

# THE FAMILY AND ABUSE: A PERSONAL VIEW

By JANET DIGBY-BAKER

*This article is a transcription from an interview given by Janet Digby-Baker to the Editors*

**M**Y SPECIALIST WORK now and for the past eleven years has to do with children who come before the courts, usually because of disputes about who should care for them; that is, where parents are in dispute about who should care for their children in matrimonial proceedings or where a local authority or family may be in conflict about the right place for a child to be cared for. I come to be involved in cases either because I am asked by one of the parents of the children concerned or because I am appointed by the courts. In my work as guardian *ad litem* in the family courts, I am a member of a panel of guardians *ad litem* and the courts appoint from that panel. Since the 1989 Children's Act was implemented on 14th October 1991 all public cases that come before the family court have a guardian *ad litem* appointed.

I visit the child and usually then the parents and other close members of the family. I also contact the professionals involved with the family. My task from thereon is to safeguard the best interests of the child while the proceedings are before the court, and to make some recommendation to the court as to the best outcome for the child.

## *A personal journey*

I came to be in this work through a combination of personal experience and training. My professional background and training are in social work and in youth and community work. I have always specialised in work with children and young people, over a period of more than thirty years, working mostly with children in the context of their families.

I can point to several different experiences in my own personal life which have led me to this work. I grew up as the only child of elderly

parents in a non-Christian home, which, in fact, became anti-Christian. I became involved with Christian theological issues in the Church in my teenage years. I have always said jokingly that my Christian commitment was part of my teenage rebellion against my non-Christian parents, and maybe there is some truth in that. My own experience of family life also involved separation. I was born immediately before the war in 1939 and my early experiences of family were of my mother and myself being separated from my father on account of the war.

Other experiences that have led me to where I am now were my marriage, my life as a mother and the death of my husband. In my twenties I married a colleague on the parish staff where I was working. He was an Anglican priest. Within the following two and a half years two sons, were born to us. I became involved in community work in the parish, and we settled down to a very busy, happy, Christian family life with small children and the general comings and goings of a curate's house on a council estate. We subsequently moved to a rural rectory, and parish and life went on much as before until quite suddenly it became clear that my husband was ill, and we were informed that he was suffering from an inoperable brain tumour. He died six months later.

At that point I became homeless with two small children. I believe this experience of being homeless is relevant to my work today. I know of course that my situation was very different from that of many of the homeless people I meet in bed-and-breakfast accommodation today. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which homelessness still feels the same whatever your social standing.

My spiritual journey has led me from a non-Christian home to the Anglican Church and then to the Roman Catholic Church. I was received into the Catholic Church in 1978. My own situation and my position in both the Anglican and Catholic Church and my views about that are perhaps unusual, but I feel that life is too short and the mission is too great for us to be too bound by denominational barriers. Someone asked me the other day whether I was a Christian. The person concerned said she didn't think I was a very good Christian because she didn't see me as a respectable, church-going person who keeps the rules within the bounds of either the Anglican or the Roman Catholic Church or within respectability. I expect that her concept of Christians is that they are respectable. That reminded me of my late husband, an intellectual and a theologian, who, very soon after I got to know him, said to me: 'The problem with

Christianity is that people in the Church think Jesus Christ was respectable and he wasn't and nor are we.' And from that time on I have never confused Christianity with respectability.

My experience as a social worker with children and families, as a foster mother and a mother, and in the work I have done in recent years has led to me developing a very ready and easy rapport with children of all ages. And if my speciality is in anything it is in making relationships and working with children at times of trauma in their lives and helping them through difficult situations and confusions in their circumstances.

### *The family*

I have a basic philosophy about working with families and it is that children probably grow up best in their own families. And the task of the social worker is to try to enable families to stay together. My belief in the family system as a good and proper place for healthy personalities to develop is rooted in my Christian belief and Christian culture, which is or has in the past, in my perception, been based on family.

The whole situation regarding families and the importance of the family has to a certain extent changed or become more questionable in my lifetime. My experience and understanding of the Church, and particularly the Roman Catholic Church, was one that based healthy personal growth on good family experience, and a family where there was a mother and father and children who all related in happy and healthy ways produced integrated, successful adults. My personal and professional experience still show me that that is probably true. But the reality today is that many, many children are growing up in family structures which are far different from what we would regard as 'normal'. And we constantly meet children and adults who are not living in families and who are growing up in very different systems, and we have to help them to become successful and integrated adults. Surely we have an obligation to do that for their own well-being?

