

Reaching Out

by Stephanie Shute Kelsch

August 1, 2011

A sermon on Domestic Violence prepared for the Safe Havens 2nd Annual Sermon Contest

I'd like you to think for a minute about sometime when you were utterly, completely, absolutely lost. Given our world of Onstar and GPS systems, that may be difficult to imagine – but perhaps as you think back to a time when you were younger and didn't have such tools at your command, you might come up with something. Perhaps you were in a store with a parent and got separated. Maybe you were hiking in the mountains. Or possibly you were exploring a new city and took one or two wrong turns, which resulted in you finding yourself lost. Think about how you reacted. Did you panic? Scream? Cry? Did you start to look for threats? Signals? Signs? While you were lost, what went through your mind? Through your heart? Did you imagine things would come out all right or could you only imagine disaster? Could you count on yourself or did you look beyond for help? And what ultimately rescued you?

I remember getting lost in the woods when I was about eight years old. I was playing with some older kids, and didn't really know them all that well. They knew these particular woods and suggested we go into them. Having spent a fair amount of time playing in the woods around my own house I found that idea just fine. But when we got into these new woods, the older kids ran ahead to a spot they all knew and were anxious to reach. I lost sight of them, then I lost sound of them, and suddenly I was all alone in a strange woods. There were no paths to guide me. Just endless pine trees whose fallen needles covered any indication of where my friends might have gone. The panic rose in my mouth, but I fought it down. I didn't want to be a baby about this and surely someone would come to find me soon. Wouldn't they? As the minutes lengthened I tried to figure out what I would do if they didn't. I imagined how upset my mother would be to have me lost. The reassurance of her concern steadied me and I tried to think of a plan as I kept walking. And walking. I

remembered my Girl Scout training and tried to guide myself by the position of the sun. I knew I was loved, so I believed I'd be found. By the time the so-called "friends" came looking for me, I had figured out where I was and knew how I could get home. But I never forgot the panic of being so lost.

Many years later I found myself lost once again, but in a very different context. I was driving through the desert in Nevada when my car engine started to misfire. It was the mid-70's; I was driving a small Chevy Vega; later I would find out that the engine had started to shake loose, which resulted in the misfiring. I knew the route I was following, the direction, the distance to the nearest town. So in many ways you could hardly say I was lost. Except that's what I felt like. I was in the middle of nowhere, and there was nothing for miles and miles. No other travelers. No stores, no gas stations, no phones. In that pre-cell phone world help was not just a "9-1-1-" call away. I knew where I wanted to go, I just didn't know if my car would take me that far.

And that's when I started the familiar dialog with God: "God, if you let me get to the next town I promise" I would have negotiated almost anything not to be stuck in the desert that night. That dialog got me through the jolting fear of each engine misfiring and eventually my car coasted into a town. I hadn't been all that sure I would successfully follow the road to civilization, but feeling that I wasn't alone certainly helped me keep hope. And like my lost-in-the-woods story, I never have forgotten that terrifying feeling of being lost and unsure of what to do.

I realize there isn't anything particularly extraordinary about my stories of being lost. They're actually pretty tame. But I mention them because I've asked you to think about times when you might have been lost. I think we all have a few of those stories. As we remember them, we may remember different kinds of details but probably we remember the same fear. For some the fear may have passed quickly; for others it may have lasted a long time. But I feel pretty confident in saying we have all shared the fear of being lost.

Now, the stories I've shared are about being physically lost or threatened - that's safer for public discussion, isn't it? And perhaps makes it easier for us to think about that fear. Especially if it was eventually resolved and we found our way. During the experience, the fear might have felt paralyzing – especially if we felt we had little or no resources to draw on. Even if we conquered the fear and can congratulate ourselves for solving the problem or having good luck or finding a savior, I'd suggest it's important to remember what that fear felt like and how we overcame it.

I find that important for so many reasons. One is that we can look at these stories as possible metaphors for being lost emotionally, professionally, spiritually, morally. When we look at them that way, we may recognize certain things that need to be present for someone to find the way when lost. Perhaps it's a strong sense of self. Perhaps it's luck. Perhaps it's the support of family and friends. Perhaps it's faith in a Higher Power. But what strikes me as being necessary to take the initiative to find one's way when lost or threatened begins with an inner strength or faith in something - self, God, love – that renders us able to reach out for whatever help may be present.

What happens to the individual cut off from those sources? What happens to the lost individual when cut off from inner strength or faith? What happens when someone has been beaten down by loved ones to the point of not feeling worth anything? What happens when the inner monolog in a person's head repeats and repeats, "You're not worth anything! You might as well stay lost!" ? What happens when all the voices seem to belittle? I'd suggest that it makes it very, very difficult to reach out for help – or to even see that help is available.

Today I'm thinking of that situation in the context of domestic violence. Now, please resist that impulse to sit back with a sigh and say, "Well, it doesn't touch anyone here." First of all, I'm speaking of *intimate* partner violence and we don't know each other's intimate histories. Secondly, dismissing consideration of domestic violence

doesn't square with the UUA principles, especially the goal of "world community with peace, liberty and justice for all."

