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Shame to Community: Ethnography of Personal Violence Survival and Religious Experience

Preface: Narrative of a First Ethnography

My activism and scholarship has revolved around issues of sexual and domestic violence, from the time I had entered Divinity School. Many of our intellectual interests are autobiographical and yet I have struggled to claim this issue outright for fear that the stigma from a culture that “blames the victim” would somehow discredit my agenda and insights. Perhaps in part due to my own process of post-trauma meaning making, I have been working in the Divinity School women’s Center for the past year and a half. My location as a seminary student, and a feminist lead to relationships with other *survivors* I have met in the Divinity Women’s Center.¹ Resulting from this location and these relationships, I have a particular interest in recognizing the role the Church plays in preventing or perpetuating violence against the vulnerable, and stifling or promoting healing and community among survivors. I am equally interested in honoring creative spiritual, theological, and communal practices that emerge from survivors in coping with the trauma of interpersonal violence, regardless of one’s relationship to the institutional Church. Through a process of ethnography, I seek to make space for survivors to tell their own stories of finding voice, making meaning, and relating to community after experiences of interpersonal violence. As survivors and pastors speak on these issues, a critique of the church’s compliance along with a new sets of values and practices for inclusive community emerge.

My activism in helping to organize a grant for a conference on sexual and domestic violence and pastoral care also arose out of this location, and these relationships. Statistics say that ¼ of women, 1/3 of girl children, and 1/7 of men are survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence. Current pastoral care research is concerned with the ways in which this trauma deeply impacts their relationships with other people, communities such as the Church and theology. In that sense, surviving an act of sexual or domestic violence is practically initiation into our patriarchal society.² It is high time then, that institutions of theological education think

¹ The term Survivor is now the PC term for those who have been victimized in domestic or sexual violence and lived. Later in the paper I will deconstruct this term. However it does serve (however inadequately) a basic function of identification in this project.

² Farley, Wendy. “Evil Violence and the Practice of Theodicy”; Shawn Copeland, “The Wounds of Jesus the Wounds of My People”; Nancy J. Ramsay, “Preaching to Survivors of Child Sexual

systemically and holistically about these issues, and that this thinking becomes pervasive in the curriculum of equipping the Church to respond to this cultural crisis in productive, and preventative ways. In congruence with my political motivations, theological sentiments emerge regarding how to theologically and ethically honor and respect the diversity of survivors of interpersonal violence.

The term survivor

The dominant activist movements around the topics of domestic abuses, violence against women, and sexual violence have moved from the word “victim” to “survivor” to raise these issues politically, and to depict and thereby render the recipient of these acts less passive. The idea is that to survive these sorts of violence takes a great deal of inner strength, and sometimes a long-term conscious effort. Some individual survivors have moved to the term “thrivers” as if to say, they have used acts of violence perpetrated on them to become strong healthy people. Or, that they are thriving in life in spite of something horrible that happened. One woman, who self-identifies as “thrivers,” has stated that she is coming to a place in her healing process at which she identifies with much more productivity than simply having refrained from suicide.³

After spending two months “hanging out” with folks who self-identify as “survivors,” the term now seems flat and banal to me. We are all so diverse in our methods of self-interpretation, meaning and community making. Our identities are much thicker and stronger than what can be connoted in any one term regarding our interaction with a violent situation. We have all arisen to the challenge of becoming resilient, creative resisters in the face of what seemed like, or could easily have been, insurmountable challenges. We have yet to come up with a good political term for that. Our “survivor” statuses may be one thread or one group of threads that now make up our complex tapestry of identities. Yet this is the term that initially gathered my informants who are now friends, and the term that deemed me a “native” anthropologist.

My Native Status and Our Interpretive Diversity

Abuse” in, *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, edited by John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay. (Cleveland: United Church Press 1998).

³ Nancy Werking Poling, ed., *Victim to Survivor: Women Recovering from Clergy Sexual Abuse*. (Cleveland: United Church Press 1999).

I come to this project as a “native” anthropologist in the most complex sense of the term “native.”⁴ I am a white, middleclass, female survivor of marital violence with a seminary education from a protestant school. My current church involvement and theological loyalties are complex and admittedly nebulous at times, even to me. Suffice to say I have deep sympathies with those who are committed to church and those who are committed to not going to church, those with traditional Christian theological doctrines, those with institutionally unrecognized spiritual practices and everyone in between. My intellectual foreground for theological and ethical exploration is primarily from the perspective of a liberation feminist (sometimes) theologian.

The majority of those I interviewed are white with the exception of one African American man, and they represent a variety of economic backgrounds. The survivors represent a range of histories of and current commitments to various protestant doctrines and religious communities. They range from having left the Church with a “fuck you” attitude to having the dual identity of survivor and pastor. All of them have spent some time in their lives with strong protestant religious commitments ranging from liberal to evangelical. Many of these survivors have seminary educations from a variety of seminaries throughout the country.⁵ Two of the people I interviewed are pastors without a history of violence survival. The mix of pastor and survivor participants represent great diversity in background and modes of interpretation and community formation.

Without exception, however, each survivor I interviewed gifted me with the trust of an insider, or a “native.” I believe this is primarily because I was forthright, although not detailed about my own “survivor” status. I also think in many cases the network of survivors within which I proposed my topic was also perceived as trustworthy. The pastors who trusted me with their ideas and observations probably did so because of my status as a seminary student because those who were not survivors did not know of my survivor status.

Introduction: Methodology: Working Networks while Obscuring Contexts

I began soliciting survivors with a one-page description of my interests in how (broadly defined) *faith communities* and *spiritual practices* are related to survival of (broadly defined)

⁴ Here I am alluding to Narayan’s rendering of the complex identities and locations of the “native” anthropologist.

⁵ See appendix for a more specific breakdown of the demographics.

interpersonal violence. I sent this proposal out on several listservs.⁶ Initially I was flooded with respondents, but only half of them followed through with scheduling an interview. The next step was to email the proposal to people I know directly who either are survivors or had connections with survivors. The majority of people contacted through this more direct network followed through with scheduling interviews. I wanted to ask similar questions of pastors to find out more about the connections and disconnections (as it were) between theology taught in school and “real, live ministry,” as well as their understanding of theology and ministry as compared to what various survivors had to say. I simply “cold” emailed three pastors and asked them for interviews. They were all glad to help a seminary student out. I met with two of them in their offices, and I spoke with the third over the phone.

Divinity Women’s Center as Shared Context

Those survivors who responded to my proposal were extremely generous with their time and commitment to this project. All except two of them met me in the Divinity Women’s Center, whether or not they had any connection with the Divinity School or University. For the sake of convenience, I met one survivor for an interview in my home, and another in her office at the church where she works as the pastoral care coordinator. Because the obscuring of contexts and identities is important to my research, the space of the Divinity Women’s Center bears highlighting as a shared context for survivors. Within the Divinity School the actual space of the Women’s Center functions as a “safe space” for all women, supporters of women, and persons with LGBTQA identities. This may be the one space within the divinity school in which anger, curse words, graphic descriptions of violence and discrimination, and politically and theologically open conversations are welcome and free flowing. It is a place of both confidentiality, and community for all who enter, regardless of their affiliations with the larger educational or ecclesial community. It is a rare place of racial and political diversity where the top priority is to practice being supportive community. The student coordinators (such as myself) intentionally make this clear, and foster this culture among all who are involved with or happen upon the space of the Divinity Women’s Center.

The Interviews as the Road to Mutuality

I asked Claire whether she would ever tell the members of her church that she had survived date rape. She responded that she would, but only for the sake of someone else. “I

⁶ See appendix for a copy of the one page proposal.

don't want to be self-righteous or self-serving. I want to be humble. As women you don't ask for things. You don't feel like you have the right to." In a sense, my methodology is born in part out of the same gender socialization. I am doing this project for the sake of myself, but more obviously for the sake of others who struggle with themes of meaning making, and isolation in the wake of the trauma caused by personal violence. Furthermore, each and every one of the survivors who offered me their stories expressed gratitude for this "much needed" project, and offered to help in any way they could. Many expressed that they were of course participating in part for the sake of their own expression, but primarily they wanted to help other survivors, and to help me with my schoolwork. Beyond gender socialization our altruistic motivations are also attempts to give up a piece of isolation and privacy for a piece of community, of knowing and being known.

