

HEALING AND POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN AFRICAN AMERICAN  
SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S  
NARRATIVES

by

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores how African American women's narratives present their healing processes after they experience domestic violence. The research was conducted within the framework of Black feminist epistemology. A narrative approach was selected to present the lived experience of each woman in her own words.

Participants were selected through a purposive, snowball sampling procedure. The criteria for participants included three elements: (a) African American women who were native to the United States, (b) experience with domestic violence, and (c) in a self defined process of healing as evidenced by one or more criteria of healing. Six participants were identified and recruited by domestic violence service providers. One participant was subsequently excluded from the research as she had no experiences of being physically abused. The other five participants completed a series of three interviews.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using narrative data analysis procedures that were adapted from Polkinghorne. A storied account for each woman was constructed from the interview data. The stories contain the plot elements, both exterior and interior, that helped each woman move from trauma to healing. The stories also convey biographical elements for each woman that provide a context for the abuse and subsequent healing. Following the stories, the major common themes are identified:

In the discussion section, the healing themes from the narratives are related to the relevant literature. The healing narratives contain the five markers of posttraumatic growth: deepened spirituality, redefinition of self, hope for the future, increased gratitude, and deepened relationships. Although growth is evident in all five areas, the participants

stress the primary importance of their spiritual connections to God. Cognitive restructuring is the process by which the women are able to develop deeper spiritual faith and to tap into their own internal strength and wisdom.

Racial issues are also discussed, including areas of discrepancy between the participants' accounts and literature about African American women and domestic violence. The discrepancies are explored and questions are raised about how the race of the interviewer might have impacted the interview process. The discrepancies are also discussed within the context of the literature about intersecting identities and racial identity development.

The implications for clinical practice are presented along with specific recommendations for helping African American victims of domestic violence heal from the trauma. Limitations of the research are named and suggestions for future research are outlined.

## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the six courageous women who opened their lives and hearts to me and invested hours of their time to share their stories. I respect their fierce determination to offer their stories of pain and struggle as a way to help others. They all expressed gratitude for the privilege of being included in research that attempts to construct increased meaning and understanding. The generosity of their hearts and the courage of their spirits left me humbled and infinitely grateful. They made this research possible.

I also want to dedicate this research to all the other abuse victims who have shared their stories with me over years of clinical practice. Each of their stories deserves equal opportunity to be heard and witnessed. I hope the process of this research gives them some vicarious voice as well.

Beyond these two groups, I want to name and acknowledge the millions of women of all races who suffer in silence and isolation. May their spirits be emboldened by the voices of women who are able to offer their stories as example and as inspiration.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To my family, I extend tremendous gratitude for your love and support. To my daughter Christin, and her family, Ted, Chase and Madison, and to my son Logan, and his family, Kim, Avery and Mason, I thank you so much for understanding the choices I have made to follow this particular path at this point in life. I am so grateful that you can value the choice of putting education and the pursuit of dreams long deferred ahead of the more traditional roles of mother and grandmother. To my son, Ken Dickerson, I add the special thanks of expanding my awareness by engaging me tirelessly around topics that inform my world view: social justice, politics, literature, culture, therapy, and existential questioning. I thank you all for believing in me and I look forward to more time with family!

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I believe that violence is inextricably linked to all acts of violence in this society that occur between the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and the dominated. While male supremacy uses force to maintain male domination of women, it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated.

hooks, 2000, p. 118

To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.

Lorde, 1984, p.67

### **Overview**

Domestic violence is an undisputed problem in our culture. It reaches across socio-economic, racial and cultural lines and impacts millions of women and children each year (Lee, Thompson & Mechanic, 2002). In 1998, the latest year for which the USDJ (United States Department of Justice) has data, there were approximately 1.3 million women who suffered acts of physical violence perpetrated on them by their male partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). There is universal agreement that domestic violence is costly to society in terms of the mental and physical health problems that it creates (Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004). The damage resulting from domestic violence is disproportionately borne by African Americans. The highest rates of domestic violence occur with women who are black, between the ages of 20 and 24, earning low income, and living in rental housing in an urban area. The Department of Justice reports that the

rate of victimization for African American women is 35% higher than it is for white women (USDJ, 2000). The additive effects of racism and poverty exacerbate the increased toll from domestic violence for African American women. Despite some recent progress in the research, much work needs to be done to understand the dynamics of domestic violence in the African American community and to learn how to foster healing in more effective ways.

Domestic violence first began to receive national attention from scholars in the 1980's. Spurred by the feminist movement, most of the literature about domestic violence has been written from a Euro-centric perspective and has been fueled and shaped by the White middle class (Green, 1997; Taylor, 1999). In 1988, Coley and Beckett combed through the available literature to compile information about the particular experience of African American women subjected to domestic violence. They found very little literature at that time that related specifically to African American women and domestic violence. In the last ten years, with the emergence of multicultural viewpoints, a body of literature pertaining specifically to African American women and domestic violence has begun to emerge. There is a growing awareness that the marginalized racial status of African American women contributes to a very different experience of domestic violence that must be understood in its particularity in order to intervene in effective ways (Bent-Goodley, 2004). Although the relative incidence of domestic violence among African Americans is sometimes debated, there is a growing consensus that domestic violence is an acute problem for African Americans (Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004). There is also a growing consensus that traditional, i.e., dominant culture, models for understanding, preventing, and treating domestic violence are not readily applicable to



African Americans (Few, 2005) and in some cases, are actually deleterious (Taylor, 2005).

Despite the emergent body of literature that addresses the incidence, causes, and immediate effects of domestic violence, there has been little research that addresses the actual process of healing from domestic violence. There is literature that addresses certain specific areas related to healing, such as depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms (Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005; Crane & Constantino, 2003), but the total experience of being controlled and abused by a person who is loved and trusted has received very little attention. Domestic violence is something that impacts a woman in every aspect of her life; it has physical, spiritual, emotional, cognitive, financial, and social ramifications. Given the vast array of differences between women in all of these areas, it is understandably daunting to achieve a unified approach to domestic violence interventions. In addition, unlike some other areas in mental health, such as uncomplicated grief and loss, domestic violence is closely connected to systems of oppression that operate at the individual and the cultural levels (Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003). These systems of oppression operate differently for White women and African American women and the differences permeate the experience of domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Nash, 2005; Weis, 2001). In order to heal, women need interventions and support systems that fit both the circumstances of their individual lives and their larger racial and cultural identities (Harvey, 1996). Given the high incidence of domestic abuse among African Americans (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the relative dearth of literature pertaining to the African American experience of domestic violence (Taylor, 2004; West, 2004) and the parallel dearth of literature related to the healing

process, it is especially imperative to pursue more understanding of how African American women perceive and heal from abuse at the hands of their intimate partners.

As a background for developing a deeper understanding of the experience of domestic violence for African American women, it is important to incorporate an awareness of developing trends in two related areas: the process of healing after trauma and the feminist consciousness among African American women. The ongoing academic dialogue and investigation into these two areas brackets the scope of this research.

First of all, the research into the healing process after trauma has taken a new direction in recent years that signals a more holistic orientation to healing. Until recently, the area of healing from trauma has been dominated by considerations of resilience, hardiness and coping skills (Bradley, Schwartz & Kaslow, 2005; Hoge, Austin, & Pollack, 2007; Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982). Although these considerations have yielded important research and conceptual knowledge, they have frequently brought as many questions to the field as answers. In recent years, interest has focused on the increased personal growth that frequently occurs in the aftermath of a crisis or trauma (Linley, 2003; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). Although the concept of growth after trauma is not new, there is a renewed interest in examining how and why the growth takes place in order to learn how to foster and support the process. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996; 2004) coined the term posttraumatic growth and identified five components of posttraumatic growth that set it apart from resilience and other forms of enduring and coping with stressors. Posttraumatic growth has been examined by researchers in many specific situations, such as cancer diagnosis and the loss of a loved one, but there has been little attention given to the incidence of posttraumatic growth following domestic

violence (Cobb, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2006). In a closely related trend, there has been a re-emergence of an interest in spirituality as a healing force (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). At least two studies have examined the parallels between spiritual growth and posttraumatic growth (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000; Shaw et al., 2005). Both of these orientations to healing involve a more holistic and phenomenological view of the person and the healing process and pay attention to the ensuing growth as equal in importance to the mitigation of the distress.

A second academic discourse that relates directly to the context around domestic violence for African American women is the ongoing dialogue among women about oppression and the intersection of racial and gender issues. For African American women, the dialogue has been spurred by the ascension of feminism and the predominantly Euro-centric feminist voice that purports to speak for all women about issues of gender oppression (Phillips, 2006). In response, African American leadership voices have emerged with messages for African American women that are more relevant to their lived experiences of both gender and racial oppression. In particular, female African American scholars and leaders have fashioned a different brand of feminist philosophy to address the concerns and the standpoint of African American women. This larger movement of African American feminist thinking includes several differentiated strands including womanism, Black feminism, Afrocentric feminism and radical feminism (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Collins, 1996; Hamlet, 2000, McNair, 1992). All of these ideologies, like feminism, aim to ensure the dignity and human rights of women. However, given the contrasting standpoint that comes with race, ethnicity and radically differing histories, there are many differences between Eurocentric feminism and African

American alternatives in both the specific details and the general philosophical perspectives.

The two most prominent strands of African American feminist thought are womanism and Black feminism. Although there are subtle philosophical and linguistic differences between the two, the differences are more complementary than contradictory. Collins (1996) addresses the split between the womanists and the Black feminists and finds the differences to be more about allegiance and focus than philosophy. Womanism has grown out of black nationalism and has flowered, in particular, in cultural and artistic expression. Womanists have worked hard to combat the oppressive and destructive stereotypes of African American women by defining and empowering their particular history, culture, and racial identity (Hamlet, 2000). Black feminism has strong ties to academia and flourishes among the voices of more privileged African American women. Black feminism takes a more political and global view and addresses big issues of institutionalized oppression that are both racial and gendered (Collins, 1996). As a generality, it is instructive to look to the womanists for a deep understanding of what it means to be black and female in day to day life and to look to Black feminists for a philosophy that defines and opposes the institutions of power that continue to oppress.

Despite Collins' lucid and informative discussion of the differences between Black feminism and womanism, other African American academics blur the distinctions entirely. In an article that purports to assess womanist thought, Hamlet (2000) uses the terms womanist and Black feminist interchangeably and quotes Collins' (1990) book on Black feminism as her major source for womanism. Given this lack of clear difference between Black feminism and womanism, the term womanism will be used when referring

to the general body of emerging feminist consciousness among African American women. When referencing specific literature pertaining to Black feminist epistemology, the term Black feminism will be utilized. For purposes of this proposal, the distinctions between womanism and Black feminism are not relevant. As Collins (1996) herself asserts, “ At this point, whether African American women can fashion a singular ‘voice’ about the black woman’s position remains less an issue than how black women’s voices collectively construct, affirm , and maintain a dynamic black women’s self-defined standpoint” (p. 9).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Domestic violence creates tremendous suffering and, beyond the individual suffering, brings significant social and financial costs to our culture. Around a quarter of all women in this country suffer at least one incidence of rape or assault by their intimate partners within their lifetimes (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). For white women, the incidence is 24.8% while African American women suffer in the proportion of 29.1%. For each woman who struggles with the aftermath of abuse, there are children and extended families who are adversely impacted as well.

Despite the proliferation of domestic violence agencies, the needs of abused women remain largely unmet. Healing from abuse is difficult even with support and resources (Smith, 2003). The services that are offered to women are challenged by both financial and ideological constraints. The Battered Women’s Shelter in Charlotte turned away over 220 women in the month of December, 2008 alone (Jane Taylor, conversation, Jan 12, 2009). Although the feminist movement has made an invaluable contribution through the creation of domestic violence agencies, services and awareness, their

perspective has been almost entirely white and middle class. The lack of multicultural sensitivity and knowledge has created barriers to African American victims that are sometimes insurmountable to them (Grossman, Hinkley, Kawalski, & Margrave, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

Domestic violence agencies and shelters are largely the product of Eurocentric feminist activism and their services are infused with the work of the preeminent feminist voices in the domestic violence awareness movement (Donnelly, Cook, Ausdale, & Foley, 2005). The multicultural movement among counselors has helped to focus attention on multicultural needs and has contributed needed research in the area. Domestic violence agencies perpetuate their racial blindness more from a place of ignorance than intention. Agency directors are frequently unaware of the racial issues that become intertwined with the agency's services (Donnelly et al.). Given that domestic violence service providers have few intentions other than compassionate care, it is likely that education and training around multicultural issues could have a significant impact.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose and scope of this research are defined in large by two conceptual frameworks: posttraumatic growth and womanism. Posttraumatic growth signals an interest in how women may experience growth and positive change in their lives after domestic violence. Since this growth and positive change frequently coexists with on going distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), research that focuses on the relief of symptoms might overlook this area of significant change. Womanism provides important considerations for conducting and interpreting research that is specific to African American women and for understanding their social, cultural and political location. For

the most part, research into domestic violence has been conducted from a White feminist viewpoint. However, given the ongoing differences and controversies between mainstream feminists and African American women invested in gender equality (e.g., Banks-Wallace, 2000; Collins, 1996; Hamlet, 2000), the most racially appropriate lens for research about African American women is a womanist lens. These two frameworks, posttraumatic growth and womanism will be discussed in detail in the literature review section of this proposal.

As a brief overview, posttraumatic growth measures positive change in five areas: (a) restructured priorities around a greater appreciation for life, (b) greater investment in relationships and a deepened appreciation for other people, (c) self-definition that includes confidence in personal strength, (d) ability to see new possibilities for the future, and (e) deepened spiritual faith (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). According to the theory behind posttraumatic growth, the changes occur when a trauma shatters a person's assumptive world and the person engages in a process of cognitive restructuring. When the restructuring accommodates both the horror of the trauma and the possibility of a fulfilled life after the trauma, the mere coexistence of those two contrasting realities creates complexity of thought and depth of spirit in the person (Tedeschi & Calhoun).

