

Press-Telegram (Long-Beach, CA)

MIND OVER MATTER

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For a thousand days the father had lived in a psychological grave, buried alive by his own daughter.

That's the way it felt when his first-born, Melody Gavigan, accused him of sexually abusing her as a child. At the time she made the charge, Nov. 29, 1989, she was a patient at the Los Altos Hospital and Mental Health Center. She had called her mother to say that, after 35 years, she was suddenly recalling memories of being molested by her father when she was a year old, and sodomized when she was 4 or 5 or 7 - she wasn't exactly sure of the age.

She asked her mother to relay to her father the message that she never wanted to see him again. In her eyes he was dead. That was four years ago. Now the father is known to national TV talk show audiences as Melody Gavigan's father, an articulate spokesman for the growing number of people who are publicly accusing pop psychology authors and mental health practitioners of nurturing and even planting in their offspring terrifying memories of sexual abuse that never occurred.

The father, whom we will call Ron West, declines to use his real name out of concern for the privacy of other family members.

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On this December day, West is seated in the dining area of his immaculate three-bedroom stucco home off Wardlow Road and Palo Verde Avenue in Long Beach. At 61, he refers to himself as an old warrior, a guy who spilled his blood in Korea at the battles of Heartbreak and Bloody Ridges.

He displays an American flag in his manicured front yard. Military medals decorate a memento box in the den. His wife, Melody's mother, died of cancer in September. He believes the real killer was stress. Two weeks later, his second granddaughter was born. She's been terribly sick, and has spent much of her life hooked up to tubes in the hospital.

It's been a rough time. Very rough indeed.

But he says nothing can touch the devastation that struck the West family Dec. 7, 1989, when West's wife told him of Melody's charge.

``The worst thing about this repressed memory thing is that as soon as the accusation is made you're guilty," he says.

For the past two hours he has been talking about his life, his kids, Melody and her two brothers, who are now 37 and 27, his career in the aerospace industry, the loss of his wife of 43 years. He said wistfully of his wife, ``Every morning I get up and I'm surprised the coffee isn't already on."

But the horror of Melody's charge and its devastating impact on the family hangs **over** the conversation like an ominous cloud. He has spoken urgently of his belief that "recovered-memory therapy" is an insidious evil. "It's like the brainwashing in Korea," he says.

Now he recalls the familiar voice he heard on the phone in March 1992. It was the call he had prayed for for three years, the call he told himself **over** and **over** and **over** again would one day come. Had to. Had to come in his lifetime. He relates it as though it had come only moments ago:

"Hi, Dad. This is Melody. How are you doing? Are you all right? I called to tell you I'm sorry. It was all a mistake."

His voice halts. He bows his head. His lips quiver with emotion. With difficulty, he manages to relate the end of the conversation, "Dad, I want you to forgive me."

Tears involuntarily flood his face. He cries quietly for a moment and tries to continue. He cannot. In a low whisper he excuses himself and disappears into the kitchen to regain his composure. When he returns, he clears his throat and says in a husky voice, "It was a welcome call."

A psychological hell

The story of the West family's journey into psychological hell is not a new tale. The "recovery" - usually while in therapy - of memories of sexual abuse and other sordid events has become so mysteriously commonplace that serious questions are being raised inside and outside the mental health community.

Can memories of repeated incest be so repressed that the victim is totally unaware of them until they are triggered decades later by reading a book on sexual abuse or talking with a psychologist? Does staggering childhood trauma cause people to "dissociate," or to develop multiple-personality disorders? Is the rise in the number of cases of "repressed memory" - usually among white women in their 20s, 30s and 40s - a result of a greater willingness of women to speak out more openly about abuse?

Is it a cruel fad? A form of psychological quackery? Or are the questioners and skeptics "in total denial" because the truth about sexual abuse in the American family is too awful to acknowledge?

Other battles about the nature of memory are being hashed out in the courtroom - children against parents, parents and children against therapists and hospitals. Melody Gavigan is suing the Los Altos Hospital and Mental Health Center, her psychiatrist, Dr. Marvin Epps, and her family counselor, Frank Connors, charging them with medical malpractice.

She contends that they encouraged her to invent false memories, which caused her and members of her family extraordinary grief. Hospital administrator Michael Hunn will not comment on the case, nor will the other defendants in Gavigan's lawsuit.

Hunn's last day at Los Altos was Dec. 20. He won't elaborate on his reasons for leaving except to say they are related to the "daily changes in the health-care field."

