

INTO ACCOUNT

SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS + ALLIES

Susan Birsky

Submitted 6/30/2020

Roughly thirty-four years ago, I worked as a fulltime liturgist at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in New Hope, Minnesota. During these years, dancing before the Lord and community was welcomed in many Catholic churches. I was professionally trained in modern dance and discovered that prayer through the art of movement was powerful.

I first met David Haas at a parish in Cottage Grove, MN, where we both were guest participants within the liturgy. I danced in prayer as he offered his voice in song. Before the service began, we were introduced. There was a genuine warmth while greeting each other. In other words, there seemed to be a nice connection. Following the liturgy, we wished each other well and went our merry ways.

About a year later I attended a Christian music workshop held at either St. John's or St. Ben's College in the St. Cloud area. David Haas was a large part of the program. During the early portion of the first evening, my eyes scanned the room and we again greeted each other, this time with warm smiles and a nod of recognition from across the room. I was pleased he appeared to remember me. Following the evening's presentations, I went up to where he was speaking as others did. He had gained notoriety for his published spiritual music. His music had touched my soul in a mystical, prayerful way, similar to how liturgical dance connected me to my soul. I admit I was enamored by his talent and thus interested in wanting to know more about him. Many people were in line to speak with him, so I waited. Once it was my turn, I reintroduced myself and he quickly and warmly expressed that of course he knew who I was. I then asked if he would be up for a walk on campus, he said yes, he'd love to walk.

During the walk, we chatted, laughed, and I spoke my truth respectfully that I was in admiration of his musical gift, and in a very short time, I was picking up that he seemed interested in me. When we turned around to head back to where we came, he took my hand and held it for the remainder of our walk. As we reach the area where he was residing, he asked me to join him in his room. I remember feeling very awkward because I didn't know him that well. I remember feeling flattered that he wanted to continue our time together. I was finding myself attracted to him and wanting more time with him. In my mind I reviewed the walk we had just ended, and determined I felt safe enough to enter his room to continue our conversation to learn more about him. (Please note, though I found myself attracted to David, I did not live a promiscuous lifestyle. Getting to know someone was very important to me before any intimacy would ever happen.)

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When the door closed, his demeanor immediately changed. He began to kiss me. The conversation ended. I only remember he came onto me as if on a mission. I immediately felt like he took over. He moved me in the direction of his bed, laid me down and quickly unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis. He took my hand and placed it on his penis. He requested sex, I froze, I was confused. I no longer felt safe and started wondering how I was going to get out of this situation. My mind searched for something to make sense. Things shifted so fast, nothing seemed real. It was all about what he wanted. What is this man doing? Why is he in such "need"? I was so uncomfortable and told him that I was sorry but I had to leave. As I began to get up to leave his room, he held me back physically as well as with his words. His touch began to strengthen, I thought again, I have got to get out of here. "I've got to go," I told him again. He did not release me and continued to try to lure me. Was he feeling entitled? Didn't he like me? I will never know. I began fearing I was never going to get out of his room. I knew if I cried out, no one would hear me. He became more demanding, taking my hand and firmly placing it on his penis. I felt trapped, he continued his persistent harsher request to take care of his needs. I was no longer safe. I was being forced to comply. When I removed my hand again from his penis, he grabbed my hand and more harshly returned it to his penis. He was not playing around. He meant business. I began to panic and weigh my options. He would not accept that I wanted to leave, he would not let me leave. I struggled some and finally worn down, intimidated and frightened, I delivered a hand job. It was not what he wanted but that is all I was willing to deliver in order to safely get out of his room. When he climaxed, his energy shifted to a more formal distant mood. He was done with me, he needed sleep, thanked me, said good night and I left.

My head was spinning. I was in shock. Why did I do that? OMG that was disgusting, I filled with shame. My mind started blaming myself, how did I lead him to this? I must have given him a wrong signal. It must have been me. There was no one I could talk to as David was now famous and I believed no one would believe me, he wrote and sang sacred music. I then told myself I would know more in the morning when we exchange greetings from across the room. I remember going back to my room feeling frightened, shame-filled, confused and dirty.

