

11-25-2002

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### Recommended Citation

Penner, Carol (2002) "Sexual Assault, Resurrection and the Healing Community," *Consensus*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss2/6>

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## **Sexual Assault, Resurrection and the Healing Community**

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The woman struggled to find words to describe her experience. Twenty years earlier as a teenager she had been sexually assaulted by a group of men. She wanted to describe the effect this event had on her life. Finally she said, "I felt like they had stolen my soul." What does health mean for women who have been sexually assaulted?<sup>1</sup> Certainly, health encompasses more than the recovery of the physical body from the attack. Survivors can feel alienated from their own bodies, their community and their faith. Healing is a complex journey that involves reclaiming that which has been lost or damaged. In this paper, I explore how faith communities can help or hinder the healing journey of survivors of sexual assault. I discuss the connection between sexuality and spirituality, and how sexual assault can be a spiritual issue. Then, I suggest how faith communities can either isolate survivors, or stand in solidarity with them.

### **Sexuality, Spirituality and Abuse**

There is a growing body of literature that discusses the connection between sexuality and spirituality. James Nelson's work typifies the thinking of many writers: "The mystery of sexuality is the mystery of the human need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. Sexuality thus expresses God's intention that people find authentic humanness not in isolation but in relationship...."<sup>2</sup> Nelson suggests that our sexuality is intrinsic to our relationship with God.<sup>3</sup> There is also a body of literature, primarily feminist, that explores the theological implications of sexual assault and abuse. Assault threatens the survivor's "capacity to reach out, to trust, to respond to another, to experience pleasure."<sup>4</sup> Feminist literature explores the implications this has for faith. It contextualizes sexual assault within the broader gamut of sexism, and critiques the patriarchal structures in our society that perpetuate violence against women. This literature also suggests how healing can happen for survivors.

It is significant that these two bodies of literature are generally quite separate. Curiously, the books that celebrate the close connection between sexuality and spirituality, rarely mention sexual assault. Similarly, theologies written more specifically about assault or abuse issues, do not usually refer to writers who are exploring sexuality and spirituality.

This bifurcation may have to do with the understanding that sexual assault is not primarily a sexual act, but rather an abuse of power. Feminists have taken great pains to emphasize that rape is not about sex or lust, but rather is an issue of power and domination.<sup>5</sup> Sexuality is the tool used, but the primary issue is power. This emphasis was needed because, for too long, rape was simply seen as “sexual relations without consent”. (One author points out how bizarre this definition is by saying that one would never talk about theft as “gift giving without consent” or murder as “assisted suicide without consent”).<sup>6</sup> However, having established that rape is a power issue, the fact is that being sexually assaulted brings with it different issues than other types of physical assault.

Speaking theologically, one could characterize the positive sexuality/spirituality writers as dwelling on incarnational themes. Our physical bodies are a part of God’s good gift of life. Those who discuss sexual assault and abuse are on the crucifixion end of the theological spectrum, dealing with the effects of evil on our vulnerable bodies. I suggest that these two streams of thought could profitably interact. It makes sense that, when one speaks of the sacredness of our bodies, one should also discuss what happens when the sacred is violated. Conversely, when discussing violation one needs to have a clear understanding of the sacred. Certainly Jesus’ own life suggests that both the incarnation and crucifixion need to be held in creative tension.

What happens when our bodies are exploited and abused against our will? The abuse of Jesus’ physical body provoked a spiritual crisis for him. Being tortured on the cross Jesus cried out, “Father, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34) One theologian comments:

Jesus articulated for suffering humanity, and especially for the victim of assault that strikes at the fundamental integrity of body and spirit, the cry of one who could see neither meaning nor hope in the depths of pain.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' words on the cross have been the source of much theological speculation. Some theologians suggest that, with these words, Jesus was remembering God's faithfulness, quoting from Psalm 22 that speaks not only of despair, but also of God's deliverance. Other theologians admit Jesus felt despair, but suggest that this was the result of bearing the spiritual weight of all the sins of the world. The text, simply read, suggests that in extreme pain, Jesus felt forsaken. This is the experience of many people who have been sexually assaulted.

