

Chapter Eight

THE LITTLE GIRL INSIDE



Eight

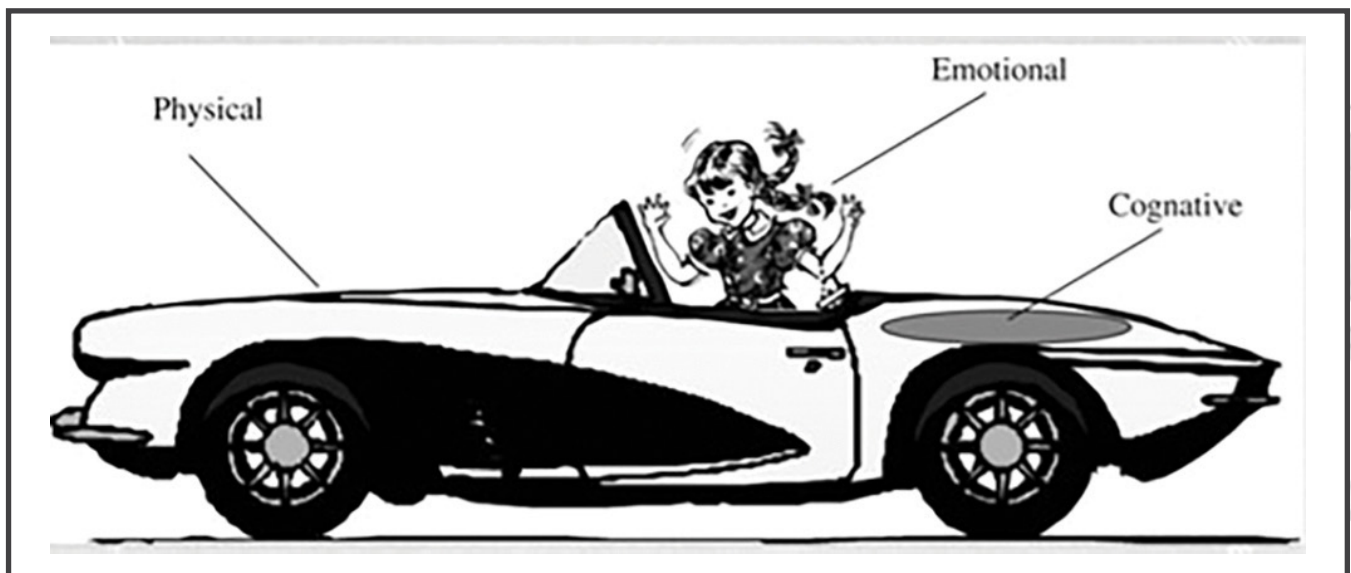


“When will I feel like an adult?” I have heard this question asked by so many women I have counseled over the years. As we delve further into their childhoods, it always comes out that they feel there is a part of them that is still a little girl. Not a sweet, innocent little girl. They see the little girl they were (who is still very much alive in their lives) as disgusting, ugly, loathsome, and guilty.

When a child goes through trauma, abuse, neglect, or any of the other terrible things that come out of dysfunctional families, the child arrests emotionally. As a little girl, she is expected to perform as an adult, and she is shamed when she doesn't. She is blamed for the things wrong in her parents' lives. She is used by people who should protect her. These circumstances can result in a person who never grows up into an emotionally mature woman. The little girl is blamed and “guilted” for being herself. As the girl grows into an adult, the woman continues to blame and even loathe the little girl she was. The reality is, as long as the adult woman views the little girl (herself) as disgusting and guilty, then the woman will never heal.

WHO'S DRIVING THE CAR?

