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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Beginning At Home

Ten p.m. in New York City. A knock on the door, though no one had been buzzed in. There stood my good friend. The closest thing I had to a best friend. In the dim hall light, all I could see was her tangled hair, a hand covering her eye and cheek. She was crying. “He’s beaten me up,” she said, her boyfriend a top-level executive.

About a week ago, when I learned that this was Domestic Violence Awareness Month, my first reaction was, “I don’t know anything about that. To speak about it would feel disingenuous.” How, in that moment, could I have forgotten my friend’s assault...sitting on the couch, patting at the open cuts, bruises raw and angry for weeks, lawyers in my office taking a deposition? Some things we bury.

Here at UUFES, we’ve started a conversation about inequality. Our Community Evening speaker this summer challenged us to prepare for and observe the 400th anniversary of Africans arriving on these shores. She calls it “400 Years of Inequality.”

Last week, members of the Board, the Sunday Services Committee and the Women’s Group devoted part of their meeting time to sharing stories of inequality, personally experienced or observed. You may think you have nothing to say about inequality, but the stories came swiftly – memories of economic inequality, academic achievement inequality, inequality in what we look like, how old or able-bodied we are, inequality because of whom we love or how we express our gender identity.

One person told a story about a teenager not doing well academically. Asked if something might be standing in the way of doing better in school, the student said yes, there was. Something that had never been told but now, in response to the kindness of an observant adult, might be told. What had stood in the way of this student’s unfolding was sexual assault at a very young age, a buried trauma that had put this child on an unequal footing from then on.

What effect have recent events in Washington and the #MeToo movement had on your memories? I’ve learned that some of mine have been long hidden. My original thought, that I knew nothing about domestic violence, turned out to be more untrue with each day last week. As UUFES stories of inequality came out, I was stunned to remember that not only was my New York best friend a sexual assault survivor, but so was my high school best friend. This too I had put away in a dark place.

I learned her story as an adult. In college, she had abruptly cut off our long friendship as well as her relationship with a whole group of college friends. Refusing to talk to anyone, she left school and came back later to finish after her friends graduated. Everyone thought she was mad (and guessed at the reasons), but when our paths happened to cross over twenty years later, she told me the truth. Junior year, a sexual assault had shut her down.

Before this week, had you asked me to tell you about either of these best friends, I'd have described them as big center-of-the-room people – super smart, lively, confident, attractive. Would I have mentioned that they'd been assaulted? No...and I'm so curious today that I didn't see what had happened to them as a big part of their lives. Or maybe I took my cue from them, because they didn't dwell on it either.

The other night, Lady Gaga gave a long interview to Stephen Colbert. A sexual assault survivor, she said:

When someone is assaulted or experiences trauma...the brain changes. And literally, what it does is, it takes the trauma and it puts it in a box...and it files it away and shuts it *so that we can survive the pain.*

It also does a lot of other things [she said]. It can cause body pain...baseline elevations in anxiety. It can cause complete avoidance of wanting to even remember or think about what happened to you.¹

This may sound familiar.

I feel disappointed to think that, as a best friend, I was once complicit in letting my friends' stories go untended – the events as well as the suffering they likely continued to cause. Was I silent out of discomfort, or did a misplaced sense of loyalty or some idea about holding a confidence keep me from going there? Those assaults were violent. I need time to come to terms with that and to understand the forces that stood in the way of my supporting them the way I wish I had.

Our lives went on, with friends and partners, careers, eventual moves out of the city. My New York friend and I talked about so many things over the years, but rarely if ever about the impact of the beating. I wish I could apologize, but she died young of early-onset dementia. The high school friend has kept her distance. I've wondered how the Ford/Kavanaugh debate sits with her. Maybe it's still possible to offer support.

“Domestic violence,” writes UU Rev. Pat Hoertdoerfer on the UUA website, “is the mistreatment of one family member by another.” It is a pattern of coercive, controlling behavior that can include physical abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, sexual abuse or financial abuse (using money to exert control).