My methodology, that intuitively changed as the process progressed, demonstrates my attempt to walk a line between simply doing an "ethnography of my own psyche," and also honoring differences between my own interpretations of the survivors who began as my informants and became my community and my sacred text.⁷ Overall, this process was a move toward mutuality and depth of respect in these relationships. While my primary loyalties are to the survivors' own voices in this paper, naturally because I am the adjudicator of "what gets said," the salient themes of my own journey and biases are also revealed.⁸

In the sentiment that I have been gifted with sacred texts to work with, I will always feel a sense of loss and regret in that I will come up short in honoring the depth and detail of what was shared with me in the context of this term paper.⁹ In the interest of space I have had to limit the details of life stories actually overtly used in the final paper.¹⁰ If I may speak directly to the survivors who gave to this paper, "if it is any consolation I want you to know that various aspects of your stories have become such a part of my vernacular that I voice pieces of them in every conversation of educational relevance. Your generosity, bluntness, and openness with me goes out in my various contexts with reverence, and hopefully has a ripple effect on others' thinking about "survivors" while your individual contexts and identities will always be our secrets."

⁷ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*

⁸ An illusion to Margaret Mills

⁹ The idea of field notes as a sacred text originally came from the Jackson piece, "I am a Fieldnote."

¹⁰ See appendices for the full transcripts of all interviews.

The process of an interview:

Each interview with a survivor was the beginning of some sort of friendship. Without having decided whether or how I would disclose my own history, I intuitively chose to begin each interview with a survivor by revealing my survivor status in general terms. I did not feel the need to reveal this to the two pastors who are not also survivors. I began all of the interviews explaining my general interests and motivations for this project, my methodology of note-taking, later typing the story and getting their feedback, and my commitments to their own senses of confidentiality. I then gave them a chance to respond with questions, comments and preferences.

The survivors then would relate parts of their survival story, and I might ask questions about spirituality, church, or healing if those aspects were not clear to me in the rendering. Various aspects of my own story came out when survivors would mention an experience I could relate to. With time, interviews became more like mutual sharing and conversations. In the beginning I related to survivors less verbally, with knowing looks, nods, smiles, frowns and sighs. Later I would interrupt saying “God, I’m so sorry.” “You too??” “Yeah, I can relate to that!” “You’re not alone.” I even began to bring wisdom from previous interviews to later interviews by saying things like, “Other survivors of this kind of violence have expressed the same sentiment.” “One survivor said, ’...’”

After the interviews I would type the story as I heard it. I began each story with the context of my first impressions, and located each survivor in his or her primary identity as a “musician,” an “artist,” or “a minister by baptism.” Their secondary identities were that of survivor of various sorts of interpersonal violence. I wrote the better part of each story in the second person, with several direct quotes. Even in the second person, I was careful to use the vocabularies of the survivors as much as possible.¹¹ I would then email the stories back to

¹¹ The exceptions to this methodology: I only took notes when talking to non-survivor pastors, and did not keep up communication with them, although my commitments to confidentiality were the same, and they will have access to the final paper. In my first interview with a survivor, with her permission, I had my laptop with me and typed while she was talking. I did not clean up my notes, or send them back to her. I would like to do this after the paper because of how meaningful this methodology was to other survivors. The rest of the survivors were more concerned with confidentiality, and I switched to the primary method described above. Finally, the last pastor and survivor I interviewed, the interview took place over the phone, and again I typed as he spoke (it was easier than writing). Again I have not cleaned it up and sent it back. His addition to this piece is primarily directed toward wisdom for the ecclesial community and pastoral ministry.

survivors, giving them a chance to read what I had written and give me feedback. Almost all of them corrected a few vital details. Without exception, each of them commented that this was a very meaningful process to them, and the write-ups were special to them. A few commented that I read them with more compassion than they read themselves. Here are some email responses to the process:

"Jenny, You have given me a gift. a beautiful gift. an understanding of myself so accurately put, i couldnt have done it myself any better. Thank you Jenny. You know you live in your own world everyday and are never really sure how people perceive you. Thank you for seeing the goodness in me that im not always reminded of myself. Thank you. everything looks great. so, fake name, hmm, Claire. we now have a bond, lets keep in touch. "

"Dearest Jenny, Thank you so much for this! It is a true inspiration. I thought everything you wrote was accurate. I have one correction. I hope this turns out well for you. It is an admirable project! Thank you for honoring us. Let me know if we're getting together for dinner. Peace! (Sophie) "

" Hi Jenny, I can't thank you enough for getting me in touch with Claire. I think she is going to be an amazing collaborator for my project...! I SO enjoyed meeting you on Friday and I love what you've written. I do have a couple of suggestions /changes. I'll try to get those to you by early this week. Oh, and are you free to come for dinner this Wednesday?" (Sarah)

"Jenny, Thank you for the write up. I appreciate your treatment of the story and your comments at the end. I don't think I'll ever tire of encountering persons who can empathize with my story. I am touched and humbled. I don't imagine that is an easy task. If you need anything else related to the paper, please feel free to be in touch. " (John)

Having only begun to anticipate the extent my personal and professional gratitude toward survivors who told me their stories, it suffices to say that I was stunned at sense of gratitude survivors I interviewed continued to convey to me, and at their further extensions of friendship. I've continued visiting the market with Hanna. I loaned Judith one of my favorite books, and have had dinner with Sarah and John. Claire and Sarah are now collaborating on another project. With others, I have had deep conversations about life, and theology that extends beyond our participation in this project. I hope to continue to participate in the gift of these friendships after the paper is finished.

Because in this project I happened upon a spirit of openness to connection and community with other survivors, I have suggested to several participants that I intend to hold a dinner in my

home after they each have a chance to read the paper, as small token of my appreciation. There they would have an opportunity to meet a community of creative, courageous survivors and decide whether or not to give up their pseudonyms. The general response to this suggestion has been one of enthusiasm. What has been the basis for feelings of isolation for all of us has now become the foundation of friendship and community. After the initial revelations of parts of our own stories, we have gone on to do mundane things together, like grocery shopping, and eating dinner and have shared mundane conversations with one another only indirectly connected to the bonding experience of this project. This phenomenon of almost instant friendship, or instant potential for long-term friendships has been somewhat of a mystical, religious experience to me. It is good and it is beyond my theorizing.

Note on an open text:

I wrote my own story a year ago. I would write it differently today, if I were to write it again. I would write it differently this week than I would have last week. Each of these survivors' and pastors' stories represents one valid, wise, courageous moment in their ongoing processes of interpreting themselves, making meaning and relating to community. In a week, or a year, or 10 years, they might or might not choose different themes, strategies, and interpretations. People are open texts. In my rendering of others' stories, I try to remain faithful to the moment given to me. The fluctuation in my verb tense represents some of the verbal choices of the survivors. Sometimes in retelling an ongoing relationship to a traumatic event, past and present tense can be interchangeable. What is present tense now, may be past tense later and vice versa. The italics in the body of the interviews represent some of my interjecting comments and thoughts. These were all included in what I sent back to the survivors I interviewed.

I. Meeting the Survivors

I will briefly introduce several survivors' stories and use parts of the interview transcripts to explore themes of voice, and religious experience, and self-transformation. Some of the survivors have remained decidedly inside their protestant traditions, and others now define faith and community in other ways. Each survivor has personally valid wisdom about the experience of violence, making sense of and representing themselves and their experiences, and relating to spirituality and community. Sometimes their wisdom converges, and sometimes it diverges. Holding their points of similarity and difference together is, for me, the foundation for inclusive community, and the creation of just and inclusive theories and practices.

First I will introduce the survivors who, in the wake of violence, continue to find themselves within the walls of a protestant community. In some cases I found myself at first struggling with their ideas on theology and ethics. However, in the course of getting to know and respect each survivor, I had no choice but to respect their ideas and choices as representing their internal resources of strength, and experiences of faith. I thus found myself relinquishing my own blanket generalizations about the sorts of theologies that are “helpful” to “survivors.”

Sophie: Finding and Using Her Voice

Sophie tells me she is honored to be helping me with my research. She has a stylish professional look, and a sweet demeanor. She is a baptized Christian, raised in the faith and in the process of discerning the sort of ministry to which God is calling her next. God has always given her a spirit of happiness and resilience. The question for Sophie is one of voice. As I am introducing my project to her, we both talk about how the experience of having survived violence is so isolating. She says, “It is not something people want to hear about.”

