

# PATH OF A SURVIVOR

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*Personal experiences inform professional journeys. The author of this narrative has been afforded the opportunity for growth on paths of personal enlightenment and professional competence simultaneously as the two have converged in her life. This narrative is her proclamation as social worker and a survivor that all voiceless voices shall be heard; that everyone can have the courage to stand as one in bringing sound to our shared cause.*

\* Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

*"We have the power, we have the might,  
the streets are ours, take back the night!  
Join together, free our lives, we will not  
be victimized!"*

*What do we want? Safe streets! When do  
we want it? Now!*

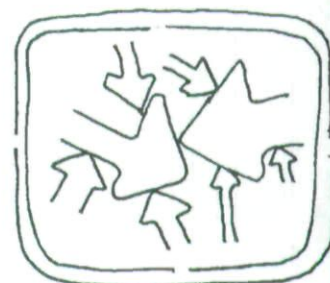
*However we dress, wherever we go, yes  
means yes, and no means no!"*

## **A Critical Incident of Intersections**

I attended the "Take Back the Night Rally & March Candlelight Vigil" on October 6, 2005, at the University of Louisville campus. The event is held every year in October, which is Domestic Violence Awareness month. This rally and march support the fight against "...sexual assault, rape, childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner abuse, domestic violence, and all forms of oppression and violence against women" (University of Louisville, 2005). At the time of this event, I was a member of both the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). I have also been involved with the Center for Women and Families for several years. That night, I was staffing tables for both the ACLU and NOW, literally running back and forth between the two.

In intersecting personal and professional roles, I participated in this event for several reasons. First, I was there to represent my own personal agenda I am a survivor of rape

and domestic violence I brought my best friend's daughters, "Janelle" and "Janey," both of whom I consider my nieces. Janelle was twelve and Janey was thirteen. I brought my nieces to teach them about violence against women and children, to teach them about empowerment, and to actively show them resources available to them or anyone in need of support systems within the community. Several organizations were there in support of survivors and victims alike. I was there to represent NOW, which supports the fight against all violence and oppression towards women. As part of my social work field placement and as a member of the ACLU, I was also there to represent RFP (Reproductive Freedom Project). Between the two tables, I assisted in the sale of t-shirts, pins, and bumper stickers, as well as providing information about the two groups. After listening to the speakers, working at both the NOW and RFP tables, walking around with my nieces to gather information from other organizations, and absorbing the powerful statements written on t-shirts designed by survivors through "The Clotheslines Project," I marched with my two nieces. We held up signs provided by NOW that stated "Stop Violence Against Women. We chanted as we marched around the large campus perimeter on public sidewalks. We screamed as loud as we possibly could. Screaming these chants was a very powerful experience for me.



I had attended my first rally and march in 2004, while a BSSW student. At this event, the organizers allowed survivors and supporters the opportunity to approach the microphone after the march and speak in an open-mike format. Several survivors approached the podium and spoke out against their abusers. Some read poems they had written, some read from speeches, and some just expressed what they were feeling at that exact moment. I was one of those survivors who spoke that year, quite unintentionally, I might add. I had spoken to friends and therapists about the abuses I had survived, but I had never spoken so publicly, openly, and candidly as I did that night.

I felt compelled to say something in the presence of others, whom I thought surely understood what I had gone through. I wasn't afraid that I would be judged harshly for having experienced domestic violence and rape. I hesitated at first as a flood of emotions welled to the surface. I remembered then, as I do now, the powerlessness I felt with each separate incident. My voice was stifled as I whimpered "no" when my ex held me down from behind. Not once, but twice. I remembered feeling utterly ashamed. How would anyone believe that I was raped by my significant other? I told no one, and I never reported either occasion I suffered in silence.

I also remember feeling out of control all the moments when I was hit, choked, threatened, or told I was meaningless. As quickly as the images of my past abuses came, they passed; leaving me with the courage to step up onto the podium and speak.

