

Shelter From the Storm

Rev. Bev Waring

October 16, 2016

READING from (*UU World Magazine Winter 2013, pages 8-11*).

On July 4, 2011, 18-year-old Lauren Dunne Astley was strangled and slashed to death by her former boyfriend, weeks after their high school graduation.

Lauren was a singer and a French horn player. With other members of First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts, she had travelled three times to New Orleans to help rebuild the city after Hurricane Katrina. She loved fashion.

Her former boyfriend convinced her to meet him alone on her way home from her job at a clothing boutique. Lauren had tried to break up with him several times, but he never seemed to take no for an answer. Rather than accept rejection, he took her life. [...]

Within a week of Lauren's murder, her parents, Malcolm Astley and Mary Dunne, had established the Lauren Dunne Astley Memorial Fund. Its three-part mission is to promote healthy teen relationships, the arts, and community service. In establishing the fund, Lauren's parents were trying at once to remember Lauren for who she was and to prevent what happened to her from happening to others.

A retired elementary school principal, Astley has devoted himself since Lauren's death to educating people about dating violence, exploring violence against women, and questioning why boys and men have been enculturated to have such difficulty dealing with rejection and shame. "We have to dig into matters we don't have the courage for," he said. Failing to do that, "we will continue to go from calamity to calamity."

Astley talks at schools and conferences about how couples can find healthy ways to end their relationships. "We need to reframe breaking up," Astley said at a recent Summit on Breakups and Gender. "We need to think about it and teach our youth to talk about it differently." "Ending a relationship is one of the most painful of human experiences," he said. But "it is not about losing your value or self-respect so that you forget about what is important and then turn toward harming someone else."

Astley and Dunne have been meeting with Massachusetts legislators to promote passage of a law that would mandate education about healthy relationships in the state's public schools. Such legislation could be an expansion of an anti-bullying curriculum. (*UU World Magazine Winter 2013, pages 8-11*).

SERMON

"Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let pain make you hate. Do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place." (1)

That quote by Iain Thomas along with the words we sang earlier in our hymn, “How Could Anyone,” (2) have been my mantra through the writing of this sermon. Domestic violence is a challenging topic. It was hard to write about, and it may be hard for some of you to hear.

But, I know from experience – as a social worker and a minister – I know that this continues to be a relevant, painful subject that people of faith, people of conscience and people who love and care about others must talk about and do something about if the cycles of violence in our community, in our homes, and on our college campuses is to end.

And make no mistake about it – when an individual experiences violence in an intimate relationship – spouse, living together, dating – there is not just one victim. Children living in the home, other family members who may or may not know for sure that abuse is happening, close friends in teen-dating violence situations, all are profoundly affected – affected by witnessing, by hearing or hearing about and by the secret-keeping that so often accompanies domestic violence.

There is a cycle of violence that is predictable, documented and very difficult to break. Briefly, this four stage cycle includes Stage 1: all is calm. no abuse is taking place. Stage 2: tensions rise, stress levels increase and the victim becomes fearful and tries to placate the abuser. Stage 3: a violent incident occurs – could be physical, verbal, or emotional abuse. It is often accompanied by threats, intimidation, anger and blaming the victim. Stage 4 comes after the violence and usually the abuser apologizes and “explains” the behavior. At this stage the victim may hear anything from, “It never happened – the victim lied,” to “the victim brought it on themselves,” to “it will never happen again.”

And sadly, the victim and witnesses (especially children) so want this part of stage 4, “it will never happen again,” to be true that they most often simply move right back to the stage of calm, pre-violence status quo unless there is a major intervention.

Bystanders, people affected by but not the direct recipient of violence, especially friends and family members not living in the home are in a very difficult position. If he or she knows both the victim and the perpetrator it can be hard to know whom to believe. It may feel easier to just ignore the situation, hope that it was a one-time thing or wait for the victim to get out of the situation.

Another important aspect to the cycle of violence is the escalation that occurs when a major intervention does not break the cycle. In retrospect – and that word is important – in *retrospect* those of us who knew Lauren Astley (the young woman in my reading) saw the pattern too late. Lauren had attempted to break up with Nate on several occasions. Lauren’s mother noted that Nate almost never spent time with Lauren at the family homes of Nate or Lauren. (3) Friends of Lauren’s were glad when she broke up with him for the last time after high school graduation. They were concerned when they realized she had agreed to meet alone with him that fateful July evening.

