Faith Born of Seduction

Manlowe, Jennifer L

Published by NYU Press

Manlowe, Jennifer L.
Faith Born of Seduction: Sexual Trauma, Body Image, and Religion.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15763.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15763
A Thinly Veiled Skein:
Exploring Troublesome Connections
among Incest, Eating Disorders,
and Religious Discourse

Paternalistic theology that instills the need for female redemption and promises it via an external rescuer has failed survivors of incest. Yet such a faith still lingers in the language of the survivors. Discern through the following case studies how frequently these survivors reveal psychological and social conflicts, born from their incest trauma, in their religious discourse. A survivor’s relationship to her body and to food reveals an abusive past not mitigated by her faith. Religious discourse both shapes and is shaped by her sexually abusive past and at points reflects a double wounding.

Religious language is available to give spiritual meaning to a survivor’s post-trauma symptoms. I found the survivors to share a number of religious convictions: the belief that a survivor’s suffering has a divine purpose, the notion that praying for reparation will heal her wounded self, a sense of God’s silence, a sense that her hunger and food behaviors are symptoms of her evil, the idea that her parent’s nature is God’s nature, a sense that she is guilty and worthy of blame, and her use of food rituals to find meaning.
I. Shared Religious Themes

God's Will

Long after their liberation, people who have been subjected to coercive control bear the psychological scars of captivity. They suffer not only from classic post-traumatic syndrome but also from profound alterations in their relations with God, with other people, and with themselves.¹

Many of the survivors initially attempt to make sense of their incest trauma through turning to their religious contexts. Even though only three out of the nine survivors interviewed for this study come from extremely religious homes (where traditions were observed on a daily basis), all went through periods of believing that the abuse was “God's will.” To maintain a just omnipotent God, the survivor must blame herself. As W. R. D. Fairbairn has said, “It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil.”² In her struggle with her abusive past and painfully compulsive present, Renita saw God as the only possible source of meaning for her life:

I'm more desperate than any normal person, in the sense that I—I really need to believe in God to just—just to kind of make it. If there weren't a God, that would be awful. I mean all this suffering and very hard work has to pay off. If there is a God, then maybe I'm supposed to go through this, then there's some sort of purpose to my life.

When I asked Renita what purpose her life would have without a God, she said, “If there is no God then there's no purpose. I mean if we're all just accidents, then we just come and go, that's all—and my working through the pain of my past has no point. My living today has no point, why bother if there is no reward for all this?” Janine, like Renita, related a desire for a God figure, though she was not able to convince herself that such a figure exists. To hold an omnipotent God would entail holding herself responsible for her past, yet without God life was “painfully empty.” In her words, “I ache inside when I think that there's no one out there who cares about me. I mean, why go on if no one's there? I wish I could believe that there was some power that could help me reclaim my own power.” Hope depended on help from an outside source for the majority of the survivors I interviewed. Their *horizontal*, human relationships had failed them, so they moved into a *vertical* one. As Stephanie put it, “God's the only one I can trust.”
As a feminist working with survivors, I find the practice of seeking the will of an external, omnipotent, masculine God suspect. To the extent that recovery through Twelve-Step programs depends on reliance on a Higher Power, these programs are based on a patriarchal ideology that has no place in female liberation. Twelve-Step groups have been known to save lives. But “surrendering our wills” is at the core of female oppression in patriarchy. Like other feminists in psychology and theology, I believe we need to find an inner will that is both our own voice and part of a collective political movement.

Asking a survivor to search within to find her strength, hope, and courage is asking her to contend with the horrors of memories she has been trying to avoid, to manage through symptoms, or to soothe through her quest for external spiritual meaning. No survivor can empower herself without help from others. Sexual trauma profoundly affects the survivor’s human relationships, which can become infused with suspicion and vulnerable to dissolution. Help or friendship may be perceived as counterfeit nurturance, as insincere and unreliable. Trust in people and communities can be impaired and difficult to recover. The survivor’s wish for an external redeemer reveals that she has internalized the perpetrator’s view of her, and that her religious community does not support her empowerment. Feelings of abandonment fester inside a survivor who has been betrayed not only by the perpetrator of abuse but by her social environment as well. Yet in order to move past destructive patterns, the survivor will need to reach out to others and learn about her rights to physical and emotional respect. She needs support in finding her own voice, her own language; and encouragement to honor her will to survive can help her begin overcoming a wish for paternal rescue.

**Prayers for Reparation**

At age ten, Janine would pray daily from a devotional book called *My Utmost for His Highest*. She would ask God for “strength to have the discipline to serve only Him.” She spoke of writing diaries that were full of prayers that her “selfish nature would be purged . . . so that I could better serve God.” She prayed, quoting the New Testament, “He must increase and I must decrease.” She “would search in the Bible for psalms and prayers that affirmed celibacy and my wish to eat only vegetables.” Her father fought with her over her refusal to eat meat. She told me, “It
was a battle that I felt powerful enough to stand up for. I could say no to food but I could not tell my father to leave me alone."