It was the scariest, most empowering, and most courageous feat I had ever accomplished. I thought that my heart would explode and life, as I knew it, would be over. I was both wrong and right. My heart did not explode, but my life—the life that I knew, the life that made me hide and feel ashamed—was over. I remember how shaky my voice was when I declared, "I was sexually assaulted and abused. Today, I face the fear. Today, I face the pain. And this is a good way to begin." People—total strangers—cheered and clapped. They approached me, thanking and hugging me. Many told me that I was not

alone. I knew that if I had chosen to cower and hide in the crowd, I would be giving my perpetrators the power to restrict me once again, and I would never forgive myself for staying silent. I chose the word "assault" because what they did, through rape, emotional and physical abuse, were direct attacks without mercy, shame, guilt, feeling, or conscience. They directly assaulted every facet of my being. "Rape" is an ugly word, but the act itself is even uglier, much more vile, and the most damaging.

This occasion of my personal triumph illustrates Gilligan's (1982) revolutionary insights about women's moral and psychological development. As Gilligan articulates "virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice...[which] is directly in conflict with the concept of rights that[supports] women's claim to a fair share of social justice" (p. 132). Throughout my life, I had set aside my personal needs and desires to benefit others, sometimes to the extent of personal annihilation. I couldn't seem to get beyond sacrificing myself for others. I spent an entire decade spinning my wheels and getting nowhere, only to be left with heartache and loss.

Turning thirty in 2004 was a pivotal moment in my life. Things started to fall into place for me, and for the first time life was starting to actually make sense. I was beginning to truly recognize that I was an important person in the cogwheel of existence. Standing on that stage was part of that transitioning from sacrificing only for the sake of others to the realization that my needs are just as important as the needs of others. It is a balancing act that I am still learning to practice on a daily basis as I learn to claim my voice.

After this first experience of the rally and march in 2004, the following year I came prepared with a written speech. I thought about what I would say and what impact it would have on my growing self-esteem. I had faith that by releasing all the pent up anguish I would be free of it. I was building momentum as I walked around from booth to booth, soaking up all the supportive energy in the crowd. I felt powerful when I marched, proclaiming loudly, not only to whoever could hear us in the immediate vicinity, but also to those who

hurt me, that it is never okay to abuse or to rape anyone for any reason. The moment came after the closing statement. I had my speech in hand ready to approach the podium, when my energy was cut off by the announcer saying, "That's all. Thank you all for coming Good night."

I couldn't believe it. Not one survivor in the audience was allowed the opportunity to put voice to the pain, anger, anguish, abuse, or trauma they had experienced. I was deeply hurt and angered. Had I been younger, I would have walked away depressed and sulking. But, I'm not the same person I was then. I walked up to the person in charge and told her exactly how I felt about not being able to speak out and how important it is for a survivor to be allowed the opportunity to do so. Clearly, she was taken aback and said that she had wanted to try something different this year. I told her I could guarantee that I would not have been the only person to approach the mike that night. Maybe someone who had never spoken to anyone about the abuse they had experienced would have approached the podium, having not felt so alone after all.

I walked away feeling conflicted. I was able to voice my concerns, yet I did not feel fully validated by the organizer. I wanted to convey to her the deeper reasons for feeling hurt, for the injustice, and for what it meant to be one of many survivors in the crowd longing to connect on a more meaningful level.

### **Characters and Considerations**

My personal experiences influence my reaction to the fact that, as a survivor, I was not allowed the opportunity to voice my thoughts and feelings surrounding my abuse. I was hurt and angry for myself as well as for the other survivors. My voice was stifled for many years, and now that the floodgates had opened, I no longer wished to be silent. As a survivor, communicating my experiences is an important aspect of my healing. How many other survivors in the audience at the rally felt stifled because they were not heard? What kind of message does the action of the organizer send when lines of communication that had been opened are cut short? Should we remain quiet and suffer in silence?

