

The **MAST** *Journal*

Suffering

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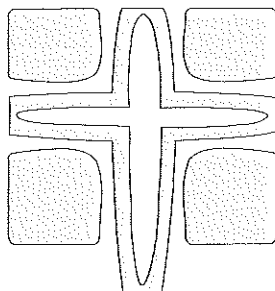
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Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

This issue on the theme of suffering describes life-altering experiences. These include caring for family members through terminal illness, acknowledging the violence of wartime rape after fifty years, and survival from the acts of violence, rape and incest. Hopefully, confronting the reality of evil in spiritual direction involves claiming for the self an image of healing and transformation that ennobles the sufferer and recontextualizes the suffering.

One pervasive suffering that deforms the spirit of women, because of its enormous demographic sweep, is domestic violence. Its universal effect as an assault on the dignity of all women was acknowledged at the Beijing International Conference on Women in 1995. Even if a Mercy Sister or Associate did not grow up in a household burdened by the dynamics of violence, every one of us knows someone who has—a classmate, a coworker, a former student, a friend, a relative. U.S. statistics offer sober estimates of the relation between poverty and violence. A major cause of homelessness and poverty among women follows the breakup of the family unit and the flight of the woman and her children because of domestic violence. A major factor leading minors to run away from home is sexual violence.

One of six children in the U.S. lives in poverty. The racial factor cannot be analyzed apart from the violence factor. A well-to-do Caucasian woman, a manager in a Silicon Valley technology firm, gets verbally and physically abused a few blocks away from the emotionally terrorized woman she has not met, a less-educated immigrant newly arrived with her husband from India. On any given Sunday, as a priest looks out over his congregation, the statisticians say that at least 20 percent of the women listening to his homily have been or are being physically abused by their husbands. Fifteen to twenty percent of pregnant women have been physically abused while pregnant.

A good number of Sisters of Mercy confront these realities first hand. They work with state and local agencies, operating shelters for women who flee violent spouses, training these women for jobs, and facilitating their need to find housing for themselves and their children. These directors should have a substantive voice in addressing the agenda for the Institute Commission on Women in/of the Church. Their work deserves greater visibility in the Institute.

Why? Domestic violence does not only affect women who are married. The violence syndrome, because it touches the lives of all women, has an insidious effect when it seeps into ecclesial structures, toxifying the relations of men to women in the Church and women to each other in community. Women who have survived a battering relationship in marriage typically say that the physical violence is secondary to the emotional reign of terror and the constant barrage of verbal humiliation which demeans a woman, breaking down her confidence and self-respect. Human beings are traditionalists. We “hand on” what we ourselves have received, what we have been taught about the status of women, and what we have absorbed by osmosis from the culture of violence which degrades women.

Violence—in the home, in the Church, in an intimate relationship, in the community—is a mimicking of power relations observed in the family, a learned attitude toward women and “lesser” persons such as children and the elderly, a learned way of expressing power or a position of authority. Violence takes the form of internalization. Women depreciate themselves, accepting the “lesson” of their inferiority, fearing candor lest they offend, fearing to act lest they be disapproved, fearing to dissent lest they be intimidated into submission. A tradition of violence against women creates a climate of fear and uncertainty among women in relation to authority, even when the authority is female. Such a climate extinguishes the means of imagining a future for religious life because violence fosters a preoccupation with gaining security now and preserving peace at all costs.

Women do not find a path through the forest of violence to the clearing of self-respect without the assistance of other women. The charisma of Mercy, expressed in Catherine McAuley’s determination to establish a house to protect young women from sexual predation, inspires Mercy women to give special attention to the forms of suffering borne by their own gender.



Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

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Suffering

No Answers, Only Response

Maureen Crossen, R.S.M.

Author's Note:

September 11, 2001, Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. Early in this article, I mention that the events of the twentieth century changed the way of thinking about God and the problem of evil and suffering. We can be sure that the horrific events of September 11, 2001 and the consequent responses to this tragedy will change our thinking once again about God, evil, and suffering. Yet, however we think this through, what will not change is "the Word made Flesh." Whether our "silence-in-awe" is a response to a "terrible beauty" in suffering, or to the horrific, unimaginable extent of suffering caused by human beings against human beings, faith in "the Word made Flesh" will always challenge us to see Christ in the bodies of others, even those who are our enemies. In our response, "may we be made worthy of the promises of Christ," and may God be with all people of the earth.

One of the things that I've learned in my studies on suffering and through experience is that I vacillate between considering whether suffering is a problem or a mystery. I teach a course entitled "The Problem of Suffering" but as soon as we get into the phenomenon of suffering from a theological perspective, I find myself referring to the mystery of suffering. The philosopher Gabriel Marcel offers a helpful distinction between a *problem* and a *mystery*. A *problem* is something to be solved, a *mystery* is something that we encounter, that we live, that draws out of us a commitment.¹ This distinction becomes clear when all efforts to alleviate a certain kind of suffering as a problem fail. Then one attempts to live the experience. The living of this mystery occurs in many ways, as I will try to point out in the section below on *Responses to Suffering*. But let me return to the course I teach.

One semester I had a particularly engaging group of students who, with great depth, truly scrutinized the phenomenon of suffering, first as a theological problem, and then through personal experi-

ences. After an unusually heavy dialogue that included strong demands on God to justify suffering and some very poignant, tragic stories of personal suffering, a reflective pause came over the class. The silence was broken by a student who said, "Sister, why don't you call this course 'The Power of Suffering.'" She caught me off guard. She recognized that every person who had told her or his story that evening had somehow acquired a new kind of power. By power, I mean, an ability, an energy—dare I say a gift—that acts as an agent of the deepest change or transformation in one's life. In the stories she had heard, this student recognized power in her fellow students who had gained a new strength of character, or wisdom, or insight, or even, for many, a closeness to God that never could have or would have been achieved without the experience of suffering.

It is up to each of us to reflect upon whether suffering is a problem, a mystery or a power in our lives. Certainly in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, the Christian gospel and the legacy of the Mercy tradition, we recognize the problems of suffering and passionately address these through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The mystery and the power are the heart of contemplation, prayer, and faith-sharing. Ultimately, however, real experiences of suffering put us face-to-face with God, or at least with whom or what we thought about God.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the image of God has undergone a radical change. Although the God of love and mercy will always be a real problem of suffering, the old classical theology of an invulnerable, omnipotent God, as the unmoved mover has been rendered a significant and tremendous blow. The suffering of the twentieth century cries from Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Bataan, Argentina, South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, El Salvador, and on and on, forced theologians and ministers to look to a different understanding of God, a God more

ancient in Christian theology than the unmoved invulnerable God of philosophy. They heard the God of Israel and Rachel. It was this God who heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt (Exodus 2:23–25) and the cries of a mother's inconsolable grieving over her dead children (Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:18). The God of Israel and Rachel² was not unmoved. The God of Israel and Rachel responded to suffering and was moved to action.

The image of the God of Israel and Rachel is revealed as Emmanuel, God-with-us. According to Abraham Heschel, unlike the unmoved God or the capricious gods of other nations, Israel had “no *idea* of God. What they had was an *understanding* . . . To the prophets [of Israel] God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present.”³ Israel had a keen awareness of God's ability to suffer with them (com-pathos, com-passion). No amount of security or comfort could ease the tense memory that “we were slaves in Egypt” and that our “children are no more.” The awesome history of Israel's relationship with God is a story of knowing God through their history of suffering. God's presence was experienced through the *shalom* or the *wholeness* of the community. If a member was in need or want, it was the responsibility of the community to respond. God's presence even stretched the limits of the community's responsibility, for they were also “to welcome the stranger.” The problem of suffering called for the community to respond as the agents of God's justice and mercy.

Although this “understanding of God” does not ease all of the tension involved in the problem of suffering and God, it does reveal God's essence as love and compassion much more clearly than the unmoved, unchangeable theology.⁴ Contemporary theologies, although varied and many, tend to move in Heschel's direction, that is, away from an *idea* about God removed from the scene, to the question of *understanding* who God is, or where God is in the event of suffering.

With this very quick background to the change in our understanding of God in the problem of suffering, I would like to move to the more precise and striking moment of the revelation of God in suffering by presenting the human responses to suffering. In the responses is the intimate, incarnate revelation of God. As I mentioned in the example from my class, many incredible things happened to

the students because of the suffering they endured. What began perhaps as a problem, soon drew them into an encounter (mystery) with themselves, and/or a loved one, and God that revealed a unique power in them never before experienced. So I would like to present three response to suffering that I have observed in the stories of others, or that I have experienced myself along the way. As my theological luck would have it, each of these responses is evidenced and reflected in Scripture and in Catholic theology. This then will be a weaving together of those stories and the wisdom handed down from those who have gone before us in faith. It is not conclusive. The experience of suffering by the reader may not resonate with these responses. The reader may have a fourth or fifth response. Nevertheless, this is the little wisdom that I have gained in my studies of the theology of suffering and my participation in suffering with others.

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Responses to Suffering

From a theological point of view, people tend to respond to suffering in three ways: lamentation, thanksgiving, and, what can best be described as silence-in-awe. Sometimes these three happen singularly in an experience of suffering. Sometimes they occur simultaneously. And sometimes, they spill over into one another. No one response is better, more perfect, or more faith-filled than the other. To suggest otherwise is dangerous in that it can cause guilt for the sufferer and arrogance to the community through its judgement. Nor are these responses based on a person's emotional or psychological response. Rather, they are based on faith, that is, how one encounters God in the event of suffering. For example, the emotional

response of depression to serious illness or loss may appear to be a lament, but that does not exclude the potential for silence-in-awe. A part of the mystery of the revelation of God is that only deep within the sufferer is their most authentic response known. Each of the three responses is an opportunity for encounter with God, as well as a revelation of God to the one suffering and to her or his community.

Lamentation

I once held a dear friend who had just found her youngest brother dead from a dose of bad drugs. Her parents had both died of cancer six and eight months prior to her brother's death. Holding her, I could physically feel her world shattering. She trembled with such grief, and screamed with such fury, that I was certain that every living being within miles must have been aware that Jimmy had died. Like Rachel of old, Ruth was inconsolable. There were no words to comfort her.

Lamentation, crying out, this inconsolable mourning, is a raw response to suffering. In ancient Israel, as in many cultures even today, the lament was an ascribed role of women. Hence, it is Rachel moaning over her lost children that Jeremiah hears, not father Jacob.

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One of the few public roles allowed to women, this crying out was an audacious challenge to God, like the question: WHY? Though wordless, the lament shrieked out to God: Something is wrong here! Dead wrong! Do something now!

In her landmark book, *Suffering*, Dorothee Soelle presents three phases of suffering based on language.⁵ Phase one she calls mute or speechless. In

this situation, the suffering is so devastating that the sufferer is numb, mute. An inability to articulate the suffering enhances the isolation caused by suffering and reveals a sense of powerlessness felt by the sufferer. Phase two is lamentation. By crying out, the suffering is accepted and acknowledged, opening the way for conquering it. Phase three is the language of change. This is met through solidarity with others who can help shape the situation. One of those others who can help shape the situation is God.

Lamentation in Scripture is always addressed to God. The most familiar lament of both Hebrew and Christian Scripture is Psalm 22 (also Mark 15:34): "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" As a testimony to the deep faith of the psalmist and of Jesus, it is important to note to whom this anguishing question is addressed: *MY* God. The "my" is most significant. It is a confession of faith. It recognizes God and demands to understand how God is to be revealed in this suffering.

In the lament, the one suffering experiences the dreaded hiddenness of God. Yet the hiddenness of God is as much a part of revelation as is God's presence. Forsaken by God, the sufferer remembers with vivid hope the acts of deliverance that God has done. Rather than give oneself over to the powerlessness or nothingness of death, the sufferer cries out: WHY? To maintain a confession of faith with the proclamation "MY God," did not deter the one who was forsaken from exclaiming the strong protestation: Why have you forsaken me? Faith and protest are the language of lament. Biblical scholar Andre LaCocque uses the terms *plea* and *praise* here. "Plea and praise mean living. Life is lived between the two poles of lament and praise. This tension is brilliantly expressed by bringing the two together in the same psalm. Plea is accompanied by praise; praise by plea. Plea without praise is despair, absence of hope; praise without pleas is complacency, arrogance."⁶ Praise however does not absolve God of God's responsibility for suffering. Lament remains a challenge to God to be faithful. For instance, Jesus apparently could tolerate the abandonment of his disciples, his family, his religious leaders, but God? God is the one to whom Jesus puts the cry of lament: Why? Paradoxically lament recognizes that there is no one else but God who can change the suffering of the one who cries out.⁷

In an essay entitled “Lamentation as Prayer,” philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests that today, lamentation provides an authentic experience of God.⁸ While it seems to have fallen to the wayside, lamentation expresses a radicality of faith in God and demands that God pay attention to what is happening in history. Lament protests that if God is in his heaven all is *not right* with the world! While human beings may be able to resolve much of the suffering in the world caused by injustice and oppression: can we? Will we? And why should we? Lamentation reaches into the depths of love and demands that God speak to us, act again in history by becoming “shatteringly present,” to rupture the heavens and change this situation!