Assault can be a life-shattering experience. Three different survivors speak about their experience:

"I am not the same person who set off, singing, on that sunny Fourth of July in the French countryside. I left her—and her trust, her innocence, her *joie de vivre*—in a rocky creek bed at the bottom of a ravine."<sup>8</sup>

"Being raped changed my life—it changed me—more than anything I have experienced before or since. I saw myself change from a relatively independent, adventuresome woman to what felt like a raw bundle of nerves and fears."<sup>9</sup>

"My world had been crushed.... I felt emotionally ruined. I knew. I knew what horror and hate were. The transition from basketball and cheerleading to horror and hate happened in one split second."<sup>10</sup>

An experience of assault or abuse changes the way a woman lives in the world. Ruth Krall uses the terms 'pre-rape world' and 'post-rape world' to describe this phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

Many women who experience sexual assault suffer from post-traumatic stress. A characteristic of trauma is that:

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion.<sup>12</sup>

People experiencing trauma such as earthquake or war, at least inhabit a common shattered world with other survivors. Survivors of sexual assault deal with the destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who do not understand what is happening to them.<sup>13</sup>

Survivors may feel alone but, unfortunately, they are sharing an experience that is common to many women. Health Canada's 1993 survey on Violence Against Women surveyed over 12,000 women. The survey asked about sexual attacks, "Has a stranger, date or boyfriend, spouse or other man ever forced you or attempted to force you into any sexual activity by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way?" The answer was that 24% of the women surveyed had experienced a sexual attack, 42% of the group reporting that they had experienced it more than once.<sup>14</sup> These numbers are high and they suggest that in every faith community there are women who are healing from this type of violence.

In a very real way rape is a confrontation with the forces of death. "When rape survivors are interviewed, they generally report being afraid for their lives—even if no additional physical violence or use of weapons accompanied the rape."<sup>15</sup> While physically alive, survivors of sexual assault are faced with the prospect of struggling out from under the forces of death. In a metaphorical way, they must experience resurrection. They must reclaim the hope, and the meaning for living, as well as the confidence to connect to other human beings. Judith Herman suggests that the strongest antidote to the traumatic experience is the solidarity of a group around the survivor. "Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging."<sup>16</sup> Christians have been commissioned to go out and spread the gospel or good news of Christ's resurrection, his returning to life after a humiliating and painful death. How can Christian communities spread this good news of resurrection to survivors of sexual assault?

### **No News is Bad News**

Think back to the last time your faith community prayed for survivors of sexual assault. If your congregation is similar to most others, you probably can't remember praying about this. Churches have largely been silent on the issue of sexual assault. This silence means that sexual assault is not recognized as a reality, neither specifically in terms of survivors in the pews, nor generally in terms of a societal problem. This silence means that the congregation does not mobilize itself to help

survivors, neither individually, nor generally through supporting rape crisis centers. This silence means that sermons and Christian educational curricula for children, youth, or adults, never discuss how sexual assault affects our faith. I will suggest four reasons for this silence.

The first reason that comes to mind for most people in explaining this silence, but not necessarily the most important reason, is that Christian churches are uncomfortable discussing anything to do with sexuality. In most Christian churches puberty, pregnancy, childbirth<sup>17</sup> and menopause go unnoticed. These are seen, at best, as private matters that are not to be discussed in public, or at worst, as something unclean or shameful. Sexual assault is just one of a variety of sensitive issues that people avoid in the church. Many writers have documented the historical development of negative attitudes towards sexuality in Christian theology; these attitudes can be present in conscious and unconscious ways.