It still surprises me that our social system is based on an expectation of what society would regard as 'normal'. Very recently I was invited to a Lord Mayor's dinner at the Guildhall in London and it was made clear to me that although I was invited as a woman, to a certain extent in my own right, I was expected to bring a male partner. Clearly those who invited me would have been very embarrassed if I had not done so.

*The dysfunctional family*

What my professional life in working in matrimonial cases has taught me is that many children are growing up in quite dysfunctional families. Many of our troubled adults today, and some of them mothers of children I am now dealing with, have grown up in what to the outside world looked to be normal healthy families but were in fact dysfunctional and unhealthy families. In these cases it might have been better for them if they had been separated from their family, or if their parents had been separated much earlier in the children's lives.

The embitterment that one comes across in matrimonial disputes about children is very sad and very damaging to the children concerned, who often express loyalties to both parents and almost cannot tolerate the emotional abuse which they experience. The present housing market in Britain has not eased this situation. Parents who want to separate now find it is impossible, because it is not easy to sell the matrimonial home and set up two separate homes.

Recently a twelve-year-old girl said to me she was afraid for her daddy to go to sleep. She felt obliged to stay awake while he was asleep because she thought that otherwise her mother would kill him while he was asleep. This is one family where, if it were financially viable, they would already be living apart.

*Sexual abuse and the family*

It is usually the case that no one ever really wishes to abuse a child, but often the circumstances of their own lives have led to people not being able to control their abusive actions.

Our fulfilment as parents is such that we are usually only able to parent as we are parented, and our experience of being parented is our model for being parents. If our own parents have abused us or family experience has been dysfunctional, then we pass that experience on to our children. The possibility of change, of course, is always there and for some people therapy, or other professional intervention, will make it possible for those who have come from a dysfunctional, abusive background to be successful parents. But in my experience in working with families, there has to be some external input to the family as well as, on the part of the adults, both insight and willingness to change.

I have worked with many sexually abused children, in excess of a hundred, and I have never yet interviewed a mother of a sexually abused child who was not herself sexually abused as a child. I believe

there are statistics now that do not bear this out and I can only speak from my experience. I recently said to a mother, 'Tell me about your own abuse and what happened to you as a child', and she looked at me horrified and said, 'But how do you know? I have never told anyone'. And I gave her the answer that I have just given: that I have never yet met a sexually abused child whose mother was not sexually abused. My question gave her the freedom for the first time in thirty years to talk about her own abusive experience from her stepfather.

### *Power abuse*

It is sometimes said that power abuse is a key concept here and I think that must be right. Our whole understanding of sexual abuse is that it is in fact a use of power by an adult over a child. There are various definitions of sexual abuse. I regard something as abusive if something that happens between an adult and a child is for the gratification of the adult. Sexual abuse of children by adults or older children is clearly wrong and appalling. At the same time, however, one has to bear in mind that the child may enjoy it. And I think this is something that we—those of us who work with abused, including sexually abused children and see ourselves as rescuers—often forget. Pleasant physical experiences are often bound in with the fact that they are being sexually abused.

I think particularly of a fourteen-year-old boy whom I have known for two and a half years. To this day he *claims* that he has never been sexually abused, although very strong medical evidence suggests otherwise, and probably by two abusers; and his own sexual activities, now that he is separated from his family, are such that he is clearly a sexualized child. In talking to him, about two years ago, once he had begun to settle down in a separate home from that of his family, I suddenly realized that nothing had ever happened to that boy that had hurt him or that he had not liked. How therefore could he turn against his family and say that they had abused him when his only experience of them had been that they had loved him?

This boy did not experience the sexual abuse as his parents having power over him, and I do not think they saw themselves in a particularly powerful role. But he is of higher intelligence than his parents and better educated, and that, combined with his sexualized nature, has led to him abusing other children, as an exercise of power. Sadly in adult life he will probably become a power abuser, unless there can be found a way of helping him, which I am told by the psychologist is unlikely.

I am not saying that all children I have worked with have enjoyed the experience of sexual abuse. Many of them have not and are relieved when it stops. And I think of a fourteen-year-old girl who cried when she said to me: 'I only wanted my dad to stop doing it, I didn't want him to go to prison. I wanted everything else to stay the same, I wanted him to stop doing that. And now our family has been smashed up and he is in prison. I wish I had never told anybody.'