When a father seduces his daughter into sexually earning his favor and the mother does not see such offenses, the survivor realizes that her world offers her no protection. She learns that she will neither be able to get her emotional needs met nor actively participate in life; she must serve the needs of others. All nine of the survivors interviewed had moments when they prayed to God to protect them, to heal their pain, to rescue them from their helpless situation, to guide them in the right way to live so that they would not have to suffer.

Many of these survivors went through periods when they felt something was dreadfully wrong within them as a result of the sexual violation. They pleaded to God not only to protect them, but also to purify them from their essential sinfulness. Stephanie articulates how deeply she feared being tainted by her grandfather’s abuse.

I was always extremely ashamed of my body. I had frequent dreams about ugly things growing in my body. I felt my grandfather transmitted his evil inside of me and I lived in terror most of my life waiting for those evil seeds—that evil root—to bear fruit. When I was nine or ten especially, I’d wake up at two or three in the morning and I would open a Bible and—I couldn’t understand anything, but I would try to read and would think, if I set the Bible by my bed, it will protect me. And then if I die, they will say the last thing she was did was read the Bible.

Survivors in this study received no reparation until, as adults, they entered socially sensitive counseling. They seemed to know cognitively that the disgrace belonged to their offenders, but their affect, posture, and voice volume revealed a continuing sense of shame and self-blame. Victims of trauma often experience a self-cognition that would be more appropriate to the perpetrator. A culture that blames the victim collaborates with the perpetrator in making it excruciatingly difficult for the survivor of sexual crime to overcome a feeling of sinfulness, unredeemable without the favor of God.

**God’s Silence**

Without the inner picture of caring parents, how can one survive? . . . Every soul-murder victim will be racked by the question “Is there life without father and mother?”
Survivors of chronic childhood trauma face the task of grieving not only for what was lost but also for what was never theirs to lose—the childhood that was stolen from them is irreplaceable. They must mourn the loss of the foundation of basic trust, the belief in a good parent. As they come to recognize that they were not responsible for their fate, they confront the existential despair (a parent and God absence) that they could not face in childhood. As survivors look to secular culture to aid them in finding meaning, they also find that it is not just their fathers (or just those offending relatives in authority) who experience females as the “touchable class.” A female body is both more visible and more humiliating to her simply because the choice to make it visible or sexual is not her own. Hope for being recognized as other than a body is felt by all the survivors interviewed. But most do not “see” the extent to which their God language, the patriarchal culture to which they belong, their incest experience, and their eating problems are interdependent.

Renita recalls times when she would analyze and doubt God’s existence:

I start feeling sorry for myself sometimes over having this problem with food and my self-image and then I start overanalyzing everything and then I doubt God—and the meaning of God, and wonder if my life has any meaning really. I think my biggest fear is that there is no God and that we all just die [slight laugh], and then there, you know, I mean we could die today in that case, it doesn’t really matter. And that’s my legitimate fear, like there is no God—and I wonder about this every day [slight laugh].

Renita is a survivor of multiple molestation by the men in her family. She does not know what it would be like to be out from under a masculinist, minimalizing male gaze. Her plea to God to help her find meaning reveals her core grief born of her incest trauma—which sent the message to her, loud and clear, regarding her place of meaning in this society. Kaschak illustrates this point in reference to her suicidal and depressed client Diane. Diane, like my case study Melinda, reported being gang-raped. When the rapists were finished, they laughed at her and said, “I hope you know your place now.”

Samantha illustrates the frustration one feels when one prays and nothing changes:

I was wondering where was God when I was being abused? I mean he totally ignored me as a child. Even today, I get the feeling that there is something wrong
with me and I am a freak from outer space and all that stuff. A [male] minister at the Twelve-Step meeting once said, "Well, all your Higher Power wants is for you to be happy." And so on and so forth. So, why doesn't my Higher Power do something? I don't know, I guess I need more trust.

The temerity of Samantha to ask "Where was God when I was being abused?" is the very courage that she must nurture to move through seeing the trauma as merely a personal injustice. When female/child submission to paternal authority for a sense of protection is exposed as the patriarchal backbone that it is, fewer women will blame themselves for the sexual crimes against them. They will refuse to rely on prayer to change the offender, and will thus be more likely to face the reality of their predicament and speak up for the help they need. They will no longer wait around for their higher power to "do" something.