The power of lamentation as a response to suffering is being cried out in the voices of so many in the world today. As Soelle suggests, following lamentation there is the opportunity for changing the situation of suffering. Through lamentation to God, hope is revived. However, God responds to the cries in history through the body of God’s people. The church is held accountable to respond as much as God does for situations that causes suffering. The lament is a challenge to all those who hope in God. Nelly Ritchie, a Methodist minister from Argentina, reflecting on the widowed mother who mourns the death of her only son in Luke 7:12–15 says that for women in Argentina “when they take a child away from a woman, they also take away her fear.”⁹ Fear-less women who have lost a child through death or disappearance cry out before their oppressors with the demand for justice. Their cries are to be heard by all those who join them in wanting to overcome the injustice that causes suffering. Their plea offers no praise to the oppressors, or even to those who support the women. Rather, their plea cries out with praise to God, who can save their children even in death (cf. Hebrews 5:7–10). Like Israel, the church, all people of God, are challenged by the cries of those who suffer to right the wrong, to heal the wound.

Thanksgiving

One beautiful October afternoon in Fort Lauderdale in 1998, my brother Terry and I were driving home from a most devastating doctor’s appointment. He’d been told that the cancer in his neck was incurable, there was no way to judge how much time he had. We

could not speak to each other, only sob in each other’s arms. In the car, I broke the sad silence: “Can you tell me how you feel right now, Ter?” My brother, a very private man answered immediately. “I feel what I told you I felt when the lump first appeared in May, I am so thankful for today and for every day. There is a line from a poem or something that keeps going through my head: I’m thankful for everything and when I think of it all, I am filled with joy.” I burst into tears and cried, “That’s Philippians 1:3.” “What?” My agnostic brother nearly laughed. “I’ve never quoted Scripture before, how would I know that!” I don’t know how he knew it, but he did. I also don’t know how he faced the agony of that diabolical illness that left him unable to swallow, filled with anxiety, deep in depression, and yet, he was able to give thanks. In fact, the last words I heard him speak before he died were “Thank you.”

Thanksgiving or gratitude in the face of suffering is a baffling response.

Thanksgiving or gratitude in the face of suffering is a baffling response. Thanksgiving is the fitting response of one who has received a gift. In my brother’s situation, in any situation of suffering, it is impossible to consider suffering as a gift. But, as Terry lived out, it was not the sickness that was the gift. It was seeing life in the face of death. The gift was an intense appreciation for life. Authentic gratitude is not superficial. It is a deep, uncomfortable, even embarrassed response to a gift that comes as true surprise, a gift that opens a new awareness to life and relationships. Often a gift turns the receiver to focus on her or himself. However, a gift that opens a new awareness to life and relationships draws the receiver more deeply into an encounter with the one who gives the gift. The gift itself acts as the outward sign, a sacrament, if you will, of the love between giver and receiver. Writing on the experience of a life-threatening disease Patrick Malone reflects on gratitude. “The enduring lesson of gratitude—the genuine kind that stirs our soul and humbles our arrogance—comes at a great cost . . . It is an acknowledgment that our lives will be forever unfinished,

unbalanced, uncertain, and untamed. It is waking up to how much this would glitter with holiness. And when we wake up, we wonder how we could have missed what now seems so obvious.”¹⁰

Malone’s insights are lived out in these accounts. A friend’s fiancé was stung by a bee. He died in her arms within minutes. When I arrived at Betsy’s that evening I was greeted with, “I am so thankful. Larry said ‘I love you’ then he died in my arms.” Etty Hillesum, a prisoner in a concentration camp, surrounded by despair, suffering, death, and raw evil, saw a rainbow one morning, and was so delighted that it was apparent on her face. The other prisoners thought she had heard news of liberation. “I couldn’t fob them off with the rainbow, could I?—even though that was my only reason for cheerfulness.”¹¹ Etty had decided early on in this experience that she would make it a daily task not only to look for beauty in this ugliness, but especially, she would search for the “spark of God” in the soldiers who inflicted the suffering.

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If lamentation is a response to God’s hiddenness in suffering, thanksgiving is a response to God’s presence in suffering. Thanksgiving does not avoid the sadness necessitated in a situation of suffering. There is always grief in letting go or in an experience of powerlessness. However, thanksgiving draws on the deep joy that comes from love. It stakes a claim on the hope that God makes all things new, in spite of the uncertainty of how newness will occur. In *The Prophetic*

Imagination, Walter Brueggemann describes this response to suffering in terms of “a language of amazement.”¹² Through a language of amazement, those who suffer recognize that God is the one, the only one, who can bring about newness in the experience of suffering. This hope in God is rooted, not only in what God has done in the past (lamentation), but in the signs of God’s presence now, which promise a better future, such as the rainbow over the camp that inspired Etty Hillesum. The hope generated through amazement expressed in thanksgiving “redefines the situation”¹³ of the one who suffers, or for those who suffer, if it is possible that such amazement can occur in a whole community. Amazement is enriched by the ability of the sufferer to give thanks to God for the gift of this awareness, in spite of suffering.

Silence-in-Awe

Somewhere before or within the awful suffering that cries out in lamentation, somewhere after or within an act of thanksgiving in suffering that makes one aware of how precious life is, there is a response to suffering best described as *silence-in-awe*. It is the awful, awe-filled recognition that one has come face to face with God. In *Lament for a Son* Nicholas Wolterstorff grieves the death of his twenty-five-year-old son, Eric, who died in a mountaineering accident. This father comes to see in his suffering how it is that God suffers. He had thought that seeing God’s face meant seeing God’s glory and that this is why no one could behold God’s face. But his glance at God’s face was God suffering. A friend sheds light on Wolterstorff’s experience: perhaps God’s suffering is God’s glory.¹⁴ The friend’s insight echoes the climax in John’s Gospel where the Cross is the “hour of glory.” However, this revelation leaves one speechless, silent in the awe of the mysterious God who dares to be revealed in suffering.

The example par excellence of this response to suffering is the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. In the psalms of lamentation and thanksgiving, the speaker confesses her or his sin or claims of innocence. However, in this poem “others declare the innocence of the sufferer and confess their own sins.”¹⁵ The servant never speaks, indeed, the poet twice comments, “he opened not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7). While this silence could be an admission of guilt, it is not perceived as such. No one can make

sense of the servant's suffering. Kings and nations are speechless (52:15). They seemed so overwhelmed that they are paralyzed, helpless to aid the servant. The people of Israel, characterized as the first person plural "we," however, become engaged in a process of conversion on seeing the Suffering Servant. "We" know this fellow, but "we" never paid attention to him. Surely he was being punished by God, or so "we" thought. But then "we" make a confession: yet it was our infirmities that he bore, he was crushed for our sins (53:4, 5). The servant is silent, defenseless, but he is not powerless. His suffering effects change in the community. His suffering calls the community to see their sins and to accept responsibility for the alienation of the suffering servant.

The silence of the servant is enhanced by two more dynamics in the poem. First, the servant is claimed by God from beginning to end in the poem. He is called "my" servant (52:13 and 53:11, 12). God's claim of "my" serves as a poetic embrace around the servant. Although there is no explicit mention that the servant feels the embrace, there is indication that he is not hopeless in his suffering. His silence suggests that he is in awe of God, in spite of his suffering. The servant gives his life for others, specifically for their sins (53:10) and he sees his descendants in a long life, a sign of blessing. He also sees the light in fullness of days (53:11). God gives him his portion among the great (53:12). If the servant's disfigured body was enough to render kings and nations dumbstruck, his hope for the future in the midst of his suffering, his assurance that God was with him, was even more incredulous to "us" because he is the one who is claimed by God.

Christians, of course, cannot help but see this Suffering Servant as Jesus Christ, who offered his life, suffering, and death, as sacrifices for our sins. As Catholics, when we behold a crucifix, we see the *body* of the Suffering Servant of God. This symbol should not be overly glorified, but should render us silent-in-awe of the God who historically and physically suffered for us and with us. The sight of the body on the cross should not freeze a moment and one person in history. Rather, the body on the cross opens up history as a history of suffering and God's presence *here and now* in suffering bodies.

A Catholic understanding of the Eucharist reveals this presence of God in suffering bodies based on the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ on the

cross. We say that it is "the body of Christ" that we receive in the Eucharist. It is "the body of Christ" that we, the Church, become. In Catholic theology when we say "body" here we mean "body." Not the symbol of a body, not the memory of a body, but the real body and blood of Jesus Christ. We say "amen" to the broken crucified-risen body of Jesus Christ, who maintains the marks of his suffering even in his resurrected body. God has become flesh, not for thirty-three odd years in the first century. God has become flesh in all bodies, in all flesh. The awful, awesome revelation of God in Jesus Christ is that we are to seek God in the bodies of others, most especially in those who suffer. How can we say we love God if we do not love our sisters and brothers who, in their suffering, represent God to us? "Who would believe what we have heard? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (Isaiah 53:1). If receiving *the body and the blood* of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist still holds any awe or mystery at all, it must point to the mystery of God's suffering in the body and blood of sufferers throughout the world.

When we experience suffering within ourselves or with those around us whom we love and serve, we are called to broaden our compassion for those who suffer through out the world. It is possible to have *com-pathos*, to suffer with others, because a response to the overwhelming suffering in the world as silence-in-awe is a sign of the revelation of God incarnate in all suffering. When direct response to suffering alludes us and even when it consumes us through our compassion and service, silence-in-awe draws us to contemplate God in the prayer of silence. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on a visit to the United States in 1984, encouraged an American congregation to be faithful to prayer, even when you feel like "there is a dryness."¹⁶ If you are faithful, even in silence, then your fidelity to prayer allows for God's grace to spill into the heart of a tortured prisoner who may be tempted to turn to bitterness and hatred for his torturers. Yet, for one more day, he or she continues to see the enemy as God's children. Tutu asks, "How is that possible unless you have prayed him into that state of grace."¹⁷

Tutu's insight on fidelity to prayer expresses well what is meant by the mystical body of Christ. This sacramental expression of the Eucharist comes about when the body of Christ, which we receive, is recognized as the awful, awesome presence of Christ in

those who suffer throughout the world. The unity the sacrament signifies¹⁸ is not detached from the reality of the world. The mystical body of Christ “demands that this body should be the fullness, the revelation of Christ himself in and through the whole of humanity.”¹⁹ Suffering is the one, true, universal—catholic if you will—experience shared by human beings. Would that the shared experience were love or beauty, but it is not. Suffering should, at some time, fill us with silence-in-awe because it is in suffering—our own, that which we share with others, and that which seems so remote to us—that God is revealed. Through the experience of the mystery of suffering, we enter into a fullness with God through Jesus Christ. Any encounter with God leaves us in awe. It does not leave us in powerless fear. Rather, it offers us a deep faith, filled with awe that yearns to alleviate, or at least, to be present to those who suffer.



There are no answers to suffering in our lives, nor to God's will or reason for suffering. There is only our response to suffering. Whether the response is lamentation, thanksgiving, or silence-in-awe, the power of these responses reveals the mystery of God. The God of Israel, Rachel, and Jesus Christ hears the cries of those who suffer and offers hope and mercy through an amazement that makes all things new. And deep, deep within the suffering, God waits to show God's true glory and compassion. When you reflect on your response to the experience of suffering in your own life and in the world, what power lies ready in you with the question of praise, amazement and awe: Who would believe what we have seen? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? (Isaiah 53:1).



Editor's Note: Sister Maureen's brother Vince was diagnosed with cancer two weeks after she submitted this article. He died one month later.

Notes

- 1 Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans., Kathleen Farrer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), pp. 154–175.
- 2 Perhaps I need to explain my addition of Rachel's name in reference to the God of Israel. Israel, of course, was the name given to Jacob after his victorious struggle with the messenger of God. The name “Israel” means one who contended with God (Genesis 32:29). Rachel is the second wife of Israel (Jacob), the one he truly loved. Centuries after her death, as the people of Israel suffered the abominations that led to their exile, Rachel is “heard wailing for her children” who have died because of violence and injustice. Both Israel and Rachel are essential for understanding God in a biblical theology of suffering.
- 3 Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, II (Peabody, Mass: Prince Press, 1999), p. 1.
- 4 For a very good, brief summary and insights into the changes in theology from God as the unmoved God to the suffering God, see Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *The Christian Century* 103 (April 16, 1986): 385–389.
- 5 Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 70–74.
- 6 Andre LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 188–89.
- 7 LaCocque, p. 190.
- 8 Ricoeur, pp. 230–232.
- 9 Nelly Ritchie, “Women and Christology” in *Through Her Eyes—Women's Theology from Latin America*, edit. Elsa Tamez (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 85.
- 10 Patrick Malone, “Lessons Learned,” *America*, (March 5, 2001): pp. 20–22.
- 11 Ety Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerborn* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), p. 319.
- 12 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 69.
- 13 Brueggemann, p. 69.
- 14 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 81.
- 15 R. N. Whybray, “Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 4 (Sheffield, England, 1978): 116.
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The Suffering of Korean Comfort Women

Carol Rittner, R.S.M.

"You hear me speak. But do you hear me feel?"

Gertrud Kolmar
"The Woman Poet"
d. Auschwitz, 1943

In the summer of 1991, I met a Korean theologian by the name of Dr. David Kwang sun-Suh. At the time, he was dean of the Graduate School of Ewha Women's University in Seoul, Korea. We were both fellows at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Because of a book I had just edited with John K. Roth from Claremont McKenna College (California), David knew I had an interest in the experience of women during the Holocaust.¹ Shortly after leaving Cambridge, he wrote and asked me if I would read some essays written by a group of young Korean-American feminist scholars about the experience of Korean women during World War II. I almost said, "No, thank you!" because I was already over-extended, and besides, what did I know about Koreans and Korea?

