

Remarks by Councilmember Tim Burgess, Seattle City Council
Turning on the Light Greenlake Event
Seattle, Washington

October 6, 2013

Thank you for being here tonight to turn the light on sexual abuse, its darkness and its power to cause great harm.

Leonard Cohen sings in his song, *Anthem*, “there’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Turning on the light extinguishes the darkness and brings great hope. I know that and I know many of you do as well.

I read Brené Brown’s book, *Daring Greatly*, this summer. It’s about guilt, shame and vulnerability.

Brown writes that the courage to be vulnerable can transform how we live, love, parent and lead. She encourages us to practice vulnerability with the right people and in the right setting. You seem like the right people in the right setting.

I’ve been very blessed in my life and I’m deeply honored to serve the people of Seattle on the City Council. But there’s another part of my life story that I don’t talk about very often. That’s the part I want to share with you tonight.

I agreed to share my story because I’ve learned the importance of unlocking the power of the secrets. Turning on the light is one of the first steps.

I was in the hall at the top of our stairs when my dad and teenage brother got into a shouting match. Then it got physical. My brother pushed my dad down breaking several of his ribs. I was terrified. I ran down the stairs and out the front door and screamed for someone to call the police.

I was six years old.

That was by no means the first, nor the last incident of violence in my family.

At home we lived with constant verbal and emotional abuse. From outside my family, there was sexual abuse as well; that’s a trauma that is devastating and long lasting.

I’d often run to my room to hide under my bedcovers. I thought I would be safe and secure under my covers.

The violence and the emotional and the sexual abuse accumulated and took a toll. In my 20s, even with all of the interesting, compelling things that were going on in my work life, I was caught in a downward spiral of anger, loneliness, and a sense of isolation. In some of the darkest times, I considered ending my life. I even had a plan. (PAUSE)

I needed help. Thankfully, I was able to get it.

I want to tell you this as simply as I can . . .

Talking to a professional counselor saved my life. It was a long, hard journey.

Over a period of several years I worked with my counselors. They heard my story, and they didn't reject me.

As they showed compassion, I learned to be compassionate with myself—and with that little boy who'd lived through years of fear and abuse.

I learned that I'm not defined by the narrative I lived through as a child, nor by my despair as a young adult.

But healing came not so much from understanding where I'd been, but from sitting in the presence of a therapist who week after week held my story without recoiling, who walked with me through immense darkness, who sat with me in a room that became a sanctuary of healing.

There was a spiritual component, too, as the therapist embodied for me the patience and love of God. For me, with my religious upbringing, it was an amazing journey. Slowly, I became acquainted with a God of grace, a tender and loving God.

The week I turned 28, I met Joleen. It wasn't long before we were married. Joleen loved me and also taught me how to love. She walked with me through personal growth, showing me how to forgive others and myself. She offered me patience, tenderness and forgiveness. We made a home and are fortunate to have a strong family with three wonderful daughters and two granddaughters. Two weeks ago, Joleen and I celebrated our 36th wedding anniversary.

Sometimes I look back and wonder, "Who was that guy?" Why'd that all happen to me?

I'm frequently reminded I wasn't the only kid to grow up scared. And today, when I hear about trafficked children or teenage moms in crisis or kids who can't learn in school because of the chaos at home, I want with every fiber in my being to intervene and make it better. And as a city, we can and we should.

It breaks my heart that we utterly fail to meet the urgent needs of so many people dealing with trauma, with sexual assault or with mental illness.

We too often turn a blind eye until something dramatic captures our attention—a mass shooting somewhere, a college professor stabbed to death in Pioneer Square, a neighbor undressing in the middle of the street. It is the shock of the unexpected that draws our attention.

Whether we know it or not, most of us have colleagues, friends, neighbors, or relatives who silently struggle with childhood trauma.

For people like me in my youth, traumatic experiences may start a downward spiral. That spiral might happen contemporaneously or it might start much later in life. What's important is that we recognize the cries for help, those signals that something is wrong, and respond with tenderness, love and respect.

I can stand here tonight and tell you that it's possible to break the terrifying hold of childhood trauma, to face it head on, to find healing. The people at Shepherd's Counseling Service do this good work.

So, we are not alone. In our courage to be vulnerable we find strength. We find others who lend support. We find ourselves, our true selves. And that's why it is so important to turn on the light and make sure it shines brightly forever . . . for me and for you.