CREATING A SAFE HAVEN
FOR TALKING ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
THROUGH WORKS OF FICTION

By

Lisa Jo Bezner
(MDiv, Boston University 2008; STM, Boston University 2013)

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for TY 855 Pastoral Care, Community Justice and Feminist Ethics

Dr. Phyllis Sheppard

Fall 2012
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... 2

Section
I PASTORAL CARE WHEEL .................................................................................................................. 2
  Experience ............................................................................................................................................... 2
  Social Analysis ..................................................................................................................................... 3
  Theological and Ethical Reflections ....................................................................................................... 4
  Pastoral Care ....................................................................................................................................... 5
II WHY USE FICTION? ............................................................................................................................ 6
  Beauty and the Beast ............................................................................................................................. 6
  Teaching through Literature .................................................................................................................. 8
III THE CROSS-COUNTRY QUILTERS BY JENNIFER CHIAVERINI .............................................. 9
  Sacrifice ............................................................................................................................................... 9
  Isolation ............................................................................................................................................. 11
  Cycles ............................................................................................................................................... 12
  Rescue ............................................................................................................................................. 13
  Healing ............................................................................................................................................ 14
IV NEXT STEPS .................................................................................................................................... 16

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................................... 18
ABSTRACT

Feminist theologians have called on pastors to break the silence or holy hush that surrounds intimate partner violence for some years, but little progress has been made. This paper is part of a larger project that hopes to make churches a safer place for conversations about domestic violence, for people who have been abused to go for assistance and a place where ministries keep the conversation going.

PASTORAL CARE WHEEL

Experience

Within the first six months of being a pastor, I had my first exposure to domestic violence as a pastor. It started out normal enough. She walked into the fellowship hall where I was planning worship, took a deep breath and said she needed help.

What she needed was food and the nearest food bank was in the next town but their car had broken down so they were stranded eight miles from the nearest food source. So we went to the next town and she chattered non-stop the whole way about her children, her husband or whatever came to mind.

There was another trip for car parts with her and the husband. They both showed up in the church the following Sunday, she listened and he seemed somber. As she chatted with people, she explained they needed help with bills.

I couldn’t explain it, something just seemed off. It was during another trip that week that she told me about her rape in graphic detail. By this time one of my parishioners was out hunting a deer for them. That Sunday she greeted people as they entered church and they complimented her on her hair that she had cut herself. She was a talented, but unemployed cosmetologist.

Maybe it was the next day when she called and said he’d beaten her and she needed help getting out. As soon as I hung up the phone I grabbed Counseling Women by
Christie Cozad Neuger, which I read for my pastoral care class because I knew I needed to know more.

A few months later, I gave a sermon on domestic violence using one of the Scriptures that had been used to keep women in domestic violence situations. I’ll never forget the sinking feeling in my stomach when a parishioner after church said he was certain preachers didn’t do that anymore and I must have been talking about 100 years ago. When I said there were still pastors preaching sacrifice, he gruffly responded “Not in our denomination.”

**Social Analysis**

One of the biggest difficulties surrounding silence in churches on domestic violence is the assumption that “it doesn’t happen here.” If church people accept that Christians do abuse, then it’s got to be in a different denomination like the Evangelical Protestants with their male-centered, inerrancy-based theology. And the Evangelical Protestants protest that it is not the ones who actually show up to church, but the ones who claim to be churchgoers in order to look good. The truth is the percentage of people who are abused by an intimate partner is the same in the secular world as it is in the sacred world.

The most recent information I was able to find confirmed 2004 findings that “the Christian community is not spared the harsh reality of family violence, with rates of occurrence that parallel those in the general population.” More alarming: is there is no indication faith-based batterer’s programs are more helpful than secular programs.¹

Spirituality is, however, beneficial in providing strength and resilience for the

---

survivors who utilize domestic violence shelters. This statistic is problematized by the ineffective help that has frequently been provided by pastors who may not know anything about intimate partner violence. In our visit to Casa de Myrna, Justine’s story about her pastor recommending couple’s counseling is all too typical.

