

Marion Elizabeth Witte

An Interview about “Little Madhouse on the Prairie”

Q. Your memoir, "Little Madhouse on the Prairie," begins by going back two generations in your family. Why?

A. I had a desire to understand what it was that made my parents act and behave as they did. I intuitively knew that there must be a reason for how they parented. I came to believe it was a learned behavior, so I wanted to go back and find its source. Both of my parents came from rather stoic cultural and genetic backgrounds – Scandinavian and German – and they were very closed-mouthed when it came to talking about family “issues.” I wasn't going to find out what I needed to learn from them, so I needed to go back to the ancestral source. It seemed as if “not talking” was part of the problem, and I discovered that to be the truth.

Q. Describe the farm on which you were raised.

A. The farm was very large. We didn't own it, as we were sharecroppers, which meant my family farmed the land. We raised crops and gave the landlord half the proceeds at market. We grew sugar beets, grain crops, wheat, soy beans. A portion of the land was used to raise sheep, pigs, cattle. Most of the farm animals were raised for our own consumption. The buildings on the land were about fifty years old. It was actually a beautiful area, prairies with fields of grain and blue skies. It was a beautiful place to be raised. It was relatively self-sustaining – garden, dairy cows for milk and butter, cattle, chickens for eggs.

Q. What was it about the conditions on the farm that made life so difficult for your mother in particular?

A. My mother had three children by the time she was 24. She was a farm wife, and that was a very demanding and difficult job. She had to do all the cooking for the family and farm hands. She had to take care of the house and laundry, do all the errands. It was a 24/7 job and she was a young woman taking all of this on with my father either being in the fields working or away in the evening. I don't think it was the life she envisioned for herself – even though she grew up in a similar environment. I think it was my mother's idea to escape from that. I think she became disappointed, then bitter at the life she ended up finding herself in. My mother would have loved to stay in California, where she and my father spent their honeymoon. But those were the days when women didn't have a choice – the men made the decisions.

Q. How did your father handle the frustration and fatigue of life as a sharecropper in such an inhospitable environment?

A. My father and his brother loved farming. They were men of the soil – and they lived and breathed it. My father actually found great joy in working the ground and growing crops. He thrived on it. The hard work, the weather, the adversity....all of it. Work was both an escape and an addiction for him.

Q. When did your mother begin the physical abuse?

A. It began, to the best of my recollection, when I was about three years old. I have a theory that my mother may have suffered from post-partum depression after my sister was born. Both my brother's and my world were turned upside down after my sister was born. To me, something changed in our lives. Maybe everything in her life – the three children, workload, husband who abandoned her every night to go to the bar in town – tipped the scales.

Q. Describe the circumstances that would prompt her anger.

A. It was pretty random and unpredictable. That was even more difficult than knowing you'd done something wrong. Or that it was precipitated by something other than my behavior. For a while I tried to control things by being as good as I could, or as quiet as I could. But when that didn't work, I tried to absent myself from the physical situation.

Q. Discuss the moment you realized your father was incapable of coming to your defense.

A. The first time I realized it was when I told him how my mother was treating me. My father was gone a lot. I realized that when he was home, my mother did not punish us. I came to believe he was totally unaware of what was happening. I decided to share very carefully what was happening in my life. I was waiting for him to rise to the occasion and whisk me away. The opposite happened. He left. Then he came back and told me he was leaving my mother and we would never see him again. That was all traumatic for a little girl. That was when the abject loneliness began, because I knew I was alone in the world. I also believed he was leaving because I told him my "secrets." I never spoke to him about it again until he was on his death bed.

Q. What were the other methods of abuse did your mother inflicted on you in addition to beatings?

A. She would not speak for as long as two weeks if she was upset. Not speak to anybody. We would tiptoe around the house. The tension was absolutely unbearable. At times she would lock me out of the house during the day. I think she'd sunk into a depression. I think she wanted to be alone. That's when I started to roam around the farm.

Q. You have an older brother and younger sister. Were they abused as well?

A. I know my brother was because I observed it. That was something my mother would do if she was punishing my brother or me – she would make the other one sit and watch. My sister was two years younger. She was in the house a lot with my mother while I was outside. So I really did not observe her and my mother together. But speaking to my sister as an adult, I think she was.

