

Speaking Out on Domestic Violence

Anne Castleton

I WAS A TRUE INNOCENT when I was married for time and all eternity in 1975. One month later, pregnant and exhausted, I spent the evening enduring my Eagle Scout, returned-missionary, medical-student husband bouncing up and down on our bed, reading to me from his ob/gyn textbook. He was making sure that if I wouldn't have sex with him, at least I wouldn't be sleeping. This began my twelve-year experience in an abusive marital relationship.

Abuse has been defined in a multitude of ways (Gelles and Straus 1988). For the purposes of this essay, I will define abuse as inflicting harm—verbal, physical, or psychological—on another person. Behavior in many marriages falls under the umbrella of this broad definition of abuse, at least at times. When the harm becomes ongoing and/or cyclical, and the offending partner refuses to acknowledge it and change, an abusive relationship exists. I am excluding sexual abuse from this definition; although serious and common, the dynamics and treatment of sexual abuse are more complex.

The term domestic violence, however, refers to the use of physical power, either as threat or actual force, to ensure compliance. Abusive relationships may or may not involve physical force. If psychological and verbal abuse control the victim, the abuser may never need to resort to physical violence. But scholars have yet to see a physically violent relationship that doesn't also involve psychological abuse (Horton 1989).

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Spouse and child abuse have only been recognized as social problems within the last thirty years (Pagelow 1984). Women and children had to be recognized as something other than men's property before the concept of abuse could surface. Until late into the nineteenth century, men were the legal and physical owners of their families. The term "rule of thumb" came from English common law and meant that a man could not beat his human "property" with a rod thicker than the width of his thumb. As society has moved toward valuing the rights of all humans, the already existing realities of marital rape, incest, and child and spouse abuse have become "seeable."

Patriarchal ideology supports the legal precedent for ignoring family abuses, a precedent that stems from the medieval doctrine of *coverture* articulated in English common law by the respected legal scholar Sir William Blackstone. Wives were "under the cover" of their husbands (Micklow 1988; Pagelow 1984; Weitzman 1981). Upon marriage, a husband and wife merged into one legal identity—the husband. As recently as 1966, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the implications of *coverture*, which decreed that since the "very being" (Blackstone's term) of the woman is suspended during marriage, a wife has no right to sell, sue, or contract without her husband's approval. Taking legal action against a spouse was tantamount to suing yourself in the law's eyes.

The consequences of this tradition to women and children still appear in such diverse arenas as credit ratings and applications, expectations for women's surname changes upon marriage, political rhetoric about family privacy that often protects the supremacy of the patriarch while leaving vulnerable the wives and children, and the assumption that what is in the best interest of one member of the family (the father) is in the best interest of all.

Feminists brought the problem of battered women to public visibility, identifying major inequities in the distribution of physical, economic, psychological, and socio-cultural power within relationships (Martin 1976; Dobash and Dobash 1979). Feminists also helped protect and rehabilitate abuse victims by establishing shelters and by working to educate legal and public officials, change laws, and generate funding.

However, none of these measures has been particularly effective in preventing abuse. This is partly because abuse is a relational situation, occurring when two people interact. As yet there is no adequate way of dealing with the issues of individual accountability within a relationship. There can be no abuser without an abused. The interactional pattern in the relationship creates and maintains the abuse cycle. As long as victims stay in an abusive relationship, they are part of the

cycle, saying by their very presence, "It must be okay for you to treat me like this. I'm still here for more." I would argue that both partners have a degree of culpability. However, one of the unfortunate aspects of this type of relationship is that the woman, who is most often the abused, often assumes an inordinate amount of responsibility for the man's behavior and for the relationship.

