

CHATELAINE

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You must

A flashback from childhood triggers a flood of hidden memories—and leads a woman to accuse her stepfather of rape. Can her memories be believed? Can his denials? And can anybody heal from this kind of pain? Sandra Martin takes stock of the war raging around recovered memories

My husband, Richard, never even had a cup of tea that morning. We were all up in the kitchen and I saw a Mountie come to the back door and ask Richard to go outside. Then, she called me out and I saw Richard in the backseat of the car and she said, "Don't go leaving the house because I'll be wanting to speak to you before the day is over."

I was devastated. I had to pretend nothing was wrong because his mother was here and I was scared that she would take a heart attack or something. Finally, late afternoon they called me out to be questioned at the Mounties'. After she was finished with me, we went to the jail and picked up Richard. It was a really hard day.—Isabel Fieldstone*

The Mounties came for Richard Fieldstone because his stepdaughter, Sarah Robson, had accused him of raping her hundreds of times when she was a teenager. She had forgotten or "repressed" the assaults for a dozen years and then recovered them in therapy.

At the time of his arrest, in 1992, Richard and Isabel were both in their 50s, and Sarah was a 33-year-old mother of three boys. They all lived in the same small community in the Maritimes. Richard ran a car repair business and did some market gardening; Isabel took care of the house and kept the books for Richard's business. They had been married for almost 25 years. They both vehemently deny Sarah's accusations.

Is Sarah Robson an incest survivor, a malicious liar, or the dupe of an overzealous therapist? Is Richard Fieldstone a sexual predator or a falsely accused victim? Who knows? There are no witnesses, there's no physical evidence, nothing but

**Names and some identifying details have been changed to comply with a court-ordered publication ban.*

one person's denial against another's recovered memory. What really counts in the memory wars is who you believe—the alleged victim or the alleged perpetrator.

Accusations of sexual abuse retrieved during recovered memory therapy began surfacing in Canada and the United States in the mid-1980s. At least one expert estimates that as many as one million "victims" per year have emerged since 1988. Typically, they are female, aged 31 to 50, and report assaults that supposedly happened between 20 and 39 years ago.

Since 1988, more than 20,000 families in the United States and nearly 2,000 in Canada have contacted the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, a nonprofit clearinghouse of advice, information and support for parents accused of incest. These families have reported harrowing tales of adult children accusing parents of horrific crimes, and then cutting off contact, laying criminal charges and launching civil suits for redress.

Nobody has ever documented a controlled laboratory experiment showing that traumatic memories can be repressed. But just because repression can't be proved, doesn't mean it doesn't exist, say supporters of recovered memory therapy. How could you invent such suffering and horrific abuses, they ask. But proof, not sympathy, is what the "false memory" side insists on. They dismiss recovered memories of sexual abuse as the product of misguided or incompetent therapy.

There are no absolutes or simple truths in the memory wars. Both sides sincerely believe they are right and defend their positions with the fervor of religious zealots. The result is an ideological and legal battle about memory and experience that has set children against parents, parents against therapists, and experimental and clini- ▷

remember this...

cal psychologists against one another.

Amid suits and countersuits, the Canadian Psychiatric Association finally followed the lead of the Americans and the Australians and issued an official caution in March 1996 about the validity of uncorroborated recovered memories. "Reports of recovered memories of sexual abuse may be true," the CPA said, "but great caution should be exercised before acceptance in the absence of solid corroboration."

The statement went on to urge that "recovered memories which incriminate others should be handled with particular care." The warning came too late for the Fieldstones. Their family is just one of the many human casualties in the bloodiest gender war of the century. Their story is both instructive and illuminating.

