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As the sun dipped on that balmy January evening, Joyce Allan immersed her body in the Arabian Sea and shed in its salty embrace years of guilt, pain and confusion.

What began as a vacation to India a year ago led to a long-awaited healing for Allan, scarred by the incest that had rocked her family for five generations.

"When I came back up, I felt like everything was being washed away," Allan said as she sat in the airy living room of her mountainside cottage in Crozet. "It really sounds like how people described their baptism."

For Allan, who is 61, the immersion was an act of self-forgiveness. For 11 years she felt she had betrayed her children for not protecting them from her father, who had abused her as a girl.

"That was the last part that had to be washed away, and I felt like I was straight again with myself and my children," said Allan, a psychotherapist with 40 years of experience working with abused children and adults.

Allan's journey illustrates the lifelong struggle of many victims of childhood sexual abuse to untangle themselves from a web of deceit and destruction.

"Talking about it has got to be the first step," said Allan, who underwent therapy off and on since age 19.

"You know all the public-health numbers: Any disease or illness or epidemic we don't talk about, we can't figure out how to prevent it. AIDS was hard because it was about sex. But this is even harder because it's about our relatives, our loved ones, and sex."

Allan not only talks about it, she spent seven years writing a book, "Because I Love You: The Silent Shadow of Child Sexual Abuse," which traces her father's sexual abuse for nearly 40 years. A pedophile, he abused dozens of other children.

"Of all the many people who knew that my father was a sex offender, no one spoke out to protect other children from his assaults," Allan wrote. "It is time to speak."

And so she does.

In 1955, Allan's mother, Marjorie Culbertson, opened a bathroom door and discovered her 10-year-old daughter kneeling before her naked father holding his penis in her hand.

Marjorie offered George Culbertson a choice between jail and a psychiatric hospital. He chose voluntary commitment, and she later divorced him. Allan has no recollection of her mom's discovery or much of the abuse, which likely started when Allan was around 3.

She only has two clear memories.

"One, when I was pretending to be asleep and my father tried to wake me up and I wouldn't respond. I think that I remember this because I was able to refuse, to say no. I was successful.

"And I remember being in the car with him, before he was caught. He asked me to take off my underwear and let him look at me," Allan said in a calm, measured way of speaking that is partly a result of growing up with deaf parents who read lips and used sign language.

Her ability to talk matter-of-factly about difficult sexual matters to small and large audiences also stems from nearly 30 years of being able to react to anything without emotion.

Allan said she suffered from dissociation, a condition in which one becomes detached from traumatic events and may not remember them.

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After her parents' divorce, Allan didn't have much contact with her father, who moved to Colorado. But over the years she dealt with the effects of his abuse, including depression, a drinking problem and an inability to enjoy sex with her first husband, who reminded her of her dad.

Even her initial career as a pediatric nurse "to help children stop crying" was connected to her abuse, she later learned in therapy.

Allan's book starts with the return in 1985 to her father's Colorado trailer home, where he shot himself to death at age 69 after an arrest for sexually assaulting a girl. Adding to that event, her brother, Gary, died a few days later from a heart attack.

The siblings never discussed whether Gary had been molested, too, but Allan believes he was.

"I'm sure he abused both of us because that's what he did with my children."

Allan's research included 150 interviews with relatives as well as colleagues and victims of her father. She also obtained permission to look at her father's psychiatric records, where she learned details about her own abuse.

Allan learned her father was molested around age 3 or 4 by his uncle. Her father generally began molesting other children when they were about the same age. He molested girls and boys, including a great-nephew, who was arrested for molesting his two sons in 1998.

It wasn't until Allan was 50 that she confronted her 75-year-old mother about her silence.

"I asked her, why hadn't she talked about it? We hadn't talked about it for 40 years."

Her mother said she was advised by a social worker not to discuss it. Mother and daughter began counseling together and their relationship deepened. Allan forgave her mother.

Soon she would seek forgiveness from her own children.

In 1978, Allan's father asked if his grandchildren could visit. Allan agreed after her father promised he would not touch them as he had her. She did not know about the other children.

Close friend Pat Arnold was among those who questioned her decision.

"She was in so much denial at that point she convinced me her father would never do anything and that she had threatened him with his life if he molested the kids in any way," recalled Arnold, who met Allan 35 years ago.

Allan said she functioned in a fog of denial, depression and drunkenness the six summers she sent the children.

"I had no memories of my own abuse except this left-brain fact my mother left my father for abusing me. But it wasn't very real to me. That's dissociation, no real emotions or memories. I was experiencing a major depression and medicating myself with alcohol, so my judgment was lousy anyway.

"Most of all, I had this piece of information and I said something to him. He promised not to. Not as an excuse, but in those days there was no news about pedophilia. I had no reason to think a man who I trusted, who was my father, tells me he won't do that – I had no reason to not believe it.

"I wouldn't do it now, with all the exposure I have now. I didn't know any better, and I wasn't . . . present."