It is easy to stereotype men as abusers and women as the abused because that is by far the most common pattern. Clearly, the situation can be reversed. In addition, men and women in intimate relations are often mutually violent (Gelles and Straus 1988). However, for the purposes of this essay, I am discussing abusers who are men and victims who are women. I resort to this classic stereotype for several reasons. First, it reflects my experience. In addition, women are more likely to be harmed and tend to take men's violence more seriously than the reverse. After all, men are, on the average, fifty pounds heavier than their partners. The difference in physical size, strength, and expertise at fighting and weapon use means that, by some estimates, 90 percent of incidents involving police or hospitalization involve serious physical harm to the woman (Dobash and Dobash 1979).

Those who operate battered women's shelters know that women often return to their abusive partners. Many factors explain this recidivism. Though battered women don't exhibit particular personality traits that make them more likely to be abused (Rosenbaum and O'Leary 1981), within the relationship, they often develop patterns of psychological dependence. Over time, an abusive relationship wears down their fragile self-esteem, leaving them unable to believe they can survive without the abuser. In reality, it is usually the abuser who cannot survive without the abused.

In addition, many battered wives, if they left, would face the economic realities of single parenthood, eking out a living often with minimal skills in a marketplace that discriminates doubly against workers that are female and/or part-time (Hewlett 1986).

Richard Gelles and Murray A. Straus, in two national random samples, ascertained that one out of four marriage partners can expect to be involved in marital violence at some time during marriage. One in twenty-two, or 3.8 percent, of wives are the victims of violence likely to produce injury *each* year. Six of every one thousand wives are severely beaten by their husbands each year. However, between 1975 and 1985, overall marital violence (throwing something, slapping, hitting, kicking, using a weapon) decreased among married couples (Gelles and Straus 1988).

Scholars argue that domestic violence is more prevalent in relationships and cultures with the greatest inequalities, with strong patri-

archal ideology, and with rigid sex roles (Finkelhor et al. 1983). These factors and those that follow indicate that domestic violence is likely to be as high within the Mormon culture, if not higher, than in U.S. society in general. Further, unique conditions in Mormon society can lead to disastrous consequences for women who are victims of domestic violence. Utah census data from 1980 indicates that Utah women (about 75 percent of whom are Mormon) marry younger than those in almost any other state. Their youth indicates fewer skills and less education. Utah women are also likely to have, on the average, one more child than women elsewhere (Castleton and Goldscheider 1989). The responsibility for more children, coupled with fewer skills and less education, significantly limits these women's career options. In addition, Latter-day Saint women, taught from an early age the sanctity and eternal nature of marriage, may try to stay in marriages no matter how difficult the emotional and social constraints.

Underlying marital struggles over trivial issues (have you ever tried to explain a fight that started over the TV remote control or the toothpaste?) is a more important contest over who gets to define the meaning of behaviors and who controls the relationship. Definition and control shape the social reality we live in and provide the rules underlying the constraints and freedoms of social life.

I believe that the *recipient* of any behavior gets to define what that behavior means and is. If you feel I'm being abusive to you, *you* get to decide that. I teach this idea to my children. My son is physically stronger than my daughters; in their ordinary scuffles, they complain that he is hurting them. He says he doesn't hurt them. I say *they* get to decide what hurts. We shape our family rules according to this principle.

In my relationship with my husband, I consistently voiced my concerns over what I considered to be a troubled and unhappy marriage, while my husband consistently voiced his belief that we were happily married. As time passed, I became more and more aware of an ongoing power struggle over who got to define "normal" behavior and thus the relationship. About two weeks before I made the final decision to separate, he wrote me a poem for Mother's Day, celebrating our good match and happy marriage.

The preceding information provides some background for understanding the partial marital history that follows. Before I present that history, however, I must offer three caveats: (1) this story is necessarily one-sided, picturing an abusive relationship, and not a complete history of a twelve-year marriage; (2) what I have written here represents the sense I have made of my experiences all retrospectively (which is the only way we do make sense of things); and (3) my experience was trivial compared to what many women have been through. I will

describe how I experienced this abusive relationship, why I stayed in the marriage, how I got out, and what happened afterwards.

