

Surviving to Thriving

By Adriana L. Blake

Surviving is the barest, most meager form of life, in my mind. It is putting one foot in front of the other, and proceeding throughout one day, and then another. There is little joy in that, if any. Surviving is hardly more than eating, consuming food and water, and living from one moment to the next.

I'd heard so many times in church, about this "abundant life" God wants us to have. I figured it didn't apply to me for reasons I couldn't understand. An abundant life seemed as far from my reach as all the stars above. Perhaps, such a life was a fairy tale, or something that happens after one leaves this earthly existence.

God didn't want to deprive me of this abundant life. I knew that beyond all reasonable doubt. He wasn't my tormentor, or inflicting this unimaginable suffering on me. I cursed the concept of "free will," because it allowed my parents to abuse me without any intervention.

I was sexually abused by my dad from infancy till I was sixteen, and by my mother from the time I was months old, until seven. I've never even printed those words before, that she did it too. However, the abuse didn't stay in the sexual realm. Not even close! My father beat me and my two sisters, with whatever was handy. His favorite was a 1 x 4 that he engraved our names on. He wouldn't stop beating us either until he was completely physically spent. Though I didn't realize it at the time, when my father beat me, he was getting off on it. I was even more horrified when I realized that. An auditory memory of his breathing during the beatings clued me in.

My mom wasn't above using physical methods to get us in line either. I was shaken till I couldn't see, sent to school with red handprints on my face (before schools were taught to recognize child abuse), and had my hair pulled and yanked till it hurt for days at a time all the way to the roots. I was also force-fed detestable vegetables, with my mouth held shut so I couldn't barf.

My older sister was raised in a different home, with a different mother (lucky her!) but he beat that sister with a cat-o-nine tails. That is a whip of sorts, with nine strips of leather hanging down from it, and some sort of metal tack at the end of each strip. She wasn't lucky though, to be beat like that. He eventually left her and her mom, without a word, and went off to start another family with my wicked mother. She seems to have escaped

the sexual abuse, but her wounds are plentiful.

At seven years old, I tried to tell my mom what my father was doing to me. I didn't understand then, that what she was doing was a different version of the same thing. Her response to my declaration was, "You're crazy" if you think he did that." In a single sentence, she stole all the hope I could ever have of being rescued, AND inflicted more insult to the severe emotional injuries I already had.

Her response to my plea for help was nothing short of devastating, but it went far deeper than I could know. First, it left me, a young child, with a larger than life decision to make. If I believed myself about what he did to me, (years of rapes and molestations) then I was irretrievably crazy. If I didn't believe myself, maybe I'd be sane in her eyes, but I'd still feel plenty crazy. That is not a decision anyone should ever put on anyone, much less a little kid! Before I could decide which way to head on this, she made that decision for me. She proclaimed to her friends, to me, and to anyone near, that I was crazy. This was no joke. She meant it. I had no clue how far she would take this, or how many years down the line I'd suffer under it.

Not only was it evident that I'd never be able to confide in any of her friends, begging them for help out of my private hell, I could also never count on my own mother for protection. As it turns out, that would also apply to any of the other people who sexually abused me. It was useless, and I was without help.

My mother did this to me, to divert all attention to her own abuse of me, as well as protecting my father from any legal sanctions that would come his way, should I tell someone she hadn't convinced of my insanity yet.

Once I realized I couldn't turn to my mom for anything I truly needed, like protection, all of the sexual abuse from my parents was blocked out. I've never even told my mom that I know she did it too. It came back with a vengeance though, once I had my own child. The awful memories flowed for a decade, some here, and some there. They rocked my world with a terror that I hadn't remembered until they revisited me. The flooding of those memories racked my body with the physical side of all that had been repressed, and my body's reactions to those endless traumas.

As a result of all this trauma and psychological conflict, my body shut down. I became so weak I couldn't walk. I was so exhausted, it was as if I'd run a hundred marathons. This did not improve for over seventeen years. Many neurological problems accompanied the debilitating fatigue. By the time I was thirty, I was in a motorized wheelchair.

On the psychological side, I was diagnosed with severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder. If anybody can cope with repetitive rapes enduring for years, without serious

emotional consequences, I want to know how. After years spent in the wheelchair, I was also diagnosed with conversion disorder. I refused to believe it for a long time, until I realized that it was actually the proof of what my parents had done to me. I was at a loss as to how to prove their abuse because they were so adept at hiding it, especially behind the crazy label they sewed on me.