I was one of the many survivors in the audience. I am a thirty-four year-old, white female, CSW, survivor of rape, and survivor of domestic violence. I have been beaten, choked, threatened verbally, threatened with a loaded gun and a butcher knife, slapped around, almost run over by a car by an angry ex-partner, and forced upon sexually. I have been told I wasn't good enough, smart enough, or talented enough to be in any professional position. My experiences at the time taught me to believe that I was not worthy, and that hurting someone or being hurt by someone was normal behavior.

Violence against women knows no boundaries. It does not pick victims based upon socio-economic status, race, or religion. Gender does play a role. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (2009), 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. As a woman, based upon my own personal experiences as well as those of friends, family members, and clients I have spoken to, I know that women have been abused and oppressed for a long time. Violence against women is not an uncommon phenomenon and is not just a current problem; it is a systemic, prevailing issue that crosses time, space, geography, and culture.

### **Cultural and Ethical Considerations**

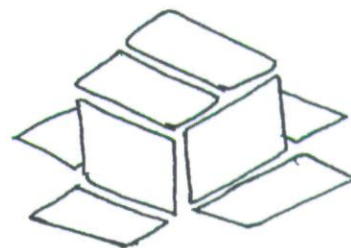
Awareness of violence against women is a key factor in helping women fight for their rights, in assisting organizations within the community to provide a support system, and in providing policy changes to create programs that not only support victims, but also hold perpetrators accountable for their behavior. Awareness creates an atmosphere of recognizing signs and symptoms of abuse, counseling, the promotion of coping skills, and rehabilitation of both victims and perpetrators. At one time, violence against women was socially acceptable and considered a form of discipline. The belief systems surrounding abuse have altered as time has passed. We are in an era where it is no longer acceptable to hit a woman because she burned dinner, to beat a child because of toys left on the floor, or to rape a female because she wore the

wrong outfit. A man can no longer do whatever he wants to and get away with it just because he is "powerful."

Because I am a social worker, the NASW (1999) Code of Ethics both appeals to and guides me. There are six ethical principles within the Code of Ethics: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. All six principles apply to and should influence the issues surrounding violence against women and their vocalization of the issues. As a social worker, I am responsible for helping those in need while addressing the systemic social conditions underlying the problems. It is my passion and mission to address oppression, degradation, humiliation, and suffering. The Code of Ethics challenges me to become the best social worker I can be. Social Work encompasses fighting for positive changes that support a just society. I must keep in mind that the people I come into contact with have value, and that to serve them through social justice is to honor them, no matter who they are or what role they play in the issue at hand. When I understand the circumstances of all those concerned, I honor them through validation of their dignity and worth, while understanding the underlying causes for every action or inaction.

We are all interdependent creatures and, therefore, the bonds created through intersecting relationships have grave importance. When I connect with victims and survivors, whether through my personal experiences or professional commitments, I open the doors to change through empathy. Following the social work principles as a creed, I can build trust through actions and words. Trust is key when working with victims and survivors. As I actuate the first five principles, competence in my professionalism is created. As a survivor, I feel validated knowing that the Code of Ethics exists. I feel safe knowing that there are regulations in place supporting victims, opposing acts of violence, and providing supportive rehabilitation to perpetrators and abusers. I have the humility to understand that the same principles that protect victims also reach out to perpetrators

and abusers to make amends and better themselves through self-determination. Understanding and education are keys to creating a non-violent future for all.



### Deeper Connections in Professional Practice

Looking back on my experiences, I realize that the inability for the voiceless to be heard in a supportive and non-threatening environment is antithetical to the Code of Ethics. When I think about the silenced voices, several concepts come to mind. Saleeby (2006) discusses the link between the strengths perspective and empowerment. To empower the victims and survivors in the audience at the rally, the organizers needed to first see that strength is derived through validation, and that there is a need to put words to the pain and suffering trapped inside each individual. When provided the opportunity to strengthen the voiceless through communication, empowerment is created.