These two qualities, complexity and depth, are also central to the womanist perspective and there are striking parallels between posttraumatic growth and womanism. Just as trauma victims must reconstruct a new version of reality after being deconstructed by the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), womanists arrive at a deeper and more complex understanding of society and institutions of power after experiences with oppression have deconstructed previously held social and political paradigms (Collins,

2000). Each of the five areas of posttraumatic growth corresponds to a central belief among womanists: (a) finding joy and beauty in the everyday world, (b) emphasis on community and support and the belief that healing occurs in community, (c) belief in the wisdom that comes out of suffering and an emphasis on celebrating the survival of oppression, (d) faith in the future despite a history of oppression, and (e) centrality of spirituality and a holistic approach to life (Hamlet, 2000). Womanism has grown out of a history of slavery and oppression, a history that was and continues to be inarguably traumatic. Perhaps the womanists, in part, have created a philosophy that mirrors and illustrates the process of posttraumatic growth among African American women as they struggle for dignity and equality in a culture dominated, in large part, by white men. The fit between the two theories provides extra significance to a study of healing among African American women. The construct of posttraumatic growth, which occurs among differing racial and national groups (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004), lends credence to the validity of womanist philosophy as a viable alternative to Eurocentric feminism in the efforts to reach all victims of domestic violence, no matter their race or ethnic background.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of healing from domestic violence among African American women through an analysis of their narrative accounts. The exploration will move beyond an examination of relief from isolated symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, and will address the healing process as it relates to the whole of the woman, her spiritual, emotional, and physical well being. The study will also address important contextual elements that include familial, geographic,



religious, socioeconomic, political, racial, gendered and cultural influences. Driven by my own experiences with posttraumatic growth, I hope to add to the literature base in a way that will encourage more research about the process of fostering and supporting the growth of domestic violence victims as they heal. Given that preliminary research equates the most growth with the highest levels of trauma (Cadell, Regehr, & Hemsworth, 2003; Cobb, Tedeshi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2006), posttraumatic growth holds out enormous hope in a field that is awash in depressing statistics.

As the author of this study, I propose to focus on the process of healing among African American women for the purpose of social justice. Given the higher statistical prevalence of domestic violence among African American women (USDJ, 2000) and the dominant culture bias found in most domestic violence agencies (Donnelly et al., 2005), there is a significant need for increased awareness of and sensitivity to the interwoven dynamics of race and gender for African American female victims of domestic violence. As an oppressed racial minority, the experience of domestic violence creates a piling on of oppression that intensifies the potential trauma. Domestic violence agencies are ill prepared to help African American women with the racial and gender complexities of their situation and there is the potential for both the lack of knowledge and the lack of racial insensitivity to create secondary trauma for the women. The literature that addresses the African American experience of domestic violence repeatedly notes the need for more culturally sensitive research and exploration, especially as it might impact the delivery of culturally appropriate services (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Carter & Parks, 1996; Fowler & Hill, 2004; Ramos, Carlson & McNutt, 2004). Numerous studies note the relative low utilization rates by African American women of domestic violence services

(Paranjape, 2006; Weisz, 2005). These low rates are linked to a lack of cultural sensitivity in current service provision ( Donnelly et al., 2005; Watkins, 2005).

Additional voices advocate for policy and program changes that would bring expanded understanding of the intersection of race and gender to the problems of domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003; West, 2004).

At a more systemic level, other voices go beyond a call for more research about the specifics of domestic violence in the African American community. They advocate the need to implement a womanist epistemology in the pursuit of knowledge about African American women (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Within this epistemology, researchers would bring awareness of the patriarchal cultural context that has normalized the use of power and violence to control and dominate others (Collins, 1998a, 1998b; hooks, 1984/2000; West, 2004). They would also understand and incorporate culturally competent processes for analyzing data so that findings are not contaminated by the researcher's cultural bias in the research process itself (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Collins, 2000). These advocates of womanist research emphasize that research based on a faulty paradigm of cultural color blindness will be flawed through the inherent bias and blindness of the researcher. The inadequacy of the research about African American victims of domestic violence is more than just a problem about insufficient quantity; there is also a glaring need for research that is rooted in a conceptual understanding of the African American experience and of the socio-political context of violence as an omnipresent method of culturally sanctioned social control.

### **Research Question**

The proposed research study will be a narrative analysis of African American women's stories of their healing processes after domestic violence. The research will be driven by the central question: How do African American women's narratives present their healing processes after they experience domestic violence? The research will provide a rich understanding of four to five African American women and their healing journeys, including the commonalities of their experiences as well as the unique and personally idiosyncratic factors. Although this study is exploratory in nature and will not attempt to find definitive conclusions, the data analysis will identify elements in the narratives that propel the story line towards healing. Conversely, obstacles to that healing, as they show up in the narratives, will also be identified. Story elements will be drawn from a broad understanding of each woman's life history including both intrapersonal processes and contextual elements.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative methods are the appropriate vehicle for exploratory research that involves complex and interwoven variables (Glesne, 2006). Within the general category of qualitative research, there are many theoretical and methodological choices. The proposed research will be framed by Black feminist epistemology and will use methods drawn from narrative research for both the interview process and the data analysis. Consistent with narrative research, a small number of participants will be engaged in a series of three interviews over a period of three to four months. In order to ensure that adequate interview information is obtained from a minimum of four to five participants, a larger pool of seven to eight participants will be indentified. It is expected that one or

more participants might chose to terminate the process before completion. All participants will be African American women who are in the process of healing from domestic violence. Interviews will be audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. The scope of the interviews will be broad and the questions asked will be framed with the intention of eliciting both deep introspection into the specific process of healing and also a wide overview of relevant contextual and biographical material. The end product of the research, the findings, will consist of reconstructed narrative accounts of each participant's healing process. These narrative accounts will provide deep and rich insights into the healing processes of African American women as they come to terms with gendered violence within a larger context of racial oppression.

Narrative research is consistent with both the epistemology of Black feminism and womanism and the theoretical orientation of posttraumatic growth. Black feminist epistemology advocates for using narrative to present a holistic view of each person rather than dissecting the person and arbitrarily dividing and labeling experiences through thematic dissection. "The narrative method requires that the story be told, not torn apart in analysis, and trusted as core belief, not 'admired as science' "(Mitchell & Lewter, 1986, as quoted in Collins, 2000, p. 258). Narrative conveys lived experience as personal and unique and allows the power of self-naming to remain with the participant.

Posttraumatic growth is a theory based on the cognitive restructuring that creates a new world view following trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth occurs as the trauma victim creates a new understanding of self, others and the world after the traumatic events have deconstructed previously held beliefs. Although various quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to pursue understanding of

posttraumatic growth, narrative analysis provides a particularly good fit. Tedeschi and Calhoun frequently refer to posttraumatic growth as a process of “narrative reconstruction” (1995, p. 102) and encourage further analysis of what contributes to the creation of the new narrative. They also advocate for more inquiry into contextual and cultural influences on posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). The proposed narrative research will address both of these areas as it will illuminate the process of recreating a new narrative and it will also address the broader context.

Interview issues raised by Mishler (1986) will be heeded and the narrative analysis will follow a form adapted from Polkinghorne (1995). The theory and methods of the proposed narrative research will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter Three. The issue of validity will also be addressed as narrative research brings specific considerations to safeguarding validity. Since the person of the researcher is a major factor in qualitative research, I have included a Statement of Researcher Subjectivity in Chapter Three and I will attend to my personal reactions and emerging biases throughout the process by the use of a reflexive journal.

### **Assumptions**

There are several assumptions that provide a foundation for this research. First of all, it is assumed that healing from domestic violence is possible. Additionally, it is expected that women have an intuitive knowledge of what has helped them heal and have the ability to communicate that knowledge. It is also assumed that the participants will express their healing processes in the form of narrative stories that include elements that support the movement towards healing and elements that create obstacles to that movement. Finally, it is assumed that the healing experiences of African American

women will be impacted not only by their internal resources, but also by their larger life narratives and by their contextual experiences.

### **Limitations**

There are inherent limitations to all qualitative research. Given the size of the sample and the use of convenience sampling, the findings cannot be generalized to any larger population and will represent only the women who participate. In this study, the sample consisted of African American women from the Southeast, who have utilized the services of a domestic violence agency or a mental health provider. Therefore, African American women who have not used these services were not included. It is probable that women who chose to use services may differ in their beliefs, perceptions, and processes of healing from those who chose alternative paths to healing. As the researcher, my race (white) also posed a potential limitation in recruiting participants and in winning their trust. Although I have years of clinical experience with domestic violence and training in multicultural sensitivity, it was to be expected that some African American women might not be willing to participate in a study conducted by a white women. For those who did participate, it was also a limitation that the participants may have edited or withheld information if they were not comfortable sharing it with me.

### **Delimitations**

In order to minimize the impact of the limitations, I enlisted the assistance of mental health providers and trusted employees in the domestic violence agencies to identify the potential participants and to introduce the idea of the research to them. Participants were chosen who fit the criteria for the study in terms of race, experience with domestic violence, and evidence of healing and moving on with their lives. It was

expected that women who are in the healing process would have an easier time with trust than women who have not yet begun that journey. The researcher continued the interviews until vivid and complex narrative data had been collected from a minimum of four to five participants.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Domestic violence* is defined in various ways (Bent-Goodley, 2004). The definition offered by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) includes psychological and emotional abuse as well as the more prominent features of marital rape and physical abuse (Center for Disease Control, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the researcher has used an inclusion criteria based on the nonsexual physical aspects of domestic violence. This choice was in no way meant to downplay the significance and impact of sexual, emotional and psychological abuse. However, it is possible that healing from sexual, psychological and emotional abuse when there is no specifically physical component may be qualitatively different than healing from physical abuse. Using the list of descriptors from the CDC website, typical physical abuse “includes, but is not limited to, scratching, pushing, shoving, throwing, grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, slapping, punching, burning, use of a weapon, and use of restraints or one’s body, size, or strength against another person” (Center for Disease Control, 2009). For inclusion in this study, participants reported an ongoing pattern of physical abuse that meets this definition over a period of time.

For the purposes of sample selection, *healing* was be defined through a combination of selected criteria and the judgment of the referring agencies or mental health providers. First of all, it was expected that the women would have terminated any

contact or relationship with the abuser and would be living free from any overtly abusive relationships. Other criteria included at least one of the following achievements that would indicate being on the road to self-sufficiency: a job or job training, appropriate and safe housing, a new social support system, or a new definition of “self.” It was also expected that the women would be able to access some degree of optimism about the future and would be moving away from a victim mentality. Healing is seen as a continuum that is hard to define and much importance will be placed on the subjective assessments of the referring professionals and the potential participants themselves.

*African American* is a term that can be strictly interpreted to mean persons who have descended from African ancestors or it can be used more generally. For this study, African American women were defined as women who identify themselves as African American and who were born in the United States to parents who were also native to this country. Since racial themes were expected to emerge in the data, the sample population was restricted to women who carry historical identification as descendents of slavery.

*Posttraumatic growth* is defined as growth that occurs in the process of healing from a trauma when the growth that occurs is more profound than the growth that would have occurred without the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The growth occurs when the trauma is sufficient to dismantle the person’s assumptive world and the person goes on to reestablish an assumptive world that is more complex, more resilient and provides a healthier context for life. Posttraumatic growth will be explained in more depth in Chapter Two.

*Black feminism* and *womanism* refer to different strands of African American feminist thought. The subtle differences between the two can be argued academically but



they are not important to this research. Both Black feminists and womanists insist that the experiences of African American women can only be understood within the context of the intersecting identities of race and gender (Collins, 2000). Womanism will be explored in detail in Chapter Two and the main components of Black feminist epistemology will be presented in Chapter Three.

In qualitative research, the term *narrative* can have many meanings and may simply refer to explanations or interview answers that contain sentences rather than one word responses. For this research, the term narrative relates to the idea of “story” and involves the temporal organization of discrete elements into a plotted storyline (Polkinghorne, 1988).

### **Organization**

The first three chapters of this research study contain the research proposal. Chapter One includes an introduction to the research topic and a brief summary of the conceptual framework. Key literature pertaining to the topic has been referenced to provide support for the significance of the research. As theoretical framework, both posttraumatic growth and womanism/Black feminism have been outlined. Chapter One also contains a specific discussion of the purpose and significance of the study and a statement of the research question. Certain aspects of the general methodology are introduced such as the research design, the definition of key terms, the assumptions, and the limitations and delimitations.

Chapter Two contains a thorough review of the literature. The review is divided into five sections. The first section provides an overview of domestic violence. The second section addresses the impact of domestic violence on victims and efforts to

understand the resulting incidence of trauma. In the third section, the literature specific to African American females experiencing domestic violence will be reviewed with special emphasis on culturally relevant themes that emerge. The fourth section examines the concept of intersecting identities which provides important background for appreciating the emerging African American feminist consciousness. This section will also contain a presentation of womanism and the rationale for using womanism/Black feminism as the analytical lens for this research. The final section addresses interventions to promote healing among African American women recovering from domestic violence. Integrative summaries will synthesize each section and the literature review as a whole. These summaries will support the importance and relevance of the proposed research.

Chapter Three presents the research methodology that will be used for this study. Black feminism provides the theoretical grounding for the research and key elements of Black feminism are explained. The choice to follow a method of narrative analysis is discussed and defended. The specific research process is mapped out with detailed explanation of the participant selection process. The interview process is described including the interviewer's conceptual approach as well as the logistical details. The procedural steps to be followed to analyze the data are detailed as well as the procedures for enhancing the verification, reliability and validity of the study results.

Chapter Four will contain the research findings. For each participant, a coherent narrative that illuminates that woman's unique healing process will be presented. The narratives will strive to present a nuanced and detailed portrait of the participant, a clear description of the healing process and important contextual information. Elements of the narrative that help the healing to progress or impede the healing will be highlighted.

Following the narratives, the common themes across the narratives will be discussed. In Chapter Five, the narratives will be linked to the larger body of relevant literature and a discussion will underline important considerations that emerge from the research. There will also be recommendations for improved services for African American victims of domestic violence and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear it is the task of women of Color to educate white women – in the face of tremendous resistance – as to our existence, our differences, our relative role in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

Lorde, 1984, p. 113

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.

Lorde, 1984, p. 43

The literature review will be divided into five sections. The first section will focus on a general overview of domestic violence including statistics about the prevalence and costs of domestic violence. In the second section, the literature pertaining to the impact of domestic violence on victims will be summarized. The relationship between trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder will be discussed and various constructs that guard against PTSD will be explored such as hardiness, resilience, coping skills, posttraumatic growth and spirituality. In the third section, the literature specifically pertaining to the African American female experience of domestic violence will be presented and analyzed. This literature will reveal how the experience of belonging to an oppressed racial group intersects and interacts with the experience of gender violence. The fourth section will address this intersection of race and gender more fully through a presentation of the literature on intersecting identities. This section will also include a presentation of

womanism, a natural outgrowth of the intersection of race and gender. A discussion about the contrasts between womanism and Eurocentric feminism will underscore the need for racially sensitive research from a womanist perspective. Finally, the last section will present the meager literature on the African American female experience of healing from domestic violence. Although there is a robust body of literature that outlines the African American experience of domestic violence, there is very little that addresses their unique needs for healing.

