

APRIL 30, 1991

How does one begin a letter written to a child molester? Do I write, Dear Reverend Benjamin Wysolmerski? Or, do I just continue calling you, "Father," as you preferred me to do when I was your victim? You are certainly not dear to me, and you are far, far removed from any decent concept of father that I have ever held. So, I'll get right to the point of this letter and address the issue-- my pain. I am still hurting, after all these years because of what you did to me when I was a girl.

In the United States incest is defined as any sexual contact between a child and a trusted adult. Such contact is damaging, according to incest experts; and it is illegal.

I am hurting because I trusted you, and you damaged me.

Incest is a crime that puts perpetrators behind bars once they are prosecuted and found guilty. The statute of limitations has run out in my case. I cannot put you in prison for the crimes of sexual abuse you committed against me as a girl. But I can certainly file a civil suit.

The law of this country recognizes that boys as well as girls can be victims of sexual abuse and that anyone can be an abuser-- especially if that person is perceived by the child to be in authority. Perpetrators of sexual crimes against children have included such authority figures as older brothers, uncles, friends of the family, police officers, teachers, and priests.

I am hurting because as a girl I was taught to perceive

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priests as persons whose authority I must obey. I obeyed you and it ruined my life.

I want you to know that 30 years after I finally got away from you I still need a support system in order to function as an adult. It's true, I'm on life support 24 hours a day, every day. I am a member of an incest survivors' group. There are hundreds of these groups in our country with thousands and thousands of members. Incest is not something you wake up in the morning and get over. It eats away at you until you have the courage to confront the perpetrator. By the grace of God, I have been given the courage. And I intend to act on it. I am sick and tired of crying my heart out, carrying around shame that is not mine. You are the guilty one, and it is you who must suffer the consequences of your acts.

I am hurting because growing up in the small town of Bellows Falls, Vermont, I had small-town dreams. I wanted to get married, have a family, and live in peace and harmony with my friends and neighbors. Because of what you did to me in that town, I had to flee from it. I ran away, as far away as I could get, with the first person willing to give me a ride to what I imagined would be a better existence-- Flushing, New York and a tenement overlooking traffic. I have been on the run ever since.

You hurt me more than anyone else on the face of this earth. I have cried myself to sleep thousands of nights because of the way my life unfolded as a consequence of your abuse. I kept the poisonous secret of your repeated sexual molestation of me all locked up inside my body. I was terrified

of telling anyone. Who could I tell? My teachers revered you. My family idolized you. I was convinced by you that if I did tell my parents, who were already in a dysfunctional relationship, they would become even more distraught. I believed my father's rages would escalate and destroy everything I knew as home, if I did not keep on giving in to you. My mother, my grandmother, and I lived in terror of my father's temper.

You knew about this. In fact, it was because of my father's regular and violent temper fits that I first began looking to you for guidance. I was 12 years old. I needed solutions to the family problems I was suffering. I needed spiritual upliftment and practical help. Instead, you helped yourself to my adolescence. You molested me in rectory bedrooms, in bathrooms, in cabins, in forests, in the back seats and front seats of your cars, in the church basement, and in the very sacristy itself.

You may have forgotten these places. I have not. They are vividly etched on my mind and branded on my heart. I do not always recall your physical acts beyond their repulsiveness. They made me want to throw up mostly, so I often disassociated myself from my body, separating myself from you while the incest was occurring, not wanting to see it as real.

But I do remember the wallpaper, the furnishings, and the fibers of the rugs. I remember the dashboards, the car upholstery, and your Parliament cigarettes. I remember these details because I studied them keenly while you thrust your obese male body onto my girl being.

Survivors of incest do this bodily separation-from-emotions

act quite well. As children, we became hyper-vigilant, soaking up our surroundings like little sponges. We blocked our emotions because we could not cope with them. Some of us endured; others of us killed ourselves when we were only 12, 13, 14... Those of us who did survive have paid a hefty price for our lives. Often we have been incarcerated in prisons and in asylums. We are alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes, masochists, compulsive eaters, compulsive gamblers... In other words, "Father," we tried to get rid of our problems by getting rid of ourselves. But, an amazing number of us are getting well. And, we are coming out of the darkness into the light. We are letting people know the truth. We are doing this because we feel it is our duty, not only to ourselves, but to those lost souls who gave their lives and minds too quietly to protect too many people who simply did not warrant protection.