That Samantha ends up feeling she need only surrender her skepticism to her Higher Power for (usually masculine) him to do his job in empowering her is the core theological point that I find so dangerous. The paternalistic discourse so heavily woven through Christianity and the language of Twelve-Step Anonymous programs is the very discourse that keeps women stuck in cycles of shame, passivity, isolation, and believing that their only real problems are their "addictions" and their "stubborn wills."

For survivors with patriarchally conceived notions of God, especially ones from devout Christian backgrounds, rethinking religious rhetoric and institutions is paramount for overcoming the valorization of female self-abnegation. As survivors question patriarchal notions of God, they move away from giving theological meaning to their abuse experience. They see that such an experience makes sense only in a culture that justifies the sexist allocation of power. For some survivors, to question paternalistic constructions of God and self can provoke feelings of a second abandonment. In facing the truth of their victimized pasts, they have had to leave the enchanted notion of home. In challenging the ways in which their religions of origin and Twelve-Step groups silence them into daughterly obedience to divine will, they confront the possibility of having to leave home—that which is familiar—a second time. As one survivor queried, "How many homes can a person leave?"

A survivor needs ongoing support to deconstruct the governing masculinist worldview that has so gravely encoded itself upon her flesh. Natalie garnered such support by taking a women's studies course.
Because of the breadth of questions she could explore there, she was able not only to ponder the reality of oppression, but also to explore possible ways of dealing with such evil. For a just future, the absence of a patriarchal God seemed to be paramount. In Natalie’s words, “After I read Mary Daly, I found myself feeling like how could God allow this to happen to women . . . generation after generation, it keeps happening. Just getting a sense of being overwhelmed with this, and the rage of it, and feeling like if there is a God—that God would either have to be completely powerless, or evil.” Natalie eventually dethroned the patriarchal God who does not respond to atrocities against female humanity. She experienced the vacancy that such a dethronement engendered and filled it with her idea of a God who cares about humanity. She made clear that such a God needs allies in the world to bring about social justice.

Imagine the justice that could be brought about if women channeled their dieting rigor—which masks righteous rage—into supporting each other, for instance, in the fight for the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment. Instead of expiating patriarchally imposed shame through their bodies, they could strengthen their bodies, minds, and souls to stand solid with ever expanding political, economic, and psychological weightiness.

**Hunger as Indicator of Innate Badness**

Those whom satiety drove from paradise, fasting restores.

—Jerome’s counsel to a virgin

Like fasting saints of the late Middle Ages, incest survivors experience their bodily sensations—especially hunger—as something that could mushroom out of control. The saints who directed their hunger toward the eucharist did so partly because it was an acceptable object of craving and partly because it was a self-limiting (contained) food. Like contemporar y incest survivors with eating disorders, these ascetics felt desperately vulnerable before bodily needs and used food refusal to destroy them. Contemporary dread of female flesh is heard throughout these case studies. It is as if modern survivors can hear through the centuries the internalized religious beliefs held regarding female flesh.

The contemporary survivor’s behavior with food reveals her desire to
receive that which she felt was missing in her relationship to her parents, to God, and to herself. She both repairs and expresses her damaged self through her food conduct—overeating, binge-purging, chronic appetite policing, or not eating. For Janine, food refusal or eating only selected kinds of food were means of self-repair and purification:

When I was hungry I felt like I was living right. I even felt better when I would eat only fruits and vegetables, even when hungry. Pretty soon I was able to convince my mind and my body that such feelings of purity were much better than any fattening food. I was on my way to becoming the invulnerable perfection that I really craved. To eat bad foods when hungry would so annihilate my self-esteem that it was never worth the indulgence. If I ever binged it would be on what I called “air foods”—ones that were virtually calorie-less. I believed the kind of food that went into my body had the power to absolve or disgrace me and I would feel these feelings deeply depending on what I had ingested.

What the survivor does with food corresponds to her history of being violated. She enacts the violence against her as she binges. What was “put into her” (whether a finger, an object, a penis, or a tongue) in sexual abuse had the power to taint her and make her feel ashamed. The metaphor of food reveals and extends the defiling power that sexual abuse had on her. When she ingests the foods she calls “bad,” the degrading memories that she experienced while being abused again emerge. Food refusal, purging, and consumption of only “good” foods regulate these memories’ entry into conscious awareness.

Parental Projection as God Image

Sigmund Freud offered important insights into the role of parents in the formation of the representation of God. He posited that God was an “exaltation” of parental images. Too often the notion of God receives little or no attention among mental health professionals. Such an omission means missing an important and relevant piece of information about the survivor’s developmental history and her private elaborations (conscious and unconscious) of parental images.9

Samantha reacted very strongly to my questions about God. The parental aspects of God seem very clear: “I refuse to use the term God; it’s too loaded for me. It’s the God of wrath, it’s the God of judgment, it’s the God of shaming, it’s the God of punishment.” Samantha told me directly that “as a little kid, my parents were God, always shaming and
forever punishing me." She claimed the word "God" was just "too loaded." Instead she used the term *Higher Power*.

