

Chapter 7 - Step 4: Reclaim

...but to not do so is even worse, because then the past is in charge, instead of you.

Before going to this fourth step, I just want to remind you that, even though they are numbered one through four, you can start with any step you feel most drawn to, you can do more than one step at a time, and you can take breaks whenever you like and for as long as you like. Recovery is a life-long journey, and you can chart your own course.

That said, there must be a reason for doing all of this. Why bother even recognizing a problem exists if there isn't some benefit? Isn't it easier just to keep repressing all the bad from the past, rather than dredging it all up, again? And just because you reach out to someone for support doesn't mean it's going to be pleasant when you tell them all about it. True, embracing your inner child of pain is going to be painful, but to not do so is even worse, because then the past is in charge, instead of you.

When we first went through our abuse, we were ill prepared to deal with any of it. Beyond overwhelming, it contorted and distorted our worlds into dimensions we never dreamed could exist. So, just like when we move to a new home and leave behind the things we don't need,

our little minds moved on and left behind the things it did not want. All those terrifying moments of madness simply disappeared by waving the magic wand of repression. Don't like remembering mommy constantly yelling and hitting you? Repress it! Don't want to think about what daddy used to do in your bedroom at night? Repress it! Having a hard time admitting you were given neglect instead of love? Repress it! Just repress it, and forget it. All of it.

But repressing something - the act of partially or completely blocking our ability to recall - is not the same as solving or resolving something. In other words, just cause it's gone from you conscious memory does not mean that it's really gone. It has just been pushed down into an even bigger playground: your sub-conscious. Unlike the conscious which has boundaries and limits, the sub-conscious is boundless with infinite dimensions and time. Unlike the conscious which migrates towards pleasure and retreats from pain, the sub-conscious entertains, and even magnifies, all emotions from the most sublime to the most sinister. And unlike the conscious which is only active while we're awake, the sub-conscious is full on, 24/7/365, ready and waiting to take over and take charge. So, maybe the subconscious wasn't the best place to stash these unwanted memories after all. Live and learn.

That is why people migrate to things like 12-step programs, and that is why I wrote this 4-step book: to provide a mechanism for you to create the space and use

the tools you will need to pry these long lost parts of you from the deep, dark recesses where they lay. Only then, when you look them in the eye and say, “I see you, and I hear you,” will you be able to reclaim them and, thereby, reclaim control over your own life.

Left to fester in the darkness, these scorned pieces take on a life of their own, continually growing, becoming stronger and stronger, as they sub-consciously seep into your very marrow, making you feel and do things that, to your conscious, make no sense at all as they slowly destroy your life. Ever wonder why you’re the one who always gets left out? Ever wonder why you’re the one whose relationships never work out? And ever wonder why you’re never able to be truly happy because it always seems like there’s something inside that needs to come out? That’s because there’s a ghost in your machine: a ghost you created when you repressed the predatory nightmares of your past.

Of course, what options did you have? Being told that you’re a liar if you did speak up, or, worse yet, that someone you loved would die if you tried to speak, well, making it all just “go away” didn’t seem all that bad. And if and when repression did start to lose its efficacy, then at some point there were always drugs and alcohol to re-fortify your capacity for self-delusion. That is why, in 2014, over half of the patients in my drug addiction treatment program whom I surveyed admitted to having survived significant childhood abuse: if your mind gets tired of doing back-flips on its own, then chemical

holidays will just have to do. Thus, day by day, and drink by drink, and drug by drug, we dug an even deeper grave in which to pile all the past, present and future misery that we could find. Until, one day, we finally fall into that grave ourselves and don't come back.

There is, however, another way. Stop burying. Stop covering up. Stop pretending the past did not exist. Recognize you have a problem. Reach out for help in dealing with it. Remember exactly what it was. Then, little by little, you can loosen the grip it has over you, you can break the strings by which it moves your arms and legs, and you can sail your ship - damaged though it may be - wherever and whenever you like. But you can't reclaim any of this until you first learn one magic word: boundaries.