But it also doesn't square with the statistics on intimate partner violence. The National Center of Injury Prevention and Control reports "nearly 25% of women have been raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their lives." Twenty-five percent. That's one in four women. The Center also reports that while intimate partner violence may be "disproportionately" present in "those below the poverty line," it happens in ALL "social, economic, religious or cultural groups." If you haven't experienced domestic violence, that doesn't mean someone you know hasn't. Or won't. Think for a moment about your children or your grandchildren. Just pause a moment to consider the new world of electronic social media if you are feeling totally in control of the contacts that youngsters you care about are making, or if you're feeling completely confident in what they have been raised to expect.

Anyone – male or female – who becomes trapped in domestic violence feels lost and confused. And that means that they feel what I asked you to think about earlier: fear. Just consider this insight from Lundy Bancroft's Why Does He Do That? Bancroft, who has worked extensively with abusive men, notes that, "Chronic mistreatment gets people to doubt themselves." (49) He goes on to identify one of the characteristics of an abusive man is to create a good face in public so that everyone – except his partner – thinks he's a great guy. Bancroft sees that "The pain of this contrast can eat away at a woman." (69) How much harder it is to ask for help when no one believes that you need it. And if in your confusion you doubt that you deserve help, if you believe you deserve how the abusive spouse berates you, it is harder still.

But sometimes, somehow victims of domestic violence do succeed in reaching out for help. Sometimes that help begins with their church. I remember a member of this church who told me that her first marriage had been an abusive one. She went

to her minister at the time who told her she would just have to put up with it. Being an individual whose self-confidence had not yet been eroded by the abuse, she rejected the advice – and the minister – and got herself out of that church. And she told me the story many, many years later, when things had worked out for her and she could finally make herself the heroine of her own story. But what about the victims who lack the personal support system and inner confidence she maintained? What about the women who encounter a minister who quotes the New Testament at them, referring to Ephesians 22 in the New Testament which says, ‘Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife.’ If the minister conveniently takes that verse out of context - ignoring the fact that verse 21 calls for both husband and wife to “(submit) yourselves one to another in the fear of God” and verse 25 that calls for, “Husbands (to) love your wives even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it,” – how is the domestic abuse victim to realize the omission?

Okay, in a Unitarian church Biblical verses may tend to be examined and interpreted in an intellectual way, but that doesn’t necessarily diminish their power. My point here is that the author of Ephesians calls for a balance of commitment and honor in marriage and an emulation of Jesus’s self-sacrificing love. With the benefit of study in divinity school, I’ve been able to look at the context of a verse that’s often quoted to justify the domination of women. Would an abused woman necessarily have had that same opportunity? When she seeks out a representative of the church and hears that the church authority justifies her miserable existence as a domestic violence victim, what can that do to her will to seek further help? Unless she has the strong support from other sources and is receptive to their encouragement or has an incredibly strong sense of self – something the abuse has likely eroded - it can drive her further down a dark road.

What I’d like you to think about today is how much remarkable personal courage is shown by any victim of domestic violence who reaches out for help. Overcoming her own doubts or her cultures’ rejection is no small achievement. Knowing one’s self as

lost and worthy of being found in this context is an overcoming of a fear much more profound than what I asked you to think about what I started my remarks. Such an accomplishment is a fragile flame that needs to be tended.

I would like to help tend that flame. And I would like to invite you to help me.

There are many, many things that we can do. And some things that we already do. Every Christmas Eve, for example, our goodwill donation goes to DOVE, a local agency that offers help to abused women. But I wonder how many people miss the minister's explanation of the donation and think to themselves, "Isn't that nice that we're supporting peace. " Peace. Doves. It's a well-established association.

Perhaps it's no surprise that, from all my years in teaching, I see education as part of what we can do.

First of all, we can make victims of domestic violence aware of where they can they can get help. How hard is it to put the number of the National Domestic Violence Hotline on our bathroom doors or on the order of worship? Consider all the people who come through our church – for concerts, art show, special lectures, AA meetings – and you start to realize what a gift it would be to make any of those people who might be victims of domestic violence realize that there IS a place they can call and we want them to know about it.

Secondly, we can make awareness of domestic violence a larger part of our mission. Yes, we collect for DOVE on Christmas Eve, but how about making people aware of what DOVE means? Or what Safe Havens means? Or what the National Domestic Violence Hotline means? October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Perhaps a sermon that brings this issue front and center would help people understand what is truly at stake here.

Thirdly, we can seek to educate our children about the nature of healthy relationships. This is something I'm glad to say that the Unitarian Universalist . religious education curriculum is already doing with the "Our Whole Lives" program- making our youth aware of the mutual and healthy responsibilities of partners who commit to each other. We need to support the work of the OWL program and insure that our children know - from not just their parents, but also their church - what constitutes a healthy relationship.

I am not asking you to become trained domestic violence counselors. I AM asking you to respect the courage that it takes for someone who has been physically, emotionally, and sexually lost to say, "Enough! This is not right!" I am asking you to think of what is required to conquer the fear that overwhelms you when you know you are, finally, lost and need to reach for some sort of help. I am asking you to help those who need help to FIND resources that will help. There are many services in place. But they can only be of service when those who need them are encouraged and shown how to contact them.

We have all been lost. And, by virtue of the fact that we are all here today, it would seem that we have all found our way out of being lost. Surely, we can help others overcome their fear, find their way and reach for help.