But, luckily for me, I did read those papers, and what I discovered opened my eyes to another dimension of women's suffering during World War II and the Holocaust.

Korean Women's Suffering During WW II Overlooked

What women during the Holocaust and women during the Pacific War have in common is that their suffering has been largely overlooked by scholars. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that men and women alike have suffered the ravages of war and the horrors of the Holocaust. Men and women alike had their lives disrupted, their homes destroyed, their loved ones traumatized, maimed, and murdered. Still, I agree with Myrna Goldenberg when she writes that while women suffered the same hell as men, they often endured different horrors.² Many of those horrors specifically tied to their biology and gender, with rape one of

the most horrific. Still, while it seems almost callous to say this, there is nothing unprecedented about rape during war.

From time immemorial, women have been raped during war as casually or frenetically as a city, town, or village is looted or destroyed.³ In 1937, for example, two years before World War II broke out in Europe, the Imperial Japanese army invaded and occupied Nanking, China. It was accompanied with such free-wheeling sexual violence it became known as the "Rape of Nanking." In an effort to reinstitute some discipline among their soldiers, the Japanese Military Command revived an idea tried in Shanghai in 1932. They opened a series of "military recreation centers" in Japanese-occupied China. Agents of the Imperial Japanese Army were ordered to recruit Japanese *karayuki* [traveling prostitutes] for their troops in China, but unable to recruit a sufficient number of *karayuki* for the army's purposes, agents of the army's Special Service Branch, normally in charge of undercover or subversive activities, were assigned to recruit and entice young women from Korea (occupied by Japan since 1904) to work for the army.

The vast majority of these women were poor and illiterate, so when they were promised high

From time immemorial, women have been raped during war as casually or frenetically as a city, town, or village is looted or destroyed.

wages and benefits, many readily accepted, assuming they would be employed as cooks, maids, and laundresses for the emperor's soldiers, but they were mistaken. The Japanese had no intention of using these Korean women for menial household tasks. Their job description was different. Women and girls, some as young as twelve and fourteen years of age, were sent to the newly revived military recreation centers in China. There these chaste "daughters of Confucius" were forced to provide "sexual services" to Japanese

No one knows for sure how many women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese, but George Hicks, who wrote one of the first books in English about the "comfort women," estimates there were approximately 139,000 women and girls from all over Japanese-occupied Asia—Korea, Taiwan, Okinawa, China, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies, among other places—who were forced into the comfort system. About 116,000 survived the war and about 50,000 may still be alive today.⁵

mother in her mid-seventies, living in Australia. The stories they told left me speechless and amazed. These two women could have been—perhaps even should have been—defeated by forces in the human world that threaten and seek to destroy women, and yet not only were they not destroyed, but they survived to bear witness to the horrors we human beings are capable of inflicting on one another.

Kim Yoon-shim was so young when she was kidnapped that she "didn't know anything," but she learned quickly:

I was so terrified. There were countless times when I wasn't fast enough taking off my clothes; then those sinister soldiers would tear my panties off with their hands. I couldn't resist them, so I stopped wearing underclothes at night and only wore my dress. I got to the point where I could not bear any more, so I hid, but I was caught, and beatings and starvation were my punishment.

One day when I couldn't fight off an overly harsh soldier, he hurt me so much that I wasn't able to walk, nor could I go to the bathroom. I had to crawl around and continued to do my duties while crying. From then on, I lived with a permanently bent back, unable to stand or walk straight.⁶

Kim Yoon-shim survived the war and her sexual slavery. She made her way back to Korea, but she could never bear children because of what she had been forced to endure between 1937 and 1945. Her anger, justifiable and palpable, and her determination to bear witness, to not let the Japanese government evade their responsibility to the wo-

Whatever name one gives to these places—"comfort stations," "military recreation centers," or "brothels"—the system involved female slavery. No other term more accurately describes it.

troops, officers and enlisted men alike. Thus began what was to become a vast network of military brothels, or so-called "comfort stations," organized and managed during World War II by the Imperial Japanese Military Command.⁴

Whatever name one gives to these places—"comfort stations," "military recreation centers," or "brothels"—the system involved female slavery. No other term more accurately describes it. Women recruited or forced into this system literally were "owned" by the Japanese military. They had no control over their lives. Theirs was the "job" of providing sexual services on demand to members of the military, whatever their rank.

Report of Survivor Kim Yoon-shim

In March 1997, at a conference I organized at Magee College in Derry, Northern Ireland, I met two former "comfort women," Ms. Kim Yoon-shim and Mrs. Jan Ruff-Oherne.

In 1937, Kim Yoon-shim was a fourteen-year-old girl kidnapped from her remote Korean village and sent to a "comfort station" in Harbin, China. Today she is a woman in her mid-seventies, living in Korea. Jan Ruff-Oherne was a young Dutch woman living in the Dutch East Indies when it was occupied by the Japanese army. Today, she is a widow, a mother, and grand-

men who survived the military brothel system, have helped her endure her suffering for more than fifty years:

My crumbling body and my diseased uterus never allowed me the joys of having a child. My life has been hanging by a thread since the end of the war. This is what I want to say to the Japanese government: You must take responsibility for the sins of your forefathers, and the government must apologize for our situation. Those responsible for the crimes of war must be punished, and the nation must pay an indemnity for those crimes. Know this: Our memories are vivid. We will not forget. You will never be able to disclaim responsibility. We will not die. We will bear witness forever!⁷

Report of Jan Ruff-Oherne

The second woman, Jan Ruff-Oherne, was a young, unmarried nineteen-year-old Dutch woman living with her family in the Dutch East Indies. A devout Roman Catholic, she had wanted to be a nun, but the war prevented her from entering a convent. Instead, with thousands of other women and children, including her mother and sisters, she was interned in a Japanese prisoner of war (POW) camp for three years (1942–1945). In February 1944, she was “selected” for “special duty” by several Japanese officers strolling through the camp, singling out pretty white women. Ten women were selected, put on trucks, and taken to a place called Semarang. With six others, she was ushered into a house, where, she said:

We were made to understand that we were here for the sexual pleasure of the Japanese. We were to obey at all times, and we were not to leave the house. In fact, the house was guarded and trying to escape was entirely useless. We were terrified. All of us were virgins, and none of us knew anything about sex. We were so innocent. We tried to find out from each other what to expect, what was going to happen to us.

As I sat there waiting, fear completely overpowered my body. Even up to this day I cannot forget that fear. In a way it has

For three months, Jan Ruff was forced to “sexually service” Japanese soldiers. She no longer remembers how many violated her, but she did remember the day she discovered she was pregnant:

I was absolutely terrified. How could I give birth to and love a child conceived in such horror? Like pillars of strength the [other] girls gave me their support. They advised me to tell our Japanese female guard that I was pregnant. I approached the woman, and, as an answer to the problem, she produced a bottle full of tablets [intended

For fifty years, I could not talk about my wartime experiences. The shame was too great. I had no counseling. My healing process began when I was able to come face to face with my perpetrators, the Japanese people.

been with me all my life. As we prayed, I could hear the arrival of more and more military men to the house. We could hear their crude laughter and their boots treading the floor. We were ordered to go to our own rooms. We refused. We stayed close together, clinging to each other for safety. My whole body was burning with fear. It is a fear I can't possibly describe, a feeling I shall never forget and never lose. Even after more than fifty years, I still experience this feeling of total fear going through my body and through all my limbs, burning me up. It comes to me at the oddest moments; I wake up with it in nightmares and still feel it just lying in bed at night. But worst of all, [after the war] I felt this fear every time my husband made love to me.⁸

to destroy the fetus]. I could not kill a fetus, not even this one. It would be a mortal sin if I did, so I continued to refuse the tablets. Eventually they were forced down my throat. I miscarried shortly afterward.⁹

Surviving by Telling the Truth

How did Jan Ruff-Oherne survive such violence? How did she endure her suffering? How did she manage to go on with life after the war, even as she continued to be haunted by her past?

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come face to face with my perpetrators, the Japanese people. I am still haunted by the past. The scars, the pain, the fear, and the shame, did not stop at the end of the war. I never felt sorry for myself; rather [I felt] that all that happened to me was somehow God's plan for me. I am a survivor because of my deep faith in God.

I came to realize that healing comes through forgiveness and reconciliation. We cannot build a better future if our hearts are filled with anger, hate and revenge. Forgiveness must come from the side of the one who has suffered the violence. Over the years I longed for the opportunity to be able to show the Japanese people that I had forgiven them. I found the courage to speak out and be a witness at an international public hearing on Japanese war crimes in December 1992. At that time, I told the Japanese people that I had forgiven them for the atrocities done to me, but that I could never forget. To suppress the memory would be to perpetrate the violence. Through taking the initiative by forgiving the Japanese people, I also gave them the opportunity to say that they were sorry. A dialogue had started.

The energy for building a better future comes through confronting the cause of the suffering, through telling the stories, through being a witness, and through reconciliation.¹⁰

Rape is Still an Instrument of War

I am not a psychiatrist, nor am I a psychologist. I am a teacher, but one thing I've learned these past twenty-five years teaching about the Holocaust is that

survivors want to tell their stories. They need to tell their stories. This is an essential part of the healing process. Encouraging survivors to speak is not enough, however. Those who speak also need us to listen, to pay attention, to hear both their words and their feelings. As the epigram to this essay puts it, "You hear me speak. But do you hear me feel?"

Recently, I read Ann Llewellyn Barstow's book, *War's Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women*. Reading her book made me think again about Kim Yoon-shim and Jan Ruff-Oherne, because Barstow reminds the reader that the best-kept secret is the one we all know, but rarely talk about: the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war. (One only needs to recall, for example, the genocides in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda during the 1990s to remember how men on all sides of those conflicts used women's bodies as battlefields.) I also thought about them because of the questions posed by Aida Dizdarevic, a woman from Sarajevo, who also participated in the Derry conference. Barstow concludes her book with her questions. Aida wondered if at the close of World War II, former comfort women could have told the world about what had happened to them—and been heard—whether the Serbs would have dared to build rape camps in 1993? She wondered as well whether if the Allies had prosecuted crimes against women at the original Tokyo war crimes trials, would men have used rape and rape camps as weapons of

war and genocide since the end of World War II and the Holocaust?¹¹ I wonder as well.



Notes

- 1 Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York: Paragon House, 1993).
- 2 See Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed., Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 150–166.
- 3 Susan Brownmiller, "Making Female Bodies the Battlefield," *Newsweek*, 4 January 1993, 37.
- 4 George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), pp. 45–46.
- 5 Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, p. 19.
- 6 From the presentation of Kim Yoon-shim, "Even before the Heat from My Mother's Embrace Left My Body" at the conference, Men, Women & War, held in Derry, Northern Ireland, March 1997.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 From the presentation of Jan Ruff-O'Herne, "Cry of the Raped" at the conference, Men, Women & War, held in Derry, Northern Ireland, March 1997.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Jan Ruff-O'Herne. Personal correspondence with the author. September 1999.
- 11 Ann Llewellyn Barstow, ed., *War's Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), pp. 245–246.

Deadly Sins and Spiritual Direction

A Feminist Reflection

Rev. Susan I. Fowler

Introduction

The way we understand sin (in both its personal and corporate aspects) is formed and informed by culture, tradition, and revelation. It profoundly affects our understanding of others, our world, and ourselves.

This paper will look at traditional concepts of sin and how these have been used by our culture to oppress women's ways of knowing and being in the world. It will then present an understanding of sin from the perspective of feminist theology, which posits sloth as women's "deadliest sin" and show how sloth, the dissipation of self and agency and loss of power-in-relationship, is a function of women's lived experience in the culture of patriarchy, a system of dominance entrenched in social systems and institutions which profoundly distorts and diminishes women's ways of knowing and being in relationship with self, God, and others.

We will relate these understandings to women's spiritual journeys, suggesting clues for discerning patriarchy's influence in women directees' lives, and presenting some correctives that can be utilized by spiritual directors to empower women to move more fully into their lives and the life of God.

Traditional Understandings of Sin.

The basic view of sin in the Old Testament emphasizes the breakdown of the covenant relationship between God and humans caused by their rebellion and disobedience. Hebrew words frequently translated as sin include: missing the mark, rebellion, transgression, violating the covenant, and disobedience.¹ In the New Testament, sin continues to be understood as a denial of covenant through actions of injustice. In Paul's letters, particularly, the emphasis is on sin as lack of faith. Missing the mark means refusal to have a relationship of trust with

God. Both traditions emphasize the social aspect of sin, and its context in covenantal and community relationships.²

In classical Christian tradition, the doctrine of original sin as developed by Augustine in the fourth century also emphasized the radical nature of human separation from God. Augustine, who posited that everything has a place in the divine hierarchy of goodness, defined sin as a disorientation of desire, i.e., rejecting the inviolable (hierarchical) order created by God and substituting one's own perverse will. This radical tendency to disobey God Augustine defined as original sin.³

The doctrine further teaches that because of and since the original disobedience of Adam and Eve, all human beings have the innate propensity (transmitted biologically) to disobey God. This propensity is embodied in the capital sin of pride, in which one puts oneself in God's place (idolatry), refuses to acknowledge the relationship between Creator and creature, and lives a self-referential life, cut off from God, self and others.⁴

In later church traditions, however, sin takes on a quantitative aspect, shifting from an understanding of sin as a condition to sin as individual acts which can be overcome through participation in the Church.⁵

The basic view of sin in the Old Testament emphasizes the breakdown of the covenant relationship between God and humans caused by their rebellion and disobedience.