Saleeby (2006) discusses that as a social worker the importance of nourishing the strengths of others while sustaining and emboldening them enables them to become better versions of themselves through self-determination. As a social worker, it is my duty to empower others through encouragement. The courage to take on fear through breaking the silence is powerful. Each person possesses strength to overcome obstacles. Some are able to recognize the strength within, while others need their strengths to be nurtured in a positive direction. The strengths perspective teaches us to encourage our clients to see the possibilities within. Change happens internally as well as externally.

Finn & Jacobson (2003) discuss the concepts of belonging and difference. Group dynamics teach us that from the onset of life

we belong to a certain group and are differentiated through belonging to this group in the larger context of society. This applies to victims as well as survivors. Once a person is put into a situation where safety and security are compromised due to domestic violence, they are automatically categorized into a group. The individual becomes one of those poor souls that can't get out of his or her situation. When one is pegged into the category of helplessness, whether or not it is recognized by others, it becomes difficult for that person to fit into society's norms of perfection without problems.

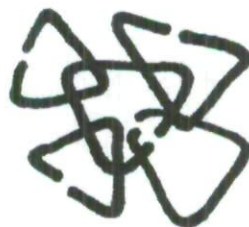
As a survivor, I know firsthand how it feels to be different. I have never felt that I could fit into the perfect *Leave It to Beaver* lifestyle that I assumed others lived. At one point, I was so ashamed of all of the abuse I had experienced that I thought, "If people really knew me—what I thought, what I felt—I would be shunned...I'd be different from everyone else, and I wouldn't belong." It is vitally important for victims and survivors to feel that they belong. Part of that belonging is allowing them to actively participate in healing openly with others like themselves. I see now that because of my past, I belong to a very powerful force that supports the fight against oppression, injustice, and violence on so many levels. When I am surrounded by others who have suffered as I have, I don't feel so different after all. The concepts of difference and commonality bring us all together to belong to something much more grand; healing through beautiful self-expression and common bonding.

Mooney, Knox, & Schacht (2002) discuss how societal and cultural factors play a role in violence against women. Some factors discussed surround how the media portray violence as a normal part of society. As a nation, the United States has become desensitized to violence, accepting it as normative and ignoring the signs, symptoms, and consequences of violence against women. Societal acceptance of women submitting to men is an example of "gender role socialization." It has been well documented that both women and children were viewed as property, that the view of property has

prevailed through time, and that the devaluation of women and children has become accepted as a rationale for violence against them. It is far easier to abuse someone who is thought of as weak, helpless, and powerless. Victims and survivors alike have found it difficult to fight against their abusers because of the views surrounding violence against women and children. I felt completely helpless in my situation when I was being abused. I felt powerless and I was incapable of stopping the abuse and rape.

My story is only one of many. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (2009), the most recent data (2007) documents 248,300 victims of sexual assault annually. However, approximately 60% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police. These stories are both personal and systemic. According to the American Bar Association, Commission on Domestic Violence (2009), of all females killed with a firearm, almost two-thirds were killed by their intimate partners. In 2002, the number of females shot and killed by their husband or intimate partner was more than three times higher than the total number murdered by male strangers using all weapons combined in single victim/single offender incidents. Fifty-six percent of women who experience any partner violence are diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. Twenty-nine percent of all women who attempt suicide were battered; 37% of battered women have symptoms of depression; 46% have symptoms of anxiety disorders, and 45% experience post traumatic stress disorder.

Abuse on any level is not acceptable. No rationale can excuse the behavior of someone who perpetrates and abuses. Why is it, then, that as an industrialized, modern society, we have not overcome the obstacles leading to violence and have created a generation of perpetrators filling the prisons to the brink?