Richard killed me—the child that I was—and I created a new person.—Sarah Robson

Sarah's father abandoned the family when Sarah, the eldest of three children, was 7. About three years later Isabel married Richard, and soon gave birth to another daughter. The family lived in an old house with Isabel's parents. Space and privacy were at a premium. The children shared a bedroom, the two boys on the side near the door and the girls on the other side of a divider. According to her mother, Sarah was a difficult child who was jealous of her stepfather and wanted to disrupt the family. "She would rather fight than eat," remembers Isabel. For her part, Sarah says Richard was a cruel and violent man. "I was petrified of him and I still am," she told me in a telephone conversation. "He beat me when I was in Grade 4. I was black and blue from the back of my neck to my knees." At his trial Richard admitted spanking—not beating—Sarah once on the advice of the family doctor he and Isabel had consulted about her unruly behavior.

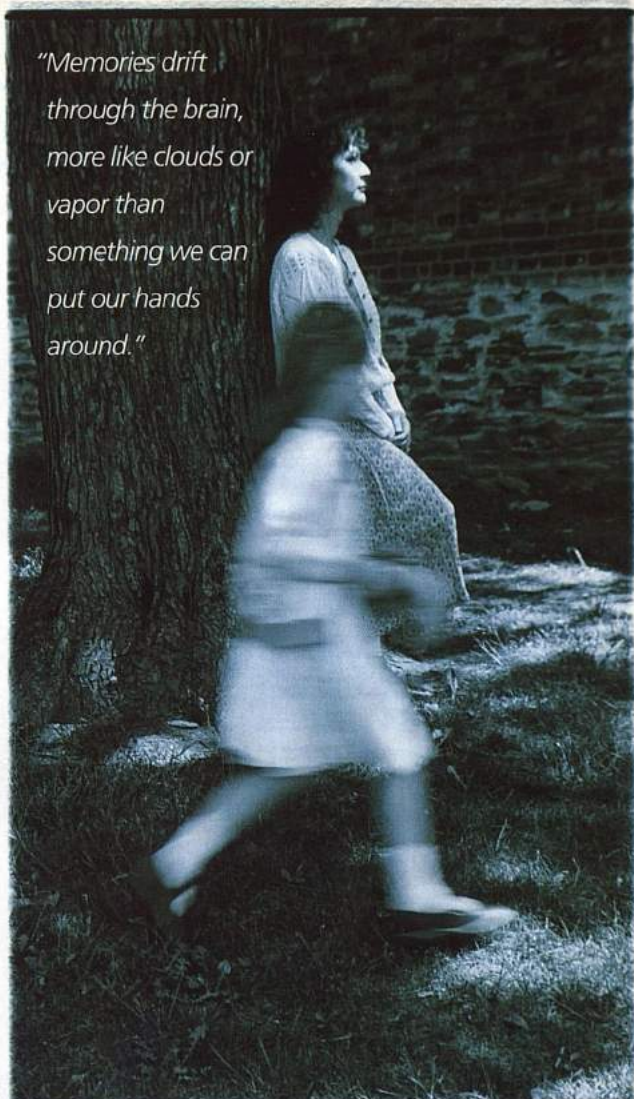
After Grade 12, Sarah left home, married a local boy, and a year later reconciled with her mother and stepfather. For a dozen years the two families visited back and forth and celebrated holidays together. "Her kids were with us more than half the time," says Isabel. "I didn't see anything wrong with bringing the kids over," says Sarah. "Richard loved children and I think in his own way he loved me, but he didn't know how to express it."

Things started to fall apart in December 1991. "It was a feeling when I'd go to the house," Sarah explained. "My skin would crawl." Then, in May 1992, Sarah was watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on television. She can't remember what the show was about, but "it started stirring up thoughts" of her stepfather sexually assaulting her. Every time she had a "flash" she jotted it down in a notebook.

Around that time, Richard's niece, Lorna, charged her own father with sexual abuse, saying he had raped her at 13—an assault she had never forgotten. With the help of her therapist, Lorna was now beginning to remember being trapped in the barn at the age of 8 and being forced to perform oral sex on her late grandfather, her father and one of her uncles. She hinted to Isabel and Sarah that the uncle was Richard, and that she'd reported her suspicions to the police.

