

# Breaking the Silence

## *Notes of a Victim and Therapist of Child Sexual Abuse*

By Niki Fisher

***I have been trying for years to tell my father that I love him. Love comes easily between my mother and me, as I curl up in her arms on the sofa and she strokes my hair. My mother has gentle, aging hands, which I still grasp when we cross the road. But I have inherited my father's large, strong hands. When I moved away to graduate school, he clutched my hand in his, leaning stiffly to plant a clumsy kiss on my cheek, and I urged myself, "say it now!" The words, "I love you," were trapped inside me. But I was embarking on a journey through which I would discover the meaning of my silence.***

My graduate supervisor is "old enough to be my father." Accordingly, when he is unimpressed with my work, I feel like a little girl. It is a response to me as natural as crying when my roommate is angry. Although I complain about, and explain away, my "lack of assertiveness," I seek no further to understand my feelings. When my supervisor asked me to fill a female therapist's position, I accepted as a matter of course. Working with a group of pedophiles sounded like a constructive career experience, and besides, I would not want to let my supervisor down. When I stood to leave his office, I mentioned to him that "I had an experience...." I hurriedly assured him that there were no bad effects and it should not prevent me from performing as a therapist in the group. As I walked home that day, thoughts of my "experience" began to return.

I had been afraid to tell my mother,

because I had talked to "the man" and had done what he told me to do (what his hands wanted me to do). I was embarrassed about the whole affair. My family found out through a friend who had been present but uninvolved. My mother came to ask if I had anything to tell her. I grinned awkwardly. I had been found out, and I did not know how to talk about sex. The police were called. I had to go to the station to make up an identity kit photo, and I was driven in a police car to show where I had seen the man. It was my big moment and my mother was right beside me.

For my first few meetings with the pedophile therapy group, which my supervisor led, I was silent (silenced?). I told myself I was learning (re-learning?). The pedophiles did not make me feel uncomfortable. I did not like some of them, but most were pleasant fellows who gained the confidence of therapists as they had done with children. I despised their acts and their rationalizations, but I was neither hurt nor afraid at the prospect of being their therapist. What kept me silent, I realized, was the fear of appearing foolish in front of my supervisor; not judging the child molesters, but being judged, feeling like a child.

*(Ten years later, I had difficulty sleeping in my father's house. I dreamed I was walking to school and I met "the man." He smiled and stretched that same moustache. Then, he tried to throw something in my face. All I saw was his outstretched hand blocking my view. I awoke, startled, sitting, sweating.)*

If I was going to be a therapist, I told myself, I would have to become more assertive. I signed up at the university counseling services, prepared to talk about being the youngest sibling and about hav-

ing to work hard for my grades so that I never had time for socializing. "Draw your ideal self," my counselor suggested. She was older, self-assured, comforting, and saw herself as nurturing me. I was in safe hands (my mother's hands). I drew a sexless, bold figure standing at the same height as shapely business women and men. "Now your present self." I had intended to use a whole page, but my Shirley Temple-like figure covered only a square inch in the otherwise blank sheet.

My father played with me a lot. His strong fists drilled "non-stoppables" into my ribs and I laughed uncontrollably. I must have seemed happy (what his hands wanted me to). But he's a good man, I love him. One day, I would like to tell him that I love him. One day, I would also like to please my supervisor. I would have to become more active in the group, but I fear the signs of his displeasure. He would turn his nose up, interrupt me, even raise his hands (his hands!) to stop me talking. I remained silent.

During one meeting, a group member recounted his recent experience in court. The children were coached, he complained. They performed in court and enjoyed the whole charade: "Don't ever tell me that children have bad effects from pedophilia, it's not true!" His words shot through me and I sank. For the first time in those meetings, I was silent outwardly, yet crying inside. Because I knew he was wrong, and I was afraid to tell him.

*(In my undergrad college, I hid at an isolated desk by a window in the library. A man saw me from outside and undid his jeans... I was afraid to look. I tried to ignore it and I was paralyzed in my chair. But then I ran, hiding in between bookshelves until a friend reached out and touched me.)*

The counselor reached across my silence.  
"I had an experience..."

*(I reported it in a sexual harassment survey. The college said it was all lies.)*

"Perhaps you could draw it instead?"

*(My friend's brothers had more hands than I did. They told me it was top secret.)*

I drew a small face with no mouth. My body was obscured by the tall, strong figure of a man. He was facing me and, viewed from the back, his hands could not be seen.

*(A teenager pressed against me in the*

*market place. Another woman saw it happen.)*

I cried as I told my counselor what had happened. His hands, those damn hands, they took my hands in his. And my hands did what his wanted me to. I rediscovered the fear and shame. I learned to feel the anger, the feelings which made me think I was still a child, the feelings I never thought could make me cry.

*(The woman shouted at him and told people around us what he was doing.)*

"It's all part of the same thing," I blurted out to the counselor. They hurt, they harass, they humiliate me and all women. And they keep us silent. We have to real-

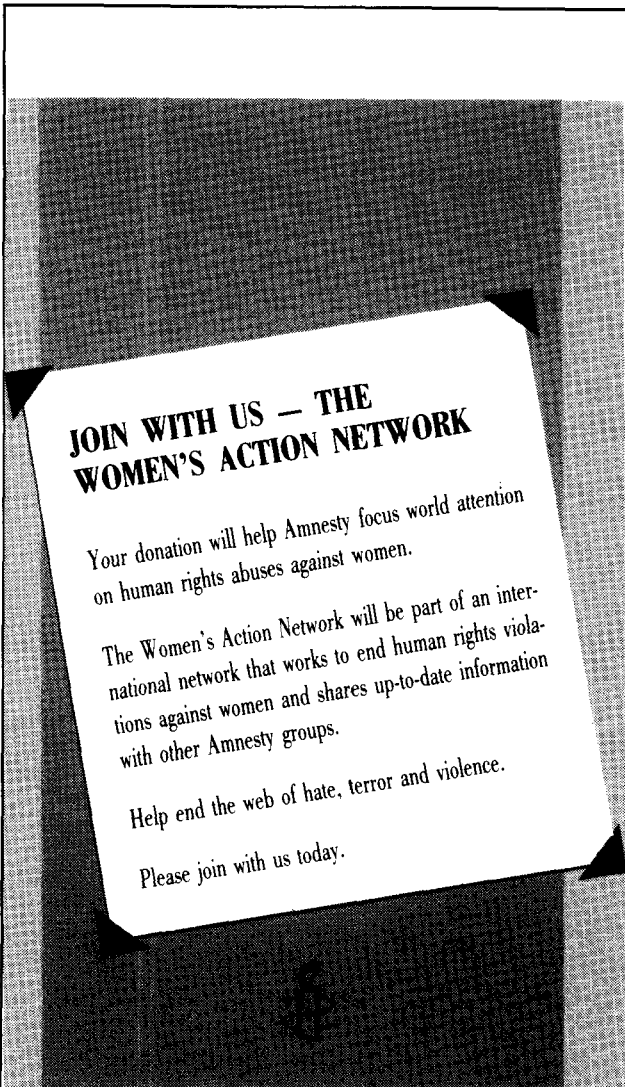
ize how they are making us feel.

*(I ran and told my mother.)*

I led a group meeting on the effects of child abuse on the victims. I led another on children's self-protection literature. Another on power.

A child used sexually is a child abused — hurt, harassed and humiliated. A woman who harbours these feelings and knows their place in her relationship with mankind is a survivor. I survived through my relationship with womankind.

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