

Family Secrets: Incest and the burden of denial

By Emily Morrison

The root of the problem, it appears, is denial: that natural human tendency to avoid trying to make sense of that which is perhaps too distressing or monstrous to make sense.

The problem, in this instance, is alcoholism, incest or sexual abuse, and, particularly, incest within families in which alcoholism creates what family therapist Dr.

of Nazareth Arts Center. "Most people who have been sexually abused have never felt that it would be acknowledged if they opened up and talked about it." To make her case for societal denial more convincing, Wise cited the case of a minister in Minneapolis who didn't believe that sexual abuse and incest even existed in his community.

The nature of the problem apparently

extensions of their parents. On a lateral level, interpersonal boundaries within the family may become blurred; in such an eventuality, it isn't clear "where one person 'ends' and another person 'begins.'" Finally, says Wise, intersubjective boundary problems often become manifest, and incest feeds them. "When incest occurs, everyone acts as if it isn't happening," she elaborates. This problem stems from a distortion within the individual psyche, "to try to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. It splits the identity."

Children, Wise claims, are often part of the elaborate and unstated conspiracy of denial. "Children may be taught by such parents that sex is 'dirty' and 'bad,' yet a trusted guardian is initiating it. A child just can't reconcile that. Or the child wants to believe that he belongs to a happy family." Often, she adds, such a child loves the perpetrator, and wants to "keep his secret."

This denial can be a particularly confusing issue in religious settings, according to Wise. "If you've been brought up to think of sex as strictly for procreation, or only in the context of marriage, and incest occurs, then telling someone can carry an additional burden of guilt. Think of the way an abused child would feel — that he or she had committed a terrible sin."

How is it, Wise asks, that incest can remain so hidden? The answer, she observes, often lies in the gray area in which alcoholic and incestuous family systems overlap. Both systems are characterized by blurred generational boundaries, a dysfunctional marital situation, and almost nonexistent parental guidance of children who must often reverse their roles and "take care" of drunk or emotionally needy parents. Alcoholic parents, like those who commit incest, have developed defense mechanisms by which they hide their abusive behavior from themselves.

In both situations, says Wise, "normal inhibitive mechanisms are short-circuited. If

are A-sharp and G-flat — which are the same note. If there's something that's being kept secret in the family, it engages so much of the family's energy to suppress that secret that none is left over for the positive, healthy things that need to happen."

Family roles become rigid, and nurturing or bonding have no room to develop, Wise continues. The children of incest eventually grow up and escape their "captivity," yet often at the expense of both their childhood and a mentally healthy adulthood.

"Somehow we expect children to have 'fended off' these things," Wise laments. "I emphasize to such people that they are both victim and survivor. Acknowledging the truth — which is that you're a victim — is a way of stabilizing the guilt. Acknowledging that you're a survivor is also important, because many abused children don't survive. They commit suicide, or — even if they do physically survive — they run away from home, become chemically dependent, become vandals, or abuse their own children."

At the Christopher Street Project, a Minneapolis treatment facility for adult women who had been sexually abused as children, Wise observed that people who look or act like victims often have an easier time asking for help from a therapist. "Those who look like survivors often don't know that their own pain is causing them to be, for example, workaholics," says Wise. "Some people feel very accomplished in the world, yet feel numb in their personal relationships."

A truly sensitive therapist is able to meet the incest victim/survivor at the crossroads between the two divergent parts of his or her severed identity. Such a process, if successful, helps adult children of incest "reclaim the lost part of themselves," adds Wise, "and fit the halves together."

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Mary Louise Wise terms "elephant problems" — "something so huge, so visible, that it's right in the middle of the room, but everyone in the family denies its very existence."

Denial, according to family counselor Dennis Boike, is not endemic to such agonizingly distorted family systems alone. His observation was made at the close of a discussion by guest speaker Wise at Nazareth College on Wednesday evening, Sept. 25. Boike Counseling, Inc., along with the Nazareth College department of psychology, sociology and social work, co-sponsored a two-day seminar Sept. 26-27 on the topic of "Victim-Survivor Paradox: Therapeutic Needs and Process For Adults Who Were Sexually Abused as Children."

In society at large, Boike points out, the unfortunate syndrome persists of categorically denying the prevalence of such pervasive societal taboos as chemical dependency, sexual abuse or abduction of children, and incest. These unthinkable occurrences are so difficult for us to collectively swallow, he insists, that many of us rationalize away their existence.