Theological and Ethical Reflections

There are several Scriptures that are used to keep women in abusive situations and they have theological counterparts that may be used explicitly or implicitly to discourage someone who is abused from leaving. The most difficult concept is sacrifice because there is a fine line between unhealthy and healthy sacrifice.

Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac is seen as abhorrent by Søren Kierkegaard in Fear and Trembling, yet many Christians laud the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. Both of seen as the father sacrificing the son. If God doesn’t want burnt offerings or animal sacrifice for sins, then why does God want a human sacrifice?

And, of course, who can forget Paul’s advice to not divorce non-Christians because you can make them Christians through the marriage. If your abusive husband doesn’t attend church regularly, then this is the passage a pastor might use to find meaning in your abuse. You purpose in life, the reason for your sacrifice, is his salvation.

In the courtroom scene of Fried Green Tomatoes, the lawyer asks “Are you aware that you broke up the most sacred thing on this earth – a Christian home with a loving father and mother and child?” It’s fiction, but the sanctity of marriage is often put before

---

3 Psalm 51 and others.
4 Diane Swancutt provided an interesting insight on this in the context of the first century understanding that the Spirit was a physical thing that was ejaculated during sex. I’m still looking into that.
the command to help the least of these. And the least of these, in this case, is clearly the person being abused and the children who may be witnessing the abuse and thinking that’s the normal way love is expressed.

Marriage is a legal institution. A pastor may perform the words that create the sacred blessing, but the marriage is not legal until the marriage licensed is signed by two witnesses and entered in the public record by the clerk. That’s why to end one, you go to court for a divorce.

I state what seems obvious because I don’t think while there is a legal marriage, the sacred bond is always intact. If one person tries to control another, the sacred bond of mutuality is broken. If one person abuses the other, the bond is broken. The most sacred thing on earth is a loving, mutual partnership where two are one, but that doesn’t mean every marriage is the most sacred thing on earth.

**Pastoral Care**

In the instance of domestic violence, there are a few things a pastor needs to know. First, believe the person who tells you they are being abused. Second, know your boundaries. Third, get more knowledgeable help. Fourth, be patient and listen.

The person who abuses is a person interested in control. They will not be beyond trying to control you. If they can win you to their side, then they can control not only the person they’ve been abusing but you as well. If you try to get their side, they’ll lie to you.

Too many pastors have learned the hard way that domestic violence is more than they can handle. I know of a pastor who lost his churches because he believed the woman and didn’t seek help. He tried to help the woman on his own, and the abuser accused him of having an affair. In one accusation, the abuser maintained control over the wife and
enforced to her that she had no one to turn to that he couldn’t eliminate.

This is why you need to contact people with more experience such as social workers and domestic violence agencies.

But you’re going to need to be patient because even though the person has said the person is abusing them, it might not be a safe time to leave. And sometimes there aren’t vacancies in the shelter. The person being abused may stay put for years for reasons they understand that you don’t. Be patient and listen.

For all of those warnings, the simplest reason to get involved is this: “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” If you were in the same situation, how would it feel for the person or organization you thought would help turned their back on you?

WHY USE FICTION?

**Beauty and the Beast**

It wasn’t until recently that I read *The Beauty and the Beast*, and it is difficult to read after studying domestic violence because Beauty or Belle offers herself as a sacrifice to the Beast in order to save her father.

In Van Gool’s version, Beauty is given permission by the Beast to see her father for eight days, who greets her and asks, “The evil Beast didn’t hurt you?” And Beauty replies, “No, Father, he’s only a monster on the outside. Inside he is generous and sweet.”

After seven days with her family, Beauty tells them she must return and her jealous sisters try to keep her from returning, so Beauty sneaks out saying “The Beast needs me. … I must go to him.” When she arrives Beast is dying and he whispers “I’m

---

7 Van Gool, 51.
so happy to see you once more before I die.” Beauty tells him she loves him and wants to marry him and Beast is transformed into a prince, who tells her “Your love has broken the evil spell that made me the Beast. I love you, Beauty.”

