

A Spirituality "After"

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For many victims there is a demarcation point in their lives. There is the time before the trauma, and the time after. There is the time before they were raped, before they met the abuser, before a certain person exploited them sexually. Trauma has been defined as some form of "life-changing unfairness" and trauma theorists say one part of healing is realizing things can never be like they were before. The trauma must be accepted as reality and somehow incorporated into one's life.

This applies to the effects upon the victim's spirituality as well. For those who had some form of religious faith before the trauma and who may have expected it would carry them through life, it is dismaying to realize that even this has been changed. The things that gave meaning and that satisfied their spirits before the trauma, do not always help in the same ways anymore. In fact, sometimes the trauma provokes what may seem like a complete loss of faith. The world has been turned upside down. Former feelings of security, protection, connection have been gravely challenged. Oftentimes, one has been not only harmed, but frequently abandoned by others as well. There is a tendency to turn inward, to hide or protect the self, to either present a false front to others, or to avoid them. It is hard to see how one can believe, connect, hope again. It may seem now that nothing can be trusted, even God.

How does one minister or give spiritual counsel to someone in this state? Where does one start, once issues of physical safety and other urgent practical issues have been addressed? Victims can look to ministers and pastoral counselors to help give a larger framework of meaning to what has befallen them. They may come with many questions about their own responsibility, and, if they are thoughtful persons, also about the viability of belief, the reality of evil, the purpose of life. These are essentially spiritual questions. Many different theological routes can be taken in addressing them.

But the difficulty in giving spiritual counsel is that many of the common reactions that victims have to trauma look remarkably similar to what Western religion has defined as "sin." Sin is a dirty word to many today, but the concept has real usefulness when it is understood. Sin has had many definitions over the ages. It has been seen as defilement, disobedience, disorder, disconnection, disbelief. For many in the Western world, sin has been understood as a deliberate and, at the same time, inborn turning away from God. One "turns in" upon oneself and, in effect, puts oneself or another in the place where God should be. Traditionally, theology has often understood this turning away, as well as "unbelief" and lack of trust in God, to be a key source and occasion of sin. The result of replacing God with something inadequate is alienation from God, others and even from self. The spiritual alienation from self results because the self knows, deep down, (except in cases of extreme delusion), that it is not and can never be God nor can it choose a competent replacement.

While the descriptions of sin that we have inherited — sin as alienation, lack of trust, turning away, turning inward — do have validity, if they are used like a blunt instrument to diagnose every condition of spiritual malaise, depression, isolation or negativity, they can do harm. It is true that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." No one is perfect, no one even comes close to the purity of God. This puts us at a distance from God, even though God longs to approach us. But starting at this end of the spiritual spectrum, emphasizing our responsibility in moving away from God, can do harm to traumatized persons.

Because of the stress on personal accountability within Western religion, Christians looking to deepen their spirituality are often led to discover the ways in which they are alienated from God and how they have helped bring this about. In other words: How have I sinned, how have I become separated from God, and how do I move out of this state? This strategy for spiritual growth puts victims in a terrible bind. They have been sinned against, with often devastating consequences. But now they may be told that these same consequences, that is, changes which were forced upon them and which have produced some predictable results, are in fact their own fault, that is, their sin. It is ironic that, having been sinned against grievously, victims often feel themselves to be the chief sinner.

If victims are guided to look first for their own sin, to "take the beam out of their own eye" before looking for the "splinter" in someone else's, they may have great difficulty coming to terms with the victimization. The word "sin" can be used in conversation with a victim, but primarily to make clear that

they are suffering from having-been-sinned-against. No matter how morally complex the situation (and victims often realize this better than anyone else), in cases of trauma, such as clergy sexual abuse, there are victims and there are perpetrators. No one should be made to prove complete innocence before being deemed "worthy" of help.

If a minister or counselor, then, takes a traditional approach to defining sin when confronted with persons who have been battered, sexually abused or exploited, additional harm can be done to the victim. The sheer fact and courage of approaching a minister for spiritual counsel and help can backfire on the person. Marshaling what may have seemed their last shred of hope and trust, victims can find instead that their feelings of self-doubt and self-blame are corroborated by the helper, rather than exposed as the predictable consequences of victimization.

