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Evil injustice

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Marietje Lemmens

PERSONAL STORY

Marietje Lemmens grew up as one of sixteen children in a small village in Limburg. Ever since she was six years old she had been sexually abused and this went on until she left home at the age of sixteen to become a nurse. She was the mother of two young children when she became psychotic. The medicine she received then caused her further trauma. With the help of her twin sister, trained in women's health care and who was also one of the initiators of self-help groups, she managed to recover. She discovered that many other women had had similar experiences: abuse and feelings of guilt, fuelled by the Catholic Church.

Michi Almer recorded her story.

Devil in the mirror

I really want to explain about being possessed by the devil. The church has convinced us of this in so many ways. It was only later that I could unmask the way in which it affected me.

When I was psychotic, my inner world was in fact my outside world. I became a life-size devil complete with claws and red horns. I found myself repulsive when I looked in the mirror. It shocked me, it drove me absolutely crazy. My husband Jan was extremely shocked when he saw me walking around the house in the middle of the night with a rosary. I told him that I was possessed by the Devil and that he must make me a cup of coffee because I was caught in a horrendous nightmare and couldn't wake up.

Traumatized and overburdened

Jan had been depressed for months and we had two young children. Perhaps I was bit overstressed too. Jan was given Halcion, a strong sleeping pill, for his depression. It even said on the leaflet that it could make you feel suicidal. He was a teacher and during the day he went to work and every evening he would talk to me about suicide. One day he dropped one of his pills on the bathroom floor and our five year old son found it and thought it was a sweet and ate it. He reacted as if he was very drunk and we had to rush him to the doctors. It was such strong medicine. It was all extremely intense.

There was something more than this going on. Our first daughter died shortly after she was born. As a child I was abused by my eldest brother for many years. I was in fact also depressed. I had depression even as a child. I couldn't go to school and there was always something the matter with me. I only learnt how to tell the time much later in life. My father couldn't understand this and made me a clock with a big and a small hand, I never managed to get to grips with it. I didn't understand Mathematics either, I was inhibited, extremely inhibited. I just lived with it until the psychosis came along.

**ON THE HEALING POWER
OF HUMAN RECONNECTION**



Growing up

At home there was always a big difference between the boys and the girls. The boys were idolized and were always right. The girls had to obey their brothers. We had to do whatever they asked, get things from upstairs, fry eggs for them. This of course opened for them the door to abuse.

However, my mother was the boss at home. She had a large poker which laid on the table and this is what she would hit us with. Once my eldest brother told her that I had laid down with a boy, next to the stream. I didn't do anything with that boy but my mother believed him and I got a terrible thrashing. I was also shut up in the cellar as punishment. It was so dark in there, it was terrible. I was so angry, I smashed all the glass storage jars in one go. Afterwards I of course received a good beating from my mother. My father never ever hit me. I was a recalcitrant child and I was also strong. When we needed to mow we had to help, I walked across the field with my bare feet. The stubble used to cut into your feet but that didn't bother me at all. I sometimes think that I enjoyed the pain because I could actually feel something.

The Church

Five years ago I was suddenly able to feel again how I felt as a child of seven at my first Holy Communion. I had a rosary and little white gloves and a white veil but I didn't feel at all like the bride of God. I was the Devil, I was pitch black, I was going to Hell while all the time I was standing there as an angel. That was a contradiction. I now know how seriously depressed I was standing there at Communion. I was a very anxious child and often wasn't able to take part in things because of my poor motor skills. I saw a sea of flames which called to me while at the same time I stood there as an angel. Since then I have carried this stress around with me.

After this I had to go to confession every month. Each time my eldest brother abused me he said "you will go to Hell and you need to go to confession and pay penitence". Exactly the same thing happened to my twin sister. All that time we were left with the feeling that we had committed a mortal sin and would go to Hell. As a child you believed that, you were indoctrinated, it was so awful. The priest gave me exercises to do for repentance and for hope. You had to do a certain number of Hail Mary's. Going there every month was terrible. Everything meant shame and humiliation. I felt completely black inside. Afterwards you were free for a while but the abuse still kept happening three times a day.

The perpetrator

It lasted from when I was six until I was sixteen. I had more than one bad brother but my eldest brother was the one who affected me the most. Once he took me on the back of his motorbike to Cologne. I think I must have had an abortion there. I thought that I'd become fat and didn't understand why. Nobody ever told us about these things. I remember that when I came back I had lost my white pair of trousers and I was covered in blood.