Q. Were any adult friends or family aware of the abuse?

A. I don't know. At the time I thought not because no one ever said anything. As an adult I believe the family that lived on the same farm was aware. My aunt, I think, knew something wasn't right. I also believe the teachers at the school knew something was wrong.

Q. Why was your family so isolated? You were forbidden from visiting your cousins, who lived on the same parcel of land.

A. It was isolation imposed on us. Because of some disagreement between my mother and my aunt, we were advised by my mother to stay on our side of the property, and not play with our cousins or visit their house.

Q. Yet there were people who gave you hope. Tell us about them.

A. There were two. Beverly and Juanita. Beverly was a town kid. I was told not to go into the town kids' homes. But in spite of that I became friends with her. She and her family embraced me and I would spend lots of afternoons in her home. To a certain extent, they saved my emotional life. It set the stage for me knowing there was something better. Juanita was the child of migrant workers from Texas who worked in the summer on the farm. I became friends with her in defiance of instructions from my parents not to speak to "the Mexicans." By the time I was 5 or 6 my rebellious nature – my survival skills—began to take hold. Juanita was adopted, and her mother and father loved her beyond words. That showed me that there was another way for a family unit to interact. They shed light on my life and enabled me to see that perhaps something was awry. Perhaps some thing was not right in our household. They planted that seed.

Q. When did you finally say to yourself "enough is enough"?

A. I was sixteen and my mother and I had an argument. She went into the porch to get the wooden oak rod she used to beat me with and I snapped. I broke the rod into two pieces and threw my mother against the washing machine. The years of pent-up rage came out. I told her enough was enough and that next time I would kill her. My life could have taken a whole different path that day if I had made good on that promise.

Q. When your mother finally stopped abusing you, you seemed to start abusing yourself. What happened in high school?

A. After that event there was something released in me that I'd been shoving down. It exploded in high school and I was angry and it was coming out in the most inappropriate ways. I turned into a juvenile delinquent. I started drinking and defying the teachers. The result of years of abuse started pouring out and I took my anger out at people in authority.

Q. Who convinced you to go to college?

A. A woman named Barbara. Barbara's family lived in the next town. I babysat for her on the weekends. I asked Barbara if I could live with her in her house during the summer and be the nanny. Bonnie was not like the other farm wives. She would rather hire me to do the housework so she could be politically involved and go to law school. She said I had too much going on not to go to college. Not in a forceful way but in a kind way. She convinced me that contrary to what I'd heard at home – that I could never be anything – she knew I could.

Q. You graduated college early and became the youngest person to pass the CPA exam that year in the country. What was your hurry?

A. It was a financial situation. My father said he'd help me the first year to see how I did. I was working to pay my room and board – my father paid tuition. But my brother dropped out of college that same year and my father was furious. Said he wasn't going to pay for any more of kids' educations. So I got three jobs. Finishing college in three years was a way to save money. Part of it was also to show my father he was wrong.

Q. You were so successful in your early career. In what ways did your childhood abuse interfere with your enjoyment of that success?

A. Because nothing I did it was ever good enough. It was never perfect. It was a constant struggle to accept and enjoy the success. Outwardly I appeared to be climbing the ladder. Inside I couldn't climb it high enough or fast enough. No matter what accolades I earned, it didn't satisfy me because I didn't feel it inside. No external achievement could change how I felt inside. Most people had no idea this is how I felt - because when you're abused as a child you're always pretending everything is okay.

Q. Did you tell your husband, who seems to have been a very kind and nurturing man, about your abuse?

A. I never talked to him about it, so the first time he was aware was when he read this book. He was a wonderful husband, terrific father, and if there was anybody I could feel safe telling it to, it would have been him. But I didn't. These kinds of secrets are insidious – they make you feel so bad and so dirty. That's the kind of hold they have.

Q. When you became pregnant with your daughter Angela what thoughts went through your head?

A. I was absolutely shocked. At that time I had enough awareness to know that my childhood would have an impact on what kind of parent I was. I had to adjust to the gravity of the situation in my mind. I was despondent, which was problematic because my husband was absolutely thrilled and his parents were too.