The Disney version is complicated with a rival lover, Gaston, and Belle leaves the Beast to rescue her father, Maurice. Gaston leads the town in storming Beast’s castle to gain Belle’s hand through heroic measures and he faces the Beast on the balcony wall. Belle arrives to see Gaston clubbing the unresisting Beast, but “at the sound of Belle’s voice, the Beast was roused to fight off his attacker.” Beast has Gaston by the throat when Belle reaches where they are fighting and Gaston pleads for his life, the Beast releases him because “he had become too human to kill.” Gaston is forgotten as Belle and the Beast embrace, which allows Gaston to stab Beast in the back and “with a cry of pain, the Beast turned on his attacker.” Gaston backs away, falls to his death, and Beast collapses. Belle rushes to the dying Beast’s side as he whispers, “At least … I got to see you one last time.” Belle pledges her love and Beast becomes a “handsome Prince, whom her love had restored to human form.”

What the two tales have in common is the love of the woman transforms the Beast. For the Disney Princess culture or little girls who grow up with these stories, the most obvious message is that a woman’s love can transform a man into a prince. The Disney story is complicated because the Beast’s violence is justified through the threat of Gaston, who sees himself as Belle’s best choice for a husband. In the climactic scene, Beast does not fight back until he hears Belle’s voice. She is the cause of his violence.

As we grow up the story surrounding the myth or fable becomes more complex,

---

8 Van Gool, 54.
9 Van Gool, 59.
but it remains as rogues and pirates become wealthy lords in countless romance books
known as “bodice rippers.” Or in Fifty Shades of Grey where he states he is “fifty shades of fucked-up” and her offering herself in sexual domination and submission heals him.11

This message told in countless varieties and written by both women and men is
often so pervasive, we don’t even realize the harm until learning about domestic violence
and the methods of control used by the person who batters.

Teaching through literature

In 2011, three Malaysian literature instructors presented their findings on using
selected texts to encourage awareness of social issues. The found because “literary works
are mimetic of the realities of our daily lives, they actually present an excellent
opportunity to relate texts with current contexts.”12 They used a four-step process in the
classroom: analysis of text, reading related newspaper articles, design posters and the
present on the posters. The researchers found “by bringing into the classroom issues
which are important as part of their learning experience …we would be doing our social
responsibility of nurturing these young minds to be more overtly aware of their
surroundings.”

For churches, I think what is important is the production of something that goes
beyond reading a book and discussing it for an hour or two. While the students created
posters that they presented in a class, this will be modified to create a worship element
that can be used in worship services on domestic violence. There will be more on that

11 I’m almost embarrassed to admit I read one of them, but I didn’t read the other two to see how the “romance” ended.
It is also my understanding that what is depicted is not a proper BDSM relationship because of the lack of a safe word and mutualiy. For more on this see Rebecca Alpert’s “Guilty Pleasures: When Sex is Good Because It’s Bad,”
Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection, 2nd ed, eds. Marvin Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas
12 Hashim, Ruzy Suliza, Imran Ho-Abdullah and Noraini Md Yusof, “Fiction Out of Fact: Raising Awareness About
later.

THE CROSS-COUNTRY QUILTERS BY JENNIFER CHIAVERINI

*The Cross-Country Quilters* brings together a group of women at a weeklong quilting camp. At the end the week they promise to keep in touch and assemble a challenge quilt. There are several issues explored through different characters, but we’ll be looking at Donna and her daughter, Lindsay. Lindsay announces she is getting engaged to Brandon and dropping out of college before Donna goes to camp. Donna comes back hoping to get her daughter to return to college because she’s suspicious of Brandon.

Lindsay returns but starts cancelling visits to the family because of Brandon and when they visit for Christmas it’s a short visit ended with a lie. But it’s when Donna receives a call from a professor about Lindsay skipping class to take care of Donna that the family discovers Lindsay has been physically abused. A key character is the younger sister, Becca, who consistently offers a critical voice.

This book was selected because it offers insight into the types of control used by an abusive partner to isolate the person from their community of support. It also provides an opportunity for ministry from the encounter between Donna and Lindsay when Lindsay realizes the hold Brandon had on her.

