

Religion and Domestic Violence

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Hagerstown

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As much as I enjoy delightfully thoughtful topics or explorations of our Unitarian Universalist history, it is part of my calling as a minister from time to time to address difficult topics, and this is one of those days.

Today's topic is domestic abuse—not because I'm aware of any special need to address that here, but because October is Domestic Abuse Awareness Month and because we'd be lying to ourselves if we pretended no one's life here wasn't touched by domestic abuse. None of us needs to extend our search too far up or across our family tree to see behavior that fits this topic.

I don't mean to overstate the importance of this topic or underestimate what you already know, yet it is possible that something you hear today might save someone's life someday.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, in the time I take to give this message, 400 people will be physically assaulted by an intimate partner. (<https://ncadv.org/statistics>) That sentence contains a lot that needs unpacking, as a one of my professors liked to say. Domestic abuse covers a lot of topics: elder abuse, child abuse, and sibling abuse. For today, in the interest of time and to give this message more of a focus, I'll be speaking about intimate partner abuse, which includes current and former partners of abuse victims. It includes abuse perpetrated by women against men, though the numbers are overwhelming the reverse. It also includes abuse in the gay community, which is compounded by inability of many in that community who fear being open about their relationships.

Despite common references to domestic violence and physical assault, the better description of my topic today is domestic abuse. That's because far too many of us labor under the stereotype that it's not abuse unless someone strikes another and even then, some limit the definition to being hit with a closed fist.

The most basic definition of domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior that is used to exert power and control over another person. I've given you a copy of the so-called power wheel, which shows all the ways that a person may exercise

Emotional abuse is putting the other person down, attacking her self-esteem, and lowering her sense of worth and dignity. Telling a woman no one else would have her is emotional abuse. Isolation becomes a tool of oppression when the perpetrator prevents or limits the partner from contacting family and friends and seeking help. Keeping the only

keys to the car or the only bank card is a form of isolation. Minimizing, denying and blaming makes light of the abuse. That's what is happening when the perpetrator tries to convince the victim that their relationship is just like everyone else's or that what problems they have are her fault. Threatening to abuse the children or take them in a divorce is one of the most powerful tools in the perpetrator's toolbox. Simply observing that the school district where her family lives is much worse than the current school system is a subtle threat that the kids will be worse off if she tries to leave. Many victims rationalize that they are protecting their children by staying in an abusive relationship. Yet, we tend to underestimate the long-lasting negative effects children experience simply by being in an abusive home, whether the children are abused or not. In most cases, though, where a partner is being abused, the children are being abused, too.

So, to summarize, abuse is not limited to physical abuse. It's any form of abuse that seeks to control another person. Very often, physical abuse is the last expression a perpetrator may use, so if you see someone in a relationship experiencing these other warning signs, don't dismiss it with the thought that "at least it's not an abusive relationship." It is, and it's only a matter of time until it becomes violent—perhaps years, but it is inevitable.

If one is in an abusive relationship, the goal is to move from the power wheel to the equality wheel, which I've also provided you on the reverse of the power wheel. For perpetrators for whom the power wheel represents deeply embedded values and behaviors, this is very difficult but possible with counseling and other forms of treatment. In the short run, though, this likely means the victim and perpetrator need to be physically apart. Safety always comes first. This is a way of saying, though, that abusive behavior doesn't have to end a marriage or relationship. It may. Indeed, it likely will. Still, my Unitarian Universalist faith teaches me that people can grow and change. In the case of DV, it just means such people may have to do so under separate roofs.

An even better outcome, of course, is to help women and men identify and avoid abusive behaviors before they ever are embedded in the first place. There's no better example of that than the OWL program, which this congregation has embraced. If you're new and don't know what that means, I'll say here that it is a comprehensive sexuality curriculum at age-appropriate levels for all children and youth and invite you to speak to other members here about that program. (For more information about the OWL program: <https://www.uua.org/re/owl>)

For those of you who are not in abusive relationships but love people who are, I urge you first to get your own help. Before you have a serious talk with a loved one about her situation, talk to a therapist or a counselor at a shelter for women who are abused. They will help you to know what to say and do. I can tell you a few things they

will tell you. Do not confront the abuser. That simply risks more violence. Do not tell your loved one that she must leave her partner. That's a very difficult choice to make, and pressuring her won't help. It will merely isolate you from her because she won't feel she can confide in you. The better approach is to ask her about some of the elements on the power wheel and to let her reach her own conclusion. Do not leave any literature on this subject at her home or even in her purse because her abuser will find it. Affirm your support of the person and ask if she has thought about a safety plan. There's a huge difference between insisting that someone leave their partner to stay with you and inviting her to keep some clothes and some extra money at your home in case she ever decides on her own to leave.

