Self-Help or Self-Harm? Analyzing the “Politics” of Twelve-Step Groups for Recovery

My relationship with my Higher Power is based on what I used to look for in men.

—Renita

All of the women I interviewed for this project were involved with Twelve-Step spirituality groups at one time. Such groups are based on the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (see Appendix D). Seven of the nine are still involved in some form of Twelve-Step spirituality group. A core element in a Twelve-Step approach to “recovery” is the notion of surrender. To heal from your addictions, and the pain of your past, you must “surrender your will to God as you understand Him.” Serenity as well as sanity are promised to all those who surrender to this external (nearly always understood as male) God or Higher Power.

Theological paternalism is a theology that ultimately fails survivors of incest and compounds their setbacks, especially those who suffer from decidedly female compulsions—food, weight, and body preoccupations. For such theology repeats the paradigm of an abusive past. In the survivor’s history the redeemer and the perpetrator are one; both invite the survivor to surrender her will for healing and to have value.

A Community of Peers

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections.1
Psychotherapeutic counsel has significantly helped all nine of the survivors interviewed for this study come to terms with their traumatic pasts. However, all see their present task as one of creating a functional future with the help of peer support. Such a self-validating future can take place only within the context of relationships—not in isolation. It is only through relationships that the survivor can rebuild the bases of human connection, such as trust, autonomy, identity, and intimacy which were destroyed by the abuse.\(^2\)

Self-help groups modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous offer a place for a survivor to find helpful connections. Though not all of the survivors I interviewed found Twelve-Step groups to be liberating, the majority of those who do believe that it is possible to “take with them only what is helpful and to discard the rest.” They are unaware of the multiple social constructions that are upheld in such groups.\(^3\) Such constructions cannot help but psychologically and socially influence a survivor’s burgeoning identity.

The “addiction” anonymous groups do not focus on in-depth exploration of the incest trauma itself, nor do they analyze the underlying dynamics of eating disorders—a therapy group for incest survivors or a therapist who specializes in sexual trauma and eating disorders are the places a survivor (who can afford to) turns to engage in such work.\(^4\) The anonymous groups do, however, offer a cognitive framework for understanding symptoms that may be secondary complications of the trauma, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, and other self-destructive behaviors. They also offer a set of moral guidelines for personally assisting survivors and for restoring their connections with others, instructions known generically as the “Twelve Steps” (see Appendix C).

**What’s Going On?**

A psychological dynamic of the Twelve-Step program seems to be a kind of *theological transference*. In psychoanalysis, *transference* refers to the therapeutically invaluable tendency of the patient to see the therapist as a reincarnation of some important figure in the patient’s childhood and thus to reenact this past relationship in the therapist’s presence.\(^5\) Survivors who have left their “organized” faith-of-origin, or those who have felt left out of their congregations—chilled by the lack of acceptance there—seem to come to the anonymous programs to experiment with
separating both from their family-of-origin as well as from their patriarchal faith-of-old. They experience, in Winnicottian terms, the *transitional sphere* of the supportive, nonhierarchical meeting rooms.

In these meeting rooms survivors come to believe in a power greater than themselves that is of their own understanding (or creation). Through the help of their *Higher Power* (transitional or good object) they are enabled to separate from their past betrayers, both internalized and real. These betrayers are internalized as bad objects, the cruel voices born of abusive relationships from the past. These betrayers are, more often than not, those authority figures who have gravely let the survivors down in both their church and family.

Sociologically, a Twelve-Step group acts, in Van Gennepian terms, as a *liminal sphere.* That is, the survivor is personally not what she was (a victim) and not yet what she hopes to be (an agent in her own life), she is “in between”: surviving but without a solid conviction of herself as powerful.

### Goals of Rituals for Survivors

Though individual meetings may vary, Twelve-Step rituals usually include the opening of every meeting with the reading of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, a description of addiction, as well as each member’s introduction of himself or herself, for example, “Hi. I’m Jane/John and I am an addict/incest survivor.” The group meeting may include a speaker, listening to a tape about addiction, writing about a step, or a discussion of one of the twelve steps. The second half of the meeting allows time for sharing how each person experiences addiction in his or her life and how each is “recovering” today. The meetings end with the request to honor each member’s anonymity, and hands are linked while reciting the serenity prayer.

“Change brings with it risk—either in the movement itself, or in the new relationships and possibilities brought about by it. It should not surprise us, then, that socially significant movement is often regulated by ritual.” Ritual is a necessary and important form of social and self-communication for people overcoming early sexual and psychological trauma. Changes are aided and sustained by self-affirming and self-expressing rituals. Rituals, or purposeful actions whose intent is healing transformation, are a significant part of Twelve-Step meetings. They
work to reshape and reaffirm each member's personal and collective identity. The ritualizing community promises to help persons troubled by "addictive" behavior move from being victims of their past to becoming survivors in their present.

For an eating-disordered survivor of incest in particular, the Twelve-Step group Overeater's Anonymous enables her to make the move from being soothed through narrow and isolating behaviors with food and food rituals to being soothed and supported by relying on her "Higher Power" and the community of peers. Too, where she uses food to assuage her guilt (the concomitant effects of self-blame/social shame), she is offered in exchange the fourth and fifth steps to give her vehicles to speak the truth of her past and confess any harm she may have done to others as a result of being victimized. The group and her faith in a Higher Power are offered as identity-shaping forces in exchange for her dependence on the magical and atoning powers of food.

**How Rituals Work**

Twelve-Step groups can be ritualizing communities. Ritual theorist Arnold Van Gennep has outlined ritual processes that accompany "life crises" in the following stages:

1. Separation (pre-liminal);
2. transition (liminal); and
3. incorporation (post-liminal).

A *spatial passage* across a threshold symbolizes social passage through life crises.¹⁰

The woman who has been sexually invaded and narcissistically wounded as a child is, in a way, making spatial transitions by disengaging from present and past abusive settings and abusive person(s). As the woman becomes conscious of the dynamic by which she was trained (through the incest experience) to respond passively to another's exploitation of her, she may work also to separate from her internalized accusers. By becoming conscious of the messages she was given by both her perpetrators and her culture regarding how females should respond to males (or others) in authority, she makes a necessary separation from a victimizable role.