When my husband first bounced on the bed and when, one month married, he tossed a glass of water at me in a restaurant, I could not categorize these experiences that were so foreign to me. I knew my siblings hadn't treated each other or me like that, and I wondered if this was how marriage was supposed to be. Maybe, I thought, this was what people meant about the first year being a difficult adjustment. Many such incidents happened during the marriage. Though the experiences rarely involved physical harm to me, they always involved intimidation.

One major incident of violence, after six years of marriage, showed me how unprotected I was and led me eventually to question the "rightness" of patriarchy in all its religious, legal, economic, and social manifestations. This particular incident happened after my husband had worked all night (by his own choice) and was due home to care for our three little ones while I taught piano students. He forgot to come home, a common passive-aggressive pattern of his. That day, he forgot repeatedly, even when I called him. I taught my students and cared for the children, but I resented being forced to be unprofessional. I was also in the first sick stages of pregnancy. When my husband finally came home, I nagged him about his delinquency. He responded by dragging me into the bedroom, where he physically beat me up, banging my head and upper body against the bed, bashing and bruising me, and terrifying the children. I remember visualizing where the car keys and Visa card were, making a dash for them, and escaping. I left the children because I sensed he wouldn't hurt them and I knew I couldn't escape with them.

I drove to the county sheriff's office; they took one look at me, said, "You've been assaulted," and sent me into a room to wait by myself. I spent what seemed like a long time in there, sobbing, before a man came in and explained to me my options. I wanted to avoid humiliating my husband in front of his peers but wanted him to be warned. They explained that there was nothing they could do because they hadn't caught my husband in the act.

After a couple of hours of serious thought, I realized that my home was with my kids and husband and not with my parents, where I had intended to flee. I called my husband, who was contrite, and returned home. I insisted that we get counseling. We did, and our counselor, without ever probing for a history of similar patterns and with the certainty often characteristic of his profession, assured me that the violence would never be repeated. This was what I wanted to hear. Though

our stake and ward leaders knew about the incident (because my husband had told them), no one ever broached the subject with me. At the time, no one—including me—suspected what profound spiritual and intellectual implications this one incident would have for me.

The abuse I endured considerably altered my self-concept. One evening, at a monthly “Stitch ‘n Bitch” get-together with friends, this became clear. In a discussion of self-esteem, my friends all noted that marriage had improved their self-image. I realized then that during my youth, I had been an admired and loved person among family and friends. With marriage, however, my self-esteem had dropped.

I experienced this drop partly because my husband tried to redefine my personality. He told me often that I was a complainer, which eventually became true. Though I had always thought of myself as being happy and cheerful, I wasn’t in that relationship. So I began thinking of myself as an unhappy person, a chronic complainer. I redefined myself instead of attending to the relationship.

I remember thinking I might be crazy. Everyone else seemed satisfied in their marriages, and it seemed that I should be too. After all, my husband was on his way to a successful career. Maybe I was exaggerating; perhaps my expectations for marriage were too high. I also felt that I might be partially responsible for the problems; it was my responsibility to stay in there and fix the relationship. (Western culture implies that women are responsible for relationships; abusers invariably imply that if their partners weren’t so delinquent, they wouldn’t have to be so mean.)

In addition, our family was beautiful. People treated us as if we were the ideal: my husband was a doctor, I was energetic and slim, the children were talented and beautiful. This was all a heavy burden for me. I felt I shouldn’t disappoint our extended families or the Church by admitting we weren’t such a happy family after all. I always felt I was lying when I mailed out the Christmas photographs.

I developed skills common to women in abusive situations. I learned to be watchful, searching for the warning signs of his sudden outbursts. Once, in family therapy, I mentioned that my husband gave us little warning before an outburst. Our five-year-old daughter, when asked by the therapist, said, “Oh, he warns us. He goes like this.” She took a big, quick breath and exhaled immediately. It was very clear that the children, too, had learned to recognize the signs of an impending blowup. We had thirty seconds from the breath to the blowup.