This is one of the first times Sophie has talked openly about her experience. She reflects on what a huge step it was for her to email me, responding to my general proposal sent out on several list-serves. She could hardly believe she was writing that first sentence “I am a survivor of gendered violence.” She had looked up the terms on Google to see if her experience fit into *that* category. “It wasn’t like I was raped or assaulted... I don’t know what it was or how to speak about it...” She is hoping I will help her to find words. *At this point in the interviewing process I have learned that these are her words, and they will likely change over time.* “Between the ages of 3-4-8-9 my grandfather would touch me and say he was tickling me... I’ve always thought I was making a mountain out of a molehill.” She remembers having a happy childhood, and she never remembers being afraid, or thinking she was being violated. She doesn’t know how many times it happened. It would not happen every time they visited. She never spoke about what her grandfather did until college. She didn’t think about it for years. It was triggered when she became interested in dating guys.

Sophie continues sifting through how to deal with being abused and betrayed. She wants to find a balance between a realistic caution and protectiveness of children, and projecting her experience on every man she meets. “It seems like society is focused on sex and men.” *I agree.* She is going to therapy. “I know that I will never be a whole person... But I want to free from these chains, to be able to see things as they are.” She knows that in whatever form of ministry to which God is calling her, she will come in contact with vulnerable people, and she wants to be able to honor them.

She wants to be able to talk about her experience openly. She is looking for her voice. “Is my being quiet suppressing others’ voices?” Sophie wants to say “this happened to me and I am not a freak or crazy. I can be a healthy and balanced person.” She says she is seeking out a comfort level with herself that is not based on what others think. She wants to live in a healthy way and not blame herself or let the cultural stigmas define her.

Hanna Grieves the Rape of Language

I pick Hanna up at her house in the morning and we go to the market. She lives in this city without owning a car, and normally walks to the market. I am admittedly lazy so I offer to drive today. Already, I think she is brilliant and interesting. At the market, she knows what

kinds of cows make the best cheese vs. the ones that make the best ice cream. She knows what to do with the various herbs and greens and how to get the best tastes out of fresh foods. She knows where to get the best bake goods and coffee in town, and she regularly checks books out of the public Library. Already, I admire the way she truly lives in a just relationship with the earth. Hanna is also a lover of words. She loves to read. She is a writer, educated at an Ivy League institution in the Northeast, and has traveled the world as a scholar. After a couple of errands we wind up at my dining room table enjoying coffee and a few cookies. She speaks of a British Play, *Look Back in Anger*. It is a play about an abusive relationship. She says that smart, strong women get sucked into these relationships because they think they can help the guy. But the truth is, these types of guys don't want to be helped. I relate with the cultural myth of Beauty and the Beast, and "the love of a good woman."

Hanna was with Jared from the fall of 1991 to January 1994. She met him in the States and then went overseas to do her grad work in his country. She was a middle class American girl with an upper class education. "The relationship was a living hell....There was nowhere to scream- you couldn't even scream." She had fantasies of building a soundproof room in which to scream. "I didn't write for years because I lost all faith in the power of words." It was like She and Jared were speaking two different languages. In this relationship she experienced "the rape of language." "He used what was most important to me against me. "His words were devastating and my words meant nothing."

When Hanna moved to Jared's country she discovered he had lied to her about the amount of money that she would need. She had no work permit and was therefore dependant on him. She slept with him because otherwise she would have been homeless. "I basically prostituted myself." *I protest. No, he abused you, he took advantage of your vulnerability!"* "Does that make it clean?" *I don't think I answered. This is her story, not mine, I remind myself.* There was constant sexual tension. Everything was a turn-on to him. Even breathing was provocative. When she lost all sexual interest in him, he treated her as though something was wrong with her. He was a psychopath. Lying meant nothing to him. He destroyed things she cared about and would lie about it. "Everything was my fault, and my responsibility." If she disagreed with him she was accused of not being "logical" but being "emotional, intuitive, or irrational." She remembers reading Debora Tannen (a gendered-communication theorist). Tannen describes communication in terms of a gendered dichotomy of "logical vs. emotional." "Male communication style perpetuates cultural values which are abusive. Reifying difference never has positive consequences."

Even after she left him and moved back to the States, he would track her down, sending flowers and phone calls trying to win her back. At one point he left her a note saying "I know where you live and nothing has happened." Hanna says, "If that wasn't a threat I don't know what was. Four years later at her institution in the US, she saw him in her first floor, sliding door bedroom window. She went to the campus police, who took her seriously. He moved in next door to her. He was evicted though, when Hanna told the landlord about his drug abuse. The Campus police officer was the first person ever to tell her that she had been strong and courageous in leaving him. She suspects he is still looking for her, and will be obsessed until one of them dies. *I don't really pray much, but at this very moment I find myself earnestly praying in my heart that Jared will OD or be hit by a bus. I tell Hanna that it is Biblical to pray for God to smite your enemies (I am clearly justifying myself).* Yes, she remembers when the cursing Psalms meant a lot to her. She would pray the Morning and Evening Psalms one of which asks God to "Smite those who spy upon me." "He nearly killed me with words," she reminds me.

Hanna describes other instances in which she survived abuses of power (including an unwelcome kiss from a former Priest), and in the midst of this she developed and holds on to a strong theology of suffering. I found myself as one who prefers liberation feminist interpretations disagreeing with her theology at several points. I had to ask myself, “Who am I to do anything but respect her faith?” Obviously, it is empowering to her, and she acknowledges and respects theological differences of interpretation.

Hanna’s Theology of Suffering.

Eight months after the relationship with Jared was over she felt the overwhelming presence of God. She was in her dorm kitchen when she felt enveloped in absolute love. She knew it was the presence of God. It was like having been on a road trip when you were a kid and you have fallen asleep in the back of the car and your parent lovingly carries you up to bed. In the fall of 1996 she struggles but goes back to the Episcopal Church and is a baptized member several months later. She knows, “God is OK with me and called me after all of that.”

Hanna has no patience for “happy clappy, spiritual Disneyland” She makes the literary reference to *Candid* (which she must explain to me) “all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.” She has found a home in the Black Church tradition, which admits struggle and pain. There you can say, “I am being blessed, but still suffering.” It is a struggle to deal with suffering in a productive way without saying God is powerless or blaming the sufferer. She says, “The Old Testament is not badly redacted.” It is reality. Reality ranges from joy to despair and back all the time.

She has trouble with theologies that make God helpless (such as that of Rabbi Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, or the modernist approach that sacrifices either God’s Goodness or God’s power. “God needs to be in charge for me to have courage and stay alive.” “What has happened in my life would make a really bad Oprah novel.” (*We giggle*). “God allowed these things to happen to me and there is a larger reason for the ultimate good. There are the positive consequences of being able to help others.” She remembers a time recently when she was able to tell another survivor of an abusive relationship that she was courageous. “What I believe about God is a matter of survival.” Faith for Hanna is an act of resistance. She presents it with an attitude that says, no matter what you take from me, you’re not going to get my faith.

She says, “When the way you believe is helping you stay alive it is easy to become dogmatic, but proverbs says, “teach a child in the way that child learns.” This way of dealing with suffering doesn’t work for everyone. Some have problems with atonement theory and like Delores Williams (a Womanist theologian) and they focus on the life and teachings of Jesus. Hanna struggles with the valorization of chosen suffering. We talk about the season of Lent, which tends to emphasize suffering. She says, “For Lent I give up trying to impress God.”

Claire, the Photographer-Theologian

Claire is an artist with a mystical heart and a resilient faith. Photography is her way of finding God everywhere. “In life, if you’re waiting for some kind of big moment you’re missing out.” God is in everyday community, friends, family, people, and nature.” She calls what she captures on camera, “the Spirit of life.” Claire is a sweet Christian girl from a small southern

town. She has a small frame, and a small voice. I figured her to be about 23, and am embarrassed when she tells me she is 27.

