

# Healing Sexual Abuse

by Ulla Sebastian

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Ulla Sebastian has trained in psychoanalysis, Bioenergetic analysis, group dynamics and group therapy. Since 1970, she has worked as a psychotherapist and workshop leader, focusing on body awareness, development of the self, love and sexuality. Ulla has been part of the Findhorn Foundation Community for nine years and during this time she has focused on programme development, internal education and integration of the open community. For the last two and a half years she has helped many to recognize, build up and use sexual energy in a creative way, to shift the consequences of sexual abuse and re-programme attitudes so that joy and fulfilment can be a normal part of daily life. Ulla herself practises The Healing Tao, as taught by Mantak Chia. The text is based on an interview with Ulla that has been put together by the editorial board.

*Why is sexual abuse such a prevalent issue in our society today?*

The incidence of sexual abuse isn't higher now than it was before; it's just that the way we culturally interpret or define abuse is changing. Awakening to the implications of abuse started in the women's movement, where women suddenly realized that being used or treated in that particular way was not their only choice. What we call abuse today comes as a direct result of what we have learned to understand and value about our individuality and the uniqueness of each one of us. Culturally, that's a relatively new concept which has only been around for the last two hundred years.

What I think is happening today is that men and women are also awakening to a more equal way of being with each other. Before that, we lived in a more tribal, animal way, particularly in rural cultures, where people have been used to living out of their animal nature and using each other. For example, in many rural cultures it has been the accepted norm that the governor, landowner or a male family member of high standing has had the right to 'use' or sexually initiate the virgins under his jurisdiction. Until relatively recently, power over in the realm of sex has been an accepted part of our patriarchal society, ever since man took power over woman.

Nowadays we are also a split culture, and a narcissistic culture, if I may use those terms. There's a split between the mind and the body which is the result of the technological evolution of the last two hundred years: the dominance of science and the operation of the mind has made the body into a mechanical instrument rather than an integrated part of our being. The narcissistic part is that many people are cut off from their feelings, which also cuts them off from their fellow humans. They feel isolated and alone but at the same time experience tremendous economic pressure to perform and succeed socially. Because they have lost the love connection with others they are capable of abuse on many levels, of

walking over dead bodies in order to achieve personal success. The focus on our individuality has been a necessary part of developing and recognizing our uniqueness, but it has now gone too far and is becoming destructive to ourselves, others and to the environment.

*Do you see any of these issues being worked out within the Findhorn Foundation community?*

When I came to this community nine years ago, the Community was still operating like an organism, or a tribe. Tribes operate on a collective-symbiotic level. The individuals are undifferentiated parts of the whole. If you look at human development, a child has to have a symbiotic bond with the mother during the first one and a half years of its life, because that's how it can survive. The child perceives the mother as a part of itself and likewise the mother perceives the child as part of her biological being. Then, at around eighteen months, a period of separation and individuation begins when the child realizes that it is its own person. If all goes well, by the time the child has reached the age of four or five, mother and child can meet again as two separate beings and at the same time acknowledge and recognize their unity.

During the years I've been in the community I have observed how people have gradually started to individuate more. Now we are changing from a community into a village, and we face the question of separating out into independent, unique parts which then re-connect through a spiritual core. This process means that we are moving from a symbiotic way of connection towards unity, from an organism towards a new blend of organisational and organismic structures.

Many of the individuals drawn to this community think they're highly spiritually evolved because they're able to leave their body. But the actual story is that they were forced to leave their body, it didn't come through their spiritual work, it came through sexual abuse, a traumatic ongoing event - which is not transcendence, it's a leaving. I know myself that what drew me here was the overlighting presence of a love that was pure, a love that would allow me to free my soul and bring it home. People with a history of abuse feel drawn to come here and connect with the spirit of unconditional love and acceptance which is present and which helps the soul to recognise itself. But they also bring with them coping patterns of abuse that get played out on a social level. At the root of those coping mechanisms is a low self-esteem and a lack of self-worth that has been running the Community for many years. Other mechanisms include hiding, isolation, spacing out, blaming, dishonesty (mostly with oneself), control, and denial, mechanisms that we experience in living and working together and that we're also learning to transcend. We're recognizing as we play these mechanisms out that they're abusive, and as we recognize this behaviour, we are given the choice and chance to transcend it. It's becoming part of our collective awareness that this is what is happening. It's part of the process of purification. I believe that as we do this work we are also creating a hologram or a morphogenetic field that can help other people in our culture to connect with these issues and move through them as well.

The work of recognizing and looking at sexual abuse as an issue which affects all of us, began in this community about two years ago, during a Community Game of Transformation. I remember how difficult it was before that even to talk about it here. Now the danger is that it too easily can slip into lunchtime conversation and could become a new sort of "woundology": "Oh, that's nothing, listen to what happened to me!" When talked about in this way, the impact of working with the pain of sexual abuse can lose its power of healing and transformation.