While both understandings of sin and redemption are positive in that they help us acknowledge our dependence on God's grace in order to restore us to right relationship with God, the focus on the privatization of sins prevents us from seeing the social dimension of sin (oppression) and fails to reflect the concern for social justice emphasized in both Hebrew and Christian Scripture.

Feminist theology proposes a radical way to reclaim both the religious dimension of sin (rebellion against God), and its moral and social dimensions (oppression and injustice) by recapturing the biblical understanding of mutuality-in-relationship as the essential norm for human relating.

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Feminist Understandings of Sin

Patriarchy as the Locus of Sin

Most modern-day theologians understand original sin not as our biological patrimony, but as a situation of personal and social alienation that all human beings experience.

Feminist and liberation theologians situate that alienation in the cultural condition of patriarchy. Reinforced by Augustine's notion of hierarchy and nature (which places women at a lower rung on the hierarchical ladder owing to biology, intelligence, and culture), patriarchy is a system that declares that certain inherently inferior people will always be at

the bottom or on the margins of society. As such, it distorts the nature of relationships by legitimizing and normalizing oppression of women and other non-dominant groups and maintains a dominance of power over them through control of culture and access to resources. In this system, women's reality is defined by the race, class, property, etc. of the men to whom they belong. They are derivative, that is, defined by the status of men.⁶

Patriarchy and Women's Sin

Contrary to Church tradition, pride may not be the deadliest sin, at least not for women. In the context of patriarchal culture, feminist theologians name sloth, and not pride, as "women's" sin. Sloth, classically understood as indolence, is the failure to do what is right when one has the autonomous freedom to do otherwise.⁷ In the context of feminist theology, however, sloth is loss of power-in-relationship, i.e., a dissipation and disorientation of autonomy and sense of self that results directly from the experience of oppression in a patriarchal system.⁸

Every woman has been the unknowing participant in that sin "that constricts and restricts human beings from the abundance of being-in-relation which is proper to them . . . which dissipates, blocks, disorients or counters the dynamics of genuine and full mutuality."⁹

And every woman has been its unwilling recipient; it is reinforced in the ways we are taught to see our roles (as selfless caretakers), in the ways we are inhibited from validating our experiences and expressing ourselves (silence in order to protect others), in the ways in which our contributions to the world go unrecognized and unvalued by those who control and therefore define culture.

Complicity in Our Own Oppression

Placing women's sin in its cultural context is very important. It helps us understand why, even though women have the inherent capacity for freedom and autonomy which is central to personhood (regardless of gender), we still comply in our own oppression simply by virtue of our participation in the dominant culture.

For women, the experience of oppression results in an internalization of patriarchal notions that equate different-ness with less worth, and re-

sults not only in feelings of shame and inferiority, but in the disorientation and dissipation of the power characteristic of that sin. Cut off from one's feelings and agency through external cultural oppression and internal denial, dissociation, or suppression of feelings, women are denied full participation in the normative divine-human pattern of being-in-relationship which forms and informs our sense of selves as relational beings.

I worked with a female directee who was trying to sort out her feelings about an out-of-wedlock pregnancy that happened when she was eighteen. She happened to ask me one day what I was working on, and when I described my work on feminist views of sin, she began to cry and related that she could never see her pregnancy as sinful, because it was the natural outcome of her love for her partner. Her sin, she decided, was that she lacked the courage to stand up to the authorities in her life (parents, church, etc.) who pressured her to give up her child and tell them she intended to keep the child and marry its father. This realization led to an outpouring of grief and anger, the beginning of self-forgiveness and healing, and reconciliation with her now-grown daughter.

The Task for Women

Given the feminist understanding of sin as distortion and loss of power-in-relationship, are women doomed to be held forever captive to the sins of oppression, sexism, and injustice embedded in patri-

Feminist theology suggests . . .
that salvation (the complete affirmation of one's true nature) rests both on the ability to break free of the cultural constraints of patriarchy and the personal sins of sloth and pride, and to move beyond them toward others in relationships of mutuality and justice.

archal systems and structures? Are we to resign ourselves to accepting our assigned cultural roles as caretakers? Must we settle for being less than who we might become?

Feminist theology suggests a different possibility: that salvation (the complete affirmation of one's true nature) rests both on the ability to break free of the cultural constraints of patriarchy and the personal sins of sloth and pride, and to move beyond them toward others in relationships of mutuality and justice. The blueprint for this transformation is given in scriptural notions of creation, covenant, and saving history.¹⁰

Radical Discernment A Different Way to Read the Signs

Situating the Locus of Divine Activity

Every spiritual director knows that one cannot locate the spiritual journey outside the context of culture and lived experience. If, as an incarnational theology suggests, the world is the locus of divine creative activity, then we can look to the history of God's creative and saving action on behalf of humankind for clues about how to companion women directees in ways that counteract the negative effects of patriarchy and point toward life-giving ways of being-in-relationship.

Radical Signs of Love

If pride is a refusal to acknowledge who one is before God, sloth is a refusal to claim one's selfhood, freedom and autonomy. Both reflect a distortion of the divine-human relationship seen in the Hebrew stories of creation and liberation.

The Genesis creation myths stress the essentially relational character of humans to God and to each other. Even while detailing humankind's disobedience against God, the stories still acknowledge the intrinsic goodness of persons because we are created by the source of goodness, and in God's image. As such, we possess an inherent dignity and worth and are to be seen not as objects or means for others' own pleasure or advantage, but rather as ends in ourselves.

The Exodus stories embody this divine-human relationship in the notion of covenant love and justice. Even as God liberated the Israelites from slavery

to freedom, we also, as persons called to enter into the life of God, are invited to live in right relationship with God and with each other, recognizing a partnership of equals and a manner of relating marked by the mutuality of knowing and loving which creates collaboration rather than competition, shared power rather than domination or submission.

If the divine-human relationship is to be normative for Christians, relationships will look very different from the model of domination-subordination normative in patriarchy. How do spiritual directors help directees identify and embody them?

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Relating to God

The issues of the self's relationship with God and how that relationship has been affected by patriarchal culture deserves mention here. Theologians such as Karl Rahner and Elizabeth Johnson have connected the development of self with the development of the experience of God and loss of self-identity with the loss of the experience of God.¹¹ One cause of such self-loss is attributed to the power of the dominant culture to devalue or silence women's ways of knowing and being in relationship. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, patriarchal ideology produces language and meaning for the sake of dominating and excluding women from defining the world and the meaning of human life and society.¹²

For spiritual directors and women directees, naming and reclaiming reality includes exploring the directee's relationship with God and her words and images for God. Does she use words like *punitive*, *dominating*, and *judging* to describe God? Is God the One with power-over who controls her life and the relationship? Does she feel like she has to be "nice" or

"good" in order to gain love and approval? All these words and images suggest that a directee has internalized the patriarchal model of relationship.

One simple way to open the directee to other ways of thinking about God is for the director to suggest that the directee look to other, more congenial signs of God's love by asking, "who or what is or has been love for you in your life?" and moving from there to an understanding of God as God-with-us in our human relationships of love.

A Caution Here

Patriarchal society defines love in a way which is essential self-referential to those in positions of dominance. As defined for women by patriarchy, love is care taking and nurturing at the expense of one's own freedom and growth. A feminist understanding of love is quite different.

Building on the feminist understanding of salvation as a movement from oppression to freedom in relationship, Carter Heyward points out that if the Divine Creative is that which brings us into realization of ourselves as relational beings and empowers us to move into right relation with each other, it is the radical love of Jesus that informs and defines those relationships.¹³ So in the same way that the Creation and Incarnation are radical signs of God's love for humankind, we are also to be radical signs of divine creativity and love.

Mutuality-in-Relationship

Many women I companion on the spiritual journey often begin a session by complaining how exhausted or uncentered they feel. In my experience, it usually signals a situation of being cut off from herself and the important relationships in her life (including God). As we explore this more deeply, the directee realizes she is really feeling guilt, anger, unfreedom, and powerlessness from trying to live up to society's expectation that she "take care of" all the people and situations in her life. This is a red flag for exploring whether and how her desolation might be a sign of internalization of cultural oppression effected in the sin of sloth.

One way to do this is for the director to ask the directee to reflect on the Creation and Exodus stories: do I feel worthy and deserving of dignity as God's beloved? How am I partnering with God to

mend the creation? Are my ways of relating consistent with the divine creative impulse, i.e., Do the people around me grow stronger and more empowered as a result of my love, or weaker and more dependent? Do I feel freer and more empowered, or depleted and depressed? Does my love result in new life, growth in intimacy, and acts of justice and love, or isolation and desolation?

One directee, an ordained minister, frequently needed to reschedule our appointments because of illness resulting from overwork. She apologized, saying that in her family of origin, being sick was the only time it was all right to rest. As we explored that situation, it became clear that God was inviting her to a place of stillness and quiet, but she couldn't allow herself to hear that message because of the voices in her history that equated being with achieving. Her sense of self-loss and self-trust was so profound that her body had to break down in order to restore itself.

When we put her situation in the context of feminist ideas of sin and salvation, she was able to see that her frenzied activity was a way of running away from God and herself, and was, in fact diminishing rather than enriching her life and relationships. She discerned that her sin was in refusing to trust that God loves her simply because of who she is and not because of what she does, and in not treating herself with the dignity her personhood demanded. For this woman, repentance meant taking time every day to be with God in prayer and discover herself as beloved child. Eventually, it meant feeling free enough to say no to many of the demands being made on her time. In time, she noticed a distinct difference in the quality of her relationships, and a deeper feeling of connection to others.

Sin, Patriarchy and the Spiritual Director

The best gift a woman director can give to a woman directee, is to be a reflection of the divine-human model of mutuality-in-relationship. If mutual relationships are those that stress equality of partnership and power-in-relation, then director and directee are invited to use their collective power to move toward mutual freedom and growth and an experience (although often different) of God's presence and love.

This means that the director must be willing to examine her own internalization of patriarchal op-

pression and confront the ways she participates in the sin of sloth: does she keep silent instead of speaking the truth in love because she doesn't trust her instincts? Does she collude with the directee in keeping hidden areas that need to be explored because she wants to protect her or is herself uncomfortable with confrontation? Is she so involved in taking care of a directee that she leaves no room for the directee to struggle with the hard questions and reach her own answers by listening to God's voice?

Placing women's experience in the context of God's saving history revealed in Scripture is a powerful way to negate patriarchal notions of sin. Recapturing the power to act as a free and autonomous person-in-relation can be a powerful and radical experience of hope, healing, and salvation.

Life Signs

Placing women's experience in the context of God's saving history revealed in Scripture is a powerful way to negate patriarchal notions of sin. Recapturing the power to act as a free and autonomous person-in-relation can be a powerful and radical experience of hope, healing, and salvation.

If freedom involves having and using the power to retain self-direction and not being overpowered by external forces or internal impulses,¹⁴ then women must explore our own saving story, asking what it means to be called to community and new life by the God who stands with those on the margins, noticing where and how God is moving us from slavery (self-loss) to freedom (self-in-relation), even in the midst of oppression and suffering.

In the context of covenant faithfulness, remembering and honoring who one is before God

can be an act of great personal faithfulness. In the context of God's reign of justice, confronting personal sloth and corporate sexism can signal deepening intimacy with Christ, whose empowering love enables us to mend the Creation by working for systemic change. In the context of Jesus' love ethic, engaging in relationships of mutuality and participating in the community of faith can yield fruitful experiences of God's love.

The Already and Not-Yet

While we live in the new creation of the Risen Christ, we must yet continue to struggle to bring about its hallmarks of peace, justice and love. As Salvation history shows, we do not do this alone, but in the faith community of persons who love us and who affirm women's ways of knowing, support her ways of being, challenge her understandings of sin, and help her maintain her identity as a person of worth and value.

For every person of faith, the healing and prophetic/justice dimensions of the new creation invite us to live in right relationship with all persons. If, in the context of relationships of mutuality, women can know themselves as persons created in the divine image and held there in love, we will have participated with God in healing the person, the culture, and the cosmos.



Notes

- 1 *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), vol.4, pp. 361-362.
- 2 Letty Russell, "Refusal to be Radically Helped," in *Reflection, the Journal of Yale Divinity School*, 80/1 (Nov. 1982): 7-8.
- 3 Kathleen Sands, *Escape From Paradise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp.18, 38, 39.
- 4 Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), pp. 135-136.
- 5 Russell, p.7.
- 6 Land Russell and J. Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), pp. 205-20.
- 7 McFadyen, p.139.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.
- 9 McFadyen, p. 162.
- 10 There are several streams of thought in feminist hermeneutics about the relevance to women of Scripture written in context of the domination and influence of patriarchal thoughts and culture. Letty Russell and others discuss these in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), cf. pp.11-18. Like Russell, I believe that Scripture, as God's timeless and empowering word, is always to be interpreted in the context of mutuality, justice, and inclusivity. My interpretation of the scriptural stories of creation and liberation are informed by this context.
- 11 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 65-66.
- 12 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 261.
- 13 Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), pp. 91-103. See also Heyward's *Saving Jesus From Those Who are Right: Rethinking What it Means to be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) for a further exposition of this concept.
- 14 McFadyen, p.131.

