



ANTI-DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The History Section

Until the late 1960s, domestic violence had neither a name nor legal identity in American common life. It was viewed simply as an individual social pathology that affected a small number of relationships. However, with the struggles and gains of the civil rights movement, along with anti-war protests, and the emergence of black liberation theologies and impulses, the nascent feminist movement found a platform to raise awareness about a crisis that was more widespread than people wanted to believe. Interestingly enough, in the United States, advocacy groups for animals' rights were established and supported before any such movement against domestic violence.

Nancy Lemon's survey of domestic violence law in the United States notes the formation of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866, and the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1875.¹ Both groups predate any organization aimed at preventing cruelty to women. The modern reader may be struck with disbelief that this cruelty to women (and in many instances children) was an acceptable practice in American life in the eighteenth, nineteenth and (part of the) twentieth century. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1857 allowed for marriage to be an acceptable defense against the charge of rape.² At the same time, in the states of Mississippi and North Carolina respectively, state law allowed for the "moderate chastisement" of wives by their husbands.³ During this period, states were grappling with serious re-envisioning of women's roles in public and private life.

With regard to black communities and churches, domestic violence has long been a crisis that has gone unaddressed. Undoubtedly, black women and children have been the most vulnerable among us. Quoting a passage from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Dwight Hopkins writes, "Everybody in the world was in a position to give [...black women] orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' White men said, 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' They...carried a world on their heads."⁴ Hopkins acknowledges an inherent vulnerability (this is meant to be interpreted merely as description and not prescription) in the social status of black women and their children, by extension.

National statistics released by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence indicate that 1 out of 4 women will experience some form of domestic battery or abuse in her lifetime.⁵ Most vulnerable for nonfatal battery are women between the ages of 20 to 24. These numbers trend worse for minority communities. What remains the most staggering of all facts is that most cases of abuse go unreported (it is estimated that only a third of cases are ever reported).

Sadly, among many of the victims of abuse are children, the innocent. Statistics from Childhelp, an advocacy group against child abuse, indicates that over three million reports of child abuse are made every year in the United States.⁶ Having worked as a chaplain in a children's hospital in Louisville, Kentucky for fifteen months, the incidences of child abuse cases are more frequent than one might think. At least five children die daily because of abuse and many more infants die because of maltreatment but their death certificates do not record this as the cause.⁷ A common fact about violence visited upon women and children is that most victims know and/or have relationships with their attackers. Perpetrators prey on the intimacy and often the financial dependency by women and children in those relationships in order to exercise control over their victims. Whether referred to as domestic violence, spousal violence, child abuse, or intimate partner abuse, any act or pattern of behavior by one or both partners in a relationship that causes bodily injury, mental anguish, and or suffering is to be judged as wrong and the injured party should be encouraged to report it.

II. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

One of the most powerful rituals I have observed around the issue of domestic violence was the telling of stories of survival. Two years ago, I attended an event at the invitation of a friend that was hosted by her church. It was an intimate gathering of people all sitting in a circle. The arrangement was purposeful—representing the circle of support victims need. The lights were dim with a candle blazing, representing a will to survive in the darkness of despair. Each participant (three in total) sat in the middle of the circle when telling her story. They all began with the details of intimacy, then betrayal or suspicion leading to abuse. They were graphic about the details of their abuse. One could not have participated in that event and not have been sensitized or re-sensitized to the plight of abused women. The telling of the narratives was compelling. What incredible strength the women showed to recall such horror and not be jaded by it.

The goal of the evening, as the convener concluded, was to highlight the possibility of life and flourishing after experiences of abuse and violence. Inasmuch as advocates against domestic violence need to name abuse and confront it, they also need to affirm the survival of victims and lead them to healing places.

III. Audio Visual Suggestion

To heighten the sensitivity of parishioners regarding domestic violence, photos of abuse victims can be displayed prominently in your church vestibule. The photos should be set up during the worship service and made ready for viewing by the time worshippers are prepared to leave the sanctuary. The minister should alert the congregation about what they will see as the

exit the edifice. Another helpful component is to have trained counselors strategically positioned to provide emotional support for women and children and their families.