Q. You write that your in-laws showed you how to be a loving parent. How?

A. I studied their relationship with my husband, Paul. It was really amazing how they interacted with him as a son and as an adult. I observed how they treated me – they told me I was the daughter they never had. Their role modeling enabled me to parent my daughter, when I had learned no such skills myself as a child.

Q. Why did you end your marriage after nearly 10 years? It seemed to be a happy one.

A. The responsibility lies on my shoulders. I was still pretending I was okay. As I moved into my 40s I began to realize I was not okay. My marriage was not the type of marriage I saw his parents had. My parenting skills were not what they should have been. My work relationships were not as healthy as they should have been. All the things I was pretending and not talking about started to ooze out. I made the very difficult choice of starting the journey to healing without him. It was such a deep and personal journey that it was one I had to take alone. In the end, we all wound up fine. My husband found a wonderful woman and has a wonderful marriage.

Q. You describe a number of different healing approaches in your book, from traditional to more experimental. Is there any one therapy that seemed to work best for you?

A. They all helped because the process of healing is about peeling off layers. Each one, to me, was the perfect one at the time. Traditional therapy was a good way to start; hypnosis was a way to go deeper, garnering more information. More dramatic and traumatic was the residential treatment program for abused children who were now adults, and working with a shaman. Because there were so many layers to my damage, I needed to get in there with a jack hammer to heal the old trauma. The residential treatment program was the most painful thing – perhaps even more painful than when I was a child – because back then I no framework to understand or describe what was happening. As an adult you look back and realize none of it made any sense whatsoever. For me it was very painful, but very effective. And working with the shaman healing helped heal my spirit. Each was a part of my journey.

Q. You write with compassion about your family, even though they wounded you. Is forgiveness part of the healing process?

A. For me, it was an important final step. I realized if I couldn't forgive, there would always be tightness in my heart and in my spirit. Others disagree and say you don't need to forgive your abuser. To me, forgiveness opened up my heart. You can heal emotionally and psychologically, but until you bring your heart into state of forgiveness, you can't heal spiritually. It was the step that set me free.

Q. Your mother is still alive. Do you have a relationship with her?

A. It's very tenuous. We speak on occasion. We can't speak of anything serious, so I keep it cordial. I know it could be better - maybe someday it will be better. I understand my mother, from whence she comes, and for that I have deep empathy, yet I choose not to go back and risk the possibility of being reinjured. I choose not to be wounded any more.

Q. Has your mother read the book? The rest of your family?

A. I sent the book to my mother and my sister and brother. I have not heard back from them if they have read it or not.

Q. Who is Victoria?

A. I've been involved with the Boys & Girls Club for years. One day I was volunteering, teaching a class on self-esteem, at a club after school. I asked the children to write something nice about themselves. One little girl wasn't writing. I asked if I could help her, but she said no. She had a look in her eyes that reminded me of me. When the time was up to finish the assignment, I walked by and felt her grab my wrist. She'd written: No little girl should have to live my life. I knelt down and told her it took a lot of courage for her to write that and that I would do what I could to help. She hugged me. A voice inside said, "It's time to tell your story." Victoria is why I wrote this book.

Q. Tell us about the Angel Heart Foundation.

A. I established The Angel Heart Foundation in 2005. We provide resources and information about positive parenting and youth empowerment. I want to support people who are interested in helping children – who want to take action and become what I call "an ordinary hero."

Q. What is your hope for "Little Madhouse on the Prairie"?

A. My hope for the book is two-fold. First I want to shed light on what happened to me so that others who encountered childhood mistreatment, or are now in those situations, know that they are not alone. There is hope and help and you can recover. I want people to understand that what happened to them as children affects their adult behavior and the way they parent. I call it "connecting the dots" between our childhood experiences and our adult behavior.

I'd also like all of us to take a critical look at what's happening to millions of children on this planet. Take make an honest assessment at the level of disrespect we show children. When we don't treat children with respect and love, they can grow up to be adults who don't treat their children well, and on and on. I want to shed a light on our youngest citizens, who have no rights, no economic viability. I know we say we love children – but are we really walking that walk? We need to quit saying that we care about children and start acting like we do. If I can help in my own small way to shine a light on the problem, I'll feel like I've succeeded.