As the story came out prior to and at Nate’s trial, episodes of possessiveness and angry outbursts surfaced. Now, this is not to in any way blame Lauren, her family or friends – or Nate’s family and friends – for Lauren’s murder. Nate is the one to blame, and he is paying for his actions by serving a life sentence.

Let's stop here for a few statistics. (4) (5) (6)

- 70% of batterers also abuse their children
- 75% of batterers witnessed abuse between their parents
- 50% of batterers experienced abuse themselves as children
- Domestic violence crosses all boundaries - income level, race, ethnic background, and sexual orientation.
- One in three adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner.
- One in 10 high school students has been hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence — triple the national average.
- 43% of dating college women report experiencing some violent and abusive dating behaviors (including physical, sexual, tech, verbal or controlling abuse.)
- Over one in five women attending college (22%) report actual physical abuse, sexual abuse or threats of physical violence.
- 52% of women attending college report knowing a friend who has experienced violent and abusive dating behaviors (including physical, sexual, tech, verbal or controlling abuse.)
- 20 – 30 young women die each year in MA at the hands of an intimate partner
- 3 women die each day in the US at the hands of an intimate partner

These statistics are startling, aren't they? So what are we to do? Lauren's father, Malcom Astley, worries about the boys. He points out that they are "surrounded by a cultural preoccupation with winning. They are increasingly shame-phobic. And despite society's increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage," he said, "boys are extremely concerned about being seen as effeminate or gay." Astley concludes, "We especially need to attend to the increasing isolation of boys and men, and the pressures they face from our culture, our movies, our television shows, and our video games to compete and dominate and be cool and scary." (7)

I agree with Malcolm when he points to society's pressures put upon boys and men as part of the problem. But, I worry about the focus being on movies and video games alone. I know many people – male and female – because we must acknowledge that women are also perpetrators of domestic violence – I know many people who love violent, scary books and movies, play video games of all types but who also have been taught the difference between fantasy and reality; who have learned ways to deal with their own anger in non-violent ways. I know many people who have been taught that violent speech as well as violent action is never acceptable in "real life."

Yet, we cannot ignore those statistics. So, what can we do?

As Unitarian Universalists, we can teach ourselves and our children how to live the principles we covenant to uphold. Inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations should not be just nice words we repeat to make us feel good about ourselves and our

religion. Rather they should be guides to what skills we want to learn so we can live by these principles every day in our relationships and in the world.

As a society we can teach our sons and daughters that violence against women is never appropriate in any form. This feels particularly hard and important in the current political climate we are experiencing in our country today. We cannot fall back on “boys will be boys” or “it is just locker-room talk” excuses.

So much violence in our society stems from prejudice and fear. It is important we educate ourselves and our children about all the “isms” and phobias that are rooted in violence. Racism, Classism, Homophobia, Sexism, Islamophobia, Ageism, Able-ism all have roots in violence; not only do they contribute to physical violence, but emotional and spiritual violence are pervasive in these institutionalized prejudices in our society.

I know this can feel overwhelming at first. And I know that Unitarian Universalists make up a small percentage of the American population. But I am talking about the work of humanity, about what people of conscience can do. In the midst of preparing for this sermon, I took time to listen to a speech that First Lady Michele Obama gave recently – she was speaking in response to some allegations of sexual assault against one of the presidential candidates. (8) In that speech Mrs. Obama said in part:

“[] We have consistently been hearing hurtful, hateful language about women...[]. And I have to tell you that I can't stop thinking about this. It has shaken me to my core in a way that I couldn't have predicted. So while I'd love nothing more than to pretend like this isn't happening, [] it would be dishonest and disingenuous to me to just move on to the next thing like this was all just a bad dream.”

“This is not something that we can ignore. It's not something we can just sweep under the rug as just another disturbing footnote in a sad election season. [] This wasn't just locker-room banter. This was a powerful individual speaking freely and openly [] using language so obscene that many of us were worried about our children hearing it when we turn on the TV.” [..]

“It's that feeling of terror and violation that too many women have felt when someone has grabbed them, or forced himself on them and they've said no but he didn't listen - something that we know happens on college campuses and countless other places every single day. [..]

“Many have worked for so many years to end this kind of violence and abuse and disrespect, but here we are, in 2016, and we're hearing these exact same things every day. [..]

[..] “Maybe we've grown accustomed to swallowing these emotions and staying quiet, because we've seen that people often won't take our word over his. Or maybe we don't want to believe that there are still people out there who think so little of us as women. Too many are treating this as just another day's headline, as if our outrage is overblown or unwarranted, as if this is normal. [..]”

