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Forward: Why Go Back?

by Marie Keenan,

Dr Marie Keenan

School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice

University College Dublin

Ireland

Phone: +353(1) 7168319

email: marie.keenan@ucd.ie

<http://www.ucd.ie/research/people/socialpolicysocialworksocialjustice/drmariekeenan/>

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Forward

Why Go Back?

Marie Keenan

I am honoured and humbled to have been asked by Joyce, June and Paula Kavanagh, affectionately known as The Kavanagh Sisters, to write this forward for their deeply moving and exceptionally informative new book. It was without hesitation that I accepted the invitation, because of my admiration for what these three women and their families are doing to help other survivors of child sexual abuse and rape, and all of us who love them, to navigate the painful and shocking realities of what child sexual abuse and rape are, and what they can do to our children and families. I am pleased to be part of a project that, as the women suggest, has touched all of our lives, in one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent.

This is a book largely about healing and about the steps these three women took to help themselves heal from a terrible happening.... one that lasted through many years of childhood, in some cases almost the entire, and as the women tell us, into their adult lives. It is a generous and honest book about the healing journey, in which the women draw on and synthesise the most current of research and give examples of how the research related to and relates to the real world of their lived experiences. Opening one's soul in this manner is generous in the extreme and will not go unnoticed by the many women and men who will read their accounts.

These pages present journeys of healing that have been painful and challenging, as the women came to heal from the injuries of child sexual abuse and to love themselves all the more. Their journeys are also ones of transformed pain, and readers are brought up close and personal to the ways that such pain and suffering has been transformed. The strength, wisdom, psychological depth, personal growth and freedom that resulted from working out and working through such inflicted suffering are in evidence in this book also as we the readers are brought into the ways in which this healing journey occurred for Joyce, June and Paula individually.

While this book represents three stories of how tragedy has been transformed, it is not to say that one should ever be complacent about the impact of child sexual abuse and rape on children. Child sexual abuse and rape can leave a legacy of human pain and suffering that can reach far beyond childhood. What we see in this book is how Joyce, June and Paula tackled such tragedy as they regained their power over its awful legacy, turning their tragedy into a source of great strength. This is why Joyce, June and Paula's book is so important.

The book presents the lists of questions that the women found useful to ask themselves along the road of healing and it takes us into their thoughts and feelings and their unique answers to these questions. The book then collates these questions into a number of questionnaires that other victim survivors, faced with similar situations, might find useful to contemplate. Questionnaires can be extremely helpful in giving permission to go into areas of our lives that we might not otherwise feel

able. The questionnaires presented in this book cover the key areas for victim survivors of child sexual abuse and rape and are set out in full in the pages of the book.

The Kavanagh sisters, who share their lives with us in this book, have also taught us that along with having the 'right' kind of therapy and the right therapist, and the love of family and friends, having good spiritual practices can also help the healing process. Spiritual practices can often be overlooked when we are in the fog of pain and suffering, but Joyce, June, and Paula tell us that it can and did help. I believe this to be true too. One of my own favourite spiritual practices is to say the Serenity Prayer, which I repeat as often as I can, the frequency of which increases at the more challenging times in my life: *Lord, Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can and Wisdom to know the difference.* It never fails to sooth and guide. Good spiritual practice and a positive attitude 'that this too shall pass' really helped Joyce, June and Paula and they suggest that they might also help others who suffer, especially in the wake of child sexual abuse and rape.

The healing that is presented in this book is presented as a journey... not fixed or finished ... and I resonate with this sentiment. It also made me think how suffering, which is so much part of the human condition, and the terrible events of child sexual abuse and rape, that can vandalize so much of childhood, must not be allowed to define those who so suffer. Rather, the approach to life that can emerge from such suffering and that sees healing as a journey to be taken with love, empathy and courage is evidence of pure wisdom in action. This book is a reflection of that love, empathy, courage and wisdom.

Split largely into three sections, Part One of the book takes us through the impact of child sexual abuse and rape on children and highlights the impact that can last into adulthood for many survivors. Part Two offers a treasure chest of ways to work through the pain and suffering of the impact, with love, honesty, compassion and wisdom. Both of these sections are sensitively woven together. Part Three of the book takes us bravely into relatively new territory, which is yet fully to be explored in the public domain, the impact on and healing journey of the secondary victims of such awful crime: the non-abusing mothers, the mothers of perpetrators, the partners of victim survivors who only come to know the pain of abuse through their partner's adult pain, the children of victim survivors. We get a glimpse into the pain of secondary victims of child sexual abuse and rape from the testimonies of three additional women who shared a little of their lives with us in Part Three. Their stories are painful, but necessary that we begin to contemplate the impact of child sexual abuse and rape on these secondary victim survivors too. This section also begins to talk about how relationships with the perpetrator can be transformed and healed, nodding us in the direction of the importance of restorative justice. While healing the relationship with the perpetrator might not be something that every survivor wants or believes in, and this is a topic that warrants a whole book on its own, the wider issues discussed in this part of the book open us up to new possible dialogues and to new areas for consideration: areas about which I hope to see more written and more public dialogue in time to come. The Kavanagh Sisters have put down the challenge to us to begin these conversations with integrity and compassion.

While this book is about the ultimate transformation of the pain and suffering that follows many children who have experienced child sexual abuse and rape, we must also be cognisant of the new

era of disclosure into which we have entered. Thankfully with this new era of disclosure-children now have a language to tell what is happening to them, in some measure as a result of the stay safe programmes in schools and the work of victim survivors and investigative journalists in putting this problem onto the social agenda and shedding light on its secret powers and harms. As a result, social attitudes have changed to allow for disclosures made by children to be believed and to better understood and responded to appropriately at the earliest, a much better situation than was heretofore the case. We can only hope in the light of this that the years of silent pain and secrecy that so many survivors have had to endure in the past, as they journey from childhood into adulthood in silent isolation, will be lessened in the future for all children who are so abused.

While much has been achieved, a mountain has yet to be climbed and we can never be complacent about the lived reality for victim survivors of child sexual abuse and rape. At the very least social attitudes have a long way to go to enable victim survivors to be met with real justice and compassion when their experiences come to be known and for the whole agenda of restorative justice to begin to be considered for those victim survivors who want it.

June, Joyce and Paula have done a great service in this work. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Marie Keenan