DISENFRANCHISED EXPERIENCE:
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION'S NULL CURRICULUM ON TRAUMA AND DISABILITY

Lynn Bridgers, Ph.D.
St. Thomas University

While our churches claim to respond to the least among us, the *anawim,* that claim stands in high contrast to the null curriculum religious education offers in response to trauma and disability. True, religious education has celebrated the "return to experience" in its incorporation of praxis-oriented models. But relatively little attention has been paid to the spectrum of experience that is incorporated into such models. On examination, one discovers that underlying informing disciplines acknowledge and reify certain types of experience, leaving other forms of experience disenfranchised. For in the lives of millions, justice is not limited to public or "social justice." By intentionally moving behind the public/private divide, the religious educator has the opportunity to help churches reinforce the basic human dignity of the traumatized and the disabled. The church's response to trauma and disability speak to the core of theodicy and address the meaning of human suffering. Religious education has an opportunity to redefine its own moral credibility through its response to disenfranchised experience.

EXPERIENCE AS VISIBLE & PUBLIC

In the past few decades, religious education has taken its cue from models that focused on the political, the visible and the social in recognizing the role of experience. By that same process, those forms of experience not visible in the social sphere are often not addressed at all and are disenfranchised in the process. Three common disciplinary perspectives in religious education often shape our understanding of experience. Early liberation approaches often incorporated sociological

data and economics, focusing on socio-economic or socio-political experience. Cultural anthropology began with observable cultural experience, and educational responses grounded in that discipline often elevated racial, cultural or ethnic experience. Sociological perspectives, by definition, begin with a focus on the societal and not the individual or personal. When core assumptions from these disciplines are applied universally, experience that is not visible or not valued in the social sphere is often lost in the process.

Approaches Grounded in Early Liberation Theology

As many of us remember, Latin American liberation theology came into being as a response to extreme inequities between the developed and developing world. Responding to the poor, early liberation approaches often relied sociological data and economics and focused on socio-economic or socio-political experience. As José Miguez Bonino wrote in 1976, "the Marxist revolutionary has found himself side by side with a number of active revolutionary Christians and has discovered, in the new movement within the Christian fold, the potential motivating and mobilizing power of the Christian faith for revolutionary change" (1976, 24). When Marxists found themselves side by side with these revolutionary Christians, selected elements of Marxist theory rubbed off. In part, this was through the adoption of what Enrique Dussel terms "Marxist Analytical Tools." He explains, "the fact that Christians were becoming involved in politics in order to fight injustice, together with the social teaching of the church… made adequate analytical categories necessary….What was occurring, if we may so speak, was an epistemological revolution in the world history of Christian theology. For the first time, critical social sciences were being used" (Dussel, 1993, 87).

Dussel refers here specifically to the use of political economics and sociology, but other social science perspectives found their way into theology and religious education at the same time. Writing in the early 1970s Gustavo Gutierrez, in his classic text *A Theology of Liberation,* stated simply,

"The social sciences…are extremely important for theological reflection in Latin America" (1988, 5). Social sciences are appropriately named, as sciences that focus on social dimensions of interaction, be those the economic, the societal, as in sociology, or the cultural dimension, as in anthropology. For our purposes, the emphasis here is on the social orientation of these informing disciplines, whether political economics, political science, sociology, or anthropology. All focus attention on the observable, the public, traditionally male, world of human interaction.

Approaches Grounded in Cultural Anthropology & Phenomenology

Once liberation theologies had broken down barriers to incorporating insights from social sciences, use of other social science perspectives accelerated in both theology and religious education. Perhaps in no case is this more true than with anthropology. Cultural anthropology, which began with observable cultural experience, has informed many of the educational responses that elevated racial, cultural or ethnic experience. Culturally based experience became central, as in James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* or Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought*. Cone cites black culture as one of his six sources of black theology (1990, 27). And Collins, reflecting on the work of Alice Walker, notes how by "placing Black women's experiences and culture at the center of her work, she draws on the alternative Afrocentric feminist worldview extant in Black women's culture" (13). Emphasis in both is clearly on black culture.