Sarah met Lorna many times that summer, "to help her with her charges," as Sarah later told the court, and in the fall began seeing the same therapist. "I went in with just a bunch of one-line memories written down and I told him I knew I had been sexually abused for sure," Sarah said. Many more memories came back

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during her twice-a-week therapy sessions. She also joined a support group for abused women. Within weeks, the Mounties were at Richard's door charging him with sexually abusing Sarah. By the time Richard appeared in court, a little more than a year later, the charges had grown exponentially to gross indecency, sexual intercourse without consent, illicit sexual intercourse and indecent assault. "As soon as I had given the statement to the RCMP," Sarah said, "I knew I had to work very hard to get the memories the best that I could for the trial." Although Sarah suggested to the police in her statement that Richard had sexually abused Lorna and physically abused his stepson Daniel, Richard was never charged in connection with these accusations.

By the time Sarah accused her stepfather of rape, recovered memory therapy was in full swing across North America. The women's movement had dragged sexual abuse out of the closet and into the headlines, sending a message that molestation of women and children was not only real, but was epidemic. At the same time psychotherapy was booming. Between 1975 and 1990 the number of clinical psychologists almost tripled in the United States, and the number of therapeutic social workers and marriage and family counselors grew at an even faster rate. Finally, female victims had a sympathetic ear in therapists who listened to their >

stories, believed them implicitly, and were committed to validating their experiences.

One of the most influential therapists and teachers was Harvard psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman, author of *Father-Daughter Incest* (Harvard University Press) and *Trauma and Recovery* (HarperCollins). She argued that abused women suffered the same symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as combat veterans and survivors of political terrorism. Herman developed a healing process that called for a working partnership between patient and therapist in which the therapist was a kind of creative director who helped the patient to shape her memories into a coherent story. The process, which eventually became a model for recovered memory therapy, included having the patient confront her abuser, and eventually take part in survivor groups for remembrance and mourning.

In the late '70s and early '80s, memoirs of childhood sexual abuse became popular sellers, including Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (Pocket Books) and Charlotte Vale Allen's *Daddy's Girl* (Berkley). One of the most haunting stories came from Canadian journalist and novelist Sylvia Fraser in 1987. Unlike Armstrong and Vale Allen, who had always remembered their abuse, Fraser's history of incest had been buried for 40 years. Her book *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing* (Doubleday) is a searing account of how during the course of a variety of therapies, including hypnosis, she recovered memories of her father sexually abusing her. It was an immediate best-seller.

Then, along came *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (HarperCollins). Written by Ellen Bass, a creative-writing instructor, and her lover and former student, Laura Davis, *Courage* took therapy out of the consulting room and put it on the paperback racks. It appealed both to women who couldn't forget their abuse and women who couldn't remember—in other words, almost everybody. Providing a lengthy list of vague symptoms—"Do you feel different from other people? Do you feel powerless? Do you have trouble expressing your feelings?"—the book encouraged readers to self-diagnose, taught them how to recover memories of abuse on their own and in groups, and urged them to seek redress by confronting their alleged molesters. "Assume your feelings are valid," the authors state categorically. "So far, no one we've talked to thought she might have been abused, and then later discovered she hadn't been."

By the early 1990s, people were flocking to join the sisterhood of the abused. Thanks to daytime TV talk shows, self-help groups, burgeoning nonmedical psychotherapy and popular books like

Courage, "survivors" of sexual abuse—real and imagined—began seeking legal remedies to punish their molesters. Many of the accused parents were astonished to learn about the heinous crimes they had committed against their children.

Sarah wrote a journal as she was seeing the therapist. When I read it I could see she was very troubled. She included me in some of the accusations. One time I was in bed with them, but she can't remember whether I took part in what was going on.—Isabel Fieldstone

At Richard's trial, Sarah's therapist testified that he was using "intense" therapy to treat her for childhood trauma from sexual abuse. Their sessions usually lasted 90 minutes and included relaxation techniques, trance and hypnosis. "We tend...to get caught in our heads," he explained to the court. "If you want to get to the traumatic material that exists in an individual, you've got to help them get past that. Hypnosis, trance work, is one way." He denied, however, that he had ever suggested to Sarah she had been abused.