I believe that if even one victim goes to the grave without blowing the whistle on her perpetrator, it is one victim too many. So, I plan to avenge that child within me, the one that you damaged. I am going to avenge her because I love her! What's more, I will fight with my last breath-- and beyond-- for the right of every child to live a happy life-- a life free from sexual victimization.

I am hurting, but I will not give up. I am hurting because you made me feel so ugly and so dirty. I am hurting because you intimidated me into believing I had no choice but to confess my "sins" to you. I felt shame and confusion, guilt and anxiety, grief and panic, headaches and stomach aches and nausea. I felt 100 negative, swirling emotions sometimes;

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and I would employ every ounce of my energy to keep those emotions from coming out. These repressed emotions grew heavier and heavier, pressing on my heart like a marble tombstone as I prayed each night for God to deliver me from your hands, the tears pouring over me while I swallowed my sobs and my screams. I did not want to wake anyone up. But now the adult survivor is wide awake and it is she who shall avenge the child you damaged.

I am hurting because you convinced me I was evil because sometimes my body could not help but react to your probing. I would become aroused at times, and you told me this was my own lust, not yours. I never felt good in my heart about anything you did to me or anything you made me do to you. I never knew what an orgasm was until after my third child was born. I was like a puppet when you got hold of me. You pulled all the strings.

I kept on praying to God for help. At the same time, though, I believed that God might strike me dead for my "sins." It was you who began to steer me away from the teachings of my religion, convincing me that you knew more about right or wrong than the Ten Commandments.

You took me to the movie, LOLITA, starring James Mason and an actress that did not look anything like me or the girls in my school. After the movie you tried to tell me that it was normal for older men to have sex with girls. You suggested that I act more like this Hollywood Lolita. In the hotel room that you took me to that night, I got drunk on the brandy Alexanders you served me. I passed out before I could know what you

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were doing to me. My idealistic, small-town dream had turned into a shriveled up condom in the wastebasket of life. I was the next-best thing to dead.

Soon, I began to wonder whether you really did have the power to forgive other people's sins as you claimed you did. And when you told me some of the confessions of the other people in the church, I was shocked and scared. I did not know what to do. I hung my head in shame for the whole parish. I did not understand how a man who was doing what you were doing could absolve other people's sins. I was so mixed up. I felt sick kneeling in the confessional trying to explain myself to God-- through you. It didn't make sense. It's a wonder I didn't kill myself or go mad. I can only conclude that God kept me alive for the very purpose of writing this open letter to you and to all those who might come in contact with my words.

Now I am clearer about my childhood entrapment. And, I understand why I reasoned there was nowhere else to go to confess my "sins." There was only one other Catholic church in the town and to go there would have made me stand out like a neon sign to my family, or at least I thought so at the time. And, remember, it was you who taught me that going to that church was dangerous. I would be exposed! My family would be exposed!

I am hurting because you made me terrified of telling my own mother what was happening. I did not know how to stop your actions. I remember when you first drove me out of town to Lake Saint Catherine. That was the first time that

you began to sexually satisfy yourself using my body. I felt so degraded. But I was certain that my mother would never listen to me if I tried to explain. My mother was so immersed in her own problems that she rarely had any time for me. And, you had become her hero. She cooked for you and my grandmother did your washing. What's more my father enjoyed your company in our home nearly every evening. His temper outbursts became less frequent. So, I felt obligated to give in to you to keep the "peace." You knew this and taught me that what I did for you was a fair exchange. It was not. I refuse to carry your shame any longer. All of it, every last drop belongs to you; therefore, I gladly give it back to you with this letter.

Sadly, my family looked up to you for spiritual guidance. They were not learned people who read books in their spare time. They were working-class parishoners struggling to make ends meet. They took your words as dictums from on high. At that point in time, you personified God in the flesh to them. In spite of, and because of, my father's violent temper, he needed you to help him-- not to molest his daughter and turn her away from her religion.

I do not know why you chose me as a victim. Perhaps all children are potential victims of people who commit sexual crimes against youngsters. Or perhaps those of us who are selected appear to be more vulnerable. We may exhibit obvious signs of being easily entrapped. Like birds of prey who swoop down out of the sky, molesters grab up those of us who run a little slower, who move a bit more awkwardly, perhaps. I don't know for sure. I do know, though, that I was not your

only victim.