**Sacrifice**

Since the 1980s, the graphic used to explain how an abuser asserts their power and control over another has come from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs of Duluth, Minn. The eight-pie wheel is known as The Duluth Model. The methods used are coercion and threats, economic abuse, intimidation, emotional abuse, male privilege,
isolation, children and minimizing, denying and blaming.13

Economic abuse is used by Brandon when he convinces Lindsay that she doesn’t need to return to school because he’ll be able to support them as a doctor. As the family protests her leaving school right after she announces the engagement, Lindsay says “I know it’s a sacrifice, but when you love someone the way Brandon and I love each other, you make sacrifices for him.”

Her sister wants to know what Brandon is sacrificing and there is no mutual sacrifice just an explanation that Brandon can’t afford to pay her tuition and doesn’t feel comfortable with her parents paying her tuition.14

While it is correct that couples often have to sacrifice for each other because of economics. The important thing to notice is Lindsay doesn’t say “you make sacrifices for each other” but “you make sacrifices for him.”

In Carol Winkelman’s *The Language of Battered Women*, she notices how women who have recently fled a violent relationship often speak in a way that puts the abuser at the center. They have spent the relationship conforming to his desires in hopes of avoiding abuse, so their desires are sacrificed to make him happy.

The problem with the sacrifice is that it’s intended to keep Lindsay from being able to depend on her own income. It makes her dependent on Brandon and unable to set aside money to move out. A batterer is able to convince their loved one that the sacrifice is for the good of the pair even the only one who truly benefits is the person trying to gain control of the relationship.

---


14 Chiaverini, 29.
Discussion: Is sacrifice part of a mutual relationship? What does that look like? How is Lindsay’s sacrifice different?

Cycles

In Chapter Six, Donna has returned from quilting camp and they’ve invited Lindsay and Brandon for Sunday dinner so the future in-laws can get to know each other. Donna and her husband Paul notice Lindsay arrives alone and discuss Brandon. Donna says: “There must be some good in him or Lindsay wouldn’t love him. … We might have to look hard to find it, but it must be here.”

Think back to *Beauty and the Beast*, where everybody else sees the Beast and can’t find anything lovable about him but Beauty or Belle can see the prince inside the Beast. There are three recognized cycles in domestic violence: anticipation, abuse and honeymoon. During the anticipation stage, someone who is being battered can feel the tension rising and will modify their behavior if they think it will keep the batterer from striking out. Those who have been in an abusive relationship for a long time might even do something to provoke the physical violence so the tension will go away.

The second state is the physical abuse that we often think of when we hear the words domestic violence or intimate partner violence. The third stage is the honeymoon phase where the batterer treats the battered like a princess, begs forgiveness and promises to never do it again.

It is in the third stage where women find what is so lovable about their batterer. They want to believe that the batterer can be transformed by their love and that it will never happen again. But the most important part of this cycle for controlling those abused

---

15 Chiaverini, 147.
is that the batterer is at that time a prince, who does all the romantic things expected.

Discussion: There are several times when Lindsay uses language that focuses on Brandon’s happiness instead of her own. In fiction, these are quite clear. Identify some of them in the text and reflect if you’ve heard something similar from someone you know. Compile a list of them as a group.

**Isolation**

There are two types of isolation that a batterer uses. The most obvious is when friends and family are cut out because the batterer wants all of their attention. At first, this might seem like the batterer is devoted to their partner and wants to be with them all of the time.

The other is shame-based. The person battered may be present, but they think people can see that something isn’t right in the relationship so they begin to withdraw from friends and family. It may first be an emotional withdrawal that later becomes a physical withdrawal.

In chapter eight, Lindsay calls to say they won’t be coming to Thanksgiving dinner. Notice the different reactions from Donna and Becca. Donna is hurt that they won’t be coming, but tries to dismiss it as “the couple’s first Thanksgiving together” and hopes they’ll make it for Christmas. Becca responds differently stating, “I’d never let some guy control me like that.”

Discussion: Why do you think they responded differently? Even though Vinnie had never met Lindsay she suspects something based on Donna’s descriptions, what does she see that Donna isn’t letting herself see?

