

The Whole Town Knew

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Aline de Bruin



Rinke Verkerk



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Gijsbert Bouw: Welcome to this video podcast of the Reformatorisch Dagblad. This time our podcast is not a look at the news, but offers some reflection. Today we have with us the writer and journalist Rinke Verkerk, as well as colleague Aline de Bruin. My name is Gijsbert Bouw.

Rinke, you wrote a very intense book. I have read it two times now. It deals with the sexual abuse of a girl, Lenneke, by her grandfather, and especially how bystanders reacted to this. The title of the book is: The Whole Town Knew. This title really sums up the book in a nutshell. We want to talk about the question of why we have the tendency to look away when we are confronted with cases of abuse. We also want to discuss the role of the church. We will try to address aspects of guilt, shame, discomfort, and especially the courage to take responsibility.

As I said, Rinke, you wrote a gripping book with a striking title. Maybe it is good to mention first that the names of the people which we will be discussing are all pseudonyms. Why was it necessary?

Rinke Verkerk: Well, there are two reasons for that. The people in the book do not want to be associated exclusively with the traumatic things which they have experienced for the rest of their life. My initial reaction to their request was: why is it you who has to resort to a pseudonym? None of the things which happened are your fault. The shame and guilt do not belong to you, and now you are the ones who have to take a different name. But then I realized that they have the right to choose for this, since they never asked for these experiences which they suffered. But then there's also this: the town described in this book exists everywhere. It can also be a city neighbourhood. The town in this book is a Protestant town, but it could have been a secular town or a Catholic town just as well. Every community deals with these things. This story is about us all, and so it represents how we deal with sexual abuse and child abuse. By changing the names of the people as well as the places, we remove the story from the place where it actually happened. This is indeed one of the goals of the book. It is a story based on a lot of research and analysis to show how sexual abuse takes place, how communities deal with it, and this happens to be almost identical wherever you go in our Western world.

Gijsbert: So you're saying that this makes the book more universal, and it prevents anyone from saying, "It happened over there."

Rinke: That's right. We don't want anyone to say, "That happened over there! Oh, it was those people! That didn't happen by us." No, they could be people from your town or community.

Aline de Bruin: So the story starts with Lenneke, a girl of twelve who is abused by her grandfather. And then further on in the book we learn that the grandfather has been committing sexual abuse for generations already. What was the reason why you started the book with the story of Lenneke?

Rinke: Because my awareness of this story started with Lenneke. I am the same age as her. We grew up together, and I never helped her. I was nine years old when I first heard about what was happening. The town fair was taking place, and the holiday Bible club organized a huge pancake

meal on the Wednesday of that week. Every mother bought a bag of pancake mix. The floor of the town gym was covered with garbage bags. The mothers all brought a tray full of pancakes. The children sat in groups on the floor. It was very fun. You know of course that in most communities there are hierarchies and cliques which determine who you sit with and who you talk to. In our town there were two times when everyone ignored this. This was during skating and during pancake meals. Everyone really talked with everyone and sat with everyone. The atmosphere was so good! But then, when our group had finished off our pancakes, I reached over to take some from the group beside us, who still had lots. Suddenly, as my arm was hovering in the air, someone reached over, grabbed my arm, and said, "Don't eat those, those are the snot rags of Helen van Dijk." I knew who Helen van Dijk was. I also knew there was nothing wrong with those pancakes. When you're nine years old, a pancake is a pancake. But then I realized it had something to do with who had made them. I saw the pancakes, and I noticed that the only ones who were eating them was Lenneke and her brother Gus, the children of Helen van Dijk. I very much wanted a pancake, but I realized that if I took one from that stack, I would become "contaminated" with whatever it was that caused people not to eat from that stack, which is why they had so many left.

This is how I learned that there was something going on with Lenneke. And this was before anything had happened to her. Bizarre, isn't it? It would be another three years before she would be abused. But then already she was "contaminated."

She was twelve when she was sexually assaulted by her grandfather in the orchard. This was reported, and he was convicted. A year later we both went to the same middle school. One time, as we were biking home, she told me what happened. I did not know her well. We had never really talked, although we were often at the swimming pool and at the holiday Bible club at the same time. So we were biking together one day when she told me what had all happened with her grandfather. She cried very hard; the tears ran down her cheeks in the wind.

Then the next day at school, she looked at me very expectantly, as if to say, "We know each other now." But I just said hi, and kept walking. I never looked at her again, and I never thought about her again for twenty years.

Aline: Why did you react like that? What were you thinking?

Rinke: I thought, I'm not interested in her. She's just trying to get attention. She's a faker, crying all the time. We were both thirteen, entering the teenage jungle, you know. I wanted to belong, and I realized that associating with Lenneke would not help me very much, when it came to that. She was a bit of an outsider, and contaminated, remember.

So that is why I started the book with Lenneke, because for me, that is where this story started. What I also find remarkable is how the story of Lenneke unfolds. At times during interviews, people sometimes say to me, "Lenneke was only sexually assaulted one time. It could be worse, no?" But if you follow Lenneke's story chronologically, imagine being ostracized already at age 9. And then at age 12 to be sexually abused by your grandfather. Then, at age 13, you discover that

if you talk about this, people will never look at you again. Plus, after the assault you find out that you were not the first one, but that your grandfather served jail time for this in the past. You learn that your mother was also sexually abused by him. Imagine her questions! "But how is it then possible that I ended up in the orchard alone with him?" This is really the heart of the matter. The question is not, what did grandfather do to Lenneke? If everyone had supported Lenneke in the right way, she could have processed this and overcome this. No, the question is, what did we do to Lenneke? How is it possible that the entire town knew: this man cannot be trusted, and yet he had the chance to be alone in the orchard with his granddaughter of twelve. That is the central question of the book. The whole town knew, and yet it was allowed to happen again. And when it happened again, once again everyone looked the other way. Why did this all happen? That is why in this book we follow Lenneke, and how insult was added to injury. Imagine her thoughts: my mother knew about this, my grandmother knew about this, and yet no one protected me. It must have been such a lonely and frightening feeling as a child: still so dependent on adults, and then to discover that that they will not be there to protect you, or to help you process things which happened. I think that is the trauma which still troubles Lenneke now, twenty years later.