Cherise indicated, though unwittingly, that God and Satan were inseparable in her mind from her father. Both her church community and her father left her feeling like "a perpetual sinner." She told me,

My grandmother took me to church and I hated it. I remember people whom I'd never seen before would be telling me I was a sinner, and that I was bad and that it was because of me that Jesus died. I didn't even know who Jesus was, I thought he was the boy down the street and I wondered out loud, "Was he the one who was hit by a car?" They would respond back, "Heathen! Satan has her!" Nobody explained and this made me more confused because Satan I did know—he was my father. My concept of God mirrored my relationship to my father.

Because one's God-image is thought to be formed in relation to early experiences with one's parents, listening to what a person believes is essential to discerning her world of wishes, fears, hopes, and dreams. Discerning the content of one's God-language and religious imagination can aid helping-professionals to gain a wider vision of a survivor's relationship to her parents and social context. Carol Saussy lends an example of the power and process of parental projections when she writes:

One could assume that a child's early experience of her angry, verbally abusive father resulted in a representation of authority as exacting, threatening, and punishing. The child's felt reactions to authority—that is, to her father—take the form of an unconscious representation of ultimate Authority. To this child, father is ultimate authority. The child internalizes, along with bad, frightening father, a negative self-representation: bad me, worthy of punishment. Her negative father/authority representation is in place and will become her unconscious representation of God/authority.

Experience of parental harm and neglect for the survivor then easily becomes projected onto God (bad object/wished-for object) and acted out in food behavior. The survivor's relationship to food and her body not only reveals a conflict born of the trauma of incest, it also reveals a conflict over who she ultimately is, and why she is here. Her sense of meaninglessness does not represent a vague philosophical angst about being mortal, but evolves out of the specific experience of incest, which teaches the survivor acutely painful lessons about the meaning of her life as a woman. The survivors I interviewed all struggled against the lessons
that being objectified had taught them. None wanted to believe that the only way she could find relational meaning was through her ability to please. Each one wrestled with these issues through her body, managing conflicts over the threat of meaninglessness by ritually imbuing food with symbolic content that helped her determine her worth and identity.

At times food served as a good God, a wished-for parent. It comforted when she felt lonely, it soothed when she felt anxious, it nourished when she felt emotionally deprived, it rewarded her for coping with a life that could crush a person. At times food functioned as a guide, praising the survivor when she ate the “right” amount of food and wasn’t too greedy or self-focused. Not only the larger culture’s message about proper female behavior, but also the controlling voice of the offender may be heard in this God. At other times, the survivor’s food behavior revealed a cruel God who teased her with temptation and then berated her for having indulged herself. This God too has the voice of the perpetrator, holding her accountable for all her appetites and punishing her with shame. This despotic voice also proclaimed her doomed to a failed future, an isolated life due to her insatiable appetite, which would surely make her repulsive.

Self-Blame

Maria Goretti’s story (which I related in chapter 4) is a recent example of religious emphasis on female value through a female bearing responsibility for what happens to her sexually. Yet holding females responsible for sexual activity is nothing new in religious and secular circles alike. The biblical account of creation blames Eve for the advent of universal sin. Her sexualized disobedience was the cause of humanity’s fall from grace, the bringer of lust into the world. The message to any child is simple: “I’m a female just like Eve, therefore I too bring about lust.”

As a child, and even now, Renita wonders whether her perpetrators, who accused her of being seductive, were right. In her words:

I did feel responsible for what had happened. . . . I start feeling like, “Well maybe they were right. Maybe I shouldn’t have tried to look good, or—wear, you know, fashionable clothes.” I was always defiant as a child. Like if they said, “Don’t wear something that showed my arms or stomach,” I’d wear it. So I’d feel like, well if I hadn’t done that . . . if I had covered up my body—it
wouldn't have happened . . . maybe if I were fat and unattractive, you know, nobody would touch me.

Traditionally, Christian doctrine focuses on overcoming the appetites of body, the sexual act in general, and the female body in particular as the origin of the worst sin. For females raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, as were Renita and Janine (two of the three anorexics in this study), the focus on asexuality, via adoration of the Virgin Mary, begins early.

Focusing on the Virgin Mary as a spiritual figure can be a way a child finds imaginative sexual refuge—for Mary was considered to be the pinnacle of asexuality. Identifying with Mary as an icon can help the child-victim dissociate from her sexuality. Although neither Renita nor Janine explicitly identified with the Virgin Mary, other Catholic women survivors with whom I have worked have identified with “the virgin” as a desire to be impenetrable. But the untenable image of Mary can also work to shame the child who was sexually abused. For no one can be like Mary—a Virgin Mother.