The power of secrecy is also an important factor. At present we are seeing in some parts of England and elsewhere whole systems of abuse being uncovered. And it seems that once it becomes known within a community or institution that one person is abusing children, then others who find themselves in the same or similar situations will join in a sort of cover-up. This leads to the whole affair expanding and becoming collusive and a group of adults having power over, very often, large numbers of children. It must be borne in mind that these adults also have power over each other and thus secrecy becomes extremely important to them.

The other thing that we have to realize is that sexual abuse crosses all social strata and happens both in families and in institutions. I think particularly of power abuse in institutions. I have seen and counselled and talked with people within the English public school system and I have seen and know a vast amount of power and sexual abuse in those settings. I understand from my contact with people who work in those schools now that these issues are at last being addressed. But I also see the same pattern in institutions for delinquents, where there are boys and girls of a similar age, but of a different background, a different social stratum from those in the public school system. Nevertheless these institutions also show similar patterns of abusive initiation rites and exercises of power by the longer-serving residents.

#### *Abuse and the care system*

Let me mention some wider ramifications of family abuse and the way in which we, the professionals, are really unable to deal with it. I see many children who are removed from their own families because of having experienced sexual abuse within that family, and they seem very often to move on to further abusive situations. Children moving into foster homes or specialist environments for abused children are often with other small groups of abused children, and it is not unusual for them to begin interacting in a sexual way with each other—'abusing each other'.

Dealing with sexualized children, having removed them from their family, is something we have yet to find a way of doing successfully. I am coming to the view that putting any child in a family or institution where there is another sexually abused child is actually not helpful to any of the children concerned, but the resources are such that there often is no choice for us to do other than that. However, what we have to try and give these children is some understanding of being an ordinary child, whilst at the same time appreciating that they have been sexualized. This means being sympathetic to their condition and giving them some therapeutic help to overcome the sexual frustration they will experience when the sexual contact stops.

I do not want to be entirely pessimistic about what happens to children in the care system and I have seen some children enormously helped by therapy and by foster families. There are therapeutic institutions and specialist small units that are doing good work with sexually abused children. In this context it has to be remembered that I work with children who perhaps come back into the care system or who fail to benefit from the various resources that have been arranged for them. It may be that, because of this experience, I have emphasized too much the failure of the system.

Despite my beliefs that the family is the best place to bring a child up, I obviously sometimes decide that a particular child or children should not return to their own families. We have a phrase, in my work, about 'good-enough parenting'. That does not mean perfect parenting, none of us are perfect parents! And I look to see if the parenting in question is good enough to keep that child safe and well. Then I have to look at the child's needs, combined with the child's wishes, which are often just to go home. And I have to look at what resources there are for the child, should he or she stay away from the parental home. Finally I have to make a recommendation as to what I think may really be the least detrimental alternative for the child. Very often none of the options is good, and sometimes it may be better to go back to a partially dysfunctional family than to end up in the care system.

I am currently debating, for example, whether one particular boy should go and live with his elderly grandparents in Ireland or stay in the care system in England. He is aged eleven. Currently the local authority who have taken the proceedings have no suitable resource for him, and yet they feel that his grandparents in their late sixties are too old. I feel that they only have to live six years to bring this boy to adulthood. And maybe the least detrimental alternative for the boy

would be to live with his elderly grandparents in Northern Ireland rather than pursue a route through the care system in London, where he will almost certainly end up in a delinquency sub-culture.

*Sexual abuse and Christian ministry*

It has recently come to the notice of the national and international press that there are many people within our churches and caring systems who are using the position of trust and power that they have to abuse those who have been placed in their care. In my experience, both professionally and personally, I have always been aware of this. In this context, however, perhaps we should look first at how we select people to go into these professions, how we train them and what we expect of them.

It seems to me true that the dysfunctional family offers a model or framework for understanding abuse in other relationships including ministry. Our early life experiences, in our family and friendships, through school and community, must determine how we are as adults in our relationships with others. I am thinking now, for example, of a very elderly lady whom I have known for many years. She had a very deprived childhood and has never in her life trusted anyone. She still says that it is not right to trust people and no one needs anyone else. She lives in squalor and misery with a great deal of money. I feel that something happened in her early childhood which prevented her from ever being able to trust another. She has never trusted anyone and therefore never made a friend.

What we also have to accept, of course, is that people consciously or subconsciously go into the kind of work where their own needs will be met. At this level I believe that all of us are selfish. Again, it may not be consciously, but nevertheless a reality, that people who have paedophile leanings are likely to find themselves working with children.

