



Review of “Reclaiming Lives from Sexual Violence: Understanding shame through innovative Narrative Therapy” by Tim Donovan and Dale Johns

Dale Johns

Donovan, T., & Johns, D. (2022). *Reclaiming lives from sexual violence: Understanding shame through innovative narrative therapy*. Routledge.

My name is Dale Johns and recently, together with my counsellor Tim Donovan, we have co-authored our book, which has been 7 years in the making. It's extraordinary how I met Tim. I had just experienced my second court appearance, in a case against Catholic priest Gerald Ridsdale for childhood sexual abuse. I was struggling deeply. After the court appearance, I met a social worker from the Office of Public Prosecutions who made an appointment for me at a sexual assault agency in Bendigo, Victoria, Australia. Incredibly, it happened to be the agency where Tim had just taken up a position.

The day and time for my first appointment with Tim had arrived. What really hit me that day was the view out of the counselling room window; it was quite unnerving having the Bendigo Catholic cathedral, which was such a powerful image, casting a shadow over the counselling room window and over my mind, how ironic. I was anxious going to counselling. My past counselling experiences were excruciatingly painful; I never told any previous counsellor or psychologist about my experiences of childhood sexual abuse because I didn't trust any of them, and their demeanor and counselling rooms were cold and clinical. I didn't know them, and they didn't know me, or even attempt to get to know me... From the very first time I saw a counsellor or psychologist most of them did not care about or believe me, from the onset most of them made some painfully destroying accusations. I needed to trust whoever I was going to divulge my soul to and share my most painful truth. I was crying out for help. So, I took the opportunity I was given to see Tim; I needed to be able to break the silence I had held for 42 years. My other counsellors and psychologists had all been female, this was the first time I was seeing a male counsellor. Apart from my dad and



brothers, I did not trust other males. Ridsdale and other boys and men had been so cruel to me with physical and verbal abuse, which was heartbreaking for me, so I never really trusted other males. In saying that, I have always craved male friendship, but have never found any I really trusted. So, under all the anxiety I was feeling, I was quite excited about meeting Tim. I had been praying continuously before and as I approached the sexual assault agency and, as I put my hand on the door, it seemed to take such force and strength for me to push through what felt like a wall of chaos, a fight between my integrity and shame, guilt and silence, but I pushed my way through. Yes, I made it into the waiting room, I had jittery legs and my heart felt like it was going to pound out of my chest, I found it difficult to sit down. Then this young man popped his head around the corner of the door, "You must be Dale," we shook hands and he said, "Hey Dale, I'm Tim," and I followed him down the hallway into that room with the infamous view... It wasn't long before I realised I had made the right decision giving counselling another chance. Tim made me feel welcome, his demeanor calmed my anxiousness, and I felt the vulnerability from both of us in the room, which was a comforting, new experience in the counselling room. I felt accepted, not even the slightest bit judged, and I felt a real connection with Tim. I remember making a joke about the overpowering view out of the window... We laughed. I had made a decision that if Tim was the right person, I was going to start dealing with my unbearable silent past. But I knew there was so much work to be done to get me to that point... Tim took the time to get to know me; we got to know each other, that was so important for me.

Our therapeutic journey spanned three and a half years, and now, nearly eight years on, we are working together and have just published our book. Tim has supported and walked alongside me through the process of Narrative Therapy. His professionalism, incredible knowledge, and the way he works with such innovation, understanding, care, compassion, vulnerability, and sensitivity is amazing. It was December 2014 when I first started seeing Tim, and it is now 2022. Tim's dedication and the time he has, and continues to, put into 'walking alongside' me has brought me incredible freedoms. Tim created a space for me where I was believed, with no judgement or detrimental comments or assumptions were ever made. With other counsellors and psychologists prior to



and during the court process, I endured horrendous treatment, soul-destroying judgements and comments, and an environment where I wasn't believed.

When Tim and I began working together we had no idea that we would ever be writing a book. However, as a result of the way Tim goes about his work, all our notes and documentation were saved and readily available for future study. For example, Tim shared note taking during each session on a whiteboard. He would then email me a photo of the whiteboard along with a new set of questions for me to think about and have a go at answering before the next appointment. It was incredibly freeing for me and an amazingly gentle way for me to break my silence. And for me to have the most secret, painful information, which had been locked inside of me for forty-two years, things that I had never even been able to whisper to myself, written down outside of me on the whiteboard, in this space of vulnerability, now that is incredible for me, this most private information, my lifelong secrets each week were now out there, outside of me. Tim worked gently, asking the right questions through externalising and scaffolding conversations, leading me in the direction of my truth, which was hidden deeply and controlled by shame and guilt, keeping me in a place of dark defeat, self-hate, self-blame, and silence for forty-two years, that private information was now all written down outside of me, there was such freedom in that for me. Tim also interviewed me as 'Shame,' it was painful, yet extraordinary, and it awakened my integrity. I was then able to reclaim my integrity, which gave me the strength to dig myself out of the deep dark pit covered in shit and blood, the filth of sexual violence, which brought me into the light of wanting to live again, revealing to me that I was innocent and not to blame for the violent sexual abuse. Because of the way Tim worked with me through the process of Narrative Therapy, with absolute consideration and care for me, the client, I now have a deep understanding of the way shame works and can fight through shame's power to break the silence and talk about my story of childhood sexual violence. Breaking my silence with this deeper understanding of shame has brought such freedom to me. Tim could see that my fight for justice was becoming political, I wanted to stop the shame and silence, and stop the abuse. I hated the thought that there are so many men out there that are suffering in the same ways I have been. We absolutely needed to



share our story of reclaiming lives from sexual violence through innovative Narrative Therapy approaches.

Why did you write this book?

This book came out of the knowledge that this subject had not been approached or produced in a book before, so it was paramount that we told our story. Our hope in writing this collaborative book was to: 1) to share the compassionate and innovative way Tim works; 2) to reach out to other professionals working in the mental health sector to treat clients of sexual abuse with careful consideration, compassion, and respect; and 3) to give students studying in this field a case study to read about and consider. And above all else, we wanted to reach out to anyone out there who is living in silent turmoil after being violently sexually abused as a child. It is our wish that this book will give other people like me hope for a future free from silence, shame and guilt and to gain some justice through the opportunity to share their story.

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