Boundaries are the foundation of any independent life, for they are the difference between a loose cannon and a well disciplined person. Boundaries distinguish the person who is out of control from the person who knows where and when to stop. And boundaries give us the confidence to go where we want, because we know we will not go where we should not be. True, boundaries can not erase or redraw our past, but they can keep us from repeating it, because boundaries built on memories will never let us forget.

Life is really all about our relationships: your relationships with friends, with family, with co-workers, and even your relationship to your own body. We could even sum it up by saying life is your relationship to every

person, place and thing in the universe. But without proper boundaries, relationships that might have otherwise been wholesome and supportive will become toxic and destructive. That is why things went so tragically wrong when we were children: those in charge did not have healthy boundaries. They did not think and stop before unleashing a barrage of hateful and hurtful words. They did not think and stop before they brought their hand down in yet another painful blow. And, they did not think and stop before they turned you into a human sex toy for their pleasure, only. You see, they had no boundaries, and you paid the price.

This is why we go to such lengths to recognize, reach out, and remember: so that we can create healthy boundaries. That way, we know how to think and stop so that we can take back control of our lives. This is not something we can do while the ghost in our machine thrives, for the ghost in the machine does not care about boundaries. It only cares about acting out, about being heard, and about being seen. And, since you have condemned it to the darkness of repression in the netherworld of your sub-conscious, it acts out as an invisible puppet master, pulling the strings of your life.

So, we remember, painful as it can be, because in remembering we confront that ghost for what it really is: our inner lost child. In remembering, we can finally see it in its full vulnerability which others once used to destroy us. In remembering, we can finally hear its cries of pain and anguish that no one wanted to hear (“*Keep*

crying and I'll give you something to cry about!"). And in remembering, we can finally elevate it back into our conscious where it will never be forgotten again, never to be abandoned, never to be left alone, unseen, unheard, in the dark. Then, and only then, does that ghost become a child once more, and then and only then can the child let go - of its pain, of its loneliness, of its need to control - and become one with us, again.

In this fourth step, we reclaim what 12-steps address through blame. By embracing the ghosts in our machines, we disarm them so they don't act out, harming ourselves and others. As we reconnect with our past and what was left behind, we begin to see how it affected us and our behavior towards others. And, we can do this without blame, guilt, or slapping anyone in the face.

Finally, we strive through all four of these steps to regain control of our lives by recalling our past, so as to accept what it was and reclaim what it is. And we hold onto this new found freedom by establishing healthy boundaries, by removing toxic people, places and things from our lives, and by actively choosing who we want to be now, rather than being what our past said we were. Some of these choices are easy and obvious to make. But, sometimes this means making very hard choices, including radical change, such as cutting people out of our lives, moving from old familiar places, and letting go of things which only served to reinforce the dysfunctional parts of our lives.

It is not easy to learn how to establish and sustain

functional boundaries. Often, those around us will resist such change. They may even try to sabotage it. But their unwillingness to support our rise from the ashes is just one more toxicity which we will have to review and rectify if we are ever to regain a sense of self-worth, self-respect, and self-control. And boundaries are the means by which we can achieve all of those “self’s” for ourselves and for our futures.

To that end, chapter eight describes three exercises which were the foundations for the most important turning points in my recovery process. The first one - *The Empty Picture Frame* - was a guiding light for me in determining who should, and shouldn’t, be in my life. The second exercise - *Mosaic Patterning* - gave me the tools to experiment with my memories, including those which were incomplete, so as to create a fuller and truer picture of my painful past. Finally, the third exercise - *Keep It, Change It, Leave It* - helped me to define meaningful boundaries in my path forward, so as to keep out the harmful while letting in the healing, including the discovery of SIA - Survivors of Incest Anonymous - and all the warts and wonders it would bestow upon me.

So, remember to practice the four R’s - recognize, reach, remember and reclaim - for they are four steps to recovery for survivors of childhood abuse like me and you. Through them, we can begin our journey of healing. With them, we can bring the ghosts in our machines back out into the light. And by working them, they will help us to reconnect and reclaim our children of pain.