Approaches rooted in cultural anthropology also gave greater credence to related phenomenological forms of inquiry. When an individual first thinks of the "phenomenology of religion," he or she is likely to first associate the term with such scholars as Mircea Eliade or Rudolph Otto. Their school developed out of late nineteenth century *Verstehendepsychologie*. It utilizes a classificatory scheme that, as James Edie notes, "has developed a comprehensive (*Verstehende*) hermeneutics of religious symbols, institutions and the like, and has established a more or less

universal sociological and anthropological 'morphology' (Eliade) or 'typology' (Wach) for the interpretation of historical religions" (Edie, 1987, 50). These approaches consistently emphasize the eidetic aspect of phenomenological observation – that which can be observed by the eye. Recently, we have seen a marked tendency to conflate phenomenology with ethnography, both of which have become critical tools in theological reflection and religious education.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz's mujerista theology, for example, springboards methodologically from sociology into ethnomethodology, which offers a theory of everyday life as opposed to the classic sociological study of ideal types. She combines ethnomethodology with ethnographic interviews in recognition of the critical role culture plays in the lives of Hispanic women (Isasi-Díaz, 1993, 62-70). Ethnography and other phenomenological approaches have become common tools in the postmodern religious landscape, applied in a myriad of ways to the documentation of human experience. Grounded in the "thick description" of Clifford Geertz, anthropological perspectives bring with them an unstated legacy of the empirical, of the observable, of the seen and the social (1973, 6-7).

Approaches Based in Sociology

Other approaches to religious education have been grounded in the sociology of religion. From the time of Max Weber (1864-1920) on, sociology has concerned itself with religion and its role in precipitating social action or reaction. Following Weber, Emile Durkheim (1857-1917) focused on religious life from a sociological perspective, delineating between the sacred and the profane. As compared to his contemporary William James (1842-1910), Durkheim examined almost exclusively the communal dimension of religion rather than individual religious experience. In the 1980s Robert Bellah and his associates explored religious life in American in their widely read book, *Habits*

of the Heart. The emphasis again was on social dimensions and movements, right down to the appendix that argues the case for "Social Science as Public Philosophy" (Bellah et al, 297-307).

In Roman Catholic circles, perhaps the best-known sociologist of religion is Father Andrew Greeley, a priest and widely read author of novels as well as academic work. Greeley has sold over 20 million books and serves as a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and the University of Arizona. It's possible, some say, he has never had an unpublished thought. Many Catholic educators also rely on the Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. for sociological data about the Roman Catholic church in the United States. CARA is a national, non-profit, affiliated research center that has conducted social scientific studies about the Catholic Church for over forty years. Regardless the source, sociologically informed approaches to religion and religious education utilize the same research methods as sociologists – statistics and surveys – and tell us something about church in society. But as a discipline concerned with the study of society, the focus remains, on the whole, on communal or public dimensions and not individual experience.

THE LEGACY OF EMPIRICISM

What all of these approaches to religious education – those rooted in liberation theology, cultural anthropology, and the sociology – have in common is the legacy of empiricism, the use of social sciences based on observation as informing disciplines, an empirical legacy that filters through these disciplines. The unintended consequence has been that these approaches reified the objective, the observable, the public and the visible as primary forms of experience. A second unintended consequence was the diminishment of experience that was not social, publicly shared, or visible. Those forms of experience were no longer deemed important, if addressed at all.

This vision of the social or communal as the only area that matters has become widely accepted. Thomas Groome, in his vision of Total Catechesis/Religious Education demonstrates the complete diminishment of the private sphere when he writes:

> emphasizing the *communal*, a private Christian is a contradiction in terms. Christian faith must be lived in and through a community of disciples in the midst of and "for the life of the world" (John 6:51). Since the call of Abraham and Sara, it has been clear in the Jewish-Christian traditions that our relationship with God is through a people of God. In other words, God comes to us and we go to God as a community – together (2003, 9).