### **Overview of Domestic Violence**

#### **Prevalence**

Although domestic violence is a pervasive social problem in United States, it is difficult to ascertain the exact dimensions of the problem. Different surveys and reports proffer contrasting statistics and interpretations of the incidence of domestic violence. Frequently, the statistics that report domestic violence are derived as secondary information during the conduct of related research projects (McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien & Watson, 2005) and widely differing rates of occurrence are reported (Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004). Problems associated with obtaining clear numbers include differing definitions of domestic violence, the reliance on self-report, and the confusion about whether to report the number of violent incidents or the number of victims (McFarlane et al; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). However, the report issued in 2000 containing results from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) represents the most comprehensive effort to date to quantify the problem of domestic violence (Tjaden & Thoennes). This survey, cosponsored by the Justice Department and the Center for Disease Control in 2000, estimated that 4.8 million women were raped or assaulted by

their intimate partners each year. During the course of their lifetimes, 24.8% of white women and 29.1% of African American women report marital rape or domestic violence or both. Whatever the actual number, there is universal agreement that domestic violence is costly to society in terms of the mental and physical health problems that it creates (Tjaden & Thoennes; Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004).

### **Societal Costs of Domestic Violence**

The social and monetary costs of domestic violence reach staggering proportions (National Center for Injury and Prevention Control, 2003). Using data from the NVAWS, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports various categories of costs associated with domestic violence. They found that 41.5% of the women who are assaulted by intimate partners each year are injured and 28.1% of those injured seek medical care. Hospital emergency rooms provide care for 78.6% of the victims seeking medical attention. Thirty-two percent of the women who seek medical care are injured badly enough to spend one or more nights in the hospital. Mental health services are also heavily utilized as a result of domestic violence, accounting for 18.5 million mental health visits per year. It is estimated that the costs for medical and mental health services for victims of domestic violence exceed \$5.8 billion each year. Beyond the direct medical costs, victims of domestic violence lose an average of 7.2 work days per assault. For the country as a whole, there are 8 million paid work days lost each year because of domestic violence related injuries. Another perspective based on this statistic would be to equate the lost productivity to the loss of 32,000 full time workers.

The emotional and psychological costs to families and children are harder to quantify but are undeniably staggering. Children who witness domestic violence are

frequently victims as well (National Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2009).

Between 30% and 60% of the perpetrators of intimate partner domestic violence are also abusing their children as well. Whether they are themselves victims or merely witnesses, boys who are exposed to domestic violence are 50% more likely to grow up to be abusers themselves, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence (National Coalition against Domestic Violence).

The emotional, psychological and financial damage inflicted by domestic violence is disproportionately borne by African Americans. The highest rates of domestic violence occur to women who are black, between the ages of 20 and 24, earning low income, and living in rental housing in an urban area (USDJ, 2000). The Department of Justice reports that the rate of victimization for African American women is 35% higher than it is for Caucasian women. The additive effects of racism and poverty exacerbate the increased toll from domestic violence for African American women. This toll is physical as well as psychological. Data collected along with the Black Women's Congress Health Conference documented the relationship between racism, abuse, and health problems for African American women (Lawson, Rodgers-Rose, & Rajaram, 1999). The questionnaire was given to 323 women, 91.6% of whom were African American. Seventy percent of the African American women said they experience racism all the time and this experience of racism was positively related to chronic yeast infections. The African American women who reported being beaten by a spouse (25%) were suffering from significantly increased levels of depression and allergies. Finally, psychological abuse (75% of the African American women) was correlated to higher levels of depression, hypertension, and yeast infections. Citing these statistics, Bent-Goodley (2001) named domestic

violence as the single greatest health problem for African American women. Despite some recent progress in the research, much work needs to be done to understand the dynamics of domestic violence in the African American community and to learn how to foster healing in more effective ways.

### **Impact of Domestic Violence on Victims**

#### **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

A study of domestic violence inevitably intersects with the field of trauma. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the most prevalent mental health outcome among victims of domestic violence, followed closely by depression, with or without suicidal ideation ( Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005; Hoge, Austin, & Pollack, 2007).

Although an indepth review of the trauma literature is beyond the scope of this proposal, it is important to note two important findings that have relevance for the field of domestic violence. First, the relationship between trauma and PTSD is complex and there are significant mediating variables that interfere with a simple correlation between trauma and PTSD (King, King, Foy, & Keane 1999). Secondly, it is also important to understand that the detrimental health consequences to survivors of trauma are related to the degree of PTSD the person develops and not to the degree of the trauma (Taft, Stern, King, & King, 1999). These two concepts have ramifications for the treatment of domestic violence survivors.

To understand more fully how PTSD develops following trauma, King, King, Foy & Keane (1999) used archived interview data from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study. In the original survey study, researchers had interviewed over 1,600 Vietnam veterans: 1,200 males and 432 females. The data collected included information



about three time periods identified as pretrauma, trauma, and posttrauma. The researchers measured several pretrauma factors including such variables as family stability, the relationship with the father, and any prewar trauma. To measure the actual trauma experienced during the war, the participants were asked to characterize the intensity of their experiences as belonging to one of four categories ranging from normal combat conditions to atrocities. The interviews also covered posttrauma information including any post war traumas, level of social support, and degree of hardiness. The measurement of PTSD among the participants was obtained by rating each of the participants on the symptoms of PTSD according to the DSM-IV. Using this data, King et. al. conducted gender specific factor analyses of the variables related to PTSD. Examining their results for women, King et al. concluded that the degree of PTSD does not relate solely to the intensity of the traumatic experience but is a cumulative result of the experiences of pre trauma, trauma, and post trauma. The important pre trauma predictors of PTSD include low socio-economic status, a weak relationship with the father figure, family chaos, and earlier traumas. Post trauma resources, including support networks and hardiness, had a mediating effect on the development of PTSD and underline the need for support structures for victims of trauma.

Although the data analysis conducted by King et al. (1999) ignores racial demographics, the findings of the study have crucial significance for African American survivors of domestic violence. African American women are more likely to have experienced other traumas in their lives that coexist with the domestic violence (West, 2004). They are also more likely to be economically challenged and to live with family chaos and an absent father. Given these pre conditions, African American women might

be expected to suffer a higher degree of PTSD in response to domestic violence than their white peers. However, African American women also experience deeper spiritual connections and family and peer support than white women which might counterbalance the negative effects of trauma, socio-economics and family structure (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). The ways in which the experiences of African American women and white women differ around variables associated with trauma and recovery highlight the need for racially specific research.

Another study involving the data from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study underlines the importance of preventing or containing the development of PTSD in order to minimize the functional physical health disturbances to the individual (Taft, Stern, King, & King, 1999). The researchers were interested in the relationships between war time exposure to trauma, hardiness characteristics, PTSD and physical health symptoms. Through path analysis of these variables, they concluded that physical health problems were related to the degree of PTSD that the veterans were experiencing and not to the war experience itself or to hardiness and social support. The authors recommend proactive mental health treatment following trauma as a preventive medical technique to minimize the onset and duration of both PTSD and subsequent related health problems. This recommendation is problematic for the domestic violence community as victims of domestic violence frequently suffer in isolation for long periods of time before identifying as victims.

These two studies on PTSD point towards two important considerations for helping domestic violence survivors to heal: the relevance of pre trauma factors, both environmental and personal and the importance of effective interventions to mitigate

damage following trauma. Both of these considerations are intertwined in the literature about such topics as hardiness, resilience and coping skills. All of this literature focuses on the basic question: what protects some people from the damaging effects of life challenges while others have their lives devastated? Researchers hope that the answers to this question will enable us to encourage the same protective qualities in a broader portion of the population.

### **Hardiness**

Hardiness is a concept that was first introduced in 1979 by Kobasa who was looking for an explanation for the imperfect correlation between stress and illness (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982). Increased stress does not always lead to increased illness. By integrating previous knowledge with new theoretical thinking, Kobasa proposed that certain personality characteristics protected people from the harmful physical and psychological effects of stress. These characteristics are designated by the terms *commitment*, *control*, and *challenge*. Together these characteristics allow the person advantages in both the cognitive and the behavioral realms of reacting to stress. *Commitment* relates to the proclivity to engage rather than retreat from the stressful events and to wrest meaning from the present circumstances. The word *control* expresses a belief in the ability to influence events even though absolute control is not possible. Control gives people an experience of agency and delivers them from a sense of powerlessness. The characteristic of *challenge* relates to the acceptance that change and stress are normal and growth-enhancing processes (Kobasa et al.).

Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn (1982) tested the relationship between hardiness, stress, and physical illness by measuring the three variables among 670 middle-aged, mostly

male, management personnel in a large company. They found clear support for their hypothesis that hardiness would mediate the effect of stress on illness. However, this study has little direct relevance for female victims of domestic violence as the participants were middle aged business executives experiencing job related stress.

Two more recent studies that focus on childhood sexual abuse provide a closer link. The first study looked at several variables to explain the severity of symptoms among women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse (Feinauer, Mitchell, Harper, & Dane, 1996). The variables were severity of the abuse, duration and frequency of the abuse, hardiness, and identity of the perpetrator (relationship to the victim). Statistical analysis revealed that hardiness accounted for the greatest amount of variance in the symptoms of the participants while severity of the abuse also related, but to a lesser degree. A second study examined the relationships between child sexual abuse, hardiness, shame and intimate interpersonal relationships (Feinhauer, Hilton, & Callahan, 2003). Similarly, it was found that hardiness moderates the effects of the abuse and as hardiness increases, shame decreases. Furthermore, it was found that higher levels of hardiness relate to increased incidence of intimate relationships. This particular finding has implications for the ability to seek and receive support. Both of these studies conclude with the same two questions: Does hardiness precede the abuse or is it somehow generated in response to the abuse? How can hardiness be systematically cultivated as a protection against life events? These questions remain open for further research.

### **Resilience**

The concept of resilience has eclipsed the study of hardiness and has received considerably more attention in the literature. However, in contrast to the concise nature of

hardiness, there is no agreement about a definition of resilience or about the parameters of the construct (Hoge, Austin, & Pollack, 2006; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Richardson, 2002). Resilience has variously been defined in three different ways: by the personal characteristics of resilient people, by the process of the development of resiliency, and by theories of resilience relating it to “natural” energies in the world such as spiritual or physical energy (Richardson). Despite these differing theoretical approaches, there is agreement that resilience contains two basic elements: exposure to stressful experiences or environments and positive adaptation within that context (Luthar et al.). Various personality qualities have been linked to resilience such as intelligence, cognitive skills, self-esteem, and internal locus of control. In addition, there is strong support for connections between resilience and social and familial relationships and support. There is ongoing debate about whether resilience results from internal or external factors or a combination of both (Hoge et al.).

Despite the obvious utility of understanding the construct of resilience, there are significant ongoing challenges to research in this area. First of all, there are few opportunities to study individuals after trauma where there is pre trauma psychological data. Without the pre trauma data, questions remain about whether the resilience develops through the process of the trauma or precedes it in measureable form (Hoge et al., 2007; Luthar et al., 2000). There have also been few studies that have examined resilience longitudinally post-trauma to identify changes over time. Secondly, there is a problem with consistency as some subjects will show resilience in some areas of life and not in others. Thirdly, without more agreement on terms and definitions, there is no clear

measurement for resilience and no clear consensus that continued study will yield additive value to the understanding of personality and adjustment (Luthar et al.).

### **Resilience among Battered Women**

Although most of the research about resilience focuses on children, there is one study that measures resilience among battered women in shelters (Humphreys, 2003). The participants ( $N = 50$ ) were all women who had been in a shelter for battered women in the San Francisco area for at least 21 days. In addition to a demographic questionnaire, the women were given the Conflict Tactics Scale to measure the battering, the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised to measure degree of distress and PTSD, and the Resilience Scale. Twenty of the 50 participants were African-American and the rest mixed between Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian-American and other. However, the results were not broken down by race. The participants scored significantly higher in levels of distress than a normative sample of women and 56% tested in a range that indicated PTSD. However, the participants also scored high on the scale of resilience; in fact, they displayed more resilience than samples taken from two groups of female graduate students, a group of post-partum new mothers, and a group of public housing residents (Humphreys, 2003). High scores in resilience were related to less PTSD and less psychological distress. High resilience was also related to a higher perception of good physical health. However, it is interesting to note that resilience was not found to be related to levels of battering or degree of physical injury sustained. Thus, the degree of distress is linked to the presence or absence of resilience rather than the severity of the abuse.

Humphreys (2003) proposes that the study should encourage domestic violence service providers to focus on the strengths of the victims as a mitigating factor and to

look for ways to buttress resilience. Humphreys notes several limitations in her study including sample size and questions about the validity of the instrument to measure resilience. She also notes that the sample consisted of women who had put forth the initiative and the effort to move into a shelter and to stay there for 21 days. Therefore, the sample consists of women who have already demonstrated a high level of initiative. Despite these limitations, the study underlines the importance of the victim's level of resilience as a protective factor against the effects of abuse.

### **Coping Skills**

Three additional studies attempt to identify more general protective factors through examining the coping mechanisms of domestic violence victims. Two of the studies focused on African American women who came to public health facilities seeking medical care. In the first study, the authors cited the lack of research about protective factors against PTSD among African American women (Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005). Their research targeted this problem by examining the correlation between domestic violence and PTSD and also between PTSD and self-esteem, social support, positive religious coping and negative religious coping. The participants in this study had to meet the criteria of experiencing domestic violence in the prior year and having made one suicidal attempt. Although the women were not given an instrument that directly measures the presence of PTSD, their average score on the Davidson Trauma Scale was higher than the score needed to indicate PTSD. The majority of the women met the criteria for PTSD and there was a significant relationship between severity of abuse and PTSD. Positive religious coping was not shown to be related to PTSD but negative religious coping was positively related to PTSD. Increased self-esteem and social support

related to lower levels of PTSD. An interesting side note from this study is that a regression model demonstrated that social support was no longer statistically significant as a mitigating factor. The authors postulate that social support may not perform as a protective factor unless the person has a needed level of self-esteem in order to effectively utilize the support.

A similar study examined the relationships between the symptoms of depression and anxiety and the mediating variables of coping, social support and spiritual beliefs (Mitchell, Hargrove, Collins, Thompson, Reddick, & Kaslow, 2006). The participants were 143 low income African American women who came to a public hospital for medical care. Sixty five of the women had experienced domestic violence in the previous year. Instruments were administered to the women to measure degree of domestic violence, psychological symptoms, ways of coping, spiritual well-being, social support, and frequency of utilization of medical services. In the statistical analysis, the scores of the abused participants were compared with the scores of the non abused participants. As expected the abused women reported less spiritual well-being, less adaptive coping, and less social support and they reported more utilization of medical, mental and social services. Additionally, there was more anxiety and depression among the abused women. However, the results also uncovered that coping, social support and spiritual well-being were mediating variables for depression and that coping, social support and access to services were mediating variables with anxiety.

The findings of the study underline the importance of helping abused women find effective ways of coping (Mitchell et al., 2006). The authors suggest that coping skills could be taught within the context of group dynamics and that social support would



increase at the same time. The research is limited by the narrow range of the participants, including their status as low income. It is also limited by its cross sectional nature and the inability to measure the constructs across time.

