



THOMAS ESCHER

## LEARNING TO FLAP WINGS AS ONE

BY MARGARET FRIMOTH

The bus leaves as we sing upbeat choruses to young campers, "You are So beautiful," "One Big Family" and "Each of Us is a Flower." We wave goodbye for as long as the bus is visible. Then, with the bus out of sight, some volunteers let tears flow, finding solace in the supportive arms of friends. Others breathe quietly, lost in a full range of emotions. We take time to gather our belongings, and our thoughts. Then we sit down together and talk about our experiences, our emotions, our fears and our hopes for the children who shared the last three days with us. Before we leave camp, we build a transitional bridge to the other side, where the world is not as safe. Where community is threatened by individual desires and singular entitlements. Where people are mistreated and blamed. Where possessions are more protected than people. Where war is on the minds of the mighty, while hunger ravages the most vulnerable. Before we leave camp, we remind each other to guard our hearts, to tend to our physical needs and, after a weekend of attending to others, to once again extend beyond our own needs and ask our loved ones about their time while we were away. Before we leave camp, we sing. Together. Then we each in our own way return to the business of the world outside of safe community.

*Carry it home to your children. Carry it out in the street.  
Carry it on to the ones you love; On to the ones you meet.  
Carry it light on your shoulder. Carry it deep in your soul.  
For we have been blessed by magic.  
And the magic will make us whole  
(Betsy Rose)*

I think that when the bus rounds the corner and returns the kids to the outside world, adult volunteers are left with a million unanswered questions, not just about the kids' lives, but mostly about our own. The camps demand a kind of intimacy that the world rarely embraces. Our culture typically links intimacy with sexual behavior—sexual intimacy. We are a nation confused by our inability to relate to one another honestly, intimately, without sexual contact. The social justifications for sexual frolicking are vast. The forum for sexual abstinence is bound up in biblical bantering. Neither ideology encompasses the full spectrum of who we are—our physical and emotional needs, desires, passions, beliefs, reasons. The debate polarizes, rather than informs. The consequences of sexual confusion leave our children burdened with unwanted pregnancies, a constantly increasing rise in sexually transmitted diseases, disrupted relationships, seemingly uncontrollable drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse.... Why? Because sexuality is at the core of our personhood, our individual power. To abuse that core is to devalue, in fact, destroy, the person. Our individual sexuality is the essence of who we are. It is how we arrived on earth, in this body. It is the manifestation of future generations. Yet, we cannot talk about sex in meaningful terms, with a respect that pays homage to our soul-selves. Thus, we are paralyzed, and are sorely equipped to respond properly to the issue of childhood sexual violence. It gets clumped in with all other uncomfortably embarrassing dialogues. Without guidance to address core trauma, the cultural norm represses the human desire to heal. This stifles all else in the lives of survivors, their families, their friends, their co-workers, their lovers, their children. Trauma is normalized. Healing halted. Silenced. Eventually denied. Thus, violence continues.

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*Sometimes it's hard to resign yourself to your life.  
But you quiet your heart and your mind  
Not looking so hard is the best way to find  
That certain light that will shine, on your way home.  
(Luther Schultz)*

Victory Over Child Abuse (VOCA) Camps exist precisely because sexual abuse has been used against the core personhood of the child survivor. Sexual abuse is purely for the satisfaction of the abuser. Sex, used as a weapon to overpower. Used against children. It's a coward's way to gain power. But effective. Especially in a culture that has difficulty respecting children and discussing sex. Sexual abuse is allowed to ravage children in the hush of adult social restraints. Culturally, this is our common experience. Yet, at VOCA Camp there is a divergence from the norm. There is intimacy without sexual contact. Issues of safety and touch are honored rather than assumed. Safety is a goal, an on-going process rather than a measurable outcome. Touch is used only with permission (i.e., "Can I give you a hug?"), and we practice accepting "no" as an appropriate answer. We demonstrate appropriate respect of personal space by drawing imaginary circles around and above our bodies, graphically defining the space we can each call our own. We sing, "When I say no, I mean no!" At any time, someone might call out, "Whose body is this?" with clear knowledge that anyone within hearing distance will shout back the anticipated reply, "This is my body!" We talk about our personal and emotional rights. We discuss tricks and excuses that people use to break safety. We talk about alternatives to violence. We work through conflict. In these ways we give children back the power that sexual abuse stole from them.