"We make them into either sacraments or orgies," Boike says of the blanket denial of subjects too painful or frightening for most people to deal with in any substantive way. Catholics, he points out, are certainly no exception.

"In the words of the British poet W.H. Auden," Boike observes, "Man can't stand too much reality."

Contrary to what many people believe about the prevalence of incest and child sexual abuse, Boike says the incidence of the problem is truly staggering. In his private practice in Penfield, Boike and his six associates see "an average of 10 to 15 incest cases a day. Many times," he adds, "the parent or older sibling who is the perpetrator has no realization at all that the incest has had any impact on the child."

Dr. Mary Louise Wise, a native Texan who is currently a therapist and licensed consulting psychologist in Minneapolis, concurs. "Sexual abuse and incest weren't talked about when I was first in school, eight years ago," she told the large audience that gathered for the discussion held in Room 14

needs some clarification for many people among whom the mere mention of the subject elicits confusion and anxiety. Wise provides a therapeutic definition of incest, which occurs, she says, "any time a family member in a more powerful role tries to satisfy a need with a less powerful family member, and sexualizes that need. It could be a parent, sibling, babysitter, an aunt or uncle — someone who is trusted, familiar and acceptable within that family. You can have an incestuous family system, and not have overt instances of incest ... Not much coercion is usually involved; because coercion is already built into the family system."

The needs to which Wise refers are actually for affection, closeness, power or other forms of gratification not primarily sexual in essence. "These are natural kinds of feelings and needs that we all have, but they get focused through a sexual form of activity," Wise explains. "Sexual activity is hardly ever strictly sexual. Sometimes what adults really need is closeness, and sexual activity is a way to get that closeness."

In a typical scenario, a man who has been taught to avoid his needs and feelings marries a woman who has been taught to respond primarily to other people's needs. "Let's suppose that these two people carry a deficit in being nurtured and cared for," proposes Wise. "Neither one really had a childhood. These two people may be a pretty good match for each other. He's going to provide direction for her, and she's going to be attentive to his needs — needs he doesn't even know he has. This, coupled with a natural desire to have children, can set the stage for these people to expect children to meet their needs."

Such individuals, Wise theorizes, may have unrealistic expectations of children, and not be terribly cognizant of children's needs. "Role reversals develop, where children are taking care of parents' needs," she adds. "There start to be boundary problems."

Boundary distinctions tend to blur in incestuous family systems, according to Wise, on several levels. The family may become isolated, and develop a belief that needs must be met within its confines — or perhaps there's too diffuse a boundary between generations, and children become

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Dr. Mary Louise Wise
family therapist

an adult is abusing a child, he or she is doing that without much empathy at all for what it's doing to the child. Such a person would have to have a very strong defensive orientation, a propensity for denial."

In such a family system, she adds, "the family range is muffled or distorted. You have a whole range of keys on the piano, and the only ones that are played in your family

we need to learn," Wise observed near the conclusion of her Nazareth lecture. "As you talk about something, it opens doors."

In the human family as well, perhaps, we'd do well to open our eyes and hearts to "the elephant syndrome," before it becomes so huge and pervasive that it will no longer fit through the doors without being divided into irreconcilable halves.

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their efforts confusing at best. Many volunteers assumed that the diocese in some way was supporting the shelters with direct financial help, which has not been the case. While most people acknowledge that without Tierney a shelter network might never have been created, few have recognized his time and effort in fundraising and organizing as diocesan support. And as he pointed out,

"the response we got from private sources was very generous. We really didn't need the diocese's financial support." Funds he raised in past years went primarily to pay coordinators and to meet expenses like buying into food programs.

Tierney was one of the first people to act when it became clear in the early 1980s that the city of Rochester had lost much of its

low-cost single-room occupancy (SRO) housing. In 1982 alone, nearly 600 single-room housing units were lost, primarily because the YMCA and YWCA stopped providing housing and the Edison Hotel was demolished.

During the winter of 1982/83, homelessness came to public attention when the city's daily newspapers reported on the

deaths from exposure of several street people.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark issued a letter to parishes that winter, asking churches to open their doors to the city's homeless population. St. Boniface, St. Bridget's, St. Augustine's, Corpus Christi and Blessed Sacrament opened shelters along with St. Joseph's House of Hospitality.

If you would like to help with the emergency shelters or are interested in the task force plans for a drop-in center and young adult shelter, call Ann Byrne at (716)244-1017 or Bill Privett at (716)546-4894.

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