

Violence Against Women: The Spiritual Dimension

Books on spiritual direction seldom talk about violence against women. Yet large numbers of women have personal experience of sexual and domestic violence. Even conservative estimates indicate how widespread violence is. Wife battering, rape, incest, and child abuse cut across all class, religious and color lines. Ntozake Shange conveys the magnitude of the problem in her poem, "With No Immediate Cause":

Every 3 minutes a woman is beaten
Every 5 minutes a woman is raped
Every ten minutes a little girl is molested

Statistics on the extent of such violence only scratch the surface, and do not include all the violence that goes unreported or forms of violence such as verbal abuse on the street, telephone harassment, and degrading media portrayals of women. Nor do statistics reflect the psychological abuse – criticisms, threats, humiliations – that occurs in relationships. Even for women who have so far not experienced it directly, the reality of sexual and domestic violence creates a climate of vulnerability and fear that all women must live with daily, a climate affecting all our relationships.

The topic of violence may surface in the spiritual direction context in any number of ways. Sometimes an experience in prayer, a movie, or a present relationship will trigger a long-buried memory of abuse. At times a session of storytelling with other women either evokes memories or finally provides a safe setting for recalling childhood abuse. I have also had women in spiritual direction who had already been through extensive therapy to heal the pain of wife battering or physical assault, but who were still dealing with dimensions of these experiences many years later. In other cases the violence is an immediate and current issue, as it was for one young woman who came to a spiritual direction session terribly shaken by the frightening and harassing phone calls she had been getting from a man who was a casual acquaintance.

While issues related to violence may surface in many ways in spiritual direction, they may also fail to arise for a number of reasons. It takes time for women even to realize and remember some forms of violence; violence against women has been taken for granted by our culture for so long that women themselves have taken it for granted. Women may not be aware that it has an impact on their spirituality. They may carry a sense of shame and guilt about an experience that makes them fearful that rejection and judgment will result if they reveal it. A spiritual director's lack of awareness or denial of the pervasiveness of sexual and domestic violence sometimes prevents the director from listening well when a woman alludes to the topic. We miss what she is trying to say or inadvertently deliver the message that such incidents are not really important, or are too delicate to talk about. The fact is they are extremely important because of the deep and lasting impact they have made, and they must be talked about if the woman is to be healed.

The reality of violence strongly influences our spirituality as women. As the silence surrounding this issue continues to life, more of us will be exploring the religious dimensions of violence in spiritual direction. In this chapter we will look first at some of the issues which violence raises, and then at some paths to healing which spiritual direction can facilitate. A final section will examine nonviolence as an option for women.

VIOLENCE: THE SPIRITUAL ISSUES

Sexual and domestic violence has a profound effect on a woman's relationship with herself, with others, and with God. Since all three relationships are central to her spirituality, it is important to understand the religious issues inherent in each.

1. *Feelings of Shame and Guilt*

A woman who planned to tell her spiritual director that she was sexually abused by her brother when she was a child arrived at the session with a bouquet of flowers. She was feeling such shame and guilt that she feared her spiritual director would almost certainly reject her once he knew the truth about her. Women are accustomed to bearing responsibility for relationships. When violence occurs, their first response may be to wonder what they did to bring it about. Feelings of shame often prevent them from even talking about it.

A sister who was raped, in trying to tell her community how they might be helpful in such instances, describes a rape victim's reaction.

Almost immediately she feels a sense of guilt. The guilt is her irrational way of asserting that of course she did have some power-so she must have had some responsibility. No matter how incapable the woman is to prevent the experience, she almost inevitable feels that she should somehow have prevented it. The guilt is like a refrain that replays in her mind, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She may not be able to tell anyone why, or even that the feelings of guilt are present. A religious woman probably knows how irrational they are. But they are one more aspect of powerlessness: a thought pattern over which she has not control.

This tendency to feel responsible is reinforced by our cultural pattern of blaming the victim. This is often the attitude of police departments. It is also very much alive in the churches, where the implied or explicit question is, "What did she do to cause it?"

The experience of shame and guilt takes many forms in the lives of women who experience violence. Looking back on an experience of child abuse, for example, they may now think that they should have known what was happening or how to stop it. Women who experience sexual harassment from men in work situations wonder if they are too warm and friendly, or if they are dressed too attractively.

These feelings of shame and guilt may be accompanied by intense anger and then discomfort with the anger. The anger can increase her feelings of guilt if a woman believes that her Christian faith calls on her to forgive her enemy, and she cannot bring herself to forgive the person who has injured her so. In her book on *Battered Wives*, Del Martin shares a letter from a battered wife who describes her efforts to seek help.