Guided imagery, suggestion and hypnosis are not reliable routes to the truth, as the late psychologist Nicholas Spanos demonstrated in a number of experiments in the 1980s and early 1990s at Carleton University in Ottawa. He hypnotized adult subjects and easily persuaded them to describe previous lives and to adopt multiple personalities, a process that included playing the roles he proposed to them. When he suggested to subjects that they had been abused as children, they not only agreed, they magnified the extent and the nature of the abuse. Spanos concluded that his findings were "consistent with anecdotal reports indicating that clients in psychotherapy sometimes confabulate complex and extensive pseudomemories that are consistent with the expectations held by their therapists."

Between her intensive sessions with her therapist, Sarah continued to keep the journal in which she jotted flashes and fragments as she reconstructed the story of the abuse she suffered. She would then discuss these "memories" with her therapist. "You might have a memory or a piece of memory in one session," he testified, "and maybe you won't deal with that memory for another three or four sessions and then all of a sudden it will come up again." In such a circumstance, the therapist explained, a person could consult her journal, like a writer checking her notes, and "refresh her memory."

But memory is not a filing system where events can be stored and retrieved exactly as they happened. Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus of the University of Washington is one of the world's foremost memory researchers and an outspoken critic of recovered memory therapy. "Memories are more of a spiritual than a physical reality," Loftus says. "They drift through the brain, more like clouds or vapor than something we can put our hands around." As such, they are prone to distortion, decay and suggestion. Loftus and others have demonstrated that people can be induced to believe they have experienced all sorts of things that never happened, from being lost in a shopping mall as children, to witnessing accidents and sniper attacks.

Those findings are irrelevant, say those who argue for the acceptance of recovered memories; none of the artificial "memories" successfully implanted in experiments could come close to matching the trauma of childhood sexual assault by a trusted ▷



"Before I started remembering things that happened, I was a very angry person. Now, I'm much calmer."

adult. Because researchers cannot ethically implant memories of abuse in human subjects, they can't prove or disprove statements by recovered memory advocates that sexual trauma is stored differently from other memories.

There is one spectacular example of a false memory of sexual abuse being implanted, albeit in the mind of the accused rather than the accuser. In Washington state in 1992, Paul Ingram, a policeman and a Christian fundamentalist, was accused of incest by his two daughters. At first he denied the charges, but under pressure from police interrogators, and believing his daughters would not lie, he later confessed, though he claimed to have no memory of the abuse with which he was charged. Then, after weeks of consultations with his pastor and a psychologist (both of whom encouraged Ingram to choose God over the devil), he said he remembered the assaults, going so far as to say he was a member of a satanic cult that had murdered 25 babies. Ingram was so suggestible that social psychologist Richard Ofshe decided to perform an experiment. Ofshe fabricated an accusation about Ingram forcing two of his children to have sex while he watched. At first Ingram denied the event had occurred, but after following Ofshe's request that he try to remember more details, Ingram wrote a three-page statement confessing in graphic detail to a crime that even his children denied he had committed.

Even if false memories *can* be implanted, does that mean *all* recovered memories should be dismissed as false? An emphatic no comes from supporters of recovered memory. Psychologist Jennifer Freyd of the University of Oregon, author of *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse* (Harvard University Press) and herself an accusing daughter, argues that victims like Sarah Robson are too powerless to deal with incest when it is occurring; they have no choice but to trust their parents or caregivers. When they are sexually abused they create "information blockages" as a survival technique, "forgetting" or repressing the trauma in a hidden recess of their brains. In the worst cases, they develop multiple personalities. "To know is to put oneself in danger," Freyd writes. "Not to know is to align oneself with the caregiver and ensure survival."

Freyd's theory, which she admits she developed to explain her own recovered memories, only works for people who have retrieved repressed memories, and not for what some experts say is the majority of incest survivors who never forget their abuse.

