

❧ INFORMATION FOR THE READER ❧

This excerpt is from the book
Little Madhouse on the Prairie
by Marion Witte.

You can purchase the book and obtain further information
at www.littlemadhouseontheprairie.com

The author's website is www.marionwitte.com.

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Your support of Ms. Witte in this matter is appreciated.

No amount of expression of love from her was enough to overcome the self-defeating, sabotaging thoughts I carried in my subconscious. It is frightening to know I carried these thoughts for so many years, and even scarier to realize that I had no idea what impact they were having on me.

The good news is that I discovered these thoughts can be reprogrammed. I have worked to re-parent my wounded inner child. I now know that the little girl in me, who never got the love and protection that she needed, is indeed worthy and lovable. And I learned that I am worthy and lovable. I have developed faith that my daughter absolutely loves me. Today I take great pride when she tells me so, and I truly believe it. And the part of me that is still a little girl is happier too, for she knows that she is loved, for I have learned to love myself and to nurture that part of me that so long ago went unnurtured.

The journey I started toward recovery was unique to me, as is every journey to recovery. Many programs are available to assist with healing and recovery. A program may be effective for some people and not for others. Anyone who commits to his or her well-being after childhood abuse must travel a road that works for him or her as an individual. As I discovered for myself, the key is to stay with what works for you until you get the results you desire, or better yet, the results you need. A program will be effective only if you commit to it and do the required work.

∞ INCIDENT AT THE SHOPPING MALL ∞

During my process of recovery, I discovered that issues from which I had not yet healed surfaced in ways and places I never dreamed of. One of the most striking and surprising ways in which such an issue revealed itself happened in a shopping mall.

I often worked late at my CPA practice and would do my

errands on the way home. One particular evening I decided to stop at the mall in Palm Desert. I finished my shopping and was walking out of J.C. Penney, exiting through the doors that led to the center courtyard. Behind me, from inside the store, I heard a slap followed by a child's cry. That howl of pain sent my mind back to a five-and-dime store in Casselton, North Dakota.

As a four-year-old, I had strayed from my family and crawled under one of the store's wooden display cabinets. There was just enough room for me to squeeze into the open space between the bottom drawer and the linoleum floor. The slippery surface of the linoleum allowed me to slide around from side to side and watch the customers' shoes going by. After a while, I started to get hot, as I was wearing a snowsuit. I thought about sliding out when I realized that no one had found me, and I was having fun outsmarting everyone. I heard people calling my name, but I ignored them and stayed hidden in my great hiding place. Eventually I was discovered and pulled out feet first when a store clerk saw my snow boot sticking out from under the cabinet. I saw the furious look on my mother's face as she glared down at me. She screamed, "Don't ever leave my sight in a store again!" Then she struck me across the face to reinforce her words. I did not understand what I had done that was so horrible, and I was humiliated at being so publicly punished.

As I was exiting J.C. Penney, the force of this memory turned me around and marched me back into the store. Standing at the checkout counter in the children's department was an enormous woman in a white dress covered with large red printed flowers that emphasized her size. She was wearing one shoe and holding its red high-heeled mate in her hand. Beside her, his cheek reddened by the blow from the shoe, was a three-year-old boy, unsuccessfully trying to hold back his tears. The young clerk behind the counter concentrated her attention on the cash register. The woman with the shoe towered over the child and had to bend low to glower in his

face as she screamed, “If you open your mouth again, I’ll give you something to really cry about!”

I focused my gaze on the little boy. His lower lip was quivering and tears were streaming down his face. His eyes were focused on the floor, as though he was looking for a hole in which to disappear. The abject fear on his face was very familiar to me.

The woman ended her tirade and stood upright. She turned around and directed her attention at me. I looked directly into her eyes and then at the shoe in her hand. The woman had a solid 200 pounds over me. I was thinking about the bones that would be snapped if she decided to haul off and slug me.

