

## FAMILY VIOLENCE

### *James Winderlich*

Relationships, any sort of relationships, can be amazing. It seems that as human beings we were made for each other. It's a very unique person who can survive and even thrive while living in isolation from other human contact. I just think of the way that a grandparent's eyes light up when a grandchild enters the room – and often vice versa. That shared presence enriches and emotionally nourishes everyone. Even those of us who watch from the side.

It was God, after all, who remarked in one of the Bible's creation stories: 'It is not good that the man should be alone.' In response to that we might say, 'It is rarely good for anyone to be alone.'

While it may not always be the case, sometimes relationships can reach deep levels of intimacy. This profound connection can be difficult to explain. Endless poems, songs, books and movies have tried. In the Bible it is described as two people becoming one flesh. People might assume that this only describes the physical intimacy that is shared between two people, but it's much more than that. It is about wholeness. It's about one whole person fully giving them self to another whole person for the two of them to become something wholly new. This describes a complete handing over of themselves by both people.

These relationships can be a mystery. Logically we might assume that when we give something of ourselves away that we lose out. Or, when we give of ourselves we should receive something equivalent in return. But that's not the case with healthy, selfless, intimate relationships as God sees them. The mystery of such relationships is that they are neither a transaction nor a resource management issue. Jesus' follower, the Apostle Paul, picked up on this when he compared Jesus Christ's relationship with those who follow him in faith, and our intimate relationships with each other. He wrote: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Despite increasing public awareness and strong community concern some people: children, women and men, continue to suffer great danger and harm in the very relationships where they should be safest. Their horrifying experiences are called Domestic and Family Violence.

Violent acts and settings reflect nothing of God's desire for people and the relationships they share. Violence destroys intimacy and community. As it attacks another, violence also becomes an attack upon one's self. We become lost in it. Violence only ever isolates and so love struggles for life.

This is particularly true for intimate and family relationships. It was God, after all, who declared about the first human: 'It is not good for the man to be alone,' and then said, 'I will make a helper suitable for him.' Far from placing that first human in a superior position, as the centre of God's loving gift, that first human recognised that the gift of a partner brought

an abandonment of self and an entry into life-long, loving and sacrificial community. That first human sang: 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.'

Not all relationships are healthy or safe for those people who share them. This is particularly true for some intimate relationships. While using the language of intimate, sacrificial love some relationships can actually be grounded in destructive fear. This often begins with one person's fears. This fear can cause dangerous and painful isolation, and violent and destructive behaviour toward an intimate and trusting partner or family member.

The terms Domestic and Family Violence describe patterns of abusive behaviour in an intimate relationship or family relationship where one person assumes a position of power over another and causes fear and harm. Most often this is recognized as physical violence, but it is not limited to that. It can also include verbal, financial, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual and socially isolating abuse.

Domestic and family violence is a real, lived human experience. In Australian communities at least one in four women have experienced sexual and physical violence by an intimate partner, while it is conservatively estimated that one in 19 men have experienced similar abuse. This does not take into account the countless numbers of children who experience direct abuse from at least one parent, or who have helplessly witnessed the violence carried out by one parent upon another.

Domestic and family violence is widespread. It is not limited to one particular cultural or socio-economic group within Australian society. The act and experience of Domestic and Family Violence cuts across all human categories. Because it is so widespread, domestic and family violence impacts all of us.

Much is being done to help and support people who experience violent acts in their intimate and family relationships. Helpful conversations around people's very real experiences of violence, perpetrated by their intimate partners and family members, have become more prominent in recent years. This is thanks to the ground breaking bravery of people such as Rosie Batty and former army Chief David Morrison, as well as the hundreds of people and organizations who are prepared to speak out and act in their local settings.

Violent beliefs and acts are challenged in Christian tradition and teaching. One of Jesus' followers, named Paul, while describing the nature of wholesome and healthy community used intimate, marriage relationships as one example. He began from the point of view of diversity. Not everyone has to be the same. In marriage, for example, there are husbands and wives. They are two different people who each bring unique gifts to their relationship. Paul's teaching was radical for his time as it challenged the common belief that a wife was her husband's possession. Here, Paul promoted something quite different. Both wife and husband could now freely offer themselves to each other through their loving acts. Human beings could no longer regard themselves as the possessor or as the possession of another.

To help those who might be tempted to think of their relationships as a series of transactions where their own personal interests should always be asserted, Paul says to husbands (those who were culturally empowered):

Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the Church.

To this end Paul suggests that far from accumulating power, those culturally empowered husbands should be prepared to give up their power for the sake of their wives (those who were culturally overpowered and disempowered):

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her. Violent beliefs and acts have no place in intimate and family relationships, most particularly within the context of Christian faith and tradition. Violence isolates, it destroys intimacy and community as it hushes the first human's song of love: this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.

So violence has no place in God's desire for all human relationships. This is particularly the case with intimate and family relationships. In violent relationships, where one person's self-belief is inflated and another person's self-belief is shattered, and where power is used to harm instead of bless, God weeps. God makes us for healthy and whole community with each other. This is experienced and received through a culture of mutual giving. Not a culture of possessing, demanding or demeaning. It's a culture in which we all can thrive.

*If you are experiencing sexual assault or domestic and family violence, or you are supporting someone who is, in Australia help is available to you on 1800 RESPECT, that's 1800 737 732. Alternately you can go to [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au) If you cannot access this support, you may wish to speak with your local health care professional, doctor or someone whom you can hold in deep and reliable trust concerning your experiences.*

*If your actions cause fear and harm to your intimate partner and family members help is also available for you. You can call Lifeline on 13 11 14. In some cases, you may also wish to contact Men's Line Australia on 1300 78 99 78. Or speak with your local health care professional, doctor or someone whom you can hold in deep and reliable trust concerning your actions and your desire to change, so that instead of fear there can be genuine trust and respect.*

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