There is an old tale from India that tells of a peaceful flock of quail who were tricked when a crafty hunter used his whistling to call the flock. With some of the flock gathered near him, the hunter flung a huge net over them, captured them, and took the quail to market. The wisest of the remaining quail saw the trickery and told the rest of the flock to flap their wings as one, to lift the net that bound them, and then escape from underneath it. The next day the hunter failed at his task despite his keen trickery. He thought, "When the small birds cooperate, not even I can capture them." But the following day when he tried once more, some quail accidentally bumped into some others and they began fighting amongst themselves. The hunter quickly approached, scooped up his net and proclaimed, "I'm the winner! Together they're strong. Divided, they're dinner."

You see, the common denominator in this monstrous problem of sexual violence against children, is us. All of us. Adults. Regardless of religion, race, gender, economic status, physical abilities, educational status, sexual orientation, geographic location. WE are the problem. Not the kids. Not the schools. Not the taxes. Not the Democrats. Not the Republicans. Not the queers. Not the heathens. You. Me. All of us. When we allow our differences to divide us, then the common denominator of "us" becomes the problem. This is the centuries old domination theory. It is effective because it keeps us separated, fearful of losing whatever little we gain. An alternative to the old domination theory is to focus on our similarities, to see and respect our differences as our greatest strengths. Imagine a weaving, where each strand represents an individual, distinct from all others, yet part of the whole. When one strand is missing or broken, the entire community is impacted. The task is to support the whole weaving while repairing the broken strand. Thus, the common denominator of "us" embodies the solution.

*My own life is all I can hope to control.  
Let my life be lived for the good of us all.  
(Tom Paxton)*

Before VOCA Camp begins (after intensive training, criminal history and reference checks), every adult is reminded that we, the adults, have automatic power over children, not because we are better, not because we deserve it, mostly because children have been taught that adults have and will use this automatic power over them. Frankly, it's easy to victimize kids. It happens daily. It's occurred for generations, for centuries. To be safe, adults must grapple with and commit to *not* using what society has given us as automatic power over children. Instead, we talk about sharing our power, rather than using it to maintain our authority. We discuss the old, misread adage of "spare the rod and spoil the child." We disregard it as another justification for violence against children. After all, the saying is

a misquote. The real meaning behind the biblical parable is a reminder to the shepherd to guide the sheep, not hit the sheep. Hitting sheep could break-down and devalue the wool. No shepherd worth his herd would beat his sheep. Nor will adults who truly care about children. Adulthood demands responsibility. Safe community depends on adult willingness to honestly assess power differences, while also committing to the use of adult power to consciously create safety. VOCA Camps are less about personal healing and more about social change. We live the world we want to have. At least for two, long weekends each year.

*Listen to the children. Voices of the children.  
Spirit of the children. Turn the world around.  
(unknown)*

Once you experience the magic of safe community it's hard to understand why it isn't the norm. It benefits everyone. It brings out our best. Together we are strong. But the world outside of camp wants us divided, weakened, embittered. When we leave camp, each of us is forced to choose between returning to life as it was before camp, or to shift our course and walk against the societal tide, attempting to find a world that makes more sense. Much of the time it's easier to go with the flow. Easier to believe that my one voice hardly matters in the barrage of conflicting voices outside of camp community. Yet the inner longing for a changed world lingers, beckoning us towards a more equitable view of the world. This occurrence itself divides us. Another encounter with the perpetual institutionalization of current power-over structures. Accosted again. At least until next year.

*With every voice, with every song  
We will move this world along  
And our lives will feel the echo of our healing.  
(Ruth Pelham)*

If we could somehow live the VOCA Way most of the time, interrupted occasionally by the bustling demands of production, I believe we would be a healthier culture. That's the continuous draw of the VOCA Camp community. Regardless of the emotional exhaustion, the physical fatigue, the loss of two weekends away from work and family, it simultaneously holds the possibility of living closer to the land, supporting one another in intimate community while also confronting the curse of childhood sexual victimization. We return, year after year after year. Sensing the VOCA Season before it arrives. Celebrating each success as it unfolds. Embracing whatever challenges await us in the next year. Together we stand. Diverse. United. As we now embark on our 15th year.

Margaret Frimoth organized VOCA Camp with a handful of adults who heard the request from child survivors of sexual abuse who wanted "a camp just for them, where the secret of their sexual victimization would be safe," and they could heal. That was in 1988. Currently there are two annual camps in Clatsop County, one for boys, another for girls. For more information call (503) 325-2761.

Songs quoted in this story are from the VOCA Camp song book.

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