



Listening & Learning: Stories of Survivors

Hope and Healing in the Diocese of Albany

A Conversation with Stephen Peacock

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It was Good Friday, April 15, 2022, when I first had a phone conversation with my dad's cousin, my first cousin once removed, Steve Peacock. Thinking back to that initial phone call, I'm guessing that it was the first time we ever actually spoke to each other. My extended family on my dad's side is large and spread far and wide. It's rare to see these distant cousins, let alone have a deep conversation with one. That conversation was the start of what I hope to be a long and life-giving relationship on both sides.

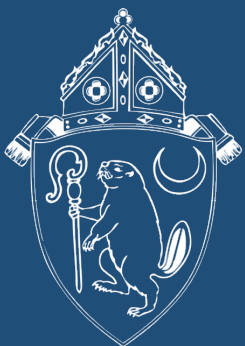
Steve had reached out to me several days earlier to set up a time to talk. Through another relative who had visited me in Rome during my time there as a student, he had learned that I was a student in a program at the Gregorian University that is focused on studying the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. We sent a couple messages back and forth, set up a time to talk, and proceeded with a profound conversation.

During that first phone call, Steve shared with me that he was sexually abused by an older male teenage neighbor when he was in elementary and middle school. My brief notes from that call remind me that he described having no tools to talk about it and did not feel safe telling his family for over a decade which led to feelings of shame, guilt, hurt, isolation, and loneliness.

Four decades later, things changed dramatically in late 2021 when he was on LinkedIn and came across the profile of Alex Prout whose professional tagline included the words "Sexual Assault Survivor Advocate". Alex and his wife Susan cofounded an organization called "I Have The Right To" dedicated to eradicating sexual violence in schools following the sexual assault on their daughter. So, Steve reached out to Alex to say thank you for bringing this cultural crisis to mainstream social media. To thank him for seeing survivors.

This was the beginning of a long process of revelation, of sharing and describing this abuse and its consequences over the past several decades. Steve is now in his 50s and has just recently become comfortable and prepared enough to reconcile with his nuclear family and share his pain with extended family, and others in public.

I was privileged to witness him open up to our extended family at a summer family reunion, the first reunion to happen in many years. Steve's sister Anne set up a purposeful and special time scheduled early one morning on a beautiful little beach



in Maine for family members to gather, listen, and share. It seems that all too often families, including ours, sweep the tough conversations under the rug where they go ignored – depriving all of us the strength and healing power of our most loved relationships. This session was intended to do the opposite of that; it was designed to reveal, share, and discuss some of those difficult moments. The time on the beach was extremely special for Steve, me, and indeed for each member of the family sitting there.

Over the course of the past year, Steve has since arranged spaces and times to talk about the prevalence and devastating impact of sexual abuse, the importance of mental health, and our cultural blind spots that support sexual violence, in his workplace, to hundreds of high school students at his alma mater McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester and on traditional and social media. He has spoken to parents, community leaders and recently he accepted the invitation of our Diocesan Hope and Healing Committee to share his experiences with us.

A few profound takeaways come to my mind from our conversation:

- When abuse does happen, the response is crucial as the initial reaction can lead to either silence, isolation, and anger as in Steve's case, or to beginning the healing journey as in the case of Prout's daughter. Words that heal start with tenderness and love: "you are not alone, it is not your fault", and critically "we believe you and will get you the help you deserve". Things that hurt: blaming the person, shaming them, phrases like "what did you do to cause this?", worrying about the ramifications to the abuser or the institution, like "what impact will disclosure have on Fr. X or the Church" and doubting or minimizing their experience, like "it's not that big of a deal, it happens all the time".
- In a spiritual sense, abuse is a "permanent cross". It's not temporary or short-term, and not something that someone carries for a while and then lays down. It's life-long with far reaching impact on relationships, family engagement, and trust. We must recognize the different forms of forgiveness, only the victim can forgive what was done to them. As only the survivor is the one living with the consequences.
- Focusing exclusively on being careful is not enough - the image of the "blue light" comes to mind, the ones that we see in parking lots and on university campuses. The "blue light" doesn't address the problem, it simply gives a way to report the problem. As part of comprehensive education, the blue light would exist as does the seatbelt, there only in the case of emergency when all else fails, not as the proud beacon of safety. So, we need to change the culture behind why these problems exist in the first place.
- Sexual violence, including child abuse, is prevalent, 1 in 4 women and up to 1 in 6 men (mostly young boys) have been or will be victimized. We have seen this pandemic in every institution religious and secular, including sadly within families. Generational trauma begets generational trauma, but it doesn't have to be this way. Where there is light, where there is honest conversation, we can address this problem.

- We need to address deficiencies in the male experience, including social value deriving from sexual experience and exploitation. We need to clarify misunderstandings of the meaning of “consent” and be clear in our cultural and legal definitions. We need to have conversations about healthy relationships including celebrating and sharing our full range of emotions, as well as emphasizing the beauty of mutually desired human connection.
- We discussed the challenges some may have with the image of God as a father and almighty male figure and how that can lead to misunderstanding of male centered vs. human centered experiences. It is vital that our language and beliefs reflect the value of all people, of any gender, of any race, of any creed.

One of the purposes of our Hope and Healing Committee is to welcome survivors to share their stories with us. We have now had several conversations like this during our meetings because we continually strive to deepen our own understanding of the effects of abuse and how to proceed ahead.

For me personally, this conversation was particularly special because Steve is a relative of mine. I am truly sorry that he had to endure this horrific act at a young age. Simultaneously, I am extraordinarily thankful that he accepted our invitation, I’m grateful for his courage, and I cherish our continued conversations as we update each other on the progress each of us is making in this area.

Steve has graciously reviewed and contributed to this document and given his permission for it to be published and shared.