



Transforming Trauma: The Power of Touch and the Practice of Anointing

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A young woman abruptly quit going to worship. Her life was suddenly in complete disarray and she was utterly overwhelmed. An elderly member of the church noticed her absence. He stopped by her house one afternoon to check on her. She offered him a terse snapshot of the chaos that was her life at that moment. He pushed a bit, encouraging her to come to church, to be surrounded by a community. “You don’t have to bear this alone,” he promised. She responded, “I’m afraid I’ll completely fall apart if I come.” Her friend gently responded, “There is no better place to fall apart.” But falling apart, especially within the public sphere, is often seen as something to be ashamed of, a sign of weakness, a moral failure. And this is perhaps particularly true when the traumas are of a traditionally private nature (such as domestic violence or child abuse) or are stigmatized (such as sexual assault). Even in the midst of such traumas, even in situations where the reality of the trauma is known by others, churches—like the communities of which they are a part—often have a tacit “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy as if by pretending the ugly reality of trauma is not real it will go away.

The practice of anointing—though not a magic eraser by which the marks of violence can be purged—is both a proclamatory act that announces the redemptive and healing work of Jesus and a performative act that not only begins the healing of the individual wounds of the body of the one who suffered violence, but also of the wounds that violence inflicts on the body of Christ.

Interestingly, the traumas most apt to be privatized and stigmatized are those that include violence against the body, as if the vulnerability of the human body—or perhaps the human body itself—is a source of shame. However, the Christian tradition maintains that in creation God declares the body good. In the incarnation, God enters into this good human body and experiences it fully, both its strengths and its vulnerabilities. And, the promise of the resurrection is that human bodies matter. Bruised and broken bodies traumatized by violence matter.

Traumatic personal, bodily violence within our world occurs at alarming rates. According to recent studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 35 percent of American adults are estimated to have been the victims of violent crime of some sort or another.¹ One in five women in the United States has been sexually assaulted, the vast majority of these assaults perpetrated by someone known to, and trusted by, the victim. And one in four women has been physically assaulted by an intimate partner.² Lest we erroneously infer that personal traumatic violence only impacts women, the same report suggests that one in seven men have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner and one in seventy-one men report having been sexually assaulted.³ Additionally, men are statistically much more likely to be victims of nonsexual physical assault by a stranger and of homicide. And, it is estimated that at any given time nearly 20 percent of America's children live in homes in which domestic violence is a real and present danger, while reports of abuse have been filed with protective service agencies for roughly 10 percent of America's children under the age of 18.⁴ Add to this a recognition that such violence is widely presumed by most law enforcement and protective service agencies to be significantly underreported, an untold number of bodies bruised and bloodied by traumatic violence populate our church pews each and every time the body of Christ gathers for worship.

A STORY OF BROKEN BODIES AND SHATTERED SELVES

Though we are not our bodies—that is, we cannot be reduced to our bodies—who we are as individuals depends upon our bodies. And insofar as it is through our bodily senses that we come to know the world and our relationship to the world, damage done to the body cannot be extricated from damage done to the

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Youth Violence Research Bulletin*, February 2002, at https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/yv_2002_2_1/contents.html (accessed January 27, 2014).

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *NISVS: An Overview of 2010 Summary Report Findings*, at <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/index.html> (accessed January 27, 2014).

³Ibid. The vast majority of sexual assaults against men happen in childhood. Childhood physical and sexual abuse is vastly more complex and pernicious than adult trauma. And, though there are implications for addressing victims of child abuse, the focus of this article is on providing an ecclesial response to traumatized adults.

⁴There are numerous organizations committed to fighting child abuse and each provides the same heartbreakingly grim picture of the welfare of a sizeable percentage of America's children. See, for example, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/statistics/can.cfm> or <http://www.childhelp-usa.com/pages/statistics> (accessed January 27, 2014).

self and to the communities that constitute that self. Individual bodies, selves, do not exist in isolation. Psychologists and sociologists have long recognized that individual identity is an ongoing, interactive process dependent upon a complex matrix of relationships.⁵ Who we are, whatever it means to be one's self, is always reflective of the many communities in which an individual participates. There is no "true" self hidden beneath, or obscured by, the layers of relationships that constitute the external self. Rather, human beings not only learn who we are in relationship with others; we become who we are in relationship with others. This happens first, of course, in families. The child discovers her self through her interactions with those who care for her—parents, grandparents, siblings. Gradually, as the child's social world expands, in something like concentric circles, the child's sense of self likewise expands. It is important, however, to recognize that it is not merely that the child's sense of self expands; the child's very self is expanding. And this is as true of adults as it is of children. Who I am can never be isolated from the relationships that constitute my life. Our selves are inextricably dependent upon the many other selves with whom we are in relationship.

