

***Fragments of Home:
Piecing Life Together after Childhood Sexual Abuse***
by Monique Lisbon (Braidwood Press: Melbourne, 2008)
www.monomusic.com.au

BOOK/CD LAUNCH SPEECH

This is a book, but it could have been a thesis. I remember a couple of conversations where the book was re-born out of a thesis. This is quite properly because...

In a very real sense this is Monique's story, but it is much, much more – because it carries a cross-woven theme of pain and hope that could also be the story of anyone who has been abused or hurt in such a way that pain, powerlessness, and consequent illness become dominant players in the scripts of their lives.

This book is more than a record of one person's path towards healing from sexual abuse. It journals the tough, disciplined task of self-exploration, theological reflection and hard-won discovery where the anxiety of doubt and sometimes the threat of death are unwelcome but frequent companions.

This book will challenge you (and those in your care to whom you lend this book, without asking for it back – so that you need to buy another) with some confronting questions such as: Am I too broken to be made whole? How do I respond to, or survive, those who represent the caring professions or the Church when sometimes they seem to oscillate between enemy, friend, liberator or jailer? How can it be safe to remember when I just want to forget? What sort of God lets this happen? Is suffering the only way to feel 'real'?

In the midst of these questions Monique sets up a dialogue between a broad-ranging Theology and a passionate Christology. Her narrative places the emphasis on an immediacy that denotes a hard-won but fragile sense of meaning. Raw and painful stories are selected from significant years of her life and woven through more contemporary events. This process reveals a deeply reflective person in the midst of the apparent chaos of a life in the process of healing. The structure that emerges gives us a comfortable handle on the book that belies the true cost of developing that structure:

1. **Starting Again.** The personal/psychological dynamics of coming to face and grapple with having been sexually abused as a child.
2. **Perceiving God.** The spiritual/theological perspective of healing. Though this section is distinctively 'Christian' in flavour, it does not attempt to proselytise or sway readers to a particular framework, and poses questions rather than providing definitive answers.
3. **Leaving Home.** Exploration of the particular struggle to heal from abuse when it is perpetrated by a trusted caregiver, rather than a stranger.
4. **Living Forwards.** Exploration of what it means to learn to live and relate healthily as an adult in the wake of the abuse.

The theological reflections that come at the end of each chapter are signposts for a deeper theological work that is perhaps yet to be written. The complex pastoral theologising (very few of us are systematic theologians!) that seeks to answer the question "Where was/is God when all of this was happening to me?" leads Monique to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his proposal that "only the suffering God can help". We are then on a bit of a roller-coaster where evocative headings such as "Sitting on Razor Blades" (grappling with the absence of God), "Gnarled Roots" (of self-doubt), and "Skin" (healthy and unhealthy boundaries) will reach out and grab us – sometimes against our will. In turn these sections will, I believe, all conspire to unsettle the reader and edge him or her into what I often call the empathic shadow-land of a book such as this.

Such reflections, albeit tough, honest and uncompromising, strangely offer a place of peace and stillness after the intensity and rough edges of the narrative and will no doubt for some readers reopen wounds or stir even more unwelcome questions. However Monique's theological insights and discoveries are still in process and even as they offer readers the threads of her faith, perhaps they will become part of the fabric of reflective healing for many. As readers we are not students of the social sciences or integrators of trauma theory, I get the feeling we are peeping over Monique's shoulder as she writes her journal. Thank goodness it's a book and not a thesis! This is a gift to the reader who has been similarly hurt or to the reader who struggles to understand how anyone could experience such deep pain and despair.

Each chapter therefore concludes with a window on life that unlocks fresh meaning and promises new hope for today and tomorrow.

The struggle to survive and hold onto faith often finds that a tiny spark of hope can emerge: "I know I am not alone."; "[I am] finding the freedom to hold my questions largely unanswered. And finally discovering that only the suffering God can help."

Monique's songs on the accompanying CD provide another reflective counterpoint to each chapter to touch another part of the brain.

This book is inhabited by a community of people: the agonising steps towards truth as she is hurt by well-meaning believers; the letters she writes that spell out the hurt; or the life-giving sessions with her therapists, all enable Monique to refuse to compound the lie of denial. The constant search for reconciliation and the exploration of its meaning, leads Monique into a mysterious process where paradoxically "cutting off [contact with the abuser] empowered me to keep healing".

Monique is holding and describing for us the jigsaw of the pieces of herself and the picture is slowly emerging – it is a picture of hopeful integration, honest searching and reflective determination. She outlines a chronology of pain with postcards from the past and the future where birthdays became doorways to yet another hospital room or to a new dawn. Each chapter is a persistent unravelling of themes of hope from raw narrative. The dance with anger and the question of how to express it is a powerful dilemma. It is not yet solved but Monique can now declare "My needs are worth defending" and I am learning more about myself each day.

We witness the complex and fragile patterns of a relationship with God presented in such a way that those who have been through similar experiences will recognise it as a story of redemption, courage and hope. There is no slick 'God talk', no easily found (and just as easily lost) grip on spiritual insights. This is a realistic story of a faith that now settles down for the long haul, and knows it is OK to be on the road. Monique has understood the role of therapy as "a tool for examining the deeper issues and relational dynamics" and she embraces, and is embraced by, the suffering God who is found in Jesus the Christ.

Monique, congratulations on your hard work and we thank you for the gift of this book to many.

*– Rev Dr Alan Niven
Vice-Principal and Head of Pastoral Studies
Churches of Christ Theological College, Victoria
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