IV. Cultural Responses

African American churches can fulfill two important roles in preventing domestic abuse to women and children: 1) giving advocacy; and 2) raising awareness. No congregation can afford to pretend that abuse is not taking place in their fellowship. Pastors and parishioners alike must become savvier in recognizing the signs of domestic abuse, especially the signs from children. Regarding our ministry to victims of abuse, congregations must affirm to victims that it is okay to speak about their experiences of abuse. While the confidentiality of sensitive information received from victims should be maintained, congregations that speak openly about the nature of abuse and ways of preventing it will put victims at ease about coming forward for help.

Additionally, the person who hears the story of an abused person should believe what is told. Since abuse is a violation of trust, the one who comes forward to tell about the breaking of that trust is seeking a way of having it restored. That person should not be further violated by having the story questioned or examined in such a way that undermines what was told. What victims need is a validation of their new-found courage. A victim's admission of abuse is a courageous act; it is a decision to regain agency in light of the violation experienced. That should be affirmed and celebrated.

In my recent ministry to an abused member, I believe I liberated her with the words, "You do not deserve to be abused, no one does." Upon hearing those words, she wept uncontrollably. But her tears weren't tears of shame or guilt; they were tears of release. She was releasing her belief that her abuse was God's will for her life—something she deserved as a result of her past misdeeds. Oddly enough, many parishioners cling to narrow theologies about a vengeful God who exacts punishment upon them through the blows of an abusive partner. But they must hear that God stands against such abuse. Even further, the display of righteous anger is appropriate. Without ambiguity, congregations must say with clarity that abuse and violence work against the purposes of God. Perpetrators need to hear that, and so do victims and advocates. Churches can no longer allow so-called church leaders to maintain positions of authority if they are abusers of women or children. Churches also need to clearly urge the abused to report their abuse to criminal justice entities and to the church whenever it happens. The days of sweeping the pain of women and children under the rug are over.

When ministering to children, they must be taught they have the right to say no when they feel uncomfortable. They should be encouraged to tell someone when they feel uncomfortable and not fear consequences. Congregations should encourage families to teach children about those areas of their bodies where no one should touch them. Most advocates acknowledge that the information must be kept simple for children, but clear. Even when they are uncertain about what something means, children should be encouraged to talk about it and told to tell even if they are threatened by adult not to tell. Now is the time for parents and Christian educators working with therapists and others to use classes to do more than teach children Bible verses and Bible stories.

While these practical steps should be followed, there remains a need for preachers and Christian educators and church leaders to do theoretical work. Abuse is about power and control, never about love. The presumption of power and dominance based upon a religious community's reading and interpretation of biblical texts can create a context where abuse becomes a means of maintaining negative power and control. Thus, congregations must be careful in their theological constructions of gender roles and identities, and must not cower at the task of condemning violent and abusive expressions of patriarchy.

V. Story/Illustration

One of the most public stories of domestic violence in recent times occurred in the high profile relationship between Chris Brown and Rihanna (Robin Rihanna Fenty). In February 2009, days after being investigated for assault and making criminal threats upon what was then an unidentified victim, Brown turned himself in to the Los Angeles Police Department, and subsequently pled guilty to felony assault upon Miss Fenty. Investigative reports after the attack contended that it was not the first time Brown had assaulted Miss Fenty. This was not surprising because domestic violence is a pattern of abuse that escalates. What disturbed me most about the public playing out of this story was Brown's pre-recorded interview with Larry King in September 2009. When confronted with the details of the night of the attack, Brown responded, "I'm in shock, because, first of all, that's not who I am as a person, and that's not who I promise I want to be." In an incredulous manner, he attempted to distance himself from his actions by insisting that he was shocked by what had happened. It was the classic "I lost control" defense, also known as the "I don't even recognize the person who did that" defense.

Perpetrators of abuse and violence must be held accountable for their actions, even if they are unwilling to accept responsibility. I once heard a perpetrator admit that churches forgive and forget too quickly, without holding perpetrators accountable. While I do not believe that one is to be judged perpetually for sin s/he has confessed and stopped, serious consequences, however, must be assigned to those who abuse women and children.

