

# SHRINKING THE MONSTER

*Healing the Wounds of Our Abuse*



**NORBERT KRAPP**

**i.e.**  
in extenso

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## FOREWORD

by Fran Salone-Pelletier



We can only shrink the monsters in our life. They never totally disappear. However, they are now—or can be—sufficiently down-sized to manageable shadows in an otherwise enlightened world.

For Norbert Krapf, a box long held in an attic was the key to memories buried in the garret of his mind. The box contained a photo of him as a youngster. It would open his heart to pictures of a lost youth and searing years scarred with secrecy. It would also begin a rite of passage where he would hunt for—and find—serenity, security, and a peace truly beyond understanding.

I “met” Norbert when I reviewed his book *Catholic Boy Blues*—a masterfully poetic exposition of his painful experience as a young boy abused by a priest, a close friend of the family. I especially remember writing one sentence that concretizes Norbert’s life and works: “As memories bob to the surface and recall becomes razor sharp, the sword of truth cuts to the core.”

Ours was, and yet remains, an email connection that quickly deepened even while it remains in cyberspace. His heart touched mine. As a writer and sometimes poet, I felt an instant kinship. It grew as I perceived we shared a common calling, that of hurting truth tellers who dare to open their own wounds so the world can

begin to heal. I sensed Norbert's shrinking monster was becoming linked to the many fiends tormenting us human beings in multiple abusive ways. I knew the prose book he was writing that you now hold in your hands would be a success, not just as another literary feather in his already festooned cap but as an anchored hope for others suffering the pain of childhood abuse in deafening silence.

One of my dearest friends—a woman who went to graduate school with me and, also like me, was a Director of Religious Education—endured the harsh reality of having all three of her three sons being abused by a priest in the parish where she worked. The boys were threatened by him to keep the secret or their mother would never again have a job or ministry in the Church with a capital “C.” Her experience of violence and betrayal (the bishop of the diocese covered-up the abuse) resonates with all whose suffering touches deep places in their being, wounding them but also affording an ultimate sanctity few understand.

Readers in all stages of life will connect with Norbert and his story, whether or not they have been sexually abused. They will opt to enter into his hard reality: “Everything must come in stages.”

Truth be told, we all have stories of abuse, our own or those of others, to narrate. We need to release the pictures buried in the garret of our corporate mind, those assaults we have piled upon ourselves as a people in the name of pride masked as humility. We move slowly through a maze of excuses before being able to climb out of the container in which we have encased ourselves.

Each small step we take is a crucial move forward and

upward. It took fifty years before Norbert could face and begin to share what happened to him. Half a century passed before he began looking at a photo of himself as a young boy taken by his abuser and saw the face of an adolescent whose hands were raised in mock prayer offered with eyes already deadened with dread. With the power of Providence, most of those fifty years, as he proclaims, “was given to writing books that eventually prepared the way for turning and facing the abuse in my past.”

“Nothing heals better than simple, honest, human compassion” he writes in this incredible memoir of recovery. *Shrinking the Monster* generously exudes healing ointment. The cure begs—perhaps demands—systemic awareness, transparency, and merciful justice.

This healing process comes in stages—often more slowly than we desire. Impediments slow our travel to a pace that allows for deeper consideration, more profound understanding, and keenly felt forgiveness. Norbert experienced these “setbacks along the way” as the means by which his healing process has deepened. Without identifying and presenting specific steps as procedures to empower healing (after all, this is not a self-help book), he chronicles the episodes that revealed his grief, helped assuage it, and ultimately provided an exit from its grip.

This faith-filled adventure will deepen, if the command urged in Scripture is followed: “Take hold of yourself, it is I.” These words underscore a message of hope. Others will assist us, empower us to believe we can take hold of ourselves. They help us let go of the various individuals and memories enslaving us with their abusive presence. Many wonderfully competent and devoted

companions have accompanied Norbert in his healing. By telling his story and encouraging similar narratives, he encourages all of us who are “healing the wounds of our abuse.”

There is yet another truth in this book. It is expounded in this sorrow-laden statement Norbert pronounces regarding those who cannot hear truth or bear it: “Yes, there are eyes and ears everywhere, but there are things some eyes and some ears don’t want to hear, choose not to hear, and could never acknowledge as truth if their child dared speak it. We knew very well what we could not say, what truth we could not tell.” Without honest and sorrow-filled admission of their sinful cover-up, hierarchical “powers-that-be” will continue to obstruct, in fact deny, the healing process. Norbert also realizes the “prospect that there would be some allies of the poems who would have their own agenda, using them for their own purposes and quite possibly reactivating my sense of being abused in the process.” And, they did.

