

“Sex and Violence”

On a beautiful, sunlit morning like this one, it's hard to imagine the darkness that lurks in the human heart. For it was exactly one year ago, in the early morning hours of October 7, that Michelle Gardner-Quinn was walking home to her dormitory at the University of Vermont after a night out with friends. She borrowed a cell phone from Brian Rooney, a passerby, and the security camera on a jewelry store downtown captured the two walking together, the last time she would be seen alive.

This very same week last year, a thirty-something man named Charles Roberts was assembling an arsenal of stun guns, flex ties, assorted lethal weapons and tubes of sexual lubricant in the back of the milk truck he drove for a living in rural Pennsylvania. Robert's wife was at a prayer meeting at the local Presybetarian Church, and just an hour earlier, he'd put his own kids on the morning bus with hug and a kiss, when around 10 am he burst into the West Nickel Mines Amish School and ordered the boys and their teachers to leave. It was the girls he wanted.

In another school room, closer to home, Alicia Shanks, an admired teacher at the Essex Elementary School had been shot in late August by an enraged Christopher Williams, stalking his ex-girlfriend after shooting her mother.

And that same fall, in November of last year, Carole Anne Lozinski of Lyndonville, an avid skier and recent arrival to the Northeast Kingdom, was murdered by a jilted boyfriend who then turned the 40 caliber Glock handgun on himself.

The only remarkable things about these cases is that they made the headlines, and coming in such close succession, briefly raised concern about the safety of women in our community. More often, domestic violence and sexual assault are below the level conscious awareness—at least below the level of most men's awareness. For women, it's another story.

Violence or the threat of violence is a daily reality that women live with—or for the unlucky ones like Laura Winterbottom—a reality women don't live with. For instance, I know my wife, a criminal attorney who is not at all timid about entering a felon's jail cell, is reluctant to walk the bike path near our home late at night where I, as a male, have no such fear. Her world is different than mine. Vulnerability is a female fact of life, as the numbers prove.

In 2006, the Vermont Network Against Sexual and Domestic Violence received 17,172 calls on their hotline, a fifteen percent increase over the previous year. Half of all homicides in Vermont are related to domestic violence. So while overall crime statistics around the country are at historic lows, brutality directed against women is an exception to the rule, at least in this state.

You might think that this is a problem for law enforcement, and not for the church. But religion is at least partly to blame for a culture that victimizes both women and children.

Think of the thousands of Catholic priests who have been indicted for molestation. Think of thirteen year old Mormon girls forced to marry their cousins and uncles, or Afghan women stoned for the sin of adultery, or Hindu brides burned alive because their dowries were too small. You might say these are all offshoots of a fundamentalist faith, distortions of religion rather than genuine expressions of a higher power. But they are also outgrowths a long tradition of male supremacy and control, a legacy in the West of a Bible that says "wives obey your husbands." It ought to go without saying that gentlemen don't hit ladies, but for most religious institutions, that would be a bad assumption. Silence from the pulpit has more often been a sign of complicity or cover-up.

Even progressive congregations like this one bear some responsibility, if not for promoting violence, then for too often turning a blind eye in the name of excessive tolerance. Freedom of expression, one of our most cherished liberal values, too often means anything goes in these times: hip-hop lyrics about pimps 'n hos, video games that involve hunting naked coeds, sexploitation in movies and ads. Some say that Unitarian Universalism is the faith where you can believe anything you want; but that's just not so. Because as a Unitarian minister, there are some things I can't believe. I can't believe, example, that it's healthy for children or adults to be constantly bombarded with words and images that humiliate and degrade our wives and mothers and daughters and sisters.

So what's our responsibility? In my opinion, denouncing violence is not enough. Pointing the finger is not enough. Condemning pornography, or blaming Hollywood, or liberals, or fundamentalists for their role in the problem, is not enough. Rather, I think we need all to accept responsibility and examine our own lives for the ways we've been hurt and damaged by a culture that pushes both men and women into dysfunctional sexual identities. Because it's not only women who are made insecure by violence. Whether they batter or not, whether they actually act on their fantasies of domination or not, men are also damaged. Because insofar as they internalize the tough-guy, action-hero stance idolized in figures like Rambo, men also wind up trapped in macho poses based more on fear than on self-confident masculinity. Men are also bruised and maimed by the culture of violence, stunted emotionally, unable to trust or let down their guard in relationships where they always have something to prove or something to hide.

Think of Charles Roberts, who killed all those Amish girls. In a confused and desperate call to his wife, from inside the school house where he was holding them hostage, he admitted to molesting two female family members, twenty years before. He must have been eleven or twelve at the time, a child himself. But for two decades, he'd carried the secret, never told anyone, never trusted another human being with the horrible burden that tormented him every day. Until all that loathing and rage just boiled over.

But I do think that sexual healing is possible for both men and women. I found it refreshing, for instance, just to sit down with a group of women last week and talk about what we can do together to address sexual violence in our community. I was a little nervous as a man, inviting women from our congregation to share their thoughts about

this topic. It's a touchy subject. There are, after all, some angry women out there—many of them angry for very, very good reasons. And one of the women present, who works with victims, said she couldn't have imagined, even ten years ago, sitting down in the same room with a man to try to find common ground. But when we're able to talk and let down our defenses as men and women, we begin to experience the co-humanity where genuine acceptance and understanding and compassion can begin.

One forum for that kind of healing conversation is Our Whole Lives, the sex education curriculum we've been offering our young people for many years. For the first time this year, we'll also be offering OWL for adults, where we can begin to talk about the ways we've been socialized and sexualized for good or ill, where we can speak not in judgment, not to win debating points for political correctness, but in honesty and from the heart. As poet Alice Walker says,

love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home
love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.

The heart, I believe, is the point inside each of us where hope and healing and change can begin.