



# Remember the children

by Rosemary L. Bray

*When we look at the issue of domestic violence, our attention is drawn mainly to the direct victim—the wife. Rosemary Bray points out that we forget one very important actor in the equation, the children. How does one compute for the total effect of enraged, ranting fathers and petrified mothers as the children grow up? And decades after, when the children enter into intimate relationships, bringing along their baggage of fears, the anger, the despair?*



I hated my father soon as I understood what he was doing to my mother. I hated the way he kept our family suspended in a state of terror. I hated the way he always kicked on the door to announce his arrival, sending us kids scurrying to an unobtrusive corner. I hated to suppress my exuberance about life, an exuberance that comes natural to most children, for fear that it would draw Daddy's attention—and thus his wrath—to me. Most of all, I hated the way he hurt my mother, the way she became so quiet, nearly docile, whenever she was around him. I hated her hopeless efforts not to provoke him, as though there were some rational explanation that made Mama the reason Daddy threw plates of food all over the kitchen, ripped phones out of the walls, pulled out big handfuls of her hair.

As I grew older, I understood more about his own miserable childhood, his passive father, his embittered and unaffectionate mother. My paternal grandmother was apparently a kind of woman who would wait until her children were in school, then sell their beloved bicycles out from under them. Once long ago, I listened to my father's brother talk, with a curious nostalgia, about getting beaten by his mother with belts made of harness leather. It was the kind of discipline my father knew best, the kind he enforced with us, using his own buckled belt, whipping if from the loops on his pants and doubling it in two. One night when my husband and I were dressing to go out, he removed his belt from a pair of pants in that same way, and was startled to see me jump away from him as if I were on fire—the force of a grim habit.

My mother's life seemed circumscribed by a single narrow goal—not wanting to “get your father started.” His fierce jealousy and possessiveness made all her friendships clandestine, her activities suspect. Even outings to the store were measured to coincide with the uncertain period between Daddy's departure and his return. To arrive home after he did could mean nothing. Or it could mean hours of screaming, curs-

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ing, fighting that moved from room to room, with Daddy punching and kicking, Mama deflecting blows with her arms and legs, and the four of us kids in varying stages of anger and tears. There was never any blood; even now, I can think of reasons to be grateful. He never broke any bones. He never beat her senseless; he never killed her. That was what I feared more than anything—that he would live up to his constant, rageful promises and kill her.

When we think about the toll domestic violence takes, we first think—and rightly so—about the women who are the targets of this violence. It is absurd that the most dangerous place for a woman in the United States is the very place where she should feel safest. But too often, we forget about the witnesses to domestic

terror, the children who grow up in violent homes. We understand that it's not good for them to see such a twisted version of male-female relationships. What we don't talk about is the profound effect a violent home has on the children who must live in it, people even more powerless to escape than their mothers.

I can promise you that the effect is real and lasting on the Simpson children, and on millions of other children. I can promise you that such children know the sound of every blow, the vibration of every wall as their mothers' bodies hit, the pitch of every voice raised in anger. I promise you that at least once, and probably more than once, those children lie crying in their beds, praying (if they have words for prayers), begging God or someone to make Mama and Daddy stop fighting, to make Daddy stop hitting, to make Mama stop crying. And if the beatings go on long enough, and no one helps and nothing changes, I promise you that they begin to make promises to themselves: I will never let anyone hit me, ever; I will never have children, so they will not have to live like this; when I have children, they will never hear this.

I know these worlds because some of them are my own childish promises, made in the frightening dark, listening to my father raging against my mother three decades ago. Though many of us forgive, do not delude yourselves: we never forget. What we remember colors much of our intimate lives forever—whether we manage to love a man or trust him, much less marry him;



## Violence Against Women

whether we learn to have an honest argument without fear; whether we risk the vulnerability of parenthood; whether we can teach our children what we wish our parents had known about love.

The man I married had to share my struggle to see him as a separate person, a man who was not my father.

For years, Bob had to wade hip-deep in my own terror of the person he might be, reminding me in his steady, ultimately exasperated voice, over and over: I am not your father. I am nothing

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like your father. After all this time, what kind of man do you think I am? It took years for me to answer the question accurately, to see him clearly, to separate him from what my father had taught me about men.

I couldn't get a grip on all this until my son was born, until I came to know him—as well as you know a person who can't yet talk and who depends on you for everything. I had to meet Allen, see him and his father together, see him open his eyes and his infant heart to the world. That was when I realized that the answer to my fears was currently unavailable—that, like all parents, I would have to wait and see.