It is “a problem,” she writes, “of epidemic proportions in our country and in our communities. Every fifteen seconds, a woman in the U.S. experiences the terror and humiliation of being battered by a spouse or partner, and 2 to 4 million women are assaulted each year by their husbands or boyfriends.”²

¹ Lady Gaga. *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. 5 October 2018.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWaV_PTICxk

² <https://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/culture/165729.shtml>

Referring to the SafeHouse Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Hoerl doerfer says that battering is “as prevalent in rich, white, educated families as in minority, poor, poorly educated families.... In over 95 percent of domestic assaults, the man is the perpetrator.... Battering is a pattern...of force and terror....not just one physical attack. It’s one person’s domination and control of the other....tactics...used repeatedly.... The community [tends not to place] responsibility for violence where it belongs—on the criminal....[More likely,] people blame the victim...for the crime....[And] At least 70 percent of men who batter their wives, sexually or physically, abuse their children.”³

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the United States have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner.⁴

Knowledge is power. It is on the rise. People are finding ways to make a difference. Nearby, at the UU church in Concord, the Women's Dignity Project invites people “feeling stressed and upset by the recent events in our national political discourse [to] come put your hands and hearts to work creating personal care kits for women who are experiencing domestic violence or homelessness. Open to all [the notice reads], with men encouraged to listen more than they speak.”

Another inspiring action is “The Clothesline Project”: thousands of T-shirts decorated by people affected by violence. Displayed in row after row of clotheslines, they honor survivors, help heal, memorialize victims, and they educate people and promote awareness. The Clothesline Project originated on Cape Cod in 1990 “when a group of women learned that while 58,000 soldiers were killed in the Vietnam War, 51,000 U.S. women were killed by the men who claimed to love them.”⁵

The website reads: “A public must be informed about violence in order to act to prevent it.” And: “Put yourself on the line in unity with sexual assault.”

A sampling of 15 actual Clothesline Project T-shirts:

1. Don't Touch Me - I just wanted to be Daddy's little girl - You were supposed to protect me.
2. How am I still alive? Middle and high school was HELL....you all hurled whatever you could at me. you put hate notes and gay porn in my bag and locker. you spread the worst rumors about me. you all told me that I was broken and unloved. a waste.
3. MY LIFE WILL ALWAYS BE DIFFICULT.

³ SafeHouse Center Inc., in Ann Arbor, Michigan. <https://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/culture/165729.shtml>

⁴ https://ncadv.org/statistics?gclid=Cj0KCQjwr4beBRDNARIsAGZaZ5cp_A-Cc_-A4bN-KwjqbKEsaBRIfx3FJrfW1wQWy2_PYzZ5HIW8CqoaAjQUEALw_wcB

⁵ <http://clotheslineproject.info/about.html>

4. I was so AFRAID of you back then...but not ANYMORE! - I was raped, but I am powerful, brave, strong, in control, UNBROKEN - Love should not hurt. - I remember you throwing me across the room and the bruises you gave me over the years. I still love you Dad. I'm glad you changed - I am not a victim, I am a survivor - There are too many shirts here. Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?
5. Break the Silence.
6. You are still beautiful, worth it, lovable and valued, even after you are raped.
7. Never the Same.
8. I will NOT be defined by what they did.
9. Protect me.
10. Educate others.
11. Advocate for me.
12. Know the signs.
13. Understand it.
14. Prevent it.
15. Stand up for Me.

The stories continue. At my 50th high school reunion last week, I connected with someone I once admired but didn't know well back then. I recalled her boyfriend – they'd married and split up. Why, someone asked? "Abuse," came the answer.

We do know something about domestic violence, this heinous form of inequality. We know more than we think we know and more than we want to know.

Today the world is hearing stories that have been buried for too long. The more awareness grows, the more connections form. Survivors of domestic violence, you are not alone. You are good and you are loved. Just as the sanderlings in the storm return again and again to shelter, "all but under/the roof of the duck's tails,"⁶ we return to each other. To safety. To kindness. To listening and hurting and living.

"The very least you can do in your life," writes Barbara Kingsolver, "is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."

When we shine the light of compassion on inequality, change does happen. Together, as people of conscience, may we be a part of that change.

So may it be.

⁶ Mary Oliver. "In the Storm," *Thirst*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.