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Surviving Incest

A Public Testimony

Regina Pastula

Before I begin, I would like to express my gratitude to God for this moment and for this day. To God be all the honor and glory. I want to thank my husband, Joe, for his quiet strength. He has supported me through all these years and has sacrificed much for me. I need to say thank you also to my daughter, Tiffany, who in the last few months has inspired me and shown me what it means to have courage. *I love you both.* And I thank my therapist. I don't have to say why, for she knows all the reasons.

I have walked your walk . . .
I have felt your pain . . .
I have cried your tears . . .
You are not alone . . . You are not alone.

My journey of abuse began when I was three years old. It continued until I was nineteen.

My awareness of healing first began when I was twenty-eight. After recovering from my third suicide attempt, I spoke my truth about the abuse and someone finally listened and believed me. My healing is an ongoing daily process. There have been many roadblocks that I have had to face and am still overcoming. There were and still are many thoughts about myself and questions I deal with concerning my abuse. As I heal, I am learning that abuse is not who I am, but rather some-

thing that happened to me. With this realization, I am no longer victim, but survivor.

In preparing to speak about our experience, my friend Jean and I looked for major themes concerning our abuse. Those themes center around the abuse itself, the effect of the abuse and then finally the healing. Each person travels this journey in her own time and in her own way.

that they may realize that they are not alone.

The Abuse Itself

The most horrific years of the abuse in my life were between the ages of thirteen and nineteen at the hands of my father's best friend, a man forty years older than myself. It is not important for me to tell all the de-

My awareness of healing first began when I was twenty-eight. After recovering from my third suicide attempt, I spoke my truth about the abuse and someone finally listened and believed me

Many times I have said that I could not believe that God would allow me to go through what I did unless He was going to let me use it to help another sufferer. I share my experience so that perception will change into reality. I speak my truth for all those who believe they have no voice, so that their truth may be heard. My hope and my prayer is that listeners will draw strength from my words and

tails of my years of abuse. Each victim and survivor have their own story. What is important is to recognize that it did happen, it was not my fault, and there was no one there to stop it or to help me. Did I ask for help? Yes, and my requests were unanswered. Did I say, "Help me! I am being abused!"? No, as a thirteen-year-old I could not express in words what was hap-

pening to me nor could I convey the confusion I felt in knowing that someone I loved and trusted was doing something so wrong to me.

As the abuse continued, I remained silent. I was afraid to tell because I was sure that no one would believe me and that people would think it was my fault. I turned to my church and tried to confess what was happening. I was reprimanded and told to go and sin no more. There were physical signs of the abuse. Scars still exist today, including the bruises and cuts on my body from the beatings I received. These bruises and cuts were explained away as accidents in the tobacco barn when I was climbing a ladder or falling off the back of the pickup truck in the corn field. These explanations were more easily believed because they were coming from an adult and a friend.

The abuse was not only a violation against my body, but against my self worth, my soul, my spirit, and my total being. Emotionally I withdrew, not only to run away from the abuse, but also from the world.

Effect of the Abuse

The abuse was not only a violation against my body, but against my self worth, my soul, my spirit, and my total being. Emotionally I withdrew, not only to run away from the abuse, but also from the world. I sought refuge in books which helped me escape to another world rather than facing the

reality I lived in. I closed down my emotions. I would not allow myself to feel anything in myself or toward anyone. I didn't and wouldn't let anyone in, and I certainly did not reach out to anyone. I became a puppet not only for my abusers, but for all people who came into my life. I learned very early that in order to be liked or loved, I only had to do what people wanted me to do. I became so many different people that the real Regina became more and more lost in the shuffle.

It is hard for me to separate the effects that the abuse had on me and that of my healing. It has been through my healing process during these years that I recognized just how much sixteen years of abuse had had on my life. My healing continues each and every day. I have had well intentioned friends who have asked me, "Why don't you just

deal with and get over it and move on with your life?" I asked myself the same questions. Why couldn't I just get over it and move on? I wish it was just that easy. I have come to realize that healing is not just about the healing of my body, but it is also about the healing of my mind and spirit.

Each time I was raped, molested, or beaten, I received the

message that I was no good, that I was worthless, that this was all I was good for, that I was ugly and dirty, and this was the only way that anyone would ever love me. These experiences left me feeling guilty and full of shame. I was told endlessly that I was getting what I deserved and that I asked for it. Each time I did not "perform" correctly, I was beaten, imprinting in my mind the need to be perfect in order to be loved.

I grieved for what was taken from me, my virginity, my self respect, my trust, my ability to love, my childhood, my very identity. These messages permeated into every aspect of my life, in my relationships with others, my relationship with my self, and in my relationship with my God.

I tried to reach out in my own way for help. Every time I cried out for help, wanting to break my silence, but no one heard or helped me. The messages that I received from my abuser were only affirmed and became more indelibly imprinted in my mind and soul. The more messages I received, the more I hated myself and the more I wanted to escape in whatever way I could from all the pain I was feeling. I felt alone and abandoned. Through the process of my healing, I now believe that all those messages were lies. More than anything, I felt betrayed and I know that, other than God, there was no one else.

Process of Healing

I cannot speak of my healing without speaking of my relationship with God and the role that He has had in my life. I am sure you are

wondering where God fits in the picture. I wondered about that also. I laid awake at night questioning God's existence and His love for me. Questions plagued me for years. I continually asked God, "Where were you for me all those years?" and more important, "What did I ever do that was so bad that I would deserve being punished in this way?"

I am learning to love myself and to accept the good things about myself. I am learning to deal with my anger and rage . . . My realization is that I need to experience all my feelings around the abuse before forgiveness can happen.

Have I received answers to all my questions? Not completely, but the answers continue to unfold as I heal. Can I give you your answers? No, you can only find them for yourself in your time and in your own way. I can not tell you how I was able to achieve it, but I know that without coming to peace with God and knowing that He loves me, I could not have done my healing. I know that my awareness of His presence breaking through the darkness was slow and gentle and He moved in me only when I was ready and invited Him in. I encountered these moments not only in the quiet times of my prayer, but also during many of my therapy sessions. My image of God has changed from "the one who punishes," to an image of a loving God who gently caresses me in His arms, loving me and forgiving me, as I am and

inviting me to grow each day closer to Him.

Allowing myself to feel is a new experience. I shut down all my emotions many years ago believing that if I allowed others to see them, they may think of me as weak. I have always felt fear and guilt. But I shut down all the others, especially the good ones like happiness and peace. I am learn-

ing to love myself and to accept the good things about myself. I am learning to deal with my anger and rage. Forgiveness . . . I've done some work in learning how to forgive. My realization is that I need to experience all my feelings around the abuse before forgiveness can happen.

Will I ever forget? No, but I am learning that I can choose to use the past to help me to become stronger. I am reaching out in trust and allowing others to be a part of my life. I find great comfort in being with others who are journeying in this healing process also. It helps me to know that there are others out there who have experienced what I have and understand. Knowing there are others gives me courage to stand in my truth, to reach out and invite others, like myself, to stand in their truth and being or continue their healing.

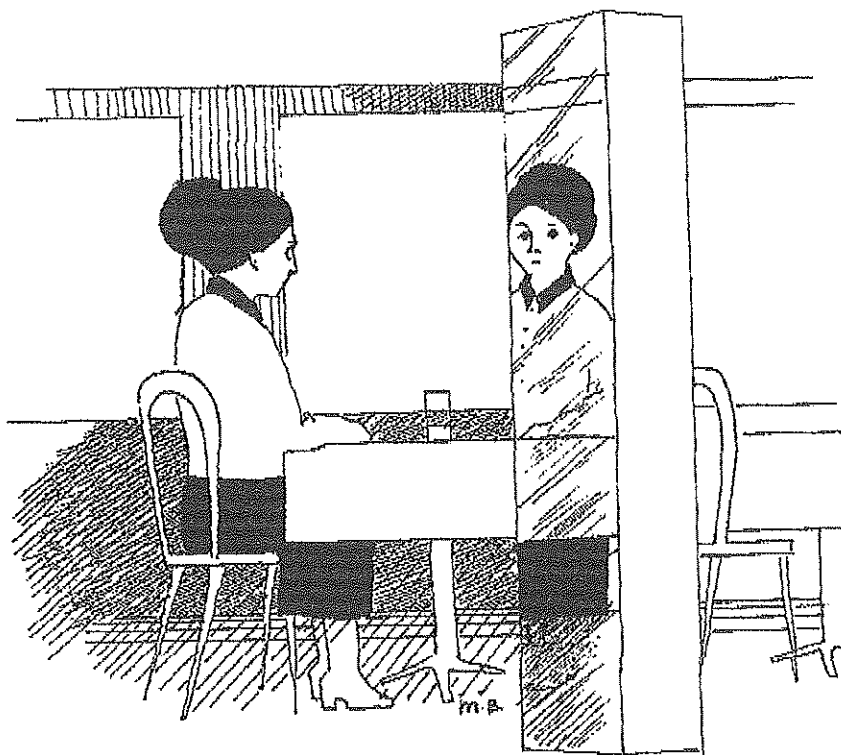
I hear God saying to me:
I have walked your walk . . .
I have felt your pain . . .
I have cried your tears . . .
You are not alone . . .
You were never alone . . .
And I love you!

My healing continues. There are still areas with which I struggle. The biggest obstacle is trust. My trust was violated by my abuser and others. God has brought many wonderful people into my life who, unknown to them, are helping me each day to break down the barriers. I share standing in my truth and I trust.



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"Lonely Resident"
by Maura Barga, R.S.M.

Sabbath Suffering

Surviving Rape

Sandra Jean Sherman, O.S.U.

In my first year as my community's vocation minister, I was asked by the diocese to give a presentation on the vows. I used it as a prayerful preparation for the celebration of my own silver jubilee one year later. In twenty-five years, it was my fourth extensive reflection on the vows and in writing it, I used what was still my truth from the other three. It was the third reflection that had the greatest impact and I introduced it by saying that it was written out of the incarnational reality that my vow of chastity didn't make me any better or any safer than any other woman. Remembering a line from a poem entitled "The Solitary Path," I referred to it as "the hour when nothing rhymes."¹ I wondered how many in the room who knew me really remembered that hour and how many others were able to uncover the meaning I had carefully disguised. I also wondered how much more impact, positive or negative, it would have caused had I simply added, "the hour when I was raped." But being simply honest about such truths within community is far from simple.

Present Revives the Past

One Sister-survivor was recently informed that her trusted gynecologist is moving away from the group practice that carries the diocesan insurance to which she is bound. That means that in a few months, she will have to choose a new doctor. That is never easy, because more important to her than financial insurance is the emotional assurance that she will feel safe with her choice.

Another woman religious survivor recently went to the dentist and spent the rest of the day with the image of someone forcing things into her mouth. Even with her permission, any invasion of a natural opening in her body is still traumatic. Still another woman shares that she just had her annual eye appointment, which again brought up in her the mem-

ory of the rapist on top of her, staring at her, eye-to-eye. It was difficult for her to look her sisters in the eye and smile the rest of the day.

Keeping herself calm and focused at prayers is difficult for another Sister because of the flashbacks, which the male-inundated language brings up in her. And with the holidays approaching, another Sister wonders what excuse she can use this time for not going home to visit her family.

Most would ask, "Aren't these just ordinary, everyday activities?" But what they fail to grasp is that it is often the most ordinary of activities that are the most difficult for women who are survivors of sexual abuse, and that being women religious does not exempt us from these difficulties.

Women religious survivors are the first to agree that we should be in solidarity with women. The good news is that we are already there. The sad news is that it is so very often not known. We also know that while we definitely support, identify with, and feel with our sister survivors in the world, that we need not all go to a third world country or even to our city streets to meet these women, because they are in our midst—we live with them—they are our sisters in community.

It is often the most ordinary of activities that are the most difficult for women who are survivors of sexual abuse . . . being women religious does not exempt us from these difficulties.

Releasing a Woman from Bondage

Now he was teaching on one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he had said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (Luke 13: 10–17)

I have never before considered the number "18" to signify anything other than an American sense of the coming of age. It was at this year's women religious survivors' retreat that I heard that part of the passage for the first time and found in the number "18" my own sense of the coming of age for my healing. As the deadline for this article approached, so does the eighteenth anniversary of the night I was raped. While the celebration of my silver jubilee a year ago was indeed a celebration, the truth remains that I spent a goodly portion of eighteen of my twenty-six years in community in bondage, not only from the act itself, but from the silence of others and of myself.

Release from Humiliation

Just what was it that made Jesus notice the woman that day in the synagogue? Was it that she tried to hide or that she was simply tired of hiding and finally bared herself to rather than barred herself from public awareness? Might it have been the comments of others, whispering their misunderstood concept of her "bent-overness?" Regardless of the answer, even more amazing and central to my reflection here is that the woman allowed herself to be noticed.

Women who have been sexually abused often do not feel worthy of notice, even if it is negative notice. Often times this comes from feeling that they are falsely living under the vow of chastity or that it has been stolen from them. Having been raped just before my final vows, I wasn't really sure that I legally took the vow of chastity until many years later. Every time I attended a seminar or read an article or participated in a group that addressed the issue, I felt guilty and unworthy. And yet in what should be our most healing act, the Eucharist, one little line pulled from Scripture makes healing difficult for many women, "O, Lord, I am not worthy."