By participating in safe constellations of relationships, many survivors
begin experiencing support from others like themselves. The Twelve-Step member simultaneously makes a social passage through life crises into what can be a first stable relationship with self and others. Both her habits with food (eating and/or not eating) and her involvement in anonymous programs have ritual qualities. But the anonymous program has the potential of helping her connect with a community—it offers possibilities to repair narcissistic wounds (needs for mirroring, touching, echoing, affirming, listening, trust building) in relation to others—something no food or drug could ever offer her.

I have adapted Van Gennep’s rites of passage to fit the ideal context of the Twelve-Step spiritual support group. To be a member of a Twelve-Step group, one need only want to separate from past abusive patterns of behavior and relationships. This begins the transition process, giving one time to reassess goals and needs in the company of others who share a similar quest. Finally, the group incorporates the individual into a way of forming “healthier” relationships. These three definitions are not “states” but demarcations of movement over the course of one’s participation in a ritualizing community.

Designated passages mark important points in a survivor’s transition. First, she separates from a past identity as a victim of abuse (pre-liminal). With this move, former socializations, introjections, and community loyalties are examined and, quite likely, brought into question. Second, during the period of liminality, “a period of betwixt and between,” the survivor is neither comfortable with her old values nor has replaced them with new ones.

The survivor is no longer unconsciously in a destructive relationship with food or with violating others and is not yet a person consciously coping on her own (liminal stage). The final phase may be a time of reaggregation during which the Twelve-Step member reestablishes a new “assumptive world”—a new belief and value framework that creatively challenge aspects of old values, while locating new ones that have been more freely chosen. The adult survivor then prepares to incorporate herself into a valuable self-image that will better deal with the world outside the group’s “practice setting” (post-liminal).

Unlike Joseph Campbell’s monomythic hero cycle (separation, initiation, and return), in the survivor’s cycle she does not return to the same setting as a changed “heroine.” The survivor in recovery more often will choose to move into finding relationships and settings that
reflect her internal change. Self-value and bodily respect (not self-sacrifice or abuse) are the survivor's guides. Such internal (Higher Power/Self) and external guides (the group and its steps) may lead her to seek and sustain relationships that reflect a more empowered model. As ritualists cross the threshold, they temporarily exit from the status system and find themselves in immediate, nonhierarchical contact with their compadres. A prime quality of liminality is an I-thou ethos which Turner calls "communitas." In this liminal moment distinctions of wealth and class are suspended in favor of equality and homogeneity.

For Turner, communitas represent those who exile themselves and call into question the whole of normative order. They are volunteers who "pull out" of the status quo to reach meaningful planes of existence and follow "higher callings"—mystic life-styles, counterculture groups, or socialist bastions. Incest survivors seeking healing through Twelve-Step spirituality groups may fit this definition of communitas insofar as they refuse to remain ashamed and silent regarding the abuse they have experienced in their family of origin. In many ways, the woman who rejects violence against herself and names this violence is not only a survivor but a revolutionary against hierarchically gendered family systems and sexually abusive family secrets. By their resistance to violence and their newly found solidarity with other resisters, they invite all who will listen to rethink traditional "familial" arrangements.

Communitas—like Twelve-Step groups—have a unifying element that works to make the group cohesive. All members have been "wounded," in one way or another and feel there is nowhere else to turn for help. In Turnerian perspective, the Twelve-Step group models communitas, in that "their rituals involve [sharing] cooperatively," and "secular distinctions of rank, office and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant." In a Twelve-Step group, each member speaks on a "feeling" level—status, position, or title remains anonymous. "It is in liminality that communitas emerges . . . if not as a spontaneous expression of sociability, at least in a cultural and normative form—stressing equality and comradeship as norms."

In North America, whose citizens are relationally hungry and lacking in meaningful ritual, it is not surprising that so many people find comfort in Twelve-Step meetings. The groups provide a predictable format where people can attempt to be relatively honest and open about who they are and from where they have come. This may explain in part why so many
people stay in groups for so long. There are few other places for them to find authentic interaction and support.

**How Twelve-Step Groups Help**

*A Place to Share Feelings*

The white fathers told us, “I think therefore I am,” and the Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, “I feel, therefore I can be free.”

Twelve-Step groups have helped survivors by offering them a financially cost-free environment where they can gather and receive psychosocial support. For many survivors of incest who attend anonymous meetings, such an environment also facilitates their breaking the silence of their incest history. A slogan of the groups is “To heal you must feel.” The groups offer the survivor a place to share feelings that were not safe to express in her family-of-origin. For most of the women interviewed for this study, a multiplicity of feelings was bottled up for years and consequently manifested in a somatization—the survivor’s self-destructive relationship to her body and to food.

Emotional venting is only a small part of what the Twelve-Step program offers. The focus in meetings remains largely on learning from a common source of instructions (the Twelve Steps and Twelve-Step literature). Sharing day-to-day experiences in such groups reduces shame and isolation, fosters practical problem-solving, and instills a sense of possibility for a more functional future. Through the sponsor program, the survivor is able to connect with like-experienced others who promise to support her in maintaining her “sobriety” (nondestructive behavior with food or other symptomatic habit).

Through listening and connecting her own story to the stories of “recovery” told by other survivors who struggle with food problems, she gives language to these experiences. In such a group a survivor may be inspired to break the destructive coping habits fueled by isolation. In some anonymous groups specifically for survivors of incest (Incest Survivors Anonymous [ISA] or Survivors of Incest Anonymous [SIA]), members are permitted to share their sexually traumatic history, their relationship to a present habit/addiction(s) that they use to avoid the pain of their past, as well as to safely rage against their offenders. ISA/SIA
groups reframe the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous by saying, “We admit we are powerless over our pasts,” thereby giving themselves frequent reminders that they were not responsible for the sexual violence against them. Unfortunately, this language does nothing to equip survivors to resist future violence against them.

Anonymous programs are places where many survivors seeking spiritual help look to imagine a nonoffending spiritual power that can give them courage, strength to resist further abuse, and hope for “right” relationships.

When I asked the survivors how they were helped by the Twelve-Step program, they gave me the following accounts.

