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To Be the Protagonist of One's Own Life

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I do not know what time it is. I think it is after midday. I am at the cinema and, suddenly, a scene from the movie I am watching changes my life. From a certain perspective, every day can be a turning point. Every decision, every instant, is a turning point. And the unexpected can also work in this way. This is one of those tremendous and overwhelming moments, for which you are not prepared. In reality, nothing can prepare you for the realisation that you were sexually abused as a child.

I do not know what time it is. Memories came flooding back, like a whiplash from the back of my mind. And, at first, they seemed unmanageable. I remember nothing but tears, pain, despair, and the feeling of not wanting to be me or be in my body. I do not know what happened at that moment, after the door to my memory of that horror opened. It was 1996 and I was almost thirty years old. It was a very complex time that I am not going to describe further in this article. I do not think that is what the compilation of these first-person accounts is aiming at. What I can say about once I came out of the shock, the shock and the time I spent in therapy, is that I realised I was very much supported, absolutely supported, by the people who have always been by my side in life, whom I thank every day. They know who they are.

A central theme to address in terms of reparation: the indispensable loving bonds that contain us. Life is about relationships, about connections. We start from there.

I use the word 'abuse' because I am not interested in the legal framework that defines what happened, but rather in the damage it caused. When such violent and tremendous situations happen to us, and in my case to a 5- or 6-year-old girl, its legal qualification is irrelevant. The important thing is to be able to assess the extent of the damage and trauma that was caused.

In my case, the fact that the person who had committed the crime against me was dead added a further element to the complexity of what I was experiencing. I often thought about how one would demand justice, what one should expect when that person is no longer there. How do you achieve justice in the courts, on the judicial scene? How do you do that? Besides, he had died almost in front of me. I was there because he was a close relative. I remember the day he

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died perfectly well, not knowing at the time, or rather not remembering, what had happened to me. The mind can work wonders when it needs to protect us.

Then life had confronted me with an unexpected dilemma: knowing about a crime that had happened to me, but having no way of prosecuting it. Without the offending person, I felt that I would not be able to get amends. Would I have wanted to prosecute? That was another important question, just as it had been when I first wondered about the definition of this crime. If I had to answer that question, knowing what I know today, and having travelled the roads and paths that life has taken me down, I would say no.

Yes, I would have wanted the justice system to take actions against that person so that he would not do to other people what he did to me. I would have wanted him to be prevented from repeating his terrible behaviour towards me – and, dare I say it, towards himself. In principle, as a victim of such a cruel crime as child sexual abuse, my need is that an adult human being should not commit such a crime to other people.

I also need to ensure that the issue of child sexual abuse is not trivialised, because it is really hard for those of us who have been through it to witness such trivialisation. In my view, and based on my awareness of statistics and opinions on social media, the terms 'abuse' and 'harassment' are taken very lightly nowadays. They are applied to many things that do not warrant them, and it is alarming how many false reports are made as a result, causing more and more pain. This is a point I want to emphasise because these are very crucial issues for the lives of victims, offenders, and the community. It is important to consider how we feel about these kinds of crimes. Because trivialisation undermines common sense.

I will connect my story to my work in Restorative Justice, because they are inextricably linked.[1] When I say that I would not have prosecuted the offender, it is because, afterwards, life led me to find paths where I have felt, and still feel, constantly repaired about what happened to me. And I can play a leading role in my life, peel off the label of victim, and feel full of love.

What repairs me? My work, my connections with the community, getting to know the feelings and possibilities of other victims and offenders, coordinating an association of victims of crime, being the secretary and referent of a prisoners' cooperative. All these things repair me. In other words: not dwell-

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ing on resentment or criminal prosecution led me to open my mind and my heart. It led me to being the protagonist of my life. It taught me to bear with what happened to me with love. With love I mean that I would not be who I am today if, after everything that happened to me, I had not acted with love for myself and for those who have loved me. Another fundamental value of mine is respect for others who are different. We must teach ourselves to live with these differences and build on them. This helped me to find meaning in the horror I had been through.

I believe that, when it comes to repair and restoration, one has to carry their own scars. I feel I am a person who acknowledges her pain but is not broken by it. I carry my healed scars with strength, with the humble hope that what I am sharing about myself will help someone.