I came to feel that my extended family and the Church cared more about the stability of my marriage than about me. My family loved and supported me, but I got the clear message that divorce was not

appropriate; it was a negative, unspeakable possibility. My mother's rule was not to make any important decisions within a year of having a baby—that in itself kept me married for eight years! Even when my family learned about the incident of violence, they did not immediately consider it a good enough reason for a separation. Getting out of the marriage was a very radical idea. However, once I decided to divorce, my family was extremely supportive.

My husband's parents suggested at various times that it was possible to keep me from getting a divorce, that I was a quitter, and more. They ignored the violence. When they finally had to face it, they maintained, as did my husband, that it wasn't qualitatively different from verbal abuse. When I finally recognized how hard my husband and his parents were willing to work at denying that any problems existed, I understood that the problem preceded our relationship; and I gave up hope of saving the marriage.

I now realize that others supported the marriage partly because I spoke very euphemistically about what was going on. I didn't realize I was doing this. I think I was still protecting my reputation and my dream of a happy family. I was embarrassed to say how things really were and did not fully trust my perceptions.

The situation was so murky that I could neither see it clearly nor report it clearly to my friends. I'd ask, "Is it always like this when your husband works all the time?" or "Is it always like this when you're having babies, or when you're poor?" without really specifying what I meant by "this." I didn't know whether what was happening was a normal "this too shall pass" unhappy stage or a bad marriage. I felt powerless and vulnerable. My husband, who, I finally realized, didn't have my interests at heart, had everything to do with the outcome of my life. In many ways, I am certain he too experienced similar feelings of powerlessness.

I have since discovered that I stayed as long as I did for all the classic reasons. First, I didn't trust my own judgment. I tried to compare my marriage with other marriages to figure out whether I could justify a divorce. Second, I stayed because I was taught to believe that divorce would ruin my children's lives. Third, I had economic fears. I had visions of teaching kindergarten for the rest of my life (which is a whole lot better than many women's job alternatives), and I didn't relish the prospect. I was afraid I could not fill the emotional and economic needs of all those babies. Finally, I believed in eternal marriage and eternal families. I wanted my marriage to be like those I had heard about in Laurel class, even though I rarely saw real-life examples. I kept thinking that maybe I *could* fix it. The hardest thing I did was give up that happy, intact-family dream.

It didn't help that I had not been taught to recognize abuse. Nobody at church teaches about domestic violence or tells us how to recognize it, what to do about it, and when to quit a relationship. Instead they talk about eternity. I didn't see myself as a quitter. I was embarrassed at the potential stigma of divorce and was relieved to have an "acceptable" excuse (like violence). Just being miserable for twelve years is not seen as reason enough to divorce.

Graduate school and feminism were the strongest influences helping me leave my marriage. I had first dreamed about attending graduate school during my third pregnancy. The reality I found when I awoke from those dreams made graduate school seem like an impossible fantasy. But by the time my fourth child was a year old, my husband was teaching at an Ivy League university; I sensed that attending that quality of graduate school, however demanding, would be my ticket to the future. I immediately enrolled as a faculty spouse (entrance requirements weren't as rigorous) in a course that introduced me to feminism and ultimately gave me the courage to change my life.

I was more candid with my graduate school friends than with my church friends because they had less invested in the outcome of my decision. In return, they were frank with me. "That's sick," they would say when I told them something that had happened. "That's really sick. I can't believe you tolerate that." They gave me another view of reality, and I vacillated back and forth between the two views, trying to figure out what was right. Gradually, the view of school friends began to hold some weight with me because it offered hope.

Feminism helped me put my unique, personal story into a global context, which I found very useful. I realized that what was happening to me was not half as bad as what was happening to many other women. When I went to court to get a restraining order and saw the other women there, I began to realize how lucky I was. I saw that the oppression of women fills a political and economic function. Our societal values (first articulated and accepted during the Victorian era only one hundred years ago) about women's unique role as mothers and the sanctity of the home—"a man's castle"—keeps women doing unpaid and socially unvalued work, which in turn keeps them economically dependent on men. The cycle continues as we raise our children to think this pattern of family life is not only natural, but the ideal!