**Spiritual Strength**

Cherise believes “there’s no other way to explain how I survived other than direct intervention from God.” She also claimed her “willingness to ask for help has grown as a result of being a member of several Twelve-Step groups.” In her words:

_I am_ a miracle. . . . My faith is everything. I came into Overeater’s Anonymous four and a half years ago, and I have four-and-a-half years of abstinence. I came in weighing over 320 pounds, wearing a 30-and-a-half dress. I’ve lost about 160 pounds; I wear a size 12 dress. At that time my blood sugar was 280; today it’s 80. My blood pressure was 200 over 110; my blood pressure today is 120 over 60. I had arthritis, I had a cane; I walk 2 miles today. I couldn’t tie my shoes, I can tie my shoes, I play tennis. All of these miracles have come about because of the Twelve Steps of Overeater’s Anonymous that are spiritually based principles.

Janine seemed to find more support from the Feminist Step group to which she belonged. She described what she liked about the group: “Though I still go to OA, I find I like the Feminist Step group better; it’s based on a spirituality from within.” When I asked Janine about the step that requires turning one’s will and life over to the care of God, she told me this: “I’m uncomfortable with the wording in that step. Rather, I try to transform myself—to turn the abusive voice within into an advocate.”

Melinda reconstructs the Twelve Steps to resonate with a more creation-centered spirituality. When I asked her what she meant by the word _spirituality_, she said:
Self-Help or Self-Harm?

Spirituality is a sort of integrated sense of myself, and of all my qualities, good and bad, you know? It's the ability to perceive all of myself with compassion and a sense of connection with all of life actually, you know? And the bottom line is I see sort of like hands holding it, you know, caring hands holding the whole earth. A sense of caring for all that is, whether it's a tree, or whether it's a deer or someone in Brazil or wherever. It's—it's life. And it's that sense of reverence for it and a desire to do whatever one can to protect and cherish it. Whether it's someone else's life or my life, that's what spirituality is to me . . . a sense of dignity or integrity towards the uniqueness of all those lives . . . allowing them to unfold in their own way and in their own time with their own mistakes.

It is clear that these survivors are searching for some power to aid them in finding hope. Whether it is direct intervention from “God,” the nurturing quality perceived in compassion for all beings, or an advocate voice within, the desire to find courage to resist despair and further violence against them is paramount for these survivors. Such “liberating ideology” may even be shared. In the case of Melinda, she deeply wants “to find a safe community where I can experience and share the reverence for life that I have known.” Janine also claims: “I want to help others find their own ‘inner advocate’ and I want to participate in groups where people are being self-affirming, actualizing themselves, and letting their true power emerge in ways that are ultimately empowering to many.”

Social Skills and Support

For some survivors peer support was never part of their childhood, due to their deep sense of isolation and shame. The Twelve-Step groups seem to be places to practice relating to male and female peers. Samantha says: “I have gained support. Some social skills. The feeling that I’m not alone, you know, other people have these issues. It’s a very slow process. You know, trusting. Trust is a real huge issue, trusting people.” Samantha, like Cherise, has a sense that the meetings are giving her the safe—nonsexual—opportunities to learn to trust.22 She told me she prefers the Feminist Step group because “there are things that I can say to females that I can’t say to males. I feel more comfortable with women than I do with men.”

Renita told me that what she really likes about the Twelve-Step programs are “the phone calls [laugh].” Somewhat nervously she said, “Just knowing that there are other people out there like me. And it’s
okay. You know, I'm not the only one who sticks her fingers down her throat [laughs]. That's a big one, I think. And then just knowing that, you know, I can talk about something, there's somebody who cares, or somebody who's 'faking it till they're making it.' ” For Renita and for many survivors, Twelve-Step groups are more functional than the family they grew up in. Problematic rules of “keeping up the appearances of a happy family” do not apply at the meetings and are in fact exposed as a destructive force that has worked to keep the survivor alienated and ashamed for her anger at familially imposed silence. In these groups she can make connections with other survivors and strategize on how to cope with traumatic experiences (flashbacks, numbing, hypervigilance, mistrust of others) as well as how to deal with basic elements in life and relationships—something many of these survivors were never taught in their families-of-origin.

Exploring Incest and a Wounded Sexuality

Haddock told me the following:

The group that's been the most helpful to me is Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). It's basically a group for grown-up incest survivors. Once you get through the tangible Twelve Steps, you've gotta deal with the intangible. And the reason I'm not saying Survivors of Incest Anonymous is 'cause I've very seldom seen people there who wanted to get well, they just wanted to wallow in it. And that's all AA is, I would say. At SLAA everyone there is looking at their adult dysfunctional sexuality, and how it relates to God. And how it's an outgrowth of the incest. I would say very few people [in SLAA] don't know that they're incest survivors. I'm sure they all are, but 95 percent of them admit it and are working on it.

Ideally, a group facilitates a survivor's constructive survival instincts, resulting in a collective wisdom that is greater than the sum of its parts. It takes everyone beyond where they started. For a group to be effective, there needs to be a balance of structure, receptivity to change, creativity, and room for individual differences. Groups operate at both a conscious level and an unconscious level, where people's buried or repressed needs operate outside their awareness. It is important to realize the power of group norms. People have been lifted to new heights in groups, and they have been abused and led to violate their own values.23

For one lesbian survivor I interviewed in this study, “coming out” in these groups “was not an option.” She told me, “The one time I did
share that I was a lesbian I had two people come over to me and invite me to lunch so they could help me see what they termed 'my sinful lifestyle.'" There are Twelve-Step groups for lesbian and gay people as well as for bisexuals. But such groups are usually found only in metropolitan areas.

The two women who stated that they felt confused about their sexual identity said they could never explore their sexual ambivalence in meetings. "The heterosexism is in the air in most meetings in my town," said one of the survivors. The group Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous is a spin-off group of regular Twelve-Step meetings. Though the preamble does have a caveat that "renders sexual preference irrelevant," such a message seems to work as a euphemism: "Don't bring your specifically Gay/Bi/Lesbian concerns to this meeting." However, sexual conversations are more often limited to examining that which is pathological about one's sexual appetite. Such groups are not seen as places to explore sexual desire, expression, and identity.