Secondly, the church may shy away from speaking of sexual assault because it is an experience that provokes strong emotions and difficult theological questions. Survivors experience terror, rage and despair, not to mention nightmares and flashbacks. "We who have a strongly articulated theology of salvation sometimes find it unbearable not to be able to save another person in anguish, danger, or despair."<sup>18</sup> The words of rape victims shock us, the questions they have shake up our comfortable faith; theological answers flee from us in the face of suffering. Listen to the words of one survivor of sexual assault: *when evildoers draw near to me in war, to gorge my flesh...my heart will not be afraid.*

'My heart will not be afraid' -- this does not make any sense. Evildoers are going to gorge my flesh; they are going to rip, tear, eat, puncture, burn my tender flesh with knives, guns, with violent words—and my heart is not going to be afraid? If it beats it fears. Even shock does not totally numb.

Evildoers did gorge my flesh. And my heart, my soul, my mind, my body, my spirit were all afraid. All trembled, shook, and looked straight into the eyes of two men to promised to 'fuckin' kill me' if I didn't do what they said.

Only people who have never seen, who don't know, can listen to the text as it is because, if you know, you know it is not true.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than face difficult questions and intense emotions, it is easier to walk on by these survivors.

Thirdly, the church may feel no responsibility to speak of sexual assault because it is seen as an individual tragedy with private psychological consequences. The community may feel that there is little it could do anyway since healing must happen inside the person, likely with the support of a professional counsellor.

We tend to place the responsibility for emotional well-being on the parent-child dyad, the therapist-client dyad, and the I-Thou dyad of personalistic faith metaphors. In the process we exempt the community and society from responsibility for growth and healing.<sup>20</sup>

Rape victims speak of the isolation they feel as friends and family avoid them after the assault; people feel that they do not have a role to play in a survivor's healing journey.<sup>21</sup>

The final, perhaps most significant reason, is that people do not want to admit that we live in a world where sexual assault happens and very little is done about it. "They cannot allow themselves to imagine the victim's shattered life, or else their illusions about their own safety and control over their own lives might begin to crumble."<sup>22</sup> It is easier for the church to think of sexual assault as an aberration or tragic accident that can be ignored, than to examine the forces of sexism in our society, including our churches, that perpetuate conditions that lead to violence against women.

In my own denominational tradition this avoidance of addressing structural issues is starkly seen in the experiences of Mennonite refugees during the Second World War. Many women were raped by soldiers. After the war, some churches took a negative view of these female survivors, implicitly suggesting that they should have chosen death rather than submit; "The problem of remembering wartime rape, particularly when it involved a woman's active choice of survival for herself and her children, was intensified when juxtaposed against the Mennonite

community's standards of morality."<sup>23</sup> These rapes were not placed within the context of war and violence against women, but instead were seen as personal sexual issues. The result was that women kept the stories hidden, and the community pretended that no violation had occurred.

There are many possible reasons for silence in the church on the matter of sexual assault. Silence is not neutral. It carries a strong message to the survivor. Churches are a place where people are challenged to speak of their lives in the context of their faith tradition. If sexual assault is not part of the discussion, then survivors infer that good Christians don't have problems with sexual violence. Speaking from the evangelical tradition, Andy Smith writes about the dangers of denial:

Because women trust evangelical men and assume they would never think of assaulting someone, they often ignore obvious warning signs....Evangelical women often think to themselves afterward that, since evangelical men do not assault, then what happened to them could not have been an assault. They must have asked for it in some way.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of the silence of the church, survivors may feel that the assault was an aberration, or perhaps a freak occurrence of their own making. They will be more likely to try to submerge the assault into their unconscious because they cannot determine how to incorporate it into their faith narrative.

Alternatively, the silence of the church about sexual assault can alienate the survivor from her community. If, in sharing their stories, survivors meet blank faces, they can feel re-victimized: "...it can be re-traumatizing when people refuse to listen. In my case, each time someone failed to respond, I felt as though I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or, worse, they heard me but refused to help."<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Fiorenza sums up the implications of this denial:

As long as Christian theology and pastoral practice do not publicly repent their collusion in sexual, domestic, and political violence against women and children, the victims of such violence are forced to choose between remaining a victim and remaining a Christian.<sup>26</sup>

Some survivors leave the church because staying and being ignored is too painful. The silence that the survivor meets at church is significant in and of itself, but it is compounded by many other layers of denial and minimization in our culture. Her family system, the examining doctor, police officers, the lawyers, the judge; all these may deny the survivor's experience of suffering. Given this context, the church's silence can be the unkindest cut of all.