While families seek relief and retribution, therapists are arguing among themselves about "lost memories."

On the one hand, some argue that trauma doesn't cause people to repress memories. Far from it. Citing Vietnam veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as examples, they say trauma has the opposite effect. Memories and unwanted flashbacks of emotionally charged events such as sexual assaults or horrible accidents are the least forgettable.

Other therapists and authors say repression is commonplace and that it's entirely possible people repress memories of early abuse that are too painful to remember. Weary patients, a growing number of whom, like Gavigan, have recanted their stories and are reunited with their families, are confused.

"Dissociation is not as common as popularly believed," says Charles Webb, a clinical psychologist who is also a poet and professor of English at California State University/Long Beach. "Sometimes people remember abuse, but are too ashamed to admit it."

Like other psychologists, Webb says memories can be created in many ways - by hypnosis, in writing, through a preoccupation with self-help books and some kinds of therapy. As an example, Webb says when he's writing well, he may dwell so long on an event from his past he is able to create vivid memories that have almost nothing to do with reality.

"The power to make up memories is enormous, he says. "A lot of therapists do more than encourage memories. A lot try to get people to have memories. I know therapists will hate this when I say it, but I think some of them see childhood sexual abuse as a major social problem that can be solved in their offices. It's like a great discovery. It gives them a lot of power. It makes them feel they are doing something good. They are invested in having the abuse be real.

"A lot of us - including therapists - have unresolved issues with authority: our parents, priests. One way to express your outrage toward authority figures is to label them perverts. Good therapists take all of this very seriously. The problem is, the 'recovered memories' phenomenon has become a psychological witch hunt. Everyone is looking for someone to blame."

Webb adds: "Every child feels psychologically abused sometimes. Maybe the adult children who make these accusations should take some responsibility and stop whining. Some of them recant their stories. Their parents don't want to blame them. They all need a scapegoat to help them heal. So they blame the therapist."

Webb pauses. "It's complex. It's murky. There is a lot of aberration out there. But there is a lot more decency."

Adds CSULB professor Gerard Hanley, who studies memory: "Memories can be unreliable. They are unpredictable. That's why there should always be inherent doubt about memories as testimony in a courtroom. A person can firmly believe something happened to them in their childhood. It doesn't mean the event didn't happen. But it doesn't mean it did."

When asked what would motivate a person to want to remember ugly events that might not have occurred, Hanley says it may be a way of passing the psychological buck. "A person says to himself, 'I'm 35 and I don't match up to my image of myself.' So I look for external attribution. 'Someone else screwed up my life, and not me.'"

The recent surge in the numbers of claims of childhood sexual victimization and the subsequent controversy has led the American Psychological Association to study the phenomenon. Cal State psychologist Robert Thayer attended an APA convention last spring in which the issue of false memories was hotly debated.

"Some APA participants suggested that it could be recessionary," Thayer says. "Therapists are down 30 percent."

Mental health professionals who argue that both recovered memories and childhood sexual abuse are commonplace are harder to come by, but they are just as passionate. Dr. Roland Summit, a psychiatrist at Harbor/UCLA Medical Center, and a designated specialist in childhood sex abuse cases, is one.

"People don't believe the survivors, and they are being trashed," he says. "I'd like to see a more active survivor revolt. It's become politically correct to mark those who treat abuse survivors as some kind of fanatics. The problem is not the people who are falsely accused. The problem is that too many people have been sexually abused and society can't handle it."

Help for victims

Before calling her dad to tell him she no longer believed he sexually assaulted her, Gavigan sought assistance from the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, a Philadelphia-based organization that helps victims of so called recovered-memory therapy. It was founded last year by Pamela Freyd, who holds a doctorate in education, and other parents whose children had accused a family member of sexual abuse.

Freyd's daughter, Jennifer, is a psychologist at the University of Oregon who cut off communication with the family after accusing her father three years ago of sexually abusing her **over** a period of time, Freyd says.

Jennifer Freyd could not be reached for comment.

Currently, the foundation has a list of more than 100 "retractors" who have changed their **minds** about their memories of childhood sexual abuse, Pamela Freyd says. She notes that more than 7,500 troubled families have contacted the organization since it was founded in March 1992.

"What is most helpful to parents who have been falsely accused is to understand what's happening," Freyd says. "It is happening to thousands and thousands of people. It's a social phenomenon. The notion of victimization as a cultural belief has spread."

January 9, 1994