

WALKING WITH SURVIVORS

Part 3

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.

What do people think of as "partnering with a survivor," that might not actually be that helpful?

To answer this, we need to listen to the experiences of any survivor. I think each of them has encountered at least one comment that was not simply unhelpful but also discouraging, emphasising their loneliness, helplessness, lostness. One such attitude is to tell a survivor that they should have pulled themselves together, that it is time to move on and forget the past. Imposing our healing rhythms on a survivor is counterproductive, even if our sincere desire was to help. Messages like this not only show that we do not understand the intricacies of the abuse and the complexity of its consequences, but also clearly express that we are not committed to walking with her. A survivor's ongoing pain and suffering is too much for us to deal with. Repeating the words of urgency to get over the abuse she experienced will only increase the distance between us and the survivor, forcing her into isolation, increasing her shame and sense of failure.

There are various little things that are born of a genuine impulse to help, but which are nothing more than our desire to control someone else's life because we are unwilling to offer ourselves in humble service to them. Because we are not ready for sacrificial love.

First and foremost, we must be patient. She will come to understand if we persist in loving her. She will act when she is ready if we stay with her. We cannot dictate from the outside. Our role is to be a clear, bright, safe voice, a hand to support them until they can stand on their own. They need to walk out of the situation of abuse on their own steady legs, not using our arms or other aids.

Likewise, doing things instead of them, undermines their ability to grow and regain their self-worth and self-esteem. Guiding, signposting, and support are all beneficial, but making choices and acting in her place will rob her of her ability to make decisions, which is always damaged in a situation of abuse. A survivor needs to experience repeatedly that she is allowed to and can decide about happenings in her life in order to begin the process of recovery.

What does it look like to publicly support survivors?

Most of us would say that abuse is wrong. All would believe that survivors should be helped. But is it enough just to acknowledge the suffering and the needs, and pray? Or do we need to speak out in front of others?

When talking about publicly supporting survivors, for most of us, the first reaction is probably resistance. We usually do not like to be in the public spotlight, especially on sensitive issues such as domestic abuse and violence. *Standing up and speaking up for survivors may be too much for me*, you would comment. I also agree that not everybody needs to be in the headlines or invited to TV shows or podcasts as a public supporter of survivors. But I think everyone needs to come out of their anonymity when it comes to supporting a survivor. You cannot remain silent and be content to 'only' pray, but not speak out when the need arises.

Men and women have a responsibility to support survivors. And this cannot be done without being noticed.

The moment one more person knows about what I am doing, it has become public. In that sense, we all must publicly support survivors. We have to protect and fight for the truth. And that can be done only by making it public. Expressed clearly. Voiced out. Acted on. Is the only way light can shine through that darkness. Because remaining silent means being on the side of the dark. We only need to open our eyes and our hearts, and we will see what it means in each specific case to publicly support survivors. If the need is there, we must acknowledge it and act. Step in, tell the truth, and protect the one being abused.

We may not make an obvious difference to their story, we may not alter the course of their life in the now, we may feel totally unprepared and unhelpful, but the truth is something else. For someone who is suffering violence and abuse, to experience that they are not alone and that reality is not as the perpetrator forces it upon them, is a moment of empowerment that can be activated then or at some point in the future.

Many small moments like this – moments that affirm a survivor's worth and beauty – can finally lift the victim above the abyss and make them strong enough to leave the dark and hopeless reality of abuse and begin a process of healing.

Let me finish with a testimony.

It was a summer afternoon. Sitting in the kitchen before my laptop, I slowly became more and more aware that outside a woman was scolding a child. At first, I avoided the sound from touching me, instinctively telling myself that maybe it was a toddler who had a tantrum and the grandmother was drawing the boundaries.

But the woman's voice grew louder and the little girl's crying intensified. I didn't think... It was an urge to jump in and save the one in danger. So, I quickly opened the window, knocking the flower pot to the floor, and saw her... Right in front of my eyes, in the narrow alleyway between the back gardens of two blocks of flats, I saw a blonde woman and a brown-haired girl. The woman turned her face towards me at the sound of the window net being raised but continued to interact with the child in the same abusive manner. I asked her in a firm voice, "Woman, what is going on?" She said nothing was wrong, and asked me - a beautiful lady, well dressed - not to intervene, as the child is her daughter, and she knows her well.

The woman spoke calmly to me, but very angrily when she turned to the little 6-7-year-old little girl. She was terrified. She turned her beautiful face and lifted her eyes towards me, in the window of my flat on the second floor, as if she had caught a glimmer of hope of being saved, as if she was expecting a protective hand - a mighty hand that would make the torture stop.

My interaction with the woman was fragmentary. I could not find my words; the emotions were in my throat and I was almost out of breath. I asked her to stop. She repeated that she knew her child. All the while the little girl was crying and taking steps backwards, as if trying to avoid any attack from her mother, and pleading with her to stop. The woman turned and walked away, the little girl following - by her own accord or dragged along by her mother, I do not remember or did not see... who knows.

I was so disturbed by the situation that I stayed in the window for a few seconds, wrestling with my helplessness. O, how words and strength vanished while that beautiful child was looking at me in the hope of being able to end her suffering. I saw them as they reappeared on the street, the woman maintaining her raised tone while talking to the child. **I cried one more time "Woman!" in a naive hope that she will stop and listen - listen to the hurt and scared child in front of her. That she would see the damage she was inflicting on her own daughter. But they disappeared.**

I came back from the window. My heart was beating at a very high rate and my body was trembling...

And then as I made some more steps in the flat, it seemed that I heard again the raised female voice and the crying child. Quickly, I ran to another room and opened the window. I heard it as if it was happening in front of me but saw nothing. A tall pine tree just in front of the window was completely obscuring my view. It was a dental clinic from where the sounds came. It was a terrible state. Unbearable helplessness and sheer pain. Hearing the cry and not seeing where it comes from.

The child was crying and imploring her mother to stop. In my desperation I let out a last cry: "Woman!" And in a few seconds their voices vanished, while I was heavily fighting whether I should quickly put on my shoes and run down into the street. I missed the moment. The woman and her child disappeared from the reach of my ears.... Cars were coming down the street and I felt it weird that they did not notice the situation. Where had the woman with the child gone?

I hate the pine tree that blocked my view. I hate my lack of action. And I regret that I did not do all I could for that child. And for that mother. I should have run to embrace them... Because I am a mother too.

To conclude: *What does it mean to walk with a survivor?*

It is a lifelong determination to learn how to show love that supports their healing, acknowledging the fact that there will be times when we will fail. We need to recognise our limits, but more than that, we need to trust that we are not fighting this battle alone.

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Jeremiah 32:27

Only by walking with God can we truly walk with a survivor.