Despite the apparent obstacles, however, truth about childhood abuse bubbles to the surface and cannot be withheld forever. One of the most powerful statements Norbert makes, one that evokes hope no matter how far the horizon might be, is this: “Healing can never come too late, in my opinion.” Healing is his goal. Forgiving is his action. Forgetting is not possible for him. All the while there is a holy fragility underlying his prophetic stance. Norbert offers a gift of presence to all who care to receive it... presence in pain and sorrow but also presence in the joy of healing. This gift is one to be opened, used, and shared. It is boundless and beautiful, pouring the nard of grace into wounds of grief.

*Shrinking the Monster* is so much more than a book to read

and heed—or to dismiss as too painful to tolerate. As “Madeleine,” the courageous victim assistance coordinator of the Diocese of Evansville, Indiana, wrote to Norbert: This is “the healing process...you have precipitated for the entire community.” Norbert understood. He wrote back to her: “Not talking about the monster makes it grow bigger. Talking about it shrinks the monster, weakening its grip on us.”

*Shrinking the Monster* also brings to the surface a deep certitude to which I heartily subscribe: “That which is most personal is most universal.” Trusting this verity, Norbert Krapf offers the world a gift beyond telling. He presents us with this challenge: “This Is Not the End,” the last poem in *Catholic Boy Blues*, section II, The Boy and the Man He Became:

*Nobody in any of these stories,  
wherever they take place, will  
live happily ever after, but if people  
can summon what it takes to tell  
the truth, they can live together  
and help others and their voice.  
One voice singing by itself can  
sound awfully small, but several  
voices lifting as one can make  
a chorus that sings a mighty song.*

“It’s not over.” That is the sad but honest truth for the Catholic Church and for all of us about the child abuse and cover-up



that has rocked our world. Again, Norbert reminds all who have suffered abuse in any way that “NO” is always the appropriate response to childhood abuse because, “Sometimes we can’t understand why a wrong can’t be righted and a person or people don’t see what we think they should. Sometimes we must admit that we are not saviors and had best move on to the next chapter, not keep turning around to look back, and let things work out as they will...”

Yet, this book is not the end. It is an invitation to begin, again and again, a remembering which is itself a “re-remembering.” Healing is a limitless pilgrimage in a land where all monsters shrink, even if they do not disappear. It is a journey into the wondrous land where we can mostly forgive yet never forget what has been done to us. It is the place where the balance of power shifts, healing happens, and true freedom is achieved.

Take the first step by reading this book.

Fran Salone-Pelletier is the Lead Chaplain at Novant Health Brunswick Medical Center in North Carolina and author of the trilogy *Awakening to God: The Sunday Readings in Our Lives, Years A, B, C*.

## PREFACE



*It is possible for a person to do either good or bad. As a result of the latter, a body is placed in many afflictions. To lessen them, a person should therefore act according to the judgment of a spiritual director lest one find only the bitterness and not the sweetness of life.*

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Some subjects take hold of us as writers more deeply than others. It may be that the longer we resist writing about them, the more and longer we will have to write about them. In my case, such a subject was child abuse, my abuse by the founding pastor of Holy Family Parish in Jasper, Indiana, from the sixth through eighth grades. This book is an attempt to tell you the story of why and how I had to write about this ugly subject to free myself of it.

As I said in *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet's Journal of Healing*, poems drafted from February 2007 to about a year later and published in 2014, I resisted writing about this experience, which had ended fifty years earlier. I didn't want to honor it by writing about it. That's how I thought of it, but the time came when I realized I had to write about it, for several reasons you will read about here. I thought I was finished writing about this dark subject, working through it and finding the light beyond it, after *Catholic Boy Blues* appeared, but I was wrong again.

This time, someone asked me to write a prose memoir about the experience of writing those poems, with an emphasis on the process of my recovery from the abuse. That someone was Greg Pierce, publisher of ACTA Publications, who took over that poetry collection and brought it out in a new edition, under the In Extenso Press imprint, with the same photograph of me as a boy, taken by my abuser, on the cover, but with a different design.

It was clear from the start when I began to write the 325 poems, from which I selected 130 with the help of two friends, that writing the poems in four voices—the boy I was, the man I

became, the priest, and Mr. Blues, a mentor and counselor based on my love of the rural blues since the second half of the 1960s—was very healing for me. I knew about the tradition of shooting the messenger who delivers bad news and tried to prepare myself and my family for what might come. The response to the publication of *Catholic Boy Blues*, however, was so much more positive than I anticipated that the act of publishing it was as healing for me as writing it. There were so many expressions of gratitude at readings, in reviews and emails, and on blogs that I could see how healing the poems were also for many readers. There were also some readers who admitted that the poems were too painful for them to finish reading the book, which I regretted because that meant they did not experience the sense of healing that developed throughout the book, culminating in “Epilog: Words of a Good Priest.”

