

**A Need to Be Heard:  
Victim-Centered VOD in Father-Daughter Incest Cases**  
by Jon Wilson

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Among providers of counseling services for victims/survivors of violence and violation, some believe that facilitated victim offender dialogue (VOD) in father-daughter incest cases is not a good idea. For those who have worked with survivors of such betrayal, violation, and victimization, their caution is understandable. The depth of the wounding is almost unfathomable, the complexity of feelings is almost impermeable, and the carried pain is often palpable. In the face of such complexity, who would intentionally place a victim/survivor in this proximity to someone who has demonstrated the capacity to so terribly victimize his own innocent and trusting child? And yet, there are daughters who have done – or want to do – exactly this. They want to meet and talk directly with the man who betrayed their love and trust, seduced and manipulated them, and who would not – or could not – see the pain he was causing as he wounded the soul of the child he should only have loved and protected.

They do not want to meet simply to let him know what he did to their hearts and their minds and their bodies, though that is certainly important to them. They want to meet because they have struggled to comprehend how it is *possible* for a father to do this to his child; or for the father they loved to have done this to *them*. They want to meet and talk because there is virtually *no one else* who can provide the answers they need to the unrelenting questions they have about what happened and why, and there are few others with whom they can feel comfortable enough talking about this – including, sometimes, other incest survivors. The sense of shame they often continue to carry can threaten to corrode their very sense of being – even when that shame is shared and understood by others, and even though they know they don't deserve to have to carry it. Their experience is so profoundly inexplicable to them that no explanation by another, no psychological or behavioral theory, no shared experience can bring much relief to them. This was, after all, not a stranger (or so they believed) but their own father. They carry a wound and a mystery so deep and defining that the unrelenting question *why?* underlies everything. It's a miracle, in a way, that so many find such strength and power to build lives and families of love and trust. But none ever truly "get over it." Instead, they find ways of living with their wounds despite what they have seen and experienced.

Living with these wounds for so much of their lives, they have learned how to do it. What remains so elusive is how to *come to terms with it all*. And in many ways incest survivors are particularly alone in this. We've come to understand through the years that, given enough time, and given enough real opportunities to be thoroughly "heard," many survivors of other severe violence and violation *can* come to terms with the frequently unanswerable question, "why me?" What is harder for incest survivors to come to terms with is the concurrent question "why *him*?" Because he was *not* a stranger; he was her *father*. And she loved him – and she may still, despite what he did to her. This is the awful complexity for incest survivors.

What she needs – what she has *always* needed – is to be *heard and acknowledged* by this man. What she wants is for him to understand what he did, and to acknowledge it to her. If the fathers in these cases would more readily do this, many survivors would feel much less "damaged" and confused. But too many fathers do not acknowledge it. Instead they deny with

vehemence or an infuriating flatness – which is another challenge altogether. Here she is, having finally found the courage to speak aloud what she needs to say to him, and he tells her, with no apparent remorse, that she is crazy, that she is making up lies about him, that he would never – could never – have done such things. Moreover, as so often seems to happen, her mother may appear to believe *him* and not her. This is often the kind of situation surrounding survivors who request facilitated VOD through Victim Services. But where does VOD, with its prototypical requirement that the offender must take responsibility for his role in the crime, fit in, here?

Victim-Centered VOD holds that victims/survivors deserve the chance to address their offenders – even, under certain conditions, when those offenders deny any responsibility for the crime or violation (yet are incarcerated for it). This requires, of course, that the survivor completely understand the full implications of confronting the denying offender with her own certain truth. It could mean that, at best, she might have to resign herself to his entrenched denial, or at worst, she might feel completely re-victimized by his obstinacy. The problem is that she might thoroughly believe beforehand that she'll be completely OK with his refusal to acknowledge her victimization. She knows she has things to say to him, and she does not require his admission of guilt. She merely requires him to *hear* her, in order to feel a measure of *control* again. This is yet another of those critical places in the VOD preparation process where the facilitator must be exquisitely sensitive to not only what the survivor is *saying*, but what may lie *beneath* what she is saying. If she is surreptitiously counting on the hope and possibility that, when actually facing her in person, the offender will suddenly feel ready to admit his guilt, her disappointment could be enormous, unless she has been rigorously prepared for his denial.

In father-daughter incest cases, this quiet expectation on the part of the survivor can be deeply rooted – related to the same context in which the violation itself was so inexplicable: such profoundly incomprehensible betrayal by a father just “cannot be possible.” By the same token, especially all these years later, another negation of her will seem even more impossible. And yet it happens. But assuming the survivor and the offender may proceed with VOD preparation work despite his unwillingness to admit guilt, herein lies the critical element. Providing sufficient emotional safety and security for the survivor *requires* that she be comfortable going into the dialogue on the presumption that the offender will, almost without doubt, deny or try to minimize his culpability. Of course, as some survivors know, there are offenders in these cases who, while not admitting guilt, do not exactly deny it, either. For those who know this pattern among their offenders, *being heard* by them can be enough to allow them a sense of achievement, and that result alone would make the risk worth taking. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that he could, during the dialogue, suddenly and to everyone's surprise actually attempt to actively cast doubt upon her memory, her experience, and her beliefs. Obviously, at this point, the facilitator must call a halt to the VOD. But that's a different situation, and a transparent act of re-victimization.