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Who we are is intricately embedded in the contingent communities of which we are a part. Alasdair MacIntyre insists that our selves actually predate our own relationships and include the vast network of relationships into which we are born.⁶ In other words, not only is there no self isolated from formative relationships, there is no self isolated from the history and character of the communities into which the self is born and formed. Who I am cannot be disconnected from the family, regional, and national history into which I am born.⁷ Communal and familial ties are akin to the scuba diver's air hose. There is a real sense in which our very selves depend upon them. Without these ties the essence of my being is

⁵See Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), and Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶"For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualistic mode, is to deform my present relationships." Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 205.

⁷Malcolm Gladwell describes a study of the prevalence of feuds through the nineteenth century and of the continued relatively high level of aggression demonstrated by men from the Appalachian regions, which suggests that the roots of the patterns of aggression displayed can be traced, via immigration patterns, to the culture that existed among the Scottish highland herders in which the defense of one's honor—as well as of one's property and possessions—was a cardinal virtue. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2008) 161–176.

thrown into question. And yet one of the most common effects of traumatic violence is the fraying—sometimes even the severing—of just such ties.⁸

Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* poignantly illustrates the contingency of individual and communal identity.⁹ The play, set in an unnamed Latin American country that has just recently (re)established a democratic government after years of oppressive dictatorship, has only three characters. Paulina Salas spent years in a detention center where she was blindfolded and repeatedly tortured and raped by one of the regime's doctors. Gerardo Escobar, Paulina's husband, has just been named as head of the new government's truth commission, which has been ostensibly charged with uncovering the crimes of the previous regime. And Roberto Mirando is a physician who brings Gerardo home late one night after his car has broken down on the isolated highway that leads to Gerardo and Paulina's home. When the men arrive at the house—a house that is secluded, without neighbors, and far from the nearest town—Paulina hears Mirando's voice and immediately identifies him as her torturer. The play revolves around the intense interactions of the three characters through the night during which it becomes clear that Paulina and Gerardo, though living together, are as emotionally isolated from one another as they are physically from the rest of the world. In fact, in the aftermath of her ordeal, Paulina is functionally isolated from everyone she has ever known. Her life in a desolate locale is the perfect metaphor for the person Paulina's torture created. And Paulina's identity, which serves as a metaphor for a nation's identity, is intimately but destructively bound not only to her family and friends, but also to those who are the cause of tremendous pain and suffering. And the trauma experienced by both Paulina (directly) and Gerardo (indirectly through Paulina) isolates them from one another as well as from the larger community. This isolation concretizes suffering's damage, calls into question the very nature of identity, and threatens to destroy all three characters.

Though the church does not play any apparent role in *Death and the Maiden*, the implications for the church are vast. The play beautifully illustrates the paradox that isolation is perhaps an inevitable consequence of trauma and, yet, that isolation is impossible. In her attempt to isolate her self from her trauma—an effort at disembodiment—the entire community is disembodied, divided from its members. There is a ripple effect; the violence that has invaded Paulina's self is a poison that radiates outwards, affecting all with whom she is in relationship.

Part of the trauma of violence is its tendency to isolate bodies—and therefore selves—from one another. Selves are made up by the reciprocity of relationship and by the interweaving of my narrative with the narratives of other selves. When I

⁸This post-trauma isolation is perhaps written about most widely in the aftermath of sexual assault. Though by no means an exhaustive list, the following accounts are quite insightful: Nancy Venable Raine, *After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back* (NY: Three Rivers Press, 1998); Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Jamie Kalven, *Working with Available Light: A Family's World after Violence* (NY: Norton, 1999).

⁹Ariel Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden* (NY: Penguin Books, 1992).

suffer the trauma of violence my self is irrevocably changed, making continuity of relationship difficult. Personal trauma interrupts relationships. One is no longer who they had been, which means relationships seemingly unrelated to the trauma itself can never again be the same—they have been ruptured. I can no longer be for you who I was before, because that me is no more. As Nancy Raine says in the aftermath of a brutal sexual assault, “My history had been ruptured—the woman who had not been raped could never return.”¹⁰

In 1 Cor 12, St. Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ. And though there is little consensus among biblical scholars as to the precise nature of the church as a body, it seems to me that the claim that the church is the body of Christ is an ontological claim that makes sense of the experiential realities of the suffering of trauma.¹¹ When one member of the body suffers, all suffer precisely because we are members of one another, knit together—not merely metaphorically, but ontologically—in and through our baptism in Christ Jesus. Thus there is no way to separate the body of Christ from the suffering of any of its members.