In a sense, the poems and this prose memoir are sequels to my *The Ripest Moments: A Southern Indiana Childhood*. The poems I talk about here complete a chapter in that book, “Aunt Tillie’s Farm,” which I came to see as a metaphor of the abuse that I did not allow to become a part of the 2008 memoir because I was not yet ready to face it. *Shrinking the Monster* follows another, more experimental memoir, *American Dreams: Reveries and Revisitations*, a 2013 collection of seven prose-poem cycles that includes portraits of an uncle who died in Germany near the end of World War II, my father, and my mother, a harrowing European experience my family and I had while living in Germany just before the Iron Curtain came down, and a cycle in the voices of my ancestors and their contemporaries telling the story of coming

from what is now Germany to my southern Indiana hometown, looking back on what they left behind and giving thanks for the new life they found and made.

In effect, *Shrinking the Monster* is the third (though not in chronological order) in a series of four memoirs, which will include also another and longer book almost ready for publication, *Homecomings: Selected Autobiographical Essays*, a more literary volume than the others that tells the story of my development and allegiances as an author and teacher of literature.

Writing the thirty-two chapters in this prose book has given me a chance to put the writing and publishing of the *Catholic Boy Blues* poems in perspective and see what a valuable network of supporters, albeit of different kinds, I have had in taking on the difficult experience of surviving child abuse and working hard to recover from it. It also gave me a chance to describe some of the obstacles I had to overcome in writing and publishing *Catholic Boy Blues*. Writing this prose book has furthered my healing and, I hope, might encourage some of my fellow survivors who have not yet been able to take the steps I have finally taken to make my ongoing healing a reality.

If you are a survivor of childhood abuse, I can say that I wrote this book more for you than for myself. I pray that what I say about what happened to me and how I am still recovering from it moves you, when the time is right, to take whatever actions will help you heal. Maybe by the time you finish the last sentence in the last chapter, you will hear a voice that wants to speak to others about your own experience. If you hear such a voice, please listen to what it wants to say and give it permission to speak.

Writing the poems in *Catholic Boy Blues* taught me that we can best “help someone’s soul heal,” to borrow a phrase from Rumi, if we first heal ourselves. This book tells the story of my healing, a healing still in progress that I expect to take the rest of my mortal life.

## PART ONE



### LEARNING HOW TO SHRINK THE MONSTER

*Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder,  
Help someone's soul heal.*

*RUMI*

## 1. A BOX IN THE ATTIC

When my mother was dying of lymphoma in 1997, at the age of eighty-four, I came home from New York to Indiana several times to help my brother take care of her. Knowing I would have to sort through things after she was gone, I started looking through the attic to explore what was there.

I came upon a cardboard box of things with my name on it and started sifting through envelopes crammed with press clippings of my Boy Scout honors, my baseball, football, and baseball games, and my academic records and honors. Then I came upon a pile of photos of me involved in those activities.

All of a sudden I was holding one I had forgotten about. It was of a boy dressed in a white T-shirt with some kind of logo, maybe from a Boy Scout Jamboree, on the front. His arms and face are deeply tanned, his dark hair is cut short in the “flat-top” popular in the 1950s, and his hands are pressed together, as if in agonized prayer. His lips are pursed, eyes squinting in a frown. Deep in his eyes, hurt is visible.

Who took this Polaroid snapshot that captures such tension and pain where joy and happiness should be in a boy so young, eleven or twelve? Who took this photo of me, on the side of our family’s early 1950s brick house, with branches and leaves all around, as if I were in a southern Indiana Garden of Eden? It suddenly came back to me: It was our parish priest, our founding



pastor from our German-American community, my abuser who, I later came to see, had molested many boys in our parish, probably at least fifty.

It came back to me in a rush that a few days after taking that photo, our pastor had shown me that snapshot and asked, with a strange and insecure look on his face, if I would like to have it. I didn't know at the time what to make of this perplexing situation or his motive, whatever it was, in offering it to me. He also asked if my parents might like to have it. I said, hesitatingly, "I guess."

Rummaging around in the attic that day in 1997, I said to myself, "I'm taking this right now and holding on to it. I don't know what I will do with it or what I should think about it, but this picture must be saved." I wasn't sure why.

