

Among Us: May 28, 2017 Sermon by Wendy Page ©

This is Memorial Day weekend, and I invite us to remember a group of people who have died. They are too often forgotten and are too often silenced during life by domestic violence. I begin with a story that my friend Yao, has given me permission to share with you today.

The call came as I was returning home from a church board meeting. I remember sitting in my car in the driveway talking for an hour.

“Wendy, I left him. He beat me.” Yao was a colleague from my software days at IBM. Yao was young and bright: undergraduate engineering degree from MIT, law degree from Harvard. She was born in China, fluent in four languages. When I had last seen her, she had married her college sweetheart and they had two little children.

I listened to her as she told her story. How he held her down on the floor trying to choke her, she could see the terrified faces of her children huddled in the corner of the room. He eventually let her go. She called the police, got a restraining order, changed the locks to the apartment,

hired a lawyer. My heart broke for her and what she was going through. She was in a city a thousand miles away. All I could do was listen to her, believe her, make sure she was safe. Over the next 18 months she would call periodically to update me. She had doubts, she worried about the children, got them into therapy, got herself into therapy. She sent me an email of celebration on the day her divorce was final. She is still angry and feels taken advantage of because she is paying him, her abuser, alimony because her salary is bigger than his.

Hers is a success story. Though she had doubts, she got out when he got violent. He had been controlling and condescending for years, but once he was physically violent she left. Her children's fear was a big motivator for her. She was resilient. She reached out to every resource she had, probably around the world to give her support. Yao gave her permission for me to share her story because she shares it whenever she can to help other survivors of domestic violence.

This is a hard topic. What has it got to do with Sunday morning worship? How we are in relationship with one another as Unitarian

Universalists has everything to do with this topic. If we are to follow our first principle of “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and our second principle of “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations”¹ we need to be looking at our own community, our own households as well as out in the world.

This is a justice issue, on a global level, community level, and an individual level. It is an issue for victims and survivors. It is also an issue for abusers as they confront their own woundedness and brokenness. Often, they have pasts of violence in their childhood, and a cycle of violence is being repeated.

The numbers are staggering. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, one in 4 women has been victimized by physical violence by an intimate partner. One in 7 men has experienced the same violence, usually by another man. The survey also shows 85% of domestic violence victims are women and 40-50% murdered women were killed by partners.

¹ <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

Now, if you are like me, these statistics are beyond surprising. My first thoughts were: how can that be right? How can those numbers be so high? How could I not have known that?

Why do we not know how high the numbers are of victims of intimate partner violence: because we don't talk about it. Ministers don't talk about it from the pulpit. We don't talk about it with our friends. Why is that? Well, it is an uncomfortable topic. Talking about violence is hard. Talking about intimate topics is hard. Talking about violence and intimacy is really hard. And if you are being battered, it is an embarrassing, humiliating, and dangerous topic. But the more we don't talk about the violence in the home, the more isolated battered men and women are. And there are battered men: the majority of them are in Gay relationships. This is not just a heterosexual problem. It is also an LGBTQ problem. It is a human problem.

What exactly is intimate violence? Power and control are at its center. The Power and control can manifest itself in many ways. It can be using coercion and threats or intimidation, it can be economic abuse where the

victim does not have financial control, it can be using male privilege, it can be minimizing and denying behavior and blaming the victim for it, it can be using children as pawns or threatening to take them away, it can be isolating the victim from family, friends and community, it can be emotional abuse.² There was intimate violence in Yao's marriage long before it became physical. Her husband criticized her child raising abilities though she did all the work, he belittled her with words and tone of voice. He was condescending to her though she is accomplished and rewarded in her career.

According to James Poling, "domestic violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners."³

The cycle which is repeated over and over works like this: there is a period of time where tension is building in the relationship. Eventually it reaches a breaking point and the actual battering happens. After the

² Ibid, 16.

³ Christie Cozad Neuger and James Newton Poling, eds., *The Care of Men* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 140.

violence, the final phase is one of loving contrition where the batterer is sorry and tries to make up to his partner by being loving and asking for forgiveness. As the cycle gets repeated, the third stage gets shorter and shorter and the active battering stage gets longer and more intense.

Some populations are even more vulnerable to domestic violence.

Economic status, race, and immigration status can all compound the difficulties experienced by those being affected by violence. Our Latina neighbors down the road in Lawrence are dealing with insecurities around their immigration status. If they or a loved one is undocumented, leaving a violent situation makes them more vulnerable to deportation when an angry partner can report them to authorities. Financial constraints either by manipulation or by poverty can reduce a woman's ability to leave an abusive situation.