### Personal and Professional Intersections

That night in 2005, I immediately took measures to make my point known. When I approached the organizer of the "Take Back the Night" rally, my personal experiences, professional confidence, and advocate role intersected, giving me the impetus and courage to speak. Her response indicated to me that my feedback did not grab her attention as I'd wanted. So, I wrote a letter to the organizers on behalf of all survivors. In this letter, I asked about the rationale for leaving out such a vital and poignant segment of the rally. I emphasized the importance of providing an open forum for all audience members to speak about their own stories, the stories of their loved ones, and their reflections surrounding the rally and march. The purpose of the podium is to allow all supporters of non-violence the opportunity to be heard and validated. I received a response letter stating that the scheduled speakers before the march represented the thoughts and feelings of the audience, because one speaker was a victim and one was a supporter. I did not believe that my point was understood or validated at the time.

However, open-mike was reintroduced the following year, and I read a poem I had written about what it was like being a victim. I felt empowered to say that being a victim was who I was, but not who I am. Shortly after I stepped down from the podium, I was interviewed by the local paper. In the article I was quoted, saying, "It's taken years for me to get to the point where I could say enough is enough. You are not alone. Just reach out to someone" (Riley, 2006, p. B1).

I will continue to fight against oppression and violence against women. I am a feminist, which I have recently discovered is more about standing up not only for women's rights but for the rights of all humanity, and less about hating and pointing fingers at men. Life has led me in the direction of fighting for everyone's rights, which is apparent in the groups I continue to belong to, the issues that I am passionate about, and the positions I have chosen to work in over the years. I believe it is my calling to fight for social justice, equality,

opportunity, and the rights of all those who suffer.

Since graduating with an MSW, one of the places I chose to work was Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women. There, I shared my philosophy of feminism with my clients by empowering the women I worked with to change their minds and open up to the possibilities that lie within each and every one of them. Frequently, I voice my rationale for having worked with the women at Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women: I believe in hope, and I believe that everyone has the capacity to change their lives for the better, no matter what their circumstances are.

Currently, I work at the Department of Veterans Affairs as a Mental Health Therapist, specializing in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Military Sexual Trauma. Working for the VA is one of my greatest honors, as it provides me an opportunity to give back to thousands of my fellow veterans. I have come full circle in my life, having started out my career path in the U.S. Navy as a psychiatric technician. The wisdom I have gained from surviving abuse, combined with the educational opportunities I have been afforded, guide me in working with the women and men who have served the United States.

I have a bumper sticker on my vehicle of a quote by Maggie Kuhn: "Speak your mind even if your voice shakes." I spoke my mind at the first rally I attended in 2004. I spoke my mind the following year when I wasn't permitted to freely express myself. I spoke my mind when I read aloud how I used to be a victim. And I will continue to speak my mind whenever I see the need for something to be said to the female and male heroes of our country as they struggle through their daily suffering. I will tell them they are not alone, that they are worthy of healing, and that although the memories may never go away, they deserve to live a healthy and safe life, free of harm.

I cannot make others see their possibilities. I cannot make them believe in their own potential. I cannot make life easier or better for them. But I can be a tour guide on their journey. I can point out things to them along the way that they may never have

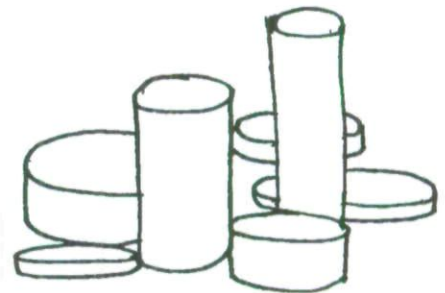
acknowledged before. but that only they can choose to see. I can promote awareness through voicing my thoughts and feelings. I can validate others as their stories unfold. I can steer my course onto the path of possibility. But in the end, I can only effectuate active changes in my own life. Others must do so of their own volition. Change is a personal phenomenon that can be a gift for others to cherish along the paths that lead them to their destination. I can never regain what I have lost, but I can obtain what I need to be whole. The intersections of my personal experiences and my professional roles bring together that wholeness—for me and for those I am privileged to serve on our common path of healing.

*Today I am a survivor.  
Today I start to heal.  
Today I start to feel.  
Today I start a new journey.  
Today I start to embrace myself.  
Today I am angry.  
Today I am hurt.  
Today.....*

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