Notice how the isolation increases at Christmas. Why do you think Donna
doesn’t react on her impulses?

Rescue

In chapter ten, a phone call from Lindsay’s college prompts Donna to action. When Donna and Becca arrive at Lindsay’s apartment they discover that Brandon has beaten Lindsay and left her with a split and swollen lip and a black eye.

One of the biggest flaws I discovered in fiction dealing with domestic violence is the assumption that everyone has a family to rescue them. In fact, many people who have been battered first turn to churches for help. One domestic violence survivor speaking to Carol J. Schlueter explained five reactions her churches had when “Jessie” sought to leave her battering husband. They are: disbelief, denial, abandonment, threat and complete support.¹⁶

Pastors, who have not been educated on domestic violence, are much like Donna when faced with someone coming to them. They don’t want to believe it, so they may listen sympathetically to the person being abused and then talk to the batterer. The batterer, of course, denies it and since the pastor didn’t want to believe it in the first place they have convinced themselves that it never happened so they abandon the person who has been battered. The first rule of pastoral care for someone who tells you they have been abused: believe them.

A church may threaten the person battered through the misuse of Scripture. Jessie recalled someone telling her “if you break up, it’s adultery” or that she should submit to her husband as the head of the household (Eph. 5).

Jessie contacted a church she had previously attended and they provided the fifth

---

¹⁶ Schlueter, Carol J., “Creating a New Reality: No More Domestic Violence;” ( ), 256.
response: complete support. They asked her what she needed from letters of recommendation, moving expenses, car repairs, and money to break through the economic abuse and go into hiding.\footnote{Schlueter, 257.}

Discussion: Reflect back on the eight ways someone maintains power and control over another. What are some ways a church might break through?

The other is that all the person has to do is leave. In Chivareni’s book, Lindsay returns home where Brandon later arrives and yells at her.

In fact, the most dangerous time for a woman is when she leaves or if she is caught preparing to leave. For the batterer the whole point is about controlling the person so they don’t leave. Leaving is the ultimate loss of control. Another woman in Schlueter’s study got help from her family as they investigated shelters and helped her pack and move when the husband was gone.\footnote{Schlueter, 259.}

To do: Find out what type of domestic violence services are available in your area. If they have posters or stickers promoting their hotline, post them around the church.

**Healing**

The main reason I selected Chivareni’s book is chapter ten. It begins with the movie star, Julia, needing a “stunt quilter” for scenes in a movie so she calls Donna for help. Lindsay had been studying theater and acting prior to the abuse, so Donna arranges a job for Lindsay on the set where she can be away from Brandon and rediscover her self-confidence.

Donna takes Lindsay into her sewing room where she explains she was unable to
make her a wedding quilt because of her unacknowledged resistance to Brandon. Instead, she had created several blocks from Lindsay’s life before Brandon that showed how remarkable Lindsay was.

There are two ways that a ministry can be created from this. The first is a prayer quilt or shawl ministry and the second is the creation of paraments.

When women leave a domestic violence situation, they have to leave almost everything behind because they might only have trunk space in a car for all the clothes and any sentimental items they need. Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo began Prayer Shawl Ministries began in 1998 as part of the applied Feminist Spirituality program at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn. The specific methods or patterns used don’t matter, what is important is the creator prays for the recipient with each stitch. After they are completed they are dedicated and sent on their way.\(^\text{19}\)

Creating these items for women in shelters lets them know that someone is thinking about them and praying for them. As part of the ministry, the women should be able to take the shawl or quilt with them when they move on to a transitional shelter and/or permanent housing. Before beginning the ministry, contact the local domestic violence agency and see if they would be willing to participate in distributing the items.

The second part is the creation of worship paraments in the form of banners and/or pulpit clothes to indicate the church’s solidarity with people who have been abused. In Chiaverini’s book she uses two characters to expose readers to the historical political use of quilts: recurring character Sylvia Compton and Grace Daniels. Briefly, quilts have been a woman’s way of making political statements since before we gained

\(^{19}\) \url{http://www.shawlministry.com} (retrieved Dec. 17, 2012).
suffrage, but the creation of worship elements are also quilmaking as education.