I'd staunchly defended against that diagnosis, because it was psychiatric, and this seemed to prove my mother's assertion that I was crazy. With her insistence, she created that as an identity for me. I believed her. I did things that seemed crazy, like cutting myself, and trying to commit suicide with frequency. The symptoms I had from the PTSD made me feel incredibly crazy. My mom also helped me feel that way directly, and not just when she denied the sexual abuse by my father. She would argue with me about simple facts, like that the sky was blue, telling me it was a different color. She wanted me not to trust my own reality. It didn't work though, because ultimately, I knew the truth, even if I doubted myself occasionally. It took a very skilled and gifted therapist a minimum of a decade to undo this aspect of my abuse---mental abuse.

If I had to pick the worst thing my mom did, I'm not sure I could. There were so many things that were beyond reprehensible, beyond unconscionable. She was sadistic. However, one major worst comes to mind right now. She sold me, pimped me out to a neighbor, and received money for it. I was five years old.

So, how did I go from surviving to thriving? God. He's the only way I made it through any of that! Why am I cleaved to a god who let me go through all of that, without human intervention? Because, I know He had my back the entire time!

When I was seven, I remember being all balled up on my bed, in the tightest position I could muster. I knew one of them was coming after me any minute, feeling that tension I knew too well, and I thought if I got close enough to the wall, I'd meld in with the wall, and disappear. I suddenly recalled the Bible stories that were in the waiting rooms at the doctor's office. They were blue and had pictures of Jesus on the covers. I loved those stories. I thought right then, "I wish Jesus would hold me like that!" Then, I felt Him there, doing just that. It was an unmistakable, intensely warm and loving feeling.

He talked with me. "You're going to go through some really hard stuff (even harder than what I already had suffered), but I'm going to give you gifts to get through this." Naturally, or supernaturally, I couldn't see Him, but I knew He was there with me. Somehow, I knew, even at seven, that these gifts weren't the kind unwrapped at Christmas or on birthdays. It would take me a long time before I knew what gifts He'd

bestowed on me. However, that memory was sealed into my bank, and I knew I'd never been forsaken by Him.

When Jesus left me, His warmth stayed with me a long while. Despite the agony of waiting for the horrible and inevitable abuse coming my way, I was seemingly transported elsewhere. I didn't feel the wrenching pain of the next intrusions, nor did I remember them. I had to eat breakfast with these people who violated me in every possible way often, and eating with them as if nothing was wrong, while carrying the real story and experience within me, was too much to bear.

Jesus gave me the gift of suppressed memories, so I could have some normalcy, some happiness in my childhood, but mostly so I could simply survive it. He also gave me what I called "inside sisters." These were alternate personalities that bore the pain of the abuses, so I could live. It may sound like I was crazy, but I learned in therapy that multiple personality disorder, now called "dissociative identity disorder" is a brilliant coping mechanism constructed by children with creative intelligence, to survive horrors they aren't equipped to cope with. When things were too intense in the outside world, an alter would come out and deal with it for me. I didn't ask them to, but it certainly was necessary.

Jesus always has had my back. He gave me therapists who could both love and understand me, and sort of re-parent me within the boundaries of their profession. He gave me the information I needed to heal myself, when I was ready. He healed me step by step, though that is a process more than a destination. He gave me the courage I needed to live. I would have to be very brave, and decide to live, and He put the right thoughts in my head when I needed them most. For instance, when I was inches away from committing suicide, on many different occasions, I couldn't stop thinking this thought:

What am I telling God by this act? "Your comfort is not enough for me!" That thought reverberated through my being every time in the later years when I was on the verge again, and I couldn't tell Jesus He wasn't enough for me. Not after all He'd given me.

I existed on the brink of suicide for so long. I'm truly amazed that I lived through it. One hair's breadth away from killing myself was all I was. I'd fantasized about it a million times, and the more violent the death, the better. I realized I was trying to kill both my parents, and my pain. Sometimes my emotional pain was so severe, it hurt to breathe, and it hurt even more, to simply exist.

The first time I tried to off myself, I was three, then again at seven, twelve; consistently from my early twenties until thirty or so; and sporadically afterward. I cut, burned, and slashed at my hands and arms, from the time I was eight, till about 28. My wonderful therapists taught me that I was trying to "write" my pain out on my arms, and that it was

better to speak it, or cry it out. I feared doing either, thinking I'd never stop screaming.

The one thing I could experience very well was anger. I was enraged at the treatment I'd received. I was furious that no one stopped this while I was growing up. There were chances for intervention, but they went unheeded by a few witnesses. Different family members have tried, unsuccessfully of course, to pat away my anger, give me platitudes, etc. It only inflamed me. I still have a lot of anger, but I fight it continually, trying to regain a peaceful balance within.