Childhood sexual assault exploits the child by prematurely introducing her to her sexuality. Her body may be involuntarily aroused, and consequently she feels betrayed by and alienated from it. She incorporates these feelings into her developing perception of her body. Eventually the survivor has to realize that the crime was not caused by her sexuality or by her body, but that the sexual relationship was the means through which the offender made use of the child for the offender’s own satisfaction.

Crave Sense-Experience of Relief

Because the nine survivors suffered from post-traumatic stress symptoms, they all grew to crave sensations that would provide comfort and relief from shame-producing memories, body-image dread, sense of powerlessness, and a sense of future doom. Samantha told me that “not being able to trust a God or a Higher Power” was a direct outcome of being abused. Yet she felt that such an inability to surrender to this God was the source of her problems today. She said, “I resent having to do it all alone.”

Theological paternalism is a faulty vehicle of empowerment. Yet no
survivor can empower herself without help from others. Sharing our social contexts and “unpacking” the gender-loaded political meanings that work to keep us cycling in a wheel of self-destructiveness is part of how we assist each other, part of how we empower ourselves. When we rely on empowering ourselves in isolation, despair can be the result. When we are desperate we are more likely than not to turn to some individualized method of coping that works to mask as well as manage the enormity of our pain. Note Samantha’s pattern of coping:

The only person I could ever trust was myself, the only person who could save me was myself. My caretakers were either abusive or were not saving me, they were not rescuing me. So I could not trust anyone. I think insofar as I could not turn to any sort of benign God for comfort, I had to be able to do something that I could do for myself—you know—I mean, my parents certainly had no clue how to comfort me. So I turned to food. I had to do it; comfort wasn’t one of the options in my family.

Samantha used food to rescue herself when God and her parents would not. Food become a vehicle to transcend her experience of feeling emotionally desolate. Surrendering to a Higher Power is not the solution. Rather, breaking out of isolation with affirming and conscious others is paramount for survivors, like Samantha, who tend to isolate. It seems that dependence on a paternal rescue and isolating and seeking self-soothing rituals in private are two sides to the same culturally gendered “coin.”

Food consumption or its refusal can indeed work to displace the anxiety and depression one develops as a result of the trauma of sexual abuse. Self-psychologists Richard Ulman and Doris Brothers define addictive trigger mechanisms as “specific substances, behaviors, or persons (e.g., alcohol, drugs, food, sexual partner, or gambling) that are used on a habitual and compulsive basis to arouse archaic narcissistic fantasies and accompanying moods of narcissistic bliss, which in turn provide desperately needed antianxiety and/or antidepressant relief from dysphoric affect states.”12 Samantha used food (as well as drugs and alcohol) to soothe her in ways her parents were unable to. All nine of these survivors reveal narcissistic deprivation due to parental failure. The intrusions of incest reinforce this deprivation, which led the survivor to seek escape. The most tangible escape route a child can find and experience is food binging, which works to anesthetize her deprivation and
isolation. As Cherise sees it, “Food is the only legal drug available to a child.”

**Food Rituals Symbolic of Spiritual Quest**

As previously stated, trauma deeply influences human relationships, which can become imbued with distrust and is vulnerable to dissolution. Assistance or friendship may be perceived as insincere and unreliable. Faith in people and one’s community can be hindered and difficult to reclaim. Yet for a survivor to overcome some of her more destructive patterns with food and self-blame, she will need to reach out to safe and supportive others. Most survivors initially resist such self-extension for fear of further shame and abuse. The survivors’ ritual behavior with food seems to have symbolized what they did not receive from peers, parents, and organized religious institutions.

All nine of the survivors have developed relationships to food that appear to reveal a spiritual quest and a desire for “right” attachment. They bond with food (an inanimate but readily available object to animate in the imagination) as a result of having no one else whom they could trust. What they do or do not do with food is supposed to produce positive feelings of being loved, good, disciplined, valued, comforted, or protected. Their food behavior can also arouse negative feelings for the survivor, such as feelings of being bad, voracious, monstrous, disgusting, repulsive, destined for failure, greedy, and lazy. In either case, food, unlike those closest to her, was an object she could trust and be effected by—it was in her control. She, and her culture, imbued it with meaning.

In all the survivors’ case studies it is clear to me that religious meaning or issues of *ultimate concern* are expressed in each survivor’s behavior with food: “The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence.” A survivor’s relationship to food and her body not only reveals the conflict born of the trauma of incest, it also reveals an existential conflict over her identity—who she is ultimately—why she is here.

