

Matt Vapor



THE BLACK MASK

Sample Chapter

Unmasking the Effects of Domestic Abuse,
Educational Disadvantage, Violence and
Homelessness

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Edited by Kristine Vapor

Published by Matt Vapor, book@blackmask.com.au



MATT VAPOR

AUTHOR

Matt Vapor is an educator, consultant, researcher and writer in Domestic Abuse, Domestic Violence, Educational and Economic Disadvantage, Youth Violence, Homelessness, and associated issues.

This book chronicles Matt's experiences and how their effects formed a Black Mask of terror for himself and others.

Matt explores the formation of his mask, the toll it has taken on his life and what it's taken to remove.

BOOK@BLACKMASK.COM.AU

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CHAPTER

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DOGS GO MOO

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FICTIONAL REALITIES

One of the jokes I love to annoy my wife with is suggesting that, when we eventually have children, we should teach them the wrong sounds for animals. Telling them that dogs go moo, or that cows go meow. It's always immediately rebuked by my wife with a stern yet happy smile. It's incredibly juvenile, but the thought of our future child mooing at a dog, even just for a short period, makes me chuckle.

Of course, I'd never actually do that, but it does illustrate a very important point. You see, one of the things I'm asked more often than I'd like to admit is "surely you must've known what was happening to you as a child was wrong?". In an ideal world, all children that are being hurt would understand immediately what's going on and have the power to stop it. However, reality is a completely different beast.

While we're children, our parents create our reality, and whatever that reality is (good or bad) it's what we absorb and believe. They're essentially our masters, creating the constraints around the way we interact with the world, how we perceive it and the lessons we learn from it. As they teach us they become the fact creators, what sounds animals make etc. And in the case of childhood neglect, abuse and violence, they become perception manipulators and distorters.

ANTIPATHETIC EMPATHY

Parental power is something we take for granted, and honestly without that power relationship, children probably wouldn't survive very long. We need that guardian to protect and guide us. A classic lesson most of us are taught is not to question the authority of a parent, it's baked into fables, nursery rhymes and other cautionary tales. The influence parents have over us while we're developing and forming the foundation for our world view is absolute. We assume this belief because they're much older, wiser and their experience can guide us. To put it another way, the family that we're born, adopted or fostered into and the way we're raised is what we believe is normal.

This creates two major issues, firstly we don't understand that the way we're being raised could be toxic, and secondly what was a normal upbringing for you is not the same as others. The latter is more detrimental, especially from an empathetic point of view. It's hard for some people to understand that the answer to "surely you must've known what was happening to you as a child was wrong?" is a very stern "NO".

I don't blame anyone for that point of view, I'm envious of it. That's the thing about the Black Mask, it's as much about aggression as it is about hiding vulnerability. My inner child, the one that now has the hindsight and understanding of its circumstance, grieves for that point of view.

Now all of us have parents that have messed us up in some way, it's all part of that awkward relationship. No parent is perfect. However, it's clear that those who ask such questions are coming from the point of view where they haven't experienced such a toxic upbringing. That was their normal, for them dogs go woof and the reality their parents created was more accurate and healthy.

What I'm trying to say, is the reason they ask that question is the same reason I didn't understand what I experienced was toxic. Reality is what our parents create. And in some way, the horror that people feel about the neglect, abuse and violence some of us face is equal to the confusion the rest of us face when coming to terms with the neglect, abuse and violence we faced.

DISHEARTENED KINDERGARTEN

Some say that we're created in God's image, I'd say we're all created in our parent's image. It might be culture, beliefs, norms and values, they all come from our parents. More broadly, the image which we become is part of the bigger picture which includes our siblings and parents.

Much like the earliest pieces of work we produce in kindergarten, where we draw our families, they're all going to be different. Some may contain siblings, other won't; some might contain two parents, or one, or none. Although they are all different, most often the drawings include a sun, grass, and a house. A bright sunny day always seems to be the default. Why is that?

In my opinion it's the image we're subtly told to produce, for some of us it might be because we're from a happy home, and it's how we genuinely feel. We're told subtly that we can be truthful with the way we're feeling. However, for some of us we don't know that privilege, what we do understand is we're supposed to portray our families in a certain way in public. Different to what we truly experience, we've learned through punishment, that the secrecy of what happens in our family home is paramount.

It might be threats in the form of "if you tell anyone about this, I'll hurt you", or it might be though controlling words such as "I'll know if you say anything". It can even be as a result of a punishment we received after that first time we slightly exposed the secret.