A qualitative study offers reinforcement for the utility of social support and spiritual resources to combat the consequences of domestic violence (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). The authors interviewed six African American women enrolled in college who had been in a dating relationship with an abusive partner for at least two months and who had left the relationship at least six months ago. Their purpose was to identify the coping strategies that allowed the women to make a decision to leave. Despite the obvious difference in the demographics between this sample and the two previous studies, the results are consistent. Spirituality, social support and therapy were cited as major factors in being able to leave the abusive relationship and move on with life. Other coping strategies noted included journals and self-help books.

### **Post Traumatic Growth**

Building on hardiness, resilience, and coping, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995; 1999; 2004) have brought forward the model of posttraumatic growth, a new concept for the exploration of healing. Resilience signifies an ability to continue with life in the face of tremendous stressors. Resilient people are able to persevere but not necessarily flourish. Posttraumatic growth is defined as growth that occurs in the process of healing from a trauma and the authors postulate that the growth is more profound than the growth that would have occurred without the trauma. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) link their theory to the ancient belief that wisdom is born in suffering but they go beyond that belief to dissect the actual process of growth. In particular, they believe that the growth results not

from the trauma directly but from the cognitive restructuring that occurs to adapt to the new realities after the trauma has occurred. In order for this restructuring to happen, the trauma needs to be sufficient to dismantle the person's assumptions about the world but not so strong as to overwhelm the person's capacities. There is a fine balance between the intensity of the trauma and the resources of the person that lead to posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The cognitive restructuring of posttraumatic growth can occur at anytime following a trauma but may begin immediately. At the beginning of the process, the person might search for comprehension of the event as he or she attempts to fit it into existing schemas about the world. Over time, as old schemas break down and new schemas form, the cognitive process will frequently shift to a search for meaning and significance and the person will become future orientated rather than staying obsessed with the past event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The ongoing cognitive process can be seen as the formation and reformation of a "trauma narrative" which evolves around the traumatic event as a distinct turning point. The turning point is crucial to the process and creates "before" and "after" components of the trauma narrative. In the "after" portion, a previous goal is seen as unattainable or a philosophy about the self or about life no longer fits. By forming new goals or philosophies, the person experiences movement and is able to participate in the flow of life again (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Posttraumatic growth is defined by growth in five specific areas: (a) restructured priorities around a greater appreciation for life, (b) greater investment in relationships and a deepened appreciation for other people, (c) self-definition that includes a claiming of

personal strength, (d) ability to see new possibilities for the future, and (e) deepened spiritual faith (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). A measurement tool, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, quantifies outcomes in these areas. Posttraumatic growth also brings added compassion for others and an increased awareness of the paradoxes of life. This paradoxical view of life shows up, in particular, in two prominent places (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Deepened spiritual faith comes with an increased amount of spiritual doubt, and recognition of personal strength coexists with greater awareness of vulnerability. The process of cognitive restructuring that occurs with posttraumatic growth is characterized by an increased complexity in thinking and a movement towards wisdom and spirituality.

It is important to the understanding of posttraumatic growth to note that the presence of posttraumatic growth does not connote the absence of suffering or distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In fact, the continuing distress may provide the fuel for continued posttraumatic growth. It is important that service providers appreciate that relieving suffering too quickly may deprive people of significant opportunities for growth.

### **Predictors and Correlates of Post Traumatic Growth**

Empirical studies have been conducted that yield more understanding of posttraumatic growth. In particular, these studies bring insights into predictors of posttraumatic growth. Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan (2000) measured various cognitive processes among 54 college students who had experienced a trauma. They used the Quest Scale, which measures cognitions around existential issues, and various items from other instruments that were selected to measure rumination related to the traumatic

event. They found that posttraumatic growth increased with an increase in the cognitive processes of event related rumination and existential questioning. Cadell, Regehr and Hemsworth (2003) studied 174 bereaved HIV caregivers and found support for their hypotheses that both spirituality and social support are positively related to posttraumatic growth. However, their third hypothesis was that posttraumatic growth would increase as distress decreased. Their results proved the opposite; increased levels of distress were related to increased posttraumatic growth. This finding brings particular hope for service providers of domestic violence victims and the results have found support in other studies (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

### **Posttraumatic Growth and Domestic Violence**

Although there have been numerous studies about posttraumatic growth following various traumatic adversities in life, there has been little attention paid to domestic violence. In an effort to begin to fill this gap in the literature, Cobb, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) conducted research that focused on 60 women who were utilizing services from a domestic violence agency. The researchers hypothesized that the incidence of posttraumatic growth would be positively related to the amount of abuse experienced. They also hypothesized that more growth would occur among women who had left the abusive relationship and among women who had positive role models who had undergone their own growth after abuse. The sample of women ( $N= 60$ ) were racially mixed although the statistical analysis is not broken down by race.

The participants were given three instruments: The Index of Spouse Abuse, The Center for Epidemiologic Depression Scale and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Cobb et al., 2006). Demographic information that was collected included information

about whether the women had left her abuser or was still in relationship with him. The results supported all three of the hypotheses with an additional finding that growth was also noted at lower levels among women who had not left their abusers. The researchers note that the survivors of domestic violence, as a group, demonstrated significant posttraumatic growth; their average score was higher than reported scores from groups of breast cancer survivors and survivors of violent crimes other than domestic violence. The study also corroborated the earlier finding (Cadell et al., 2003) that more significant growth follows higher levels of trauma. This finding is important for domestic violence service providers who might otherwise underestimate the healing potential of the most severely abused women.

Despite the importance of these findings, there are significant limitations with this study (Cobb et al., 2006). The data was derived exclusively from participant self-report and the participants were drawn from a small pool of women associated with a domestic violence agency. These constraints limit the reliability and generalizability of the findings. In addition, given the high degree of PTSD found among survivors of domestic violence, it would have been helpful information if the researchers had included a measure of PTSD in their instruments. Despite these limitations, it is useful to the field of domestic violence to have empirical evidence that there is a strong relationship between domestic violence and posttraumatic growth, that high levels of abuse offer opportunities for growth and that role models can have a significant impact on growth.

Although there is literature to support the incidence of posttraumatic growth after domestic violence, it is important to remember that not all women are able to heal after the experience. In a qualitative study of 15 survivors of domestic violence, Smith (2003)

tells the story of healing from abuse and also the story of the inability to overcome the psychological damage brought on by the abuse. Although all of participants in her study identified themselves as being in the process of healing from the abuse, four of the fifteen women were still stuck in fantasies of revenge, continuing psychosomatic symptoms, periods of excessive emotionality and symptoms of PTSD. Smith finds evidence in her data to suggest that supportive relationships are central to the women's recovery and that empowering women through support is the single most important component of providing care.

### **Clinical Interventions to Enhance Post Traumatic Growth**

From their own research and from the related literature surrounding posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun offer suggestions for improved clinical interventions with trauma victims that are easily transferable to domestic violence survivors (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998a). Above all, they warn therapists against trying to rush or steer the process of posttraumatic growth. Clinical helpers need to allow the client to set the pace of growth so that they recognize changes and growth within themselves before the counselor initiates interventions around the concept. Counselors can assist with the process of helping to rebuild an assumptive world, but must allow trauma victims to work within their existing belief systems. The counselor needs to remain strong and steady despite repeated exposures to the traumatic material and to validate growth that the client identifies even if that growth seems to be an illusion. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998a) stress that cognitive changes may precede behavioral changes and that time must be allowed for the trauma victim to fully integrate the new cognitive constructs before expecting them to display the altered behaviors. As a fine point, counselors need to be

careful about not attributing the growth directly to the traumatic event but to the process of navigating and recovering from the event. There is nothing inherently good or desirable in the event itself.

### **Criticism of the Construct of Posttraumatic Growth**

Although there has been widespread acceptance of the construct of posttraumatic growth in psychological literature, Aldwin and Levenson (2004) point out some weaknesses in the theory. First, they criticize the lack of attention that Tedeschi and Calhoun pay to the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth following positive events, such as childbirth, which are strong enough to create the need for a cognitive restructuring as well. They also object to the lack of attention to the destructive elements of trauma, such as a greatly increased vulnerability, which can coexist with the growth. Lastly, they point out that Tedeschi and Calhoun overlook the importance of coping skills and affect regulation to allow the person the opportunity to engage in cognitive restructuring. For Aldwin and Levenson, posttraumatic growth is merely a period of developmental growth that is accelerated by the crisis of the trauma and aided by the person's natural resources, such as hardiness, resilience, and coping skills.

### **Proposals for Future Research into Post Traumatic Growth**

In response to Aldwin and Levenson, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) articulate their own concerns and proposals for further research. They acknowledge that the construct is hard to measure or quantify because it is trying to measure what it means to live an optimal life, to be fully alive and human in the face of the inevitable human struggles that occur. However, to get a better understanding of posttraumatic growth, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) outline four proposals for future research. First, there needs

to be more focus on exactly how people engage with the existential questions and how that cognitive process relates to the growth that occurs. Secondly, researchers need to use narrative techniques that would allow inquiry to take its own course and perhaps broaden the definition or the understanding of well-being. The remaining two proposals both address the need to study posttraumatic growth as it intersects with cultural context. Specifically, we need a better understanding of how the posttraumatic narratives are related to and influenced by the larger American cultural narrative. Finally, since social support has a big impact on posttraumatic growth, the question arises about how the culture transmitted through that support impacts the growth. These questions and considerations are particularly germane when examining posttraumatic growth among people who belong to an racial minority culture within the bigger context of the dominant American culture.

### **Meta-analysis of Growth after Adversity**

In addition to this critique of posttraumatic growth, there have been two studies that attempt to bring needed clarity and unity to the understanding of survival and growth after trauma. In one of the studies, Joseph, Linley and Harris (2005) performed exploratory research to attempt to achieve a clearer understanding of the construct of “growth” following adversity. They administered three different measurement tools to 176 adults who had experienced difficult circumstances in the preceding years. The measurement scales were the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, the Perceived Benefits Scale and the Thriving Scale. Together these scales have 20 subscales which were grouped into three components: changes in perception of the self, changes in relationships with others, and changes in life philosophy. Based on an analysis of the



principle components with varimax rotation, the authors suggest that growth be seen as a unitary construct rather than through the lenses of various numbers of subscales.

However, as an alternate choice, they also support the study of growth through the three components listed above. The study findings reassure researchers that, despite differing terminology and measurement criteria, they are all examining a single unified experience of growth. The findings underscore the need for further research to continue honing the focus of the philosophical and practical understanding of growth.

Following a similar line of inquiry, Linley and Joseph (2004) examined 39 empirical studies that focused on growth after adversity in order to find both the consistencies and the discrepancies in the results. Pointing to the lack of unity in this area of study, the researchers noted that only 12 of the 39 studies used measurement tools that had been used elsewhere. However, in their findings, the researchers reported more consistencies in the literature than discrepancies. Important consistencies included the following: (a) greater levels of threat or trauma relate to greater amounts of growth, (b) various measures of coping were related to growth including problem-focused coping and positive religious coping, (c) satisfaction with social support was related to growth but not social support itself, (d) cognitive processes were related to growth, and (e) positive affect was related to growth. In other areas, an examination of the research yielded more ambiguous results. Adversarial growth was not consistently related to gender or age or education level and studies yielded conflicting results for the development of growth over time.

Based on this study, Linley and Joseph (2004) offer some important considerations for future research into adversarial growth. First of all, they note that study

results become less clear cut as methodological rigor increases, indicating that the reality behind the research may be much more complex than has been described to date. They note research design issues including the reliance on self-reported data, the lack of longitudinal studies and the lack of pre trauma data to link with post trauma growth. They also highlight the lack of behavioral and physiological measurements of growth to parallel the cognitive and emotional markers. As a final precaution, they note that the quantitative data reflect group norms and may not be useful for individual explanation and application. Linking this study to the previously noted research by Joseph, Linley and Harris (2005), it seems clear that the field of growth after diversity contains the extremely divergent energy of two commonly oppositional purposes: (a) to break the understanding into smaller and smaller segments and (b) to step back from the details and find an overarching and unified pattern. While there is reason to continue to track variables that become increasingly numerous and specific, there is also a need to unify concepts and measurements in order to bring the search for details into a comprehensive and consistent understanding.

### **Posttraumatic Growth and Spirituality**

The connection between posttraumatic growth and spirituality is apparent; both are concerned with meaning making, deeper appreciation for life and for connections with others, and hope for the future (Linley, 2003; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). This connection between posttraumatic growth and religion or spirituality is explored in various empirical studies. Shaw, Joseph and Linley (2005) examine eleven empirical studies that link religion or spirituality with posttraumatic growth. Of the eleven studies, four are qualitative and seven are quantitative. All of the quantitative studies used the

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory or the Stress Related Growth Scale. The authors cite the problem that religion is related to socially desirable responding and various study results may be skewed by these responses. They also note that the constructs of religion and spirituality are overlapping and loosely defined and they hypothesize that spirituality may be more important to posttraumatic growth than religion. As a final note, the authors point out that there is no way to know if there is causal connection and, if so, the direction of that connection.

In one of the quantitative studies, Cadell, Regehr, and Hemsworth (2003) explore the precise relationship between spiritual beliefs and posttraumatic growth. Through statistical analysis, Cadell et al. establish that increased spirituality is a predictor for higher levels of posttraumatic growth. They also determine that social support and level of distress are both positively related to posttraumatic growth as well. In another study, two specific aspects of religion/spirituality are found to correlate significantly with posttraumatic growth: readiness to face existential questions and openness to religious change (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000). Additional studies address both the positive and negative aspects of religious coping to pinpoint which aspects of religion are growth enhancing and which actually impede the growth process (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

### **Spirituality and Healing from Domestic Violence**

The relationship between spirituality and healing from domestic violence is specifically explored in a qualitative study that focuses on the spiritual themes in the narratives of nine survivors of domestic violence (Senter & Caldwell, 2002). Although Senter and Caldwell identify twelve different themes in their data, most of the themes are

variations on the five areas outlined in the construct of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The twelve themes constellate around the formation of a new cognitive view of the world, the strengthening of social bonds, the deepening of faith, and the re-examination of self and possibilities for the future. Although the nine participants in this study were racially diverse, the authors do not note any variation in themes by race. It was their intention to explore healing and growth in the context of the general population and not from any specific cultural perspective.

Several other studies reinforce this connection between spirituality and healing from domestic violence. Using quantitative data and a population of 65 African American victims of domestic violence in the DC area, Watlington and Murphy (2006) find a strong negative relationship between spirituality and depression. It is interesting to note that their data did not support any relationship between spirituality and PTSD nor any relationships between religiosity and either depression or PTSD. They did, however, find a negative relationship between social support and both depression and PTSD.