While I am waiting, however, I realize there is much to do. The feminist sensibility that was always mine has deepened and broadened. I know that feminism must begin at home, so Allen will see all the trials and delights of an egalitarian marriage and have a realistic picture of what such a marriage is like. He will definitely see his mother and his father angry with each other.

He will know that Mama is likely to pound on tables and yell; he will see that Daddy is likely to slam a few doors and raise his voice, too. But he will also see us take a breather and return to one another, ready to try again. He'll come to know that one of us will say something funny and the other will try like hell not to laugh. And he'll come to expect that what Mama and Daddy fight about this week becomes a family joke next week. But he will not see us raise a hand to each other—or to him. I hope.

My husband, whose childhood was the polar opposite of my own, regards spanking as a viable option. "Not 'hitting'—spanking," Bob corrects me when I ask him about hitting Allen. "There's a world of difference, you know." That's the problem—I don't know. I can follow his arguments intellectually—spankings are to be used only as a last resort, a kind of attention-getting strategy that is completely useless once a child is seven or so. But our discussions about how to discipline our growing son are also the last battleground between myself and my demon memories; what I know in my head and



what I know in my gut are two different things. I know Bob would never hurt me or my son. He has any number of ways to deal with the inevitable frustrations of marriage or children or life. But I never want to see in Allen's eyes the fearful look that was so often in mine. I never want him to think that hitting people is a good idea, except in circumstances that require him to protect himself. I want with all my heart to stop this cycle, to let it end with me.

That is another fear that visits itself on the children of domestic violence. We worry about the kind of people we will become. Sooner or later, we wonder whether we will end up like our mothers, become like our fathers. But I worry more about whether I have learned enough to handling my own anger. I wish I could be sure about never hitting Allen; the very idea that I might revisit with my own son that old, dreadful territory is horrifying.

The first time I became truly angry at my baby was one of those classic occasions, the inconsolable crying in the middle of the night. At some point, when I had sung all of the songs I knew and tried everything else I could think of, I could feel the waves of anger toward him washing over me. I understood from all my conversations with new mothers and all the books I'd read that these were normal feelings. But for those of us who grew up with rage, our own rage is terrifying. I had to close the door to his room, go into the living room and sit in the dark, convinced that it was safer to let him cry than to be with him. It was certainly safer for me; the idea that I might hit him or shake him or scare him was too awful to contemplate. To react to Allen that way would have been my father's final victory. And I was not having it.

***What I really want most, however, I can never have. I sit with friends and listen and listen to them talk about their fathers, and would give anything to think of my daddy the way other women do.***

**M**y understanding of my father's pain came with adulthood, with the safety and distance that his death provided, with several years of therapy, with my growth as a woman and as a feminist.

Frankly, it took all those things to come to terms with his violence and with my fears—my fears about men, my fears about the cost of independent womanhood. But understanding Daddy has taken me only so far. It has shown me some of what I need to be watchful about, it has calmed some of my resentment of him. What I really want most, however, I can never have. I sit with friends and listen to them talk about their fathers, and would give anything to think of my daddy the way other women do. I hear stories about the first man in their lives, men who used even the narrowest definition of masculinity to shield their children, not to wound them, and something in me still hungers for that protection.

I used to think it was some regressive part of me that wanted a man to look after me; I questioned my own claims of independence. But I know better now. Looking at the way my son looks at his father, I realize that there is still a girl in me that longs for her daddy. Watching Allen's delight when Bob and I play with him together, I

realize there is the child in me that still wants a happy home, where Mama and Daddy laugh and people are rarely angry.

For every child like Allen who lives surrounded by love, for every woman like me who knows she is safe and happy at home, there are others who are living out my childhood terrors. We can find a stack of numbers that testify to the costs of domestic violence - what we spend on hospitals, courts, police. Yet no one has ever computed the wages of fear and mistrust that are the legacy of violence at home; it's not possible. Domestic violence leaves a wrenching legacy that many of us learn to put behind us if we can. For some, though, it becomes a deadly, soul-crushing inheritance.

Whenever we speak of the lives lost to domestic violence, we can't stop with those who have died.

Some of those who have paid the price of family violence are very much alive, still wounded, still struggling. Someone needs to remember the children, still paying for the sins of their fathers.

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