She comes to me with multiple stories of surviving sexual violence. For example, when she was 19, a freshman in college she was at a party. She says she was “a little drunk, but sober enough to know better.” She made out with an acquaintance, she stopped, and he didn’t. She didn’t call it rape at the time. Now after therapy, she feels that at this point she stopped valuing her sexuality. She had a boss in one of her jobs who was very emotionally abusive. Then, she had a long-term boyfriend who became very emotionally abusive. Her parents urged her to see a therapist because she was basically suicidal. Her dad sat at the kitchen table in tears asking her what they had done to cause her to think she should be treated poorly. She credits therapy for helping her to finally end that romantic relationship. She is still in therapy, because this process has helped her to deal with the sexual violence she has faced in the past: the childhood incidents, and the college acquaintance rape. Her parents ask why she is still in therapy. She says they don’t know about the date rape. It would just make them hurt. For Claire, her parents’ pain would hurt more than what had happened. She was able to take life as it came. She tells them she wants to stay better, and that there is more she is working on. Claire has discovered that she has a history, *like most women*, of putting others’ feelings before her own, never wanting to make others uncomfortable. She feels responsible for others feelings, and still guilty when she fails to protect herself from harm.

Family, culture, God, and Church run together as our conversation on healing and spirituality continues. Upon reflection on her abusive relationship she feels she had put all of her faith in the boyfriend instead of in God. Claire grew up in the Church. Her mother and grandmother are “good role models as empowered women.” When I ask about the connection between her faith and survival story first she says she doesn’t understand. She does understand. She says, “I would think that the reason the Church doesn’t address this issue that no one talks about it. Sex isn’t talked about. We then talk about the general Christian teachings that are opposed to premarital sex. Claire adds that she is glad that the rape wasn’t her first time (having sex). In terms of the healing process she says she would have been much worse off if that were the case. “*Quite possibly.*”

I switch to a question about theodicy: “*Where was God in all of this?*” “I don’t think God did or didn’t let this happen... He’s the one you go to... In every bad situation something good comes out of it.” For example, the situation with her emotionally abusive boss taught her that she did not want to be like him. “*So*” I say, “*you look for God’s redemption in things... So, what good came out of the other stuff you went through? (I am trying not to be cynical and Claire in the end convinces me of the power of her faith).*” She says she now she affirms younger girls because she notices that this is not happening, but it needs to. She says, “I hope that God has something great for me to do for Him, and I would like to see these things as a way of strengthening me or preparing me. I don’t think you can use God for protection. A lot of people try to do that, but that’s not the way He works.”

Claire’s Ethics of Gender and Romance

Claire observes that men are basically narcissistic. *My jaw drops a little, if only in my mind. I often think the same thing but never have the guts to say it out loud.* She continues to explain that in our culture, “men need to be raised better and women need to know their worth.” She refers to a recent retreat wherein 5 out of 23 women talked about having been in abusive relationships. “All men are selfish. The important thing is knowing the difference in the one you are with.” *What do you mean?*” She uses her dad as an example. “All men are selfish and are

going to read the paper when you are trying to talk,” but her dad “can be the most giving, sweetest man on earth. Not all men are bad.” *In other words, there is a certain extent to which men are socialized to be self-centered but not all men mean harm?* Right. Claire would like to get married someday. She believes she can find someone that she can love and trust, and that *that* comes from God. “Spring always comes; I’m just waiting for it to stay.” “*It never stays,*” *I say.* “It’s that whole thing of being ready. You have to be ready.” God is working on that for Claire. She believes in her ability to find someone who “won’t hurt me, and who will put me first, appreciate me for who I am... Women need to learn not to settle, and to listen... listen to your instinct.” In her small town Claire knows lots of girls who want to get married at the age of 21. All but two of her friends are married. They are not happy, but they won’t get divorced. “That’s all they want out of life, and that’s OK.” She feels her saving grace was not being raised that way.

The Judgment of Church and the Healing of Jesus

Kristin was the first person I interviewed. She responded to my email with enthusiasm. When I visited her in her office at the church where she is the pastoral care coordinator, the first words out of her mouth were, “If anything that has happened to me could help someone else, it was worth it. I have had 8 years of time to heal and 7 years with an angel of a man.”

Kristin told me of how she ran away from home at the age of 16 and met a man who was brilliant and attractive. He reminded her of her father who was disapproving. She had two children. When she realized her marriage to this man was unhealthy, he wouldn’t leave. She was on welfare and putting herself through college. She could not imagine surviving without him. At one point when he was abusing substances and threatening to hurt the baby, she filed for divorce and told him that if he was not gone when the divorce was finalized she would have the police kick him out. He got scared, got help, and got sober (for a while). They discovered he had bi-polar disorder. Then it seemed like there was no reason to divorce him.

Kristin cared for her children and her husband, stayed close to her church and God for 18 years. At one point she was caring for a sick relative when she learned about her cousin Tilda, who had created Gestalt Pastoral Care. When Kristin heard about the workshops she burst into tears and prayed, “I want this God. You know this is me but there is no way I can make this happen.” Miraculously she was able to carve out time, space and money to attend the trainings Tilda held in New York, and her parents offered to pay for her Bachelor’s degree. In the midst of going to school, caring for a husband who had bouts of psychosis, and taking care of her family, she developed severe TMJ from the stress. “We went bankrupt but were able to keep the house due to help from her family.” She knew the marriage had to end. “I once said I would never refuse my husband sex, but here I was doing that. He was my first at 16 and owned me from then on.” When she stopped giving into him sexually he stopped having power over her. This allowed her to solidify her final break with him, and she would finally get him to leave.”

Within a couple of months she ended her marriage. “When I gave up my will and surrendered to God, doors started opening.” She becomes Joyful, “It was like, Oh, this is what you do. Once you have success in surrender, you have peace, and God makes things flow and provides for you.” She starts to laugh.

Kristin had always been very involved with her family church, “I was their baby.” She had a female pastor “trying to be supportive of co-dependant me, who couldn’t see my way out.” “No one offered me a good enough way out. I felt I had the support of my church but I had to handle it on my own.” Some church members would ask, “Why don’t you just kick him out, or

just leave?” “It’s hard when you have an ideal that you are trying to live up to. I didn’t want to get divorced because it was failure. Religiously I took the vows seriously. I had promised God I would do my best to make the marriage work.” Kristin experienced the “quiet judgment” of the Church. There was a general knowledge in the church of the hell that I had gone through and that the marriage failed, and more people were happy that I had gotten out of the marriage. I knew I was receiving a call to ministry.” Yet in her church she sensed the sentiment that “I know too much about her she cannot possibly minister to me.” “I received a lot of emotional support but a lot of rejection from my church, and that was hard. I was wanting them to do things they didn’t know how to do.”

My personal scripture, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Today Kristin has a new life, with a wonderful husband, and is on her way to Licensure in her denomination. She believes Gestalt Pastoral care is a method by which the pastors and parishioners can begin to experience and be transformed by the healing power of Jesus Christ.

Ecclesial Betrayal

Two survivors spoke with me about abuses that centered on clergy sexual abuse and the ecclesial and legal trials to follow. Both survivors are men, and the abusers are also men. Both men were life long members of their hometown protestant churches. The abusive pastors involved had much less seniority than their victims in both cases, and yet in both cases the after either ecclesial or legal trials, the survivors are no longer welcome in their own churches. Both survivors show faith, strength and integrity in pressing any kind of charges. One of the survivors pressed legal charges as well as ecclesial charges and lost in both cases. One survivor remains active in the same denomination, and the other is pursuing faith and community by new avenues.

What Happened to Her Happened to All of Us...

Andrew responded to via email to my proposal telling me his mother’s pastor raped her, and she told he and his sister almost a year later. Today he comes to meet me in the Divinity Women’s Center to talk about this experience from the perspective of a son and a pastor, “everything that I am.” Throughout the interview he reminds me, “what happened to her happened to all of us” (he and his sister). In that sense, Andrew too, is a survivor of clergy sexual misconduct. He is also a middle-aged father and pastor, soft spoken and wise.

Andrew comes from a small, close-knit family. His father and older brother have passed away. Only his mother, sister, and himself remain, and they talk over the phone often. He also comes from a small town in the South. He was raised in the congregation where his mother and father were married. Andrews mother would call him and talk about the pastor. “He’s not a nice person... He really needs some help,” she would say. Andrew says, “I thought I could hear her crying, but I didn’t want her to be crying. So I assumed she wasn’t. I never put it together.” It was Andrew’s sister that told him the guy raped his mother.