This made it so much harder for me to confront my abuse when I was older. I was so used to producing that "sunny day" style picture to everyone, that uncovering the reality was extremely unsettling. On top of that, I had pressure from extended family, and family friends who've only ever seen the picture I was instructed supposed to show. I was a forced performer in my parent's abusive pantomime.

I continued this pantomime well into my thirties, a process that set back my emotional recovery by decades. When I started to finally confront my neglect, abuse and violence, my mother was still part of my life. It was incredibly hard, and it felt like I had to compartmentalise and stifle the emotional toll it was taking on me.

I was being tortured by my past all over again, but the performance went on. The pantomime continued so much, that I wrote my own mother's speech for my wedding. Knowing that she couldn't put the effort into something that meant so much to me confirmed what I was starting to uncover. As she spoke, all I could do was look down, I hated that I felt like I had to do that. Although my recovery had begun, it felt like I was still a slave to the control my parents had over me. Even looking at our wedding pictures, I can identify the pictures that were taken while she was talking because my body language was totally different.

BEYOND THE KALEIDOSCOPE

One thing I've learned it's that people can see different things in the same picture. When my wife and I first started dating I was in a truly dark place, I was at the end of the road of running from the neglect, abuse and violence of my past, the things I had done and what I'd experienced.

I've had people in my life previously who've come to learn the reality of my parents first hand. While I was growing up, they cycled through family friends like a merry-go-round, most of the friendships ended explosively. The irony is my parents were much worse than myself at maintaining the family pantomime. They couldn't accept any sort of criticism, or what they perceived as criticism, and would instantly destroy the friendship. It was like they'd become emotional extremists, trying to extinguish fires that they started with petrol.

I remember one of their friends had once told me when I was a child, "you need to get as far away from your parents as soon as you can". This was my first experience of someone seeing the picture for what it was, and it was the first warning I'd received that people could see what was going on. It wouldn't be the last. It was like they could see past kaleidoscope of distraction my parents were attempting to display.

My wife was another person who could see the real picture. I don't think she could see the true details at the time, but she definitely knew the pantomime was false. Back to the time when we started dating, I'd told her the basics, mainly that I didn't trust my parents and I didn't have a conventional parental-to-child relationship. I hadn't started confront my past when we'd started dating, however I had learned a basic understanding that my parents weren't good people. I was caught in an emotional limbo, stuck between the pantomime and dealing with my past. However, it felt like I had to give her a heads up on how destructing they were.

We'd been dating for a few months and the time would come where my wife and my mother would be left alone together. I got the impression from my wife that she wanted to try and bond with my mother. This made me uneasy, but I felt like I didn't really have a choice. When I returned my future wife was extremely uncomfortable, and looked like she'd experienced something truly evil. She soon told me she didn't ever want to be left alone with her again my mother again. She'd seen the true picture.

THE MOUTH OF HELL

That true picture is always hard to produce, or to describe. However, I can attempt to describe it by outlining the first recurring nightmare I'd ever have and it would, ironically, revolve around a painting that hung in the lounge room in our house in Victoria.

It was an odd painting, it was different shades of red mixed with black. The black part was like a heart, with shades of red radiating from it. The edges were splattered with shades of dark brown and black. It was a large painting that took pride of place in the middle of a wall behind the couch. It was painted by a colleague of my father.

I first started having nightmares about this picture when I was around 4 years old and they'd continue until I was 9. In every one of the nightmares, I'd be in the lounge room and the painting would come to life and surround me. It would try to crush me in different ways, sometimes as a massive ball, other times it became a giant fist and crushed me in its grasp. Every time, it'd be on fire and I'd have trouble breathing as it came closer, and the closer it got the more it'd burn me.

After we moved house the painting was kept in the garage, and wouldn't be hung in our new house. The nightmares stopped, and I wasn't as afraid of the picture as much as I was before. At around the age of 10, I ventured into the garage and got a closer look at the painting that had fuelled my nightmares. I didn't like looking at it, and I decided to turn it around so it was facing the wall. I managed to turn it around and on the back there was some writing in pencil. I didn't recognise the handwriting, so I assume it was from the artist. The writing was the title of the painting... "The Mouth of Hell".

I got so used to producing that same kindergarten picture, all the way into adulthood. And although it might not be the mouth of hell, it might as well be. I was trapped in a recurring nightmare where it felt like there was no escape. A pantomime of pain that systematically crushed me, along with my hopes and dreams. It was isolating as it was destructive and there's no easy way to approach it.

What did eventually help my isolation was breaking away from the silence neglect, abuse and violence produce. Understanding that my reality can change and allow myself the opportunity to heal. This is the key to unlocking some aspects of the Black Mask. Learning about each other's experience, good or bad, and allowing that information to sprout and grow.