

## When Gender and Generational Boundaries are Betrayed

Book Review:

### *Free Indeed*, by Barbara Swallow

(2000, Seattle, WA: Exodus Publishing, \$11.95 paperback)

Reviewed by Linda A. Nicolosi

This gripping paperback book tells the story of a married woman who was caught in a seemingly unresolvable conflict. Barbara Swallow truly loved her husband and children. Yet in spite of that bond of loyalty to her husband, she still found herself irresistibly drawn into intense and codependent enmeshments with females.

"On the one hand," she said, "I was a wife who openly loved her husband and family, but who kept a dark secret from them. On the other hand, I was a lesbian lover who cared deeply for another woman."

She felt panic-stricken: What if her double life was discovered? Would she lose her marriage and three children? *Free Indeed* vividly chronicles the childhood traumas, marital deceptions, and intense need for nurturance and same-sex intimacy which motivated the author's double life.

Barbara's distorted feelings began early in childhood. "No one loved me as a girl," she said. Her father treated her like a son, and she was neglected by her mother, who spent much of the time in bed in a crippling state of depression.

When Barbara experienced night terrors in her attic room and went down to her mother's bed for comfort, her mother's love was offered in the form of sexual attention.

Each night, the little girl would see terrifying faces appear in her dreams. "If I couldn't stand the faces, I would call for my mother again and go down to her. But I hated what happened when I went down to her; so most nights I just pushed that scream down deeper and deeper, and waited for the dawn to chase the faces away."

"As a child, the only times I remember being given individual attention from my mother were when I played the male role in bed. Unconsciously, I began to accept the idea that my value rested in my sexual capabilities. Perhaps, if

I could function as a boy, I would be loved, and I would prove myself to be of some merit."

Barbara later married and had children, but she eventually developed an unhealthy relationship with another woman, Marla—who moved in with the couple as "Aunt Marla" and ultimately began to pull Barbara into a relationship characterized by psychological abuse and codependency.

A common theme recurrent throughout this short novel is that of blurred relational boundaries. As a small child, Barbara did not experience a normal mother-daughter relationship because her mother was a needy woman who violated the maternal trust to use her small daughter for emotional reassurance and sexual satisfaction. At about the same time, Barbara's uncle likewise violated his own role as an adult mentor to his niece, and he sexually molested her.

Thus it is not surprising that in adulthood, Barbara herself had great difficulty in respecting and maintaining boundaries. Not only did she dress in butch clothes in a rejection of her feminine nature, but—in spite of her absolute determination not to do so—she became sexually involved with an emotionally needy younger woman whom she had been mentoring spiritually. And in her relationship with the bullying and abusive "Aunt Marla," Barbara allowed Marla to usurp the maternal role, pushing her aside to transform Barbara into another sibling in the family.

Throughout Barbara's life, we see a pattern of crossed boundaries, betrayal of the trust inherent in a role of authority, and persistent gender disorientation.

Psychoanalyst Jeannine Chasseguet-Smirgel once observed that the "pervert" (in the psychoanalytic, not the colloquial sense of the term) violates two absolutely essential boundaries: that between the genders, and between the generations.

This novel, which is told from a Christian perspective, relates Barbara's faith-based determination to free herself from that destructive pattern. Eventually she learned how to move beyond the intense attractions which had caused her to betray her marriage and her same-sex mentoring relationships.

Today, Barbara and her husband Ron are co-directors of Free Indeed Ministries in Albuquerque, New Mexico. ■