### **Some News is Bad News**

For survivors who do not face silence from their congregation, the response they do get is less than helpful. Rather than admitting that sexual violence can happen to any woman, some people can implicitly blame the victim for the assault. "The most well-meaning individuals, caught up in the myth of their own immunity, can inadvertently add to the victim's suffering by suggesting that the attack was avoidable or somehow her fault."<sup>27</sup>

It is very tempting to provide quick theological answers to enormous questions that survivors carry. Sexual assault can bring us face to face with the problem of theodicy. A bad thing has happened to a good person, and we don't understand why God let that happen. In the face of these difficult questions sometimes Christians give easy or glib answers; "Some devout relatives were quick to give God all the credit for my survival but none of the blame for what I had to endure. Others acknowledged the suffering that had been inflicted on me, but as no more than a blip on the graph of God's benevolence—a necessary, fleeting evil, there to make possible an even greater show of good."<sup>28</sup> Churches seem unwilling to sit with survivors as they ask difficult questions.

### **Good News is Good News**

Faith communities can provide a message of resurrection to survivors who have been hurt by sexual assault. Some ways are presented. The church can become a place where sexual assault is acknowledged as a reality in our society and in our churches. This will mean that prayers will be said for survivors of assault. Sermons and bible studies will address the many biblical passages that speak of assault; struggling with the sexism that sometimes pervades the text. Addressing sexism is integral because sexual assault can sensitize survivors to all forms of sexism. "Rape, as a cultural form, reminds women that

submission to the authority of men is seen as an essential aspect of women's existence in patriarchal societies."<sup>29</sup> Survivors can find it difficult to deal with street harassment, obscene phone calls, the objectifying of women in media and advertising, and sexist language.<sup>30</sup> They may find it difficult to deal with sexism in the church, such as male dominated leadership, male language for God, or silence about the reality of sexual assault.

People in the church who identify with survivors will become sensitized to sexism. In terms of worship, leaders will be sensitive to patriarchal language and imagery:

In concrete terms, this means that we can use language that does not exclude women and other oppressed groups or perpetuate stereotypes. We can ask ourselves as we prepare sermons, prayers, and religious education materials: How would this particular statement sound to the ears of someone who has been abused?<sup>31</sup>

In terms of leadership and power, the church will be careful to examine its own structures, to insure that women and men are equal partners.

The message of resurrection will be manifested in concrete steps to help survivors. A local rape crisis centre might be regularly supported by a congregation; members could be encouraged to volunteer there. Churches will acknowledge that bad things can happen even in church buildings; policies that protect vulnerable children from assault will be instituted. This could include screening volunteers who work with children, or structural changes such as installing windows on doors. Cooper White suggests "...a congregation that is educated and sensitized is a powerful witness to the larger themes that affect the survivor's life. Just having such a context, even if not one word of her individual story is ever told, can be tremendously healing."<sup>32</sup>

As survivors walk their healing journey, they may share their stories with people that they trust in the faith community. If this happens, confidentiality will be respected. The story belongs to the survivor and must be respected. People who walk alongside the survivor will understand that resurrection is not a miraculous one-time event, but a gradual coming to life that takes hard work and patience on the part of

the community as well as the individual. Faith communities can provide immediate help to survivors by acknowledging the assault and allowing the survivor to say what kind of help they would like. Financial support for counseling or lost workdays could be offered. Child-care, food preparation, help with housework; all of the support that is usually extended to people in crisis would now be extended to people who have been assaulted. Rituals such as healing services could be planned, either in small group or congregational settings depending on the wishes of the survivor.<sup>33</sup>