For the female survivor who has an eating disorder this identity conflict is intensified. She sees in her eating behavior (like her perpetra-
The power that she cannot master. If she had any pleasurable feelings during the sexual abuse, she interprets this as ambivalence over whether or not the perpetrator was truly in the wrong—which usually is the perpetrator’s intention. The food behavior, like her abuse history, is rigorously protected from public view. She guards against it, or finds some way to expunge it from her awareness. To the survivor, this binging behavior evokes and simultaneously numbs her shame. As she diets or purges she seeks to atone for her felt character flaws. Her project of self-redemption becomes a vicious cycle.

Self-destructive religious language, like an eating disorder, can be found among people other than survivors, but for the survivor, I feel these unspeakable concerns are shouted through her body and through her food behavior. As a survivor quests for spiritual meaning in self-help gatherings to aid her in overcoming her eating disorder, she seems to be searching for a faith that will offer her what she is no longer receiving from her eating behavior—an escape from the traumatic and emotionally vacant past and a place to repair and nurture a sense of power, meaning, and value in her present.

II. Alternative Coping Techniques

Nugget Experience

Victims of incest who survive and overcome the pain and neglect of their past often develop techniques to maintain an authentic sense of self. Psychologist Donna LaMar has called such people transcenders. They succeed by affirming themselves, by distancing themselves from their families, and by drawing closer to others. “Transcenders as children, learn to nurture and protect themselves on very little. . . . They take in, absorb, and savor tidbits of offerings. These offerings are used for growth over many years.”

All of the survivors in this study have come to rely on food to help them transcend their unbearable realities. They have narrowed their focus to the fantasy, “I’ll be okay as long as I eat only certain foods” (for the anorexic), or “As long as I have something sweet I can tolerate almost anything” (for the binger). Food and food rituals become a very small life-preserver that the survivor holds onto even long after the
perpetrator is gone. There is a sense that trauma or death lurks nearby and she must always be prepared.

Some of the survivors interviewed for this study have had a *nugget* experience that they can recall. Such memories may help them transcend their abusive pasts and find connections, besides food, in their future. Observe the responses to the following interview question:

*What or who facilitated your survival?*

Cherise told me that “out of all that abuse and all of that pain, there still were some nuggets of gold that I’ve been able to pull on, and to hold onto now. I found those nuggets of gold in teachers and in books. I didn’t find it in my faith community.” Cherise spoke of precious memories of going to art museums with her mother before she died. As she reflected on her mother’s life she said, “My mother, my mother, my mother, I mean, as a woman today I can look back at my mother and say, ‘My God, what she must have endured to protect us.’ Until she took her own life, I really believe in my heart that my mother did everything she could to keep him from us.” She also told me, “My grandmother loved me fiercely.”

Books were significant for Janine as well. She spoke of a neighbor couple (therapists) who moved into the house next door to her family’s when she was a teenager. She reported:

I would go over to her house and visit and she would recommend books to me and got me involved in a peer-counseling support group. She didn’t know about the abuse but she could see I was depressed and for the first time in my life I felt someone could see through me to the half that was not visible. I felt a first sense of connection to someone. Because she and her husband were Christians, I joined their church and the youth group that they led. If I didn’t have them as surrogate parents, I don’t think—I don’t think I would be here. I’m still friends with that woman today.

Melinda comforted herself with music and had a nighttime “secret ritual” that she used to console her until she could fall asleep. D. W. Winnicott would call such a ritual—with an inanimate object—a *transitional object* that works to soothe children as they cope with parental separation anxiety. Melinda’s abandonment concerns were quite real at a very early age. In her words,
As a four-year-old, I had this secret ritual of listening to classical music in my bed at night. I would turn up the radio just loud enough for me to hear the music and then I would turn it down and guess who the composer was before the announcer gave the information. Even at age four I would do this and more often than not I would be right. If I didn’t have music I don’t know what I would have done; music was my reason for living.

Alice Miller claims a key aid for a child-victim’s survival is a sense that there is a “helping witness” who does not feel responsible for raising the child and who is not camouflaging cruelty as love because the witness has experienced love in his or her own childhood. Such a helping witness usually is someone who knows that the child is special, even remarkable, and can mirror even a modicum of the child’s specialness back to her.