In a similar study, Humphreys (2000) used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to explore the relationship between spiritual beliefs and symptoms among 50 women who were residing in a domestic violence shelter. Forty percent of the women (20) were African American and the rest were split among Caucasian (11), Hispanic (11) and other (8). There was significant psychological distress among the women; 56% exhibited the symptoms of PTSD and the severity of the distress was related to the severity of the abuse. The overwhelming majority of the women (82%) related that spirituality was helpful to them and that their spirituality had grown since entering the shelter. Although the statistics did not corroborate a strong negative

relationship between spiritual beliefs and symptoms, the relationship was in the right direction and the author believes that a larger sample would yield a robust correlation. Given the strong beliefs held by the women that their spirituality was helpful to them, it is possible that the short passage of time since the women had removed themselves from the trauma may explain the lag in the statistical relationship between the symptoms and spiritual beliefs.

In summation, victims of trauma frequently develop PTSD and other emotional or mental symptoms. In order to gain some understanding about the process of surviving trauma and healing from the effects, researchers have looked at the phenomenon through several different lenses including hardiness, resilience, coping, posttraumatic growth and spirituality. The complexity of the variables involved with these constructs points to the difficulty of understanding just how healing takes place. The studies that have targeted the victims of domestic violence suggest that coping skills, resilience, spiritual beliefs and social support are important components for the healing process. Post traumatic growth builds on earlier constructs and contributes to the understanding of the growth that can come after trauma. By focusing on rumination and the cognitive processes that create a new world view, post traumatic growth brings some needed clarity to the actual process of healing and provides a useful perspective for helping professionals.

### **African American Women and Domestic Violence**

#### **The Development of Racially Sensitive Literature about Domestic Violence**

The development of the literature to date pertaining to African American women and domestic violence is chronicled through the narratives of three literature reviews (Coley & Beckett, 1988; Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003; Sokoloff & Dupont,

2005). Coley and Beckett (1988) were the first to address the racially specific topic of African American women and domestic violence. They found that, although there had been a great increase in the amount of literature about domestic violence in general between 1970 and 1988, there was very little literature prior to 1988 that pertained to the specific experience of African American women. Prior to that time, the only information about African American women and domestic violence was contained in research results that were coincidentally categorized by race. The studies examined such parameters as the relative rates of domestic violence between races and compared the utilization rate of medical, law enforcement or mental health services by African American and Caucasian women. Coley and Beckett conclude that there is no clear statistical difference between the rates of domestic violence among African Americans and Whites and that battered African American women utilize medical services more frequently while White women primarily turn to mental health providers for support. Although there is increased evidence that domestic violence occurs more frequently within African American communities (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the other findings about service utilization would remain largely unchallenged today (Crane & Constantino, 2003).

It is interesting to note that the literature review by Coley and Beckett (1988) inadvertently introduces a theme that pervades current literature about African American battered women. The authors attempt to describe the differences in self-image between African American victims of domestic violence and White women who are similarly victimized by highlighting what is now considered a stereotypical view of African American women. Coley and Beckett refer to a conference presentation in 1982 by Bingham and Guinyard that characterizes African American women as resilient and able

to withstand violence and keep on going. Current literature (Bell & Mattis, 2000; Few, 2005; Nash, 2005; Taylor, 2005) holds that this stereotype, the myth of the African American “superwoman,” does not illuminate the experience of African American women; rather it clouds and obfuscates understanding by infecting the thinking of both the African American women who are abused and the service providers who improperly conclude that they women do not need interventions. Whereas Coley and Beckett refer to this stereotype as a new awareness, current researchers treat the stereotype as an important component of racial oppression within the context of domestic violence. In a similar vein, it is also striking that the language of this 1988 literature review hints at racial components without directly naming racism as a factor at work. For instance, the relative lack of services available to African Americans is noted without any conjecture that racism might be a cause. Similarly, a finding that White women leave abusive relationships in higher numbers than African American women draws no speculation about internalized oppression or racial barriers to advancement.

By 2003, researchers were probing in depth the interplay between domestic violence and race in the experience of African American women. In their literature review, Hampton et al. (2003) cite numerous studies that explore the structural context of “intergenerational exposure to racial and gender oppression” (p. 538). In their review, the authors focus much attention on the racial experience of African American men as it relates to a reportedly higher incidence of domestic violence among the African American community. As African American men are deprived of dignity, power, and respect by the dominant culture, they act out their rage and their need for validation and respect within the confines of their intimate relationships. The dynamic of the racial

oppression of African American men sets the stage for many of the culturally specific responses to domestic violence that African American women display, especially the themes of racial loyalty and the “superwoman” complex. Notably absent from this literature review (Hampton et al.) is any mention of the importance of looking for individual “within group differences” among African American victims of domestic violence and the emphasis consistently remains on the emerging awareness of macro level cultural and racial themes. To focus attention on the racial and cultural themes is a definite step forward from the thought processes revealed by Coley and Beckett (1988). The importance of the cultural and racial themes is undeniable and yet, the literature compiled as of 2003 lacks significant depth through the omission of the individual voices of African American women who differ from each other in many important ways.

The most recent literature review on the accumulated knowledge of domestic violence and the African American experience provides a stark contrast (Sokoloff & DuPont, 2005). Going beyond the earlier review, Sokoloff and Dupont synthesize and update the rapidly growing body of research literature. They split the literature into two distinct and equally important perspectives: the micro (qualitative) perspective where individual experiences are examined and the macro (quantitative) perspective that takes the broad over view of differences between races.

Working from the first perspective, researchers utilize qualitative research methods to record the unique voices of African American women who have been marginalized by society as well as abused within their intimate relationships. Despite the emphasis on unique “micro” level experience, common themes are present within the individual stories of African American women. These themes contain important insights



for developing more culturally relevant domestic violence intervention and prevention strategies. Researchers who espouse the second perspective continue the multicultural “macro” approach and examine how the structures of race, gender, and class create a racially unique experience of domestic violence for African American women as a group. The more structurally oriented researchers hope to arrive at more culturally competent services for African American women through looking at the commonalities within racial experience.

The issue of economic class emerges with more clarity in this latest literature review, and Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) observe a need for both schools of researchers (macro/structural and micro/individual) to give even more attention to the element of “class.” It is possible that the future of literature in this area will contain more specific examination of the oppression of class as it adds another complex layer to gender and race. To bolster the need for more attention to class, bell hooks (2000), makes a case that de-emphasizing class has been a tactic utilized for the purpose of continued White domination. As hooks proclaims, “Class matters. Race and gender can be used as screens to deflect attention away from the harsh realities class politics exposes” (2000, p. 7).

The two differing approaches to the current research described by Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) mirror the problems of attempting to understand any culture or racial group. There must always be a tension between understanding the commonalities of the experience for the group in question and also a recognition and exploration of the within group differences that can seem at times to repudiate any attempt to generalize. However, in reading the literature of both commonalities and uniqueness, it is possible to come to

an understanding of African American women who suffer from domestic violence, an understanding that contains complexity as well as cohesiveness.

### **Recent Literature on African American Women and Domestic Violence**

As we turn to a consideration of the recent (post 1999) literature concerning African American women and domestic violence, it is easy to identify that much of the literature either falls into the qualitative “micro” framework or that it continues in the style of a more traditional research orientation. Research studies from both these traditions can be organized around two general areas of interest: the racial factors that make up the context of domestic violence for African American women and racial issues as they relate to the efficacy of services aimed at prevention and intervention. Before beginning the consideration of the recent literature, it is interesting to note that a basic question that was a key focus of the 1988 literature review has not been answered with certainty. There continue to be conflicting studies about the relative incidence of domestic violence across classes and races with some studies reporting equal incidence (Lee, Sanders Thompson, & Mechanic, 2002) and other studies that contend that African Americans suffer disproportionately (Newby, McCarroll, Thayer, Norwood, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2000). Perhaps, as researchers, we should embrace a lesson from “womanist” thinking and forgo investing time in that comparative question and, instead, delve into the subjective experiencing of the African American woman as she navigates against the dominance of racial norms and gendered power.

Differing definitions of domestic violence. For the African American woman, domestic violence never happens in a vacuum; it always occurs within the context of race. However, it has only been within the last ten years that African American women

could find literature that addresses their particular experiences. As a simple example, most White women acquainted with “domestic violence” would give you a fairly consistent definition of the term and would believe that their definition is universal. Bent-Goodley (2004) brings to light the discrepancy that White women see domestic violence as inclusive of behavior that is psychologically coercive as well as all forms of physical violence while African American women believe only severe beatings that result in hospitalization deserve the name domestic violence. Although Bent-Goodley does not hypothesize about the differing perceptions of domestic violence, it is an easy leap to attribute the differences to racial history. The dominant group carries much less tolerance for enduring violent domination and verbal attacks than the historically oppressed group.

Going beyond terminology to behavior, race and cultural differences persist. In a study that compared the experiences of domestic violence among African Americans, South Asians and Hispanics, the cultural context of domestic violence is evident (Yoshioka, Gilbert, El-Bassel, & Baig-Amin, 2003). As an example, being burned or scalded is one of the most frequent forms of abuse for South Asians while relatively rare for African Americans and Hispanics. The legal, medical and mental health services that aim to assist victims need to be aware of cultural manifestations of domestic violence and the differing cultural definitions of the problem. Going beneath the definition, we find that African American women hold the phenomenon of domestic violence within a much more complex context. For white women, domestic violence is the perpetration of sexual dominance on the female by the male. It is a simple but destructive dynamic that emerges solely from a patriarchal view of gender. For African Americans, domestic violence occurs within a social context of racial oppression and humiliation that goes far beyond

gender (Fraser, McNutt, Clark, Williams-Muhammed, & Lee, 2002). Several themes, both competing and interlocking, grow out of this underlying experience of racial oppression and humiliation.

Protectiveness of African American males. African American women almost universally speak of a responsibility to protect the males in their midst. This responsibility can be cloaked in different meanings or purposes but it is almost always present. "Religious maternalism" (Nash, 2005, p. 1427) dictates that the African American female has a duty to care for her spouse, a duty that is not mitigated by the spouse's bad behavior. This duty comes from her religious beliefs and shirking this duty has spiritual consequences for her. More directly related to the racial context, African American women believe that the African American male will not be treated fairly in the White system if the abuse is reported. As one research participant voices it, "You don't 'tell!' If you 'tell,' you are putting a Black man in the system" (Nash, 2005, p. 1428). Clearly the woman was holding racial loyalty ahead of her welfare as a woman. Similarly, African American women want to protect their sons from the stigma of seeing their fathers further emasculated and from the loss of growing up without a male role model. Perhaps most powerfully, the African American woman sees the oppression the African American man faces everyday in the White world and believes she has a duty to overlook and understand any attempts he might make to dominate her in the home. Growing out of this, an African American woman might even take on the responsibility for the abuse, believing that if she could provide enough respect to the man within the home, he would not need to subjugate her there. It becomes the woman's burden to compensate all by herself for the man's cultural experience of oppression. "The world

beats up on Black men enough....the Black man gets whipped in a White society....What sense does it make for him to come home and have to deal with a [dominant] wife?"

(Nash, 2005, p. 1430).

Locating blame for the abuse. Fraser et al. (2002), using quantitative techniques, found that African American women who are abused typically place great causal importance on external factors that affect the male, such as use of substances, unemployment, racial stigma and anger, and thereby relieve the burden of responsibility from the perpetrator. Raj, Silverman, Wingood, and DiClemente (1999) look at causal factors in domestic violence among African Americans and find that attributes of the male are predictive of domestic violence. The primary predictive attributes are lower levels of education than the female, lower levels of empathy, and jealousy. These predictors for domestic violence divert the focus from gender supremacy to more nuanced personal and socio-political factors. Among Whites, the prevailing belief is that the man abuses the woman to assert the primacy of his gender on the female while for African Americans, the issue is much more complex and places less culpability on the man.

Stereotype of superwoman. The heavy responsibilities that African American women take on themselves to protect the males and to compensate for racial oppression create the seedbed for an image of the African American woman as stoic, enduring, and self-sacrificing (Bell & Mattis, 2000; Few 2005; Nash, 2005; Taylor, 2005). This image becomes an additional burden for the women to bear, prevents them from asking for the help they may need, and blinds others to the seriousness of the situation. The African American woman finds herself buying into the necessity to be a "superwoman" who is

stoic in the face of pain and enduring of insults from both the White culture and from her intimate partner. She sacrifices her own safety for the sake of others. This stereotype needs to be understood by anyone who is involved in domestic violence services so that the vulnerability of the woman can be seen behind the stereotype (Bell & Mattis; Few; Nash; Taylor). Service providers need to tailor services to African American women in such a way that they reinforce an image of co-existing strength and vulnerability, rather than focusing on one or the other.

Access to services. There is evidence to suggest that this particular superwoman stereotype might be responsible for differences in services offered to White and to African American women. One study contains data demonstrating that police provided referrals to domestic violence shelters to 51% of the White victims they worked with and to only 39% of the African American victims (Grossman, Hinkley, Kawalski & Margrave, 2005). Similarly, although safety planning is a major component of all domestic violence agencies, in one study, only 38% of the African American women who received services from a police sponsored agency were assisted with safety planning (Weisz, 2005). Reinforcing the stereotype of the African American superwoman is the notion that the African American community as a whole is self-sufficient and does not need outside services. As the director of one domestic violence agency voiced it, “The majority of the people we serve are White. It’s almost like the Black can take care of their own better. Either that or they’re just tougher, more used to it, [or] tolerate it longer” (Donnelly et al., 2005, p. 25). This particular agency director does not question whether any racial bias or lack of cultural competence might affect the low utilization rate of African American women.

African American distrust of service providers. Indeed, researchers have found that African American women are impacted in their decision making by their anticipation of racially based mistreatment by law enforcement and social service providers. Several studies (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Grossman et al., 2005; Kingsnorth & MacIntosh, 2004; Weis, 2001) report different aspects of African American women's distrust of the system and how it affects their willingness to seek assistance in escaping the abusive relationship. Bent-Goodley uncovers a belief among African American women that the social service system will take away their children if they report domestic violence. It is their belief that White women do not face the same degree of threat. Grossman et al. and Weis both report that African American women do not expect police to be responsive to their needs whereas White women usually view the police as a strong ally. White women frequently will use the police to threaten their partners while African American women do not see this as an option that is available to them (Few, 2005). In their analysis of court records, Kingsnorth and MacIntosh (2004) utilized a sample of 5,272 domestic violence cases processed in Sacramento County in California in an 18 month period ending in December 2000. They find, with statistically supported significance, that African American women do not follow through to prosecute domestic violence perpetrators as often as White women. Although this finding could be seen as evidence of racial loyalty, that assumption is refuted by the additional information that African American women prosecute White and African American perpetrators in the same proportion. The researchers conclude that the reluctance to prosecute may come from a distrust and fear of the judicial system rather than a desire to protect the African American male (Kingsnorth & MacIntosh).