Another issue (but not addressed here because of length) is how the congregation responds to people who have committed sexual assault. This is an extremely important issue, since healing for the survivor includes justice making, and in many instances both the person who has assaulted and the survivor are in the same congregation. Unfortunately, most of the books that deal with survivor issues, do not address how a congregation can minister to people who have committed assault.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, this is an area that needs further work. If the church truly wants to be a healing environment for those who have been sexually assaulted, it must be willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with them. It must confront the roots of violence.<sup>35</sup> James Nelson suggests that:

Salvation, in its original meaning, is healing. It is the reuniting of what has been torn apart and estranged. It is the recovery of a center and a wholeness in that which has been split asunder. It is the overcoming of alienation within the body self, between the person and the world, between the person and God.<sup>36</sup>

Walking on this healing journey, faith communities and survivors of sexual assault can experience the power of resurrection together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will be focusing on the effects of violence against women. The observations I make may be relevant to male survivors of abuse or sexual assault, but that is not the focus of my study.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983) 6.

- <sup>3</sup> James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1978) 18.
- <sup>4</sup> Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Theological Perspectives on Sexual Violence," in *Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals*, (eds.) Mary D. Pellauer, Barbara Chester and Jane Boyajian (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987) 97.
- <sup>5</sup> For example, Marie Marshall Fortune writes, "...for many, the realization that sexual violence is primarily violent and only secondarily sexual in nature has been difficult to accept." Marie Marshall Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983) 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Susan J. Brison, "Surviving Sexual Violence," *Second Opinion* 20 (2) October, 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Wilson-Kastner, "Theological Perspectives," 15.
- <sup>8</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Violence," 22.
- <sup>9</sup> Judith Floyd, "To Greet Brothers Without Fear" *Sojourners* 20 (Feb-Mar 1991) 24.
- <sup>10</sup> "Beth's Psalm" in David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 231.
- <sup>11</sup> Ruth E. Krall, *Rape's Power to Dismember Women's Lives: Personal Realities/Cultural Forms*, (Ph.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1990) 145.
- <sup>12</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992) 52.
- <sup>13</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Violence," 18.
- <sup>14</sup> Julian V. Roberts, "Criminal Justice Processing of Sexual Assault Cases," *Juristat*, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics/Statistics Canada, 14:7 (March 1994) 3.
- <sup>15</sup> E. Sue Blume, *Secret Survivors* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1990) 124.
- <sup>16</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 214.
- <sup>17</sup> Most churches recognize the arrival of a child with some ritual, but there is rarely any mention of the mother's labour and delivery, or the significance of that experience for the woman who has given birth.
- <sup>18</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 247.
- <sup>19</sup> "Beth's Psalm" *Facing the Abusing God*, 228.
- <sup>20</sup> Carrie Doehring, "The Absent God: When Neglect Follows Sexual Violence," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 47:1 (Spring 1993) 11.

- <sup>21</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Assault," 17.
- <sup>22</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Assault," 15.
- <sup>23</sup> Marlene Epp, "The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War," *Journal of Women's History* 9:1 (Spring 1997) 64.
- <sup>24</sup> Andy Smith, "Born Again, Free from Sin?: Sexual Violence in Evangelical Communities," in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, (eds.) Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Concilium, 1995) 341.
- <sup>25</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Assault," 19.
- <sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Introduction," *Violence Against Women: Concilium*, (eds.) Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Mary Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994) xviii-xix.
- <sup>27</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Assault," 15.
- <sup>28</sup> Brison, "Surviving Sexual Violence," 16.
- <sup>29</sup> Krall, "Rape's Power to Dismember," 338.
- <sup>30</sup> Floyd, "To Greet Brothers Without Fear," 24.
- <sup>31</sup> Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 250.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.
- <sup>33</sup> See for example, the ritual by Miriam Winter "Out of Exile" by *Woman Prayer Woman Song: Resources for Ritual* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 143-161.
- <sup>34</sup> A book that addresses the healing journey of people who have sexually offended, and is sensitive to survivor issues is Mark Yantzi, *Sexual Offending and Restoration* (Kitchener, Ontario and Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1998).
- <sup>35</sup> Doehring, "The Absent God," 11.
- <sup>36</sup> Nelson, *Embodiment*, 70.