Tom Beaudoin, writing on Thomas Groome's theological anthropology, understands the bias against the private or individual that consistently crops up in Groome's writings. Groome's existentialist anthropology, grounded in Heidegger, is a public one. In Groome, Beaudoin tells us:

> this is no absolutely solitary existentialism; our existence as people who *are* and who *know* is neither individual nor private. This can be seen, not only through psychological and sociological models of socialization, but also negatively, in the "excessively individualistic interpretation of the Christian message" that betrays the gospels' models of social-communal solidarity (Groome 1980, 46, 109ff). This existential character of subjectivity and knowledge implies that faith can be viewed as a kind of trusting, even as an "existential developmental reality," by which Groome means that it is lived in the world…. (Beaudoin, 2005,131).

In an earlier work, Groome acknowledged how the work of Paulo Freire was integrated into his own thought. He tells us, "Paulo Freire's pedagogy, with his emphasis on beginning with and ever returning to peoples' own praxis in the world, has been particularly influential" (1998, 430). When one revisits Freire's classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* one finds that his "praxis in the world" is exclusively the world of men in the public sphere, "men's activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world" (1990, 119). Freire's assumptive world, in turn, rests on an anthropological conception of culture. In his own work, as Freire states clearly "one of these basic themes (and one which I consider central and indispensable) is the anthropological concept of culture" (Freire, 117). Again the central role of the observable and the public lie as undercurrents in the development of his thought. But sadly, a pedagogy that reifies agency in the public world is

likely to be of little use to the "private" experience of the traumatized, whose own agency has been overwhelmed, or the personal suffering of the disabled, defined by their lack of agency.

The bias against the private sphere is in part gendered, and feminist theologians were some of the first to systematically critique this public/private divide. Since, more often than not, men's experience traditionally took place in the world, in public, in visible positions, and women's work took place in the home, it was easy to link the denigration of the private sphere to the devaluation of women's work and women's lives. But decades after the Women's Movement, to a great extent, this public/private bias remains intact, and religious education is no exception. Private religious experience is frequently devalued – equated with devotionalism, emotionalism, or madness – and dismissed or rejected in favor of public, social justice oriented approaches or a singular emphasis on communal practice. In part this has been a pendulum swing from the private, pious, devotionalism of the 1950s, where religion played a diminished public role. Does the often-discussed contemporary hunger for spirituality mark the need for that pendulum to return to center? And what happens to experience that cannot be considered either social or just?

TRAUMA & DISABILITY AS DISENFRANCHISED EXPERIENCE

Over a decade ago pastoral theologian Kenneth J. Doka coined the term "disenfranchised grief" to refer to grief that could not be "openly acknowledged, publicly named, or socially supported" (Doka 1995, 272-274, Doka 1989, 3-11). Both traumatic experience and disability present experience that runs counter to the world we want to see, and both forms of experience are often not acknowledged, publicly named or socially supported. Theses are the hallmarks that qualify them as forms of disenfranchised experience.

Trauma as Disenfranchised Experience

Traumatic experience has been defined as "experiences that overwhelm biological and psychological coping mechanisms (1987, van der Kolk, xii). As Judith Lewis Herman tells us, "Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (1992, 32). In a sense, traumatic experience is experience that occurs outside the social compact, experiences that are blocked from collective consciousness by denial and regulated by socially mandated invisibility. Herman identifies what she terms the "dialectic of trauma" (1992, 47). The personal dialectic between re-experiencing traumatic events and going numb, between intrusive and dissociative responses, is replicated in the community or social response to trauma. Communities shift continually between emotionalized acknowledgement of tragedy and denial of trauma in their midst, alternately offering sincere sympathy or blaming the "victim" of such experience.

Interview of survivors brings harsh views of religious communities. Survivors frequently have difficulty remaining in relationship with organized religious communities. One survivor of sexual abuse described her own experience and the inability of the religious community to address or acknowledge the impact of abuse. "Maggie" did not recommend church participation to other survivors of sexual abuse.