And I joined *Victims for Peace*, which I now direct (an association made up of people who have suffered minor, serious and very serious crimes). I did not know then how much being with other victims would restore my life. Learning from them, being contained by them, containing them, and loving all these different points of view of people who have suffered deeply.

At the same time, in my life, in a search for options outside of my profession as a lawyer, I embarked on a journey to become a mediator. My expectation was to integrate knowledge about conflicts, tensions, horizontal dialogues.

That, then, turned into restorative justice. I began to realise that, in the practice of restorative justice, in addition to victims, offenders and the community (an absolutely fundamental stakeholder), those who facilitate the dialogue (and I am one of those) are also restored in the same way as everyone else. I think the value of these practices, approaches, encounters, and circles, lies in the fact that they provide a space for pain, truth, reflection and listening; all powerful processes. And all of this points towards the development of a restorative culture.

And so it came to pass that I became the person who facilitated the dialogue in the first restorative meeting held in Argentina in relation to a case of homicide. Although the crime was initially deemed intentional, it was ultimately judged to be negligent. But there is no need for a spectacular or cinematographic categorisation of the event: the change from intention to neglect does not make the crime less impactful. Intentional or negligent, for a mother it is almost the same thing: in this case, the loss of a daughter. M., a 19-year-old girl. Her mother and the offenders had their first restorative meeting with the help of my facilitation, in the presence of other people from the community and members of the association *Victims for Peace*. It was an incredibly emotional moment of unique human depth, where the needs of the mother/victim were recognised. We were able to realise that even in the idea of the 'irreparable' loss

of a life, paths can be found together between victims, offenders and the community to repair the harm. These paths can only be travelled by the protagonists of cruel stories like this one. This restores our hope for the future and recovers our capacity to see humanity in others, making us able to trust in human nature. I consider this facilitation a personal milestone because it is one of the events that restored me and continues to do so every day. I believe that Restorative Justice has this effect: it makes one understand the value of meeting with others, of providing service, of returning the gaze of people deprived of liberty to victims of crime, and of returning a humanising gaze to the offender. Participating together in restorative activities has a constant restorative power. There is a real and, I dare to say, often ignored need to recognise ourselves in the other, and to acknowledge the deep pain and profound transformation that can happen. Restorative Justice attempts to bring together what the punitive paradigm has always separated. 'Common sense' is but a historical construct, not an imperfectible moral equation.

I have left until the end what I consider to be the most transcendent aspect of what we are talking about: the issue of forgiveness. Although Restorative Justice is not directly linked to forgiveness, how much of its power is present in it? How much forgiveness is present in all the possibilities that Restorative Justice offers us?

I would like to finish this text by bringing back a memory, a small extract, from an article I wrote about my first visit to Batán prison, in the context of the first *Intramural Marathon with Victims for Peace*, organised together with our dear judge Mario Juliano, in the unique and luminous space of *Liberté*:

> Everyone here knows what Victims for Peace stands for, and that is a source of absolute pride for us. The inmates know that we are thinking about them, that we are looking at them, and recognising their existence, and that inside these walls there are people in pain, with a desire for transformation. Who have made mistakes. In many cases, very bad mistakes, but that they are paying for them. And perhaps these people need more than just the time of incarceration or the gaze of the outside world to recover: perhaps they even need to ask for forgiveness. The most powerful moment of my visit to Batán happened when, after the Marathon, (…) we were chatting, there was no formality, or anything like that. A chubby guy comes up to me, an inmate who was about thirty years old, rather short – I cannot describe him well, because he came out of nowhere – and says to me: "*I don't know what happened to you, but I ask for your forgiveness*". I looked at him deeply, with a really deep look, wanting to hold his face in my memory, to hold it forever because he touched my soul. That request

> for forgiveness served for so many years in which I had to forgive myself, in which I had to forgive my aggressor and in which I had to do all the work by myself; a work that I know will never be finished, whether it is done well, whether it really transformed me as a victim. But he asked for my forgiveness and I am grateful to him for the rest of my life.

I was the victim of a crime. But I was also the strength, the willpower, the bricks and mortar used to rebuild myself. I am not saying it was easy. It was tremendously difficult, and it is a job that, from time to time, needs to be revisited. I learned to forgive and to take control of my life. We can all be the protagonists of our own lives. In fact, I urge each and every one of us to do so. And it has to happen today. Every day of our lives is the final episode of a show that has no second season.