Creating a domestic banner for worship is similar to the 1876 Crusade Quilt made to celebrate the women’s temperance movement, which is an example of epideictic rhetoric because it was “used for ceremonial display, embodies the value of the group, and also suggests a more idealized image of the … speakers.”

In 1995, a group of women serving sentences at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women formed the Battered Offenders Self-Help group where they constructed a quilt depicting their experience of domestic violence that led them to kill their abusers in the hopes of educating the public. The quilt was displayed at the State Fair where Gov. Brereton Jones saw it and the clemency process was sped up so the women who had been victimized by their abusers and the judicial process were released from prison.

NEXT STEPS

I was hoping to get more books into this paper, however, this paper has a limited amount of space so I focused on the one novel read that had the richest applications for ministry that can not only break the silence surrounding domestic violence, but keep the conversation alive.

This work will continue at creatingasafehaven.wordpress.com, which already contains prayers, a short story for discussion, liturgical dance option, meditation and parament sample related to Luke 13:10-17 and Psalm 71:1-6, which are paired on Proper 16C and were indicated as potentially helpful in discussing domestic violence by


21 Interestingly, the acronym BOSH is the Hebrew word for “shame” or “disappointment” (בוש).

22 Amelon.
Marjorie Procter-Smith.

This material will be put into a PDF format that can be used by a church leader for a book group. It will be joined by analyses of Picture Perfect by Jodi Picoult, which examines the question of whether treatment is possible for the batterer; Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe by Fannie Flagg, which allows a more focused discussion of the social network and economic abuse; and Safe Havens by Nicholas Sparks, which allows an examination of professions that batter and the role of substances in battering.

At this point, all works have focused on white people and men beating women. Intimate partner violence, however, knows no socioeconomic, racial or sexual orientation boundaries. Women do abuse men, women abuse women, men abuse men and there is abuse in the trans community.

I made the selections I did because of the type of research that is available through four library systems: Boston Public Library, Boston University, Boston College and Harvard Divinity School. But also because I had to be able to connect that research to a novel and gaining titles has been from my own reading experience, from people I know, and reading book jackets and discussion guides.
Bibliography


Clark, Ron, “Submit or Else!” *A Cry Instead of Justice: The Bible and Cultures of Violence in Psychological Perspective*, eds. Dereck Daschke and Andrew Kille, (NY, London: T&T Clark, 2010), 87-106.

Herman, Judith Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery* (NY: Perseus, 1997).


Domestic violence is one of the disturbing problems of the society. Domestic violence occurs in all countries, regardless of culture and education, regardless of religion, and there is no exception for rich or poor. Domestic violence often comes with a high proportion in families with special problems such as economic difficulties, low levels of education, illness, unemployment, drunk, or addictions. However, this does not mean that the rich families or intellectuals will have no violence. Moreover, there are different forms of violence that outsiders are difficult to identify. Such violence can happen between parents and children, often reflected through the educational style with harsh punishments. It can be the acts of beating, starving, humiliating or verbally abusing victims in many forms. For some, their work is a 'safe haven' where they can physically and emotionally escape domestic violence (Beecham, 2014; EHRC/CIPD, 2013). It can also be a place where they can access information about domestic violence services without alerting the perpetrator (Faichnie, 2010; Katula, 2012). Employees may also be provided with assistance from their employers, such as counselling services; changed hours or work relocation to decrease perpetrators’ awareness of their routine; and enhanced security measures or paid leave (Beecham, 2014; Forster, 2010). Managers may have neither the capacity to talk about and to escape from. And, sadly, it can happen to anyone – women, men, children, between spouses and even friends. No one is immune to domestic violence. If you or someone you know is in a situation that’s unsafe, these domestic violence quotes can hopefully encourage you or them to seek the necessary support and resources to get yourself or the person you know out. And, if you are a survivor of domestic violence, then these quotes can help remind you of your strength. It frequently feels like you are failing, or destroying your family, or not trying to work things out, or not giving your partner a second chance. – Blaine Nelson.