I did. Early in our marriage I went to a clergyman who, after a few visits, told me that my husband meant no real harm, that he was just confused and felt insecure. I was encouraged to be more tolerant and understanding. Most important, I was told to forgive him the beatings just as Christ had forgiven me from the cross. I did that, too.

Christian teachings on forgiveness can increase the emotional pain of survivors of violence unless it is made clear that forgiveness does not mean allowing things to go on as before. Since forgiveness is not a solitary action but a gesture of grace in relationships, the shape it takes often depends on justice being enacted against the offender, and evidence of repentance on the part of the person who has

injured the woman. This is presupposed when Marie Fortune describes what the act of forgiveness finally means.

I will no longer allow this experience to dominate my life. I will not let it continue to make me feel bad about myself. I will not let it limit my ability to love and trust others in my life. I will not let my memory of the experience continue to victimize and control me.

Such an approach allows us to move beyond the pain and make a new beginning.

2. *Violated Integrity*

Experiences of violence damage a woman's sense of physical and spiritual integrity. Her body has been invaded against her will, used as an object by another, or injured by someone she trusted to care for her. She may have feelings of being unclean or needing to wash. She often feels worthless and used. Because of our body/spirit unity, violence is a deep violation of a woman's personal integrity or wholeness. She knows firsthand how fragile her person and her world are.

This sense that violence and violation disturb the order of the universe is also inherent in the archaic meaning of these words, which define them as "desecration". These ancient meanings need to be brought more forcefully before our "modern" minds as we consider rape as a spiritual crisis: The experience of victims suggests that the integrity of the body is sacred. Rape demeans precisely that which we ought most fully to cherish.

The approach to healing must seek to restore a woman's feelings of wholeness and of control over her own person and life.

Violence not only affects personal integrity; it takes a terrible toll on our ability to relate to others. It threatens a woman's sense that she is lovable and can ever be loved. Moreover, being so betrayed in a relationship with someone she knows makes it very difficult for a woman to trust others, especially men. She experiences the world and relationships with others as radically unsafe. It takes a long time to work through these fears.

3. *A Crisis of Faith and Trust in God*

One of the contributors to *I Never told Anyone, Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* prefaces her account by saying that if she could give another title to her story, it would be "Why." Violence is an encounter with the power of evil in the world. Such suffering is not random or abstract, but an experience of evil directed against our person. It threatens a woman's trust in God and raises many faith questions: Was this somehow God's will? Where was God when I was so in need? How could God love me and let me go through this? Is this suffering a punishment for the sinfulness in my life? What kind of a world is this? Answering these questions on a personal level is part of healing. It means moving from feeling abandoned and alone to a sense of God's spirit with us.

Rape, battering, and child sexual abuse are life-threatening, death-dealing experiences. Women who go through them fear for their physical safety and feel they may die. Even when the threat of physical death is not immediate, survivors of such experiences find parts of themselves closing off or dying. Such encounters with loss and death create grief, and the healing experience is in most of its dimensions one of grieving. There may be dreams and flashbacks of the experience, a mixture of strong emotions, and anger at God for allowing such a thing to happen. A betrayal of trust is experienced in the relationship with God as well as in other relationships.

PATHS TO HEALING

We have looked briefly at some of the spiritual dimensions of sexual and domestic violence. While keeping in mind the fact that each woman's situation will be different, there are a number of ways in which spiritual companions can support the healing process.

1. Listening with Love

This is, of course, what spiritual friendship is all about. Yet it needs to be emphasized again in relation to women and violence. One of the principal ways in which spiritual companions assist the healing process is by being present to the person in her pain, listening to her story, and offering her unqualified love and acceptance. Survivors of sex abuse may need repeated assurances that they are not guilty; they were victimized. Likewise, battered women need reassurance that they did not deserve the beatings, even if they did something their partner did not like; that is no excuse for the beatings. Such love and listening affirms again the woman's worth and value, and helps her regain a sense of her own identity and power. It provides her with a supportive presence while she develops her own strength.

A spiritual companion can also help by expressing her personal outrage at the suffering the woman has experienced, as well as her fears in face of the potential for such violence in her own life. Honest recognition of our common vulnerability lessens a woman's sense that she is isolated and set apart by her experience of violence. A very effective form of spiritual companionship is found, for example, in shelters for battered women where they can gather around a kitchen table for coffee and tell their stories to one another. They gather new strength from common courage and find their humanity affirmed by women who have known similar pain.