Andrew’s mother decided to file an official complaint with the presiding elder (just underneath the Bishop who has ultimate authority in the denomination.) An investigational committee was formed and the pastor denied any foul play. The committee decided that both sides were believable and the case went to the Bishop. The Bishop met with Andrew’s mother and told her that if anything happened “Well, take him to court.” Andrews mother met with the

District Attorney and pressed charges. After a background check it is confirmed that the pastor has a history of abusing women. The case would go to trial by jury. The newspaper headline came out, “Area Woman Accuses pastor of Sexual Assault.” Andrew says, “Of course the gossip network got a hold of it.”

The courtroom scene is most vivid to Andrew. The pastor had a young savvy attorney and his mother had the district attorney. The pastor and got his former wife to come back to him, and testify on his behalf. Two other church ladies with whom the pastor had consensual relations wrote letters on his behalf. The pastor’s side was full of church members, his former Sunday school teachers and the folks that took him to camp as a kid. They raised him and they had known his mother most of her adult life. They had only known the pastor for 4 years. The pastor had subpoenaed most of them. His side was lonely: just his sister, a victim’s advocate from a local woman’s shelter, and himself, and one woman from church. “I kept looking over to that side and seeing the people who had raised me. They were on the side of a stranger.”

The jury acquitted the pastor on all charges because of a lack of physical evidence. Later Andrew learned that everyone on the Jury believed his mother. At the declaration of the verdict, there were shouts of joy and victory on the pastor’s side of the courtroom. “On our side, momma put her head on my shoulder and cried for about a minute, and then we filed out, quiet and disillusioned.” Andrew reflect, “I don’t know why were foolish enough to believe something would happen.” Since then, “we decided to get on with our lives.” His mother left that town and church. She never stopped going to church. She joined another church in the same denomination in her new town.

Andrew says he has had moments of grappling with theodicy.¹² *Of course, who wouldn’t?* I don’t think God does things to us... I don’t know...” Andrew had just been promoted to pastor a larger church in the same denomination, and he was angry with the Bishop, the Church, and a process that would allow “a criminal to sit in the pulpit and be a criminal.” He would hear other preachers making sexist, unprofessional remarks about women. “It all came in like a flood. What do I do with this?... We just kept on keeping on.” His mother had decided not to give this preacher and incident any more power, and he and his sister followed suit. “We gleaned from her strength... If she had reacted (differently) we would have too.” “What happened to her happened to all of us.”

Andrew notes that as a pastor he had been sensitive to women’s issues. He had some good instruction in the military. *I look stunned.* He had attended a Department of Defense school in Florida that had grown out of the racial divide in the Military after Vietnam. The school naturally embraced the gender divide as well. “I have often said, ‘The Military stands head and shoulders above the Church as it relates to racism and sexism.’” Andrew remembers having to work on his own issues, and becomes sensitive to issues of people who are ‘othered’ and invisible. As one who is sensitized to women’s issues he says he can forget that he was once unconverted. After this issue happened to his mother he has an either greater awareness of women and how they are treated in the Church. “I’m no saint, Jenny... I’m not the greatest at gender inclusive language...” *I tell him that he understands more than most. And if others who were only willing to use male language even came to the discussion with his sensitivity to women’s circumstances, we could at least talk.*

¹² *Theodicy* is the Christian theological problem of trying to reconcile God’s justice, goodness, and power with the injustices that happen in the world.

John Pursuit of Justice and Truth

John is a seminary graduate from another seminary. We begin by comparing notes on graduate programs in religious studies. We talk for maybe an hour about things relating to academics. This breaks the ice. We find common ground in terms of our worldviews and academic interests until we run out of road in terms of other enjoyable discussion and so John begins to tell me his story in detail.

Pastor Bill came to his home mainline protestant church in the South when John was about 12-14 years old. Pastor was involved with the youth group, helping them with vocational guidance. From that early age, Pastor Bill and took an interest in helping John learn to do exegesis, prepare sermons, preach, and lead worship. Bill was a good pastor. There was talk, even back then that Bill was manipulative in controlling, but John didn't really understand it. At the age of 16 John would discern that God was calling him to Seminary. When John would come home from college for a visit, Pastor Bill would continue to groom him for seminary. John would take a 4-year period of discernment between college and his enrollment in seminary. During this time Pastor Bill would continue to work with him, and eventually hire him to work as a pre-seminary intern in his home church.

The manipulation would begin with slightly strange spiritual and disciplinary practices. Pastor Bill would corner John and poke him in the chest while scolding him for sliding into church as the processional began. Pastor Bill would ask John to take off his shoes and pray with him. John would protest, but give in to his longtime pastor, mentor, boss, and important pastor in the denomination. Requests for the removal of shoes would gradually escalate into the removal of socks and shirt. Pastor Bill always had spiritual justifications around the importance of humility in John's preparations for seminary.

One day Pastor Bill calls John into his office and say, "I have a gift for you." The gift was a golden cross with John's favorite verse on it, John 1:5. Early on Pastor Bill had given John a wooden cross, which had become a strong symbol for John on his journey to seminary. Pastor Bill would continue that in order to receive this gift, Pastor Bill says, "You'll have to stand naked in front of me, would that be OK?" At this point John no longer trusted Pastor Bill, but he felt he had no choice to submit and try to dodge him until he left for seminary. There were times when John was invited to staff retreats and found himself at Pastor Bill's lake house alone where they would plan worship and then Bill would talk him into participating in strange rituals. There was the 5:30am communion on the dock which, (to John's surprise) involved bourbon instead of wine or grape juice. Pastor Bill lied about what they were drinking for a while. This is a denomination with strict rules about communion. But Pastor Bill had a tendency to make his own rules. On another retreat, which John felt pressured to attend, Pastor Bill would get John to take off his shirt, and Pastor Bill would anoint John with oil in humble preparation for seminary.

On the last retreat, John would come out of his room after a period of reading. Pastor Bill was sitting in his recliner, and would ask John if he were ready for his cross, and would ask him to take off all of his clothes. Pastor Bill had an un-nerving, odd look in his eye. He said, "you are going to do this." They went back and forth, but John had nowhere to go. He really felt trapped. He finally submits, and Pastor Bill jumps up with excitement. He explains that this was a ritual done to him once in a fraternity and it would be much less humiliating for John because it was just the two of them. When John disrobes completely, Pastor Bill grabs his shoulders and looks at him. Then he slaps him on the butt and says, "God did a real good job on you." At this point John is scared and reaches for his clothes. But Pastor Bill stops him and gives him a full

body hug. Pastor Bill is crying at this point and asks if John will let him hold him. John says that his survival instinct finally kicked in and he refused Pastor Bill's request, grabbed his clothes.

Finally John goes to Seminary. He loves classes and he feels free of Pastor Bill. A few weeks into classes however, Bill starts calling, physically stalking, harassing, and slandering John to the members of his home church. John grows depressed and starts to miss class. John's girlfriend convinces him to tell a denominational official about what is happening. The first reaction of the denominational representative is this: John was told to that he was a "grown man" and that it was his responsibility to "stand up for himself." So, John went home and stood up to Pastor Bill. Pastor Bill responded that he would continue pursuing John "because he cared." John then called the interim executive official of the denomination and "She said that what had happened was not right, but that she really liked Pastor Bill." She tells John that we are all sinners and we all "fall short of the glory of God." She then called Pastor Bill to tell him that this was going to come out, and that he had better get into counseling and prepare himself. Pastor Bill stops calling for a while. This leads to an investigational committee, and John is pressured into a mediation agreement with Pastor Bill. The two of them would sit down and write an agreement, share it with the general session and agree that the matter was resolved.

Later John finds out Pastor Bill has started to pursue John's younger brother in the same way he began pursuing John. John tells his parents, and his mother and step-father who become his biggest supporters. When John gives his parents permission to address the matter with elders in their home church, the church members begin to react against them. Pastor Bill is let go because people leave the church in droves. Pastor Bill had managed to convince the elders that John's family has a vendetta against him, and John's family loses the support of their home church.