Racism and law enforcement. The racism embedded in law enforcement institutions is illuminated in a qualitative study that describes the process of training police officers about domestic violence and racism (Huisman, Martinez & Wilson, 2005). The authors report that the police officers openly exhibited racist and sexist attitudes towards the trainers. The female trainers experienced sexual harassment from the police officers that was severe enough to raise anxiety about safety issues for them. Even the female police officers displayed a sexist attitude by placing the responsibility for rape on female victims. Racism was even more pronounced and the trainers reported that the police officers reacted to discussions of race with “resistance, apathy, and rage” (Huisman et al., 2005, p.798). If this level of sexism and racism is encountered by professional trainers who are officially sanctioned by the police department, the fears of African American women that they will encounter hostility and racial oppression from the police department are very understandable.

White privilege in domestic violence agencies. The domestic violence agencies offer only a slightly more hospitable welcome to African American women than police officers. Although they purport to serve all victims equally, the network of agencies created by White feminists comprise a system of support that is molded to the perceived needs of White women (Donnelly et al., 2005). There is a heavy emphasis on mental health and legal supports and very little attention to such services as transportation, housing and education, which are more frequently the concern of African American women. To add to the lack of sensitivity to the needs of African American women, the preponderance of domestic violence agencies are in rural areas while African American victims are more typically urban (Grossman et al., 2005) and the issue of geographic



accessibility is a frequently cited bias in the provision of services (Donnelly et al., 2005; Bent-Goodley, 2004).

Color blindness. The racial bias of services for victims goes beyond geographic accessibility, however, and pervades every aspect of the services. The prevailing ideology at domestic violence agencies, arising from their White middle class roots, is one of color blindness (Donnelly et al., 2005). The concept of color blindness rests on several preexisting beliefs about domestic violence. First is the belief that domestic violence affects all women equally across racial and class lines. Although this belief does have the benefit of de-stigmatizing and democratizing the occurrence of domestic violence, it also serves to relieve the dominant culture of any responsibility for social conditions that might foster the violence. Furthermore, if domestic violence occurs equally in every segment of the population, then the dominant culture automatically frames the problem within the context of its own culture, values and perspectives and imposes a one size fits all approach. An inference is made that if domestic violence is universal then prevention and solutions do not need to be found within specific cultures but are common to all. Given the racial biases that run so deep in our culture, services that aim for a color blind equality will not be equitable (Watkins, 2005). The concept of white privilege pervades the community of domestic violence advocates and perpetuates racial oppression through the very services that are meant to serve all (Donnelly et al.).

In an exploration of white privilege within the system of shelters for women, Donnelly et al. (2005) discover three differing themes by interviewing the directors of domestic violence shelters across the deep South. Color blindness was the first and most prevalent theme and is characterized by the statement that “violence does not know any

barriers...it doesn't matter if they're green, purple, or red...violence is still violence” (Donnelly et al., p. 20). Another director goes on to assert that color “cease[s] to be a problem and they're just battered women” (Donnelly et al., p. 21). The white director takes it upon herself to speak for the AA women and to declare their race irrelevant. The language of the directors was couched in benevolent language that portrayed a high level of perceived inclusiveness, an inclusiveness that comes at the price of leaving racial differences at the door.

Making the African American woman an “other.” Turning to the second theme of white privilege within the system of shelters, some directors addressed racial issues very directly and intentionally. However this direct attention to racial issues usually comes with highly destructive racial stereotypes. Donnelly et al. (2005) summarize these findings as placing the African American victim in a double bind.

When they [the African American women] use battered women's services, they risk being stereotyped as poor, aggressive, drug-using women and savvy manipulators trying to milk the system. Their needs may be seen as less real or urgent than those of White women. On the other hand, when they avoid the system, their ability to withstand violence is offered as an explanation, and they are assumed to have their own cultural reasons for dealing with the abuse. Either way, the end result is a lack of comprehensive outreach in their communities and a dearth of culturally competent violence programming suited to their needs. (p. 26)

When racial differences are acknowledged by White service providers, a deficit model is utilized and the African American woman is made to be an “other.” Through this attempt at racial sensitivity, oppression is perpetuated.

Protection of the status quo. The final theme that characterizes shelter philosophy in the Donnelly et al. (2005) study is the inertia of doing things the way they have always been done. History and tradition are used to support a lack of new programs or initiatives that might be more responsive to diverse populations. Virtually all the agency directors that were interviewed spoke of continuing existing services and reported “no plans to do outreach or add services” (Donnelly et al., p. 29). A lack of finances was frequently given as an excuse for maintaining the status quo. If there is not enough money to go around, then it is the marginalized women who are overlooked. Since the history of domestic violence agencies is intertwined with the needs and perceptions of White women, the lack of new initiatives supports a status quo that is racially biased.

Effects of subtle racism. Although white service providers believe they are offering services that are universal (Donnelly et al., 2005), the voices of African American women who utilize domestic violence shelters reveal a differing viewpoint. One woman speaks of the high stakes involved in coming to the White system for help. “I feel like I can’t emotionally afford to walk into an office with a White person sitting right there with my life in my hands and begging them to help me. *I can’t afford for them not to get it* [italics added]” (Taylor, 2005, p. 1480). Other women report the care they use to avoid being stereotyped as an “angry” black woman, thereby muting their own voices and minimizing their feelings. Even when African American women feel relatively welcome in domestic violence shelters, they report not feeling free to share about the racial

obstacles they face getting services. They also describe discomfort talking about being abused by an African American man. At the very least, African American women report a habit of constantly monitoring their own actions and the reactions of White staff, a habit that reveals an underlying tension around racial issues (Few, 2005).

To summarize, African American women experience domestic violence differently from Caucasian women. They define domestic violence in different terms and see it as part of a larger cultural context of violence and oppression. African American women are reluctant to report domestic violence or to seek services for reasons that are intertwined with the racism in their everyday experiences. When African American women do reach out for services, they frequently encounter harmful stereotypes and racism varies from subtle to overt. The women involved in the domestic violence movement intend for their services to be supportive of all victims; however, their lack of cultural sensitivity and color blind approach bring painful disconnects to African American victims when they are at their most vulnerable. The differences between Caucasian women and African American women are inextricably linked to the social, cultural and political history of the two races in America. These differences find clarifying voice in a consideration of the womanist philosophy as a counterpoint to feminism.

### **Womanism**

Womanism grew out of a reaction against Eurocentric feminism. The modern feminist movement emerged in the late twentieth century as a challenge to the male referenced norm. However, feminism has largely been the creation of white, educated, middle class women and it reflects the white middle class concerns and values of its

founders (Hudson-Weems, 2001). For these women, waking up to the gender oppression that constricted their lives was a liberating and enlightening process. African American women, on the other hand, had suffered the effects of brutal racial oppression for generations. Oppression was not a new understanding for them and gender oppression was just one aspect of their harsh realities. African American women needed their own specific philosophy that would integrate their experiences as both black and female (Collins, 1996). Before turning to an examination of womanist philosophy, it is instructive to consider the foundational concept of intersecting identities. A brief overview of intersecting identities helps us to grasp the existential complexity of African American women's lives and to understand the emergence of a separate womanist philosophy.

### **Intersecting Identities**

When multicultural studies were in their infancy, researchers aimed to describe differing identities through a one dimensional approach. What does it mean to be black? What does it mean to be female? However, emerging multicultural understanding includes the awareness that identities have multiple components and are layered in ways that are unique to the individual. Two early articles by Robinson (1993, 1999) and one by Reynolds and Pope (1991) place these three scholars among the heralds of the still emerging field of intersecting and interacting identities. Their work lays important groundwork for the theoretical understanding of how layers of oppression from differing identities affect individuals.

The theory of multiple identities. Robinson (1993) presents the complexity of identity development within the framework that everyone has more than one identifying

component. For the purposes of her consideration, Robinson (1993) focuses on four different components that touch each person: gender, class, race and culture. She notes that the within group differences that are frequently cited when referring to any identity construct can be explained to some extent by looking at the pattern of intersecting identities that each person will have. For instance, the variable of class creates tremendous differences across gender, race and culture. Robinson also emphasizes that just because we know the various identity components of a person and understand the relative power or privilege that comes with each, we cannot assume that we understand the person's world view. Thus, a white heterosexual man from the middle class may suffer from feelings of powerlessness and a black woman who has been abused might have considerable self-assurance and inner peace. However, these examples are not meant to devalue an understanding of the social meaning of these identities. Rather, it is important to seek out the subjective differences of individuals and to work towards empowering each individual within the context of the social climate that exists.

Deepening her theory of multiple identities, Robinson (1999) explores the unconscious perpetuation of rank and status through our habitual modes of discourse. In particular, we address the "isms" of race and sex and gender as if they affect only the minority group. Racism and sexism have destructive ramifications for everyone, not just the oppressed. Building on the concept of white privilege, she points out how blinded the privileged are by their normal reactive evaluations of identity constructs. From a place of privilege, we see differences as disabilities rather than as differences and by doing so, we stigmatize the other and fail at making a connection. If we encounter clients who are disabled or working class or members of a marginalized group, we need to understand

that the oppression is culturally based and is not a part of that person. We continue the system of oppression by immediately placing that person in a category of oppressed. Taken together, Robinson's ideas underline the importance of paying attention to the uniqueness of each woman's experience as she faces the numerous stereotypes embedded in the construct of domestic violence (1999).

A multidimensional identity model. The contribution of Reynolds and Pope (1991) to the field is an exploration of the fragmentation of each person that results from competing identities. Although this fragmentation is most highly toxic when the person is struggling with competing marginalized identities, all of us live with competing loyalties and allegiances to such dimensions as race, culture, sex, sexual orientation, religion and class. For individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups, identifying with all of their differing "parts" may produce more layers of stigma than they can bear. To apply this concept to the topic of African American women and domestic violence, African American women would need tremendous strength to be able to embrace the dual facts that they are not only racially oppressed, but also disempowered by gender and, perhaps, also by class. To further complicate matters, if they speak publicly about gender oppression within the African American community, they may jeopardize their standing within the community and risk social exile. For many African American women, these realities result in a culturally impacted choice to deny the domestic violence (Donnelly, Cook, Ausdale, & Foley, 2005; Nash, 2005).

Reynolds and Pope (1991) propose a four stage multidimensional identity model that illuminates the struggles and choices facing all of us as we define our lives and experiences. In the first stage, there is a passive acceptance of one singular identity,

usually the most visible component. Thus, an African American who is gay might just embrace the African American identity as that will be all that most people see. As a second stage option, the person makes a conscious choice about which singular identity to claim, rather than passively accepting the assigned identity. To continue the example given for stage one, that same person might now decide to self-identify as gay and make that the most important defining element. In the third stage, a person embraces more than one identity but keeps each one separate and distinct. Thus, an African American woman could be outspoken about her power as a woman among a select group of female friends but then return home to an oppressive environment where she takes on submission through undivided loyalty to her race. A final option is to integrate differing identities and to transcend the categories that any one identity demands by joining and defining new groups that incorporate differing aspects. In this scenario, African American women would create a new identity that carries both their race and their gender and this new identity would define them as qualitatively different from a simple addition of race plus gender. The philosophy of womansim has developed among African American women out of this endeavor to simultaneously embrace their experiences of both race and gender.

#### The Emergence of Womanist Thought

The first definition of “womanist” was published by Alice Walker in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1983). Since then, other African American female writers have added their perspective to what has become an open dialogue about what it means to be a womanist, to be African American and female within a history of slavery and a context of both racism and sexism. Womanist philosophy emerged as a whole hearted rejection by African American women of the



white-centered feminist model that came to political and social prominence between 1950 and 1990 (Phillips, 2006). To understand this sweeping rejection, it is necessary to trace the tension between race and gender for African American women as far back as the Women's Suffrage movement of the 1880's (Hudson-Weems, 2001). In 1870, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was passed, giving the vote to black men. In response to this political shift, white women began to organize and to urge white men to extend the vote to women. To bolster their position, they incorporated the argument that women's votes were needed to help ensure continued white supremacy. Although most feminists today give little thought to this connection, African American women have been acutely aware of the racism inherent in the Women's Suffrage movement and continue to feel alienated from and distrustful of white women and their demands for gender equality. In 1852, Sojourner Truth, in her famous oration "Ain't I a Woman," expounded on the insult to black women when white males looked upon white women as helpless, fragile and pure and treated black women as workhorses and prostitutes. To this day, African American women resent that strong black women such as Sojourner Truth and Rosa Parks are co-opted as symbols of "feminism" when their allegiance to race outweighed their allegiance to gender (Hudson-Weems). This tension between race and gender explains the need for womanism as a counterweight to Eurocentric feminism but the resulting differences between the two ideologies are much more profound and far reaching than a mere consideration of race and socio-political oppression.

### **Differing Perspectives of Feminism and Womanism**

Both feminism and womanism strive to celebrate the experience of being female in a culture where women are marginalized (Williams, 2005); however, they are based on opposing perspectives with feminism being Eurocentric while womanism is Afrocentric (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Taylor, 1999). For feminists, gender is the critical experience and patriarchal men are the sources of the problem (Greene, 1997; Hudson-Weems, 2001). The primary purpose of feminism has been to raise the consciousness of other women around gender oppression in order to catalyze social and political change (Banks-Wallace). Feminism seeks to debunk the myth of women as weak and subservient and to promote an image of women as intelligent, powerful and confident. They assume that their message speaks for the universal experience of women everywhere. However hooks (2000) underlines the differing agendas for white and African American women when she critiques *The Feminine Mystique*, an important early manifesto of feminism. This manifesto addresses the boredom, emptiness and powerlessness of being a housewife, a role that relatively few African American women have been able to enjoy. Whereas white women were fighting for an opportunity to work outside the home, African American women have never been given the option not to work. Unspoken in the manifesto was the assumption that African American women would be the ones taking care of white children and cleaning houses while the former housewives pursued careers that carried power and dignity.

### **History of Racial Oppression**

African American women are descendents of involuntary immigrants and slaves, facts that create a very different world view and lived experience (Greene, 1997). The

oppression that African American women experience is more closely connected to the oppression of black men than it is to the oppression of white women. For most, the primary loyalty is to race rather than gender. Rather than seeing the African American man as the enemy, African American women view their oppression by African American men as the result of the internalization of racism and view African American men as their natural allies against a larger problem. Whereas feminists see a need to raise consciousness around issues of gender oppression, African American women have carried the weight of multiple oppressions for generations and are impatient with the slow awakening of white women to issues of oppression (Hudson-Weems, 2001). From their harsh experiences as slaves and an oppressed minority, African American women have always viewed themselves as strong and experience little commonality with the feminists' struggle to find their voice and experience their own power as women (Banks-Wallace, 2000).