The spiritual direction relationship itself is key here. By providing consistent, non-judgmental caring, an individual or group enables a woman to rebuild her capacity for trust. One young woman was in spiritual direction several years after being badly beaten by her husband. The experience had left her doubting that she could ever love or be loved again. Telling her story and being affirmed in her goodness was an important aspect of her healing process. It supported her in her struggle to reconstitute her world and her relationships.

2. Exploring the Religious Issues

Help for the religious crisis created by experiences of violence does not consist primarily in providing theological answers, although these can be useful and freeing. It lies rather in accompanying the woman through the death/resurrection passage to her own answers. Spiritual guides are there to facilitate the process as God brings about healing. Nevertheless, along the way we may suggest resources for prayer or reflection, or provide alternative ways of viewing theological truths. The healing process should bring a deepening conviction for the woman that God is on her side and the side of life and wholeness, not on the side of the violence.

In "Where Was God?" Louise Garrison describes how in her journey of healing from the experience of incest she gradually found her way through feelings of being abandoned by God. She says that she had searched her soul in its depths for an answer to the question, "Where was God When I needed God most?" In that search she found, she says, a new freedom that comes from experiencing God

I have found the answer. My answer came from the crucified Christ as he cried out in his passion from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" "Surely a God who has such mercy and such love would not let a son die on the cross, even if we are sinners. I, a mere mortal with limited capabilities for love, would more heaven and earth and fight with all my being for the life of my son. If God's love is greater than ours, why wasn't the son saved?"

Scripture tells us in Matthew 27:40 that the chief priest, lawyers, and elders asked the same question. Even the bandits who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way. Jesus died a broken man-mocked by his accusers, betrayed by his disciple, and denied by one of his closest friends. Jeered at, spit at, taunted, ridiculed, and laughed at. But God had the last word, because Jesus overcame every earthly affliction. No matter what the abuse, the message God has given us in the resurrection is that coercive power never works; it only destroys. God has the final word, and that word is Life.

In struggling to answer questions such as Garrison's "Where was God?" it is helpful to reflect with the person on God's relationship to evil. It is not God who sends us suffering, even for our good. But God cannot prevent all evil in a world of free agents. When tragedy strikes, we find the presence and activity of God grieving with us in the pain and working with us to try to redeem it.

Another woman told me about a similar experience in coming to the realization that God could be a force for healing and hope in her life.

I was the victim of sexual abuse in my family growing up. I did not deal with this and after nineteen years of stuffing (my emotions) I was diagnosed with cancer of the cervix. I began to seek help for the pain in my heart. Slowly, inch by inch, I began to let the pain out and God in.

After healing prayer and conversion I went to an assault center for women molested as children. In prayer the day of going to the center I heard Isaiah 54 in my mind: "Do not be afraid, you will not be put to shame, do not be dismayed, you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth." My God had spoken to me, gifting me with this passage. Therefore, there is a God who is good and wants me healed.

What is at stake in the experience of violence is not so much abstract ideas about God, but trust in a relationship with God, but trust in a relationship with God. Inadequate notions of God's will and of God's relation to evil and suffering can block this relationship, and it is helpful to clear them away. But finally it is a matter of helping the woman find the existential answer, as Job did, in an experience of God's healing presence. Healing the wounds of violence is a resurrection experience. The wounds remain, but they can be transformed into a new kind of wholeness as a woman discovers new strengths within herself and her relationships.

3. Suggesting New Ways of Reading Biblical Passages

Women with violent partners may believe that the bible supports the subordinate position of women in the family and decrees that a wife be subject to her husband. How can they free themselves from such situations and still feel they are being true to what the bible commands? They need help in seeing that the bible is on their side and does not support battering and violence against women. Unfortunately, they may have heard from pulpits and bible groups that the husband is the head of the household and the wife's duty is to submit and obey. The inferior position of women in the family is presented as divinely ordained.

Passages frequently used to reinforce such a view are the Genesis depictions of creation and the fall, and sections of epistles such as 1 Timothy 2:12-14 and 1 Corinthians 11:8. Ephesians 5:22-24 is an especially influential passage, made all the more so by its frequent inclusion in the marriage liturgy itself.

Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife. As the Church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Such readings make the subjection of a woman to her husband seem just and sacred. Her duty is to bear with him in patience. For Catholic women, this is reinforced by the prohibition against divorce, which leads to a belief that marriage and the family should be preserved at all costs.