I saw that the notion of family privacy perpetuates the possibility of family abuse. Keeping abuse unspeakable is in the best interest of preserving the worst forms of patriarchy. I also realized how our culture perpetuated family violence by not training public safety officials in its prevention, deterrence, and diagnosis; by not reward-

ing good domestic-violence police work; by lenient, if any, punishments; and most of all, by not “seeing” it, except in the most obvious cases.

In this culture, it was too easy for my husband to rationalize his behavior. In fact, though he has also been violent with other adults, to my knowledge, he has never had to publically account for his behavior. I was frightened to realize that the person I had counted on to protect and guide me could, as easily as not, kill me.

As I became more informed, I began to see that I had other alternatives. Without consciously understanding why, I prepared myself economically and personally to live without a partner. I began to see that I could improve my life myself, without waiting for the approval or help of the Church or my family (though our society ensures that it won't be easy).

I read what literature I could find on divorce and children and learned that divorce isn't necessarily bad for children. Stress and tension are bad for children (and everyone else). I realized, and by the end my children articulated this, that the stress of knowing their mother and father might start an intense argument at any minute was worse for children than divorce. Having a mother who was always emotionally empty would, over time, be worse than financial stress. I realized that the Church's support for my marriage was more ideological than material; in the end, I wouldn't get any sympathy, help, or money from the Church to stay in my marriage. I would simply feel the pressure to do so.

The most important reason I ended my marriage was the most personal. By staying, I was colluding in the slow starvation of my soul. Deep down, I knew myself to be generous, optimistic, and trusting. I also knew I was becoming caustic and cynical. To allow my spirit to be twisted was a sin. I needed to get out before I lost the capacity to thrive.

I moved my children to Utah from the East so that I could begin a Ph.D. program at the University of Utah. I negotiated a trial separation. That arrangement was fortuitous; I had the option of staying in the relationship in case I began to feel that I had been imagining everything or if single parenting and the Ph.D. program were too overwhelming. I remember walking across campus that first fall, admiring the flower beds and thinking, “How did I get so lucky? I'm free, I have my children, and I get to learn things.” Life had never seemed so rich.

I reentered counseling; finally out of that intense situation, my vision cleared. I saw the incidents of intimidation and abuse as a pattern, rather than as individual episodes. I saw that we had battled all

along over defining the relationship and over control—who got to control me. The separation brought on a delayed reaction (this is common). I began to notice men who were physically large and strong. I would grab my keys (in case I had to defend myself) and make sure I wasn't near any dark or private corners. The fear I had suppressed for so long surfaced when I became safe—safe enough to feel afraid. People used to tell me I was fearless; now I'm not.

Some parts of my new life are a struggle. The economic pressures I feared are a constant worry. I will never feel safe being economically dependent on a man. The stigma of divorce is less than it used to be, but in a world where women rarely make enough to live comfortably on their own, single mothers are often seen as predators. And we still blame victims. I realize this when people ask me questions aimed, however subtly, at how I caused the violence.

The good news is that I began to recover and return to my premarriage “norm” almost immediately. Just before the divorce was final, my family gathered at a lively party for my brother's wedding. One of my brothers commented that he'd forgotten what it was like to see me smile. Because of the investment Mormon families have in marriages and intact families and because a person's decline is often quite gradual, families often don't notice when a member changes significantly.

After a time, I moved from Utah and returned to the ward I had left. Ward members continue to comment—though they seem puzzled as to how this could be—on my improved parenting skills and my overall aura of contentment and self-assurance. If I could change one thing about those dark confusing days, I would wish for one person to look me straight in the eye and say, “Your happiness matters, Anne—in this life!”

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