Gijsbert: I'd like to get back to the role of the bystanders later, as well as your role, but to focus on Lenneke for now. So Lenneke is abused by her grandfather, in your book you describe how this affected her and how it made her feel. You use the word shame. She wonders if she had somehow instigated this. She even feels guilty. Are those common reflexes of victims?

Rinke: Yes, those are THE reflexes of victims. For example, Lenneke often thought: if I hadn't fought with my little brother as we biked to grandma and grandpa, then we wouldn't have been picking berries separately. Because Grandpa said, "you know what, you're not getting along very well today. Gus, why don't you go pick berries way over there, and Lenneke, you pick berries all the way on the other side. Then you can't fight anymore." And that's when grandfather abused Lenneke. And so Lenneke and also her brother Gus think even now, if only we hadn't fought then, then it wouldn't have happened. They blame themselves.

Children who are abused, and actually adults too, always blame themselves. Children will think, there's something inherently wrong with me. That's why I was chosen, and not my sister, or my cousin, or the neighbour girl, or a classmate or friend. I have done something which has caused this to happen to me. There are logical reasons for this. Because as child, you cannot survive without capable adults. Children deeply feel this dependence. Therefore it is much safer if there is something wrong with you rather than with the adults upon whom your life depends. So it is a survival tactic to blame themselves.

And for the abuser it is of course very convenient that you blame yourself. It will make you worried about being blamed by others, about receiving punishment, about no longer being accepted or loved by others, and as a result you say nothing. Furthermore, for the person who abuses you it is also very convenient when you believe that you did this together. This means that the full responsibility for what has happened does not lie with the abuser. Of course it does

lie with the abuser, but he can even fool himself into thinking: this is not really abuse, this is something special which we've done together, or, she really provokes me to do this.

And then there is the circle of people around you, to them it is also important that you are the cause. Because if there's something wrong with the child, if Lenneke is a drama queen who is just seeking attention, they can say, "My child is not that way, so this won't happen to my child." Or, "I would never allow my child alone with a man like that, so my child is not in danger", thus placing the blame with Lenneke's mother. This is how bystanders very often end up blaming the victim, thereby harbouring the illusion that this cannot happen to them. Iva Bicanic, the director of the Dutch sexual assault centre, stated very painfully, "The victim blames herself, the abuser blames the victim, and the bystanders blame the victim. So the knife always ends up in the back of the victim. This is called 'the second rape.' First of all there is the abuse, and then there is the reaction of the people surrounding the victim, which is just as traumatic, if not more so, because it destroys the self-image of the victim.

Gijsbert: I jotted down the quote you just mentioned. That is shocking, that the victim blaming can be more traumatic than the abuse itself.

Rinke: Yes!

Gijsbert: Can you elaborate on that? How does that work?

Rinke: You know, trauma is not so much a physical experience, but rather the emotional consequences which are caused by the physical experience. What you start to believe about yourself, in other words. Your self-image determines in large part your emotional well-being. If you as a child believe that your parents love you and accept you the way you are, this gives rest, security and confidence. The child thinks, I am not perfect, but I am accepted and loved.

However, a child who fundamentally believes that there's something terribly wrong with them will think: I am wicked, I am dirty, I am bad. This is the reason why such scary things happen to me. It feels like part of me is dying. This is one reason why we often see victims suffering repeated abuse. People who are abused once often get abused again. It is as if they get sucked into a downward spiral. So then, the trauma is much more what you believe about yourself. A detective of the special victims unit said once: physical wounds will heal. For us, the horror of child abuse is the physical reality of it. This is why we hardly want to think about it. Unfortunately this often prevents us from seeing the emotional consequences which follow the horrific physical experience. Hearing about this can startle us so much that we look away and think, this is too terrible, I can't deal with this. But for the child, what happens subsequently is in fact much worse, namely the feeling that there's something inherently wrong with them.

Sadly this is reinforced not only by the victim and the abuser, but especially by the circle of people whom the child trusts. If these people, parents and others, would support the victim and reassure her that none of this is her fault, and she does not need to feel guilty about it, healing could take place. However, what often happens is the opposite: "No, that didn't happen! No, he would never

do that to you, you are lying!” Or, “What you just told us makes things very difficult for us. You just brought us into a very difficult situation. We really don’t know what we should do now. This is all very emotional for us, O, what a terrible fix we’re in now!” Of course the child will think, “Look what I’ve done now, what a terrible situation I have caused!” No, the child didn’t cause anything. The abuser has caused this. But all these things accumulate, and reinforce the child’s self-image until it becomes very deeply ingrained and becomes the child’s identity. This is why twenty years later, Lenneke still struggles with doubts and misgivings, and finds it very difficult to see herself in a positive light. This is also true for Tamara, and the mother of Lenneke, the two aunts of Lenneke...

Gijsbert: ... who were all abused.

Rinke: Who are all abused, and who all still have a very hard time believing that they share no blame.

Gijsbert: So if I hear you correctly, the crucial factor is really a supportive environment and supportive bystanders to uphold the innocence of the victim, and to bring the abuse to light. It has to come out.

Rinke: Yes!

Gijsbert: In your book we read about several bystanders who take up this responsibility: the teacher, Mr. Mats , Brother Nelis, Organ teacher Gijs, Elder Jacobs, brother-in-law Peter...

