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“Crime Victims Cope Through Bridges to Life”

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More than twenty years ago, two men made “a bad choice” and killed me. At least, that’s what one of them confessed to his girlfriend after a night of drugs and alcohol and searching his soul. I can agree about the “bad choice” bit, but the killing part was too over the top for me. The guy and his buddy were arrested. Buddy got 30 years for attempted capital murder; the soul-seeker got 15 for confessing. With good behavior, after twenty-some-odd years, they both must be out of prison by now. No one’s ever bothered to tell me.

Here’s where I am twenty-some-odd years later:

Last week, my six-year-old son, Dennis, caught sight of me wrapped in a bath towel after my shower, pot-bellied, balding, and fumbling for glasses. With that sudden sense of intense observation that only six-year-olds possess, he asked me, “What’s that thing on your stomach, Daddy?” referring to one of the scars I carry from the decades-old attack. I told the boy, laconically, without emotion, “It’s from a fight I had a long time ago.” Enough information, I figured, for a six-year-old. “Oooh!” he bent his brows and shook his head. “That must have hurt real bad, huh?” And then he skipped away to taunt his sister or tease the cat.

Some day, I will have to have “the talk” with the boy. The talk I had with my wife (back when I was only thinking that I wanted her to be my wife). The talk is hard. It is not laconic. It is full of emotion.

For twenty years, I thought “the talk” was enough. Then, my cousin-in-law, Chris, introduced me to a program called Bridges to Life. There, I started thinking about what really goes on inside my head when “scars” come up in polite conversation. I met other survivors with scars. I realized I was not alone. There were other people wondering about when to have “the talk” or whether to have it at all. More important, through Bridges to Life, I realized that surviving crime is not a criminal offense. I mean, I’m not guilty. It’s just that I’ve been sentenced to a life of remembering someone else’s “bad choice.”

The psychology of victimization is more difficult to understand than the physics part of it. In my case, a three-pound hammer on the head a few times and a tumbling toss from a moving vehicle makes sense – I should be dead. The psychology can take a while to catch up. The “Why me?” syndrome nags the id and tugs at the soul – for years.

One way Bridges to Life addresses these issues is by taking victims into prisons to talk to men and women who have made victimization their business. We (victims) try to

understand what happened us. They (victimizers) try to understand what happened to them. The conversations are not laconic. The conversations are full of emotion.

Here's an example. One prison evening, I sat in a small group of six convicts and three victims. Barbara, in her mid-fifties – my age – began her story thusly: "I was only three the first time I was raped." Though her voice was controlled, her tone disarming, our little circle of odd lives leaned hard away from that beginning line. Was it "raped"? The "three years old"? For me, it was that awful phrase "the first time," tucked into the middle of the sentence, like a stammer or a clearing of the throat. "The first time" implied a continuous loss, almost beyond recovery. Yet, it was clear in the telling of her story, she had indeed recovered.

Poised and bright and open and womanly, she spoke in forthright confidence. She recalled her past horrors without a quake, not a flinch. Her clear, kind eyes looked not at me, nor at the inmates on either side of me. Her eyes looked straight into a time before, at a little girl whose innocence and laughter was real and shared and given over freely from the heart. And then, suddenly, the child's wise eyes looked kindly, clearly into mine. She sat beside a man who had harmed many people, near another who had drunkenly abandoned all his hope. Between these thieves, Barbara seemed so much a part of Godly love that I could only stare, wide-eyed and glad, knowing that the loss of evil implies a new-found good. She told her story well.

As I drove away from prison that night, I prayed more fervently than I have ever prayed. It was late when I got home. My boy was asleep in a pile of Mom and Sister and Cat, all warm and breathing as if one. He didn't wake when I carried him off to his own bed. In my arms, his head felt good against an old scar.

Jesse Doiron will emcee the 15th Annual Crime Victims' Candlelight Vigil on Thursday, April 14, 2005 at 6:00 p.m. in the Jefferson County Jury Impaneling Auditorium of the [Jefferson County Courthouse](#). The event is sponsored by the Jefferson County Coalition for Victims of Crime. For more information, call Tel. 833 3377.