Women who have been sexually abused often do not feel worthy of notice, even if it is negative notice. Often times this comes from feeling that they are falsely living under the vow of chastity or that it has been stolen from them.

For years I haven't said it under my breath and frequently now, when I celebrate Eucharist, I nearly hear myself not saying it aloud, but saying rather, "O Lord, I am worthy!" For awhile, I considered saying, "I am 'now' worthy," as a way of disguising it. But to say that would mean that once I was not worthy and disguised truth has no real voice.

I believe that the spirit of the voice that speaks this undisguised truth from deep within me is the same spirit of movement that responded to Jesus from deep within the woman in the Scripture. His touch did not make her worthy—it affirmed that she was, in fact, already worthy. And worth has a way of making us stand tall in our truth, in spite of the pain.

By standing up straight, the woman chose to face whatever it was that kept her bent over and chose to survive by meeting life on its own terms.² I am still recovering from a four-month old back sprain, which for the first two weeks made it impossible for me to do much more than sit or lie. Standing for any length of time made me feel like I was

going to break in two. When I began to stand, I had to do it in gradually increasing time periods. I cannot imagine the physical pain of standing straight after eighteen years.

Screaming the Truth

But I am no stranger to the emotional pain of standing tall in my truth.

This truth has been speaking from within me for a long time. I gradually began to believe its whispers, only after I heard it scream. I remember well the moment. While praying alone within the safety of a parish convent's walls, I thought I heard a woman screaming. Recognizing the horror behind the scream I ran outside and looked up and down the street which was as safe outside as I was inside. It was then that I realized that the scream had come from within me. It was also then that I realized that I was not alone in my suffering.

Another time when traveling, I found myself, on Sunday, in the presence of a presider whom I suddenly recognized to be the perpetrator of another woman who had shared her story with me.

25–35 percent of adult women in American culture have been abused. The statistics remain the same both in and out of religious life.³ Typically, the lack of response of the church as well as of a religious community tends to deny, renounce, and minimize the suffering rendered by sexual abuse.⁴

The woman in the gospel was used to the stares that deemed her unworthy, stares which grew into whispers. By staying bent over she didn't have to look at them, but most certainly she felt them. I remember such stares turned to whispers. "She was raped. Why was she in that place at that time? She's in therapy. Why isn't she working?" I also remember words directed to me, meant as advice. "It happened, now forget it." "At least you're alive." "This happened for a

reason." The truth, however, is that suffering has no reason. "It is not so much the suffering as it is the senselessness of it," said Nietzsche, a senselessness not necessarily redeemed by the Cross.⁵

This is Her Body

Believe me when I say that I mean no disrespect when I say that the only emotion that a nearly naked male body hanging on a cross triggers in many women survivors is fear. Reflecting on this, Ann Thurston suggests that the need is not so much for a feminization of the symbol or even for a new symbol as for an expansion the symbol through the recognition "that every raped and beaten female body is the body of Christ."⁶ I have used this image myself more than once. The first time was in sending Reiki as healing prayer to a friend who called long distance in panic during a flashback when I could not be physically present to her. Another time when traveling, I found myself, on Sunday, in the presence of a presider whom I suddenly recognized to be the perpetrator of another woman who had shared her story with me. Not able to graciously leave the church and looking at the crucifix, I imagined her body nailed to it and said in the silence of my heart, "This is Her body." It was the only way Eucharist was possible for me at that moment. Reflecting on this later, I realized that my solution to the problem was only temporary as long as my thoughts remained silent. In the words of a brave survivor who has broken the silence, "We must listen to the whispers so that we don't have to hear the screams."⁷ Then why is it the screams that we tend to canonize?

My best friend in community has Maria Goretti for her patron. While she hasn't used the last name for years, I always tell her when we celebrate her feast, that we are celebrating who she is as "Maria" and not some imagined victory over a sin which an innocent child could not have committed had she chosen to give in and live. In an earlier article for Women's Spirituality Network, I shared my experience of being at a Eucharistic celebration with a large group at a conference on that same feast. When the presider, out of ignorance, extolled the example of integrity that poor child was to all women, I physically reacted. My limbs became numb, my eyes blinded and I trembled all over.

Again, there was no way to gracefully exit. It was then that the moment when nothing rhymed found its rhythm. That inner truth which began as a whisper, found its voice, not in screaming but in proclamation, when during the prayers of the faithful, I heard myself praying aloud for the integrity of all the women who have been raped and lived. Another woman glanced at me with eyes that said, "Thank you," and I knew that my words had not fallen on deaf ears.

Acknowledging Heroism of Survivors

However, within community, many survivors feel that their words do fall on deaf ears and many more cannot bring their voices to say them in the first place. I am reminded of this season's premier of NBC's "West Wing," rewritten to parallel the September 11 tragedy. In one brief scene toward the end, the president tells the high school students kept in the White House during a terrorist threat that while both martyrs and heroes are willing to die for their beliefs, heroes would much rather live for them. "We don't need martyrs right now, we need heroes," he says.⁸

I think of the stories of two Sister-missionaries recently. Both were hideously raped, but while one died a martyr, the other, who lives as a victim-survivor, and continues to fight for justice is truly a hero. Heroic as survivors, "their suffering in effect, a testament to their authenticity," they are inspired by a "commitment and desire to be whole," and so they become prophetic.⁹ Prophets do not tell the future, but rather, beckon to it out of their experience of the present. This is not easy because a vocal survivor forces others to look at their own secrets.¹⁰

If we think that entire communities of women are composed of individuals who have no secrets, perhaps it is because we are confusing our secrets with our sins.

Resistance of the Congregation and Leaders

The woman in the Scripture story was, most probably, not the only one in the temple who was bent over. Her unbending made the others hurt just to look at her. No one wants to deal with painful feelings, especially on a day like the Sabbath. The

inner "work" she needed to do in order to call the miracle forth was not something the leader wanted to expend time or effort on. Neither did he wish to be a witness. The leader prevented the congregants from participating in her effort. He would rather that she returned on a work day when the congregation would all be back to wrapping themselves up in their daily-ness so that they would not be forced into the painful unwrapping which she bravely risked. And so she was treated as a leper rather than as a prophet.

Women religious who have been sexually abused know how it feels to be on the receiving end of this survivor-phobia.¹¹ While most of them are professional women, they often feel that it is best to be seen and not heard when it comes to this part of their story, a part without which they would not be the compassionate ministers they are usually proven to be. A recent Lifetime television drama, *Within These Walls*, tells the true story of one such woman religious who

She looked at me and said,
"Before that happened, you were
so innocent." Without flinching, I
looked back at her and said,
"Before it happened, I was not
compassionate."

pilots a program which instructs women in prison how to train assist dogs for the disabled. As the story, on the screen unfolds, the Sister's story moves in the opposite direction, interweaving itself with the stories of the women. As a sexual abuse survivor herself, who bears the physical marks of self-mutilation and the emotional pain of giving up a child conceived during a rape when she was a teenager, she finds that she and the women share a mutual ministry of compassion toward one another.¹²

Sister Survivor Support Services

Once, during a conversation with someone who judged me to be more liberal than her image of God allowed, the story of my being raped came up. I have come to trust that when this happens, it is usually

because my image of God is calling it forth. She looked at me and said, "Before that happened, you were so innocent." Without flinching, I looked back at her and said, "Before it happened, I was not compassionate." It has never come up between us again.

Compassion means literally, "to churn from the bowels."¹³ Sexual abuse survivors move from victim to survivor to thriver when others who recognize their own story in theirs, feel compelled to stand with them cum (with) passion. It was that feeling I recognized in the eyes of the woman who glanced at me in gratitude for my prayer. And it is the feeling I share with the women with whom I gather every other week.

**Sexual abuse survivors move
from victim to survivor to thriver
when others who recognize their
own story in theirs, feel
compelled to stand with them
cum (with) passion.**

Shortly after the identification of the scream, I found out about a program called Sister Survivor Support Services (SSSS). While, in spite of the statistics, I knew of no one in my own community with whom I could share on this level, I felt strongly that if women religious could first share their stories among themselves, they would find in that the potential for ministry among other women. After a few years and not a little prayer, it came to pass.

Each year I received a notice of an SSSS training and each year I told myself it wasn't time. Like the woman who probably came and hid on the outskirts of the synagogue each Sabbath, I waited on the outskirts of community. Then one day, waiting was no longer comfortable.

While up to this point, I had begun to gradually unbend only in the presence of selected company, namely, my therapist, spiritual director, and closest friends, it was time to risk it in the presence of a larger company. The same voice that earlier screamed for my attention, whispered to my now attentive heart. I somehow knew that it was then or never. After a great deal of prayer, I approached the local vicar for reli-

gious, not knowing that my standing up in her presence was an answer to a lifting up of other local women religious' prayers. With her blessing and ultimately, that of my own religious superior, I took part in what was one of the last SSSS trainings made available on a national level. Our local group is now in its fifth year. Beginning with two of us, we have welcomed an average of one woman per year. Our annual retreat, begun three years ago, has reached an additional half dozen women.

Each time we welcome someone new, each of us risks the retelling of her own story. We know that this means bending back down to look into the fearful, often tearful eyes of still another woman who has chosen to come out of hiding and unbending all over again with her, however painfully slow that may be. However, as our circle widens and the chains binding us become connections uniting us, we find that our combined strength helps us to bear up under the pain.

Unbending of One Woman Empowers Others

Traditionally, the Sabbath rules set limits on work, preventing labor that would make people lose their focus on their relationship to God.¹⁴ Those who objected to Jesus healing the woman were not objecting to her healing as much as the fact that Jesus touched her and engaged in "work." As a male who dared to do this, he, too, was criticized for undertaking labor that was not usually done in the synagogue on a day of worship.

Jesus boldly reminded the leader who objected that the congregation's relationship to this woman, this "sister," is part and parcel of their relationship to God. He challenges the onlookers for their literalism about rules concerning the Sabbath that has settled in over the years. Instead, he invites them to a Sabbath that entitles everyone to rest from the burdens that bend them. He empowers the woman not only to stand up straight, bringing her immediate relief, but makes it permissible for others to do the same.

I wonder how many others stood up straight, perhaps not on that particular Sabbath day, but in the days to follow—not because Jesus touched them, but because the woman, herself, empowered them to do so?

In reflecting on the same gospel, Fran Ferder refers to Jesus' care of the woman as the kind of care that enables others to stand upright. It means bending down and relating to them face-to-face, eye-to-eye, as equals. Such care touches them with truth and fills "them with a sense of worth that spills over into other relationships." Such caring means standing aside and letting "them have their glory."¹⁵

"Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God" (Luke 13:13).

Would it not be wonderful if we could end the story with "And all the people raised their hands and answered, 'Amen! Amen!'" (Nehemiah 8:6)? I am sure that many did in the silence of their hearts and that some few timid souls responded likewise in a whisper. Perhaps, one or two did shout aloud with her.

Let Survivors Speak Openly

It is time that we welcome such witness back into our chapels, churches, and sacred places. On October 27, 2001, such a witness of unbending took place in Ursuline Convent Chapel in Toledo, Ohio. Where one year ago, I stood alone, proclaiming my vowedness, I stood with the other members of SSSS and together we reclaimed our brokenness and our chastity for the first time in the public presence of our leadership and sisters in community. Entitled, "Sister, Why Are You Weeping?" the program was sponsored by Mary Sue Kennedy, O.P., Toledo Diocesan vicar for religious and facilitated by Connie Schoen, O.P., of Chicago, who has journeyed with us on our annual retreats.

After the main presentation by Connie, four of us sat on a panel and shared the reality of prayer and language, embodiment, relationships, boundaries, and forgiveness in the lives of women religious survivors. Bending low so many times with one another, we did it again, meeting our sisters eye-to-eye and inviting them to accompanying us in the unbending empowerment of others to do the same.

Many of the Sisters there said, "Amen" aloud. Some whispered it to us individually. Hopefully, many more said it in the silence of their hearts and in the unbending of their spirits. One Sister who

approached me said that the room was filled with such silent reverence that she felt she had just attended Mass.

The words of a person who tried to help me eighteen years ago by saying, "It happened for a reason," while not the right words at the moment, have, in the course of my unbending, been prophetic. In the words of the psalmist, translated by Eugene H. Peterson, I pray, "... you never fail to stand me tall in your presence so I can look you in the eye" (Psalm 142).¹⁶ Healing within community is possible; I know, because on October 27, Sabbath Suffering began its unbending into Sabbath Healing.



Notes

- 1 Jennifer L. Woodruff, "The Solitary Path," in *Weavings* Vol. XV., No. 1 (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000), p. 28.
- 2 Robert Grant, Ph.D., "Childhood Abuse and The Catholic Clergy," (January, 2000), p. 1.
- 3 Ibid., p. 1.
- 4 Dee Ann Miller, R.N., B.S., "Spiritual Healing for Survivors of Clergy Sexual Abuse," (Dee Ann Miller:www.advocate web.org., 1998): 11.
- 5 "Nietzsche" in Robert Grant, Ph.D., *The Way of the Wound* (Burlingame, CA:), p. 133.
- 6 Ann Thurston, "Suffering," in *Woman, Why Are You Weeping?*, ed. Therese Johnson Borchard (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 62-3.
- 7 Ava Clark, O.P., M.P.S., "Helping the Sexually Abused," *Human Development* 13/4 (Winter, 1992): 40.
- 9 Grant, *Wound*, p. 138.
- 10 Miller., "Spiritual Healing," p. 6
- 11 Ibid., p. 7.
- 12 *Within These Walls*, (Lifetime Network, Sept., 2001).
- 13 Fran Ferder, *Words Made Flesh* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1986), p. 103.
- 14 Judith E. Smith, "Stewards in the Household of God," *Weavings* Vol. XIV, No. 5, (Nashville: Upper Room, 1999), p. 13.
- 15 Fran Ferder, *Words*, p. 110.
- 16 Eugene H. Peterson, *Psalm 42 in The Message* (Colorado Springs, Co: 1995).