I reached into a deep, dark place inside of me, and the anger I found was palpable. The part of me that controlled my emotions was overtaken by Dirty Harry, and I said as calmly as I could, “If you ever touch that boy again, I will find you and I will kill you!”

The mother and I stared at one another with a cold, hard focus. I was mentally preparing for her to physically assault me. I was unsure what form the attack would take, but I knew I could be in for a great deal of pain. She, on the other hand, seemed to sense that I could muster up the anger to fulfill my promise. She stared at me in an attempt to sense any fear. When she realized I was not going to leave, she glanced away, first at the child, and then at the young clerk. I had not contemplated how I would find her once she left the store, and she did not challenge me on the matter, but I think she believed my threat to be real.

She lowered the shoe and put it on her foot, then she turned to finish paying for her items. She turned her son so that his back was to me and I could not see his face. I stood watching them, as I wanted my presence to make her as uncomfortable as possible. It took a while for the clerk to ring up the sale, and occasionally the woman turned around to see if I was

still there and to glare at me. When she finished paying, she grabbed the boy's arm and strode out of the store. As they rushed away, the little boy turned and looked at me with his sad eyes. I sensed that this was one of the few times in his young life that another human being had dared come to his defense. I wondered how it might have affected me as a child if someone had spoken up when I was being severely punished. I wondered if I would have felt less isolated if someone had intervened in my childhood, even for a short period of time. Perhaps the course of events in my life would not have changed, yet it might have instilled hope in me to know that at least one person cared.

I waited a few minutes at the checkout counter. As I was about to leave, I glanced at the cashier. She was ashen faced. I intentionally added to her misery by giving her a look to let her know I thought she was weak and pathetic. She had made a choice not to get involved, even as the blow was inflicted on that child.

As I left the store and entered the courtyard of the mall, I was struck with a vision of what the lead story in the Palm Springs paper might be the next day if events had unfolded differently. The headline might have read, "Local CPA Hospitalized After J.C. Penney Store Beating." I thought to myself that it would have been worth it.

It is difficult to know what to do when encountering adults who mistreat children, as there are no hard and fast rules and each situation is different. Every so often I think about the boy in the store and pray that he is all right. I have no way of knowing what impact my actions had on his life, so all I can do is pray that it was positive. I did what I believed was right at the time. Having subsequently attained greater insight into these matters, I would have done things differently. There are more appropriate responses than mine that can be utilized when encountering a child being mistreated in a public place. You can start a conversation with the adult, or ask if you

can provide assistance, in an effort to direct attention away from the child. If the child is misbehaving, you can address him or her directly with a comment of a positive nature to divert their attention away from the negative behavior. If the child is in danger, you can call for appropriate assistance. I now see the wisdom in avoiding negative remarks or looks, because these reactions are likely to increase the parent's anger and could make matters worse.

As postscript to this story, I am much older and wiser today, yet I am no less passionate in my beliefs. No longer do I accost people in a mall or anywhere else! I take out my cell phone and call the police. I have finally learned about "appropriate ferocity."

The spontaneous memory recall at the J.C. Penney was significant, for it revealed to me that, despite the work I had done in therapy, the emotional charge attached to some of the memories of my past could easily be triggered. I decided that it was time for me to explore some other forms of healing.

❧ MY INNER CHILD ❧

I have mentioned that a significant part of my path to recovery has involved learning to nurture that child-like part of me. I began to work on this in therapy with a psychologist who emphasized healing the inner child as a primary means of healing the adult. The concept of the inner child has been explained in a variety of ways. To me, my inner child represents that part of me that still feels like a little girl and that sometimes causes me to behave in a childlike or a childish way. Focusing on this in therapy, I recognized more fully than I ever had before that the abuse I had experienced had deprived me of what children need to be healthy. Children raised in families in which abuse takes place do not have their basic needs met for love, safety, trust, respect, and guidance. The absence of these requirements for healthy development can result in fear, shame, anger, and despair in adulthood, the