Remember the chart you filled in about the physical, cognitive, and emotional needs of a child in chapter 6? When the physical and cognitive needs are adequately met but the emotional needs are not, the little girl grows into an adult woman who is ill-equipped to navigate relationships that require emotional maturity. So, you have a grown woman who can hold down a job and function as an adult, but emotionally she is still a child. This incongruity usually manifests itself when feelings are triggered that mimic any negative feelings she experienced but could not reconcile in her past. Extreme reactions to innocent comments, defensive reactions to suggestions, feelings getting hurt easily, reading negative motives into other's actions, throwing fits, flinging hurtful words at people she cares about—these are just a few of the childlike behaviors that adult women display when they have unresolved childhood traumas. I liken it to a car. The body of the car represents the woman's body. Like a well-dressed, shapely woman, it is sleek and shiny. The gas represents her cognitive abilities. Just as the gas in a powerful engine makes the car run, a woman's intelligence, skills, talents, and experience help her function well in society. When you put gas in a powerful engine, it can go very fast. The car looks good and is impressive while in motion. But the problem is, there is a little girl at the wheel. She represents the immature, unresolved emotional dimension of the woman. The little girl goes up one-way streets, swerves and drives on sidewalks, runs over people who get in her way, and causes chaos. She knows something is wrong, but she doesn't know how to fix it.





THE BOTTOMLESS HOLE

When a child doesn't receive what she needs emotionally, whether through neglect, hypercriticism, verbal abuse, hands-on abuse, or sexual abuse, it leaves a bottomless hole in her heart. It makes her needy and hungry for all those things she should have received. The only people who can fill this hole are her parents or loving surrogates, such as grandparents. When they fail to do so, she looks to someone else to meet her needs and satisfy her emotional hunger. Children like this often latch on to other adults and are at high risk of being exploited.

As the little girl grows into a young woman, the hole doesn't go away. Neither does the little girl. No matter how sophisticated the young woman becomes, the little girl is still there, searching for someone or something to fill that gnawing ache of the empty emotional hole. Often as little girls, they might latch on to Sunday school teachers or other kind women. But as they get older, they latch on to men. They might even find a really nice man, but the little girl inside is never satisfied. She is always hungry, always prowling for something more to satisfy the hunger.

Good people might come along and try to help her. They might offer her love and understanding. But it is still not enough. The need cannot be filled. Why? Because the hole can only be filled by the parents or a loving surrogate in the formative years. That is when it is open to be filled and when the little girl will feel satisfied. This equips her for life. An unfortunate result of this emptiness is that as an adult, she has a hard time meeting the emotional needs of those she loves. She can't give what she doesn't have. And the little girl inside doesn't understand about giving emotionally. Her only motivation is getting her needs met, often in very immature ways. She only has that hungry hole to focus on.

Oftentimes when the little girl grows up physically, she still tries to get her parent(s) to meet her emotional needs. Pam was a successful woman in the health field. Her mother had rejected her all of her childhood while she favored Pam's brother. As an adult woman, Pam took care of her aging mother, visiting her every day, staying much longer than she had time for as her mother would demand it. She furnished her room with expensive décor and bought her thoughtful gifts. This all sounds good, right? *"Honor your father and mother."* However, Pam wasn't honoring her mother. She was continuing what she had done as a little girl, trying to get her mother to love her. If only she could be better, nicer, smarter, more generous, or any number of virtues, she felt would earn her mother's love. Her brother, in contrast, had little interest in his mother as she grew older. He seldom visited or called. When he did send her flowers or a card, her mother would gush at how wonderful her son was. In a painfully honest moment, Pam asked, *"What am I, chopped liver? He does nothing and I do everything, and she doesn't even notice what I do for her."* Pam didn't realize the little girl with the hungry hole was grasping for what she had never received emotionally, and she would never receive it no matter how much she did, how much time she spent, or what gifts she gave to her mother.

There is, however, one Person who can fill that hole, regardless of her age or the abuse she has suffered: the One who created life. For this to happen, the young woman must bravely walk the journey of healing, feel her emotions, learn to cherish the little girl she was, and surrender her needs to God so He can fill them. It takes time, and it takes courage, but out of her can flow all of the rich and loving emotions God intended her to have.