*What are the "symptoms" of sexual abuse?*

Sexual abuse has a whole range of implications. One implication is that it is an assault on the soul which, depending on how traumatic the situation has been, causes the soul to withdraw, freeze or split. We leave our bodies and are no longer able to relate sexually to ourselves or each other in the normal way. To heal the split between body and soul, we need to expose and own the experience of sexual abuse. Until we do this, we will adopt different coping patterns as ways of dealing with sexual energy.

One option is to deny the sexual impulse on the physical level and channel it into developing our spiritual side. Another option is to follow the culturally popular path of 'sexual addiction', as it is called in therapeutic literature. Because the body is separated from the soul, it becomes possible to have an endless number of lovers, because the body goes for physical pleasure.

What happens in sexual abuse, if you look at the energetic level, is that our physical organism gets over stimulated. The energy which can be held by a fully developed adult organism, especially the energy of sexual arousal, is far greater than that which can be held by the organism of an infant or three year old child. After abuse, the sensation of over stimulation will be stored at a cellular level in the infant/child's body. The body's cells will remember, not the brain. Because the experience has been very intense and highly exciting, the infant/child's body will look for that pleasure again, and will want to replay the over stimulation.

Freud was the first to point out our need for compulsive repetition: we tend to repeat scenarios in our lives that have been traumatic or have been habitualised by continuous repetition. We do this out of our need to recognize different pieces of the trauma-puzzle, until we get the whole gestalt, and the pieces brought together once again can form a whole. We do this with the abusive experience as well. Sometimes replaying the situation can be a dangerous process, especially if the original experience was connected with violence. I make agreements with my women clients that if they have to replay something; they need to make sure they choose safe, non-violent situations.

Historically, around the turn of the century and back through the last two centuries, when women in a bourgeois society didn't have the outlet to follow sexual addiction that women have today, they became frigid, which means to not feel anything, to deny the sexual impulse. They went into what Freud identified as 'hysteria'- they fainted or became paralysed.

Today, this option takes the form of the woman letting the man just "do it", of letting him have her body but not her soul. In a way it's a sort of prostitution. In the sixties there was a big discussion around the "prostitution" of married women who paid with sex for the safety and security of a family and a home. What is often not acknowledged is that the woman also holds power over the man by withholding the real unity he may be looking for. This, of course, is not intentional. It is just another one of those coping mechanisms.

Another way of repressing the sexual impulse is through what is known in clinical psychology as the 'cleaning compulsion'. Again, the psychological dynamic behind this has to do with the split between body and soul. For the soul, the body is "dirty" and "guilty", because the body goes for pleasure while the soul strives for the sacredness of joy. The soul finds it difficult or impossible to forgive the body for this.

When working with abuse issues, often the hardest part for people to acknowledge is that in the abuse there was pleasure and excitement. It's much easier to say, "That bastard did this to

me and it was all awful". But that's not the truth. The physical body doesn't have a moral system, it functions according to the simple pulsation of expansion or contraction; inbreath, outbreath. The body asks, "Is this pleasure or not pleasure?" Not, "Is this moral or not?" The mind has a whole moral frame and that's where the inner body-mind conflict arises.

*Who are the perpetrators of sexual abuse?*

A lot of sexual abuse happens, not with parents, but with neighbours, uncles, and strangers. When we think of abuse we think of it as something sadistic or really cruel, and often it is. But it's important to understand that abuse can also happen out of love. The father can be so in love with the daughter that he can't contain his energy. He wants to give her the best, and if he comes from a rural background, then the best he can give her is sex. He is not aware that he is over stimulating her and destroying or diminishing her options for a healthy life. He is not intentionally mean. He is 'just' crossing the boundaries. I think it's really important to see abuse as a whole range of circumstances and depending on what those are, the impact is very different.

*Does sexual abuse always happen between male abusers and female victims?*

I think the crossing of boundaries happens more often between fathers and daughters than between mothers and sons, but this happens as well. Consider the case of single mothers without a partner, or mothers with a partner who doesn't satisfy their sexual needs; and then there's this wonderful, gorgeous four-five-six year-old being who adores mummy. It's very tempting to make him the confidante or to cuddle up with him. Mothers are mostly not aware of their own sexual energy or of the danger of over stimulating their boy sexually. So they say, "OK, sure I'll sleep with you tonight - let's cuddle up". Something we often don't want to admit as women is that women raise men who abuse women who raise men who abuse women who raise men. It's not a one-sided story. Women are the mothers who pass on the abuse and who also act it out unconsciously.