Now, let's talk about us as a religious community or, if you prefer, a faith-based community.

Domestic violence does not, in one sense, have anything to do with religion. Yet, religion, if not the cause, often provides the context for abuse in a home in which either the abuser or the victim may cite religious beliefs for the abuse itself or for staying in an abusive relationship. Thus, where religion is part of the problem, religion necessarily must be part of the solution.

I have an entire sermon that surveys all the world's great religions and identifies passages and practices that seem at times to promote healthy relationships while at other times promoting abuse. For today, I'll stick the Christian tradition because it is the dominant tradition in this community, but don't think it is unique among religions on this issue.

According to The Rave Project www.theraveproject.org, over 80% of clergy have counseled at least one abused woman yet only 8% feel they are properly equipped to respond to domestic violence. 58% of church women have helped an abused women and one in four have offered her a bed for a night. The idea that abuse is something that doesn't happen to church-going families simply is wrong or, perhaps more accurately, a self-serving fantasy.

Ministers often are part of the problem. Clergy are hesitant to take on this topic for a variety of reasons. Clergy may be abusers also, and the social stigma of acknowledging such abuse—not to mention the likely effect of ending one's career—may make it especially difficult for clergy (and their partners!) to seek help. Also, clergy may be preaching to congregational leaders who are abusers and who may have power over them through oversight, evaluations, and salary recommendations, which may lead clergy to censor themselves out of self-interest.

Religion is a barrier to reform when it validates and perpetuates gender-based stereotypes and turns Biblical-era cultural norms into God-mandated family forms.

Religion is a bridge to reform when it uses its prophetic voice to denounce scriptural interpretations used to justify violence or stay in a violent home and to provide spiritual and emotional support to abuse victims.

We are familiar with the passages in the Christian Testament that call upon husbands to treat their wives as Christ treats the church (and that's a good thing: most wives would come out ahead by that standard) and for wives to be submissive to their husbands. On its face, there is nothing in these verses that condone violence. Yet, somehow, that got translated into these so-called "Rules of Marriage" written by a 15th century monk named Friar Cherubino: A husband must first reprimand his wife "And if this still doesn't work . . . take up a stick and beat her soundly . . . for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body" (Okun, Lewis. Woman Abuse: Facts Replacing Myths, [Google Books](#), p.3. To be fair to the Bible, there is absolutely no reasonable way to read any verse as saying what this Friar says it says. That kind of pure misogyny is historical and cultural, and what the Friar is doing in that case is using religion to justify violence, and it is the role of those who love the Christian faith to say, "not in my name."

The Christian faith, like every other faith, emphasizes the importance of peace in the home. As much as I am for peace, I learned something about that when I attended a Quaker seminary. Quakers are true pacifists. Yet, they would say there is no peace without justice. To simply say "time out" and "no more fighting" while one person is dominating another simply perpetuates the domination, and that is not peace. So, while the phrase "peace in the home" has a certain appeal, it should never perpetuate a status quo marked by violence in the home. It does not mean, "don't get your father upset."

Since the problem is systems based, the response to domestic violence must be systems based, too. Shelters and victims' advocates, law enforcement, public health, and religious institutions provide parts of the response that the other parts cannot provide. How can the faith community respond?

Something as simple as posting resources for women in the bathroom tells women that this issue is real and that help is available. Adult education and special programming may be offered for people who may be in abusive relationships. Clergy and other religious leaders need to know the resources available to persons in abusive relationships.

Religious teachings about suffering need to be put into context. Women who stay in abusive relationships often believe their faith requires them to do so. They interpret abuse as a test of that faith, especially where divorce is prohibited or stigmatized. Such women need to hear from their clergy that leaving a violent marriage does not break a marriage vow; violence breaks a marriage vow.

Regardless of a tradition's teachings on divorce, it simply is wrong to insist that the covenant of marriage requires a partner to stay in a violent home. I believe in redemption and that violent partnerships may be saved. It takes a lot of work, though, to repair a relationship broken by abuse—work on the part of both the victim and the abuser. Both may need counseling, and the victim certainly will need time and space for recovery—time and space that must be spent apart from the abuser.

It's true that violence occurs in every type of home, religious and otherwise. Abuse is not a science project, though, in which we may eliminate the variables and conclude that religion has no role in either the abuse or the response simply because it occurs in non-religious homes. Domestic abuse is part of the human condition. Updating our liturgies and statements of faith won't make this problem go away. Yet, we cannot fail to do what we can do. Over a century ago, the Rev. Edward Everett Hale reminded us, "because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can." The role of faith communities in responding to domestic violence may be small compared to the roles others must play, but we must not fail to do what we can.

May it always be so. Blessed Be.

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