There were many others. Some of them will no doubt come forward and tell their stories too. Now I happen to know, for example, that BA [REDACTED] was one of your victims. Originally, she came to Vermont as a Fresh Air Fund Child from the sleazy streets of Harlem. It wasn't long before she got to know what life in the bucolic summer of Vermont was really all about. You showed her.

It is possible that my parents suspected something was "not right." My therapists over the years have said that it is likely my family did suspect and that many people in the town were aware of what was going on. After all, Bellows Falls only had about 3500 people in it in those days. Maybe my family and the townspeople were truly blind, or maybe they were too afraid to see. Perhaps those that did step forward and report you to the bishop were simply ignored. You have always demonstrated a keen talent for worming your way out of accusations and parading before honest citizens as an exemplary person. But too many people know too many things about your dark side, "Father." And these folks will come forward.

People today know that it is illegal for young girls to go off to New York City for vacations with priests unaccompanied by anyone else. No matter, you found a way to accomplish this and many other criminal acts-- taking me over one state line after the other before I was 14 years old. I cannot help but wonder if the hard-working parishoners of Sacred Heart Church were footing the bills for your extra-priestly "affairs."

I am hurting because I did not know how to get away from you. I was physically victimized by you for a period of six

years. The psychological abuse continues. My mother, whom I was only recently able to tell, refuses to believe that you could have hurt me. To keep her denial intact, and to keep her world intact, perhaps, she has chosen to disown me. Nearly a year has gone by and I have not heard my own mother's voice. Why? Because, for the moment, she believes what you told her-- that you are innocent and that I've gone mad. I am far from mad, "Father," and even you must know that in eternity a moment isn't much. I know that my mother's love for me will eventually surface and then you will have her wrath to answer to-- mark my words.

In 1981 when my long, autobiographical poem, LUDLOW FUGUE, appeared, the book received good reviews. But few critics actually realized the sordid details of the sexual abuse delineated on the pages were factual. Many readers were revolted by the graphic imagery; some were horrified by my feminization of God and The Christ. The sad truth is, that had I not written LUDLOW FUGUE, exactly as it is, I would never have been able to come to terms with what you had done to me.

Creating art out of the shards of my life and continuing my therapy were the only ways I knew to cope with the horrible open wounds of my psyche. LUDLOW FUGUE is an unpleasant experience. Being raped by a priest is hell. LUDLOW FUGUE strips away the lies and the falsehoods that shroud perpetrators in clouds of innocence, while the victims go through life in various stages of neuroses-- the victims that survive, that is.

All that is "nice" about growing up in America is erased when you read LUDLOW FUGUE. Perhaps this is why the book

continues to upset people. I lost a teaching job once because some of my students objected to the use of LUDLOW FUGUE in a Creative Writing Class I was conducting. They said it was obscene. I think obscene is a good word to describe what you did to me, and I have recorded that obscenity for those who would know it, examine it, and learn from it. And, I am not going to stop using the book as a teaching tool.

When LUDLOW FUGUE was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1982 I was very grateful because I felt that the message of my life had touched other hearts. I was pleased that what I had suffered might help others to endure and achieve emotional health. I have set the record straight about what it feels like to be a sexually abused child in the United States. I have set the record straight about the effects of your actions on me. LUDLOW FUGUE is not a "nice" book. It is my life.

I am hurting because after years and years of therapy I am just beginning to understand healthy love between men and women, and I am only now learning about the joys of God-centered commitment to a marital partner. I am hurting because, in spite of the fact that my profession as a writer allows me freedom of expression, the little girl within me must continue to go to therapy in order to keep from repressing her nightmares, anxieties, and compulsions.

Survivors of incest often feel like walking time bombs. Childhood fears and phobias can explode upon the consciousness without warning. The expression, Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome, came into popular use after therapists and psychiatrists began to notice the effects of victims-- not only who had endured wars-- but victims who had suffered incest and other forms of

sexual victimization.

I am hurting because for years I carried hate in my heart, a heart made to be the very resting place of God. I hated you with a passion and a fury. I wanted to get revenge, but I did not know how. I did not want to hurt my family!

At my father's funeral when I was 35 years old I was sick with fear that you would be there polluting the air we breathed. And though you were not actually there, your presence was everywhere in that church of my childhood. The tears I cried the day we buried my father were tears of frustration. Why couldn't my secret have been buried in that rich brown loam that is the earth of Vermont, instead of my father? I can only conclude that the secret was meant to be revealed. So be it.