VI. Songs that Speak to the Moment

Perhaps, one of the most important efforts in advocacy against domestic violence is leading both victims and perpetrators to an acknowledgement that violence is being committed. Many people have justified violence based upon social enculturation or sexist assumptions about gender roles, etc. To them, the consequences of their actions are hidden. Thus, they stand in need of a confrontation with reality. This song, "Open My Eyes That I May See," has something to offer the advocate, the victim, and even the perpetrator. To the advocate, the song encourages a work of setting another free and truth-telling. With clarity and warmth, the advocate must name violence and abuse for what it is. To the victim, the song calls for an open ear to the naming of violence and abuse. Abused victims need to hear that abuse is never okay. And to the perpetrator, the song has a basic message: open your eyes and see the truth and the consequences of your actions.

Open My Eyes That I May See

Open my eyes, that I may see

Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.

Open my mouth, and let me bear
Gladly the warm truth everywhere;
Open my heart and let me prepare
Love with Thy children thus to share.

*Silently now I wait for thee
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes (ears, heart) illumine me,
Spirit divine!*⁸

The song “Steal Away,” is a staple of the African American sacred music tradition. The spiritual genius of “Steal Away,” like many other spirituals, is the double meanings in its lines. While singing of a longing to leave the present for a time with Jesus, the additional implication is that of an intended escape from an experience of suffering. The same spiritual genius should encourage any victim of abuse to do the same. In ministry to abuse victims, advocates should encourage the seeking of places of refuge as soon as abuse occurs. I know this point well. During my writing of this commentary, I received a call from a member who sought my counsel concerning her abusive marriage. In our conversation, I affirmed for her the right to flee to a place of safety. We strategized about her exit. Sometimes victims need to hear from folk they believe know the Lord that it is okay to leave their abusive environment.

Steal Away

Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here!

Verse 1

My Lord calls me, He call me,
He calls me by the thunder;
The trumpet sounds within a my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here!

Verse 2

Green trees are bending, Poor sinner stands a'trembling;

Verse 3

Tombstones are bursting, Poor sinner stands a'trembling;
I ain't got long to stay here.
Sill away, still away, still away home.
I ain't got long to stay here.

Verse 4

My Lord calls me, He call me by the lightning;
The trumpet sounds within in-a my soul, I ain't got long to stay here.⁹

Beyond the physical injury of violence, domestic abuse inflicts emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain. Long after bruises heal and fractures mend, the inner pain remains. Mistrust and suspicion can consume victims. Guilt and shame can overwhelm perpetrators (as well as victims). Even advocates can begin to regret their involvement, depending upon the negative publicity surrounding the abuse. Thus, healing is needed at the level of the soul. Theologically, abuse and violence is sin, and sin mars the soul. The spiritual, "There is a Balm in Gilead," speaks of healing in the place where human hands cannot touch. It is a healing of fragmented parts, restoring them to a meaningful whole. This is especially significant for children who have had their innocence shattered because of abuse.

There Is a Balm in Gilead

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again

Don't ever feel discouraged
For Jesus is our friend
And if you lack for knowledge
He'll ne'er refuse to lend.¹⁰

The final song, "I Get Out," masterfully written and sung by Lauryn Hill, herself a victim of domestic violence, also one of today's featured videos, lays out in great detail, the journey of a person who has experienced domestic violence and the journey of an abuser. While we hope that no woman ever believes like Hill that their abuse is so awful that their only release is to die "If I have to die, oh Lord, that's how I choose to live," we do understand that abuse can be so vicious and cause victims to lose so much of their self-esteem, that they just want to die. What must be stressed in our churches, instead, is the dominant messages of the song: Victims, the intent of abusers is to "keep you as [their] slave", "get out." Churches help domestic violence victims,

“get out” and as Hill says, “let my Father’s will be done.” Perpetrators, if you abuse a woman or child you will go to jail, “get out;” “you’d be smart to save your soul”!