My friend Yao had the financial resources to take care of her children and herself. If someone is poor and threatened with deportation or even the deportation of her perpetrator, she is reluctant to expose her situation.

Leaving a violent domestic situation is dangerous. Since at the foundation of domestic violence is a need for control, when the person being abused leaves the relationship, leaves the home, the abuser fears they are losing control and the violence can become escalated.

Homicides go up during the exit and during separation. It is really important to have a safety plan carefully in place before trying to leave a violent relationship. This is why shelter locations are secret so that the women in them have their safety protected.

But domestic violence is not just happening in the Lawrence community. It is happening in our UU Communities. There is much social injustice out in the world. We Unitarian Universalists are really good at seeing it and working on it out there in the world. But As David Livingston points out in his book *Healing Violent Men*, “If the church community does not care for the vulnerable and abused within its own circle, it becomes an ineffectual voice for justice in the larger community.”⁴I keep coming back to our first two Unitarian Universalist principles for

⁴ David J. Livingston, *Healing Violent Men: A Model for Christian Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 3.

guidance: “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations”⁵. It is far easier to look for injustice beyond our walls than to see it right here in our pews. We don’t want to see it. It is hidden in plain sight.

A victim may hide the abuse because she is afraid of what will happen to herself and her family. She may deny that it is even happening.

Abuse is not always about hitting. It is always about control: emotional, financial, forced isolation, harm to personal property or pets are also forms of abuse done to control the victim. Yao did not realize that her relationship was abusive until it became physical.

Statistically abuse is happening among us. A quarter of us have experience of intimate partner violence and violence in the home. We don’t talk about it. But if we don’t talk about it how can we help one another? And what can you do if someone trusts you enough to tell you they are the victim of intimate partner violence? The most important thing you can do is believe them. Often the abuse has involved twisting

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

the truth, belittling her, negating her reality. Believe her. She knows what is safe and what is not. She knows the danger she is in. Help her make a safety plan.

Help her find resources such as the YWCA FINA House in Lawrence, and the domestic violence hotline. Believe her, trust her intuition. She needs her inherent worth and dignity validated. She knows the amount of danger she is in, she needs to be in control. She needs to believe that there can be justice and equity in her human relations.

I grew up in a home where there was physical violence. My mother deferred to my father's opinion most of the time. When she did not, there was icy silence. We lived on the Page family farm where generations of my father's family had lived and farmed. My father would come in from the barn and wanted to wash his hands in the kitchen sink rather than in the bathroom sink. My mother, rightly thought it was not hygienic for him to washing up where she was doing food preparation. That disagreement precipitated a week of silence between them. He was exerting power and control over her.

She did most of the child care in the home, but sometimes he was called in to discipline us. We would be lined up and be spanked one after another with a wooden paddle. Corporal punishment was more in vogue back then, but the spankings were hard enough that we would pee in our pants. My sister was once thrown across the kitchen when my father was angry. She remembers looking up at my mother for protection and realizing that mom was too afraid to help.

It took years for my sister and me to talk about it and to realize that what was happening was abusive and violent. I think it is hard to recognize when a relationship strays outside what is normal and becomes violent. It is hard to realize that your childhood experience was not healthy or normal.

In 1993 the Unitarian Universalist Association resolved” that Unitarian Universalist congregations and individual Unitarian Universalists be urged to recognize the pervasive nature of violence against women and

confront the emotional and physical violence in our own families, congregations, and communities.”⁶

It is a matter of justice for our homes, our church, our community to be places of sanctuary and safety for everyone.

And so, today, I am breaking the silence about all those who have sat in these pews who are the victims and survivors of intimate partner violence and other violence in the home. If we are to live into our first two Unitarian Universalist principles of “[t]he inherent worth and dignity of every person⁷” and “[j]ustice, equity and compassion in human relations”⁸ all of us should live free from the threat of violence.

Survivors of intimate violence need to be recognized, believed, listened to, and compassionately supported. May we live into our faith and movement as we strive for Beloved Community for everyone.

Please join me in a moment of silence. [PAUSE]

⁶ UUA Resolution Statement on Violence against Women.1993

⁷Unitarian Universalist Website, <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

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Blessed Be and Amen.

Our closing hymn is *Amazing Grace*, #205. If you are so moved, I invite you to come forward to light a candle for those affected by domestic violence in your life.