Traditional anonymous groups work toward the goal of making conscious the narrowly personal and pathological. They leave the rest unconscious. That is, influences other than the narrowly defined personal ones remain obscured. Feminist Step groups, now burgeoning all over the country, involve an awareness and understanding of addictions and everyday experiences, as organized according to gender and other culturally salient variables. As sociopolitical meanings are changed and explored in the groups, the invisible is made visible. This is not a simple cognitive experience, but one that is embodied and highly full of feeling. It is consciousness as used by Paulo Freire and certain feminists, the making visible of women externally and internally, in society and to themselves. Such goals should be a major aspect of feminist therapy and of support groups for women in general.

**How Twelve-Step Groups Hinder**

*Individual Disease/Individual Cure*

There is no doubt that Twelve-Step programs have helped people get through a lot of days. But they do nothing to decipher or change the larger context in which time passes, especially in a "Just Say No" culture that would like to wipe out progressive gains for good.
Such groups fail female survivors of incest (and people outside the dominant power structure) by placing too much emphasis on self-blame and self-responsibility. The Twelve-Step programs' core concept—personal accountability for one's actions—is decidedly acontextual. The responsibility for both addiction and recovery rests squarely on the individual. In particular, according to social theorist Ellen Herman, "The programs' philosophy that addiction is a disease emphasizes the person and problem in isolation from any outside social forces." This may ease some of the guilt that people feel for pain that they and others have experienced, but it can be debilitating to one who may have logical and adaptive reasons to turn to methods of escape. Cherise's case illustrates the damage one can undergo through privileging a disease or sin-redemption model for addictions:

Everything I do is God-centered; I am very theocentric. Everything I do is spiritually based. I have a disease that is self-centered; my disease wants me to stay here all day and think about what I don't have. So I don't have a telephone. Fine! I have a house, I have food, I have friends, I have help, I have my love. I'm in a program that tells me to do a verbal gratitude list. I don't care what you don't have; everybody knows that, you tell them.

The facts that Cherise has been on welfare and is a single mother (as well as a survivor of incest and sole survivor of a suicidal family) are never taken to be sources of her destructive use of food and alcohol; rather, the problem is her "cunning and baffling disease." If Cherise were to emphasize her particular history, she would be considered to be begging for a "pity party" or "rationalizing." Many Twelve-Step members believe that exploring the "whys" of addiction leads to making excuses that will inevitably lead to "picking up"—indulging in their destructive habits. Individual disease language, and the Twelve-Step groups themselves, frequently refer people back to themselves with the message that their "grandiose will" and "old negative ways of thinking and behaving" are the sources of their pain. Consequently, only new, positive approaches, nurtured by the programs themselves, are thought to produce "serenity." As one member said: "The primary focus in Twelve-Step groups must be on the addiction and not on any group's social inequities that the program is not designed to cure." Involvement in social change as part of "recovery" is left unexplored. Forget about instigating a social revolution!

Speakers in most meetings—whether recounting stories of assault,
struggles with work, or relationships—rarely mention directly the realities of physical power, economic inequality, homophobia, racial bigotry, or sexual coercion, even in instances where these were clearly being described. When incest is mentioned, unless that is the groups’ particular focus (as in Incest Survivors Anonymous or Survivors of Incest Anonymous), and even sometimes when incest is the focus, sociopolitical analysis is not encouraged. Rather, “naming” the particular offender and “letting go” of her personal shame is seen to be the aim of recovery, as if a social focus and personal accountability are mutually exclusive dynamics.

Linking the micropolitics of a survivor’s emotional pain and destructive coping habits to the politics of her family-of-origin is not enough. She must also see the connection between her incest history and her consequent survival skills as revealing the macropolitics of a sexually oppressive and violent culture. In my belief, social consciousness-raising is a necessary step for a survivor’s empowerment. She will be better able to find “serenity” if she sees that her “sanity” (in Twelve-Step jargon) is not dependent on her atonement, through taking her personal inventory, nor through redemption by God or Higher Power; rather, she is not to surrender her will and self but reclaim her will and self through making these larger connections to her “personal” behavior and history. Such connections may inspire her to feel the righteous rage that may motivate her to take action toward social change. This insight can also deepen her compassion toward her coping history and her process of finding support in the present.

Polly Young-Eisendrath, in her article “Entanglements: Food, Sex, and Aggression in Female Development,” discusses what women need to do to overcome the double-binds placed on them in a patriarchal culture. These binds are that whether a woman resists her socialization and asserts her right to be authoritative, or accepts the effects of her culturally displaced authority (onto men and God), she will feel and hear she is wrong. Either she will be too demanding and too dominant, or too helpless, too dependent. There is no way to get it right.29 “Double-binds drive women to destructive behavior with food. Since there is no way to get right within the binds it is necessary first to reveal them, and then to step outside them. By acknowledging you can’t get it right, it becomes easier to respect and value the choices you do make.”30 Twelve-Step groups, far from offering women a place to deconstruct the sociocultural
and psychological double-binds in which they feel stuck, instead offer false solutions: “If I surrender my will to a Higher Power, I’ll be healed from my addiction. If I’m healed, I’ll be free.”

**Distrust of the Demonic Ego**

Another central problem with Twelve-Step ideology is its emphasis and distrust of the “willful” ego and the need to surrender one’s will to that of one’s Higher Power—who ultimately “knows better.” The sin-and-redemption theme of Christianity in the Twelve Steps focuses on deflating the ego and does little to activate the will and internal power necessary for self-respect and appropriate self-defense.

The surrender of the ego/self and distrust of personal will are built into the Twelve Steps and are visible throughout the literature. There is an emphasis on “being willing” to take a “fearless moral inventory” of all one’s character defects—as if all present suffering with one’s addiction (destructive behavior) is about one’s own character flaws or burial of those flaws. There is no sense that destructive behavior patterns might be the result of being raped or exploited. The source of one’s “addictions” is seen to be one’s stubborn will to control one’s own life. As I have said before, it is in surrendering one’s will that one is promised redemption—freedom from abusive relating. Personal desire is frequently seen at odds with the Higher Power’s will. As in many cults and even in much Christian discourse, self-skepticism seems to be the rule rather than the exception.

