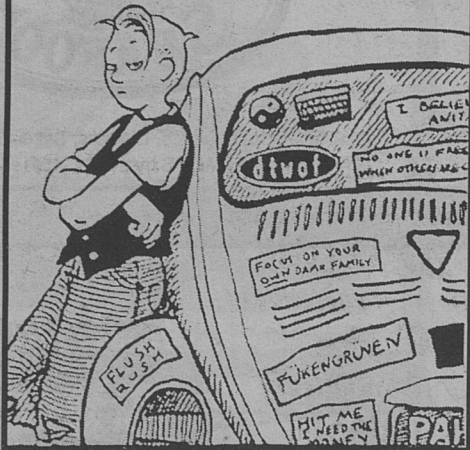


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Faith Matters & Violence Matters



Columnist - Rev. Christine Leslie

While in seminary in the late 70's I read Susan Brownmiller's 1975 landmark work, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. This book shocked and horrified me. It was on the reading list for a Religion and Society course I was taking on contemporary issues facing the church. I read it after a classmate told us about her experience of being raped while walking with a guy she thought was a friend. I simply had to know more about this. Up to that point, I was profoundly ignorant about the prevalence of sexual abuse and violence in our world and about the link between all of the weapons of exploitation, oppression, and dehumanization used by those who believe they are superior and have a right to protect and prove their superiority by threatening, hurting, hitting, raping, and killing those deemed less than themselves.

Over the last 25 years many people of good faith and good sense have worked very hard to bring an end to sexual violence in our country. Even though we have made great strides towards changing the rape culture in which we live, there are still millions who they think they have a right to get their way by using some kind of violence to take power and control over others. The numbers tell the story. One out of 3 girls and one out of 7 boys in our country are sexually abused before the age of 18. This means there are 1,000's of g/l/b/t/ people living under a shadow of pain and sorrow they did not cause, they did not deserve, and they shouldn't have to bear alone for fear no one will believe them.

Those who track crime statistics also tell us that at least 639,500 women are raped a year in this county with only one out of every 6 of them reported to police. Because a vast majority of sexual assaults, 80-85%, are committed by people who know their victim, victims of acquaintance rape are less likely to report because they fear not being believed. Their fears, as a rule, are not unfounded. If a victim can no longer trust someone she does know, how on earth is she going to be able to tell someone she does not know about the horror of what happened to

her? This means there are 1,000's of lesbians and bisexual women living with the death of a part of themselves no amount of healing might ever restore. It also means the vast majority of perpetrators of sexual violence are walking our streets, living in our communities, and believing they have committed no crime.

Those of us who are g/l/b/t people cannot turn a deaf ear or blind eye to prevalence of sexual violence in our community. We are not exempt from the affects of this national travesty. We, too, need to be among those working to end sexual violence, because "Every man, woman, and child is negatively affected by living in a rape culture in which children, females, and some males are perceived as sexual prey. No one is safe as long as anyone is physically and spiritually violated. Everyone is responsible to her/himself and to society to do what is possible to change the status quo. We must imagine a different world. If we can dream of a safe place, surely we can build one." (from *Transforming A Rape Culture*, edited by Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993 Milkweed Editions, p. 3).

WRCC's annual observance of "Sexual Assault Awareness Month" ("SAAM") in April is one we have of helping to build a safer world for all of us. SAAM is made up of events and activities that educate our community about (1) the insidious pervasiveness of sexual violence, (2) how damaging it is, (3) what survivors of sexual violence can do to heal, and (4) what we can do to help bring an end to sexual violence in our respective communities. (For a listing of WRCC's SAAM calendar, please call 802-864-0555. Sources for the statistics above and others on sexual violence are also available from WRCC's office.)

WRCC's participation in the national "Clothesline Project" is a big part of SAAM activities. This gives survivors an anonymous way to express the trauma and pain of their experience, and find some comfort for their wounds. Anyone who is a survivor of sexual abuse and/or assault, and anyone related to a survivor, can make a T-shirt for the Clothesline Project and can call WRCC for the details about our T-shirt making workshops. Once made, the T-shirts are displayed on a clothesline in a public setting. Each survivor's T-shirt visually speaks the reality of sexual violence in our midst and what it is doing to our bodies and souls.

Following WRCC's "Blow The Whistle on Rape...Take Back the Night March" on Saturday, April 25th from 6 - 8 p.m., this year's Official Clothesline will be un-

veiled at 8 PM that night in Burlington's City Hall. During this display, viewers hear a gong every several minutes indicating a woman has been battered. A whistle sounds once a minute indicating a woman has been raped. Finally, a bell rings every several hours telling us a woman has been killed by an intimate partner.

Rape Trauma Syndrome is real. It is a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that is a pattern of physical, emotional, and behavioral stress reactions, or symptoms, that appear after a life-threatening event such as rape. It is very important to know these are *normal* human responses that may appear, then disappear, and may reappear much later, and will eventually subside. These symptoms are usually the strongest at 6 weeks with marked improvement at 6 months to one year.

Recovery from sexual violence is a process that as distinct as the individual who went through the assault. Help and healing are real and are accessed by each survivor in their own time in their own way for which they need support and understanding. No matter when the events took place, survivors and their friends and family can call WRCC's 24-hour hotline at 862-1236, or 800-489-7273 to access a trained, crisis counselor and referrals for professional assistance.

Trust between humans beings is the first, and most essential, of all feelings. It's something we build between ourselves with intention, integrity, and tenderness. It is what makes it possible for us to experience the safety we need to thrive in healthy, faith-filled ways. When trust is shattered by the terror of a violent sexual assault, trusting again does not come easily or quickly. The affects of sexual violence makes trusting in others, ourselves, and The Holy One not only difficult but sometimes impossible for long periods of time. There are even those for whom this kind of trust is never recoverable.

Because of its outrageous prevalence and the magnitude and costs of its life-long affects, breaking the silence about sexual violence and ending it matters more than words can say. Resources are available, as are opportunities for volunteering, through WRCC and other centers like it in VT. Trust and faith can be rebuilt, and the isolating silence can be broken when we reach out for help, or offer to help. Anyone who can access a phone has access to tools that can help stop the violence and rebuild what matters the most in our lives: trust and faith in ourselves, each other, and our experience of that which is holy and sacred in our lives.

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