Aline: It may be good to point out that taking up this responsibility sometimes lies in little things. For example, the elementary teacher who taught a lesson of sexual education and provided Lenneke with the needed words to verbalize the abuse that took place. It starts there really, doesn’t it?

Rinke: That’s right. That enabled her to say, “What you just said in the lesson, that is what my grandpa did to me.” She did not need to find words to try to describe her horrible experience.

Gijsbert: Yes, I was going to ask about that. What is the most important thing bystanders can do to bring abuse to light?

Rinke: I think to establish a neutral and safe environment where a child can be open about their experiences. On average, thirteen years go by before children are able to speak about experiences of abuse. A person who works a lot with abuse victims described her approach this way: point a, I may not be able to prevent abuse happening to my child, no matter how much I know about it. And, point b, I cannot guarantee that if my child is abused, she would tell it to me, because that depends on a lot of factors. However I will tell my child, “If you have a very unpleasant secret, you may always tell someone whom you trust.” This involves giving the child trust and also choice as to who she would like to tell. That is something which she may choose.

It is also important to teach children about boundaries. A child needs to know: I belong to me. My body belongs to me. I may say no. If someone does something which I do not like, I may tell

about this, because there are things which others may not do to me. Richard Korver, a lawyer who handles many abuse cases, says that sometimes he has to literally open the criminal code book and show children that the abuser was not allowed to do what he did. This often gives victims a great relief, that it says clearly that this is not allowed, and the abuser knew this too. This is what we need to teach our children.

It may be good to mention that in cases of child abuse, what happens invariably is something called parentification. This means that children are made responsible for adults, either emotionally, financially or in other ways. This takes place for example when a child does something which you do not like, and you respond by saying, "This is very hard for me. It gives me a lot of trouble when you do this. I'm very sad because you said this to me." Parentification takes place when a child must bear too much responsibility for the welfare of the adult upon whom they are dependent. There is a role reversal as it were. This always happens in families where abuse takes place. Children who are parentified are much more vulnerable to child abuse. They have been trained to feel responsible for the emotions of adults, while of course they aren't. They are still children. These children are also going to be very reluctant to speak out about abuse, because that makes things difficult for the adults. The child feels that they will have to solve this themselves. So then, never parentify.

Gijsbert: Can bystanders play a role in this, to eliminate this?

Rinke: Yes! The key factor is that adults take responsibility for themselves and that children clearly understand that they are not responsible for the adults' well-being. Of course the presence of parentification in families does not always mean that there is sexual abuse, but sexual abuse does always mean that there is parentification.

So, as bystander, just be a person with whom the child feels safe, that no matter what they do or say, you can handle it. These children are often testing in a thousand and one ways whether their story can land safely somewhere. It is extremely sad that some children are seeking thirteen years for such a place, and for thirteen years receive signals that their story cannot land safely. Are you an adult who can keep breathing while dealing with sadness, discomfort, fear, disbelief, feelings which can well up while listening to a disclosure of sexual abuse, without making these feelings the child's problem? Being that adult can make an enormous difference. Take for example the teacher, Mats Vandenberg. When Lenneke first told her story to him, he actually did not believe her. But he never showed this. He did not make his disbelief Lenneke's problem. You could say that he withdrew too quickly after he felt he had done his duty. That is quite a natural response of course. It probably would have helped Lenneke if he had been more available. But to be fair, he did not make his discomfort and disbelief Lenneke's problem. She never noticed these feelings of his, which made her disclosure a positive experience. That is very powerful. While he was teaching the lesson of sexual education, she clearly felt: he can handle this, which resulted in her sharing her experiences, only two weeks after they took place. This is incredibly fast, statistically.

So then, be that adult who does not burden the child with things which weigh heavy upon you. That is already very powerful.

Aline: You describe how that after the abuse came to light, many bystanders continued to show their discomfort and disbelief. At the beginning of the conversation you touched on that, when you described how you came to feel that that family was a little different, and it was better to keep a distance from them. As I was listening to the book, it was a real eye-opener to me to hear how victims appreciate being asked about things like: “How is it going with you, now that your grandfather has been arrested?” The reflexive reaction of most people would be to think: this is an uncomfortable subject, so I won’t bring this up. I’ll ignore it, to avoid giving you more discomfort. But actually this is just another form of the exclusion you mentioned before.

Rinke: That is true. Just yesterday I spoke to someone who was also a victim of abuse. She said it is also a matter of interaction and reciprocation. Because victims can also convey feelings of discomfort. “You see,” she said, “I would just as soon not talk about it either. My first reaction is often: I’d rather not deal with that today.” Probably bystanders sense that and think, maybe this isn’t a good time to bring that up now. So those things reinforce each other. Of course victims may also want to spare the bystanders from having to deal with stuff. But it’s good for bystanders to know what happened, and it is very good for victims, that the burden which they carry through life is acknowledged from time to time, and to know that anytime they wish, they may speak about it with you. You can say things like, “Hey, if you’d sooner not, you don’t have to talk about it, but how is it going? Do you still think back sometimes? Does it preoccupy you?” Or you can simply ask: “Are you sleeping okay?” Or, “How you think about yourself at this time?” Concrete questions such as these can help.

Gijsbert: What struck me is how we need bystanders to bring these things to light, such as the people whom you named before, but just as important are the subsequent bystanders who... who...

Aline: ...who you meet the supermarket, who dodge into a different aisle when they see you...

Rinke: Yes!

Gijsbert: Somewhere you write in your book that bystanders can play a role in helping to connect the world of abuse with the ordinary world of everyday life...