To a Creating God

by Mary Daly, R.S.M.



*You!
You come to me
in darkness and in light!*

*You!
Creative beyond my imagining!*

*You!
Life-giving beyond all deaths!*

*You
are the One who gives me to myself,*

*Who reveals in my darkness
your unyielding sparks of light.*

*Can I trust you?
Can I trust these sparks?
Are you enough
when you are so small?*

*Must I always need to climb a mountain
to find you?
And miss you in the darkness that surrounds me?*

*Lead me by darkness and by light,
Lead me in clouds and tiny sparks.
Show me that each small glimmer
is enough
because you are there—
creating, living,
touching me to life,
to creativity.*

O Thou!



Suffering, Compassion, and the Beautiful Bodhisattva

Barbara Moran, R.S.M.

As a docent at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, my life is truly enriched through contact with centuries-old art pieces from the Orient, most especially Buddhist art work. But, as the museum makes ready to close for a transition year and its move to a new location, I pay special attention to my favorites, soon to be packed, stored away, and made ready for transit. In the words of Rand Castile, former museum director, "Asian arts arise from perspectives magnificently different from those of Western concepts and attitudes of expression."¹ Yet similar Buddhist and Christian ideas also give rise to common values and life choices. I find that one piece in particular, *Seated Guanyin*, seems to speak of an approach to life that is both meaningful and awe inspiring.

Guanyin as Chinese Version of Bodhisattva

Guanyin is portrayed as the Chinese version of the bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara, a most beloved figure carefully crafted in wood with traces of pigment. This four foot statue dates from the twelfth-century Song dynasty in China and is depicted as an Indian prince in a long carved robe with sashes, scarves, and jewels, and

seated in a position of royal ease, with right hand resting on the knee and left hand in the gift-giving gesture. The massive figure is visually arresting and beautifully sculpted, but what does it mean to the Western viewer?

As a bodhisattva, the figure is not the historical Buddha with the usual cranial protuberance, tuft of hair between the eyes, and simple monk's robe, but one who has chosen to forego nirvana to remain in the real world of suffer-

representations of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

Postponing Nirvana, Remaining on Earth

The Buddha had supposedly experienced a final death which he preached would free him from the cycles of rebirth and the sufferings of this world, but a bodhisattva is a follower who postpones attaining buddhahood in favor of remaining on earth.

The figure is not the historical Buddha . . .
but one who has chosen to forgo nirvana to
remain in the real world of suffering to offer
help and assistance to all sentient beings
seeking enlightenment.

ing to offer help and assistance to all sentient beings seeking enlightenment. Most probably the iconography alludes to Guanyin as described in chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra of the Buddhist canon. By the Song era, when this piece was carved, popular depictions included feminine as well as more masculine forms, and even in this work, the absence of facial hair and the narrow waist show how portrayals of princely figures tended toward more feminine

There are a number of different bodhisattvas, but the Chinese Guanyin is known as Sound Observer, and in thirty-three forms rescues believers from difficult situations as the bodhisattva is transformed from male to female and old to young manifestations. So nirvana is refused in the name of those who need help in this life. Guanyin chooses the sufferings of human existence because of compassionate concern for others.

Moving away from the spectacular wooden figure, the viewer then notices a series of small gilt bronze pieces dating from the seventh- to tenth-century Tang dynasty. These are also Guanyin figures portrayed in a variety of poses. Franz-Karl Ehrhard finds that Guanyin “manifests himself in any conceivable form wherever a being needs his help, especially when someone is menaced by water, demons, fire, or sword.”² This bodhisattva is also the one to whom childless women turn to for assistance.

The Feminine Manifestation

The feminine aspect of Guanyin is especially evident in Tantric Buddhism where every bodhisattva is connected to a female companion; so it is that Avalokiteshvara is companioned by White Tara, the manifestation of the Chinese wife of a Tibetan king. The Asian Art Museum’s Himalayan gallery includes a beautiful White Tara figure crafted in Nepal in the fifteenth to sixteenth century of gilt bronze repoussé inlaid with precious stones. She is invoked for deliverance from eight great perils: shipwreck, fire, mad elephant, brigands, pouncing lion, serpent, prison, and demons. White Tara is depicted as totally female, coming from the tears Avalokiteshvara shed for suffering beings, and is widely worshipped as a compassionate goddess.³

This piece clearly depicts a third eye on her forehead and all-seeing eyes portrayed on both her hands and the soles of her feet. The goddess is a young woman sitting with both feet in the meditation posture and hands in

the positions of teaching and the gesture of blessing, and holding lotus stalks. She comes from Katmandu where the artists of the Newar Valley are among the most proficient in Asia because of their repoussé and bronze casting abilities. Here the statue is formed in several pieces, welded together, gilded with metal dissolved in mercury, and finally heated, with the mercury volatilized to leave the gold adhering to the surface, at least on the front of the piece, supposedly because this precious metal was hard to come by in Nepal.⁴

But what may be of even greater significance for the Western devotee of this bodhisattva is the fact that, from the sixteenth

century onwards, a variety of Guanyin images in several media appear in domestic settings. Here the bodhisattva as sender of children takes on a motherly appearance as a stately woman holding a small child.

It has recently been convincingly argued that the very great popularity of this deity in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century owes something to the appropriation by Chinese weavers, embroiderers and craftsmen in a number of materials, of the Christian image of the Virgin Mary.⁵

Such images are possibly derived from European missionary statues and pictures brought to China from Spain and Portugal, especially by the Jesuits.

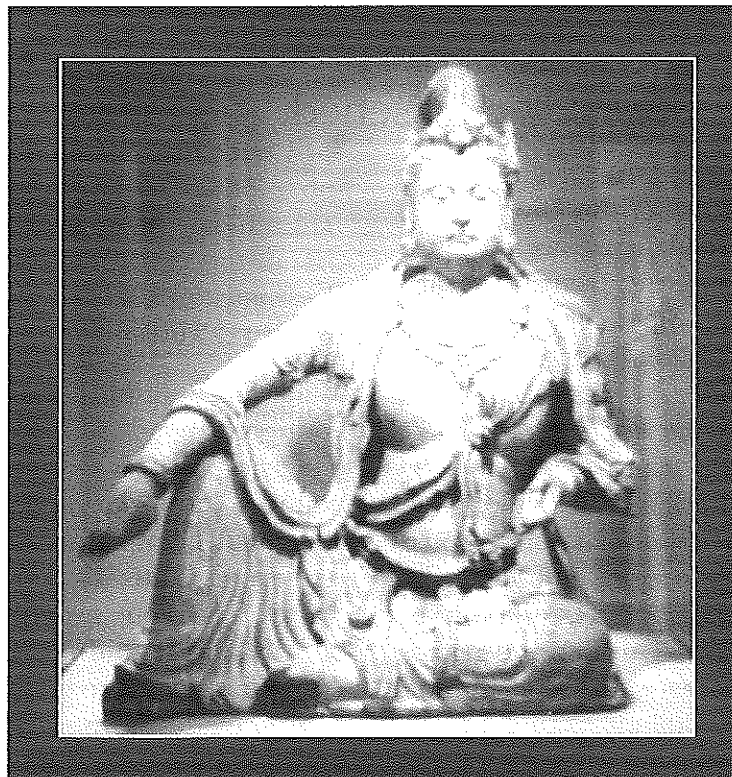


Figure of Compassion

But even in the eighteenth century, when China had isolated herself from most of the Western world, Guanyin was still depicted as a compassionate figure. The Asian Art Museum's Qing dynasty hanging scroll, with silk embroidery on silk background, dates from the Qianlong period between 1736 and 1795. This Sipi figure, a four-armed Guanyin, is shown seated in a lotus position on a lotus throne. The throne is pictured on top of a beautiful luminescent flower rising from a fungus with a lotus bud on either

of the dowager empress and her son, the Qianlong emperor.⁷

The question remains, however, what should the contemporary viewer take away from this hanging or any of the other bodhisattva pieces seen? Each of the pieces is a truly beautiful and valuable work of art: the iconography, style, materials, and purpose for which each is intended call for the greatest appreciation. Yet, this is religious art, and for the Westerner as well as the Asian devotee, there is meaning and significance which makes the viewing experience both lasting and memorable.

Surely there is suffering in today's world, and as I attain the status of senior citizen, I feel a call to forgo the escape into a "nirvana" of doing my own thing, now that some of the pressures of full-time professional work are lessened.

side. The lower two hands of the multi-armed figure are in a gesture of offering from the heart, while the upper hands hold rosary and lotus. At the bottom of the scroll is written in Tibetan script, "Fortunate days, fortunate nights, days and nights forever! Rely on the Three Jewels for good fortune."⁶

Such prayer embodies the wish for harmony and the continuous birth of children and grandchildren, as well as purity and longevity, values prized by the ruling Manchu dynasty of the time. Again, the emphasis is on the wisdom and compassion needed for life in the real world

Bodhisattva Virtues as Spiritual Model

Mahayana Buddhism teaches that bodhisattvahood is attained by one who practices virtues but renounces entry into nirvana until all sentient beings are ready to enter into this state.

Compassion supported by both wisdom and insight is a necessary factor for the bodhisattva, who provides active assistance and is ready to suffer for others to transfer his or her own merit to others.⁸ What might this choice mean for non-Buddhists?

While each museum visitor is more or less open to the religious experience provided by the Chinese Buddhist gallery, it seems safe to say that all viewers come away with some measure of awe. While we may not believe in the Buddhist concept of nirvana, the notion of the "golden rule," Christian charity, and/or unconditional love is one that many Westerners at least aspire to practice. So it is that we may see the beauty in giving up some form of escape in order to assist others.

I do see my docent work, both giving tours in the Asian Art Museum and doing the requisite study and preparation, as a form of ministry, so I have been giving some thought to my own endeavors to become a bodhisattva. Surely there is suffering in today's world, and as I attain the status of senior citizen, I feel a call to forgo the escape into a "nirvana" of doing my own thing, now that some of the pressures of full-time professional work are lessened.

As viewers who look carefully at the Guanyin figures in the museum, it is tempting for us to regard the Chinese culture which produced them as luxurious and the epitome of artistic and religious creativity. Most of the treasures of the tomb, temple, court, and even the marketplace are impressive. But this level of development is far removed from the life and sufferings of the common people, even today, and much more so in bygone centuries. Most Westerners have some familiarity with the Chinese peasant and the turmoil in China during most of the twentieth century. Yet, the peasant of past times was

subject to flood, famine, and disease to an even greater degree. Chinese history is one of continual warfare, both from competing rulers within China itself, and from foreign invaders, particularly the Mongol Yuan dynasty of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the Manchus, who ruled from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. Noteworthy, too, is the British conquest of Hong Kong in the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars, and the European concessions in Shanghai, which provided economic gain to all but the Chinese workers in early modern times.

Throughout the centuries, ordinary Chinese often adopted Buddhism and donated moneys and gifts in order to achieve merit. Several sixth-century stone votive stele pieces contain incised registers of prominent donors as well as portraits of these individuals. Nevertheless, they are most probably middle-class men of considerable means. How the peasant fared, and more especially, peasant woman, is not clearly recorded.

The life of Chinese peasant women has never been easy, and even in the twentieth century women's feet were bound, not only as a mark of beauty, but also as a mark of subservience to husbands and fathers. Maxine Hong Kingston provides a moving account of traditional Chinese family life in several of her books,⁹ and Wu Tsao speaks of the miserable life of the seventeenth century Chinese bride.¹⁰ What transpired in the lives of countless generations of wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law can only be

imagined, as few women appear in Chinese historical accounts, and those that do appear were usually empresses or other women of noble rank. The life of the average Chinese female seems to have been one of intense suffering. For these women Guanyin would have had great appeal from the time Buddhism appeared in China, in the first or second century of our era.

Desire, on the part of patrons for Buddhist images which aided, by using realistic modes of representation, visualization of deities of many kinds, appears widespread . . . Such desire was directed in particular at the figure of the bodhisattva Guanyin.¹¹

Coming to China from India over the Silk Road, Buddhist iconography is basically Indian, but the style is always Chinese, despite changes over the centuries and variations in different geographical areas of China. In all cases, however, the compassion of Guanyin for all sentient beings remains preeminent.

Compassion Needed Today

This compassion was surely appreciated by Chinese of former eras, but it might be even more needed today, in China and throughout the modern world. Perhaps if any one characteristic of life at the beginning of the third millennium is predominant, it is violence. All over the earth, in first-world as well as third-world countries, and most especially in the United States, violent words and violent actions seem to proceed from violent thoughts of the many who are so caught up in

survival, to say nothing of success, in today's economy.