TAKING ON THE BLAME

Over and over, I have counseled women who blame the little girl they were for all of their problems. In their heads, they know that their father or mother was acting badly. But in their hearts, they believe that somehow, they were responsible. If only they had been smarter, stronger, prettier, better, or “fill in the blank,” their parent(s) would have loved them and treasured them. They place the blame on themselves, not for their conscious decisions as an adult, but on the child for being a child!

Janine was one of these women. She was pretty, blond, and fun. She was a Christian who had come to Jesus from a wild lifestyle. She was in her mid-thirties, and life was going well with a good husband and a recent promotion to a responsible position in a male-dominated work environment. That is what she presented on the surface, anyway. It didn't take too many conversations for us to go deeper and for her to pour out her misery. She should be happy. But she had a secret that she had never told anyone. Her father, a college professor, had molested her for most of her childhood. She had never told anyone. She bore the guilt and shame for her father's sin.

As we started unraveling the lies, we talked about her as a little girl. *“She is disgusting!”* Janine blurted out. *“Tell me about her,”* I said. What unfolded was a picture of a despicable little girl who had tried to act sexy to lure her father. I asked her to bring in a photo of her as a little girl, and she brought one of a beautiful, blond six-year-old little girl wearing a cropped eyelet top with a ruffle at the top—a top most little girls in that generation wore, me included. *“Look at her,”* Janine said in disgust. *“Look at her trying to be sexy in that slutty little top.”* That was the lens through which she saw herself as a little girl, and because of it, she continued to shame her and punish her. You cannot heal the adult woman when you hate and blame yourself as a little girl. This holds the core of your shame. Regarding Janine, I am happy to say that she came to a place where she was eventually able to see herself as an innocent little girl who had been betrayed in the worst possible way. She grieved for her. She came to love her. And she placed the blame where it belonged—on her father!

Another woman named Sharon was very rigid and proper. She was in her mid-fifties and held down a very responsible job. As she told me her story, my heart broke over the abuse she had suffered as a child: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Like most women from this type of background, she despised the little girl she was. I asked her what she was like as a little girl. She retorted with anger and contempt, *“She was a coward!”* I asked her why she felt this way, and she told me this story: *“When I was nine years old, my father beat my brother so severely it almost killed him. I just stood there crying. I didn't stop it. I was a coward!”* We then had the following conversation:

Me: *“Were you skinny at that age?”*

Sharon: *“Yes, I was little and scrawny for my age.”*

Me: *“How much do you think you weighed?”*

Sharon: *“I don't know, maybe seventy pounds.”*

Me: *“Was your dad a big man? How much do you think he weighed?”*

Sharon: *“He was big. Over two hundred pounds.”*

Me: *“What would have happened to you if you had tried to stop him?”*

Sharon: *“He would have killed me.”*

Me: *“So why did you stay there?”*

Sharon: *“I stayed to be there when he left so I could comfort my brother.”*





Me: *"You must have loved him very much to risk your dad turning on you in his rage."*

Sharon, with awe in her voice: *"Oh my God, I wasn't a coward. I was a brave little girl!"*

And with that realization, the lens through which she saw herself as a little girl started clearing, and the healing began.

And then there was Caryl. She was a pastor's wife with six children. She often exhibited behaviors she hated, like her temper tantrums, her manipulation to get her way, and other childish outbursts. (All of this, of course, passed her shame on to her children without her

realizing it.) She truly loved Jesus and wanted to change. She had tried, but the anger and insecurity were deep and insidious. It was affecting her relationships with her children and husband and most definitely with God.