And yet the suffering of trauma is acutely personal and cannot really be shared. I can never fully enter into another’s suffering in order to make it my own. I am always removed from the suffering of another by the very boundaries of our bodies. Thus our bodies are not merely the vehicles through which we experience suffering; our bodies are also the source of our isolation. That this is so is *not* a gnostic claim that the body is inherently evil. The body is *not* the problem; violence is the problem. The body is, however, the vulnerable vehicle through which violence is experienced.

RECLAIMING THE BODY

The promise of the resurrection, however, is that not only do broken and bruised bodies matter, broken and bruised bodies are being made new. And though there is no way to recover the old self, the self as it was before trauma, the promise of the gospel is that the traumatized self—body and soul—can be, and is being, redeemed. And, because the self of the person traumatized by violence is not an isolated self, but a person in community, the redemption of the individual body cannot be isolated from the communal body—a communal body that already participates in Christ’s resurrection. God has graciously gifted the church with all that

¹⁰Raine, *After Silence*, 80.

¹¹Broadly speaking there are three major schools of thought in interpreting Paul’s language of “body of Christ” for the church. One sees Paul’s language as primarily, if not exclusively, a rhetorical device designed to transmit a particular social and political program. This can be found in Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995) and Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). A second sees the church as a real but mystical rather than physical body and is best evidenced in Albert Schweitzer and W. Montgomery in *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1931). The third, and perhaps least influential, approach understands Paul to be speaking of the church as the body of Christ in a literal, ontic sense and is most clearly articulated in Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

it needs to respond well to the needs of those in our midst who have been—and continue to be—traumatized by violence. Worship, prayer, Eucharist, fellowship, Bible study, all have important and healing roles to play in the life of all of God's people. But in the aftermath of physical violence there is one practice in particular—one that is often overlooked—that promises to reclaim violated bodies: anointing.

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In a purely physical sense, that the place of suffering must also be the place of healing seems self-evident. If I have a broken arm, it is my arm that needs medical attention. If a wound on my leg is infected and festering, it is that wound that a doctor tends. But, of course, the wounds of violence are often much more insidious than the physical scars that may be left behind. And yet, insofar as the body is the locus of the suffering of violence, it can also be the locus of healing, not in merely a metaphorical sense but in a literal, tactile sense, even when the wounds are spiritual rather than physical.

Because touch is the vehicle of violence, touch is often the vehicle through which healing may be experienced. That both violence and healing may involve touch, even personal, intimate touch, is incidental neither to the suffering nor to the healing, as both violence and healing entail a crossing of physical and social boundaries. The difference—and it is a crucial difference—is that violence violates boundaries against the will of the one being touched, whereas healing crosses those same boundaries with the consent of, perhaps at the request of, and always for the good of, one whose bodily boundaries have been violated.

That the place of violation may also be the place of healing is beautifully illustrated in the story of Maggy Barenkitse. Maggy, a Tutsi born in Burundi who adopted seven children (four Hutus and three Tutsis), was working in the bishop's house in the village of Ruyigi in 1994 when a group of armed Tutsis entered the bishop's residence, stripped Maggy, and tied her to a chair. From this chair Maggy witnessed the slaughter of seventy-two villagers, many of them her own family and friends. After the massacre, Maggy found and saved twenty-five Hutu children in addition to her own seven children. Determined not to allow the events of that October morning to harden her heart, Maggy built an orphanage aptly named *Maison Shalom*. At the site of the massacre Maggy had a swimming pool installed for the children. The swimming pool, located at the site of profound violence and un-

speakable suffering, is clearly and intentionally a baptismal reminder that offers healing for the bodies and souls of those who gather in its water.¹²

There is a geographical particularity to the placement of the pool in Ruyigi. Maggy's intention was one of embodiment of the gospel. Similarly, anointing is a fundamentally and intentionally embodied act; it is an act performed on a particular body, by particular bodies, within the midst of a particular body, and on behalf of the very particular body of the church. On behalf of Jesus. It is this particularity and intentionality that makes anointing also a fundamentally re-embodiment act. In the act of anointing, the priest reclaims the site of deepest sorrow and of deepest pain and offers a body that has suffered violence a new story, a new identity.