**Memory of Resistance**

Not all of the survivors could remember resisting their sexual and physical violations. Most often the child-victim would freeze off her feelings or envision herself escaping from the abusive event. For example, Melinda remembers using her imagination to escape into a two-foot by two-foot cardboard manger scene that her grandmother gave her. In our second interview Melinda showed me her grandmother’s gift and said as she pointed to the display: “I was safe there. Sometimes I’d be Mary, sometimes I’d be baby Jesus. Sometimes the Star of Bethlehem.” Melinda’s real mother was very sick most of the time and offered very little in the way of protection or nurture to Melinda as a result. Melinda did hold on to a few memories of the times she did see her mother show compassion. “My mom cared for her garden, for the neighbors’ plants and their goldfish. Around the house she was numb most of the time.” Melinda, who was brutally raped by her father, brother, and his friends, used her creative imagination to build upon positive scenes with her mother and grandmother. Imagination is a vehicle to resist psychological violence. Imaginal musings are all most children can summon when victimized, and not all can muster scenes of compassion. For the few survivors who could remember a time of physically resisting the violence against them, such a memory helped them to recover their integrity in ways that were not as accessible to those who felt too paralyzed to resist. Note the cases of resistance in Janine and Cherise.
Cherise informed me that her father died of alcoholism when she was sixteen. But when she was twelve she recalled the last time her father tried to rape her. By that time she was five foot nine inches and weighed 275. She resisted her father’s violence against her by taking on the persona of a “prisoner of war.” In her words:

I remember my father coming into my room. My room was always like a fortress. I was always in a state of siege, and all—I—had the mentality of—of someone in war. I mean I was always [snaps fingers] on alert. I mean I would sleep in my clothes, I would sleep with a hammer under my pillow, I would sleep with knives and food under my bed. I would booby-trap my room—I even had a rock under my sink where I would keep the knives sharp. It’s very clear to me that the menace, the terror, was not from outside. When I was 12 my father came in my room, and I very calmly just stood up, and I walked past him, and I went in the kitchen, and I got my rock out, and I took my 12-inch butcher knife, and I started sharpening it. I was very calm. He followed me to the kitchen and I just looked at the knife and said, “Today is the last day you will touch me,” and I said, “You come near me, and I will cut your fuckin’ throat.”

Janine also remembers a time when she was willing to kill if it meant saving herself. She was ten years old the summer her father held her on his shoulders in what he termed “a fun pool game.” She told me that he held her legs around him tightly and proceeded to walk to the deepest end of the pool. When she could no longer hold her breath, she tried to wriggle free from this “game.” In her words, “I needed air but he held me even tighter and refused to let me go.” Janine believed her father was getting a thrill from her fear and powerlessness—“like he had so many times before.” She goes on to describe the vivid images that went through her imagination:

I saw myself kicking free and possibly killing this man—my father—in the process. The image frightened me but I nevertheless kicked with all my might. I thrashed about, kicking and beating on him until I was free. That memory gives me courage to this day that I will not be held down by anybody. That next summer, though, he bought me a string bikini—that’s when his sadism went seductive.

Once in a situation of danger, most adult women have little experience in mobilizing an effective defense. Traditional socialization virtually ensures that women will be poorly prepared for danger, surprised by attack, and ill-equipped to protect themselves. It is rare for child-victims to feel empowered enough to resist their perpetrators; for those
who do, or even attempt to do so, the psychological benefits are enormous. If arming children is the only way to protect them from violence against them in their families, then we are in a serious crisis of values. We are in a serious crisis of pseudo-family values. Laws that do exist must be upheld.\textsuperscript{20} Others must be created and used to bring about justice for the victims. Preventive education is necessary but social policy must not leave women economically dependent on men for shelter. Religious and ethical stands must be taken in opposition to violence against children, women, as well as the Earth and all beings. The reality of outrageous sexual crimes against women and children must be articulated and stopped.

\textbf{Seeking Justice}

Survivors of every age and every culture come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why? The answer is beyond human understanding.\textsuperscript{21}

The arbitrary, random quality of a survivor’s fate defies the basic human faith in a just or even predictable world order. In order to develop a full understanding of the trauma story, the survivor must examine the moral questions of guilt and responsibility and reconstruct a system of belief that makes sense of her undeserved suffering. She then must decide what action to take.

Survivors who become politically involved with others in preventing violence in the home often find such involvement extremely empowering.\textsuperscript{22} Others find that working with domestic and sexual violence is “too close to home.” Such survivors may find other ways to actively engage in making the world a safer place. Those who do become politically active often feel that their chronic despair lessens.\textsuperscript{23}

Having identified the patriarchal order, especially as it operates within families, is not enough. Real insight implies commitment to changing the destructive situation, and the implications of this are not comfortable. For the person who has learned to see the reality of living in a sexist culture, nothing can ever be the same again. In Daly’s words, [T]here is hope involved in the insight into sexism. This hope has its basis in the fact that those who are oppressed live in a dialectical relationship with the privileged group. The status of the latter requires the consent of the former
to the oppressive situation. Recognition of this is redemptive and revelatory knowledge, pointing the way to “salvation” from the dehumanizing situation. The beginning of an adequate response is a will to integrate and transform the heretofore divided self.24

Women must be careful to check out their methods of repairing their divided selves born of social, familial, and religious double-binds. They need to ask themselves, “Is this relationship truly empowering? Do I feel I can have all my power here without penalty or guilt, or is this dynamic like the one I knew as a child?—one where I have to play a role and stuff my experience (opinions, needs, desires, and limits) to get along.”

