

MINERVA: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONCERT

by
Dortell Williams

“Minerva Rising: Concert for Domestic Violence Awareness, October 18th,” read the yellow flier on the dayroom wall. I knew enough about domestic violence awareness to recognize that October is reserved for its promotion. What I didn’t know is what Minerva meant. I looked it up: “The Goddess of Wisdom, especially strategic warfare and the arts, such as crafts, weaving.” It also said that Minerva is the daughter of Zeus and Metis in Greek mythology. Interesting. That business done, I signed up.

I remember thinking, prior to taking a number of domestic violence classes, that domestic violence is relegated to physical abuse of an intimate partner or family member. I have since learned that domestic violence is much more subtle than that. Domestic violence is any behavior that harms an intimate partner or family member through selfish behavior or insensitivity. Controlling, manipulating, neglecting are all forms of domestic violence. Womanizing, belittling or otherwise devaluing are also considered domestic violence. I knew much of this going in, but was curious as to how a “concert” could be dedicated to such a depressing subject.

Before I entered the chow hall, Joan and Patricia were singing, “Don’t Look Back.” Their pleasant melody wafted its way out the door and into the ears of those in line waiting to be processed. Patted down and checked off the attendance list, I entered to see Joan strumming the guitar, her red hair tied in a bun, her eyes inviting each of us as we passed by to find our seats. Patricia, diminutive and smiling, led the songs. The atmosphere was relaxed, warm spirited.

Lorraine, a small black woman, introduced the other guests who had come to warm our hearts and teach us about this pervasive problem. Her tone was serious. She explained that she represented the Valley Oasis Women’s Shelter, in Lancaster. She shared that domestic violence survivors can be male or female. And that domestic violence is about control; control of the person, by isolating them, controlling their finances, their associations, their free time, their bodies. She spoke with passion. She further explained that these are just *some* of the signs of domestic violence. The signs aren’t always overt, as with black eyes. Lorraine also emphasized that intervention is very important in domestic violence situations ... she paused to allow the statement to be absorbed. I felt a chill run down my back. Before inviting Joan and Patricia for more songs, she promised to introduce Rose, a young, confident and cheerful Hispanic lady, a social worker, who would share a moving story that we could all relate to.

Marion Bogan, our instructor for Alternatives to Violence, admonished us not to bite into anyone else’s issues. It was a command. “Let them deal with their issues, and you continue to grow. Just stop, breathe and think, don’t react!” she cautioned. Lorraine followed up by telling us that she has been at Valley Oasis for fifteen years. She shared that when she first started, most shelters did not accept mothers with teen boys, or even young men. As a result, men, women and children ended up homeless. Lorraine described it as the classic example of having good intentions, but doing more harm than good. As I surveyed the room, heads bobbed in agreement. She shared that the policy has since changed, “It had to!” she ended emphatically.

Following a few more moving songs, Ms. Bogan returned to explain how we become what we see and experience in our environments. She shared that some of these experiences; the abuse and the resulting trauma, make us angry, even full of rage, she emphasized. We then project that anger on to others, in many cases on those closest to us. Bogan asked us to reflect on that. She asked us to do some introspection to see where we went left, and to think back to traumatic events in our lives. For those of us who could connect the dots, she told us that it was time to heal, her voice filled with compassion. Bogan explained that transformation begins in the mind, with new thoughts expressed through new behaviors. Those new thoughts and behaviors can be obtained through self-help books, classes and the Bible, she advised.

Lorraine then introduced Rosa, the social worker, as promised. Rosa described the cycle of domestic violence. She said that it starts with the “Honeymoon phase,” where everything is happy and honky dory. Then tension arises, for many reasons: undefined boundaries; ineffective communication; unresolved conflict and triggers, external stressors and the most common, financial distress. The next phase is the “Explosion phase,” where

physical abuse comes into play. The “Remorse phase” follows, with the abuser apologizing, expressing sorrow, and then the loop begins anew at the Honeymoon phase.

Rosa went on to explain that the violence tends to escalate during pregnancy. Men can become more possessive, even jealous of the baby-to-be. For babies born into a domestic violence household, the trauma begins in the womb. When the mother is stressed, her cortisol levels rise, adrenaline is elevated and transferred to the fetus.

“Now let me share a story with you,” an eagerness in Rosa’s voice, “of the story of Johnny, a baby conceived in a domestic violence prone home.” As a fetus, Johnny could hear the abrupt sounds: doors slamming, dishes shattering, causing anxiety for the mother and fetus. The child is born hyper-vigilant, jumpy. This unhealthy state interrupts his normal bonding period, and Johnny fails to develop healthy social connections.

Johnny’s hyper-vigilance spawns trust issues, along with disconnection to others, making it challenging for him to concentrate. He does poorly in social settings, in school and has no idea why. This frustrates Johnny, which turns into anger. Johnny’s anger is eventually expressed through violence. The cycle has become generational, and in some cases it is so prolific, it becomes cultural.

Johnny has little understanding, along with his parents. His household is completely dysfunctional. When called on his maladaptive behaviors, Johnny minimizes and blames others. When the school calls his parents, Johnny’s parents minimize and blame the teachers, the school. Johnny learns to lie and cheat. The people around Johnny distance themselves, deepening Johnny’s mistrust of people and weakening his ability to bond with others. Johnny feels rejected. But he is taught that boys do not cry; he is taught to suck it up, to internalize it – until he explodes. He turns to substance abuse to numb the pain, to assuage his anger and his fear.

This weak young boy puts on a mask of strength, but he’s really afraid of not being accepted, or worse, being victimized. So he victimizes instead. Johnny ends up in juvenile hall, then prison. Finally, one of you, on the inside, guide him toward self-help books and classes. Johnny learns his causative factors, his triggers. He learns new and healthy coping skills: exercising, journaling and art. He learns to trust others and vents to classmates for balanced perspectives. Johnny learns that it is okay to seek help. He also learns to communicate effectively. He adopts pro-social activities, learns the importance of making amends, mentoring others and giving whatever little he can to charitable organizations. Eventually, Johnny is released to live a healthy life.

The concert ends with the song, “It’s a Brand New Day.” I applaud with the rest of the audience. I am so moved, I was compelled to share. There are thousands of other Johnny’s who need and are receptive to help. In fact, Johnny’s parents need as much help as he did, to end the cycle of domestic violence.

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