Ten years later in 2007, after Mom had died and my family and I moved back to Indiana from the New York area and resettled in downtown Indianapolis, I began to draft the 325 poems out of which I selected and revised the 130 that became *Catholic Boy Blues*. As I said in the Preface, these poems came with a "volcanic force," in one year. Early in the writing, I remembered that photo from the attic had come along with our possessions when we moved and was now located in a manila folder in the many files in my desk drawer. I got it out, kept staring at it, and said to myself, "This is what my cover will be, this gripping photo that priest took of me."

Eventually, I wrote four poems in response to the photo, trying to imagine what the priest's motives might have been in giving it to me, why he thought I might want to give it to my parents, and what he thought and felt about what he had done to me

and so many other boys. Now that the book has been out for over a year, I still sometimes reflect on such questions.

Even some of my friends who bought the book did not realize, before they read the poems, that I am—or was—the boy whose photo is on the front cover. I do recognize him as myself, but I cannot retrieve and describe all that I was thinking and feeling at the time it was taken. Perhaps as part of a survival mechanism, some of my thoughts and feelings from then are lost to me now. Those of you who were abused as children, however, will understand much of the inner turmoil apparent in that photo.

If you are or were Catholic and as a child were abused by a priest, you will comprehend and feel the horrible irony of my relationship with that photo. You will know why it hurt so much then and still does, at times, now. A boy from a community and family that takes its Catholicism seriously, like mine, should not possess a picture of himself like this one. What that priest did to me is the opposite of what any adult anywhere, at any time, should do to a child. What he did to me and to the other boys was and is unspeakably wrong, as any child can see, including the boy staring back at me from that Polaroid print. That priest's actions, including taking the photo and offering it to me and my parents, was and remains a perversion of the Catholic religion, a betrayal of faith and trust, a violation of law, and a criminal act.

How could I ever recover from such childhood perfidy? Telling my story, what I later discovered some call “narrative therapy,” was one good way to begin for a professional writer like me, but also for any other survivor. I had to wait fifty years, however, before I was ready to write the poems that became *Catholic Boy*

*Blues*. This memoir is an attempt to share with you what I called in the Preface of that book “my rocky road to recovery.” But if you want the full story, you must also read *The Ripest Moments: A Southern Indiana Childhood* (2008) and *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet’s Journal of Healing* (2014). The latter is my collection of poems in four voices—the boy, the man, the priest, and Mr. Blues—all of whom represent and give voice to aspects of my healing. It took, and continues to take, these various parts of me, working together, to tell the story of my recovery. In this prose book I wish to share with you the “back story” of my life and of my poems about the abuse to tell you more fully how I have been able to recover to the extent I have, though I know that the process of healing must continue for the rest of my life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norbert Krapf, former Indiana Poet Laureate, was born and grew up in German-Catholic Jasper, a town in southern Indiana. He received his B.A. in English from St. Joseph College, Rensselaer, Indiana, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Notre Dame. His twenty-six previous books include *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet's Journal of Healing* (2014, 2015), his eleventh full-length poetry collection. He taught for thirty-four years at Long Island University, where he directed the C.W. Post Poetry Center for eighteen years. He was a Fulbright guest professor of American poetry at the Universities of Freiburg (1980-1981) and Erlangen-Nuremberg (1988-1989) in Germany and was a U.S. Exchange teacher at West Oxon Technical College, England (1973-1974). He explores his German-Catholic heritage in many of his poetry collections and such books he edited and/or translated as *Finding the Grain: Pioneer German Journals from Dubois County, Indiana* (1996), *Beneath the Cherry Sapling: Legends from Franconia* (1988), and *Shadows on the Sundial: Selected Early Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke* (1990).

Krapf has received the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America (1999), the Glick Indiana Author Award (2014) for the body of his work, including *Catholic Boy Blues*, and a Creative Renewal Fellowship from the Arts Council of Indianapolis (2011-2012) to combine poetry and

music, with an emphasis on the blues. As Indiana Poet Laureate (2008-2010), he stressed collaborations and the reunion of poetry and song. He has collaborated with Monika Herzig on a jazz and poetry CD, *Imagine: Indiana in Music and Words* (2007), performs poetry and blues with Indiana bluesman Gordon Bonham, his guitar teacher, and with poet-therapist Liza Hyatt facilitates the workshop Mining the Dark for Healing Gold: Writing about Difficult Relationships. For more information, book descriptions, audio and video files of readings and performances, and reviews and interviews, visit [www.krapfpoetry.com](http://www.krapfpoetry.com).