Learning to see these biblical passages in a new way is part of the healing process for battered women. There are several aspects to this new reading:

- a. *Situating these writings in their cultural context.* This means accepting the human authorship and cultural conditioning of the bible. Elisabeth Fiorenza has shown, for example, that the prescriptions for domestic order found in Colossians 3:18-25, 1 Peter 2:11-3:12, and Ephesians 5:21-33 are based on the patriarchal arrangements found in late first century Greco-Roman households with their hierarchy of husband, wife, children, slaves. In order to reduce tensions between Christians and pagan society, the authors of these epistles advocate adopting this patriarchal order, even though such subordination is at variance with Jesus' vision of community, which is founded on a discipleship of equals.
- b. *Highlighting biblical passages which call for mutual love, respect, and care.* The Song of Songs conveys a vision of relationships in which there is mutual love and respect between woman and man. Galatians 3:28 declares that in the Christian community there is a new pattern of relationships, where differences are no longer to lead to dominance and subordination, as they do in patriarchal marriage.

All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This concern for the full dignity of persons applies to male and female relationships, and calls for mutual love and respect in marriage.

- c. *Sharing the results of current research on problematic passages.* Such study has been especially helpful with the Genesis stories. It shows, for example, that the creation account in Genesis 1 implies no inferiority of woman. God creates humanity immediately as male and female.

God said, "Let us make humanity in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea."...God created humanity in the image of himself, in the image of God he created it, male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27).

The creation story in Genesis 2 has come down to us as the Adam and Eve story, with its image of woman coming from man's rib and its overtones of male superiority. Phyllis Trible has done a penetrating analysis of this story in which she shows that the relationship of this first couple is actually one of mutuality and equality, not one of female subordination. Both originate from God, and are given to one another as equal partners.

Other sections of the bible may need to be discussed with battered women. Their importance depends on the power they have in a woman's faith life. Approaching key biblical passages in a new way

assures a woman in a battering situation that she can preserve her faith and yet take the action she needs to protect and heal herself and her family.

4. Assisting with Cleansing and Healing Rituals

Women turn to rituals to help them with the long and painful process of recovery from violence. Because ritual reaches us on all levels, it touches our emotions and restores a sense of bodily integrity. It is also a way of making tangible the support of a faith community. Moreover, ritual allows us to reclaim a time and space that have been taken from us by the experience of violence.

For all these reasons, women choose to have some kind of celebration or ritual on the anniversary of the event. One woman was assaulted in the kitchen of her home. Each year on that date she invites a group of friends to celebrate a kitchen supper with her. Another woman marks the date with a ceremony of lighting candles and praying with friends as a way of continuing to ward off the darkness and affirm the greater power of light in her life. In *Sexual Violence. The Unmentionable Sin*, Marie Fortune gives several helpful examples of the role of ritual in facilitating the healing process. One is a very simple ritual of cleansing.

A woman who had been raped realized that she felt somehow stained by the assault. It was not that she felt dirty or stigmatized by the sexual contact *per se*. Rather, in the violation of her person, she felt that something had been put on her which she could not cast off. So she decided that she wanted to experience some form of ritual cleansing in order to be cleansed of the violation. She sought the help of a woman minister friend who suggested that she gather her close friends and then use water to wash away the stain of violation.

Like the minister in this account, spiritual friends may be called on to help create a ritual or to be present at one. Reflecting in the context of spiritual direction on the symbols and actions she wishes to make a part of the ritual is one way for a woman to clarify the meaning the experience holds for her. Women may also want to create a ritual to express their solidarity with the victims of violence throughout the world, or to express the pain that comes from living with the many forms of indirect violence and the constant threat of violence.

5. Healing of Memories

For some women it is helpful to do guided work in the healing of memories around experiences of violence. Women are usually not helped by this if the experience is a recent one, or if the emotional pain is still very strong and is being explored for the first time. It can, however, help with memories of long standing which have been dealt with in therapy but still continue to interfere with a woman's present peace and prayer. Women generally know quite instinctively whether such an approach is well timed and appropriate for what they are going through.

Such healing work has three steps.

- a. The woman is helped to relax through deep breathing or other guided exercises.
- b. The spiritual director invites her to return to the memory, entering into the scene again, along with the feelings it produced. Then she is invited to have Jesus or another healing figure come upon the scene. The woman watches what the healing figure does, listens to what he or she says and interacts as she feels moved while the experience unfolds. She can do all this in the privacy of her inner space, or she can share the experience step by step with her director as it unfolds. The latter approach enables the director to offer occasional suggestions, such as: "Just stay there a few moments, really taking that (good experience) in"; or "Tell Jesus (or the healing figure) about the fear or distress you are feeling and see what he says." Some women

prefer that the healer be a woman, such as Mary of Nazareth or Mary Magdalene, rather than Jesus. This gives them a greater sense of comfort and understanding.