Problems with food and weight are seen as the result of being permanently and individually diseased, stubborn, and “unteachable,” rather than as adaptive reactions to unbearable pasts. The solution to this “disease” is promised to all who sincerely put into practice, “in all their affairs,” the Twelve Steps and their principles—it is an individual-based solution. There is no acknowledgment of a social context or lack of a social context that might be part of the problem. Rather, the Twelve Steps, with their focus on personal faults, shortcomings, and surrender, pathologize the survivor and keep her energy directed inward. She is discouraged from making broader connections to social politics in the world around her. Not only is an apolitical meeting politically and psychologically disempowering to a survivor of incest, it can work to narrow her contact with the world around her. In Käsl’s words, “While
people gain support in meetings and have loving experiences and are encouraged to help other (addicted) people, the basic construct of the program does not provide a path toward a transcendent kind of love embracing all people.” An attitude of suspicion is taken toward those people who are not in Twelve-Step recovery programs. They are often referred to as “earthlings.” Severing ties with people outside “the program” is seen as part of a sound and sustainable recovery.

**Loyalty and Unity**

Loyalty to the ideology of the Twelve Steps (rather than expressing conflict) are also built into the “Twelve Traditions.” Group unity (rather than personal opinion) and remaining apolitical are required under the guise of remaining focused on one aim: remaining sober (nondestructive with food or a destructive habit). In fact, avoiding public controversy at all costs is one of the most trenchant features of such programs. It is as if the only logical way to preserve internal cohesiveness and prevent groups from being diverted from their purpose by secondary issues is by repressing conflict. Such guidelines not only parallel the rules of most families where abuse goes on, they mirror the discourse and practices of fascist nations. As these guidelines are rigidly adhered to, they reflect a *loyalist faith* or a stage of development reflective of early adolescence. This is a stage when people shift their loyalty ties from parents and teachers to their peers, which acts as a salve in times of dramatic change (liminality). Belonging and acceptance help build a sense of security, of course, but too often people in Twelve-Step groups (whatever their age) are already stuck in adolescence, due to past abuse. They may really be needing communal help to move into a more self-empowered interdependence. Nurturing their inner authority, expressing a wide range of emotions, tolerating gray areas in their behavior, and learning to connect to their power are all necessary steps that can help a survivor build a center of meaning.

Below, I asked each survivor what she would change about her Twelve-Step group.

**Blames the Victim**

Cherise sighed nostalgically as she recalled her history of attending Twelve-Step groups. She resisted offering any criticism of the program
and called such attempts “the grandiosity of my disease.” What Cherise wanted Overeaters Anonymous to be rougher on its members. In her words:

I’m saddened by the lack of recovery in OA, particularly in [my town]. It breaks my heart to hear people say I must be one of the ones who can’t be helped by the program due to “unteachability”. And the reason that I see that in my four-and-a-half years here in OA, that it doesn’t happen, is that we don’t use the literature of AA. We baby one another here. I mean addictions to food are a form of suicide and it takes years to recover. What we do to ourselves are degradation rituals, but we do it to ourselves because we’ve been told by some perpetrator we should.

It is clear, in the case of Cherise, that being “held accountable” for self-destructive behavior has been an important aspect of her recovery. However, the connections she makes from her destructive behavior to her perpetrator needs to be explored further. Cherise’s story reveals to me that her “Higher Power” is imbued with qualities of her perpetrator—the image is unsympathetic, policing, and positive that her will is, at base, evil. Too often Twelve-Step groups see comprehending the sociopolitical context of one’s history as irrelevant to recovery. Having empathy for a survivor’s traumatic past can be dangerous if it “coddles the addict.” Such empathy is thought to give the addict fuel to justify “using”—returning to her addictive behavior. This harsh attitude blames the victim and seldom facilitates longer-term empowerment for the survivor.

Diet Mentality Maintained

Abstinence or swearing off certain foods, eating plans, and weighing and measuring food are behavioral coping techniques sometimes suggested for bingers or self-starvers in Overeater’s Anonymous. Such plans may aid a survivor in a short-term crisis, but in the longer term such techniques will not facilitate a survivor’s move toward freedom from the tyranny of slenderness or the repressed feelings embedded in her body from a sexually abusive past.

Understanding what motivates and sustains an incest survivor’s behavior and preoccupation with food, weight, and shape perception is central to moving from symptomizing her gendered and abuse-related stress. A program for addiction recovery is the wrong model for dealing
with the reality of incest. Incest is not a disease, habit, or addictive trait—it’s a social crime with immense traumatic effects.

Abuse of Power

Renita recalls: “In Alanon [an anonymous group for adult-children or partners of addicted people], I’ve often had too many leaders who talk too much; I think they’ve got a lot of anger. I feel like leaders abuse their power.” The lack of prescribed ways to voice uneasiness when people are offensive or abusing their authority is intensified in Twelve-Step programs primarily due the subjective messages for handling tensions that arise: “Remember to put principles before personalities,” and “Don’t take anyone’s inventory, focus on your own character defects.” Both guidelines encourage people to set aside differences and conflict for the common good of the group.

In Renita’s case she is thrown back into a pattern much like her family of origin, in which she must deny problems, avoid talking about them, and keep the anxiety about abuses inside her body. When a group colludes in the denial of a problem, it is tremendously scary for a member (especially if she has a history of being abused) to say out loud what everyone is denying. Much like a cult or fundamentalist religion, Twelve-Step groups encourage loyalty, discourage questioning, and see themselves as above reproach, which leads people to set aside their skepticism or forget to trust their own instincts. Loyalty, self-sacrifice, passive-dependence (on a powerful other), and self-doubt are exactly the opposite traits a survivor of incest needs to nurture. Questioning the status quo and challenging her social “feminine” conditioning are paramount features to a former victim’s liberation.