Rinke: That’s called reintegration. Yesterday I was reading a book by psychiatrist called Judith Lewis Herman. She wrote the book “Trauma and Recovery,” a groundbreaking and fundamental book which covers everything we now know about abuse and trauma. She writes that for a long time, we thought that these kinds of trauma had to be exorcised, as it were. We had to help the victim banish the memories of these experiences. There were all kinds of ways this was attempted. But it didn’t work. The experiences happened, and they have to be assimilated somehow. So how do you integrate a traumatic experience such as sexual abuse? This experience didn’t proceed from yourself, it was forced upon you. An external force, the abuser, inflicted this

on you, and now you are weighed down by this burden which is not really yours. How do you process such a burden? Part of the answer is therapeutic. You must come to terms with questions such as, "Who am I now, after these experiences? How is this going to affect my worldview, my self image, my view of other people?" These things have to be processed and integrated, and that takes time.

What is very difficult however, is to integrate the trauma in yourself when it is impossible to integrate it in your surroundings and your social context. Trauma victims simply want people around them to acknowledge: one of us has been abused. However, because in 87% of the cases, the abuser is well known to the victim, the fact is not only: one of us been abused, but also, one of us has committed abuse. If these facts are simply acknowledged, bystanders can make it clear to the victim that is not their fault: "You could not help this so it is not only your problem. Together we are going to look for ways in which we can process this and integrate this in our social circle." The victim is now no longer alone.

Remember, sexual abuse is a terrifying lonely experience. You are really alone. The only other person with you is with you is the abuser. This is one reason why it is sometimes difficult for victims to disengage themselves from the abuser, the only one who was present during this traumatic experience. Very contradictory! So there is that feeling of utter loneliness, being in this alone, except for the abuser who doesn't acknowledge you, since he can only seek himself. These are the kind of patterns which need to be broken. This allows the integration to take place. This allows the victim to become a new version of herself, as it were, since she can never again be the person she was. This has been stolen from her.

Gijsbert: We have been talking in somewhat abstract, general terms. To return to the story for a moment. The story starts with Lenneke, and after reading a number of pages, we think, how horrible! But then we are dealt a second blow as it were, when we learn that this is not the first time. So the fact that the previous abuse was not integrated, so to speak, made the subsequent abuse possible. So then the community was partly responsible for making it possible that it happened again.

Rinke: Yes, that is 100% true. You hit the nail on the head.

Gijsbert: So can you explain how exactly this happened in this story?

Rinke: All right, so in the book the grandfather of Lenneke, Leen Veenstra sexually abuse his own three daughters. This started possibly when they were only three years old, until they were around sixteen. When she was twelve, Lenneke's mother Helen told her mother (Lenneke's grandmother). She was unable to do anything to stop the abuse. Although she tried, she was not able to stand up to her husband. This was in the context of not being allowed to speak of these things, not being allowed to divorce, being a wife, not having a job, so what options did she have?

Aline: You write very strikingly in your book how at one point she wanted to leave. She stood outside on the bridge with her suitcases in her hand, and then realized that there was no place for her to go, and she had no income, so she went back inside.

Rinke: That's right. She realized, if I would go to my parents, they will send me back on the bus. So yes, she had nowhere to go. As a child, she had also been bullied very badly by her brother, without her parents ever intervening. She was raised in such a way that it was imprinted in her: oppression is a fact of life, something which we must bear. So then her husband abuses their three daughters. There must have been evenings when she was sitting on the couch and he walked upstairs to Helen's bedroom, she knowing what was going on, and it just happened.

So then, eventually they all marry and leave the house, and for a space of time Leen Veenstra has no one. Having an addiction of some kind, he needs someone, so he gets an office girl. She is a niece of his wife, who arranges for this girl to come work in his office, interestingly enough.

Gijsbert: Tamara.

Rinke: yes, Tamara. Tamara is sixteen. She just completed some kind of administrative course. Tamara has had a very unpleasant childhood. Her mother is sick. There are lots of children, and she does not count. I think a lot of people grow up that way, but that aside. At home Tamara is told that she better be very thankful that she receives this job, because she is pretty worthless, really. And now she may work for this wonderful man, for such a good wage! She better really do her best, because she won't get such a chance again. So Tamara does her best, and ends up getting sexually abused for five years. Every Friday she gets paid cash, but of course something has to happen first before she gets her money. The abuse gets more and more extreme, and takes place more and more often, several times a day, extremely traumatic. She tells no one.

At a certain point Tamara has a burnout. She literally cannot bear it any longer. She is so afraid all day long that at a certain point she simply cannot go on, and she ends up at home with a burnout. Finally she tells at home why she has a burnout. This is brought about by the help of various bystanders who take responsibility, such as her organ teacher. Tamara was very good at playing organ, and he enjoyed teaching her. But he notices how she keeps moving farther and farther away from him on the organ bench until she nearly falls off the other end. Noticing how nervous she is, and nearly falling off the other end of the organ bench, he thinks: she wasn't like this before. Something is wrong here. Finally he says, "Tamara, what is the matter? Please tell me." She is hardly able to speak about it, so he asks questions and she only has to say yes or no. The organ teacher says, "We'll finish this lesson now. I'll think about this, and then I'll get back to you about this." He ends up driving her to the police station and puts in a report. Tamara was not able to do this, so with her permission the piano teacher reports everything she has told him. Being really upset about this, he ends up blowing the whistle, alerting others, such as an elder, etc. Anyway, Tamara's father now knows all about what has happened. And the next thing which happens is, Leen Veenstra comes to visit, and father just allows him to go upstairs to Tamara's bedroom!