In 1994, Allan's children – Joe was 24, Jenny was 21 – revealed their abuse. When they were younger, their grandfather threatened to kill himself if they told.

"Grampy didn't threaten us," Joe is quoted in the book. "He would say something like, 'You can't have your dinner until you take off your clothes.'"

"Other times he said, 'I do this because I love you.' Then he would talk about how sad he would be if I stopped loving him. Sometimes he would even cry. It was like the abuse and love were the same thing. So I never even necessarily thought about it as a bad thing."

The news devastated Allan, who had confessed to her children nine years earlier, after they scattered his ashes, that her dad abused her.

Guilt, helplessness and a sense of failure swallowed her. Jenny and Joe's forgiveness eased her burden but didn't remove it.

For Joe, counseling with his mother helped tremendously, and he urges all survivors to seek help. Sometimes he still struggles with what unfolded those summers.

"[Mom] hadn't made the connection between her abuse and how it impacted the rest of her life, so I guess talking it through and having a better understanding helped with the forgiveness part," he said during a phone call from his home in Albuquerque, N.M.

"I guess from a clinical side I can understand the denial and separation. But it doesn't make sense to me as a son."

Feelings about his grandfather remain mixed, too.

"He was a good guy, when he wasn't abusing us. He taught me to weld and do stuff. There is the dichotomy of being a good man in a lot of aspects ... but he was also this twisted person, this bastard abusing his own children and other people's children. It's a hard separation."

Allan suffered another heartbreak in 1997 while reviewing sheriff's records about her dad's arrest: He had shown his young victims pictures of naked children, including his own grandchildren.

Writing the book, which was published in 2002, helped Allan work out some of her grief, but not her guilt. That, she worked out in India a year ago.

In India, away from distractions, she realized "I hadn't forgiven myself for their abuse. This was the last piece of the story that hadn't gone away yet, and so I began to dedicate the next part of my trip to paying attention to those feelings.

"We saw this notice about a transcendent experience of the sunset over the Arabian Sea. And I decided I wanted to give myself a ritual about my guilt."

Allan gathered shells from the beach in Varkala and carried them into the sea. Facing the sun, she tearfully said, "Please God, help me to forgive myself for what I have done," then submerged herself. She released the shells and years of anguish.

"Until that point it had been about looking back and healing the past. It felt like there was the focus to look forward," she said.

Since then, her husband, Freeman Allan, whom she married 19 years ago, has noticed "a real softening to her. ... She is so at peace with herself. I know it was largely transformational for her. That's the wonderful thing about life – when we are ready, the healing will deepen and finally it will be complete."

Joyce Allan, director of the Child Development Resource Center in Charlottesville, has found a peace of mind and spirit that eluded her for so long. Her sense of contentment is as solid as the Blue Ridge Mountains visible from her living room, where framed photos of loved ones dot shelves.

There is no picture of her father. "I have released him. He's not part of my family," she said. "He's part of my story."

What would she say to her father today?

"What a tragedy, your life and the lives of all the children and families you've affected. I understand now that you were not aware of how much you had been harmed and how you had harmed other children. I wish but don't believe you would take responsibility if you were still living. But I hope others will learn from your story."

Allan's own story, filled with horrific twists, has taken a blissful turn.

"I didn't expect the happy ending," she said, smiling. "I feel very blessed."

Joyce, her mother, and Jenny and Joe are in happy, healthy marriages. Her mother's second husband, Henry, has adopted her and her sister, Dorene, "so that we now have a loving and responsible father."

In June, Joe and his wife, Erica, gave Allan her first grandchild, a daughter named Dalia.

"Everything feels worthwhile to know that the family cycle of abuse and denial has been broken and that this precious little girl will not inherit this legacy," Allan said.

Equally important, she said, is the need to "emphasize that speaking the truth about sexual abuse and working through the emotions and relationships is right and necessary, whether or not a person gets a storybook ending."

Allan's Web site, timetospeak.com, has forums for sexual abuse survivors and their supporters. Her book can be ordered there.

WHAT IS ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse includes "touching" and "nontouching" behaviors.

'Touching' behaviors include:

- Touching a child's genitals (including breasts, anus) for sexual pleasure or other unnecessary reason.
- Putting objects or body parts inside the genitals or mouth of a child for sexual pleasure or other unnecessary reason.
- Making a child touch someone else's genitals, or playing sexual ("pants-down") games.

'Nontouching' behaviors include:

- Showing pornography to a child.
- Exposing a person's genitals to a child.
- Photographing a child in sexual poses.
- Encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts in person or on video.
- Watching a child undress or use the bathroom, often without the child's knowledge.

SOURCE: Stop It Now! toll-free help line at (888) PREVENT

Contact staff writer Robin Farmer at rfarmer@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6312.

ILLUSTRATION: PHOTO

MEMO: THE SECRET CRIME