A few years later John speaks with the District Attorney and finds out about the legal charges he could press, and decides to go back and press ecclesial charges against Pastor Bill. Initially he thought he could pursue justice without the truth coming out and without hurting the church and the denomination. He remembers that prior to the sexual abuse Pastor Bill had been a good mentor... On the part of the defense, the trial was a slander campaign against John and his family. After deliberations Pastor Bill was found not guilty on the charges related to his brother's sexual abuse, and guilty regarding John's sexual abuse and sentenced to at least 2 years with 5 different counselors. All of the counselors must agree that Pastor Bill is ready to return to the parish. The regional session of the denomination would receive a letter explaining the accusations, conviction and sentencing. John says he was basically, practically defrocked without being defrocked. John later learns that the jury was one vote away from defrocking Pastor Bill.

I wonder aloud how John and his family don't wind up incredibly bitter with the Church. In the aftermath, John's grandmother continues attending their home church where her husband is buried. His mother would like to go back but she is not welcome there. At one point when she went in the ushers turned their backs to her. She sometimes watches church on television, and other times his mother and stepfather will attend John's brother's Baptist church. The brother who was abused by Pastor Bill does not go to church. John does not go to church, and does not really have the desire to go. He thinks seminary may also have had something to do with this. Now he is pursuing further graduate work in religion, and he loves academia. Before seminary his relationship to faith was emotional, and passionate. Now faith is more in his head. Now there is no "Omni-God nor an Omni-Bible... If God is perfect, He is really mean... Process theology makes the most sense, a God which is evolving with us, a God who can make mistakes." He describes his faith in this way: Agnostic 50% of the time, Atheist 30% of the time

and somewhere between Agnostic and believer 20% of the time. Today John's supportive community is his family, and his wonderful wife. He has a close group of friends with who he plays poker. He has a strong faith in telling the truth and in pursuing justice, and getting on with having a good, meaningful life.

Faith By Other Avenues

There are other survivors whose experiences of violence and healing puts them outside the physical doors of the traditional Church. They too have been on meaningful journeys of self-transformation through creative practices in movement toward the divine and toward community.

Closing the Church Door, talking to Grandmother

Sarah is kind and bubbly. She is a professional concert music composer. We have corresponded a few times via email and over the phone, but this is our first meeting in person. At the age of 8 her grandfather sexually abused her, "minimally." As a child Sarah would have horrendous nightmares. She distinctly remembers that this was the age at which she stopped praying. One night she had a dream that she was in her house, and when she opened her front door, she saw the door of her family's church. She then closed the door. When she was old enough to decide whether or not she would attend church with her family, she would decide to stay home. Being in church made her want to cry.

At the age of 11 her piano teacher's fiancé sexually abused her, less minimally. At 15 she was in an abusive relationship with an older boy who raped her. She knows he had sex with her many times after the rape, but doesn't remember. At 16 she was on a double date and her date's friend, who was in the military violently raped her in a public place. People heard her screaming and came to pull him off her.

Sarah repressed all of this until she was a college freshman. One night she was watching a movie entitled, "The Accused." She does not recommend this movie to survivors of sexual violence, but for her it pulled what she refers to as "A deeply needed trigger" that opened her memory to these prior events. Her roommates would arrive to find her in fetal position on the floor, awake but unresponsive. She would begin to have severe symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at which point she started intensive therapy. After college Sarah was dating a guy, but on her 21st birthday he became violent, and she broke up with him. At that point she decided to take a self-defense class. She would later have to use the skills she learned there.

In graduate school Sarah was commissioned to write a guitar piece for "the Passion." Not having been in church since childhood, she inquired to a friend about the passion, and was invited to read the four Gospels. She remembers reading them and scoffing, and feeling as though Christianity is masochistic and repressive of the female. However she did not want to compose this music without believing. And so she had lunch with a female Episcopal priest.

She remembers being awestruck, having not really conceived of a female priest. During their lunch she wound up telling the pastor about her abuse, and that she doesn't pray anymore. The pastor invited her to read

Ephesians 6: 13-17: Therefore take up the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand on that evil day having don everything to stand firm. Stand therefore and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you able to proclaim the Gospel of peace. With all of these take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all of the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Sarah went home and read this passage on her bed and then fell immediately asleep. She had a dream in which she saw another composer thought that he writes better music than she does. Then the message “that’s not what it is about” went through her mind. She shot up in bed and felt God, and peace around her. It was a sense of super calmness. She started talking to God again and became involved with a fundamentalist church, which she attended several times per week. “For a while it was Jesus 24/7.”

She met with the woman pastor again and the pastor invited her to kneel. It was like she had this big “Santa-sized bag” of guilt: the stuff done to her and the stuff she had done to others was all mixed up. The pastor asked her to separate the stuff done to her and the stuff she had done to others. Sarah then realized she had not really done much harm to others. The pastor then asked her to give it all to God. It is a constant giving up, she admits. But after that she felt as though she was on cloud 9. Things were clear and she felt light.

The fundamentalist church Sarah became involved in was charismatic. There was a lot of dancing and joy. Worship was fun, and it was racially, a really diverse congregation. It was such an authentic experience of racial reconciliation. She was a part of the Sunday evening Singles ministry. A guy in that group asked her out. She wasn’t really romantically interested in him, but she went out on a date with him. They kissed a little, and then she decided that she had to tell him that they would just be friends. Later, around the time Sarah was planning a move to a new town this man would trap her in his home and begin yelling at her. She used her self-defense skills when he would not let her go. He fought with her and she managed to escape.

In the New Town Sarah became involved with another fundamentalist church. This time she was living with a gay couple. She has always been an LGBT ally. She also dated a Jewish musician. The Christians at her church were really concerned about her sinfulness. In order to pray her back into the church they made a clothesline with T-Shirts with her name on it. This was to show how she had fallen from Grace. That was the end of fundamentalism for Sarah. She found a wonderful Presbyterian church where she married her first husband (“she says with distain”... and then she laughs). When she first got married she vomited at least once per week. She lost a lot of weight. The Church still sings her music there. After 6 months of marriage he left her. At the time it was devastating, but looking back it was a good thing. It was also a sort of abusive relationship. Again, Church became a place that causes Sarah to feel deeply sad. She hates that, but it remains true to this day.

She is a composer, and music is her prayer. After her divorce she hit rock bottom. She was basically suicidal. She lost her music for a while... she moved into a rich woman’s mansion. Sarah lived on the third floor of the mansion. The first night there she slept for 50 hours straight. The rich woman would occasionally check on her to make sure she wasn’t dead. Sarah says there were healing spirits in that house, on the third floor. “Have you ever seen Lisa Williams, *Life Among the Dead?*” *No, I haven’t...* Sarah finds it so comforting. She really believes it, and feels close to her dead grandmother. This is the grandmother who was the wife of the grandfather who started the chain of sexual violence. Sarah remembers a dream about this grandmother when she was living in the mansion. Her grandmother, who could not sing in real life, was singing beautifully. She could actually feel her grandmother holding her hand, and she could smell her. Sarah and her roommate toasted on the day her divorce was final. It was the same day that Sarah’s nephew was born. Sarah still wanted marriage and family. So, after a while she went on eharmony.com and met the man who is now her husband. This is the ultimate marriage. She laughs more than ever, and after three years of marriage she is finding herself

opening up and trusting in new ways. Her music has come back. Now she finds God, or a higher power in nature... nature is like church to her.

Discovering the Imago Dei

Judith strikes me as kind, reserved yet passionate, smart and exceptionally articulate. I have learned much from her regarding survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Without knowing her intimately, I have held a deep amount of respect and gratitude for her due to the wisdom she shares and the skills with which she shares it. The wisdom and skills she shares stem from activist work around these issues. Today she tells me a more personal story in order to help my own project, of bearing witness to the spiritual aspects of survival.

She was raised in a conservative Christian home, in which gender roles were clearly defined. Men were the leaders and women were not. Her father was the pastor of their church and everything revolved around him. "There was a difference between the family at church, and the family at home... At Church, everyone had their shit together." Everyone in the family had that appearance anyway, even if it felt like things were falling apart at home. At home, her father was a tyrannical leader. If he was in a bad mood, and most of the time he was when he was at home, everyone was walking on eggshells. Her relationship with her dad was based on fear. He disciplined with a belt. Childhood memories are shadowy. However because of his behavior toward her as an adult, and because of things she has discovered in therapy, she believes he was at least sexually inappropriate with her when she was a child.