Unsafe Open Policy

Natalie reported feeling uncomfortable with the open-meeting policy: “Sometimes I feel like anybody can come, and so it can be a really scary place to be because people who aren’t at all safe can come, ’cause the only requirement is a desire to, you know, desire to stop eating compulsively, a desire to stop drinking or a desire to have healthy relationships. There’s no screening at the door.” Natalie had experiences “where people just really weren’t too safe,” and said quietly, “I felt
really uncomfortable in the meetings with volatile people in the rooms. I don’t know how I would change that though; I mean, I wouldn’t want to deny anybody the experience of being able to recover.” Such altruism on Natalie’s part can be dangerous; the reader may remember that Janine was raped by a fellow Twelve-Stepper from Adult Children of Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Because most Twelve-Step groups do not restrict membership or attendance at meetings, the group boundaries may be too flexible for someone who is in the beginning phase of her “recovery” or memory retrieval. The survivors of sexual trauma who are just beginning to remember their history are usually extremely frightened and flooded with intrusive symptoms, such as nightmares and flashbacks. Hearing the details of others’ experiences may trigger her own intrusive symptoms to such a degree that she is able neither to listen empathically nor to accept emotional support. Survivors are advised to wait six months to a year before considering joining a group.38

Both Natalie and Samantha told me that they were also in closed therapy groups with six to eight other female survivors. Samantha informed me that her therapy group work was initially fairly cognitive and educational. It provided a forum for exchanging information on the traumatic symptoms, and sharing strategies for self-care and self-protection, before it preceded deep-memory retrieval, and later, social-assertiveness strategizing.

I believe the power of having female survivors work together to “hear each other into speech”39 is the most helpful model for mending her sense of living a divided life. A survivor’s trauma is imbedded in her body, and her habit is to rectify such trauma by focusing on purifying and escaping herself through “fixing” her appearance. Both the female body and female appearance are charged with conflict that is best dissected among equals, without the gaze of a male observer. Even a benevolent male therapist is not recommended during the first two years of a survivor’s memory retrieval, if she was sexually abused by a male. The politics of empowerment can be hindered in therapeutic arrangements that mirror her traumatic past. Too, having a male therapist—a culturally empowered other—can keep her in a romantic-like arrangement that may not mitigate her fantasies of being rescued/redeemed by a powerful other.

In a Twelve-Step group there is no guarantee that the survivor will be
protected against being flooded with overwhelming images and feelings or boundary crossings by other members. Therapist-led or self-selected support groups give a survivor more of a feeling of control regarding her safety. Thus, she is better able to insure that the environment will be consistently safe and one that fosters the development of her strength and coping abilities as well as self-protection.

Though Twelve-Step groups have guidelines against verbal boundary violations (“no cross-talk”) there is no protection against physical boundary exploitation. For many survivors, saying “no” to any physical advance by another is not in their repertoire of experiences. Same-sex incest groups exist but many of the Twelve-Step groups are mixed. Because physical boundary violators come in both genders, there are no guarantees regarding safety. The majority of these groups are all-inclusive, “there is no screening at the door”; a survivor must be very wary.

Too Much God-Talk

A key agenda in Twelve-Step recovery groups is that each member “come to believe in a God of their understanding” who “can restore them to sanity.” In the following case studies we see that the notion of a God (let alone one with omnipotent diagnostic and psychiatric skills) is problematic for some of the survivors.

Janine claimed she disliked her Twelve-Step group’s emphasis on needing a Higher Power “to get out of the mess they’re in.” She said she felt pressured to believe. Janine understood the need for help but could not consistently “believe in an omnipotent God as a personified being that’s external to me that is in control or has a plan for my life.” She described her understanding of power as “something neutral.” Power could be abused or used to “create fairness.”

Trusting God or a Higher Power was also a painful impossibility for Samantha: “The only problem I have is in trusting a Higher Power. Only! But I don’t know whether I would actually want to change the language or anything. The language is what’s hard for me about the Twelve Steps.” Perhaps because people feel their own recovery to be fragile, problematizing the traditional discourse is anathema in meetings.

Melinda said she would change the concept of a Higher Power as “something that cannot be personified.” She resists the Twelve-Step caveat regarding the unformed nature of God: “Even though they say
your God can be ‘a God of your understanding however you want to define Him’ I have a problem with still referring to it as ‘him’ or ‘her’ for that matter. God is not a person—that’s too limiting. I even hate the word God, come to think of it... it’s too limiting too. Even Higher Power is too limiting.” Melinda said she preferred the notion of a higher consciousness: “I think it’s inherent inside people somehow. I can’t believe in a male God with a beard in heaven. I’ve—I’ve never been able to do that. Even as a child.” As a child Melinda saw Jesus as an invisible brother who comforted her. Melinda’s real brother, four years older than she, joined his friends in gang-raping her. She went on to say: “I don’t feel right about worshipping any person and that’s where the Twelve Steps disappoint me most.”

Melinda, Janine, and Samantha articulate the problem of the Twelve Steps’ double message about God: “Made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” The wording of this step is slippery. One is limited in one’s choice if God is to remain a “He.” Others may have a completely different concept of a higher power—as female, genderless, or a life energy/spirit. In the case of Janine and Melinda the terms “God” and even “Higher Power” are so problematic as to be useless.

For these three survivors, the notion of passively and mindlessly turning their wills and lives over to the care of God or a Higher Power is tantamount to turning their lives and wills over to the care of male doctors, clergy, husbands, politicians, or other authority figures—it is disastrous. It reinforces obedience to male authorities and sets up further Cinderella complexes in which women are indoctrinated into trusting that men will take care of them, when in fact they more often exploit or control such women.

Paternalism Unchecked

Analysis of the rampant paternalistic messages or the politics of one’s God image is rarely, if ever, encouraged in traditional Twelve-Step groups. Women like Renita could benefit from analyzing the psychosocial politics that lay behind their self-image and the image of their Higher Power or God. In her words: “My relationship with my Higher Power is based on what I used to look for in men. My Higher Power is my support, my place where I get validation of what I am. The relation-
ship we have helps me define me every day in terms of how I see myself. It's a more completeness of me. That's where my purpose, I think, comes from." Notice Renita refers to herself as an object, she is a "what" rather than a "who." In her home, she lacked affirming relational *mirrors* to give her purpose and validation and so sought to earn such meaning from men outside of her family—securing their favor through a thin and culturally attractive body; that failing, she sought it through her Higher Power. The social and psychological sources of her search must be explored if she is to deconstruct the multiple layers of her adaptive and destructive patterns with food and relationships.

