

WALKING WITH SURVIVORS

Part 2

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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.

What does a survivor need most?

To address the above, I won't go into detail about the do's and don'ts, which I'm sure anyone involved or interested in how best to support survivors will be aware of. In addition to providing a safe place, guidance, and practical help to access professional support, we need to gently embrace and love them, reinforcing the truth that they do not deserve to be abused, that it is not their fault, and that God would never want them to put up with any form of abuse, violence and oppression. Each of us should strive to be a listening, patient friend to a survivor, who must gather enough strength to make the decision that she wants to leave the situation of abuse. We all agree that in working with a survivor we must never make them feel ashamed, or under any circumstances question the truth of what they are saying, ask for details or react in horror to what they have experienced. Our purpose is to build the survivor's interior force and guide them in their own rhythm to discover for themselves who their abuser really is and what the reality of the situation is.

It needs to be a gentle, wise, steady walk. Just as the shepherd walks behind the flock, providing support and safety from behind, we need to adopt the same attitude.

The survivor is in front of us, expressing her needs, pains and fears, her doubts and many questions, and we can only move with empathy in her rhythm, expressing the tender love of Jesus and shining light and hope into her darkness of helplessness and despair.

CNEDA, I believe, is a community of disciples of Jesus. So, when we answer the questions of what a survivor needs or what is not so helpful to offer them, we have to do it from this perspective. By keeping our eyes on the Rock on which we all stand.

We must ponder these questions if we truly love Jesus and want to love survivors with the love Jesus offers them.

So, as disciples of Jesus, how do we see our role in supporting survivors? From the perspective of children of God, what can we give and offer them?

I recently had an interesting conversation about the meaning of the term 'survivor'. Sitting with a new friend in her car, coming back to our hotel from an early morning walk in a beautiful park in Sarajevo, the word 'survivor' became the focus of our discussion.

Many years ago, when I started to study violence against women, I read somewhere that every victim is already a survivor. It also became my personal belief that no abused woman ever surrenders to the abuse, she is always fighting it - visible or not, she is saying 'no' to the abuse every day. She may not survive the experience - we are aware of cases where the victim has been killed by her abuser - but she is still a survivor. A victim does not have to wait to leave a situation of abuse and violence to reach the next level and be considered a survivor. Every victim is already a survivor. What a powerful message to convey to anyone experiencing abuse and violence. To live in an environment of abuse requires a tremendous effort, a physical one, but even more so in the mental dimension from the part of the victim, in order to survive each new day. To survive the hell. No one can fully understand the inner strength and endurance of a victim-survivor, only those who have experienced some form of abuse.

Then, in the car, the conversation I had with my friend took us to another level. She explained how she was not satisfied with being only a survivor. As daughters of the King, we are meant to be more than that. The life planned for us is not a life of survival but a life of flourishing, of growth.

A survivor must move on to the next stage, that of thriving. And it is at this point that our role becomes very important and pivotal.

Victims usually fight their days of survival amid abuse on their own, completely isolated and without support, but once they have been able to leave that situation, they will require companionship in order to slowly become a thriver. A conqueror. That was the word my friend used. We hope that every victim of abuse will experience life beyond survivorship. When we partner with a survivor, our deepest desire is for them to become a conqueror of their past - of every lie told to them by their abuser, of every self-blame and toxic shame that prevents them from becoming the marvellous person God created them to be.

Our desire is that every survivor of abuse will one day consider themselves a conqueror through Jesus Christ.

This summer I had the opportunity to watch a wonderful documentary by my On the Spot friends, called 'Born in Auschwitz'. The young lady, the daughter of the woman who was born in Auschwitz, expresses with still a pain in her voice that she was raised to be a survivor. I was struck by this idea for the first time: **Can one be raised to become a survivor?**

We want to believe of ourselves that we would be able to survive whatever hardship life may throw at us. Could we build up ammunition beforehand, so that in the event of any form of difficulty, for the worse, be it abuse and violence, we would be able to fight and survive? This idea is probably related to the cultivation of resilience. We can certainly say that survivors of abuse and violence are among the most resilient people in the world. So what are the elements that can somehow guarantee that we or our children will make it through the pain and adversity of a tragic situation? What is necessary to keep hope alive and not give up?

Several books have been written by survivors sharing their experiences and views on what can save one from losing hope. That night, when I raised this question to the audience after watching the film, I came to the conclusion that from a human perspective, nothing, no real tangible or intangible thing can save us in a traumatic situation. Knowing that someone loves us and is waiting for us at home, feeling that people are holding us in their prayers, are all valuable and important resources for keeping hope alive. But they are fragile, and all that certainty can unexpectedly leave us at a terribly difficult moment. What then remains as a seal that we will be survivors no matter what?

As children of God, we are encouraged to look beyond the visible and the present happenings:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we

ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Romans 8:18:25

Holding on to the promise that God is with us, that Jesus is our Emmanuel, that He has sent His Holy Spirit as He promised and will never forsake us, is the anchor that keeps our hearts grounded in the only hope that lasts. That will make us survivors in any given situation. To believe that no matter what we have to endure, God is in control and that we cannot fall from the loving hands of God, is the sole way to go.

Can one be raised to become a survivor? Maybe... I wish it would be possible.

Yet, after all, it is not through human power that one becomes a survivor, but through God's merciful intervention. We cling to the hope we have in Jesus Christ to survive every affliction, every oppression, every tragic moment. Ultimately, it is all grace.

Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands."

1 Samuel 17:47

So he answered and said to me:

"This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel:

'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,'

Says the LORD of hosts.

'Who are you, O great mountain?

Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain!

And he shall bring forth the capstone

With shouts of "Grace, grace to it!" ' ' "

Zechariah 4:6-7