

WALKING WITH SURVIVORS

Part 1

Written by Erika Sebestyén

Comment: In this article, the survivor is generally referred to as a woman, as this is most often the case, but the thoughts are also equally relevant when the person who has suffered abuse and violence is a man.

In August, our city celebrated the 14th edition of the Hungarian Cultural Days of Cluj-Napoca – a city in Transylvania, Romania; a region which once belonged to Hungary, which after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, became part of Romania. The Hungarian cultural days is a week-long, rich cultural festival that attracts visitors from other parts of the country, as well as from Hungary.

With programmes taking place simultaneously in different locations across the city, it is always a difficult task to decide where to go. One programme that I knew I could not miss this year, was a presentation about a documentary film that had been shot here.

‘Too Close’ is the story of a mother and her two children. A story about a man (the father of the second child) who decided to sexually abuse his partner's daughter. *A story about courage*, said someone in the panel. A story about speaking up and telling the truth. A story about fighting for safety and justice. The filming took five years. All the pain, the fear, the difficulties, but also the small moments of tenderness, love and hope that the mother and her two children are experiencing appear 100% genuine on the screen. There are no words to express my gratitude to the mother and daughter. These bad things, these sinful deeds need to be shouted from the rooftops.

“Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops.” (Matthew 10:27)

This is Jesus' command to his disciples. We should take it seriously. In fact, this is what everyone associated with CNEDA does in their field of work. Speaking up about abuse and violence towards women in the places where we are.

The mother, an actress at the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, emphasised several times in various discussions about the documentary that her daughter commented that if she could help just one child with the film, it would be worth it. One of the saddest parts of their story is that the village on the outskirts of Cluj-Napoca, where they lived at the time of the abuse,

strongly united in blaming the victim. The family had to move out because it was simply impossible to live in an environment where they were called liars and turned into perpetrators. It is shocking to hear the accusatory voice of the villagers. *The son of the former Reformed pastor of the village, the brother of the current pastor, could not have done such a terrible thing. A man of unbelievable kindness and with a strong civic spirit for the village could never have done such a horrendous thing. The mother and her daughter invented all this in order to ruin the life of a whole family...*

I saw the film in a Christian camp a month earlier. I met the mother for the first time then. When I saw that 'Too Close' would be presented at the Hungarian Days, I felt I had to be there that Friday. I could not go anywhere else. But for a moment I was uncertain. Maybe I could choose another programme, since I had already taken part in a discussion about the film. But then I realised that that would mean going against myself. I cannot do that. That leads to self-annihilation. So, I was there, right at the front, to see her, to feel her. My eyes and my heart were glued to her throughout the discussion. I wanted her to feel safe. I wanted her to feel that she was not alone.

Walking with a survivor is about showing her that she is not alone.

When I was asked to write this article, I felt it was beyond my ability. I was to write about 'What does it mean to partner with a survivor?' I carried the question with me everywhere I went. And at different times of the day, when a brief moment of silence occurred, I pondered upon it.

What does it mean to partner with a survivor?

We have to be where she is. That was like a new revelation to me on that Friday. I had to be where the mother was, where the speaking was, because we are miraculously linked. Walking with a survivor means that you are forming one body. You are serving the same cause. You are fighting the same battle.

To walk with a survivor means that we belong to each other. A divine will has decided this. It is impossible to go against the sacred plan. It is a legacy Jesus has given us, to walk with the oppressed. We need to be faithful to Him in every possible way. God hates divorce, we learn in Malachi 2:16. Just as one cannot turn against God and worship idols instead without incurring His wrath, we cannot withdraw from the calling to walk with a survivor and turn our eyes in the opposite direction without experiencing the consequences. Visible

or not, momentary or later, there are consequences. Our responsibility towards every survivor of violence and abuse is to be where they are. Not just physically, but more so on an emotional, relational, mental, and spiritual level. Because any genuine journey starts from that space within. It is there where we must join a survivor on their path to freedom and healing.

A journey of love. Not just a few occasions of divine love. *Agape*. You cannot help but love all those brave and enduring women who, apart from their mistakes, have been abused, hurt, violated, and shattered in their dignity. These oppressed women were robbed of their God-born dignity. Were they? Could it be possible? The Almighty God, our Creator and Father in Heaven says in Psalm:

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you”*
Jeremiah 1:5ab

It is my conviction that no beloved human creature of God can be deprived of his or her dignity. It is a sacred treasure engraved in our cells. But in circumstances of devastating abuse and violence, of whatever form and severity, it is so easy for victims not to see themselves as a person shining the divine, miraculous beauty of God. Satan persistently shouts lies to every survivor of violence and abuse. *You are not loved. You do not matter to anyone. You are alone. Ugly and rejected. Even by God.* This is the most difficult false reality to fight. And it is probably felt by every woman and man who has experienced violence and abuse. It is the most difficult obstacle for survivors to overcome on their journey of healing.

As someone who is willing to walk with survivors, we have a lot to achieve. But above all else, we have one great desire: **To help each survivor rediscover the worth and beauty that God created them to be. To help them marvel anew at God's mysterious love for them.**

“Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands.”
Isaiah 49:16a

Undoubtedly, walking with survivors implies embarking on a complex journey of pain and amazement at the same time.

I have in mind the resurrected Jesus who unexpectedly joined the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Walking with a survivor is a choice we make when we see that they desperately

need our intervention. It is a decision to accompany them in their state of confusion, fear, deception, and hopelessness. For a certain period of time or a certain distance, we share with them the experiences that arise along the way. As we walk hand in hand with these deeply wounded people, we are privileged to witness what happens when the weak become strong. We are filled with incredible joy at every small achievement that a survivor makes. Every small step into the light is a cause for celebration. Healing is made up of these tiny steps. There is sheer pain, sorrow, and tears along the way, but God's special intervention always shines through like golden pearls.

Walking with a survivor in their process of salvation and recovery is like signing a covenant partnership. It is a kind of partnership modelled by Jesus.

When we partner with survivors, we are called to serve them. Not *us*, but *they* are important. Not our needs, but theirs.

When we set out on this journey, there are things we should know beforehand, things we should accept beforehand, in order for the partnership to be successful. For it to reach its full potential. Returning to the earlier image of Jesus joining the travellers on the road to Emmaus, we have the great responsibility of opening peoples' eyes. Survivors come from an experience of lies – a place where others have told them, explicitly or through the way they treated them, that they are worthless, ugly, deficient creatures, not wanted by anyone, left alone in this world to be other people's slaves.

It takes wisdom on the part of the helper to open someone's eyes to how wonderful they are. And a determination to remain when the survivor questions all this truth. To stay with them even when anger, deception, disbelief, and raw pain rise to the surface. Putting lies to death means facing all the damage they have caused to that person's mind, heart, and soul. Acknowledging their heavily shattered identity we must serve them with the greatest humility and love.

Walking with survivors is a process of restoration on every level of personhood. Alongside the physical healing, there is enormous damage that needs to be addressed on a mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual level. As disciples of Christ, we must follow in His footsteps and continue His work of redemption.

A survivor of abuse is in need of redemptive restoration. Abuse is cruel – terrible in the fact that it reduces one's dignity to zero or, very often, below zero. By absorbing a deep sense of

shame, survivors of abuse experience feelings of being less than human. From this level of darkness, only the love of God can bring someone into radiant life. Those who walk with survivors are true workers of redemption. And in this role, they must go into the deepest darkness and shine light there.