> I wouldn't recommend the church route to any other survivors unless they have a strongly developed sense of irony. You can't turn on the television or pick up a newspaper without seeing a reference to abortion and to organized religions role in sustaining the anti-abortion movement. But where do they think all these unwanted pregnancies come from? Never once have I seen clergy or religious educators address rape or sexual abuse. Rape is basically legal in this country, only 7 out of a hundred cases result in conviction. As far as the churches are concerned, you'd think every one of these pregnancies was the Immaculate Conception. It's easier to blame disempowered women, doing the best they can recovering from inequality, rape and abuse, than to demand a change in male behavior that is patently immoral and inherently exploitive. When an altar boy gets raped, it's front-page news.

> When women get raped it's, business as usual. Churches just ignore it, day in, day out, decade after decade ("Maggie," 2005).

I asked "Maggie" to what extent the failure of religious institutions to respond to her experience or support her in her healing had affected her relationship to the church. She replied:

> It's very difficult to participate with any sense of authenticity. It's like, in order to participate in "church," I have to leave one of the most important parts of my own history outside the door. I'm supposed to pretend to be Polly Pure. Then they wonder why I don't find pretending to be a "church lady" truly meaningful, or anything more than an exercise in good behavior. Church activities have no real meaning when the most difficult questions I have for God can't be asked in church. They talk about resurrection, but my own resurrected life has no place in their church. Jesus got it, but they don't. Like I said, you have to have a strong sense of irony to go the church route ("Maggie" 2005).

When churches do respond to trauma, it tends not to be as part of a systematic approach to religious eduction, but to be in response to large, public tragedies. Consider church response to the destruction of the World Trade Towers on September 11th or the recent plight of hurricane survivors in New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The response of churches is often to lead fundraising campaigns, to offer funds to the victims of these public tragedies.

Private traumas, such as abuse, violence, or exploitation, are rarely addressed in church settings or religious education. As a result, many pastors seem uncertain how to respond to traumatic experience when confronted with it, sometimes adopting the same strategy used in responding to larger-scale tragedy. "Sloane," no longer attends any church on any regular basis. Her own religious education failed to address trauma, but far more damaging, from her perspective, was religious education's failure to train pastors to respond to traumatic experience.

> I'm not particularly interested in addressing my own religious education in relation to trauma, as it doesn't exist. However, what has had the greatest impact on my relationship to the church is the response of the priests to whom I have gone at very distinct moments of crisis in my life. Many years apart and in completely different circumstances and states, I found myself with such unbearable experiences and such a definitive need to seek a human bond, that I sought counsel from my parish priest. Each time, I was granted a 45-minute appointment at the end of which I was literally offered money as a solution to my problems.

> Granted, I was barely keeping my head above water financially at both of those moments; however, finances were the least of my worries and the most concrete and solveable of problems at the time. It was insulting, unempowering, and minimizing to be offered cash at those moments. It was as if the church was quite literally saying we have nothing to offer you, not even fellowship, but we can write you a check ("Sloane" 2005).

Sloane suggests something fundamentally wrong in the training of the clergy she encountered, one that deeply undermined her faith in the clergy and the larger Christian community. Her response?

> I never took the money because money was not what I was seeking. I was seeking empathy, a safe place to be heard, and somewhere to go to restore my hope and feel accepted and human. I would have been happier to just sit in silence with another soul. The response of offering money was so ruefully inadequate, that I wonder not about my own religious education, but that of the priests. I have since become rather suspicious of pastoral training programs and wonder if many priests have better property management skills [than pastoral skills] ("Sloane" 2005).

While well intended, simply offering money to survivors was not viewed as an adequate, or "fully Christian" response. Yet it remains perhaps the most consistent response of religious communities to trauma.

Disability as Disenfranchised Experience

Trauma and disability often coincide or overlap. The physically disabled are at much higher risk for sexual abuse, because of their relative disempowerment. Traumatic experience can often result in physical disability from injury, and survivors of trauma are more susceptible to a number of chronic health conditions. Disability, as experience based in the negation of volition, consistently proves problematic for churches in a society that highly values the human will and the ability to overcome obstacles.