Describing this so-called "rat race," Diarmuid O'Murchu sees violence in twentieth century wars, starvation, malnutrition, torture, incarceration, and rampant disregard for the earth itself, as well as for all who inhabit a world saturated with suffering.¹²

The situation faced by women in this society seems especially detrimental to success or even survival. Poverty, domestic violence, the "glass ceiling," and oppression by Church as well as secular society, are only a few of the problems faced by millenium women. For many, non-violence is the only way to live without fear and to reach our potential in both church and society. Compassionate figures are essential as guides, role models, and salvific figures; Guanyin has a place in today's world either as a Buddhist "saint" or an embodiment of loving service—one who stands as a beacon to women of all religious backgrounds.

While docents have many opportunities to consider the role of the bodhisattva, it seems that all viewers who tour the Chinese galleries are cognizant of her power as they contemplate her beauty, ponder didactic materials on the museum labels accompanying each work of art, and dialogue with docents, as to the significance of these pieces. Therefore, I feel I am doing something worthwhile by refusing a "nirvana" of escapism into retirement addictions of shopping, television, complaining, or whatever other non-vital activities could take up my time as a senior sister. Still, I wonder if I am

called to a broader ministry of bodhisattvahood?

The very poor do not usually frequent the museum, although we do have a "free" day once a month. They are the homeless, those suffering from physical or psychological problems, women struggling to care for their children, the street people, "bag" ladies, and those who have more or less given up on life. But some do sit in the garden in front of our

itors, the exchange usually seems very fruitful. Sometimes, we also encourage friends to visit the exhibits and arrange to discuss what we have experienced on an ongoing basis.

One special group that has accepted this invitation consists of eight Catholic women who have met in a book discussion club for many years. We feel that contact with Asian culture enriches us spiritually as well as artistically, as

and interfaith or secular groups who support values based on the needs of the whole earth and all of her inhabitants.

While no one can become involved in every form of direct service, adult education is a ministry I try to maintain, and I still continue to support others who engage in a variety of forms of ministry, many of whom work directly with the poor and suffering. For most of my museum friends, systemic change is also essential, and we know that only through the slow process of conversion of hearts can real transformation of society be achieved. This kind of compassionate service is often a form of suffering in itself, although patient waiting and slow success seems less life threatening than many of the problems facing other women and men today. For many of us, as senior citizens, the aging process provides its own diminishments and is still another form of suffering, which must be faced on a daily basis. So the bodhisattva role is not without rewards, but is also demanding of both dedication and an acceptance of reality.

The bodhisattva provides a symbol of compassionate service especially meaningful to women who have reached the age of wisdom at a time when society, the Church, and our Mercy Institute are in a time of transition.

building and enjoy the beauty of Golden Gate Park, where we are presently located. Yet those of us who come inside, whatever our economic situation, have much to learn. I feel that my years of training are well spent when I can assist viewers in seeing and appreciating the beauty of Asian art, and learning about a culture where religion permeates every aspect of life.

Most often, museum visitors come expecting to see the art and culture of Asia, with her long history of religious practice, and, whether their background is predominantly Asian or European, most seem to find enrichment and intercultural understanding from their experience. Although we, as docents, have only an hour or so with the majority of these vis-

women who have long been in the forefront of the struggle for social justice, for the poor, minority groups, women suffering from domestic violence, and those who find the post-Vatican II Church not yet having achieved its potential. For us, the bodhisattva ideal helps us to remain in the fray rather than escape into the purely personal way of life open to grandmothers and other women of similar age. So we find support for parish ministry, even when some clergy and parishioners favor traditional ways of work and worship more than breaking into the new forms of outreach to the needy beyond parochial boundaries: the homeless, single mothers, the separated, or divorced, gay or lesbian partners,

Bodhisattva and Mercy

For those of us committed to the Mercy way of life, there is much to coordinate with our charism and traditional dedication to the lives of both Mary and Martha. Whether sisters, associates, or friends of Mercy, the bodhisattva provides a symbol of compassionate service especially meaningful to women who have reached the age of wisdom at a time when society, the Church, and our Mercy Institute are in a

time of transition. This is a time when some are tempted to hang on to past securities, while others rush headlong into future possibilities, each group experiencing a special kind of suffering, each choosing to remain in the fray of contemporary Mercy life.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, suggests that walking meditation helps the practitioner see pain, anguish, and suffering. He finds that "every path, every street—from the back alleys of Beirut to the roads of Vietnam where mines still explode and take the lives of children and farmers—every path in the world is your walking meditation path."¹³ This is a path of suffering because of the kinship felt with all beings when one walks with the compassion of an awakened heart.

In contemporary Japan, Guanyin appears as Kannon, the goddess of Compassion, kind and loving, but capable of ruthlessness and "tough love" as necessary. She is sometimes portrayed with a sword, and she is admired as a compassionate, not a merely aggressive figure. Feminists will recognize this anti-patriarchal stance, in which women see themselves, as well as others, as free from the obligation of always being nice and unconditionally giving in to others in codependent forms of behavior.¹⁴

The bodhisattva is not a weak person, but a strong individual who freely chooses to remain present to the sufferings of

humanity. This is a role which holds appeal for contemporary Christians as well as Buddhist women and men of long ago, and of today; this is a role which helps all of humanity to make sense of the sufferings of everyday life in all societies, and one that draws each person to reach out to the neighbor with a compassionate heart and loving hands.

While each art piece and each written explanation provides food for thought, what may be most valuable for Mercy readers is another look at some of our own documents and Mercy Institute spirituality. Our 1997 *Constitutions Study Guide* contains the following prayer:

Compassionate One,
You who have called us to
walk among your people
as sign of your
tenderness
and mercy to all peoples.
Be with us today.
Soften our hearts that we
might feel the suffering
of all our sisters and brothers.
Enlarge our hearts
to make a home for all those
who ask for your mercy.
This we ask in the Name of
Jesus.¹⁵

Such is my bodhisattva prayer for myself and all who follow the path of Mercy. Especially as we move toward the Age of Wisdom with accompanying diminishments and suffering because of sickness, loss, and concern for our own health, as well as for the state of the millennium world and Church, Guanyin provides an image of compassion. Perhaps

Mercy women will find in this figure a comforting role model to be with us as we suffer to form ourselves and our Institute in the life of compassionate service for the twenty-first century.



Notes

- 1 The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, *Selected Works*, "Foreword and Acknowledgments" (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994).
- 2 *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1986), p. 187.
- 3 The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, *Selected Works*, p. 49.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 129.
- 6 Museum label.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "Mahayana," *Encyclopedia*, p. 216.
- 9 See especially discussion of Kingston's and similar views in Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 115–116.
- 10 Ibid., p. 115.
- 11 Clunas, p. 115.
- 12 Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Poverty, Celibacy, and Obedience* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. 5.
- 13 *A Guide to Walking Meditation* (New Haven, CT: Fellowship Publications, 1985).
- 14 Hallie Iglehart Austen, *The Heart of the Goddess* (Berkeley, CA: Wingbo Press, 1990), p. 146.
- 15 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1997.



Above: Contemplative bodhisattva, Northern Wei, first half 6th century A.D.



Right: Standing bodhisattva, last quarter, 6th century A.D.



Contributors

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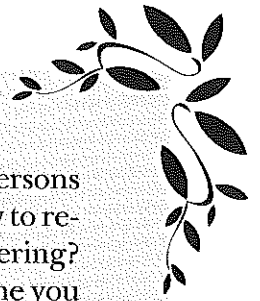
Regina Pastula is a Mercy Associate (North Carolina). She lives in Belmont, N.C. with her husband, Joe and their sixteen-year-old daughter, Tiffany. She is a member of the Justice Team for the Regional Community of N.C. and serves on the Peace and Justice Advisory Board for the Diocese of Charlotte, N.C. She received her B.S. in special education from Sacred Heart College in Belmont which was run by the Sisters of Mercy. She teaches at Holy Trinity Catholic Middle School as a sixth grade English teacher. She is pursuing her master's degree in special education with a concentration in learning disabilities and inclusion. Her e-mail is reginapastula@hotmail.com.

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Sandra Jean Sherman, O.S.U., a Toledo Ursuline Sister, has a Bachelor of Science in education and a Master of Arts in pastoral studies. She previously taught elementary and special education, and served on the Pastoral Team of her community's retirement center. Sandra teaches theology of aging at Lourdes College in Sylvania, Ohio, collaborates with the Diocesan Council on Elder Ministry and gives elder retreats on life review. Currently her community's vocation director, she is also a Reiki practitioner, a sacred dancer and a leader of ritual and the Dances of Universal Peace. She feels that she best lives out her community's vision of empowerment of women in her facilitation of a support group for women religious who have been sexually abused. Her e-mail is sanjea_43606@yahoo.com.



Discussion Questions



(Crossen) What are the ways, in your experience, that give the most comfort to persons who are dying? What pastoral wisdom can you share with your friends about how to respond to the various needs persons have when they feel overwhelmed by suffering? Which part of the biblical tradition do you yourself turn to when you or someone you love is dealing with terminal illness? What Scripture passages in this article hold a special message of consolation and strength for you today?

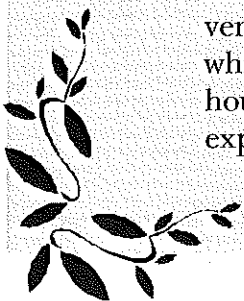
(Fowler) Do you believe that sin can be defined and/or determined by how we are socialized? Is sin an internally generated process and experience? Or an external doctrinal or ethical description? Who decides what sin is? What is the relationship of personal responsibility and cultural conditioning in relation to sin? How have you been taught to think about sin? Are there any similarities and/or differences to a feminist interpretation?

(Moran) What actions in your life or that of your friends do you consider similar to that of the bodhisattva—postponing passage into nirvana in order to relieve the pain of those who suffer? How does this image represent a response to suffering different from western images of the crucifix, or Christian martyrs, who also “give up their lives” as a sacrifice for others? How does the image of the beautiful bodhisattva differ from heroic images of soldiers, fire-fighters and police, those emblematic of heroism in the tragedy of September 11, 2001? What values are represented by these contrasting images?

(Pastula) Sexual violation of a woman as a child—whether by another family member or by a family friend—affects one’s later relationships in many ways, and has a profound effect on family members, once they realize what has happened. The church is largely silent on this issue, except for formulating legal responses in instances of clergy abuse of male minors. Does gender play a role in what forms of violation the church is presently willing to address? What should bishops, priests and official church organizations be saying to perpetrators, to families and to female victims? What should the church be doing in response to the evidence that many women are victims of incest within “good Christian families”?

(Rittner) Since the legacy of WW II is part of the life history of most Sisters of Mercy, how has the “war experience” been acknowledged in community discussion? What parts of the testimony of Kim Yoon-shim and Jan Ruff-Oherne do you find most compelling? Do you personally know any survivors of sexual and racial violence from WW II, whether from Europe or Asia? What effect does the violence of war, and sexual violence against women have on defining specifics of the Mercy Direction Statement, and the subject matter of Opening Worlds of Mercy?

(Sherman) How can we begin to recognize the survivors of rape and sexual abuse among us as prophets? Why is it easier to be compassionate to survivors who are not actually members of the community? What social pressures within community prevent the screams of truth from being heard and reduce the voice of our sisters to whispers? Is it only therapists and spiritual directors who are willing to listen to “the hour when nothing rhymes?” What are the sources of the discomfort at hearing these experiences of members?



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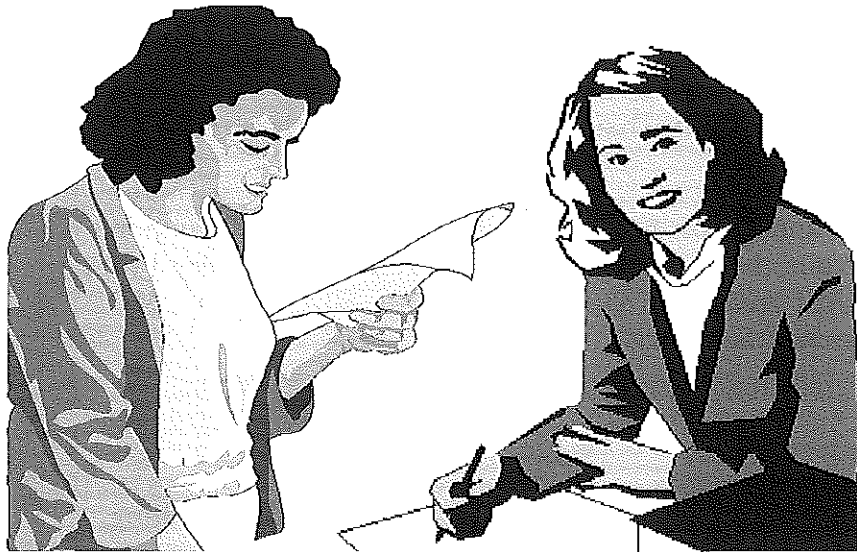
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MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

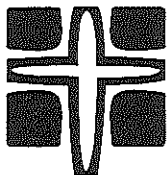
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in Philadelphia, at St. Raphaela Center, June 9–11, 2002.

Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the Institute by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

Membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8300 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., Executive Director, Gwynedd Mercy College, Gwynedd Valley, PA 19437, (215) 641-5521, email: mariemicheled@aol.com

Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity.



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