*How can we heal sexual abuse?*

The process of healing the issues around sexual abuse has a rhythm of its own. When we start to look at the abuse, we usually do so from a distance. Then the emotions hit us in due course and working these through just takes the time it takes. We have to get in touch with our body, explore it and develop a compassionate attitude towards it. We need to understand and then forgive the physical body for being a body - its true nature is animalistic. We need to understand how all our bodies operate (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual) and learn to make our peace with them, embrace and accept them all, because they all have their own truth.

What is important about the process here is that we don't get into the victim role that we really look at the abuse. What is the gift it offers, what is it that we as a collective can transcend? The gift certainly is that, as we left our bodies, we were able to develop our psychic, spiritual and heart capabilities. The difficulty then is how to get back into the body, make friends with the body and then bring it back with us up to the spiritual level.

What happens in sexual abuse on the physical level is that the lower part, what we usually call the lower three chakras, gets numbed out, especially the perineum or the first chakra at the base of the pelvis, which is the place between the vagina/penis and the anus. In Chinese

medicine this point is called the "Gate of Life and Death" because it's a point where, if it's not properly sealed, our sexual or life-force energy runs out.

So one of the first steps is to become aware of that part of the body and learn to breathe into it again, which is very difficult for many women because it requires them to travel through the pelvis, which is usually that part of the body which has been wounded. As we come back into our bodies, we need to release the emotions associated with the abuse which steal off energy; memories carried in the pelvis need to be opened up so the energy can move freely through this area again.

A lot of the work required is building up work. Sexual abuse is a trauma which interrupts the normal, healthy process of sexual development. Sexual development becomes arrested at the point at which the trauma occurred, so in order to heal the trauma it is necessary to continue and complete the work of building the structure or container for this energy which never got built. When the container is too small to hold it, the energy becomes overwhelming.

The Healing Tao system of Mantak Chia has been very helpful to me, personally, and I've been passing it on to many people. The Taoist system works with recycling. It teaches us how to become aware of sexual energy and how to circulate, balance, preserve and recycle it so that it can be used to heal, build and strengthen our inner centre. We learn how to use our consciousness, which is more powerful than animal desire, to seal our container and to hold, build up and then redirect sexual energy to use for whatever purpose we then choose.

An important step towards healing is to start talking about sex with our partner, as honestly as we can. As we come back into the body we need to start exploring the senses, because the body is sensual, in the sense of having five senses. We need to do things like touching, smelling, seeing, tasting and listening to our environment and to each other. It's often a very gentle process. It's a whole new universe, which can be scary, and the level of honesty it requires can also be scary. We need to ask ourselves: What would I really like? What am I wholeheartedly able to give? Or is there something inside which needs to be cleared with time and work? Is there enough trust between us? Or, how can we build it up? Is the atmosphere safe enough for us to explore these things together? Can we just play, not be too serious, just have fun?

Until we have fully resolved all the events related to the abuse, which takes a lot of work, there will of course be limitations to our sexual practice: certain sexual practices may not be open for exploration. For instance, if the woman experienced oral abuse as an infant which involved having a penis pushed down her throat to the point where she felt suffocated or nearly died, then that's a practice that's not easy for that woman to do. Yet many men like it. Many women do it because they feel obliged to do it, although they almost feel like vomiting afterwards. So it's a matter of becoming honest about it. Some things may be really difficult to do and it may require gentleness to explore those things again and gradually to begin to appreciate the exciting side of it.

Healing comes when we as adults learn to exert our powers of consciousness and choice. As parents raising children we are in the position of being able to put a stop on abusive family programming. We also are in the position of being able to re-parent ourselves and learn to work with sexual energy in a non-abusive way. As we become aware of our own history, personally and collectively, we have the choice and opportunity of creating something healthy, something new.

*What does a healthy sexual relationship look like?*

A healthy sexual relationship allows us to express ourselves in whatever form that takes. Some people need a lot of touch, some people need erotic words, some people need visual stimulation, some people want the light off and some people want the light on, some people need sounds, some people are embarrassed by sounds. There is a broad individual variety of expression. As we grow healthier we can also bring elements of the abuse into the sex relationship because we need to play them out so we can own them. A healthy sexual being, to me, would be somebody who is "in the flow", to use a popular term from the New Age jargon. This describes to me someone who is conscious of their sexual energy, who is able to let that energy flow through them, and who can use that energy in the way they choose.

Sexual energy is the energy of creation. Those who learn to master it can create with it whatever they wish - they can create an intimate relationship with their partner, or a wonderful painting, a family, a house, or heal themselves, others, the planet - whatever they choose. As we become more grounded in ourselves and in our sexuality, we begin to recognize and realize ourselves as the creative and powerful men and women we are meant to be.