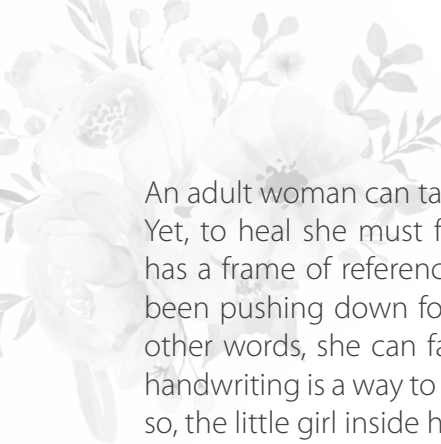
Unlike the stories of the previous women, her father had not been physically abusive. He was a religious man. He was also a man who consistently humiliated and demeaned his children. His harsh words were mocking, critical, or demeaning. He was also funny, a good provider, and fun when he chose to be. People from outside the family loved him and gravitated to him. How hard it is for a child to reconcile these inconsistencies. Caryl's conclusion, of course, was that it was something about her that was flawed, that caused her otherwise good father to treat her like this. Add to this the family message that it was a sin to say anything bad about your parents and that shame was deeply embedded in Caryl's heart. No amount of reasoning or talk could budge the impression that the little girl was to blame. She knew that it was something about her as a child that was fundamentally flawed and disgusting. This feeling, of course, was at her core as an adult woman. After an unproductive meeting, during which she refused to see her "little girl" as anything other than guilty, I gave her a homework assignment that changed everything. I told her to go to a playground and watch all the children play. It stood to reason that if she was inherently bad, she couldn't be the only child with this affliction. This condition should be obvious to an adult observer. At our next meeting, she was to tell me about the children that she recognized as hopelessly flawed. She did her assignment and came back with the predictable report—none of them were flawed. They were all beautiful, innocent little children. I then asked her if she felt this was the case with all children. "Yes," was the answer. Pause... *"So, you feel like you are the only child in the entire world, in all of human history, who was hopelessly and disgustingly flawed and who therefore caused your abuse?"* At that moment she realized that maybe she was just like the other children she had observed and that the bad behavior was actually her father's sin.

This was the beginning of a shift in her foundation. As she saw the little girl inside her as precious and innocent, she was able to identify the shame that was anchored in the lie of blame!

LETTING THE LITTLE GIRL SPEAK

Women who were raised with verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse as children spend a lifetime avoiding their feelings. As children, the feelings that come from the abuse are too overwhelming and destructive for the child to feel. The result is, from early childhood, these feelings are pushed down. These feelings do not go away as the child grows into adulthood. The emotions and the emotional child remain internalized.





An adult woman can talk about the abuse, but there is often a controlled detachment from the emotions. Yet, to heal she must feel the emotions, and this is frightening! However, because she is an adult and has a frame of reference due to her age, perspective, and ability to process, these feelings that she has been pushing down for a lifetime will not have the same damaging effect they had on the little girl. In other words, she can face and process as an adult what she simply could not as a child. Nondominant handwriting is a way to bypass the control and detachment and allow the feelings to be accessed. In doing so, the little girl inside has a chance to speak for the very first time.

While it sounds a bit silly, it makes sense when you understand how the brain is wired. Dr. Lucia Cappacchione, author of numerous books on nondominant handwriting (including the two mentioned below), an expert in the field, wrote this: *"The non-dominant hand is hard-wired to the non-dominant hemisphere of the brain, which for approximately 90 percent of North Americans, is the right brain. The right brain 'specializes' in visual/spatial perception, emotional expression and intuitive abilities. When used appropriately, therefore, writing with the non-dominant hand may offer quick and easy access to feelings, wisdom, intuition and insight."*

When doing this exercise with someone, I use a large drawing pad and fat crayons. After explaining the process, I leave the woman alone in a room to write. After a prescribed time, I go in, and we go over the results together.

Using nondominant handwriting is very common in self-help circles. There are many books that include this exercise to help people heal from childhood trauma. *Recovery of Your Inner Child* and *The Power of Your Other Hand* are popular books entirely dedicated to this concept. However, it is worth noting that nondominant handwriting has the power to unlock memories that can be overwhelming. Having a mentor helping you through this is important so she can speak truth to you and help you process what you learn about yourself.



