

Never Tell: One Rule Made to Be Broken

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The other night I was sitting in a booth at a diner with two of my best friends. It was a weekend night, and there was a lot of action around us — what we refer to as "strong social overtones."

Pretty much out of the blue, one of my friends said, "I guess my grandfather was abused."

We know what his grandfather did to his mother and his sister, and so we agreed, "Yes, it probably happened to him too."

"I guess I come from a long line of child abusers," he said. It was a weird thing to say on a hopping night at the diner, but nonetheless, it was good that we were all close enough for him to bring it up if he needed to.

Then my other friend said, "I guess I do too." We shrugged and nodded, sharing that.

"Me too," I said. We just sat there with it for a moment. We are close friends, but none of us would say it's because of that particular shared history. It's more because of a shared love for art and exercise and the mysteries of the night. We were brought close together by these transcendent things long before we told each other about the incest in our families.

I didn't feel bad about it, and I don't believe they did either, sitting there in the diner and acknowledging that behind each of our individual struggles lurks probably the very same demon.

All three of us escaped the abuse that occurred to our family members. We are doing all right, and we are glad to have each other to do all right with.

We don't have kids. None of the three of us ever do too well with long-term relationships. But we are basically three gentle men. We never have and never will abuse anyone's children. If any one of us is ever blessed with children, those kids will be given plenty of love and protection.

We don't wallow in the fact of incest. But we do talk about it. Our families don't like for it to be talked about, but we think the demons like it even less. When the time comes, we talk about it.

When my friend (the one who broached the topic) was five years old, and his sister was four, their grandfather took them out into the woods. The old man stripped them and showered them with a hose, and nothing much else happened. When my friend got home, he blabbed about it to everyone who would listen and everyone who wouldn't listen as well. No one believed him. But still, he had done enough to be spared the rest. He had told.

His sister was more the quiet type. She became the recipient of the abuse. Those demons like silence.

We believe in talking about it when the time comes, as sometimes it must. It's no fun, and there doesn't seem to be a "good" or a "right" way to tell it; but "don't tell" is the abuser's dictum, and that dictum must be violated.

My other friend writes about it. He calls it a weakness in his father. He doesn't call it an evil or a demon or a sin—he just calls it a sad and pitiful weakness. It's strange to hear a man talk about his father in such pathetic terms. There is no love or hate either in what he writes about his father—just a lot of sadness, and love for his sister.

As for the story in my family—some of them are so afraid that I will tell it. And one way or another I must, because I have a debt to everyone who has ever had the courage to tell me their story. My payment of the debt is that I do not brook the silence.

I only recently began to uncover the particulars. I spent a weekend with my grandmother and got her whole life story. She told me more than she realized she was telling. To her story I added all that I could glean from my mother and from my aunt, and then I went through ten photo albums ranging from my college graduation all the way back to the nineteenth century. I know some of the details now. But that doesn't change much. Those details were already the scenery and the soundtrack to my formation. What has changed is the silence. I can't tell you what I've been specifically asked not to tell, but I can tell about three men in a diner dealing with it.

"What if you could trace it back to the man at the root of it?" asked my friend, the topic-broacher. "What if all three of those original abusers were sitting over there in that booth in their bearskins? What would you do? What would you say to them? Because the fact of the matter is, if not for them and what they were, then we wouldn't exist.

"Think of the abuse you could stop," he continued, pointing at the only empty booth in the place, "if you could negate those three guys—three men in bearskins sitting right there. And if you eliminate those three guys, then generations of children would be spared from torture. But if you eliminate those three guys, then we get negated too, and we don't get to sit here at the diner with all these funky weekend overtones."

It's hard to say what I would do. I don't hate those men for what they did, probably because it didn't happen to me. But I don't love them either, and I probably would eliminate them and myself and my two close friends if given the opportunity—because I have had a very close-up look at the pain those abusers caused.

I can't be sure what I would do, though, and it's a moot point anyway. What I do know is that I have a couple of good friends to talk about it with. That we will do. I'll talk about it with you too.