Although feminists and womanists bring vastly differing experiences, perspectives and world views, both seek to affirm and uplift the experience of being female. For womanists, however, the racial concerns can never take a back seat to gender and the refusal to demonize men brings a different tenor to their positions. Feminists are asking men to move over and allow them to share in the patriarchal power structures, while womanists emphasize values and systems that are more organic, communal and family oriented (Bertoncini, 1993; Hudson-Weems, 2001). Instead of focusing on political systems and power structures, womanists emphasize oral traditions, the intensity of everyday experience and the fluidity of time (McNair, 1992). Their view is holistic, believing that women will gain their proper place when society evolves as a whole

(Williams & Frame, 1999). Focusing on the interests of one gender as opposed to another creates an oppositional energy that is counterproductive of holistic evolution (Enns, 1991). With this inclusive outlook, womanists strive to focus simultaneously on the various constructs of race, class, gender and sexuality (Hamlet, 2000).

### **Central Components of Womanist Philosophy**

As previously mentioned, in 1983, Alice Walker coined the term “womanism” in the preface to her collection of essays. Her lengthy definition of the term includes phrases such as “black feminist,” “responsible,” “in charge,” “prefers women’s culture,” and “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Although her lengthy generalized definition has spawned many controversies among womanists, she is universally cited as the first to identify and name the emerging alternative to feminism (Hudson-Weems, 2001; Phillips, 2006)). She refers to this connection to feminism when she concludes her definition with the statement that “womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender” (Walker, 1983, p. xii). Since this first proclamation of womanism, other prominent African American women have worked to develop a well-defined and coherent epistemology that can unite and energize African American women. Although there are conflicting viewpoints in some areas, there is a large consensus of opinion about the central components of womanism. It is instructive to examine these components as a means towards better understanding the culture of African American women. The components were not artificially created but were drawn from a deep and empathic understanding of the unique qualities that characterize the culture created by African American women.

The power of naming. Underlying the central components of womansim are an intense attention to terminology and an understanding of the power inherent in naming. There is political as well as ideological significance to the act of naming an alternative to the feminist movement. As an oppressed people who have been denied the right to chose their own names or to define their own reality, African American women are extremely sensitive to names and labels, and the power, both symbolic and real, that comes from self-defining (Hudson-Weems, 2001; Phillips, 2006).

Centrality of personal experience. Womanists value and trust their personal experiences over abstract ideas and bodies of institutionalized knowledge. Whereas womanists see knowledge as accumulated information, they view wisdom as the ability to effectively apply knowledge in specific lived situations. Therefore wisdom is acquired and demonstrated through a willingness to share about personal experiences and struggles. Experts and service providers who come with the knowledge contained in charts and numbers will not be able to reach most African American women; African American women will only trust those who will speak of their own struggles and bring personal wisdom rather than disembodied facts (Taylor, M. J., 1999). Womanists propose an alternative world order where the wisdom of ordinary women is invited and valued and there is never a top down delivery of information that bypasses the daily lives of the people. This womanist concept stands in stark contrast to the feminist emphasis on academic credibility, and research shows that most white women are not even aware of the concept of wisdom gained through the lived experience of daily struggle (Banks-Wallace, 2000). The importance of wisdom for African American women lies in the belief that their survival of oppression depends on their wisdom; sharing their wisdom

with other African American women has been, and continues to be, a way to insure the survival of their loved ones and their race (Phillips, 2006).

The primacy of personal experience carries socio-political ramifications. By replacing experts with the wisdom of the ordinary person, womanism equalizes people and undermines the hierarchies of power (Hamlet, 2000). When focusing on personal experience, there is no need to use professional terms and “proper” language. Therefore, there is no exclusion of people who do not understand the professional lingo, and the words that are best are the ones that fit the individual’s experience. The term “location” is important to womanists and the focus on personal experience locates African American women in the center of their unique experiences and allows them to define, describe and own their own lives in ways that have been denied in the past (Hamlet).

Importance of dialogue and the oral tradition. Closely connected to the importance of concrete lived experience is the womanist emphasis on dialogue and the oral tradition. Dialogue is full of folklore and passed down stories, songs, and sermons. Colorful language that fits experience and everyday life is preferred, and meaning and connection are found even in the mundane aspects of life (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Through this emphasis on spoken and shared stories, African American women are perhaps intuitively using the techniques of Narrative Therapy to create a counter-story that brings dignity to their experiences. Since history is recorded by the dominant culture, oral traditions help preserve the viewpoint of the oppressed and give voice to experiences that might otherwise become invisible. Dialogue and the oral tradition equalize people and counter the notion of the elite (Hamlet, 2000).

Struggle and community. Struggle is a central and defining concept for womanists. The purpose of dialogue and the oral stories is to focus energy on a history of the survival of oppression and create a story line that promotes healing (Hamlet, 2000). The shared struggle includes experiences of racism, classism, and sexism as well the personal and individual struggles that also color lives (Banks-Wallace, 2000). The collective mindset of African American women allows them to speak their struggles more openly than white women as struggle is seen as a unifying and universal condition of the race rather than a shameful mark of individual inadequacy (Hamlet, 2000). Sharing stories of struggle and building community have a reciprocal relationship for African American women as each one feeds the other (hooks, 1993). For African American women, “community is the healing place” and, in community, they can experience dignity in their struggle and find spiritual connections (hooks, p. 152).

The holistic view of life. The womanists approach life holistically and spiritually and believe that the life force or spiritual energy is necessary for them to be able to face the oppression that is present in their lives on a daily basis. The life force is connected to the unity of being and is dissipated when we dissect our experiences. Just as a group has more power than an individual, our lives are more empowering when we refuse to separate the physical, spiritual and emotional realms. They see the importance of staying centered or balanced and of taking simultaneous care of all the different areas of life (Hamlet, 2000). In a similar way, womanists do not separate thoughts, feelings and experiences but weave all these aspects into the oral tradition of their wisdom stories (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Womanists embrace a both/and perspective that is inclusive of all experiences (Hamlet, 2000). The either/or dichotomy creates oppositional energy

which contains the seeds of hierarchy and oppression. They realize that all people are connected to a common fate and the fate of one affects the fate of the other. This interconnectedness engenders a high degree of empathy and compassionate caring (Banks-Wallace) and a desire to work together as a group to overcome problems (McNair, 1992). By way of contrast, the Eurocentric approach of the white feminists is to shy away from spirituality and focus on the political. Although feminists speak of collective political action, there is little awareness of the power that a shared spiritual faith can bring to a group (Williams & Frame, 1999).

### **Womanism and Feminism: Differing Viewpoints on Domestic Violence**

The differing viewpoints of feminism and womanism create different theoretical constructs for domestic violence. This contrast is clearly seen when comparing the work of Lenore Walker, a leadership voice in the domestic violence movement, and the work of Patricia Hill Collins, a leading Black feminist scholar, and bell hooks, known for her social critiques from an African American perspective. Lenore Walker (2000) is best known for her identification of the “cycle of violence” that occurs in most violent relationships. This cycle includes a build up of tension, the explosion of violence and then the honeymoon period of contrition and gifts and promises. Walker’s work has been invaluable in helping women understand that the honeymoon period is part of the cycle and that it is merely another tactic to keep the woman trapped in the abuse. However, the cycle of violence is entirely microcosmic. Walker devotes a few lines in her book to the larger cultural issue of patriarchy and the ingrained entitlement of men that leads to domination; however, she does not, in any way, link patriarchy to the larger issues of racial, cultural, and class oppression. The focus of responsibility is directed solely to the



individual men who make choices to act out patriarchal oppression within the home.

When mainstream domestic violence activists focus their attention on cultural issues, they press for an elevation in the status of women instead of critiquing a system that is based on hierarchy, privilege and oppression.

On the other hand, Collins (1998a; 1998b) takes a step back from the microcosm of the cycle of domestic violence to view the larger systemic context of violence in the United States. Collins views violence as a pervasive cultural element that takes on different meanings in different circumstances. The members of the ruling or dominant class have the power to define and to identify violence as fits their purposes. There are legitimate uses of violence (war, peace-keeping, self-defense) that are condoned or even celebrated by society. However, as we see with current on-going debates about torture and accidental killing of civilians in wartime, violence is not an absolute; it is defined within and by the culture. African Americans have a long history of being victims of violence that was and is culturally tolerated and sometimes even specifically encouraged. Violence against women has also had a long and similar history. Women were considered property for years and as such, husbands could treat wives any way they wanted. Violence against marginalized groups, whether African Americans or women, becomes routine and invisible when it is tolerated by those in power. The recent recognition that domestic violence is not acceptable by today's standards speaks to the growing political and cultural power of women just as the growing civil rights of African Americans was born from their seizure of political power. African American women today may revel in strides towards the recognition of the violence inherent in domestic violence but, seeing

the larger cultural context, they are unwilling to rest with the culpability of individual men (Collins, 1998a; 1998b).

On a more pragmatic note of differentiation from feminists, bell hooks brings racial issues front and center as she writes about the feminist movement (hooks, 1984/2000). Noting that the aim of white feminists is generally assumed to be equality with men, she asks the pertinent question, “which men do women want to be equal to?”(hooks, 1984/2000, p. 19) She comments that, for African American women, being equal to African American men would not bring protection from violence and that equality with white men is precluded by racism. hooks adds that the primary concern of black feminists with the white feminist movement is that they do not want to tackle the practice of group oppression and domination; they merely want to elevate their own standing without changing the larger cultural structures of power and control. hooks does not self-identify as a womanist or Black feminist and instead uses the term “radical feminist” to differentiate her views from mainstream feminist ideas.

### **The Relevance of Womanism to the African American Woman**

Eurocentric feminists have become aware of the racial tensions between white women and women of color. They have attempted to address this schism through calls for more multicultural sensitivity and research that empowers the voices of women of color (Webster & Dunn, 2005). The womanists, buttressed by the recent research about intersecting identities, remain stalwart in their need for a separate philosophy. African American women experience oppression from both their gender and their race. When these two identities of race and gender are kept separate from each other, the person experiences fragmentation and can never get a sense of wholeness (Robinson, 1999;

Williams, 2005). Womanism represents the work of forging a new identity that combines being African American and being female. It is only through this new integrated identity that African American women can escape fragmentation and the experience of being categorized by oppression rather than being seen as a whole person who is greater than the sum of identities. As one woman put it, "It's like everyone sees what they want to see. But no one seems to want to see me" (Williams, p. 279). Womanism, in and of itself, brings therapeutic healing to African American women by seeing them holistically and as more vital and individual than the sum of their oppressions.

### **The Gendered Experience of Racism**

Several studies have attempted to compare racial identity development to womanist identity development to look for patterns in how women develop their identities as women and as members of a race. Parks, Carter and Gushue (1996) found a statistically significant relationship between the Internalization stage of Black Racial Identity Development and stages II and IV of Helm's Womanist Identity Model. This correlation indicates that the two constructs of race and gender work together for African American women; developing awareness of race and gender are interdependent processes. No corresponding relationship was found between feminist identity and racial identity for white women. These findings underscore the belief that African American women confront and work through racial and gender discrimination in tandem while white women might advance through stages of identity development as a woman without ever confronting issues of race. Furthermore, Parks et al. postulate that the findings infer that for African American women, race is a priority over gender as women who have

internalized their racial identity are likely to be at one of two gender identity stages, the integration stage (IV) or the earlier questioning stage (II).

Martin and Hall (1992) delve deeper into an analysis of the dual tracks of racial and gender identity development for African American women in a study that yields interesting statistics in spite of having admitted weaknesses that render the conclusions tentative at this point. They find that although African American women, in general, rate feminist concerns as very important, when the findings are broken down by racial identity stage, a clear pattern emerges. African American women in the immersion-emersion stage of racial identity development exhibit adherence to traditional ideas about the roles of women at a much higher rate than women at any of the other stages. At the immersion stage of racial identity development, African American women are exploring and embracing what it means to be part of an oppressed black culture and are pushing gender issues to the background. This finding indicates that many African American women may find it difficult to encounter both the oppression of race and gender simultaneously and that most will choose to focus on race first and gender second. When the African American women move from the immersion stage to internalization, they broaden their views on oppression to include other classifications of people, including gender (Martin & Hall).

An empirical study conducted by King (2003) contrasts the relevance of feminist and womanist ideas for African American women. As King points out, the preponderance of research about oppression focuses on one isolated construct and little attention has been paid to the interaction of multiple oppressed identities. King devised a research study that would capture the experience of gender and race simultaneously. Using a taped

scenario with attributes of both racist and sexist prejudice, the researcher measured African American women's perceptions of the prejudice and correlated those results to measures of the women's ethnic, feminist and womanist consciousness. The findings indicate that both ethnic and womanist consciousness were related to a high degree of sensitivity to racial and gender oppression while feminist consciousness did not correlate to perceptions of gender oppression. King concludes that feminist ideology does not relate well to African American women's experiences of gender oppression and that African American women do not think about issues of gender in isolation from race.

Turning to consider the direct mental health ramifications of gender identity development for both African American and white women, Carter and Parks (1996) conducted research that measured mental health symptoms and then correlated those symptoms to stages of womanist identity development using the Womanist Identity Attitude Scale. The symptoms were measured with the Bell Global Psychology Scale and included such aspects as depression, anxiety, obsessions, paranoia and substance abuse. Carter and Parks found that white women in the integration stage of womanist identity development had significantly fewer mental health symptoms than white women in the other three stages. For African American women, there was no correlation between womanist identity development and mental health symptoms. Since mental health functioning has been positively correlated to racial identity development in previous research, Carter and Parks conclude that racial issues are more salient than gender issues for the mental health of African American women.

The interlocking dynamics of gender and race for African American women are directly related to the experiences of racial marginalization in this country. Given that the

dominant culture shapes cultural ideals and stereotypes, African American women are bombarded with images of femininity that do not fit with their biology and their lived experiences. The ideal of feminine beauty includes silky blond hair, blue eyes and European features and body types. African American women carry the shame of internalized oppression as they measure themselves against impossible standards of beauty (Greene, 1997). Going beyond images of outer beauty, African American women are also faced with the dominant culture idealization of women as pure, passive and needing men to take care of them. This feminine image fits their racial experiences no better than blond silky hair fits their biology. Going back to the days of slavery, African American women have been forced to be strong, aggressive, and independent in order to survive. They have been used as sex objects by white men and then characterized as promiscuous or sexually aggressive. Even the stereotype of the African American “Mammy,” a capable and independent matriarch, is denigrated in a culture that is steeped in patriarchal structures and a resulting preference for helpless women (Greene; Taylor, J. Y., 2000). Many aspects of African American culture that do not fit the dominant culture norms are even taken to the level of pathology. For instance, the family cohesion typical of African Americans is frequently labeled as codependence and enabling (McNair, 1992) and multigenerational living arrangements become evidence of poverty rather than community (Taylor, J. Y.). What pride African American women may feel in the achievements of survival and protection of their families is taken away from them when they are unfavorably compared to white standards of femininity. Given this complex context, issues of gender will always be accompanied by issues of race for African American women.

