

Wounded Souls

Director Kirby Dick exposes the psychic scars of abuse; TNT's *The Closer* and Fox's *The Inside* send their female sleuths deep into homicide's twisted grasp

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published: June 23, 2005

At the beginning of the HBO documentary *Twist of Faith: America Undercover*, which was nominated earlier this year for an Academy Award and gets its television debut this Tuesday, firefighter Anthony Comes gives a personal video tour of his Toledo, Ohio, firehouse — courtesy of a camera provided to him by director Kirby Dick. Comes obviously loves his job, and when he trains the camera on the iconic fire pole, he can still conjure the sentiment of what sliding down that pole on the way to risk and rescue means. “Every little kid’s dream,” he mutters off-camera. It’s the last acknowledgment of youthful hope Comes makes in the film, because as someone who was repeatedly abused sexually by a Catholic priest when he was a boy, Comes has become a man wracked with suspicion and bitterness. After moving his wife and two children into a beautiful home in a sought-after suburb, Comes discovered that his molester — who during the period of abuse routinely invited young boys for drunken weekends at his lakeside cottage — lived five doors down from his new house. After being informed by the bishop for the diocese that Comes was the only person to make such charges against the priest — who left the church in 1987 but is now a school dean and still around boys — the bishop later revealed to the press he’d been aware of allegations surrounding the priest for nearly 15 years. And with a daughter getting ready for her first communion, Comes is torn over which pressures will win out: being there for her as a father, or protesting an institution he may no longer believe in by refusing to attend. Throughout much of the intense coverage of the sex-abuse scandals rattling the Catholic Church through 2002 and since, outrage over obfuscation, unchecked power and delayed justice has been abundant. But a sense of the day-to-day torment of living with abuse has been woefully missing. In *Twist of Faith*, Dick — an experienced hand at documentary portraits from his films about masochist Bob Flanagan (Sick) and philosopher Jacques Derrida — shows us in agonizing yet respectful detail just what makes clergy abuse an especially torturous crime. As evidenced by what the Boston victims went through, church leaders never figured out that by covering up their protection of pedophile priests, they were keeping the wounds open. Before putting his name on a lawsuit, Comes had been able to function as a worker, husband and dad. But after going public, motivated by the unfolding events in Boston and around the country, we watch a guy slowly unraveling as his identity becomes that of a prickly, sullen abuse survivor. The startling thing about Dick’s film is how we can be utterly moved by Comes’ brokenness — the weight loss and the hollowed-out look in his eyes often tell all — but also understand where his devoted wife, Wendy, is coming

from when she reartuuy voices concerns for their marriage. Later, Comes picks a night with his supportive if emotionally reserved mother over her continued allegiance to the Catholic religion, but apart from some pointed views — in one scene he blurts out that the money she tithes is paying the lawyers that fight her son — the dispiriting realization is that Comes' unfocused anger is only adding to his deterioration. More than a few times, people refer to some future time when "it's all over," as if a settlement or public apology will magically make Comes' agony evaporate, his abuser's face disappear from his dreams. Dick makes it abundantly clear that there may not be an end, only the lingering question of how strong one's coping skills are. *Twist of Faith*, which showed here last week at the Los Angeles Film Festival, isn't out to stoke the fires of injustice, although the facts of the story do so with little embellishment. That kind of heated emotion cools all too easily in a culture hungry for the next headline-screaming scandal. What Dick is trying to do is chart the slow poisoning of a soul, to show you what Comes' scars look like, sound like and feel like. Although it makes the film at times unbearably sad, it also lends it an invigorating sense of purpose. And to that end, the use of self-operated cameras for the couple's more personal disclosures is inspired, a suitably unsubtle metaphoric flip side to what the church's confessional has come to signify: just more buried secrets.