Just over a year ago, I spontaneously began to get well physically. I'd been healing emotionally for many years, and coalesced my inside sisters into one whole, unified being. I was finally able to accept the conversion disorder, because I detangled it from the crazy thing my mom inflicted on me.

Yet, up to that point, my body was still rather unwell. I then realized I'd never asked God to heal my body. I hadn't asked because I didn't think it was possible after seventeen years. I thought I was supposed to live in this body, and learn lessons from it, that would help me spiritually. It didn't really occur to me that it was okay to ask. A Christian book I was reading convinced me to ask. I don't even recall which book it was.

I asked, and I believed He could. After all, look at all He brought me through! Within a month or two, everything began to change, and quite spontaneously! God does work in mysterious ways! That is no joke!

One June day in 2011, I went outside without my wheelchair, just for a moment. I wanted to talk to my other half, who was on the deck, and it was always a hassle getting my wheelchair through the door without smacking and cracking bits of our screen door along the way. Then, I could stand up for up to two minutes on good days. We stood out there and had a conversation, and I noticed that I'd been standing longer than two minutes. I began to wonder what was going on, but healing wasn't in my head yet. I stood there longer and longer. What else can I do?

The next day, I walked out the front door, and talked to a new neighbor for 20 minutes. That was a huge record of vertical time for me. What else can I do? I wondered. The day after that, I walked to the nearest corner, maybe 50 yards away, and back. I followed that up with walking (using my walker for stability) to the furthest corner, which was also up a slight hill. Within a few weeks, I was taking my dog out for walks. I still used the wheelchair in the house, to conserve energy. Probably about three months later, I could walk a half mile, and I did that regularly.

I haven't yet stopped asking the question "What else can I do?" I simply assess whether I think I can do it, and if it's a possibility, I just do it. In September this year, I walked a 5k that took me up a very large hill to the finish line. It was sweet! I'm doing two more of them in November, and may even kick it up a notch to a 10k. I got a bicycle for my birthday this summer, and I've been riding that around. My wheelchair is up for sale, and it hasn't been used in months. I gave my walker away.

While I still go to counseling, the therapist and I determined I no longer have PTSD. I am not physically disabled any longer either. This means the end of disability income for me. I say, "bring it on!" I'm ready to return to the workforce.

My body was healed in another way too! To attempt to protect my emotional self from more pain, over time I gained a lot of weight, like 150 pounds or so more than I should weigh. I have now chipped 134 of them away. I still have a little weigh, I mean way to go. Now, I can feel as proud of my external self, as I am of my internal self.

One other important thing I had to do to heal was to permanently detach myself from my mother. Many relatives look down on me for leaving. Most will have nothing to do with me. A few see the truth and fully support me. My mom and her husband (he's not my father---my father croaked years ago) are salespeople by trade. They have convinced the majority of our family that I'm crazy, although my step-father admitted to my husband over twenty years ago that he knew I wasn't crazy, and didn't think I ever was. He just let my mom continue to run this scheme on me.

My mom still spreads this manure to whomever will listen to her, and she has my own daughter convinced I'm mentally ill. I still have to fight to prevent bitterness from filling me up. I depend on Jesus, the great equalizer, to avenge my pain. My mother has now become aware that I have a strong advocate, finally someone in our family who does NOT believe her, and is trying to right some of the injustices. I am blessed.

I don't try to kill myself anymore. My life is good, except for the manure spreaders, the estrangement from the other family members that I love, and my daughter's allegiance to her grandmother. Distance will repair some of that hurt.

God promises us He will restore the years the moths have eaten. I expect He will. He's already restoring me inside and out. My life will never be what it could have been without the severe abuse my parents heaped on me. That doesn't mean my current life can't be good, even great. I'll always probably experience pain from my parents' egregious errors, but I trust that God is going to hold them accountable. My father is already dealing with his eternal consequences.

I didn't think I could ever experience that abundant life God wants for us, but I see He's giving it to me now. It isn't a fairy tale after all! There isn't anything that can ever

lead me away from the Lord. I'm cleaved to Him through that which brought me the most pain, because He delivered me from it back then with those gifts, and now with my mobility and emotional freedom too. I can be the person He designed me to be. Fully!

I am quite certain that I've moved far beyond surviving, and am in the thriving phase of my life. I can't wait to see what it will hold for me. I'm not afraid to hope anymore!