Church was the center of the family's social life, although she was often angry that church seemed to get the best of her dad. "It was also confusing to watch her dad make public proclamations about a loving God, and then behave like a tyrant at home." To this day she says, "I don't tolerate masculine images of God." The idea of a feminine image of God doesn't work either because her mother did not protect her from her father. Once when she tried to talk to her mother about this her mother responded, "If you can't support us, then don't be in contact with us." She has worked hard to keep contact with her family. If you tell Judith she can't do something, that is precisely the thing she will do. Of course her father felt threatened, and tried to stifle her strong spirit. Abusers don't like strong spirited women.

Seminary, and church leadership were for men. But she went to seminary. "for some reason" she says. She suggests that maybe it was to prove to her father that she could do it. Or to prove to the Church that women can do it. Somewhere she quietly slips in that she that she went because she was called of God. In seminary it is clear that she has natural gifts for preaching and teaching. Her peers and professors often called on her to preach, and once her dad came to hear her. In seminary Judith discovered that she was gay, and began the process of coming out to herself. Now her question of whether she would do church ministry was answered. She could not. She has a partner, and in her third year she comes out to her family. Her voice gets a little quieter as she tells me this triggered a serious depression. Her family's response confirmed the doctrine that she could not minister to people because she was unworthy and exceptionally sinful. This was devastating because ministering to people had been one of her core values since childhood. For a time her sister would disallow her from contact with nieces and nephews

After seminary Judith moved home. At that point she had not had the benefit of therapy and critical reflection on family dynamics. Rules at home were that she had to go to church. So she found a gay-friendly church and a gay-friendly counselor. After only a couple of months she found work in the nonprofit world. She was a caseworker for drug addicts. These are the most

hated people in society. They don't have a voice. She grew to love them. And although she was not allowed to talk about God or pray with them, she was doing ministry. This work naturally lead to advocacy work around issues of domestic violence and sexual assault in which there was slightly more room to use faith language.

Ironically as faith language became more normative in her work atmosphere, she has become less comfortable in church settings. Today she doesn't go to church. She suggests she struggles to find God. Much of her abuse was condoned in Church. Because she is a lesbian, she doesn't participate in Eucharist. While she believes God would welcome her to the Table, she does not participate with people who would shun her if they knew about her sexuality. She has left the church with a "fuck you" attitude.

Judith says her life is about trying to find the safe spaces, or at least safer spaces. She may never completely trust anyone. For community, she creates what she calls "family of the heart." These are the people who know her and love her for who she is. These are the people "who believe I am worth sticking around for." This is saying something because she herself does not always believe she is worth it, and when she doesn't believe it, she convinces others of the same.

The Bible has become patriarchal, but Judith does other spiritual reading, as a way of finding other points of access to God. Therapy has been another point of access to God. Not overtly, of course. But, Judith realizes that she has long been disassociating and many parts of her personality went underground. As she is getting to know herself, she is getting to know God. She says she realizes this may be problematic for some. It is like peeling the layers of an onion and getting closer to the center of that person God has created me to be. "God blew God's spirit into me." She can see her worth, and see what she calls her "child" and she can bring that light into dark places.

Nothing Like a Good Book

When I asked survivors about spiritual practices, one subject that came up repeatedly was the practice of reading. From psychology, spirituality to science fiction, survivors have latched on to books and expanded the cannon of material with which to heal. Judith and I share a love of books. Organizing them and displaying them on bookshelves is to be of first priority for both of us each time we move to new places. We agree that someone's display of books can tell you about hem. Judith now displays all of her lesbian books because she refuses to be closeted. I feel about my books as though they are my dear friends. Anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath writes, "Reading serious literature impinges on the embedded circumstances in peoples lives in such a way that they have to deal with them. And, in so dealing, they come to see themselves as deeper and more capable of handling their inability to have a totally predictable life." Readers have compared fiction to a religious text in that the answers aren't there and there is no closure. A good book gives you a sense of having "substance," and "having company in this great human

enterprise.”¹³ What follows is an annotated bibliography of some survivors’ favorite books and how those books have been meaningful to them in their own processes of relating, and making meaning after trauma.

The Armless Maiden: and other tales for childhood's survivors. ed. by Terri Windling. “These fairy tales, poems and other pieces by contemporary authors addressing child abuse and neglect. They are heartrending and powerful, and emphasize survival and the strength of survivors.” -**Hanna**

De Lint, Charles. *The Newford stories* “Many of the characters are survivors of child abuse and neglect who have formed families of choice and found ways to survive. The stories are beautiful and hopeful but do not suggest that survivors ever completely "get over" their histories. Instead, these are characters who choose to live kind, caring, and hopeful lives because they recognize the alternative.” - **Hanna**

Feehan, Christine. *The Dark series.* “These are romance novels with quite a lot of sex, so they will not appeal to everyone. The male characters are a non-evil species of blood-drinkers, each of whom must find his destined soul mate to save him from destruction. I appreciate her tendency to make romance heroes and heroines of lonely people with sad histories.” -**Hanna**

McKinley, Robin. *Deerskin.* “A retelling of the Donkeyskin story, in which the princess' father succeeds in committing incest. Hard and painful, but also a beautifully written story of survival which does not make it look easy.” -**Hanna**

Ward, J.R. *The Black Dagger Brotherhood series.* “These also are vampire romances, with lots of graphic sex. The male characters have ridiculous names, but give them a try and see if you can get past that. There is a boy in several of the books who is trying to deal with memories of having been molested. Also, one of the male characters (Zsadi) spent a hundred years literally as a sex slave, helpless and abused. In the early books he is considered to be damaged beyond hope of healing, but eventually falls in love and gets a happy ending, although it is neither easy nor a complete healing. Another character grew up with a viciously abusive father. His story (Lover Unbound) might bother some because of his interest in Dominance and Submission. Mostly I like these books because they are stories of deeply unhappy people finding love and happiness.” -**Hanna**

Tilda Norberg, *Concenting to Grace* and other books on Gestalt Pastoral Care. This is the method by which **Kristen** was able to embrace the healing ministry of Jesus for herself, and she now uses it with others in her own healing ministry.

¹³ Franzen, Jonathan. “Why Bother?” in *How To Be Alone*, (Picador: New York. 2003) 82-83.

Melody Beattie, *Codependent No More*. “The part of my detaching from my husband was reading this book, thinking Oh this is me! It was helpful for me in the process of getting away from him” -**Kristen**

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* series, especially the last book. This story helped **John** prepare for the ecclesial trial because it is a story in which ordinary folks are rising to an insurmountable task, knowing it is likely they will fail.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*: **John** can relate to the darkness. The hero fades into obscurity at the end and has deep scars.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D., *Women who Run with the Wolves*. This book used mythology that celebrated the female archetype as a wild wolf. **Sarah’s** nightmares became beautiful healing dreams about wolves. To this day Sarah loves wolves.

Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. This book has helped **Judith** to stop and be in the moment. “For traumatized people this is hard. We are always running because if we stop we will get caught. This practice of stopping to think about “now” as a safe place has been powerful.”

Ecclesial Room for Growth

My general sense before beginning this research was that churches and pastors were largely unprepared to engage issues of interpersonal violence. Even for the survivors who found themselves still committed to mainline Church participation, they each had concerns about voice, theologies of suffering, and social stigma. For those who find themselves pursuing other spiritual and communal avenues, their feelings of ecclesial betrayal or exclusion were particularly poignant. While my paper has primarily been focused on survivors’ experiences and voices, allowing them to make their own critiques, I wanted to get some sense of how pastors would respond if I, a concerned seminary student (and somewhat of a colleague) raised these issues. What follows is short summary of my interviews with pastors. Hopefully in my rendering of the stories, the analyses of the institutional inadequacy in even recognizing these issues will be self-evident. Pastor David, because of his dual role as survivor and pastor seems most informed about practical, theological and communal issues related to domestic violence and speaks most eloquently to the need for seminaries to equip pastors to address these issues theologically and practically.

I was Under-equipped

The first pastor I “cold-called” was Pastor Mark. He is the pastor of a mainline suburban church in the Midwest. I asked him about his experiences in ministry and the issue of domestic violence or sexual violence. He says that he had no training in seminary on this issue, and really

felt under-equipped to deal with it. But when he was pastoring a church in a poor, rural area he was constantly involved with pastoring several women fleeing violent husbands. The pastor's emergency fund would provide money for them to be in different hotels for stretches of time. The body of the Church community was not aware that this was going on. He was able to tell these women that this was not God's will for their lives. Theodicy is the ongoing question from parishioners. Mark says he takes the "logical approach." Unwilling to give up the goodness of God, he tells people that God is not all-powerful. Parishioners from a fundamentalist background struggle with thinking that the Bible and God say its okay for "my husband to be the head of me." Pastor Mark suspects abuse happens in suburban churches too, but here "people have the resources to cover it up." Mark's goal for educating the church is to focus on teaching Disciple Bible Study which emphasizes God as lifting up and caring for people in need."