The following morning was the end of the workshop. I noticed the joy in the room as people talked with one another. I had no words. My eyes began scanning the room for David. When I located him, I tried to be upbeat, why I don't know. Our eyes met and much to my disbelief, he did not acknowledge me. The best way I can describe it is, His eyes, while looking directly at me, had blanked me out. I tested it again, he no longer chose to know me. I had disappeared before his eyes. He then began preparing his music.

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I had no one to help me make sense out of what transpired. I was sexually abused and used, and I couldn't even admit it to myself. I feared being judged, feared not being believed. I feared it could ruin his career and thought the greater good was worth more than me. Thirty-four years ago, women were the ones usually accused as being flirtatious and took the blame for any unwanted sex. Women had little voice or credence in the Catholic Church. Who would believe my story, he was a highly acclaimed Minister of Sacred Music.

A few weeks later, I finally became angry at him. All I wanted to do was look him directly in his eyes and say, "how could you?!" Well I had my chance or at least I thought I did. The following month David was holding auditions in a downtown Minneapolis church for a musical event he was putting together. I talked myself into going to audition and to be able to look him straight in the eyes. When it was my turn to audition, I paused looked him straight into his eyes only 10 to 12 feet from me and I glared sharply at him. As I began to say something harshly.... "Like, how could you?" I was quickly whisked off to the side by another woman. She whispered sternly "This is not the time.".... Almost like she knew what I had come to do. Needless to say, I didn't land a role in his upcoming event. I so wanted him to confess his inappropriate conduct; I wanted to experience a sincere apology.

I left and shut down. I was angry and slowly but surely depression replaced my anger. I didn't speak about it for 33 years. Instead, I began worrying how to communicate what I had experienced to the man I would one day marry. I didn't tell him. My secret got heavier. I noticed I began struggling with depression and very low self-esteem. I believed I was "damaged goods". Skewed decisions became the norm. The man I married became a dry drunk, and verbally abusive. I continued to fail, distrust men, distrust my abilities to relate with men. Everything was becoming harder. The secret I was carrying was likened to a boulder on my back. I could never tell this secret, no one would believe me and if I told anyone, it could damage David Haas's reputation.

Over the years David continued to publish new music and fill many pages in our Catholic music books. Each time I read his name or sang his songs on Sundays, I relived this story. In the churches I worshiped in, his music was sung a lot. Most times I couldn't sing it, tears would well up, I was trapped in this abuse. I tried forgiving him, I tried overlooking it, nothing worked. Feelings of anger, hurt flooded through me, and I was dismayed that his music that I had loved so much, continuously haunted me of this very old encounter. It was psychologically harmful. He was famous and successful, and as the years rolled on, I became less of a person. At least it felt that way.

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If I had known what I know today, I never would have initiated a walk with David Haas on campus. This experience dramatically changed my life.

How?

For thirty-four years, every Catholic mass that included his music, (which was frequent) continued to weigh heavily on me. The rock on my back grew larger with each song as his abuse replayed in my mind. Rarely did I find reprieve from him. I experienced ongoing depression, my career changed from religious work to business, I battled with the concept of a loving God. I drank more, and lived through 3 difficult marriages. I was damaged goods, spiritually poor and financially strained as growing depression affected my ability to work effectively and I began losing jobs. Depression inevitably disabled me. I could no longer work and no one understood why I was unable to do so. I raised two sons who deserved a healthier mother. The fact that David's music was in every Catholic book appalled me. By now, he must have hurt others.

As I addressed the real work of getting healthier, additional sexual flashbacks from an earlier time were unveiled; including one other priest abused my vulnerability during an open confession. I was offended, however I was able to remove myself quickly. I got angrier that my spirit suffered so silently for so many years. Within these last few years, I have begun to heal and learn to live life accepting the things I cannot change. For my own sake, I have taken better care of my thoughts, feelings and emotion. Finally I can see I did not abuse David Haas, David Haas sexually abused me.

What should be done with D. Haas and what should be done with the music he wrote? I would recommend:

1. his name be stripped to Author Unknown or remove his music entirely for a period of 35 years.
2. royalties from his music past, present, future, be set up in an ongoing trust to be divided by the number of victims on going for the next 35 years.
3. The church contributes what Haas cannot pay from past royalties as a consequence for playing his music over and over again, knowing David had abused women.
4. This was a painful loss in many ways. I was robbed spiritually, emotionally and mentally. If priests are facing their consequences, anyone doing harm to others in the church should as well. I have suffered and lost enough.