

## **“Intimate Violence,” Rev. Suzelle Lynch, September 22, 2002 – Kitsap UU Fellowship**

This is a riddle:

There are four women in a room. One is your mother. One is your sister. One is your daughter. One is your wife. One of them will be raped sometime during her lifetime.

Which one will it be?

That riddle jumped out at me from a T-shirt I saw at the Tillamook County Fair in August. I was on vacation, strolling happily through the fair displays with my husband, child and a good friend. Enjoying a pleasant afternoon.

The riddle stopped me in my tracks. I bought the T-shirt for \$5 to support the Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. But I also bought it for its truth. If the riddle were addressed to me, it would say, “one of them is your mother. One is your sister. One is your daughter. One is your best friend.” And there would be a fifth woman in that room, too. If the riddle were addressed to me, the shirt would say, “One is you.” I also bought it to support the courageous women who were staffing that table at the fair. It’s not easy to get out there in public and say, “Hey! Horrible violent things are happening to women, some of them violent sexual things. And we are working to help make it stop.” I appreciate the courage of those women every time I try to wear my t-shirt and do not, for fear that someone who reads it will be violent towards me.

Intimate violence. I shudder when I hear that phrase. It does not seem as though those two words should go together. And yet, for millions of men and women in America, intimate violence, domestic violence, is an everyday reality.

Next month is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It’s October of every year. Domestic violence is a hard topic to talk about. It’s not easy for me to preach about. But buying that t-shirt at the Tillamook Fair reminded me that I know too much to remain silent, for silence is where domestic violence grows deadly.

Let’s go back to those four women in the room – at least one of whom will be raped during her lifetime. Did you know that most likely, the assailant will be someone she knows – perhaps her husband, her boyfriend or a friend. A 1998 U. S. Department of Justice study reported that of all women who reported being raped and/or physically assaulted since the age of 18, three quarters (76 percent) were victimized by a current or former husband, cohabitating partner, date or boyfriend. (*Prevalence Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey, U.S. Department of Justice, November, 1998.*) The only violence more intimate is incest, which tends to be reported under child abuse, not domestic violence.

The other day I was talking with someone I love and respect – an older man who is well-educated and kind. “Oh, domestic violence,” he said. “Well, they just need anger management, don’t they.” I was surprised by his lack of knowledge. Domestic violence is not a simple anger management problem, though anger management is often mandated by the courts for those who batter. Domestic violence also is not a disagreement, a marital spat, or tension in a relationship.

Domestic violence is a pattern of controlling behavior and assaults by one person that restricts the activity and independence of another person or persons. It can include verbal abuse, emotional threats, economic control, psychological abuse, and physical or sexual attacks – often in combination. Domestic violence is learned behavior. It’s a way of taking and abusing power over an intimate partner or family member that it does not go away on its own. Indeed, it tends to get worse and become more frequent with time.

Here in Kitsap County, there have been 349 new domestic violence cases brought into the legal system since January 1<sup>st</sup>. (*Information from Laurie Adamson of the Kitsap County Domestic Violence Task Force [www.kcdvtf.org](http://www.kcdvtf.org)*) That’s thirty-nine new cases a month – or more than one a day. Some sources say that in the United States overall, a woman is battered by her husband or boyfriend every 10-15 seconds.

I used to think that domestic violence was something that happened to other people – people who were different from me, maybe poor people or uneducated people, or something like that. I thought these things despite the fact that I had worked as a volunteer in a battered women’s shelter when I was in my early twenties, and was told in training that while poverty and racial or cultural factors can put us at a higher risk of domestic violence, it does cut across all socioeconomic classes, races, and levels of education.

My own experience bears this out. When I was growing up, the father of one of my best friends used to beat up her mother. My friend’s mom would have a black eye, a broken wrist, or big bruises on her arms and legs. The dad used to whip the kids with a belt, too, as a punishment for breaking family rules. He was a terrifying man – tall and silent. My friend’s mom was lively and sassy and vibrant, as was my friend. Their family was far from poor – they lived in the same middle-class neighborhood as my family. I learned in high school that another friend’s family life was haunted by the violence of her alcoholic father. And recently I learned that domestic violence had touched my own family as well: my mother’s first husband was abusive; she left him after he threatened her with a gun. My (ex) sister-in-law’s first husband did the same thing to her.