Later on my brother abused his own children and after that even his own grandchildren. That's when I went to the police but even then the police did nothing. His son beat him up so badly that he landed up

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in hospital. When he died his daughters said: “we’ll carry him ourselves to his grave to make sure that he’s six feet under”.

When I was sixteen I went into nursing, this was with the nuns. They said: “Marietje, there is something wrong with you”. Of course there was something wrong with me! I was depressed and there were lots of things going on but this only came out much later.

I managed to find some peace with the nuns although it still had connections with the church. I just tried to do my work. Do you know what? I think I just tried to silence myself, to hide it away. I hid myself in a cellar surrounded by iron fences. There I was, Marietje, who came outside now and then if it was safe enough.

Psychiatry

It was therefore no surprise that, during my psychosis, I became the Devil. I went to see my G.P. and he prescribed Haldol. It was awful. I knew however that I needed something in order to relax so I went and picked them up from the Pharmacy. What I really wanted was to be admitted to hospital but at that time I had a really good psychologist who thought it would be better for me if I stayed at home with the children. I was however then treated for depression. So that’s why Jan and I biked every day to the day-care clinic. It was here that I became further traumatized by all the pills. I was already taking Haldol and they should have given me some other medicine to control my urge to keep moving but they didn’t give it to me. What’s more I was given anti-depressants, tranquilizers and strong sleeping pills. This combination knocked you out immediately only to suddenly wake up later. I wasn’t able to move or think anymore. I was constantly hungry and ate a lot which led to diabetes and very high blood pressure. I was full of pills and I became obese.

I was made to take part in sports and I received music and creative therapy, in the beginning I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t even read I could only look at the pictures in the magazines.

I was that far gone. And yet it worked really well: swimming, sport, music. Creativity worked well at that time. I did handcrafts, I worked with black yarns and it had to be a black hole because that’s where I was, in a black hole. During the music therapy we were accompanied by a really good pianist. One day I decided to take fate into my own hands and began to sing a song from an opera. That’s how I found once again found my creativity and began to break down the barricade that I had been building around me for all those years.

Self-Help

At some point I began to realize that I was the victim and that they had been making a diagnosis about me. I realised that I was becoming more of an object and that everything was being suppressed by medication. It felt as if I was being abused all over again. I wanted to talk about everything but instead I had to just accept it all.

This is what I told the psychiatrist: I belong here, not at home, I need to talk to someone who can help me to process all of this.

I also wanted to stop taking the pills. Jan tried to talk me out of this. The psychiatrist led him to believe

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that I was seriously ill and needed the pills. I stuck to my guns! Fortunately I knew, because of my nurses training, how this needed to be done. I have heard that today they have pills which you can gradually take off the layers. That's the way I did it and got to the point where I didn't need any pills at all. I walked a lot. I walked and walked and walked. My twin sister gave me her support and in fact was the one who pulled me through. My sister was of course also traumatized but she was being treated by a woman from the women's healthcare association. She went every week and was given a top to toe massage and that really helped her. She studied women's healthcare in Nijmegen and set up a group here in Limburg. She asked me to go to such a group. I didn't think I was ready for it but she kept asking until I finally went with her. We sat there amongst all the women who had experienced the same things that we had, physical and sexual abuse. Some of those had been, just like me, possessed by the Devil.

Exorcists and Psychiatrists

When we talked to each other about this we discovered that it was all lies. Being possessed by the Devil is the result of repression and a way to hide the repression and continue hiding it. You are a victim of abuse but you receive no support whatsoever. Instead you are made to think that you have sinned, that you are bad and must repent. As a child you especially think all the stories about angels and devils. The terrible things that happened to you must surely be the work of the Devil? Then you must also be the work of the Devil.

In the groups were women who had sought help through the church. One of these women ended up being sent to an exorcist in Tegelen. She was made to stand in a pigsty full of pig faeces while she and the exorcist prayed together. The idea was of course that the Devil would then go into the pig. This whole episode was of course terribly humiliating for her. Another woman told of how the priest had strangled her with a scarf until she almost suffocated in order to drive out the Devil. Instead of recognition for what had been done to them they suffered a new kind of abuse and humiliation. I'm glad I didn't fall into the hands of an exorcist. It is however very disturbing that the Vatican still trains exorcists. Other religions also have similar stories and rituals: stories where the blame is laid on the victim and does nothing to help recognise what really happened.

Psychiatry does more or less the same thing: it's not what actually happened to you that is important but the chemicals in your brain that could be out of balance. I slowly began to realise that psychiatry for women like me is not what is needed. What we need we found with each other, in self-help groups where we gave each other the opportunity to find out what we had been through.

Illustrations: Marietje Lemmens

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