However, as I have grown to understand and become part of the Catholic Church, I have realised that the church hierarchy and the people have expectations of priests, which lead to the priests themselves having those expectations of themselves, which for many ordinary, human people are impossible to keep. And I am not referring here necessarily to celibacy, but just to the general rules there seem to be about friendship and relationships and being allowed to have human needs. It seems to me that the support system for clergy is patchy, and some choose not to use it because they feel that they must be above needing such support. In the end, most of

these priests manage to be good priests, faithful to their calling. But it is an impossible task that we give them and we must not be surprised, therefore, if some of them fail. We must look again at how we support them and how we allow them to be ordinary human beings as well as priests.

And maybe we are looking at a situation where good and evil are in conflict: the clash of good and evil. These men set out with the purest of motives, very often wanting to be good, upstanding Christian leaders and there is a clash when something within their personality leads to them abusing children.

#### *Abuse and the Church*

For my part, the families with whom I work do not on the whole belong to any church systems or believe in God. In the cases where I have come across an abuser who was also a Christian, the Church has always rallied to support, protect and join in the denial of the member of their community: the Church has closed ranks. I am thinking, for example, of a child placed for adoption in a middle-class family, where the father ran the Boys' Brigade and the mother the Sunday School and the playgroup. They had one older adopted child and the abuse that the very small child suffered was appalling. She was told beetles, rats or other animals would crawl over her when she was in her bed at night. She was made to drink her own urine, and she was beaten. Of course she was eventually removed from that family. But these were a middle-class couple, who were pillars of their local community and church. And whilst I think it is right that these rather sad and damaged individuals should have the support which they obviously need, it does give confused messages to the outside world if we seem not only to support but also to condone, and I think that was what was perceived in this particular case.

#### *Personal faith*

My Christian faith is the mainspring from which I operate and without that I could not face each day. Without a constant awareness of God, I think I would at times despair. I was talking with a friend recently about this and he reminded me of a saying of Brother Andrew: 'My life is my prayer. What I call my prayer is my attempt to make it so.' And I felt that was something I'd known many years ago and had forgotten and I think it sums up what I feel about prayer at the moment. It's like a close and loving relationship. We may go away from the person, but we know that wherever we are that person

is still loving us and we are still loving them. And we are aware in all our doings, either consciously or unconsciously, of that relationship and it seems to me as I grow older that that is the way my relationship with God is.

### *Forgiveness*

It is easy to imagine that in the situations in which I work Christian forgiveness is not easy. I believe in a forgiving God and therefore if I am to reflect in any way a forgiving God, who I believe has forgiven me and continues to forgive me my sinful life, then I must learn to forgive others, and sometimes it is very difficult. And I think immediately of the young man who is in prison serving a life sentence for killing his three-year-old daughter. I had worked with the family two years previously and at that time believed that the children were very much at risk.

That young man had spent his twenty-third birthday in a nineteenth-floor flat alone with three children under three, and the previous week there had been many indications within the family that the children might be at risk. When I first heard of the child's death on the radio the morning after it happened, I was extremely angry with the young man and angry with the system that had allowed her to go home and be killed. I then had to go and see him in prison. I remained angry particularly with the social worker who should have seen all the warnings a few days before. I took my anger from the client on to the social worker, which is somehow more acceptable. More recently I've had to go to see the young man again, still in prison, because the younger children have to have final decisions made about their future. This time I actually felt very loving towards him and very sad. I felt that he should not be serving a life sentence for doing something that his own life experiences had not given him the tools or resources to resist when under great stress. And I felt on that visit in November last that I had finally forgiven him. On the way home I had to work on the task of forgiving the social worker. And I have more or less done that, but I'm still having trouble forgiving the system that allowed it to happen.

It will probably be clear from all that I have said here that I am not exactly 'the detached professional'. I have been criticized for sharing the pain and, yes, I do share the pain. I am old-fashioned in my professional approach and I believe as a professional and a Christian that we are not in the business of taking people from where they are not to where they do not want to be. But we are trying to meet people

where they are, share in that situation and to find ways of enabling them to have a better quality of life than they have previously experienced.

I do not believe that I could continue to share the pain and the grief if I did not have my Christian family. But my Christian family is not in any particular church group or network but in a group of Christian friends spread throughout Britain and other parts of the world who support each other and share a common faith. And it is the experience of love and being loved that makes it possible for us all to go on loving. If I ever became aware that I was not loved by my close family and friends, or by God, then I think I would find that I was so impoverished that I would not have the ability to continue to love and commit myself to those I serve.