

“Holding Perpetrators Accountable” -- a reflection

There are words and phrases that are repeated so often, are so ubiquitous, that they become part of the landscape; they are repeated and agreed upon, with little or no reflection on their meaning and implications. In the Domestic Violence field, I believe the phrase “holding perpetrators accountable” fits this description. There is near universal agreement that we must do just this in order to assure safety and justice for people harmed by family violence. But what do these words really mean?

My friend Shana (not her real name) is a probation officer. For over 20 years, most or all of her work has been with domestic violence “perpetrators”. We get together for lunch a few times a year at Babani’s, a local Kurdish restaurant, and discuss domestic violence over silopi salads and dowjic soup. Last week she told me the stories of three perpetrators she had recently been holding accountable.

The first is a homeless Vietnam vet on probation for having assaulted his girlfriend. Shana’s principal work was connecting him to the VA so that they could help him secure a place to live, food, and health services. He called her back and said she had saved his life.

The second is a young man who had struggled throughout his life with depression, a father who would not let him come to stay with him at a time of great stress, and a girlfriend who told him he was worthless. A week before a scheduled appointment he called Shana to say he had gotten a DWI and could not get to her office; she told him she would meet him at the Culver’s near his house. She waited for him but he never arrived; she later learned he had killed himself 2 days earlier, and had been found by his 6-year-old daughter.

The third is a young man who was in the workhouse for seriously assaulting his girlfriend. A few days before he was scheduled to get out he was told he would not be released. He asked Shana to investigate. What she found out was that he had called his girlfriend over 300 times while in the workhouse; she had accepted about half of the calls. Every one of the calls was a violation of a no-contact order, meaning he would be now going to prison for what Shana said was a very long time.

Shana called me the next day and invited me to sit in on interviews with some of the people she works with. Yesterday afternoon I did, meeting three people, bearing witness to their stories, and gaining a glimpse of their lives.

The first was a middle aged Native American woman who threw a plate toward her husband when he came home late, drunk and in a foul mood. The woman says she threw the plate at the wall and it bounced and hit him in the head, causing a small cut on his forehead; according to the emergency room report she threw it at his head, causing a skull fracture and 3-4 inch long, deep laceration. Responding to questions from Shana, she said it was not that big a deal. When I asked the woman what she needs now, she said a stable place to live with her husband, and a job. Shana offered to help the woman get her GED, which she thought was an almost impossible dream, but was open to trying for.

The second was a 25 year old young man from I believe Ethiopia who fought with his girlfriend over car keys and ended up pushing her to the ground (in response to her trying to kick him in the groin), causing her a broken nose. This occurred in front of his parents, and his father then started to hit him, and in response he hit his father, splitting his lip. When the police arrived the young man told them he had hurt his father and girlfriend, and that they should arrest him. He said he felt terrible about everything that had happened, took responsibility, and now wants to get a certificate so that he can work as a nursing assistant.

The third was a Somali man who I would guess is in his early 40s. He was born in Mogadishu and was tortured for many years by soldiers before fleeing to Kenya to live in a refugee camp with his parents. During his time in Somalia he witnessed soldiers kicking his pregnant wife in the stomach, and later learned both she and their child had died. He is on probation for a felony domestic violence conviction; he says what happened was that his girlfriend came after him with a knife, and he tried to grab it away from her, and she ended up with a deep cut on her hand. He is also studying to be a nursing assistant.

“Holding perpetrators accountable.” After our lunch conversation and yesterday’s interviews, I am more convinced than ever that these words are inadequate and inaccurate. Yes, each of these people committed an act of violence, but to summarize who they are based on those acts, whatever actually happened, does not come close to fully capturing their humanity. In reality, regardless of what Shana or anyone else in our system does from here on, it will be likely next to impossible for any of these people to ever secure stable work based on their convictions and records – if people with advanced degrees and decades of experience and no criminal records are so deeply struggling in this economy to find jobs, what real hope do any of these people have?

It is my privilege and honor to hear the stories from Shana, and to be in a room with her and each of these individuals who are struggling and yet still trying to reclaim their lives against huge odds. Were their versions of what happened true? I have no idea. I am not taking their side against those they hurt; I can only write and respond to what I heard. All I can know for sure is that I wish them, and the people they harmed, a chance to heal and find some semblance of purpose, stability, and peace in their lives.

To my way of thinking, I did not see perpetrators being held accountable yesterday: I saw damaged souls shown understanding and given whatever hope might be possible by a courageous and compassionate person working in a very challenging and challenged system.

I cannot help but wonder what would happen if, instead of labeling them as perpetrators and dismissing their humanity, we could fully bear witness to both the horror and beauty of their lives as Shana does in her work; if instead of “holding them accountable” by punishing through imprisonment and issuing criminal records making it difficult if not impossible to gain employment for years (if ever), we were instead to give people a supervised chance to truly own what they have done and make amends for the harm they have caused to others and themselves.

Might we more fully hold people truly accountable for their actions and provide them, and those they have harmed, a path and possibility to regaining and rebuilding their lives around nonviolence and respect? I wonder.