When it comes to definitive proof, the jury is still out on recovered memory. As for me, I am with Elizabeth Loftus. In a conversational debate with Ellen Bass, coauthor of *The Courage to Heal*, Loftus said, "If you define repression as a theoretical possibility, a rare and unusual quirk of the mind that occurs in response to terrible trauma, I could not dismiss the theory out of hand. I would say 'Yes, that's possible,' but I would have to see some proof before I'd call myself a believer." In other words, repression is possible, but not probable, and every case has to be judged with the dispassionate wisdom of Solomon. Alas, he was elsewhere during Richard Fieldstone's trial.

I truly believe that every sexually abused person should put their abusers behind bars.—Sarah Robson

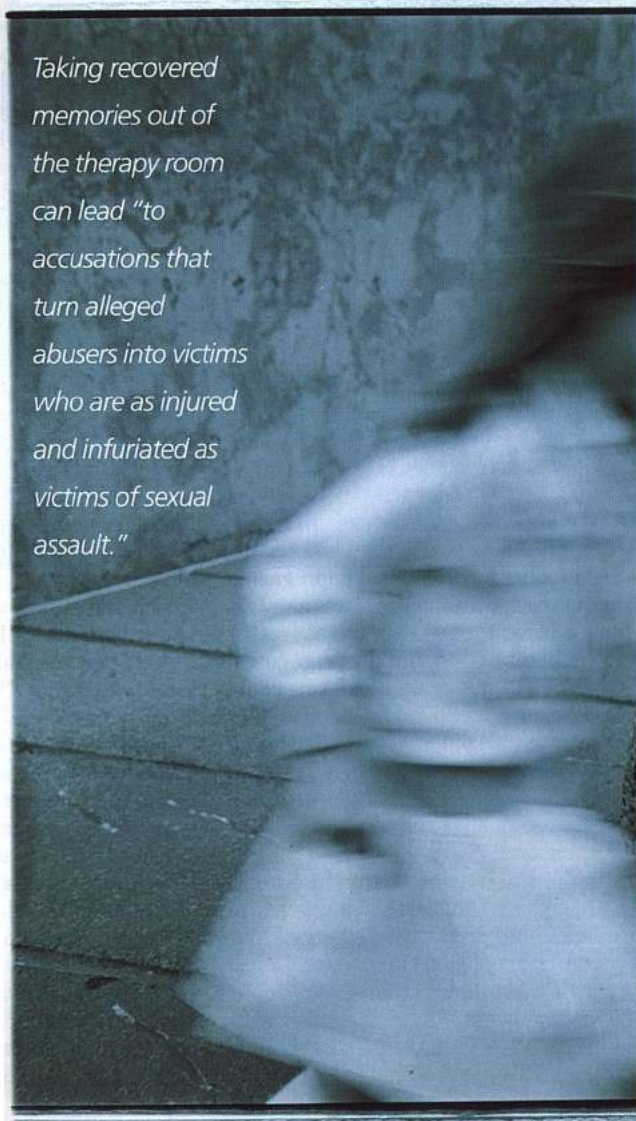
Nobody can prove conclusively that Richard Fieldstone sexually assaulted his stepdaughter several hundred times. Having

waded through the claims and counterclaims in this and many other recovered memory cases, I can tell you that I have grave doubts both about Richard's guilt and the supposed therapeutic benefits of adult children confronting their parents with recovered memories of sexual abuse.

Many people have feelings of abandonment, shame, loss or rage. Often, with the help of therapists they work on these feelings by looking into the past, to piece together the influences that brought them to where they are—to create memory stories, if you will, which become more detailed with each retelling. The goal is to use experience and remembering to understand yourself and to come to terms with unresolved pain.

Recovered memory therapy is different: it works with memories as though they are facts, and seeks resolution in part through blaming and confrontation. In researching this article I consulted several psychiatrists and therapists. None of them, including a crisis intervention social worker and a psychotherapist who have participated in family confrontations in the past, now recommends to their patients that they act on the memories that are reconstructed in the therapy room. ▽

Taking recovered memories out of the therapy room can lead "to accusations that turn alleged abusers into victims who are as injured and infuriated as victims of sexual assault."