This song, with explanation, especially of the verses that promote death, can be placed in church bulletins and analyzed in Bible Study and other Christian education classes.

I GET OUT

I get out, I get out of all your boxes
I get out, you can't hold me in these chains
I'll get out
Father free me from this bondage
Knowin' my condition
Is the reason I must change

(Verse 1)

Your stinkin' resolution
Is no type of solution
Preventin' me from freedom
Maintainin' your polution
I won't support your lie no more
I won't even try no more
If I have to die, oh Lord
That's how I choose to live
I won't be compromised no more
I can't be victimised no more
I just don't sympathize no more
Cuz now I understand
You just wanna use me
You say "love" then abuse me
You never thought you'd loose me
But how quickly we forget
That nothin' is for certain
You thought I'd stay here hurtin'
Your guilt trip's just not workin'
Repressin' me to death
Cuz now I'm choosin' life, yo
I take the sacrifice, yo
If everything must go, then go
That's how I choose to live

(Pause)

That's how I choose to live...

(Pause)

No more compromises
I see past your diguises

Blindin' through mind control
Stealin' my eternal soul
Appealin' through material
To keep me as your slave

(Chorus)

But I get out
Oh, I get out of all your boxes
I get out
Oh, you can't hold me in these chains
I'll get out
Oh, I want out of social bondage
Knowin' my condition
Oh, is the reason I must change

(Verse 2)

See, what you see is what you get
Oh, and you ain't seen nothin' yet
Oh, I don't care if you're upset
I could care less if you're upset
See it don't change the truth
And your hurt feeling's no excuse
To keep me in this box
Psychological locks
Repressin' true expression
Cementin' this repression
Promotin' mass deception
So that no one can be healed
I don't respect your system
I won't protect your system
When you talk I don't listen
Oh, let my Father's will be done

(Chorus)

And just get out
Oh, just get out of all this bondage
Just get out
Oh, you can't hold me in these chains
Just get out
All these traditions killin' freedom
Knowin' my condition
Is the reason I must change

(Verse 3)

I just accepted what you said
Keepin' me among the dead

The only way to know
Is to walk then learn and grow
But faith is not your speed
Oh, you'd had everyone believe
That you're the sole authority
You just follow the majority
Afraid to face reality
The system is a joke
Oh, you'd be smart to save your soul
Oh, and escape this mind control
You spent your life in sacrifice
To a system for the dead
Oh, are you sure...
Where is the passion in this living
Are you sure it's God you servin'
Obligated to a system
Getting less then you're deserving
Who made up these schools, I say
Who made up these rules, I say
Animal conditioning
Oh, just to keep us as a slave

(Chorus)

Oh, just get out
Of this social Purgatory
Just get out
All these traditions are a lie
Just get out
Superstition killing freedom
Knowin' my condition
Is the reason I must die
Just get out
Just get out
Just get out
Let's get out
Let's get out
Knowin' my condition
Is the reason I must die
Just get out.¹¹

Notes

1. Lemon, Nancy. Domestic Violence Law: A Comprehensive Overview of Cases and Sources. San Francisco, CA: Austin and Winfield, 1996.
2. "Herstory of Domestic Violence: A Timeline of the Battered Women's Movement." Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse. Online location:

<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/herstory/herstory.html#martin> accessed 7 December 2009

3. Ibid.

4. Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1970, pp. 109-110, quoted in Hopkins, Dwingth N. Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. p. 52.

5. "Domestic Violence Facts." National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Online location: [http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet\(National\).pdf](http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet(National).pdf) accessed 7 December 2009

6. "National Child Abuse Statistics." Childhelp. Online location: <http://www.childhelp.org/resources/learning-center/statistics> accessed 7 December 2009

7. Ibid.

8. "Open Mine Eyes That I May See." Text and Tune by Clara H. Scott

9. "Steal Away." Negro Spiritual. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O5hz5KnSdc> accessed 7 December 2009

10. "There Is a Balm in Gilead." African American Spiritual

11. "I Get Out." By Lauryn Hill. Lauryn Hill Unplugged. New York, NY: Sony, 2002.