The turning point really comes when Tamara hears that Leen Veenstra is getting another office girl. This is for Tamara the final straw. She realizes that that girl will be the next one, which Tamara wants to prevent at all cost. At that point she begins to speak out. That is typical for many abuse victims. So she doesn't do it for herself. She is not important, after all. She is bad and dirty, and doesn't expect anyone to lift a finger for her. But the other girl, she is not bad, she cannot help what is happening to her. So for that girl she comes out with everything that has happened, and this blows the lid off of everything. Leen Veenstra's daughters did not even know from each other that they have been abused too. So now Tamara brings everything to light. The sisters find out about each other and support each other's testimony. He ends up getting convicted and gets three years in jail. The case gets reported on in three local newspapers, so the whole town knew. Yes, the man gets arrested and picked up in the middle of town, he disappears in prison for a number of years, the whole town knew. And then three years later, as soon as his term is up, he abuses Lenneke.

Gijsbert: So we just said that the community is partly responsible for allowing this abuse to continue...

Rinke: That is correct. You see, Helen told her mother, she was unable to help her, but she also told an elder who never did anything with this information. A barber in town knew about it. None of these people did anything. In the case of Tamara, a man from town later confessed that he had witnessed something between them, but he assumed that it was consensual. Imagine, the man was thirty years older than Tamara! Of course she didn't want that, or at least, that chance is very slim. So then, there were people who saw things and did nothing. But then there's also the reaction of the bystanders after everything has become known. So the whole town knew what Helen and her two sisters had suffered at the hands of their father, but nobody said a word to them. One of Helen's sisters said, "At the supermarket I could have crawled under the shelves, because everyone stared but no one said anything. Never a card, an offer of help such as, "Can I do something for you? Here's a pan of food, how is it going?" Nothing.

So here's Helen. She has been abused by her father from age 3 to age 16. She has four children. Everyone acts as if nothing has happened. At the same time she realizes that everyone knows something has happened. How can she, all by herself, protect her own daughter for example? Talking about bystanders, a certain point Helen goes to a birthday party. Everything has just come out in the open, she's very ashamed, and it takes every ounce of courage just to go to the birthday party. She dresses in a nice outfit and goes to the party. It went fairly well, she thinks afterward. That evening she gets a phone call from a woman from town who says, "Don't you think your skirt was a bit too short? Especially someone in your situation should realize that." Or in other words: you are asking for this, you must have enticed him, it is your fault (She was three years old when the abuse started, remember!). That woman was my grandmother. Possibly she meant well, but I think what she was really doing was looking for something which could explain why this happened to Helen and why this would never happen to her.

Gijsbert: That is the dynamics of the interaction which is actually taking place.

Rinke: That is the unconscious dynamics. Everyone is so terribly afraid of this, no one wants to be vulnerable or susceptible to something like this. Therefore we all would like there to be something wrong with the victim, or the one responsible for the victim, such as Lenneke's mother or Lenneke's grandmother. Someone did something wrong which they would never do, and therefore it will never happen to them or to their children. But really, that doesn't make you any safer. All you're really doing is looking away, creating a blind spot. And what does a blind spot make possible? It makes it possible to hide secrets, because no one looks there. So by fooling yourself into thinking that you are safe, you're actually making you and your children less safe. Remember, the numbers are the same everywhere. This was a Christian town, but it is the same everywhere, really. People sometimes tell me, "Well, of course you grew up in a very Christian town." True, but it is no worse there than in a very liberal city district, or a Catholic town, or any other kind of community, whether it be in France, England or anywhere in the Western world. Data from multiple independent studies has been analysed and combined to show this. I've quoted this in the book and included pages of references. So the problem is just as big everywhere, and the numbers tell us that in an elementary class of twenty-five children, there is one victim, on average. If you take a class of sixteen-year-olds, there are two to three and a half victims. That's the case everywhere. And us looking away, creating these blind spots, helps the abusers a lot. Of course it doesn't help them at all, because it is not good for abusers to do these things, but it does allow them to do what they do.

Aline: To come back for a moment to the role which you played, you mention in the book that you also looked away at the time. When Lenneke was biking with you and told her story to you, you didn't know how to deal with that so you ignored it. Then years later you contacted Lenneke and told her how sorry you were that you had reacted this way. How did Lenneke react to that?

Rinke: Well, her first reaction when she read my message was, "I'm going to throw this phone through the window." But do you know what is so cruel about all this? Lenneke had no desire to respond, but she cannot afford not to. This is her trauma and she needs recognition in order to heal. She had not the least desire to drink coffee with me, but really she had no choice. Very unfair. Happily now she thinks it's super gezellig. We get along very well, so it has become a great relationship, but initially, well, you can understand that she had no desire to have to deal with this all the time. You know how many hours she has lost speaking to a psychologist, or visiting the physiotherapist? Not to speak of the massage therapist, when the physiotherapist has run out of options, because her body is so rigid and tense? That all costs time, and that keeps on costing time, all because of things which are not her fault. But it is her time and money which must be spent. So the message I sent was just one more of those things of which she thought, I'd sooner go out for supper with my husband. But then, at the same time, perhaps it might help her. And that's true of the book as well. It cost incredible amounts of energy. It really was no fun for her to cooperate with that.

Lenneke's hope is: perhaps I can help someone else with it. That it has not all been in vain. It is all so senseless, isn't it? So the people who have helped with this book hope that something valuable and worthwhile may come out of this. That does happen, thankfully.



Rinke: I'm curious about something. Your newspaper has been doing investigative reporting about a development project in Malawi, and the abuse which took place there, abuse of power, sexual abuse, quite a complex situation. It struck me that your newspaper took this on, to expose this. That must have been quite a decision. That hasn't exactly been your trademark, so to speak. I don't mean... I mean, I must have been a difficult decision which has certainly attracted attention. How did you come to that? It's kind of the same, isn't it? Within your own circle you are exposing something, while you're getting all kinds of signals that this is not so appreciated.

Aline: Gijsbert, you were more involved in that than I, so you can answer that one better, but actually we really zoomed in on the role of the bystanders as well, didn't we? The fact that the abuse could go on for years under the eye of the mission board while board members knew about this.