"The patient or client can decide for themselves what they want to do," says psychiatrist William Wehrspann of the George Hull Child and Family Mental Health Centre in Etobicoke, Ont. "But it is totally inappropriate for therapists to urge clients to take their newly constituted beliefs [based on recovered memories of sexual abuse] outside the therapy session." That can lead, he says, "to accusations that turn alleged abusers into victims who are as injured and as infuriated as victims of sexual assault." In Wehrspann's opinion, therapists have to be unbiased and humble with their patients' recovered memories. Above all, he says, "as a physician, you must do no harm."

Despite Sarah's charges, Richard Fieldstone might not have been convicted if he had had enough money, savvy or connections to retain a smart criminal lawyer like Alan Gold of the Toronto firm of Gold and Fuerst. Since 1993, Gold has defended a dozen cases involving recovered memories and won every time. The key, he says, is showing how recovered memories are "created" in therapy; he contends that such memories are "confabulations, the same as UFO abductions." In court, he relies largely on a patient's therapy records, which he says are like "drafts of a work in progress" showing the various influences that have worked on the complainant.

The Fieldstones' legal aid lawyer did not call a memory expert for the defence. He put both Isabel and Richard on the stand. Neither was a good witness. Most damning of all, Richard testified that at Sarah's request he had felt her breast for a lump, treated her with animal flea powder for a case of pubic lice, and taken her to the doctor's office for a pregnancy test after she told him her boyfriend had impregnated her. On each occasion Isabel was away visiting relatives.

Neither the police nor the prosecution explained how Richard Fieldstone could have sexually assaulted his stepdaughter as many as 400 times in a crowded house without anybody ever noticing anything, particularly since she shared a bedroom with three siblings and often had friends sleeping over.

In the end it turned out to be Sarah's word against Richard's. She won. He lost. Richard was convicted on all four counts and sentenced to seven-and-a-half years in a Maritime prison several hours' drive from home.

I can't say I'm roughing it. Once in a while there's a little conflict with one of the inmates,

but I've learned who to avoid.—Richard Fieldstone

Richard, now in his 60s, applied for parole in June 1996 and was turned down flat. Over the telephone from prison, on a collect call conducted under the listening ears of his guards, he said he wasn't at all surprised. "I'm an untreated sex offender as far as the institution is concerned," he said. He refuses to participate in the rehabilitation programs for sex offenders because part of the treatment means he has to "admit I'm guilty and stand up in front of a bunch of other inmates and describe the crime and how I did it."

The hardest part about being in prison, Richard says, is not the injustice, but the separation from his family. A new grandson has been born, but "the only time I saw him was when he was a few months old and I went home to my mother's funeral under a police escort."

For her part, Isabel scrapes by on a disability pension for her asthma and arthritis. Sarah's accusations "separated us as a family," she says over the telephone line, unable to disguise the pain beneath her Maritime lilt. Isabel never sees her grandsons except "in passing on the street" and she hasn't spoken to Sarah since Richard was arrested. "I can't, I just can't," she says. "Too much has happened."

Sarah Robson has no regrets about sending her stepfather to jail and losing contact with her mother, one of her brothers, and her stepsister. "I feel they're very sick," she told me. "I just want them to leave me alone." After five years of therapy, Sarah says she finally feels in control of her life. "Before I started remembering the things that happened, I was a very angry person. I was afraid of going out by myself and I didn't know why," she said. Now she's "much calmer" and she doesn't "get upset like I did before." Her only fear is that Richard may come after her when he is released from prison. "I feel the sentence was just," Sarah told me, "but I think he should be on parole for the rest of his life."

As for Richard, the last thing he said to me was, "If I ever get out of here, I'm going to see that the laws are changed." Then, he hung up the phone and was escorted back to his cell and locked up for the night. It was another day down and nearly four years to go in prison. □

Is there a right and wrong in the debate over recovered memory? To talk about it, visit our Web site, Chatelaine Connects, at www.chatelaine.com and click on Conversations (News & Views).