Domestic violence is not limited to heterosexual relationships and it’s not always a case of a man battering a woman or a child. A report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs in 1998 found that between 25 and 33

percent of relationships between lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender partners include domestic violence – the same percentage as heterosexual relationships. And the same 1998 Department of Justice report I cited earlier indicated that 2 percent of the violence experienced by heterosexual men was inflicted on them by a female partner. (*Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends*, U.S. Department of Justice, March, 1998.) And when domestic violence occurs in households where there are children, in 30-60% of these families, child abuse occurs as well. ("*The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering.*" J.L. Edleson, *Violence Against Women*, February, 1999)

But when we face statistics that say:

- in 92% of all domestic violence incidents, crimes are committed by men against women. (*Violence Against Women*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, January, 1994.)
- And, in 1996, among all female murder victims in the U.S., 30% were slain by their husbands or boyfriends. (*Uniform Crime Reports of the U.S. 1996*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996.)
- And, 31,260 women were murdered by an intimate from 1976-1996 (*Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends*, U.S. Department of Justice, March, 1998.).
- And one in five female high school students reports being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner -- (*Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey "YRBS"*, August 2001.)

When we hear statistics like these, we start to assume that being battered is primarily a women's problem, and that being violent is primarily a men's problem.

But truly, domestic violence is neither of these: it is a problem that belongs to all of us regardless of whether or not it has touched our lives personally. It's a problem that belongs to our wider community, our workplace communities, and to this, our faith community, as well.

I used to feel smug, thinking that Unitarian Universalism was free from influences that could promote domestic violence. After all, some religious doctrines or scriptures can be used to justify domestic violence.

Christian teaching about marriage has traditionally focused heavily on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians and Colossians. These are the texts which, when read a certain way, indicate that wives and children must submit to husbands and fathers at all times, even when they are abusive. These are the passages that would seem to say that women are meant to be dominated by men, and that the sanctity of marriage and family is to be placed above all else. Some Christian women believe their suffering is redemptive, or the will of God – and sometimes their clergy encourage them to stay in abusive relationships.

One of my clergy friends, a former Navy chaplain, told this story. She said, "I remember listening with horror to three senior male chaplains during a

pre-marriage counseling retreat for sailors. The most senior male chaplain began the pre-marriage training using a story about a female dog, owned by a man who loved her very much. He began abusing her and treating her shamefully. He beat her and left her for dead. Somehow she survived and lovingly, loyally returned to her owner. In remorse, he began treating her more kindly and they were very happy together. ... When I challenged these dedicated and zealous spiritual leaders on their teachings, these powerful senior male officers in the chaplain corps told me I “had an attitude problem with biblical authority.” (From Rev. Dr. Sandy Bochonok, “Domestic violence sermon: Be safe and well. Peace. Joy. Courage.” Given for the Suquamish UCC, Suquamish WA, October 29, 2000. Full text at [www.kcdvtf.org](http://www.kcdvtf.org) Thanks also to Sandy for the reminder about Biblical teaching on marriage. )

We laugh at this because it is so awful it does strike us as funny, perhaps especially because we UUs obviously don't follow Biblical authority that way. We also don't have anything like *shalom bayit* – the Jewish injunction to keep domestic harmony. Though Jewish tradition has always permitted divorce if *shalom bayit* is not possible, some traditional Jewish women who are being abused feel shame at not being able to keep harmony at home, and this prevents them from seeking help.

But I think there are some equally deadly problems in UU congregations that can hide domestic violence and abuse, keeping people trapped, or ashamed to reach out. These are not because of scriptures or doctrines, but they are embedded in our culture.

For example, because UU culture tends to be middle-class and individualistic, we often believe that everybody can take care of their own needs, and the needs of their families. We don't really need to take care of each other. We tend to err on the side of “hands off,” and not meddling in somebody else's business. But if we do not know one another, how can we help one another in a crisis like domestic violence?

We also tend to be optimistic, because we believe in the goodness of all people, especially the people we know. We don't want to believe that there could be battering happening to people we know here at KUUF, that one among us could abuse a child, rape, stalk or cyberstalk someone. This climate of “we're all good people here” can serve to silence someone who has been battered. Trying to reach across the barrier of a community's norms is very hard when you are wounded and vulnerable. It also silences those who might want to confront a suspected abuser, or an abuser who sincerely wishes to be accountable for the violence they have inflicted, and to change.