Gijsbert: Yes, well, the abuse is one thing...

Rinke: Yes! There will always be rotten apples, people who do things like that, but they exist by virtue of the toleration of everyone else.

Gijsbert: And we know that in our circles there are certain dynamics at play, and therefore board oversight or governance or whatever you want to call it does not always function as it should, to put it mildly.

Aline: Cronyism.

Gijsbert: Yes, cronyism...

Rinke: ...which requires loyalty...

Aline: ...very little external oversight...

Gijsbert: ...Boards which are formed by the mission workers themselves. You know, just organize a little board for the work you're doing. Pastors who end up on boards strictly because of their office, not because of any managerial talents. Lots of risk factors! This really came out in the Malawi investigation. So much went wrong due to board mismanagement. This dysfunction is really what facilitated the abuse and allowed it to continue so long, which led to all the dramatic consequences.

Rinke: It all sounds very cozy, doesn't it? "We're in this together! We know each other."

Aline: “We have a mission!”

Rinke: “We have a mission together! We’ll ask other people whom we trust to join us!” That all sounds wonderful! And it can be of course, but very vulnerable isn’t it?

Gijsbert: Very vulnerable, yes.

Rinke: There is not the strong foundation so necessary for when internal problems must be dealt with, is there?

Gijsbert: On the contrary.

Rinke: Do you have any idea how many victims there are in this case?

Gijsbert: There are nine young men who came out and reported to the police. But I was in Malawi together with a colleague around this time last year. We had only been there for three hours when we met someone who also proved to be a victim and who had never told his story.

Rinke: Hmm. So you were tripping over stories basically, without even trying very hard.

Gijsbert: Yes.

Rinke: What I find so striking is the cognitive dissonance in people’s minds. People will zoom in on the bad effects this has on the organization, the morale, or the community. “Why do you have to publish this? Why do you have to give this organization a bad name?” But the victims, where are they in the story? It is almost as if abuse devaluates people.

Gijsbert: The people in Malawi are far away. Possibly that also played a role. They are faceless, while the people in the organization here are well known of course. For me that was in fact the motivation. The young man who we met hours after arrival, I looked in his face and I heard his story. I know why we had to bring up this story. It’s about these people who have no voice, or rather whose voice is not heard, who have been abused in every fibre of their being. That’s who we did it for.

Rinke: Right!

Gijsbert: To get back to our discussion about bystanders, Rinke, you write in your book that publicity and bringing things out into the open is a good thing. It can prevent abuse from recurring. But what if the victim says, “What I experienced was dreadful, but I want to keep this to myself”?

Rinke: Then they should do that. I think a huge thing which is taken away from a person who is abused is their autonomy. And it is this autonomy which the victim needs to have restored to them. If it is your decision never to speak about this with anyone, then that is your right, as a victim. Nobody has the right to force you to make this public. Remember that for some victims, speaking out only adds to the trauma, because there is no safe environment of acceptance, which is the second rape I mentioned before. That is very sad. I think that if we were better bystanders,

it would be easier for victims to speak out. The reality is that speaking out sometimes backfires. That is very painful. Therefore we need to trust the victims' judgment in this.

Aline: So it is not always better to report the abuse?

Rinke: That's right, and I think that is something the victim must decide for themselves. Not long ago we had a discussion about this in a church in Leiden. One person said, "I have a friend who has experienced abuse. I feel strongly that she should report this, but she does not want to. What should I do?" I said, "I understand that you feel that way. But remember, you want her to report actions which were forced upon her. Her trauma is about being forced. If you would make her report this, are you also not forcing something on her, and again taking away her autonomy?"

Gijsbert: You were talking about Tamara, and how she reported the abuse because she wanted to prevent more victims. To think along with the victim, how does that complicate the decision to report or not to report? They might think, why am I now responsible for preventing new victims?

Rinke: It probably feels that way, yes. Once again the victim is made to feel responsible for the actions which the abuser has done, or is still going to do. At the same time there may be other factors. In Tamara's case, she wanted to report the abuse in order to protect the new office girl, but she was so paralyzed by five years of abuse, that her brother-in-law simply led her to the vehicle, started driving, and said, "You are going to report this." After the fact, she said, "He didn't exactly ask me for permission, but I'm very glad he did what he did, because I would not have been able to do it on my own. I'm so relieved now that I reported it."

So it is all very human and imperfect, but I think the point is that we maintain contact. Her brother-in-law did not look away, did he? I think it's very healing for victims that they are seen and recognized. The abuser does not see his victims, he just uses them. There is a very nice book by Judith Lewis Herman called Truth and Repair. It is a qualitative study of nearly 30 victims of abuse, both men and women. The question which the author poses to the victims is: after the horrible experience of abuse, what would have been the 'ideal' aftermath? Although each response is different of course, there are five things on which they all agree. The first is, that their story would have been listened to. Secondly, that their story would have been acknowledged and believed. Then, that someone from their community would have been willing to share with the victim the burden of what happened, because at no point was this the victim's fault. And yet what often happens is that victim loses their place in the community, even while the abuser may still participate!

That's a very short summary, but it sums up the things which victims need. The good news is that these are things which we are able to give to victims. Abusers may feel very powerful, but they only have as much power as bystanders allow them to have. To experience healing from the trauma of abuse, you don't even need apologies or acknowledgment from the abuser. If the circle of people around you firmly supports you, you don't need the abuser at all, in order to heal. That is good news isn't it?

Gijsbert: So that makes reporting or not reporting something secondary as well.

Rinke: That's right. Of course it is very good that abuse is reported. Also because in case of a repeat offender, when someone else reports abuse in the future, this will make the case against the abuser a stronger one. That would be the judicial perspective. But from a therapeutic and psychological perspective, what really matters is the community that surrounds the victim, and the way in which the victim views him or herself.