Disability is harder to define than trauma, encompassing a wide range of health conditions and potentially resulting from numerous causes, and although more difficult to define, disability does evoke many similar responses. Nancy Eiseland notes, "Although people with disabilities span a broad spectrum of medical conditions with diverse effects on appearance and function, studies

indicate that whatever the setting, whether in education, medicine, rehabilitation, social welfare policy, or society at large, a common set of stigmatizing values and arrangements has historically operated against us" (1994, 24). Over time, the disabled have come to be seen as a minority group. Eiseland concludes, "this recognition has led activists and sociologists to argue that persons with disabilities constitute a minority group, shaped primarily by exclusion" (1994, 24). While the disable are recognized as a minority group, the traumatized remain largely invisible in our society.

Many of the disabled are acutely aware of their sense of exclusion and the problems their physical appearance or limitations present to the rest of the world. Disability theorist Ann Marie Orr explains, "The truth of my vulnerable body continues to be something few people in the able-bodied world will ever accept. I would have to face this truth, and the violence that came with it, alone" (Orr, 2005). Rather than bringing Orr into a greater sense of community, Orr's experience with religious education re-emphasized her deep sense of isolation.

> My experience of formal religious education has been, at best, a mixed blessing. I learned plenty about the experiences of disenfranchised cultures from all over the world. The perspectives of African-Americans, Latin Americans, Africans, native peoples, women of all nationalities and people living alternative gender lifestyles were all, at the very least, mentioned in the curriculum of an institution that prided itself on its liberal, inclusive educational philosophy. However, when I, as a disabled woman, attempted to incorporate my experiences into this supposed bastion of liberal thinking I was politely shunned. My comments and questions, critiques and perspectives were appreciatively tolerated during classroom discussions, but when I attempted to do research in the areas of disability culture, social and economic disenfranchisement of people with disabilities, and most importantly, the spiritual and emotional consequences of this disenfranchisement, I was told that there was no interest in and no need for this kind of exploration. This left me feeling cold and alone. I began to wonder why I had come to graduate school in the first place. Were my experiences really so awful that they could not be mentioned and examined? Fundamentally speaking, did they even exist? (Orr, 2005).

Orr would find little in her formal religious education to counter her sense of negation. Her question, as to whether her experiences were allowed to exist, is well placed.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION'S NULL CURRICULUM
IN RESPONSE TO TRAUMA & DISABILITY

Overall, religious education responds to both trauma and disability with a null curriculum, sending the message that neither are worthy of religious consideration or response. Elliot Eisner, in his influential chapter on "The Three Curricula That All Schools Teach," posits a null curriculum as "what schools do not teach" (1979, 97). He reminds us "the absence of a set of considerations or perspectives or the inability to use certain processes in appraising a context biases the evidence one is able to take into account" (Eisner, 97). In religion education, has the evidence been biased against trauma and disability?

Often the justification for religious education's failure to address trauma or disability comes with the assertion that these experiences lie outside the realm of religious education's responsibility. Many simply defer to the medical model, suggesting those who have experienced trauma or those who live with disability should turn to the medical or mental health professional for all their needs. Arguments supporting this line of thinking often rest on the traditional gendered valuation of public over private, the convenience of relegating response to trauma and disability to the medical model (which enforces invisibility through confidentiality), and the tendency to simply pathologize the traumatized and the disabled through unquestioned application of the medical model.

Valuation of Public Over Private

As noted above, the bias against the private sphere is in part gendered, and feminist theologians were some of the first to systematically critique this public/private divide. Since, more often than not, men's experience traditionally took place in the world, in public, in visible positions, and women's work took place in the home, it was easy to link the denigration of the private sphere to the devaluation of women's work and women's lives. The world of women was the world of the

home and social structures limited women's ability to opt out. Such divisions are inherent in Scripture. Exodous 20:17 goes so far as to list the wife as property of her husband, right alongside the farm animals. For much of their early history, Israelite women simply passed from the control of their fathers, to the control of the husbands (Lerner, 1986, 168-169). Since a man's home was his castle, what went on in that castle was often considered inviolate, and correspondingly unimportant in the larger social sphere. Inside the castle walls was the narrow world relegated to women.

