

# LEAVING THE UNDERGROUND

ZAK MUCHA, LCSW

**T**he unrelenting message of Andrew Vachss has been: Crimes against children are the greatest danger our society faces. Lack of empathy in relationships, families, communities, and cultures will lead to our eventual downfall. *Underground* condenses this threat and targets another opportunity to understand the true root of all human evil.

Inhabitants of the Underground depend on the Rulers for every necessity of life and survival itself depends on an adherence to the Rules. The concept of transcending—reaching Outside—began as a rumor. The reader joins those actually building a new society, listening as each parable explains how the world—Underground—changed every time Rules were challenged.

How we, as a society, perceive and prosecute crimes against children has given us what Vachss calls Underground. We now understand that children can grow up in war zones without ever leaving their homes. We know children suffer PTSD symptoms previously only recognized in soldiers returning from battle. We are beginning to understand those childhood war zones create psychological POW camps the child takes with him

into adulthood and never leaves. The abuser can be long gone and the abuse continues.



As children, we are dependent upon adults for everything—food, shelter, clothing, warmth, love, and empathy. During childhood, adults define these things via explanation and example. Children absorb everything. The young boy struts, imitating his older brother, and the adolescent stands up, mimicking the hitch in his father's back after a long day of work. The daughter expresses joy or exasperation with the inflections of her mother. Children imitate, practicing for adulthood and trying on different roles. These lessons are passed along unconsciously and genetics play no part in behavior. No child is born wanting to be a doctor, preacher, or beauty pageant contestant. No child is born wanting to join a violent, racist group. No children are born believing all “love” must include some degree of abuse. We are not born with any set of behaviors or emotional connections. They are learned.

We are pack animals. We need others for our survival. From the moment of birth we are totally dependent. We

know nothing and feel everything. The endorphin blast of being loved is as nourishing as food. When a child's needs are met—even sporadically, mixed with neglect and abuse—that connection becomes the model that shapes the child's world. The relationship with the caregiver is all important and the child will do whatever it takes to maintain that relationship.

Some will starve before giving up that relationship. They will distort reality before they acknowledge, "My (mother/father/boyfriend) does not love me." The child learns to blame himself for any degree of discomfort or pain inflicted on him. The root of this self-blame can be anything from a steady pattern of diminishment to the violently enforced acceptance that children are to be used for the pleasure of adults. The true evil of emotional abuse is that the victim comes to believe he deserves whatever he gets.

"This is how it is . . ."

"I must deserve this."

"It doesn't bother me . . ."

"If I were better, they wouldn't do that . . ."

By this process the victim becomes responsible for the behavior of his abusers.

When any "love" feels inadequate, the victim blames *himself* for wanting more—the bad days are the price you pay to have some good days. The emo-

tionally abused child is praised and rewarded for accepting the abuser's rules. Such a child considers his own discomfort to be proof that he is "good." The child becomes the cause of the adults' anger, cruelty, addiction, depression, or neglect. The child is taught to not complain and not even acknowledge his own feelings. It is the *child's* job to keep the family together; to not make waves; to be "nice."

When such training is fully internalized, it will influence every relationship the child has and increase his susceptibility to further emotional abuse—after all, this is familiar territory. Such a child grows to adulthood carrying the core belief happiness is forever beyond his reach. He becomes vigilantly suspicious of others while simultaneously seeking their approval—this is a recipe for failure so the core feeling that he does not deserve happiness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Emotional abuse can be so weaponized as to leave the victim believing they deserve the pain. The more desperate the victim is to maintain a relationship, the more pain he is willing to absorb. This POW camp no longer requires guards or walls. This is the Underground.

Emotional abuse determines the child's sense of self, his definitions of "relationships," and eventually, his perception of the entire world.

Each Book within *Underground* pivots on a challenge to an accepted “truth.” Victims mediate their own pain, frequently increasing it in the process: drugs, violence, self-mutilation, gambling, isolation, and the ultimate retreat into psychosis or suicide.



Victims can tell themselves it doesn't hurt, they can numb themselves in the short term, but the pain stays with them. When they cannot numb themselves sufficiently from their feelings, they find relationships that mirror the hurtful ones they already know. They find alcohol and heroin, they starve or binge; they slide into depression and doubt their own sense of self. They build armor via weightlifting or learning how to use weapons; they seek soothing by hurting themselves quietly or in horrifically public manners; they seek control over the pain by passing it to others or by washing it down with toxic substances.

There is no reason anyone has to “learn to live with” the trauma of emotional abuse. Abusers only say the victim should. Emotional abuse cannot be coped with, but it can be eliminated, and recognizing “what hurts” is the first step. Emotional abuse never leaves of its own accord. Recognizing emotional abuse for what it is does not make us weak; it makes us human.

Pain is a warning signal we must listen to. The difficult step is for the emotionally abused person to consider their own pain worthy of such action.

The way out is a leap of faith, but not a blind leap. Our own emotional responses—our sadness, anger, rage, depression, and anxiety—will tell us how to keep moving into the light. Then, we are no longer “acting” for others, but recognizing our own true selves. Once we do that, challenging abuses of power becomes natural. It becomes who we are.

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*Zak Mucha, LCSW, is a therapist in private practice and counselor for the National Association to Protect Children HERO Child-Rescue Corps. He is the author of the forthcoming Emotional Abuse: Self-Defense and Healing. Copyright © 2014 Zak Mucha.*