“But, [..] be clear. This is not normal. [..] This is disgraceful. It is intolerable. [..] No woman deserves to be treated this way. None of us deserves this kind of abuse.”

“[..]Consider this. If all of this is painful to us as grown women, what do you think this is doing to our children? What message are our little girls hearing about who they should look like, how they should act? What lessons are they learning about their value as professionals, as human beings, about their dreams and aspirations?”

“And how is this affecting men and boys in this country? Because I can tell you that the men in my life do not talk about women like this. And I know that my family is not unusual. And to dismiss this as everyday locker-room talk is an insult to decent men everywhere.”

“[..] Let's be very clear. Strong men - men who are truly role models - don't need to put down women to make themselves feel powerful. []

“[] We have the power to show our children that America's greatness comes from recognizing the innate dignity and worth of all our people.”

Those words from a mother of two young women touched me and gave me the courage and hope to continue fighting to keep all our children, of all ages and genders, safe. Innate dignity and worth of all our people she said. And in another part of her speech she mentioned upholding the value of equality. I could not talk about Unitarian Universalist principles any better myself.

So, here is the thing. We all want to protect our family members, especially our children, from violence. We would love to be able to shield them from offensive and violent language, pictures and actions until they are all grown up. We especially do not want them thinking that just because they hear it on TV or little Johnny repeats it on the school bus that what they see and hear is true and ok and normal. The counter to that is communication and education.

Essential is teaching non-violent communication skills and ways to navigate the teen world of dating and breaking up. Acknowledging that some adults are not acting respectful and are not treating females the way we believe they should be treated. Speaking up when we see someone being mistreated rather than turning away because ignoring something can feel to some, especially children, as condoning that action.

There could very well be someone here today or someone you know who is in a domestic violence situation. Maybe you have a child, niece or nephew, or grandchild who is starting to date and you have already noticed some warning signs about the relationship. The most important thing we can do immediately is break the silence. If you are concerned for yourself, find someone you feel safe with and talk to them today. And if someone tells you of his or her domestic violence situation, believe that person. It is not up to you to determine causes or check the validity of claims or even to fix it.

What you can do is express your concern for their safety and help them take the next step. Ask them if they have made an escape plan, if they have spoken to anyone else about this and give them resources – phone numbers, places to go, professionals they can speak with when they are ready. You will find flyers with information in four places – the table in the front foyer, the table here at the front of the Sanctuary, as well as in the Chapel and Parlor.

We all want the same thing. We want to be respected for who we are, and we want to be safe. We want our loved ones to be safe. We want our homes and our congregations and our communities to be shelters from the storm of violence.

We can be part of the solution. As Malcolm Astley noted, “Lauren had a ‘We can fix this’ attitude. That’s why she travelled three times to New Orleans to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. And it’s that same attitude that impels Malcolm Astley to combat violence against women.” (9) Through the efforts of Lauren’s parents, Massachusetts now has student-staff violence prevention trained teams designing school programs in 90 of its 350 high schools. Additionally 10 high schools are piloting healthy relationships and violence prevention programs funded by the state. And 17 high schools are preparing to use the Escalation Workshop this academic year funded by the Lauren Dunne Astley Memorial Fund in collaboration with One Love. All this out of one tragedy.

So, I stand here, grieving a life cut short, thinking about a young man in prison for the rest of his life, wondering whose life will be shattered next. It was just two years after Lauren’s death that another high profile domestic violence murder was in the news. Jared Remy, son of former Boston Red Sox player Jerry Remy, killed his girlfriend in front of their 4 year old daughter. So many lives destroyed in mere moments.

Those are just two of the 56 domestic violence homicides in Massachusetts between 2001 and 2013. And that is why I am urging you to do what you can. Break the silence. Be that person who helps break the cycle of violence. Teach your children – the boys and the girls – what respect looks like. Counter what you cannot stop in our culture with your UU values, your sense of right and wrong. Together, we can do it. Let It Be So.

- (1) Thomas, Iain, *I Wrote This For You*, Central Avenue Publishing, 2011.
- (2) Unitarian Universalist Hymnal, *Singing the Journey*, #1052
- (3) *UU World Magazine Winter 2013*, pages 8-11
- (4) (<http://www.janedoe.org/>)
- (5) <http://www.breakthecycle.org/>,
- (6) <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>)
- (7) *UU World Magazine Winter 2013*, pages 8-11
- (8) <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/14/>)
- (9) *UU World Magazine Winter 2013*, pages 8-11