There's an additional hazard to our optimism, too, for if we hold to the idea that we're all too good to be abusers or to be battered – we stay ill-informed about the causes and symptoms of domestic violence, as well as the things we

can do not only to help survivors of violence, but to help prevent domestic violence from happening in the first place.

But there are some important things that we as a religious community can do to respond to domestic violence:

First, we can do what we are doing today – breaking the silence. Today we acknowledge that domestic violence is real, it is happening all over our wider community and perhaps even to us or people we know. Today we own domestic violence as our problem.

The second thing we can do is something else we already have begun to do – and that is to implement some “Safe Congregations” guidelines from the UUA. We’ve begun this in our religious education program – by having two adults present in each classroom at all times, we help ensure our children’s safety from possible abuse from internal or external sources. We also increase the possibility that an adult will notice if something is amiss with a child – remembering, of course, that in homes where a woman is battered, often the children are battered as well.

We also can make our Fellowship a safe place where domestic violence victims will come for help. Part of this means having people know that I am someone to whom they can come and talk confidentially, and that I will believe them. I promise to do that – to be a safe and informed person. I also promise not to shame or blame people.

But making our Fellowship a safe place also involves being informed about domestic violence. I have not gone into a great deal of detail today about the causes and symptoms, for the dynamics in violent relationships are many and complex -- but there is a pink handout you should have received with your order of service that can tell you more. Our youth, too, need to know what to watch for, and I am glad to say that the Our Whole Lives comprehensive sexuality education course many of them completed last year gave them a good briefing on the basics.

We also, however, need to post information on local crisis and intervention services for abused persons and abusers by putting the Kitsap County Domestic Violence Task Force brochures in our restrooms – where people can pick them up privately. We have talked about doing this in the past, but we have not acted. If you would like to make this happen, please let me know after the service. *(From Rev. Lynch – information from the YWCA ALIVE shelter and other DV information was made available in all three bathrooms on September 24, 2002. Thank you to Julie Boucher, who made this happen.)*

We also can stop suspected domestic violence or dating violence. The way to do this is to speak to each person in the relationship separately. If you feel unable to do this, call me, and I will. We also can help the victim plan for

safety. And we can hold the abuser accountable for changing controlling or abusive behavior. Indeed, we must – for if we truly believe in each person's inherent worth and dignity, we cannot accept excuses or remorse – only real change. And if the safety of the victim means that the abuser must leave the congregation, so be it.

The fourth responsibility we have as a congregation is to help victims and abusers get help. That means knowing how to contact the local-area domestic violence advocacy, sexual assault advocacy, and perpetrator intervention programs. I have some of this information, and pledge to you to find the rest, and to make sure our Caring Committee has these resources as well. If you want to know more, consider attending the Kitsap County Domestic Violence Task Force summit on October 1<sup>st</sup>, or checking their website.

We also can support families broken by domestic violence as they rebuild their lives. We can help with physical needs like transportation, food, clothing, or rent. We can do this for people here, and by helping agencies in our wider community like the YWCA Alive Shelter. And we can help emotionally and spiritually as well by lending our listening and our caring.

But perhaps the most important thing we can do right now, today, to help prevent domestic violence is to get to know one another. We must dare to show ourselves to one another, and to allow ourselves to be known. We like to feel like we have an open, trusting community here – the depth of people's sharing during Joys and Concerns each Sunday often shows us how very much we desire to be known and trusted by one another. But really reaching out to one another, becoming friends, takes more, takes time, takes mutuality. It might feel scary to talk with someone here you don't know, or perhaps bothersome to expand your usual social circle to include someone new. When we do it, though, whole new worlds of peace and safety can emerge – for us, for our children, and for persons whom we may never know. And if we can do it here, we can also do it in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, and in our schools.

If you are here, and you are the victim of domestic violence, I hope you will take heart from what you have heard today. I hope you will allow yourself to trust me, and to trust this community to help you. If you are a survivor of domestic violence, I hope you will walk away today with more confidence in your community. If you are a perpetrator of violence – know that help and caring for you can be found here, too, but only when you will be accountable for your violence.

And for everyone here today, still listening, still caring, still present even through this difficult topic, I say thank you. Thank you. Together, we can make a difference. Together, we can help prevent domestic violence, and help those who have been wounded by it to heal.

Amen.