Similarly, trauma and disability are often seen as simply a "personal" problem, a private tragedy which has no place in the larger world. For generations the disabled have been hidden by families in homes, not allowed to venture into public. The disabled who do venture out, even today, run the risk of encountering able-bodied individuals or groups who protest their mere appearance, believing it inappropriate for them to be seen in a public restaurant, museum, or school setting. Disability, they believe, is something best reserved for the privacy of the home. The disabled simply shouldn't be seen "out in public."

Trauma, too, is seen as something that is strictly personal. Trauma stalks the powerless. Abusers consistently demand silence and invisibility. Abuse almost always results from some fundamental inequity in terms of power, often a fiduciary relationship such as doctor over patient, pastor over parishioner, jailer over prisoner, stronger over weaker. Recovery from trauma therefore often involves significant hesitation when faced with imbalances of power in relationships and distrust of those in positions of authority. Yet, their experiences invisible, survivors are expected to interact with those in power as if their own experience did not exist, to show the trusting nature of one who had never been betrayed or seen power abused.

Churches traditionally have done a poor job of responding to trauma in the lives of their members. A quick look at research prior to 1990 tells the story of religious priorities. Domestic

violence is illustrative. One can easily locate thousands of pages of moral theology written about conjugal relations. Almost none were written about domestic violence. Apparently the largely male clerics writing moral theology were more interested in detailed descriptions of sexual positions and activity than the actual physical survival of women. Problems of violence within marriage were "personal" problems.

Survivors who do disclose their histories in church settings risk having their disclosures considered "inappropriate." Gratitude, kneeling and submission to a distant and usually male God is assumed in liturgy, but those very elements may be extremely difficult for a woman recovering from sexual abuse or rape, especially if her rapist or abuser required her to demonstrate submission or gratitude. Combined with growing evidence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy's willingness to shelter and transfer priests who were sexually abusing parishioners, a portrait emerges of a church that defended male abusers at an exceedingly high price. The cost was not only monetary but a price which included the soul murder of thousands of women and children.

Even after the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic church, few churches see the development or support of programs for healing from trauma or disability as part of their responsibility. One representative of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explained "While we have frequent dialogue with dioceses on safe environment programs, among other things, we generally don't advise them on healing programs for their victims" (Horan, 2003). This representative's use, reflecting the hierarchy's use, of the term "victims" is indicative of a significant lack of understanding of the power dynamics always lie behind abuse. The term itself disempowers survivors, reinforcing a sense of helplessness and loss of control.

Relegating Response to Trauma and Disability to the Medical Model

Perhaps the greatest stumbling block to response to trauma and disability by the religious educator is the tendency to completely relegate response to the medical model. Deference to medical or mental health professionals, while often appropriate in the immediate aftermath of trauma or in initial response to disability, becomes the only response. In later stages of recovery from trauma or adaptation to disability, however, there is a need to construct meaning from the experience and to develop a sense of community. These activities would be better addressed in faith communities than in a clinician's office.

The tendency to refer and defer to the medical model carries with it the sense that such experiences are private medical concerns, and subject to the same kind of confidentiality associated with medical records. This enforces the social invisibility of trauma and disability, and undermines the political dimensions of such disenfranchised experience. Flora Keshgegian reminds us "Conservative indications are that 25 percent to 30 percent of women are sexually abused at some point in their lives, and somewhere between 10 percent and 20 percent are abused as children…The statistics for males are even more unreliable and are generally considered to be lower than that for female victims, but more and more cases are being reported" (Keshgegian, 2000, 38). If those "conservative indications" are correct, that means somewhere between fifty and one hundred million female survivors of sexual abuse in the United States alone, and yet response to abuse consistently fails to become a political priority. It also consistently fails to be seen as an important issue for religious educators or the church. Deference to the medical model and the preservation of confidentiality come at a high cost.