As the VOD field grows, and incest survivors seek healing and justice in these kinds of ways, victim service program administrators continue to be asked to weigh the expressed needs of survivors against the risk for re-victimization. And therapists – some of whom may be opposed to such meetings because they've had no direct experience with VOD – may be causing them to try to weigh the experiences of facilitators against the judgments of the therapists. The trouble is, these are entirely different disciplines. To be sure, these kinds of cases – like other sexual assault cases and like domestic assault cases – demand that the training and experience of the facilitator be rigorous, extensive, and specialized, because such

training is absolutely critical to ensuring emotional safety for these victims/survivors. But experienced VOD program administrators are already making these kinds of decisions on behalf of survivors, weighing factors like age, history of counseling and therapy, and expectations, as well as the institutional history and behavior of the offender. And while some of the more conservative program administrators might wonder if incest survivors should, in fact, be under the care of a therapist during the VOD preparation process, others might rely on the survivor's own sense of readiness based on her history, determination, and level of self-awareness. But it's not always an easy decision, especially when one is trying hard to provide the survivor with as much control as possible.

For those Victim Service administrators who find themselves on the fence, listening carefully to the survivor, the therapist, *and* the facilitator, the answer may lie in a more precise clarification and distinguishing of roles. Obviously, although the VOD preparation process is therapeutically informed, facilitators are definitely not – nor should they be – therapists. Their job is to work carefully with the survivor and with the offender toward the single objective of a safe facilitated dialogue that remains thoroughly anchored in meeting the needs of the survivor. If the survivor also happens to be working with a therapist who isn't so sure about VOD in her client's case, there are ways to work that complement the responsibilities, and role-play is a perfect example. Facilitators sometimes engage in role-play with survivors and with offenders during the preparation process as another way of testing readiness. But in those cases where a therapist is involved, the therapist might sometimes be able to do a better job of acting out a worst-case offender role than a facilitator can. After all, the facilitator is in a working relationship with the offender, and s/he will have a subjectively affecting sense of what the offender is “more likely” to do. Because of this, s/he will probably not be able to effectively role-play an “unimaginable” situation. Free of that relational complication, however, the therapist may be able to provide a much more rigorous worst-case offender role – knowing simultaneously, of course, the client's therapeutic limits. In my view, if a therapist can provide a more challenging worst-case example and the survivor is substantively affected, that's a clear opportunity to know that the survivor needs additional help. It's unlikely that this would happen with proper preparation by the facilitator, but if the survivor could actually be unnerved by a therapist's rigorous role-play, further work is obviously needed, and I see only good in discovering that, since our work is *about* preparation. In any case, the well-trained facilitator is expected to provide a rigorous sense of *real and predictable possibilities* in advance of the dialogue, a sense enabled *because* of his/her relationship with the offender. This is a sense that therapists cannot provide.

Yet, even though we strive to predict generally how the VOD will go, the precise paths of most victim offender dialogues will always be somewhat unpredictable, despite our best efforts. And this is really as it should be. If the facilitator has done his/her job properly, the dialogue itself is really the *survivor's* time, and the survivor can (and often does) direct the course of the dialogue itself according to his/her own needs. Facilitators must obviously establish that the VOD will be *safe*, but they cannot know how, exactly, the conversations will go. And sometimes survivors *can* cause an offender to acknowledge and admit things neither he nor the facilitator would ever have considered likely or possible.

Therapists involved or not, facilitators must always be focused on enabling the safest and most effective dialogue for the victim/survivor. That's the fundamental objective. In a way, having a cautious therapist involved may be a little like having an over-protective support person in the mix. We must respect the role they serve for the survivor – if that's what the survivor wants – but we must always be working for *her* sense of power, *regardless* of

what the support person (or therapist) says or does. We must always be working to affirm the survivor's strength and courage – and power – to be *heard*, and to have *effect*. We can offer no more potent opportunity than this. So, while there may be those who believe that every incest survivor determined to meet and talk with a willing but denying offender *should* be working with a therapist during the VOD preparation process, if she has already done personal work in that area, who are *we* to say what she needs? Those of us who provide support services to victims/survivors of violence and violation have no right to deprive them of the opportunity to face down the man who haunts their dreams – or to connect with the father who went terribly missing while overwhelming their innocence, as children. No one knows what they need better than they themselves, and we must listen as carefully as possible to what they want. It is the least *and* the best we can offer.

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