Aline: You recently spoke at a symposium called "The Safe Church." There you said that in cases of abuse within the Reformed community, people often approach their consistory for advice. What do you think of this? Is this always the wisest course of action? Does the consistory need to be the first one to know of this? And how is a consistory able to help? For consistory members such cases can be very complex of course, and they don't always have the necessary expertise.

Rinke: That is a good question. It can be very difficult. In the book I write about Nelis, the oldest son of Leen Veenstra. First off, he was a good bystander. He did all he could in order to get his father arrested. But at first he only went to the consistory. When I interviewed him and asked him why he didn't go to the police right away, he said, "You know, I had the feeling that if I went to the police, it was out of my hands and I no longer had any control over what would happen next. Whereas the consistory were people I knew well, people I trusted, people I had contact with. It felt safer to first speak with them."

I think that is a very nice aspect of a consistory. But the moment the consistory thinks that they can solve this internally, they make a big mistake. There are incredibly complex factors at work. The abuse not only involves the abuser and the victim. There are also the bystanders. In fact there is a whole web in which everyone plays a role of looking away, not seeing anything, not saying anything, not knowing anything, not doing anything. There is a shared responsibility, a complicity really. There's all those dualities. If you're not a professional, you cannot unravel those things. You're really fooling yourself if you think so.

Consistories need to realize that they do not have the expertise to put a stop to abuse, to help victims process these things, to hold abusers responsible, to prevent further abuse, to help victims heal, etc. But they should also realize that they do in fact have a very important and valuable role. After all, there is no spiritual side to the courts proceedings, or the police apparatus. And psychologists are not always so spiritually in tune. So a consistory can really supply what is lacking there.

Aline: Talking about spiritual things, it is also possible that consistories will very quickly bring up the subject of forgiveness, which can make things very difficult for the victim, isn't it?

Rinke: That is terrible, yes. Forgiveness is wonderful of course. I'm definitely not saying anything against forgiveness. But what often happens is that victims are told they must forgive the abuser. "That is good for you, especially for the welfare of your soul," the victim is told. But I believe the real reason why forgiveness is prescribed is because it is so convenient for everyone else. If the

victim quickly forgives, the case can be closed. The problem is solved, and our community no longer has to be troubled about this. But that is not how forgiveness works. Frankly, I think such an approach can also be labelled abuse, spiritual abuse in this case. If a victim is ready to forgive, a consistory can play a very helpful role, to guide the victim in this process. But it is no one's business to force someone into that process, and to determine for them that this is the moment they must forgive. Before you realize it, you are again taking away the victim's autonomy under the guise of "this is what the Bible says." I think that is very dangerous. If on the other hand the victim may be guided with a lot of wisdom and discretion to the point where, at their time, they are ready to forgive the abuser, this is incredibly healing.

Gijsbert: Are you saying that it is a matter to be determined only by the victim, if or when they are ready to forgive?

Rinke: Therapeutically, there may be times in their sessions when a counsellor suggests to the victim, "perhaps at this stage you need to start considering forgiveness," or, "I'm hearing you say things which suggest that you are thinking about forgiveness." But that is very different than saying, "This is all very difficult and troublesome, all this which has happened. Of course this should have never happened. But in the Bible says that when another person hurts you, you must forgive them." No one should ever say that to a victim. That is simply trying to sweep something under a rug. I don't think that is Biblical. I don't see any examples in the Bible of this. This is not how the Lord Jesus dealt with people. Take Zacchaeus the publican for example. The Lord Jesus did not tell him what he had to do with his money. He touched Zacchaeus's heart, and then Zacchaeus himself came up with the idea of giving half of his goods to the poor and so on.

I am always struck by the way Lord Jesus approached people. There was a person in our family who was traumatized by abuse. She was not religious, but she said, "Jesus is the greatest trauma healer I have ever read." I thought that was quite a statement. Then I started to read the Gospels with those glasses on, and I thought, yes how true! Another example is the woman with the issue of blood who touched the Lord Jesus from behind. The Lord Jesus felt virtue go out from Him, and He said, "Someone has touched Me." She was a contaminated woman, literally, and shut out of the community, but then in the middle of that crowd of people, He says to her as it were, "What is your story?" That's incredible, isn't it? I think it is Luke who describes the different scenes which keep going back and forth, about this woman and then about the girl who had passed away, whom He raises from the dead. So here's Jesus, first He calls this woman, whose story had never been heard, in the middle of a crowd of people where she really was not allowed to be, and gets her to tell her story. In this way He publicly wiped away all that shame which rested on the woman. And then He goes into the room of this dead girl, very privately, with only the parents and three of his trusted disciples. It says so tenderly, He entered in where she was. In the original it suggests that He entered into her very being, as it were. So he moves from a very public scene to a very private one, with only her parents present. I find it amazing, and also very inspirational how that every situation is approached differently, but essentially it is always about

making connections, making contact with people who are contaminated, or suffering, or dead, and not being hindered by the discomfort which the community feels.

Gijsbert: Is it asking too much of a community to give both the victim and the abuser a place in their midst?

Rinke: That is a good question. It is a fact that we don't believe that someone is an abuser until it can no longer be denied. And when we can no longer deny it, he is a monster who must be locked up for life. But as Iva Bicanic says, if we lock up all abusers for life there won't be enough prisons, so something else must be done. You know, in isolation everyone becomes the worst possible version of himself. And if your way of coping is to start abusing children, then being stigmatized is only a recipe for more disaster. Not a good situation for children. So how do we deal with this? I'm not an expert in this. There are abusers for whom no form of therapy will do any good. Some abusers have no remorse or even no conscience. There are abusers who do respond to therapy. I think the community itself should not attempt this sort of thing. Forensic psychiatry offers safety protocols and integration processes.