And yet a victim is often alienated, cut off, turned inward, lacking in hope, trust and faith. This state does keep them away from God and, often, from others. What kind of spirituality, then, makes sense "after"? Where does a victim look now that the former routes to sustaining her spirit have been blocked or damaged? I believe that a spirituality for "after" cannot start at a usual place. Rather than starting with sin, it must start with grace. This may seem a bit simplistic, but it is definitely not simple. Victims of trauma have experienced the power of evil so forcefully that it looks like grace had no opportunity to squeeze in anywhere. Evil seemed to have trapped them so strongly, rendered them so helpless, even if only for a moment, that the box seemed air-tight. There may have seemed no room, during the trauma, for the breath of the spirit to blow in anywhere. How can we now speak of grace?

What is grace, anyway? It is not, at its heart, the spiritual equivalent of vitamins, energy, support, or courage. At its heart, grace is the presence of God. In fact, grace is the heart of God, calling us back home. It is the wooing of a God who never forces, but who also never stops trying to reach us. Grace as God's presence is a this-worldly experience in the sense that it happens now, in this life. It is not merely something to be hoped for after death, although many believe it will reach its fulfillment for us at that point. But how can victims of trauma experience this if they don't believe in its reality anymore? How can they be receptive to grace if now they seriously doubt its prescribed channels—such as in Church, family, love-relationships, and community—or if they feel it doesn't apply to them now "after"? If someone has been hurt to the point where they feel faith, belief, Church, religion, people, society and God have abandoned them, how can they recognize and receive grace? This is a terrible quandary because in many respects, grace does need to be recognized

to be received. It is true that we receive support, love, nurturance, sustenance unconsciously, often not even recognizing that we are being helped, but in order to best appropriate the benefits and remain open to them, they are best received and acknowledged consciously. Grace is like this, too.

I don't like to urge "gratitude" upon victims, even though that can be a strong component of a spirituality, and is an essential aspect of, for example, a twelve-step approach. Victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse have often been told by their abusers that they should be grateful for his attention, help, or his sheer presence, and victims have sometimes clung to their abusers out of this misplaced sense of gratitude. When a helper urges gratitude, it may inadvertently worsen these troubling memories. In addition, it can also counterproductively provoke even more guilt-feelings in the victim who, in many cases, already has enough of them.

Instead of trying to force feelings of gratitude, I believe victims should follow joy. Joy is one sure sign of grace. This is not a search for mere happiness, distraction, intoxication, or stimulation. True joy is deeper and more solid than that. It is only found in God, and is God's presence. I believe victims should be relentless in identifying, tracking down, and following what traces of joy they can experience. This is actually hard work. It is hard to trust positive feelings when some of your best hopes and dreams may have been used to trap you into the abusive situation or blinded you to its true reality. After trauma, it is hard to believe that joy can exist for you any longer. And if joy is found in God, but one feels God as abandoner, how can one expect to have joy?

Yet joy is our radar in pinpointing the presence of grace and God. It is our infrared sight on a night mission, allowing us to identify the object we seek, even in the dark. If it seems faint or distant, and our capacities very weak, we must follow relentlessly even the smallest light we can find. This can come in such simple ways that it will seem trite to even mention them — the smile on the face of a stranger in a crowd, the unexpected help of someone in our daily rounds, a child's trusting of us even though we feel inadequate, a good meal that we are able to eat — all these seemingly small things, if they give even a smidgen of joy, can lead us in the right direction. Joy can come in more predictable packages as well: a support group's acceptance, the music at Church, a helpful book, the continuing love of a friend, the dedicated efforts of a counselor, even the regularity of a paycheck or subsidy. Following joy in all these cases means allowing trust to re-emerge, accepting that hope might be appropriate again, believing that dreams and goals, though different now, can exist once more. Following joy means being willing to receive grace.

As the trauma survivor follows the unexpected occasions of joy, she will be edging nearer to God, even if she doesn't recognize it. And God will be edging nearer to her, gently moving as close as she will allow, never rushing, always ready. This, to my mind, is the start and the foundation of a spirituality for "after." LM