

PREFACE

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At the wedding of a friend last summer, the priest performing the ceremony addressed all the guests, exhorting us to take seriously our role as witnesses to the new marriage. It was hot. The glass-walled chapel at Pacific School of Religion was like a greenhouse. People smiled, fanned themselves with programs. Didn't the bride look lovely? Wasn't it an unusually summery day for the Bay Area? The priest's words rang out, suddenly calling us to attention, reminding us of our commitment—beyond the surface pleasantries and the etiquette of the wedding as a social occasion. He told us the biblical Greek word for witness is *martys*. He called us to pour out our lives, our selves, as witnesses, as *martys*, to this union now being created before God and before us.

I hope and believe that my friend's marriage, and her life, will be blessed with harmony and peace. But for so many women, that is far from the reality of their lives. All too often hope dies, crushed by the fist of a battering partner, overwhelmed by the violation of a rapist's attack, smothered even in earliest childhood by the devastation of sexual abuse.

This book—amazingly for the first time—gathers together by one author under a nontechnical framework the seemingly disparate strands of the violence-against-women movements. I say "amazingly" because with the research and advocacy advancing apace in the various strands, no introductory book from a unified perspective yet exists.¹ One reason for this lacuna, no doubt, is that each strand has often pressed ahead independently toward political initiatives for change, so vital for improving women's treatment within the North American context. A second reason is that many people have become engaged where they first encountered violence against women. A third is that the theoretical perspectives often shift as one moves from one area to another.

The envisioned readers of this book, then, are those who want to know more about the various forms of violence against women and some of what can be done to counter such violence. By the term *church's response* in the book's subtitle is meant the basic witness for what is healthy and against what is destructive. I am taking the hopeful stance that the church's response to violence against women can be increasingly helpful, even proactive. This book is an effort to support that response by suggesting starting points

for advocacy (both pastoral and institutional) and by undergirding those suggestions with both theological and theoretical foundations.

I felt drawn, even compelled, to write this book for many reasons. In my first parish ministry setting in 1979, I opened a program for homeless people and had my eyes opened to the realities of battered women. The very first family to come to supper in our simple parish hall was a battered woman who had fled with her two children from her violent husband, preferring the streets to the terror of their apartment. Deeply convicted by that encounter, I went on to become involved in the battered women's movement, a commitment that I have carried throughout my ministry in secular agency, church, and seminary settings. Later, while teaching at the American Baptist Seminary of the West, I discovered the lack of a book addressing the multiple forms of violence against women from one author's unifying perspective and analysis. I found myself assigning dozens of books and articles and wishing for one source that could serve as a primary text for the class.

As an Episcopal priest, I write with a Christian and, at times, distinctively Episcopal/Anglican voice. The book carries the assumption of a certain shared world with the reader, that of the Christian church in the United States. I hope it may also be of some transferable value to readers of different religions, although I do not pretend to represent in a universal way all the complexities of their traditions.

Beyond these reasons for writing the book, there is another: I am a woman. As I have shared in various places throughout, I have personal experiences with some of the specific forms of violence I am describing. Additional stories in this book have been gathered from others. The stories of my friends and colleagues, if compiled, easily fill in any gaps in experience in my own life. The stories if laid end to end could be wrapped around my entire community, perhaps around the world. These stories are included in order to model an important aspect of our witness, namely, giving voice to the voiceless. The forms of violence against women are not limited to those detailed in this book. Medical violence, female infanticide, traffic in women, and economic violence against women are all areas for further exploration, but ones that go beyond the scope of this book. There are also controversial international and cross-cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation, which cannot be adequately dealt with here. These issues need to be incorporated someday in a comprehensive work on violence against women. What I have selected, however, is one central cluster of abuses out of which a community can build a stance against violence and model an important aspect of our witness, namely, giving voice to the voiceless.

In spite of our commitment as Christians to the good news of justice and peace, this breaking of silence seems an enormous and at times overwhelming task. Why should we be so often reluctant to hear and respond to the violence in our society and even in our own ranks?

Psychologist Judith Herman describes the tremendous pressures to minimize and deny violence, especially violence by human agency, because those who bear witness "are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator."² The witness is morally bound to take a side.

It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak

no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering. . . .³

Herman highlights the importance of a social context that values justice because this “affirms and protects the victim” by uniting the victim and witness. For individual victims this alliance is formed with friends; for groups, with political movements.

In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.⁴

Moving from repression to awareness and expression is the goal of this book. All too often, with the best of intentions, those of us who collectively are the church, who call ourselves “the body of Christ,” blind ourselves to Christ’s wounds in our own communities, our contemporary world. We cannot bear the full brunt of the truth. Elie Wiesel wrote of the Holocaust survivors who tried to tell their stories, “To be believable, their tales had to tell less than the truth.”⁵ Yet we are called, again and again, to be witnesses, martyrs to the truth.

This book is an effort to support us all in that crucial work. The effort begins with Tamar, a woman whose voice calls from a distance through a biblical narrative (2 Samuel 13) from which her life is all too quickly dropped and forgotten. The invocation of Tamar’s voice is the paradigm for this project. The work of restoring victims to voice is redemptive. Through it, we proclaim Tamar’s vindication.

Acknowledgments

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I am grateful to all the women who have allowed their stories to be told in this book and the many women whose lives have touched mine through the various organizations in which I have been privileged to serve. They have graced me with their examples of courage and faith. I have in each case sought to protect their identities by conflating or otherwise altering identifying descriptions and circumstances.

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