Consciousness-raising that helps Twelve-Step members understand the classed, raced, and gendered nature of their plight and their struggle might aid them to find power to become politically involved in standing up for their and other women's rights for economic, racial, social, and relational respect. In the groups I have observed since 1985 I have never heard anyone explore the politics behind their God/Higher Power imagery. Or if they did, it was met with sententious responses: "You must have faith," "Just trust H. P. (Higher Power)," or "Remember it's not thy will but God's will." Or as Samantha heard from a Protestant minister who runs several Twelve-Step meetings in the church over which he presides, "All your Higher Power wants is for you to be happy!" In other words, "Don't speak up about your socio-personal discontent."

When Janine spoke at a meeting about never being able to forgive her family for the abuse and abandonment she felt in relation to them, she told me, "A long-time Twelve Stepper spoke after me, claiming 'recovery is about faith not feelings!'"

**Self-Blaming**

"The last thing women and minorities need to do is hand their wills over to others to control. To do so is at the heart of oppression. Our will is the source of our power for good." Most of us need to expose the anti-power messages that we have received from traditional sin-redemption theology which proposes that we were born sinful and are in need of (external) redemption from our wicked flesh or deviant wills. According to Samantha:
I think that the Twelve-Steps have a certain amount of blame. The notion of "taking a fearless personal inventory" and focusing on changing yourself to fix the source of your problems seems a bit harsh to me, especially if you've been victimized and your pain is not about self-pity. Because you are not responsible for your abuse when you are a little child; you can't do anything about it.

What is problematic with the "fearless" moral inventory idea is that it assumes the one with chronic destructive behavior ("an addiction") is morally guilty. This may be applicable for some who attend Twelve-Step programs (e.g., perpetrators of assault, narcissists with grandiose egos), but for marginalized people and particularly for survivors of abuse it is counterproductive.

A moral inventory was a core element of the moral rearmament movement (from the Oxford Group—the parent group of AA), which proposed that leaders and businessmen and those who held open power in government assess the harm that their need for money, status, and control has done to other people. Victims of oppression are rarely in such power positions as to analyze how they have abused their power. Most people, particularly the oppressed, tend to blame themselves for their abuse, and this step often reinforces self-blame.

Recovery also includes reclaiming and enlarging one's inner strength and will, not surrendering it. Most survivors who have survived have not been encouraged to notice the powerful resources within them that have enabled such survival. Self-confidence is seen as a slippery slope to sin (addiction) in much Christian discourse as well as in many Twelve-Step meetings.

What Can the Church Do?

For both Stephanie and Margery, belonging to a Twelve-Step group was not effective support. In Margery's words, "I could never open up in those meetings especially when the group members were always changing." Stephanie claimed, "There is no way my recovery could include powerlessness. Forget it—I've already done powerlessness as a child!" Instead, both women sought female support through friendships in their denominational churches. Natalie seemed to rely on a therapist group and Twelve-Step group for her empowerment but remains a member of a Christian church. I asked the three women the question: What would you like to see change in your church to facilitate healing from sexual
abuse? Stephanie answered this way: “I don’t have any real hope that the church can do anything. I mean there are some people who preach against violence in the church and that’s a little point of light, but it’s not gonna have any effect. The church is dead [long pause].” And Margery:

I would like to see people lift up the issue so it’s not a secret anymore, even hear sermons that deal responsibly with the issues. Pastors should know the police, attorneys, Youth and Family Service agencies, shelters, so they can resource women and children. They should also have safe places to offer women and children fleeing abusive settings. The church could be a real resource if pastors made the effort to be informed on the issues. I know a couple of pastors who have done this and though it’s a lot of work it is necessary work.

Natalie sees it this way:

I’d like to see the church liberated from patriarchy. Oh, gosh! Well, it wouldn’t even look like the church any more. I’d like to see the church be a place where the abuse that does go on in the world is talked about openly and honestly. And, what else? Just that other people’s realities be taken as just as valid, whether they’re women, physically disabled, or who are a different color or ethnicity, or you know, where everybody’s truths are just as valid [her voice hoarsens here], that it’s not just one person’s set of ideas or truths that everybody else has to follow. I could go on forever about the church being liberated from patriarchy, but I’m losing my voice.

Pastors and pastoral counselors can be a resource (through referral) to people involved in sexually and physically volatile household climates. They need to immerse themselves and deconstruct the legal aspects, the gender politics, the psychology, as well as the theology of the issues surrounding abuse and its prevention.

**Politically Empowering Spirituality**

The traditional Christian sin-and-redemption model sees humans as born sinful and in need of salvation—baptism, confession, deflation of self—a politically empowering spirituality sees all beings as born worthy of respect and wholeness. Instead of fearing that our passions and desires will run wild, we can consider them part of a whole, to be enjoyed in balance with responsibility and care. Thus politically empowering spirituality takes us past fear, control, and duality toward integration.

[Erotic or life-loving spirituality] takes us beyond “recovery narcissism,” where people become obsessed with recovery perfection, ridding themselves of charac-
ter defects and shortcomings, and constantly analyzing their behavior. They lose perspective of the external world, the naturalness of imperfection and the wonder and mystery of life. What is needed is a balance between inner understanding and outer connectedness.\textsuperscript{44}

The word \textit{spiritual} is such a loaded term in any case—a term so disembodied by Western philosophical and religious thought that it is hard to understand spiritual identity as part of our bodies and our social and emotional lives. Philosophy and religion scholar Tess Tessier uses the term “spiritual” to refer to “our most fundamental identity and connections to ourselves, to others, and to the world, whether or not that identity involves a relationship with some transcendent power.”\textsuperscript{45}

When a spirituality group underemphasizes the political and psychological reality of the past, it grossly discounts the reality that childhood sexual abuse affects a survivor at her very core of being as well as the deep effect on every relationship she has. They support society’s refusal to acknowledge its complicity in facilitating a male-dominated culture (where women’s and children’s bodies are objects of male entitlement).

A survivor’s relationship to food and her body reveals most vividly her sociopolitical and spiritual fragmentation. Spirituality must serve an empowering role by connecting the survivor to her self, to nurturing relationships, to her body, to her memories, as well as enable the integration of her trauma. Such work can then facilitate the important element of reconnecting to a community that offers her faith in her strength and “right” relationships, affirmation of her struggle, and reclamation of power, as well as its participation in the political resistance to further violence against women. A community that only offers a survivor support in “abstinence”—self-restraint—grossly neglects her developing a fuller sense of her power.

