

August 8, 2006

[a blog entry reflecting on the Monday Night Poetry "Art of Caring" benefit](#)

A friend tells a friend

It was a gathering of poets and artists, survivors and friends of survivors, grandmothers and urban professionals and high school students. We met last night at a coffeehouse in Snowstorm City for a poetry reading that would raise money for the Women's Shelter.

Poet Woman and I went out to dinner first, a slow meal at a downtown restaurant that serves the most wonderful bread and hot tomato dipping sauce. We talked and ate and talked, and the waiter kept bringing us more bread and dipping sauce. Afterwards, we walked through the city, taking our shoes off to splash barefoot through the fountain that was shooting jets of white water against the sunset.

Then for the next three hours, in a cozy coffeehouse filled with women and artwork, we listened as one by one, people approached the microphone and told their stories. We were celebrating the survivors of domestic abuse, their strength and resilience, and the room was filled with survivors. But when Poet Woman got up to read, she asked for a moment of silence, for some of the women she remembered from the shelter, women who were warm and loving and wonderful, women who did not survive. I closed my eyes during the moment of silence, hiding behind my hair, because I could not bear to look at the faces around me.

The room was quiet as Poet Woman read a poem about the time many years ago when she was getting beaten by her husband, and someone called the cops. The cops arrived and asked one question: "Is this your husband?" And when she said yes, they left, and the beating continued. It was 1966, and that was the law then.

The evening went late, and it was close to midnight before everyone had spoken. I kept thinking how important it was for our community to say those words aloud, to name abuse and acknowledge pain.

The rule of silence in a dysfunctional family is a powerful force that feeds the cycle of abuse. "Don't air the dirty laundry." The clothesline project draws on that symbolism: women write their pain onto shirts which are then hung on a clothesline. Speaking up and speaking out is an act of incredible courage that helps break the pattern of abuse.

That step of finding words for the pain, for acknowledging the abuse, seems to be an important moment in every survivor's story. It's the way cycles get broken, patterns get changed. A friend tells a friend. Secrets lose their power when they are no longer secrets. Words rip apart the silence.

A friend tells a friend. I don't understand completely the healing process but I have seen it work. I could feel it last night as women and men spoke into the microphone, and everyone in the room listened, trying with their bodies to absorb the pain, to pull it into their bodies so that that the pain could become diffuse and shared. I tried to think of all the experiences I've stored in my body -- lazy summer days at camp, a drive around a deep blue lake, strolls along a coastal beach, a walk through ancient trees -- and use those sunny moments as a way to buffer the painful words I was listening to with my whole self.

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- ◆ Sounds like an amazing experience. My family has a very strong "we don't talk about what's wrong" rule. It just doesn't happen, and if you dare to try... which I suppose is part of why I'm as far from them as I can get. I'm glad to hear that people are talking.
- ◆ The taboo against speaking about the family secrets is just such a hard thing to fight. It's an incredibly powerful dynamic in dysfunctional families. Sometimes distancing yourself from it all is the only option.
- ◆ While abuse still occurs every second of every day, I'm so happy that now there are shelters, laws, medical professionals, and concerned citizens who are helping to keep the dirty little laundry out in the open and

provide help for the women, men, and children who have survived and are climbing out of those abusive relationships. It takes courage, but it also takes a Village, or town, or neighborhood, or office setting or group of friends to step up and help. The physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse has to stop, but first there has to be recognition and sometimes the abuse is so subtle like not letting your wife drive a few miles to a writer's group alone, or trying to alienate her from her friends, or telling her to go take her medication, she is getting out of control.

- ◇ Yeah, so many survivors say that they didn't realize for years that they were being abused -- that they didn't know it was abusive for a spouse to sabotage their friendships and try to keep them isolated, for instance -- that they thought those were normal parts of marriage. One friend told me that she first realized she was being abused when she got angry at her husband for the way he would scream at and hit the cats. Then she saw the parallel to the way he was treating her.
- ◇ Well, I suppose that as far as we as a society may have left to go on this journey, there's been an awful lot of progress in some ways. To think that only 40 years ago the police could leave Poet Woman in that circumstance!
- ◇ It's hard to imagine To Protect and To Serve, yet such a basic need for protection being unlawful. Our family was much the same, my father even said to me once, "What would the neighbors think?" in all seriousness. I try to break the cycles, and identify the patterns so that my family's life can be different.
- ◇ When I tell my friends some of the un-happier stories from my childhood they are all amazed that I turned out so well. What they don't realize is that every time I tell another story, I become stronger and more sure that my dad's abandonment and my brother's violence were not my fault.
- ◇ My mom was the oldest of 10 kids. After her there was one brother and then 8 sisters. All of the girls except my Mom were sexually abused by her father and brother. While she (barely) escaped the sexual abuse, she was hit hard enough by her father to lose consciousness. The biggest thing she and her sisters did was to agree that there would be no secrets. They all talk about what happened. They even have a family tree that indicates who was an alcoholic, where there was incest, and who had ADHD. I've definitely seen the power of 'no more secrets'.
- ◇ A friend of mine who is a counselor recently handed me a list of the signs of an abusive relationship and asked me to read it out loud. It was a list with which I am very familiar. I've done the exact same thing he did with women I've seen in counseling. His point was to drive home that even though nothing physical occurred until the day I left, I was in an abusive relationship. I hate saying that, but when I do, it becomes more real to me, and as it becomes more real, I'm compelled to do something about it. I think that's what telling the story does. I am extremely fortunate. I got out early. And I had countless friends, many of whom I've never actually met, who listened, encouraged, and kept telling me the truth until I got out and stayed out.
- ◇ That kind of silence is so damaging. What an amazing night you had.
- ◇ Thank you for writing about your night. That was beautifully done, especially from the perspective of those of us who find it hard to write about our feelings.
- ◇ What an incredible evening you had. We have a clothesline project on campus every year, as well as a night for survivors to speak. It takes an incredible amount of courage to speak openly about these experiences, especially for young women among their peers, but to maintain their silence is far more damaging.
- ◇ I cried when I read this, thank you.