Pathologizing the Traumatized and the Disabled

The consistent reference and deference to the medical model also brings a tendency to pathologize the traumatized and the disabled. Relegated to the doctors, the traumatized person is seen as "sick" as result of his or her experience. The disabled are seen as "sick" because of their disability. Both groups are considered tainted and stigmatized. Perhaps nowhere is the pathologization of trauma survivors more in evidence than on popular television crime show *Special Victims Unit*. Writers of the show appear immune to information emerging from traumatic studies or human development about differences between modeling and reworking. Relatively little evidence supports negative modeling. A considerable body of evidence supports the idea of reworking. Those dissatisfied with the quality of fathering they received, for example, often "reworked" that model, spend more and a higher quality of time with their own children (Snarey, 1993). The writers of television drama consistently overuse the antiquated Freudian idea of identification with the abuser. The perpetrator of sexual crimes is so often linked to a history of abuse that it becomes cliché. If such aspersions were made on the basis of race or ethnic background it would incite immediate protest, but no one defends the traumatized or disabled politically. Such images perpetrate the idea the survivors are inherently sick or anti-social, continually prey to mental aberrations. Similarly, the physically disabled are often considered to be somehow mentally incompetent. It is common for people to converse with their aids, caretakers or associates using the third person rather than speaking directly to the disabled person.

Such responses fail to honor the essential human dignity or the struggle that the traumatized and disabled face in their day to day life. Yet religious educators do little to counter such stereotyping. Trauma and disability, as disenfranchised experience, are met with the null curriculum, not deemed worthy of or requiring any considered response. I remember my experiences of church

during a period when I had extreme immune impairment, due to an undiagnosed auto-immune disorder. Vulnerable because of my weakened immune system, I became physically ill when I was exposed to scents or perfumes that were made from petrochemical substances. My immune system reacted as it would to a neuro-toxin. I spent many liturgies standing in the back of the church, or even standing in the vestibule outside the sanctuary, because the unquestioned right of fellow parishioners to wear scent was deemed more important than my full participation and pastors were unwilling to set aside a single pew as scent-free. Today, my immune response has improved, but as a sufferer of Celiacs Disease I must maintain a medical diet without wheat, rye, oats or barley for the rest of my life. I sit quietly as we sing "One Bread, One Body" for communion, watching how the Sacrament of Eucharist is transformed into the Sacrament of Alienation.

CONCLUSION

Few religious educators grasp the important lessons that can be learned from the lives of those who confront suffering first hand, those who live with trauma or disability. There are exceptions, however – bell hooks clearly understands that experience can and must move beyond the public life of politics, race and culture. She writes:

> When I use the phrase "passion of experience," it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know. In the classroom, I share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively (91).

Central to the good news of the Gospel was Christ's response to suffering, his ability to heal, to hear the voices of the afflicted and to respond with generosity, with love, with compassion. Have we lost

that element in our tradition by relegating responsibility for healing to the world of the clinician, medical or mental health professional?

Religious educators have the possibility to return this central component to Christian thought and practice, to foster spiritual healing through education, and to form a new generation of responses to the suffering in our midst. Religious educators also have a moral responsibility to developing a more diverse and equitable evaluation of experience and more comprehensive response to differing types of experience. Justice is not served when certain forms of experience are elevated and reified, while others are neglected and atrophy, any more than they were under Jim Crow laws. The most recent issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* which focused on issues related to disability, distributed by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) to all its members, was a good start (AAR, 2005). But the ongoing temptation to allow denial to be the religious educator's primary response will prevail without the political heart to keep religious education receptive to the experience of trauma or disability. It is long past time that we, as religious educators, recognize justice issues are not limited to public or "social justice." By intentionally moving behind the public/private divide, the religious educator has the opportunity to recognized and celebrate the basic human dignity of the traumatized and the disabled. The religious educator has the opportunity, like Job, to speak to the religious core of suffering. The religious educator has the opportunity to equip believers with spiritual and theological tools to engage with God's responsibility in the face of true human suffering. Perhaps most important, religious education has an opportunity to go from null curriculum to caring curriculum (Noddings, 1984). In the process, in our response to disenfranchised experience, religious education can redefine and reclaim its own moral credibility.

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