\textbf{Counsel to Counselors}

What counselors who work with women survivors of incest or eating problems can learn from Twelve-Step groups is the crucial role that nonshaming and safe peers have in nurturing self-compassion in the survivor. There is a parallel relationship to food abuse and sexual abuse. The degree of self-destructive behavior often parallels the degree to which a female has internalized the cultural and familial messages of her sexual devaluation and objectification. The chronicity of her eating
problems often mirrors the chronicity of her sexual objectification in the home and family. The significance of these connections may facilitate new approaches to understanding the social and religious sources of female self-destructive impulses, specifically those found in women who experience a desire to flee from their female flesh through an eating disorder.46

Counselors and advocates who work with empowering women survivors of incest and eating problems must not only understand the gendered symptoms of a survivor’s suffering—in her depriving stance toward her body—but they must also work with the survivor to see behind the disguise of her eating behavior. For a survivor of incest, food is a double-edged tool to block or defend the survivor from being overwhelmed by her painful past and to carve out ways of mattering in her culture—which usually includes self- and bodily-deprivation. The counselor must realize that until the survivor has more functional tools to express her self-power as well as her pain, shame, and anger, she will feel compelled to use that which has enabled her survival thus far—food refusal, compulsive overeating, or binge-purging behaviors. A counselor’s role can be to promote the survivor’s empowerment through validating her remembering and naming her incest experience.

The first gift a counselor can offer is the most obvious—she or he can ask the question, “Has anyone in your past touched you in ways that made you feel uncomfortable?” If the survivor answers in the affirmative, and indicates incestuous or invasive touch, it is a good idea to take that claim seriously, and work with her, if necessary, to find a counselor who deals specifically with incest. Such a counselor should also be sensitive to the issues of eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, and gender socialization.

A combination of quality one-on-one incest therapy and conscious same-sex feminist support groups may be the context out of which a survivor will be encouraged to see social and interpersonal connections. Such work involves not just naming the unnamed but the unnamable, speaking not just the unspoken but the unspeakable, exposing the impossible values that keep women living divided lives and in double-binds. Socially empowering support groups should work to return a survivor to her own vision, and, in this way, she will be able to contribute to a feminist cultural vision. For once a survivor is encouraged to see for herself; nothing ever looks the same.
Theologically, a pastoral counselor who is counseling a Christian survivor has an important role in facilitating her spiritual reparation. The pastoral counselor may feel like a punching bag for the patriarchal mistakes of Christianity; nevertheless, such a counselor can be a powerful balm to the broken-hearted and enraged sufferer of incest. Such a counselor will need to make sure she has a quality network of support and a life-style that is socially and physically nurturing; this work is quite draining and can be a theological challenge to even the most well-balanced “person of faith.”

If the pastoral counselor is male, and the survivor was abused by a male, he may want to support the survivor by helping her find a female therapist (preferably feminist) who is conscious of incest therapy and same-sex group work. The survivor should be asked what she would prefer and encouraged to take her time in finding a qualified therapist who feels safe and theologically open-minded.

Imagine hearing what Stephanie told me: “When I was six years old I often told my brother how much I hated Jesus. Once I told him I saw Jesus nailed upside down on the cross by his penis and that he died struggling to free himself. My brother begged me to stop telling him any more about Jesus’ death.” Working to support survivors as they retrieve memories and express outrageous pain, shame, and rage about their past does indeed require helping professionals who are socially empowered, ones who are supported in processing the trauma of hearing survivor’s horrendous histories and painful coping styles.

Space to express her history and a nonjudgmental (empathic) witness to her present experiences are the best gifts a pastoral counselor can offer a survivor. An incest survivor must be given the theological room she needs to free herself from her painful experiences not mitigated by her religious upbringing. “A survivor needs to be able to express her negative feelings toward the church, her faith, and God. Counselors of incest survivors must be able to accept this. If they are unable to do this, they must be able to say so and to help the woman arrange for other counseling.” 47

When pastoral counselors are unable to understand the way a woman views God and her religious tradition, and consequently launch into a defense of both, they cannot give the woman the room she needs to let go of those aspects of religion that oppress her.48 Very often a survivor who feels straightjacketed by the patriarchal doctrine of her history will
turn to self-help settings (like Twelve-Step anonymous programs) to gain a kind of critical freedom.

Twelve-Step spiritual recovery programs have saved many survivors from taking their own lives. The fellowship, the spiritual "hope" offered, and the ongoing support groups at no cost have been life-saving for many male and female survivors who seek spiritual community and help from a nontraditional spiritual practice. Ironically, such a program offers theologically little that is different from the patriarchal elements of Western and other religious traditions.

It is a good idea for a survivor who is spiritually inclined to find a politically empowering spirituality group—one that may lead her to an involvement in claiming her political power through activism and consciousness-raising. Political consciousness-raising must be seen as part of any therapeutic approach, especially in later stages of therapy. Initially, the micropolitics of incest and a woman’s eating disorder must be ferreted out of the macropolitical situation in which she lives.

The survivors who are waking up—and wiping the sleep out of their eyes—seem to be moving beyond the patriarchal language of male divinity/hierarchy, sin-redemption, and self-blame for social ills. In so doing they seem better able to make connections between their abuse, their religious discourse, and their self-destructive behaviors with food. As connections are made, survivors can begin to move from having their bodies be the locus of their decidedly gendered conflicts. Instead of being motivated by an unconsciously self-destructive relationship to their bodies, as they are helped to claim their sharp I/eye-sight, they move to an increasingly conscious sense of embodiment.

As survivors recognize that they have internalized the patriarchal voices and gaze of the perpetrator and society, they can begin working together to exorcise the social, the specific, and the religiously sanctioned offending messages. Instead of seeing their bodily appetites as their source of shame and evil, they begin to relate to their bodies as a source of power. With their newfound insights they may seek to enable other women to find freedom from dependence on offenders and fantasy males who will rescue them from their socially enculturated shame.49