I've Never Dealt with These Issues in Ministry

The second pastor I "cold-called" was Linda, from a liberal protestant mainline denomination. She is the associate pastor in her church and her ministry is that of adult education and providing pastoral care. She agreed to meet with me although in all of her years of pastoral counseling she has not come across these issues. Given the statistics this sounded suspect to me and so I thought if I met with her and started talking I would learn something.

I begin by telling her about my project and mention the statistics of women and men who have experienced sexual violence, and all forms of abuse. She says that she will occasionally mention issues of violence against women from the pulpit in order to let people know that she is a safe person to talk to. She took a lot of pastoral care classes in seminary, but never learned about this issue specifically. "You can't address all of the issues. The main thing is relating people. If you get the basics you can always pick up extra training along the way." Early on she went to a training on domestic violence and pastoral care. She also volunteered in a domestic violence shelter, which wanted a pastor who would counter the church messages that women should stay with violent men. *I ask her what is the tenor in her congregation around this issue? Do people in Bible studies ask about texts of terror, or texts in which violence against women is promoted, or the house hold codes?*¹⁴ She says everyone here reads scripture through the life and teachings of Jesus. Because of this hermeneutic, people aren't concerned with texts that would support violence.

I know this kind of language as a very liberal protestant hermeneutic. When I was an active liberal protestant I would have been appalled to think people even take the household codes seriously. I start to wonder about how precisely the stigma around these issues functions in a "progressive church." I suspect progressive churches are just as afraid to recognize these issues in the midst of their own self-conscious identification with justice issues. There would be more analysis to be done if I had any sort of longevity of relationship here.

Pastor and Survivor

Some weeks ago I "cold-emailed" Pastor David, another pastor of a mainline, suburban protestant church. His response to my email was quick and welcoming. It read, "I think I can be especially helpful to you as both a pastor and a survivor." He then invited me to make an

¹⁴ The Household Codes are part of a Pauline Epistle in the Christian New Testament that say "wives should submit to their husbands, etc."

appointment to talk with him. When we finally did connect, he identified his two priorities in ministry. They are, “issues of sexual and domestic violence” and “helping seminary students.”

“The Church talks a good game about the family, but when it comes to seminaries teaching about violence they get an F.” Pastors need to know and utilize the lawyers, and physicians in their congregation, and in the community. In terms of pastoral care with victims, it is important to tell them that they haven’t done anything wrong. “A lot of what has been beaten into them is that they somehow they deserved it, asked for it, it was justified. That sort of thing is never, never, never deserved.” Forgiveness is the second big issue. Pastor David uses the scripture to say that when Jesus forgave someone he said, “go and sin no more.” A lot of times with domestic violence we are dealing with repeat offenders. It is most difficult to give pastoral care to offenders. The most important thing a clergy person can do is get them professional help as soon as possible. “As clergy we often don’t know when to make referrals.”

Pastor David feels strongly that people in the Church truly care about these issues but there is a strong reluctance to talk about it. *I ask him what he thinks the silence is about.* He thinks that people are protecting their friends who they know are perpetrating violence. *I also think there is a general “family systems” kind of anxiety about upsetting the entire community.* Pastor David says, “We need to have an open honest dialogue. In the Truth, the Lord will set us free. So lets all live in the truth.”

I finally summoned the courage to ask Pastor David if he would be willing to tell me about his own story of survival. After his wife died, he got married again quickly, as a way of trying to get on with his life. Of his five children, two were in college and three were in the seventh grade when his wife died. He had reason to believe his next wife began doing Cocaine and was definitely coming home from work drunk. She would sometimes physically attack Pastor David, and his teenage daughter would have to pull her off of him. “I was afraid something may happen to me or one of my kids. I took a domestic violence order against her.” A physician from his church came and physically removed her from their home. The Church Pastor David was pasturing was supportive of he and his family during this time. “That whole experience made me more aware of how my parishioners were going through things much worse than I was.”

Survivors Best Practices

I want to revisit the survivors’ initial response to my proposal that this was such an “important” project. These survivors have underwritten a strong critique of the institutional silence in the face of violence, and even active participation in further abuse. Each participant has also helped to deconstruct any one “theology of suffering” or method for finding meaning and friends after an experience of violence. Overriding any one institutional doctrine and interpretation is a prioritizing of values such as: finding your voice or self-expression, defending yourself (Physically when necessary), refusing to let the violence have the last word, pursuing truth, being creative and resilient when looking for love and belonging, reading good books, building inclusive and just community.

Due to social stigma, the celebrating of these values as any kind of coherent community that doesn't look like a therapeutic support group is difficult for those for whom survivor status impacts religious and communal life in isolating ways. It would be unfortunate if the Church could not begin to talk openly and confessionally about its institutional participation in perpetuating this stigma, and even at times systemic violence, making a well financed effort to educate itself sociologically and theologically about interpersonal violence. The church needs to confess that it has failed to even try to protect, lift up, and be in solidarity among the survivors.

It would be perhaps more of a fantasy, if the church could begin to recognize a much wider circle of practices for sustaining physical and spiritual life and communally embed new sacred practices. Who are we, after all, to limit God by trying to define the Divine with earthly language and a limited set of practices? If my grandmother visits me after she dies, I will know the presence of God. If I discover God at the center of myself, I will be grasping God's love. If a self-defense class keeps me safe, I have God's protection. If a good piece of literature paints a realistic picture of hope, and gives me the encouragement and companionship to continue pursuing truth, justice and meaning in life, I will be grasping redemption. I look forward to hearing the survivors' feedback. I want to know what they think I did well, and where they disagree. I look forward to a continuation of their inclusive community.

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Appendix: Original Proposal

Excavating Silence: sharing healing and resistance in a violent culture

What/Why:

I have come to think of sexualized violence as a large systemic problem, and the silence around these issues makes it difficult to create communities and practices of solidarity in support of survivors. I would like to explore ways in which religion and culture bear upon survivors both positively and negatively in order to start thinking more intricately about broader practices of solidarity with survivors, and creative acts of resistance against the wide spread cultural phenomenon.

How: “Ethnography” / interview project

I would like to personally interview both survivors and religious/spiritual leaders. In this interview you can only share what you are comfortable sharing. The information you share with me will be kept confidential, and any details of the story that you feel would give away your identity would be left out of the final paper.

In interview with *survivors*: I would ask about the ways in which experiences of personal violence impacts survivor’s spiritual lives and/or relationships to their communities of faith or culture (*terms such as “violence,” “spiritual,” and “faith (or supportive) communities” are as broadly and loosely defined as you want them to be*).

More specifically, I am interested in hearing stories of:

- How you are surviving and/or healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually; ways you make sense or meaning post-trauma,
 - This could include practices such as art, writing, listening to or making music, prayer, scripture, yoga, friends, specific movies, books, television, magazines, being part of a community, (this is basically all inclusive)
- How your religious communities, sets of personal beliefs or morals, doctrines, practices have helped your healing process, or aspects of your traditions, communities, doctrines and practices that have become more difficult.
- Your thoughts and ideas about aspects of your faith traditions/communities that might relate to either the prevention or perpetuation of violence against women.
- Anything else this conversation brings to mind that you would like to share

In interviews with *Religious/spiritual leaders/practitioners*:

I am interested hearing your thoughts on how to deal with issues of relationship violence that arise in the community you are leading, and what aspects of your tradition you think are helpful and harmful to this problem. To what do you attribute this problem? What is the tenor of the community around this issue? Do people ask questions about the Bible and violence, forgiveness, theodicy etc.? How did your higher education help or fail to prepare you for dealing with these issues practically, theologically, and spiritually?

CONTACT ME: If you are interested in contributing to this project.

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I am finishing up course work for my Master's Degree at Duke Divinity School, and taking a class in Ethnography from the Religious Studies Department.
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