Role of “Right-Relation”

Audre Lorde writes: “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”25 It would be a mistake to think one could heal one’s “divided self” in one act—for truly healing insight involves a will to change that which externalizes itself in continually unfolding action.26 Such work cannot be done alone, it depends upon some kind of “right-relation.” Right-relation describes a norm of relationship based upon love and justice. It is eros that moves us to seek union with others; justice requires that this union be shaped by mutuality, safety, trust, choice, responsibility, and respect for bodily integrity.27 In gender role-bound behavior, seen most clearly in violence against women by men, there is a core disconnection: we become cut off from the possibility of mutuality and joy. This disconnection deeply affects our self-conception. For the self is literally constituted in, by, and through relation.28

The role of reaching out to others and building “right relationships” has been the singularly most politically, spiritually, and physically empowering move that all nine of these survivors have made. When I asked Renita what interrupts her self-abusive thoughts or impulses to binge, she told me, “When I get desperate and needy, and I can’t ground myself, the only thing that can pull me out of the spiraling down is a phone call or maybe seeing one of my roommates at home.” Renita spoke of feeling as if she were in a trance of sadness. She claimed, “The only way out is by going to a meeting and then seeing someone I know
there or meeting someone or hearing something I need to hear there. I really can’t say that I have consciously gotten myself out of it. It’s more like someone has broken my isolation trance, and [snaps fingers] snap, I feel significantly more hopeful.”

Natalie responded to the same question by telling me she has been most helped by Twelve-Step groups “because of the peer support.” She went on to say:

I have grown to feel a spiritual connection to these people in ways that I’ve not known in my past—not that I never had connections with friends in my past—it’s just that to be able to really trust people without the real danger of merging and me losing myself or becoming abusive or manipulative in some way that didn’t happen on a consistent basis with people until I started coming to groups for adults from dysfunctional families.

The role of mutually empathic relations appears to be a powerful vehicle to healing for survivors who are able to reach out to others. A few of the survivors, like Margery and Samantha, appear to be too steeped in shame—still under the weight of the perpetrator and the larger culture’s blame—to reach out for group support. Survivors making “right-relational” connections alongside micro- and macro-political connections to their abuse and self-abuse histories seem to me to be the real “food” that most of them crave and by which they could be sustained.

Women who begin recovering from the incest trauma of their history do so when they call the patriarchal God of their oppressor by name and in doing so realize on which side this God stands. Then they can learn to let this God go.

**Courage to See**

Letting go of a patriarchal God demands courage. Existential courage, as a dynamic, has two sides: the courage to be as a self and the courage to be as a part. This idea truly applies to survivors of incest, for it will take courage for them to find and firmly be themselves, and it will take participating in a supportive community to excavate a sense of agency. She will need support to be courageous and will need to be brave to reach out for support. Such efforts are extremely difficult for survivors, so steeped in years, layers of shame. But in my experience, it is the
A Thinly Veiled Skein

beginning of a survivor’s “self” excavation. Such work will entail disen-tangling the mass of social constructions that already define her. Daly discusses radical courage as the *courage to see*, to no longer be eye-less/I-less. This courage is expressed by those who dare to defy their patriarchal context by naming their experience and expressing opinions that threaten the dominant order. Both the *courage to see* and the *courage to be* are necessary to a survivor’s empowerment process.

Many of the survivors’ mothers were eye-less/I-less and thus not able to see the atrocities occurring in the home nor to offer their daughters a sense of self-respect that may have enabled them to report the abuse. These women were often the patriarchal female ideal: submissive, docile, obedient, selfless, as well as male idolizing. These women obeyed the cultural ideal to remain eye/I-less; they were supranormal mothers in a patriarchal culture. Without role models with the courage to see, it is a wonder that these survivors were able to develop sharp and courageous sight. Throughout the interview process I consistently witnessed ever-increasing courage in all nine of the survivors. The ones who sought contexts of support, I believe, were better able to strengthen their sense of eye/I-sight.

The importance of nurturing this *courage to be* as well as this *courage to see* is paramount for lasting survival. In failing to advocate such decisive action, traditional Christian discourse grossly failed these survivors of incest: believing that God might have a plan regarding their abuse did not empower them. Holding on to the notion that God would respond to their prayers and make their offenders change did not help them. Believing that their behavior—being “good,” that is, self-sacrificing—might “turn God around” and give them the love they craved did not work.

What did seem to facilitate some of the survivors healing processes were their memories of resistance, their sense that someone loved them, their memory of at least one positive experience, relation, or ritual, their experience of becoming involved in justice-seeking, and their gaining support as they discovered both the *courage to be* and the *courage to see*. 