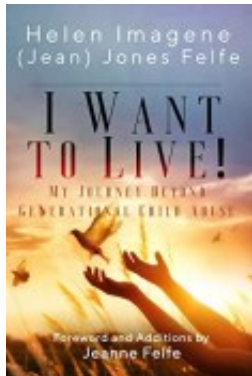


I Want To Live by Helen Imagene (Jean) Jones Felfe

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Sunday, March 05, 2023

<https://curmudgeon-alley.com/i-want-to-live-by-helen-imagene-jean-jones-felfe/>



This was an easy book to read. This was a hard book to read.

It was an easy book to read as it was well written. The first part of the book started off a little slow for me, but persevere, it picks up quickly. After reading the whole book those initial chapters almost seem written in a different style. Perhaps that was intentional. Once I got into the meat of the memoir I found it to be a real page turner. It was an easy book to read as there was much in there I could personally relate to. I know one of the characters in the book. Much of the book took place in Corpus Christi where I have relatives, and where one of my aunts and her husband raised their three children. At one point the author worked at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station where my uncle worked, albeit in different departments. My father was stationed in Corpus when he met my mother who was visiting her sister. The Papa in the story, the father of the author, was what the author called a tenant farmer. I imagine that to be the same or very similar to my mother's parents who were sharecroppers. Tenant farmer sounds less pejorative. Certainly the author's time of raising children matched my parent's child rearing years.

It was a hard book to read due to the subject matter. It deals with child abuse and mental illness, two subjects of which I have intimate acquaintance. The author spent a lifetime dealing with depression, suicide attempts, other mental health issues and being in and out of hospitals due to her depression/suicide attempts. Depression is something I can strongly relate to as it has changed the course of my life profoundly – more than once. Whether for the good or bad is hard to tell as there is no way to know what happened on the road not taken.

I was in my fifties until I really semi-labeled myself as an abused child, and then only after relating a bit of my history to a new romantic partner who took my story from the point of view of an educator . Hat trick. Nuff said. While I generally thought of the past incidences as just unpleasant occurrences in my life, when you exchange less than 100 words (most of those harsh) with one parent for a span of 15 years, they are more than unpleasant experiences . And my mother, not to excuse her but to explain, given the way my father worked (his job required a lot of travel), given my father's less than family oriented lifestyle, given that we usually lived far from potentially supportive relatives, there was an incredible amount of stress on her with five sons at home, three of those teenagers during the 60s. There is no doubt that child protective services should have/ could have been at our house...more than once. My attitude now

seems to be *eso es la vida... c'est la vie...* after all a crumbling cookie gathers no moss.

I do wonder, though, how my life would have been different if I had entered adulthood with a good self-image and especially with any self-confidence. Perhaps in one of those alternate universes that the more esoteric of the physicists go on about.

I will confess to being much less than a stellar parent myself. While there are many, many things I would change about my life, if I had to choose just one, it would be my parenting. Although one time, during a backpacking trip, I was sitting around a camp fire with my son and the subject of parenting/childhood came up. My comment was that I had been a very shitty parent. He replied, "You were not as bad as you think..." Well, maybe. I was never quite sure how to take that but perhaps as some solace.

All of that I just related was to say the book was very hard to read at points, tough subjects causing much remembrance and self reflection leading me to put it down to regroup a few times.

HOWEVER... the level of routine, ongoing physical and emotional child abuse experienced by the author and her siblings was off the chart. I do not know how these things were in the depression 30s, but today the children would have been removed from the home – and in all likelihood, permanently. I can almost imagine a parent doing the physical abuse occasionally under great stress, but as a routine practice? There are no words. There is certainly an argument here that the father was simply repeating the parenting practices he learned as a child. While there was a possibility of sexual abuse, the author was not clear on this point as she was not clear herself on whether it happened to her or not.

THEN... the author grows up, gets married and has children, perhaps too many, too fast, especially so given her lack of coping skills. She was deathly afraid she was going to repeat the abusive pattern of her childhood. Add to that the stresses of young married life, insufficient resources, a husband with difficulty communicating; it was the proverbial time bomb.

Another reason it was a hard book to read was because on one level it was a litany of bad encounters with the doctors and therapists. Doctors who failed to treat for finance reasons, or perhaps because the children of tenant farmers are the children of tenant farmers. Then as an adult the author had to deal with a health care system and insurance that pushed mental health problems to the bottom tier.

BUT... this is also a story of survival. It is a story of a woman struggling to find her way, to find her best self while fighting the demons within. We all have them, but for some of us an exorcism would not be out of order. The author despite many stumbles along the way, finally starting doing what she need to do to take care of herself, to protect her children from her demons wanting to relive the past or disrupt the present. She sought and did find some decent mental health care... by spells, by spells due to issues with the health care system and the home environment.

The author went back to school and received her degree. She started a Parents Anonymous (PA) group in Corpus Christi and chaired it for a time, and she became active in the larger PA program outside of her home town. In some ways this is a story of a child being thrown in a lake with a concrete block tied to her ankle, and yet managing to swim back to shore. Even if the author did not totally triumph in the end, the fact that she managed to stay alive, raise four children, get a degree and advocate for others in her situation is a triumphal story of survival – and hope.

Jean Felfe wrote this book many years ago, and tried very hard to get it published in the early 80s. Back then there were not a lot of options outside of the standard publishing avenues. No one wanted to touch a book about child abuse and depression from an unknown author. The fact that the book survives is a triumph of love by the author's husband and especially her daughter. They both watched as she wrote this book and tried desperately to get it published. While she wanted to burn the book and all her other writings due to her disappointments, they did not allow it.

Now after all this time the author's daughter, a writer in her own rights, has bought the book down off the shelf, breathed life back into it, and made it available to everyone. Another triumph.

While the subject matter is tough, it is a worthwhile read. I am betting the book's themes will resonate with more than a few readers. Both are issues that should see the light of day and be dealt with, but frequently remain in the family closet.

Jean Felfe's daughter, Jeanne Felfe, acted as editor (curator?) for the book. She also published it through the business she set up to publish her own endeavors. You can see all of Jeanne's books at her Amazon page: [Jeanne Felfe on Amazon](#). This book, both on Kindle and as a paperback, is also available on Amazon at: [I Want To Live](#).

Obviously this article turned into more than a book review as I tried to untangle the tripwire that suddenly became entangled around the ankles of my memory.

And so it goes...

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