Dear Younger Me
MercyMe

The flip side of nondominant handwriting is responding with your right or dominant hand. This is called “reparenting” the child within. The words of affirmation, validation, and love the child never received still have healing power. However, it is obvious that this does not work when the child is held in contempt and disgust. Therefore, before undertaking this exercise you must make peace with your little girl and see her as God saw her—as innocent and lovable. Below are detailed instructions and an example of this exercise. Note that you may only need to do this once or you may need to do it many times as you grow your little girl up!

Non-Dominant Handwriting

Letting the little girl you were speak!

1. Do this at a time where you can sit quietly with no interruptions.

2. Start with a large piece of unlined paper like construction or drawing paper that comes in pads. Have many pieces on hand.



3. Use chubby color markers or crayons, not pencil or pen. This allows you to write large and open.

4. Neatness is not important. Your writing will look like a first grader's. Punctuation and upper and lower cases are not important.



5. Print – do not write. Writing may tap into your cognitive side of your brain.

6. Keep your letters large and open. The more open the letters, the more open you are.

7. Do not edit your work. Let the emotions of the little girl you were flow out of you. Don't worry if it doesn't flow or the sentences end abruptly or don't make a lot of sense. Just keep going.

8. Think of a time when you experienced hurt feelings, fear, sadness, abandonment or another strong emotion as a little girl. Sit and try to feel how you felt when you were a little girl in that situation.

9. As you think about the event, start out with “I feel” Write in first person, present tense. You are not writing about it, you are in it.

10. Details help to bring out emotions. The colors, patterns, smells, furniture, room, clothing, etc. Write it as you remember it but in first person present tense.



11. After you are finished, there will probably be a lot of emotion along with the memories. This is a good thing – but very scary for someone who has tried to avoid these emotions all her life.

12. It doesn't always work the first time. If you aren't comfortable with the exercise, be patient. Try again another time. The little girl you were does want to speak ... she desperately wants to be heard!



Below is an example from a client who used nondominant handwriting in her healing process.

"Daddy. Why don't you talk to me? What did I do so bad that you run away from me? You leave me alone with mom and you know she is drunk. I write you notes apologizing for whatever I did and slip them under the door to you so you will just talk to me. Why did you yell at me at dinner in front of everyone? You called me disgusting names. I'm not like that. I'm not a slut. I'm not a whore. I try so hard to convince you I'm not like that, but you laugh at me. I hate you. No. I love you, but I just want you to love me back. Why can't you love me back? You love my brother. What is wrong with me. Why can't you love me too. I am scared when mom is drunk and you are yelling. I want to disappear. I want you to hold me. But you yell."

Dear Little Girl:

I am so sorry that you are afraid. I know how much it hurts when your daddy shuts himself up in the room for days and doesn't speak to you. How frightening and overwhelming it is for you to be with your mom when she is drunk.

I know you think it is your fault. You feel like if you were smarter and better behaved, your father would come out. You feel dirty when he calls you those names. And you are afraid when he yells. You think all of this is your fault. But it isn't. Your daddy is the one with the problems. He doesn't know how to be a good daddy to you. You don't deserve to be hurt. You don't deserve to be yelled at or humiliated in front of others. It is nothing you did, nothing you are or aren't. It is him. He is the problem, not you.

If I were there, I would put my arms around you. I would stroke your hair, rock you, and sing you soft songs. I would comfort you. I would talk to you and never, ever shut you out. You deserve this because you are just a child, and children deserve love. Sometimes I cry when I think of what you have endured, how confused and desperate you are.

But you don't need to keep hurting. You can grow up now in safety and love. You can rest, can nestle safely in my lap, and rest. You don't have to struggle anymore. You are loved. You don't have to prove anything. You don't have to be anything except a child. You are precious to me and to God. You are safe now, little girl. Let go.

