

Background To Break The Silence Sunday

It's hard to know where to begin – with statistics; with a reminder of the call to the work of justice that is so deeply imbedded in the scriptures; with an amusing anecdote to make this discussion easier? Let's have a story instead...

My name is Moira Finley. I am many things - a poet, a painter, someone who loves a good meal, a potentially crazy cat lady, a fan of all things Sherlock Holmes, someone who is mildly (ok, intensely) obsessed with Harry Potter, the pastor of two wonderful United Church of Christ (UCC) congregations in northern Wisconsin, and a rape survivor.

It has been more than twenty-eight years since the night that changed everything. Along the way I have been blessed to be surrounded by a great many people who have loved me when I didn't feel loveable; who have held me together when I was falling apart; who have cried with me, laughed with me, tried to understand my anger, listened to my questions, and struggled with me to make sense of all that happened.

One of the most important, and most difficult, parts of my journey (and the journey of many survivors) has been wrestling with questions of faith. Where was God when I was raped? If God loves me, why didn't God prevent it from happening? Can God still love me even though I'm tainted, broken, dirty? There are questions about suffering, grace, mercy, hope, forgiveness, and so much more.

My mother, and the church I grew up in, were wonderful about helping me wrestle with those questions, but I know many survivors are not so lucky. Their congregations, their pastors, their communities meet them with outdated and hurtful theologies, dangerous ideas about what is required to be a Christian, and have laid blame, and shame at the feet of survivors.

When I was ordained in the UCC I had high hopes that my own denomination might be a place where survivors could find space to share their stories, to be heard, honored, and respected. After all, ours is a tradition of justice seeking, and peace making, advocating for those who have been marginalized, and lifting up the voices of those who have been silenced and oppressed.

Sadly, this has not been my experience. I have been met with what feels like a firmly closed, and locked door. Responses have ranged from the fairly mundane of "it's private and personal" and "it will make people uncomfortable" to the genuinely hurtful "it's not an important issue for the church". I have received theological advice that was well intentioned, but seriously misguided including the platitudes about Jesus suffering, and that nonsense about God not giving us more than we can handle.

I have been instructed that forgiveness, immediate and unconditional, is a requirement of the

Christian faith, and that I shouldn't be angry about what happened to me because it might upset others. I have been told that PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is stupid, that I should just get over it since it all happened a long time ago, that stuff like this happens to everyone and I should just accept it, and so much more.

But I have refused to give up, to back down from my belief that the church is, and can be, a place where survivors can tell their stories; can receive love, encouragement, and support in their healing; and can find a way through their pain with faith. It has been a trying, difficult time. There has been a lot of crying, some screaming, and a lot of wondering if I was on the right track, if this really mattered, if the work was worth it.

Then something started to happen. In the summer of 2014 my dear friend Bryan Sirchio and I wrote a song about my story. The song started to get shared. I got invited to be the speaker at a Take Back The Night event in Fond du Lac in April 2015 where, after my speech, Bryan and I performed the song. We had reached a tipping point.

In August 2015, I met with the Rev Franz Rigert, our Wisconsin Conference UCC minister, and together with Lisa Hart we dreamt up the idea of Break The Silence Sunday. We are starting small, first within the UCC in Wisconsin, and a few other congregations, with the hope that eventually this Sunday, and this work, will be a part of the life of the UCC as a whole, and will move to other denominations as well.

This is an opportunity for our churches to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to reach out to those in their congregations, and communities, to be people of hospitality and welcome even when the subject is difficult, and unsettling.

This is our time to sit with those who feel they have no voice, and to listen, to what threatens to overwhelm them, to the memories that keep them awake at night, to the questions (and answers) they have about the life of faith.

This is our time to say clearly that survivors bear no responsibility for what happened to them, and should carry no shame, that they are beloved children of God and that the church stands with them, outraged at their experience, and committed to working together towards a world where no one else ever has to live through such things.

I welcome you to the work of Break The Silence Sunday, and I look forward to hearing from you about your experiences with these materials. My prayer is that together we might create congregations where survivors feel truly welcomed, and know without any qualifications that their stories will be heard, and honored as part of the body of Christ.

Acknowledgements

The work of Break The Silence Sunday would not be possible without those who contributed their words, their music, and their prayers. So many people have been a part of the years leading up to this project, who have patiently waited through the frustration, fears, anger, and silence.

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- For all the survivors who are stronger than they imagine because they get up and face each day, I hope we have done well by your stories.
- For all of you reading this who shall faithfully plan and lead worship to help us break the silence; my gratitude for your courage.

In faith and hope, *Moirra Finley*

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