



Protecting Our Children ~ Defending Ourselves: Surviving Domestic Violence ~ From Fear to Forgiveness

Brenda Irish Heintzelman

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Recent Studies indicate there are 15.5 million children, in the United States alone, who are living in partner violent homes. 15.5 million children holding their little hands over their ears, clenching their eyes tightly shut, waiting, listening, and barely remembering to breathe. Yes, 15.5 million children living in fear, unable to ask for help, perhaps even too afraid to cry. Victims of domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault are hurt on all levels of their lives, with some injuries being easy to recognize in hues of blue and purple, hidden yet known. Other injuries are not so obvious, yet there nonetheless, drilling holes in the heart daily as victims yearn for a real dad, for a sense of safety, and for the pain of his actions to be erased, though it can never be. The chance for the abuser to be a dad is long gone, taken away the first time he beat his wife, the first time he beat his child, and is never again to be known or realized, yet always hoped for. Victims are told by society to “just leave” while it goes unnoticed that victims of domestic violence, including wife battering, child abuse and neglect, and sexual assault, are emotionally frozen in fear. The batterer/abuser has conditioned his victims to believe that if they dare break the vow of silence, if they dare ask for help, if they dare leave the abuser, they will surely be punished. Whether by Bible or fist, the abuser convinces his prey that he is all knowing, and all powerful. In contrast, if ever the abuser is finally held accountable for his actions, he strategically convinces his victims that he ‘wouldn’t hurt a fly’, that it has ‘all been a big misunderstanding’, he ‘thought we were happy’ and is ‘still shocked to have been served with divorce papers’. These words serve as music to soothe the victims’ souls, if only for a moment, and the abusive masquerade of denial begins once more. “If only” becomes the excuse, with each child carrying blame on his small shoulders, or learning to blame little sister, the baby for crying, or Mom for not being brave enough to protect them from the madness, from the madman known as ‘dad’. In my case, long after the divorce, holding his wallet in the air the abuser threatened, "you mess with this and I will hurt those kids again." He then proceeded to ask the court for unsupervised visits, which were granted to begin immediately for four hours per week. Tragically, during each of the few visits which took place, my children were again physically abused by their ‘father’. At the final visitation, as my younger son struggled to breathe, suffering from an acute asthma attack, the abuser and his new girlfriend yanked the phone from my children's hands, and the phone line from the wall, before putting the children in the car and delivering them to the end of the driveway before speeding away. This is my story, one of struggle, pain, sadness, and fear. This is my story of courage, strength, and joy. Most importantly, this is my story of love, brought forth for my children, and for the other survivors of abuse, as well as the 15.5 million children who are still trapped in domestic violence, so that we, as survivors of abuse, can begin to relinquish the shame, the blame, and the isolation, which abusers have conditioned us to own.

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