The practice of anointing refuses the isolation of suffering—it is a communal act, an ecclesial act, whether performed within the liturgical space of worship or in the private space of the home. In and through the practice of anointing, the whole body of Christ is with the one who suffers.

A crucial element of the embodiment of anointing is that it is fundamentally an act of touch—touch of a particular suffering body. In the rite of anointing, the particularity of the touch of violence is met with the particularity of the gentle touch of healing.¹³ Bodies that have been touched violently, however, often shrink from touch. This shrinking is both literal, in that the body may pull away, even unconsciously, from the touch of others, and it is metaphorical in that the person, particularly when physical withdrawal is not possible, may withdraw into the body such that the body's ability to sense touch is decreased. Insofar as violent touch, then, has been that which both binds and isolates, it is healing touch that can bind in communion. There are, of course, significant risks inherent in suggesting that touch is the route to re-embodiment and ultimately of healing for folks for whom touch has been traumatic.¹⁴ However, touch changes bodies: "In any experience of

¹²For Maggy's story, see Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 166–192.

¹³I am not suggesting a direct, linear trajectory of healing. The touch of anointing will not, in and of itself, heal the trauma of personal violence. However, I am suggesting that there is a relationship, albeit a circular one, between the two. As a person continues to heal from past traumas, the practice of anointing may be a significant and meaningful way in which the church can participate in the healing of a broken world. However, in the aftermath of violent trauma, touch is sometimes intolerable. In such situations it may be enough to name out loud—privately, in pastoral conversation, not publically before the congregation—what has happened that makes touch threatening. One simple pastoral practice that may help open the door for such conversation is making sure that prayers for those whose lives have been touched by violence are a regular part of the congregation's prayer life.

¹⁴Cristina Traina argues that touch is as necessary to life as food, that there is, in fact, a threshold of touch below which predictable harm, both physiological and psychological, occurs. Importantly, she notes that even children who have been sexually and physically abused, and therefore tend to be more touch-averse than their non-abused peers, "slept more and were more alert, social, and less depressed after a one-month course of fifteen-minute daily massages." Cristina L. H. Traina, "Touch on Trial: Power and the Right to Physical Affection," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25/1 (2005) 14.

interaction with another, the body is physically changed in some way, in its posture, heart rate, skin conductance level, hormonal level, etc. Prolonged, habitual interactions can physically reconfigure the body.”¹⁵ If violent touch changes bodies in harmful ways, the touch of anointing can change bodies in healing and redemptive ways.¹⁶

The practice of anointing refuses the isolation of suffering—it is a communal act, an ecclesial act, whether performed within the liturgical space of worship or in the private space of the home.¹⁷ The priest performing the anointing not only represents, but embodies, the church; in and through the practice of anointing, the whole body of Christ is with the one who suffers. This refusal of isolation is also a drawing into relationship, an enfolding in the arms of Jesus. Insofar as the suffering of violence ruptures trust, the isolation of violence ruptures communion, even when the community remains unaware of the violence. The practice of anointing—though not a magic eraser by which the marks of violence can be purged—is both a proclamatory act that announces the redemptive and healing work of Jesus and a performative act that not only begins the healing of the individual wounds of the body of the one who suffered violence, but also of the wounds that violence inflicts on the body of Christ. ⊕

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¹⁵G. Simon Harak, “Child Abuse and Embodiment from a Thomistic Perspective,” *Modern Theology* 11/3 (1995) 317.

¹⁶All relationships are influenced by dynamics of power that have the potential to be or become exploitative, and ecclesial relationships are not immune to the potential for sin. Despite the inherent vulnerability of the practice of anointing, insofar as violent touch, as a physical act, is the cause of isolation, the greatest possibility of redemption is the redemptive touch of love. However, it is also possible for the rite of anointing to allow for a range of comfort with physical touch such that someone for whom touch is more threatening than healing, prayers of anointing may be offered without touch. Such a rite allows for the body to be positioned within the ecclesial body in ways that can also be healing. Though there is no calculus by which such can be determined, it is conceivable that the rite of anointing may be repeated with a regularity and an intentionality such that, in time, anointing touch can indeed be a physical touch that allows the space of the body to be re-claimed and re-membered into the shalom of Christ.

¹⁷I am *not* suggesting anointing as merely a one-time act, a cure-all for trauma. Rather, I am suggesting that anointing be routinely incorporated into the common life of the church, for the ongoing healing of a broken world.