But just imagine, you are an abuser. If you own up to what you have done, you will be an outcast in your community. You will lose everything and become a nobody. You will never confess, will you? But what if there are some people in your life who will say, "If you take responsibility for what you have done, I will still be there for you." That must be the most difficult role. That will not be popular. To help the victim, there may be some glory in that. But to help the abuser, that is a different story. That is not done, usually out of self-interest. Because really, it is not in the interest of the victim when the community ostracizes and bans the abuser, because that will only worsen the abuser's behavior. So yes, the people who are willing to help the abuser, they are the real heroes, because that gives the abuser the opportunity to take responsibility for his actions. For example, someone could say, "You are going to therapy. Only on that condition will we still have contact."

Well then, forensic therapists know how to work with these people. When the therapist assesses that Mr. so-and-so is ready for it, safety protocols are put in place. Bystanders are included in the process. Very clear directions and requirements are provided. Mr. so-and-so will never sit beside a child at the Christmas dinner. Let alone that he will ever be together with a child alone. Nonetheless, perhaps in this way or that way he can once again become part of the community. It must be made very clear that Mr. so-and-so cannot be trusted in certain situations. He must continue to go for therapy and consultations, even only because of the fact that loneliness is deadly. There was a study done recently of potential abusers under the age of twenty-five. They all either had low self-esteem, were lonely, were depressed, had financial problems, didn't have an education etc. etc. So it is not surprising when these people go off the rails. Especially these people need a community and relationships with healthy adults. So yes, we don't have enough of those kind of people.

Aline: Rinke, your book has been out for a year now, I'm curious, how is it going with the people in the book? How are Lenneke and Tamara and Helen doing? Do you still speak with them frequently?

Rinke: Yes, I still speak with them frequently. How are they doing? I would say, not dramatically different than before the book came out. I do notice that they are drawing some hope and satisfaction from the fact that their book has been able to help others. Every week I still receive messages from people who have been helped by the book, especially because it puts words to the things they have experienced, not at the hands of the abuser, but at the hands of the community. Because it is something which is not often inquired into, while it is often a very significant part of the trauma. So as I said, the book puts words to this. And this has all been made possible thanks to the family who has shared their story: Lenneke, her mother, her aunt... So yes, they do draw hope from this, that this is making a difference in people's lives. But of course, it doesn't suddenly put everything behind them. They do not suddenly consider themselves to be wonderful people, or even okay people. Even thinking of themselves as being okay is very difficult. Lenneke said to me recently yet, "Maybe I will have to fight with this for the rest of my life." Which of course she finds very difficult and extremely tiring.

Gijsbert: Somewhere you write that we need to gather the courage to squarely face the fact of abuse. Has this book achieved this to some extent?

Rinke: ...

Gijsbert: My own experience is yes...

Rinke: So you have read it and you would say yes!

Gijsbert: Yes, read it twice, and just recently wrote in my editorial that every Christian leader must read this book.

Rinke: That's wonderful! I'm so glad to hear that from you. I think that on a micro level, this happens. I recently read a story from a gentleman who wrote that at a train station he saw a girl who was loudly crying. Of course everyone just walked past, but he had just read this book and wondered, "What might be the matter with her?" So he said to her, "What happened?" She said, "I was just assaulted in the elevator!"

Gijsbert: That's awful!

Rinke: So he said, "Okay... Let's sit down here for a minute." His first impulse was, "We must phone the police immediately!" But then he remembered the stuff he had read about autonomy and so on, and said, "Let's sit down first, would you like something to drink?" And then he said, "What do you want to do? Do you want to report this? If you do, I'll stay with you until it's all done." And so she did! And he provided an eyewitness account that he had seen her walking there by the elevator and so on, a witness statement to back up her report. When I read that, I

thought that for her, this book may have indeed made a big difference. This gentleman was moved to action by what he had read in this book.

But at the same time, this is such a huge problem. It happens so very often. You know, the rejection, so that traumatized people are not able to process what has happened. The instinct to look away and to deny what has happened is so strong. And that is so difficult for victims to experience!

Gijsbert: Well, after reading it twice, my thoughts were, this book needed to be here. And at the same time I thought, imagine if this happens tomorrow in my congregation where I'm an office bearer. Will I have the ability to respond according to what I have learned from this book?

Rinke: I still find that hard myself.

Aline: I think you should not underestimate how important the message of this book is, and how well it is communicated. Just looking at myself, what I have learned from reading it is simply that when we see someone on the street who is crying, as you just mentioned, when we pick up certain signals, when we notice discomfort, just to ask what is the matter, to give a person a chance to speak about it. Our instinct is very quickly to look away, as in: I don't want to bother anyone. I also don't want to give the wrong impression, or to suggest something which is not the case at all. This book really encourages everyone to ask that question anyway. No, I don't think you should underestimate the importance of that message.

Rinke: Thank you. I'm glad to hear that. Thank you. Just to add one more thing, because of this book, I receive in my inbox messages describing all kinds of cases. And every time again I'm stunned at the complexity of these cases. I'm not an expert. Many experts did help me with this book, but even for them it is not cut and dried. It happens in a web, remember. And because it is a web, just solving one incident is not enough. A web is sticky. People need each other. Loyalty plays such a big role, as you noticed in the story about Malawi. And so victims always get the short end of the stick. So how can we help victims in this web? Because victims may tell us, "I don't want to leave this web. I don't want to leave this community." That is very difficult. The one thing I hope people will learn is that the abuse itself is not the most damaging, but the ignoring, the turning away, and the shame which victims are made to feel. If bystanders begin to understand this and to change this, then we have certainly achieved something.

Gijsbert: Well, that is a wonderful call to action, which must and shall have its effect!

Rinke: Thank you!

Gijsbert: Thank you! Thank you too, Aline. And thank you for watching and listening, everyone.
