



Jane Elliott

The Little Prisoner
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Q: Why did you decide to publish your memoir, and in what respects has its publication changed your life?

A: For many years before I even took my case to court I would often say, (usually after a few tears and a glass of wine), that if I got to the end of my life after all I have been through without using what I knew and what I had experienced to help others there would have been no point in my ever having been here. That sounds a bit deep but back then I was severely depressed and trying to understand the point of life, mine in particular. I am a huge believer in 'we are all here for a reason and that things happen for a reason' and I think that's what helped me through. The only way I could ever put into perspective what I had been through was to think of people starving in Africa and people living through terrible wars in order to remind myself how lucky I was. I had this big problem with feeling sorry for myself so I would get drunk to be able to do it better, and time and time again I would come back to needing to do something. I knew I couldn't change the world but I wanted to do something, if only to save my own sanity. I read books that made me see there are people out there who have been through terrible things and come out the other side relatively unscathed. In the

process of writing their experiences down they are also giving hope to other people. After a few years of heavy counseling and a great psychologist I was ready to stand up in court. The statement I wrote seemed almost as long as a book and that was when I knew it was time to do it. I honestly didn't think further than actually writing the story down for my husband, and for my children once they were old enough, and for close friends. I hadn't even considered it would be published, that was the sort of dream that I thought only ever happened to other people, (and, to be honest, scared me a bit too). I was totally swept away with the whole process. It finally felt like my moment. I cannot begin to tell you how lucky I have been having met some beautiful people in the writing industry, and obviously my husband and children are my walking sticks through life. But what really 'changed my life' was reading that a lady who has been an alcoholic for many years due to her past had read my book and given up drinking, and that a young girl read it and has decided to become a social worker when she leaves school. I have had so many letters from people, both male and female, congratulating me and thanking me for sharing my story and in some cases for helping them to change their lives. The list goes on and on so you could say helping people change their lives has helped me to change mine.

Q: How safe do you feel, knowing that your stepfather has been sentenced to prison for fifteen years?

A: Unfortunately in the UK being sentenced for any amount of time does not mean the offender will serve that length. In fact as far as I am aware Richard will only serve seven years and sadly that means he will be free next year sometime. The only way he will serve longer is by really misbehaving in prison or committing more crimes while he is in there. As for feeling safe I have my good days and my bad; on a good day I think of how far I have come, what I have faced and I refuse to be forced to live a life of fear, but on a bad day it can be quite overwhelming. It has been more on my mind recently because his release is hanging over my head and when your brain starts to think about things you can't just turn it off. I don't think I will ever feel truly safe while he is free but I will certainly try not to let it affect me and my family in our everyday lives Because I believe we have as much right to enjoy living as everybody else.

Q: As a mother to two girls yourself, to what extent do you believe that your mother was unaware of your victimization by your stepfather?

A: Parenting is not easy and the old cliché of not being given a handbook is (for me anyway) very true, but I would like to think that I would know if my children were in that situation. I'm not saying that all mothers can look at their children and know they are being abused because if that were the case no abuser would be able to get away with it, but in cases like mine the violence was always present and not always hidden from my mother, so in that respect she was well aware of much of what was happening. I do remember when I was young my mother going to great lengths to protect me by taking me with her when she left the room and getting beaten for standing up for me when he was nasty or hit me, but I think as the years went by we just got into a routine and that was the way it was. If I'm totally honest I think her standing up for me sometimes made things worse because he would become even more angry towards me and I would have to pay for her interference, so in a sense she couldn't win. I used to think a lot about whether she was aware of the sexual abuse, for a long time it didn't even cross my mind, after all she was my mother and I loved her, but when my girls started to get older I would look at them and think of some of the situations that occurred and I just couldn't see how she didn't know. The older I get, the less I think about it. It doesn't matter to me anymore one way or the other since there is absolutely nothing that can be done to change what happened. If she did know then that is a very sad thing and I truly hope she didn't.

Q: In what ways do you seek healing from the traumatic experiences you have undergone in your life?

A: In the past I have done lots of things such as self help groups, counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists. The last thing I tried was hypnosis to teach me how to relax. I was very lucky and found a lovely guy who was very spiritual and had trained as a counselor and psychologist. I hit the jackpot with him as he was so in tune with how I felt. I think writing the book has helped too. People ask if getting it down on paper was a cathartic exercise but for me that part had already happened when I wrote the statements for the police and told my story in court. By the time I came to write the book I felt quite calm. A couple of parts upset me when I saw them in black and white but apart from that it was fine. The thing that really got to me were the reviews and letters I received. It blew me away that by writing my life experiences down I had actually changed people's lives. I felt the same myself when I read Dave Peltzer's-A Child Called It. That book opened my eyes so wide I had such admiration for what he had been through and for the positive way he had moved forward in his life. So when people tell me how reading about my life helped them to make life changing decisions I feel extremely useful!

Q: What advice would you offer to readers who are experiencing similar kinds of abuse?

A: This is such a hard question to answer because every person's experience is different. Some people are in a situation that they can easily get away from but just don't know how to, or don't want to cause trouble and fuss. It's also very hard for people who haven't been abused to understand the guilt that goes with it. Most children being abused will feel it is their fault in one way or another, either because their abuser has told them that or because their self esteem has got so low that they have come to that conclusion themselves. Many children, especially if a family member is abusing them, will find it even harder to tell because they are scared of causing a split up of the family. The only advice I would be able to give is firstly to realize that nothing they could have possibly done

would have made it their fault. Someone else is doing these things to them and it doesn't have to happen. Secondly they should tell someone they feel they can trust and allow them to help. If they don't know anyone they should call the police or a helpline or talk to a teacher. Sadly, I don't have the answers. My real feelings of what you should do and how you could get away are too enmeshed with my own experiences and wouldn't necessarily be right for other people. There is, however, one thing I am sure of; when I was a child there was no talk of abuse, either sexual, physical or any other sort. It was still pretty acceptable for a man to hit his wife now and then to 'keep her in line'. So when I was young there seemed to be no one to turn to or talk to, no stories in the papers, (that I remember anyway), and no books like this one in the library because the subject was so taboo. I remember when Childline was launched I was desperate to call but I believed Richard could read my mind so I never had the nerve to go through with it. I think we have come a long way since then. These sad stories now make the headlines and books like mine are freely available. I think it helps adults and children alike to realize that they are not alone and that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and I also think it's great when people who have never been touched by abuse themselves realize the extent of what is going on behind closed doors. I believe any education on spotting the signs of abuse now and in the future and understanding the survivors has got to be one of the best tools we have for stopping this awful, awful problem.