I am hurting because you paid for my abortion in 1962-- a priest paying to destroy two people! Why didn't you stay away from me? Why did you keep chasing me-- coming even to the faraway college where I was trying to recover from the worst years of my life? I am hurting because of that abortion. I am hurting because I nearly bled to death on a dingy mattress in a rooming house in Weston, Vermont, because of that abortion-- paid for by you.

In those days abortions were not only illegal, they were life-threatening. The coat hanger did not hurt nearly as much as my soul. For three days I laid in a pool of my own blood with no one to take care of me, and you had the nerve to call me a whore. Two people died when that baby was aborted, "Father," the child to be and me. The ghost that rose up from that pool of blood was never, never more than a ghost. Yes, I have walked through this life as if alive, but there is a part of me that is

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forever buried in the rolling green hills of my beloved state, a state I seem destined not to be able to return to-- because you are there.

I am hurting because for too long I have been unable to function to my full capacity, unable to claim all that was my birthright. My pursuit of happiness has been fraught with pitfalls and roadblocks because of having been taught by you that sex is a filthy and disgusting act.

Nevertheless, you might be surprised to learn that throughout my trials, it has been my intense love of God that has sustained me. God was there listening to my prayers, no matter where I recited them-- from seashores to desert buttes, from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere, from hospital beds to drunk tanks. God heard.

Excommunicated from my church for getting a divorce from a man I loved, the father of my three children, but who I could not function as a wife for, my heart grew heavier still. While I was denied the sacraments, you were allowed live-in female companions half your age, late-model cars, and the most expensive booze. While I was supposed to hang my head in shame, you were allowed to boldly go on consecrating water and wine into the sacred body and blood of Christ. But the real Father, the Father of us all, was watching. He never excommunicated me from his omnipresence. He never stopped loving me. He heard all of my prayers-- each and every one. However, since the lot of the soul is cast, long before it enters this life, I had to wait until this moment in order to confront you properly. God's timing is always perfect.

I do not have the power to judge your immortal soul. God is the judge of that. But the man you are is still morally obligated to make recompense for what you robbed from me. There is, of course, no price that one can put on innocence. Originally, I had only wanted you removed from your priestly duties. But since my first letter to you and my two letters and one phone call to the Most Reverend John Marshall, Bishop of Burlington, have produced no results, it appears that I have no further recourse than to file a civil suit against you for damaging my life. I have a grave responsibility to myself, to others you have hurt, and to those you are continuing to hurt. Therefore, I must see to it that not a single tear that any one of us has shed, because of what you did to us, is a tear wasted. Your tears, too, must be a part of the final washing away of the lies we all lived. The truth is out.

I will not rest until I achieve my goal-- to have you stripped of your priestly duties and privileges and removed to a place where you cannot ever violate another trusting soul. I want any victim, past and present, who is still able to prosecute you to come forward and do so. BA, for example, may choose to do this.

I want financial recompense for all my therapy sessions over the years which document and record the suffering I underwent because of you. I want financial reimbursement for the cervical cancer operation I had to have at age 26 because of the "early-age sex" you forced me into having with you. Gynecologists will testify that if a girl has repeated sex before she is old enough, the result is often: cervical cancer.

There are many more incidents that I could catalog. To

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begin with these are sufficient, I pray, to let you know that I fully intend to continue my efforts to remove you from your position. With the support of loving family members, friends, and professional colleagues, I should be able to do this soon.

I am hurting because it is difficult to do these things. It is difficult to see other human beings suffer. My mother's grief is most difficult for me to bear. But, you eagerly watched my suffering on many occasions and yet you did not stop your hurting actions. I have no choice, therefore, but to behave righteously. Meanwhile, I ask that the Lord enlighten you and give you the courage to admit your grave mistakes in order to make full amends before you pass into the life that awaits beyond this one.

Copies of this open letter have been sent to:

1. Most Reverend John A. Marshall, Bishop of Burlington.
2. My mother, BA [REDACTED].
3. My brothers, BA [REDACTED], BA [REDACTED], and BA [REDACTED].
4. My sister, BA [REDACTED].
5. My children, BA [REDACTED], BA [REDACTED], and BA [REDACTED].
6. BA [REDACTED], the father of my children.
7. Doctor Zoe Alexander, my therapist.
8. BA [REDACTED] and BA [REDACTED], my present in-laws.
9. BA [REDACTED] and BA [REDACTED], my step children.
10. Douglas Murray, my attorney.
11. BA [REDACTED].

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