- c. The woman and the director process the experience after its conclusion, exploring its meanings. This tells them, among other things, whether the work is done or should be repeated again next meeting. If the woman has had a profound religious experience, the director can suggest that she keep bringing it back into her prayer in the weeks to follow.

6. Providing Referrals and Practical Support

If a spiritual companion is the person a woman trusts most, she may break through her fear and talk for the first time with this person about the violence she is now experiencing or has experienced in the past. Depending on the situation, she may need immediate help to protect herself and assure her safety and that of her children. This may mean calling the police or a crisis line. She may also need therapy or a support group. In such instances the spiritual director needs to know how to call on the resources of the community, how to refer the woman to specialists who have the kind of expertise she needs. This means that spiritual directors need to investigate and have information on hand on the resources available in their areas.

7. Working Against Violence Toward Women

In earlier chapters I have described spiritual directions as a prophetic ministry. As such, it involves a commitment to making God's promise of wholeness and liberation a reality. Women who have survived violence themselves often choose to become actively involved in the struggle to end violence: Marching in demonstrations such as Women Take Back the Night; leading groups for battered or abused women; working for education programs in churches.

Spiritual guides must also be committed to making the world a safer place for women. They do this by refusing to perpetuate the dominance/submission model of relationships and by pressing for new roles, structures and symbol systems for male/female relationships. They may find other ways, too, to help end the cycle of violence in human life.

NONVIOLENCE AND WOMEN

Many Christian women are drawn to nonviolence as a means of bringing about social change. As these women grow in their awareness of women's issues, they may need to integrate this feminist consciousness with their commitment to nonviolence. Spiritual direction can be a good setting for doing this. This process of integration can be framed in terms of two questions.

1. How can we bring about a new world without using violence ourselves?

While women want to discard their traditional passivity, they do not want to adopt traditional male violence. A central conviction of feminism is that all forms of violence and oppression are interrelated. This conviction is based on a recognition of the fundamental interconnectedness of all of life and a rejection of the principle of domination and subjugation. War, racism, and sexism are all part of the same fabric of violence. Hence women in the peace movement are disturbed when a hierarchy of kinds of violence is established, and women's concerns are considered less important than other forms of violence. Work for peace cannot ignore the threat of violence aimed at women on a daily basis. The elimination of any form of violence weakens its hold on all other areas.

Nonviolence is a way of transforming relationships. This is due in great part to its power to simultaneously accept and reject; it enables us to acknowledge and connect with what is valuable in a person while at the same time resisting and challenging a person's oppressive attitudes and behavior. As Barbara Deming says,

In this form of struggle we address ourselves both to that which we refuse to accept from others and that which we have in common with them – however much or little that may be.

Gandhi's program for nonviolence included both "ahimsa" – action based on the refusal to do harm, because we love and respect the personhood of the enemy – and "noncooperation" – action based on the belief that power is kept in place by cooperation and can be broken by the refusal of persons to be subjected any longer. Theories of nonviolence help women find a way to offer respect for persons while at the same time refusing to cooperate in injustice. We can be angry while refusing to destroy.

2. *How do we advocate nonviolence without lapsing into a weak passivity?*

The stereotype of women is that they are passive and weak, while men are active and strong. Women therefore fear that nonviolence may be too well suited to them, and may perpetuate this stereotype. In light of this danger, a woman's commitment to non-violence must be based on a rejection of passivity and a strong sense of her own value as a human being. Nonviolence, as those who are students of Gandhi know, is not a submissive or passive attitude toward oppression and violence. It is an attitude of resistance to oppression and a commitment to the struggle for freedom for oneself and all others. Gandhi's term "satyagraha" means truth force. It implies an assertive, positive stand, one which relies on the strength of truth rather than on physical force.

Training in nonviolence must be grounded in spiritual development and empowerment of the self. When a person is so empowered, she will not accept her own degradation or that of others. Women find that they can live out their commitment to nonviolence better when they know how to stand up for and defend themselves, and when they are able to affirm their own feeling, thinking and speaking. In this way they can both maintain respect and extend it to others.

I hope these reflections on issues of violence and nonviolence have confirmed their importance for women's spirituality today. As the silence surrounding sexual and domestic violence continues to life, more women will be exploring its spiritual dimensions in spiritual direction. This in turn will expand our future understanding of the role spiritual friendship can play in healing the effects of such violence.