come in here. I have to talk to you." Getting out of bed, I begin to put myself in a "buffer zone," a place where an invisible wall around me blocks incoming assaults. It is a place of no emotions, a place of silence, a place of death. As I reach the living room my wall is complete, my senses as dull as if I were sitting through a 4-hour English seminar on the proper use of semicolons.

It begins, as usual, with the question "Do you know what an alcoholic is?" I've always wanted to look up "alcoholic" in an encyclopedia, and give the definition verbatim as my reply, but I know it is a rhetorical question. While she starts to give her answer my thoughts begin to drift. I wonder: "What will I wear today? What's the weather like? Why is my middle finger longer than the others?"

Every so often my attention comes back to her, I hear myself responding with an appropriate "uh-huh" or "yeah." I don't really know what she is saying; it doesn't really matter. My mind treats her like the emergency broadcast system warning. The first time I heard it I paid close attention to the entire broadcast.

Later, after hearing it again and again, I would listen to the first couple of words, realize it's the same thing, and turn down the volume so I didn't have to hear the monotonous tone. Every so often I would turn the volume up to determine if it was over.

Knowing these "sessions" last around 45 minutes I, as usual, start to pay attention after a half an hour. It is now that I really see her. The first things I notice are her hands. One is squeezed into a tight fist; the other contains a cigarette with an ash that is two inches long. Her skin is a pasty yellow in contrast with her white robe that has countless cigarette burns in it. Slowly my eyes make their way up her frail body. Her face is streaked with streams of black. Like the soil in a river bed that begins far upstream, her mascara has been carried by a river of tears to a new location. Her eyes show her pain. Swollen and bloodshot, they *scream* at me. I see malice, hatred, loathing. She's told me many times that she should have never had children, and seeing her eyes, I believe her. I believe her! Making the same wish I've made countless times before, I wish never to have been born. I feel ashamed. Ashamed I have brought so much pain to my mother. Why? Why do I purposely cause her such pain? Does everyone know what a terrible son I am? Do my friends' parents tell them to stay away from me because I am an ungrateful and uncaring son? Do my friends talk to me only out of pity?

Finally she stops. The alcohol makes her tired. She reminds me that she is telling me "how she really feels." She says, "When I drink, the truth comes out. I can't tell you how I really feel when I am sober." I am now allowed to get ready

for school. Knowing how she really feels, my self-respect is completely wiped out; self-loathing replaces any positive feelings that I once had.

...I offered this story to Paul on that day as a means of convincing him that what I had done was just. I didn't convince him; however, I did convince myself. When I watched those children being abused, it brought back memories. Painful; powerful memories. I know what it is like to be told "you are worthless." It took years for me to realize that I wasn't the problem. It took me even longer to regain what little self-esteem I currently have. I realize now that I didn't get involved because I wanted to; I did it because I had to. Seeing the pain in the children's faces, knowing what they were going through, knowing the destruction the abuse would create. I had to stop it; I had to act. I tried to show them it wasn't their fault, that what was being said to them wasn't fair. I tried to give them the one thing I never had... hope.