### **Healing from Domestic Violence among African American Women**

Finally, we turn to the literature that addresses the healing process from domestic violence among African American women. The literature in this area is thin. Despite the growing body of research that addresses the experience of domestic violence for African American women, little attention has been paid to their unique healing process. To date, there has been one qualitative study that addresses healing from domestic violence among African American women. This study will be discussed in detail. There have also been several related studies about the importance of spirituality for African American women, and articles that advocate for more culturally competent services for domestic violence victims. As previously discussed in the second section of this literature review, there are studies that measure the degree of PTSD or specific symptoms among African American victims of domestic violence in order to identify and measure protective factors such as resilience or coping. However, those studies do little to address the long and complex journey towards healing.

#### **African American Women and Healing**

Taylor (2004) conducted a qualitative study to uncover more understanding of how African American women undergo recovery from domestic violence. The study was a womanist ethnographic exploration using interview data from 21 African American female participants who self-identified as survivors of violence at the hands of an African American male partner. A purposive convenience sample was used and no other inclusion or exclusion criteria were utilized. The women all participated in an initial interview with the author and 12 of the participants also agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. The data was analyzed for themes and patterns using an ethnographic

methodology. Taylor outlines six themes that emerged from the interview data: (a) breaking the silence, (b) defining the self apart from the abuse, (c) spiritual growth and attention, (d) forgiveness, (e) hope for the future, and (f) participating in active causes for change. Taylor uses some short segments from the interview data to buttress her findings. These thematic findings provide useful information that can help service providers create new ways to intervene on behalf of healing. Given the lack of research in this area, Taylor's research provides at least the first steps towards more sophisticated understanding.

However, Taylor's study (2004) has significant weaknesses. First of all, Taylor pays little attention to linking her findings to the broad base of literature about healing from trauma. In her discussion section, Taylor attributes the themes she finds in her data to the general concepts of resilience and strength. She backs up this attribution with general words but no specific links to the abundant literature on resilience. Similarly, Taylor does not mention posttraumatic growth despite the fact that the themes that she identifies are strikingly similar to the components of posttraumatic growth. Her discussion ends with valid recommendations about emphasizing spirituality and activism, and providing safe spaces for women to share and support each other. However, the discussion lacks sharp focus and provides only generalized insight. Taylor's discussion could have been greatly empowered by looking through one or more specific lenses such as posttraumatic growth, spirituality or womanism or through the use of a sharpened ethnographic methodology. Taylor refers to the importance of socio-political and cultural context and yet brings no specific elements of the context into the thematic discussion. As a final comment, Taylor identifies her study as womanist, yet there is no discussion of



how her framework or her methodology conforms to that discipline. Her approach to the research process and the data seem indistinguishable from mainstream qualitative efforts. Despite the obvious weaknesses, Taylor's study is a first step towards ongoing research that can provide more focused analysis and bring more specific recommendations for practice.

### **Spirituality and African American Women**

Turning to the literature about African American women and spirituality, an exploratory study by Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) underlines the importance of spirituality for African American women. They conducted a focus group ( $N = 25$ ) that was designed to examine relationships between African American women who were mother-daughter and sister-sister pairs. Although the purpose was not to explore spirituality, transcripts of the group revealed that the majority of the women's stories centered on spiritual themes. In particular, the women noted that spiritual beliefs had helped them heal from domestic abuse and had helped them build strong families and relationship ties. For these women, spiritual faith is centered around trusting god rather than religious dogma. Their personal relationships with god gave them a sense of well-being that was not dependent on good health or physical security.

Further clarification about the place of spirituality in the lives of African American women is found in several studies conducted by Mattis (2000; 2002). In the first two studies, Mattis (2000) interviewed African American women in the Midwest to determine the differences between religiosity and spirituality ( $N = 21$ ) and to attempt to find the meaning of spirituality ( $N = 128$ ). An analysis of the transcripts revealed that the women believe that spirituality involves a choice to live by internal values while religion

is adherence to an external set of doctrines. Religion is, thus, seen as a tool for accessing spirituality. Furthermore, spirituality is highly connected to relationships to others, to the self and to a higher power. A third qualitative study by Mattis (2002) focuses directly of the intersection of religion/spirituality and the growth process that accompanies struggle among African American women ( $N = 23$ ). This study yielded eight themes of which six bear directly on growth after adversity. Seventy percent of the participants stated that religion and spirituality help a person confront the hard realities in their lives while 57% believe that spiritual surrender, understanding the limits of one's power, paradoxically brings empowerment. For 48%, transcendence breaks the link between fact and truth and allows for the construction of a higher meaning or a new assumptive world and for 57%, spirituality enhances the process of asking existential questions. Forty-eight percent of the participants believe that there is a bigger plan to life and that negative events are opportunities for growth and 30% reported that spirituality invites continuing growth and self-transformation (Mattis, 2002).

Turning to the specific interaction of spirituality and domestic violence among African American women, El-Khoury, Dutton, Goodman, Engel, Belamarie, and Murphy (2004) studied the relative usage of health, mental health and spiritual resources among African American and White battered women. Their results showed that African American women more frequently utilize prayer while White women turn more frequently to mental health resources. This article supports the theme of helping African American victims of domestic violence heal through supporting their existing inclination to turn to their faith in a crisis. Robinson (2000) points out the utility of helping African American women separate religion from spiritual beliefs so that they can utilize their

strong spiritual grounding without the layers of patriarchy and White dominance that are sometimes intertwined within the African American church. The church has historically been one place that the African American man could have dominance and African American women who turn to male dominated churches for support around issues of domestic violence may encounter secondary trauma (Robinson).

Although African American women have been shown to experience higher levels of spirituality (El-Khoury et al., 2004; Robinson, 2000) and social/community support (Few, 2005), Fowler and Hill (2004) found that neither of these resources helped to protect the women against the mental health consequences of domestic violence. Given that African American women suffer more depression as a result of abuse than White women even when they receive more support (Campbell, Campbell, Gary, Nedd, Price-Lea, Sharps, et al., 2008; Ramos, Carlson & McNutt, 2004), it is problematic that African American women turn less often to mental health resources (El-Khoury et al.). It is frequently noted that African American women shun mental health services because they believe they will not be able to find providers who are culturally competent.

### **Culturally Competent Services**

Researchers are beginning to address this need for more cultural competence in domestic violence services. Two proposed intervention models advocate for more phenomenological sensitivity to break down preconceptions and stereotypes and let each individual woman define her own experience (Bell & Mattis, 2000; Heron & Jacobs, 1997). Two other articles advocate the use of existing cultural elements from the African American community to provide preventive education and culturally competent interventions. Finally, a recent article outlines the “black experience-based social work

perspective” and applies that approach to domestic violence issues within the African American community (Bent-Goodley, 2009).

Phenomenological approaches to interventions. Two studies include recommendations for more culturally competent models for therapeutic interventions. Heron and Jacobs (1997) propose a phenomenological approach where the therapist explores the world view of the client without any preconceptions and remains open to learning about the client’s unique experience. This is strikingly different from the feminist approach which emphasizes the commonalities of domestic violence in order to build the power that comes from a monolithic movement (Walker, 2000). Although this unidimensional feminist approach has stamped domestic violence into the public awareness, it has also created assumptions that can adversely affect women who do not fit the mold. After an assessment, Heron and Jacobs recommend group treatment coordinated with the use of trained advocates. The use of group process and advocates is supported by the findings that social support is a significant mitigating factor in the recurrence rate of domestic violence (Crane & Constantino, 2003). Heron and Jacobs also present a stage model related to the experience of abuse to elucidate the various coping strategies and reactions of abused women and aid in the phenomenological understanding.

Bell and Mattis (2000) describe an “ecophenomenological” approach to understanding and intervening in domestic violence. They believe domestic violence must always be held within the larger context of “an array of social-historical, institutional, community, family, and individual-level conditions and experiences” (Bell & Mattis, p. 518). Bell and Mattis see stereotypical thinking as especially problematic to

the understanding of domestic violence in the African American community. In order to reach towards solutions that will work, service providers need to understand the destructive stereotypes, such as the African American superwoman, the lack of affection in African American relationships, and the need to protect African American men, in order to transcend them. A problem Bell and Mattis do not address is the formation of newer and possibly “less destructive” stereotypes that will be embedded in the more relatively enlightened view of race and gender. Culturally competent service demands that service providers be both highly literate about sociological and cultural forces and also committed to an open-minded inquiry about any one individual’s experience.

Culturally relevant interventions. Oliver (2000) directly addresses prevention and intervention among African American women by advocating the use of existing black cultural elements such as gospel music, black radio and black cultural icons to spread education about domestic violence and to advertise resources. Harvey (1996) extends this cultural sensitivity to services for survivors of trauma and victimization. She stresses that the trauma must be understood ecologically, within the context of the victim’s community and culture and that the effectiveness of the intervention depends on the ecological fit. Therefore, service providers who seek to help African American victims of domestic violence should be conversant with the larger cultural context of both racial and gender oppression and also the specific cultural context of the victim. Harvey also brings intervention suggestions to allow the victim to have the power to choose whether to remember the trauma or not and to learn to manage and coexist with ongoing symptoms rather than tackling the hard task of overcoming them.

Black experience-based social work perspective. Bent-Goodley (2009) emphasizes a culturally sensitive approach to domestic violence issues among African American communities. Her approach builds on knowledge of African American history and culture and uses the natural strengths of African Americans to promote healing. She acknowledges that masking problems has been a coping strategy for African Americans and emphasizes special attention to building a trusting relationship and creating a safe space for unmasking the problem. After the unmasking or “moaning” phase, the service provider facilitates a period of “mourning” the various losses associated with the domestic violence through culturally relevant practices. Finally, the “morning” stage introduces hope and the collective empowerment of the client and the surrounding community through education and community organization. Given the diversity within the African American community, Bent-Goodley (2009) does not give examples of specific cultural resources to utilize; however, she reinforces, at every step, the need to be acutely sensitive to the specific culture and historical consciousness of each client.

### **Summary**

In the past ten years, the literature about African American women and domestic violence has increased in scope and sophistication. The literature defines several racially created themes that affect African American women who are abused. African American women are torn between protecting themselves or protecting their African American men, who they perceive as more victimized than they are. They risk racial exile if they make the abuse public. If African American women turn to law enforcement or dominant culture agencies for support, they risk running into the violence of overt racism. If they are lucky enough not to encounter overt racism, they still have to absorb the subtle racism

that emanates from white privilege and color blindness. If African American women want to become domestic violence activists and bring education and prevention to their communities, they struggle to tackle the issue head on without adding to the stereotype of the African American man (and African American culture in general) as violent and incapable of sound relationships. Whereas domestic violence is a painful experience for any woman, African American women are caught in a vise of intersecting oppressions and rarely find that they have clear options that come without significant painful costs.

The need for more knowledge of and sensitivity towards the unique struggles and dilemmas that African American victims of domestic violence face seems obvious. Too many African American women and their children are suffering debilitating trauma in their own homes. Progress has been made to understand the plight and perspectives of African American victims. It is time now for helping professionals to turn their attention towards helping more African American women heal. Healing from domestic violence is difficult at best, but it is possible. Research that documents posttraumatic growth after domestic violence for both African American women and other ethnicities seems promising. Aspects of womanism, a philosophy that many African American women embrace either consciously or culturally, overlap in dramatic ways with the constructs of posttraumatic growth. Both posttraumatic growth and womanism focus on the importance of relationships and community, deepened spiritual faith, a belief in future possibilities despite past struggles, and a definition of the self as strong and whole. Although African American women face greater obstacles to healing since they live with racism on a daily basis, they also possess the ability to see the world as complex and paradoxical. It is hoped that the proposed research will yield important insights into African American

women and healing and will raise significant questions. Given the psychological complexity of domestic violence for African American women, further research is apt to raise as many new questions as it answers. However, the costs of domestic violence among African American communities are so high that each piece of new information is extremely valuable and may translate into saved lives.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

[A]dimension of the oppressor/oppressed, exploiter/exploited relationship is that those who dominate are seen as subjects and those who are dominated objects. As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject.

bell hooks, 1989, p. 42

I have come to believe over and over again, that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.

Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 40

The previous two chapters have demonstrated the importance of the proposed research study to further the knowledge base about the experience of African American women who are healing from domestic violence. The preceding quote from bell hooks underlines the importance of methodology for this research. Attempts to bring to life the experiences of a subjugated group must be scrupulous in efforts to avoid further victimizing or objectifying the participants and, by extension, the related group. This problem is exacerbated when the researcher is from the dominant culture and extra steps must be taken to ensure that the research process will be emancipatory in its effect. In order to address these concerns, the research was grounded in Black feminist epistemology and the data was analyzed using a narrative analysis method that fits well with concerns of Black feminists. This chapter will first present the theoretical grounding for this study through a discussion of Black feminism. The next section, Researcher Subjectivity, will address relevant aspects of my personal history as they relate to the

research topic. The third section will focus on narrative research and will contain a brief description of narrative analysis, the rationale for using narrative for this research, and ramifications for the interview protocol that arise from the choice of narrative analysis. Turning to the concrete steps that were followed, the next section covers the specifics of sample selection, informed consent, data collection and data analysis. The final section addresses issues of validity as they relate to narrative analysis.

## **Black Feminism**

### **Overview**

There are special challenges to researching experiences of an oppressed culture (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989). Dominant groups, by nature, control the dominant discourse and the voices of the subjugated go underground and are more difficult to capture. Traditional positivist research and most quantitative research are both positioned to reflect knowledge about the dominant white male culture and to omit or silence dissenting views. The growing numbers of African Americans in academia have attempted to forward the research concerns and viewpoints of their race (Collins). However, African American women among the academic communities face pressures to validate the processes established by the dominant white male group while attempting to bring to light knowledge constructed from a different viewpoint. To counter this pressure, Black feminist scholars have begun articulating an epistemology for research that addresses the needs of a non dominant culture (Collins).

Before turning to specific tenets of Black feminist epistemology, it is important to underline that Black feminism is “a critical social theory” that “aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting

oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p. 22). African American women have outsider status as Black and as women. These intersecting layers of oppression have an effect that is more than additive and give them a distinctive viewpoint on issues of oppression. The driving force of Black feminism is resistance to oppression, and it is, therefore, a dynamic body of thought that changes in response to changing social and cultural realities. Black feminism is also pragmatic as it finds ideas useful in so far as they may be translated into resistance and actions. “Knowledge for knowledge’s sake is not enough – Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women’s lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (Collins, p. 31).

The first task of the Black feminists has been to deconstruct the dominant paradigms of knowledge validation (Collins, 2000). For Black feminists, deconstruction is the act of exposing that a belief or concept has been created by culture rather than reflecting a naturally occurring reality. For years, the entrenched powers within White academia have insisted that truth can only be known through positivist criteria. Black feminists challenge objective positivist criteria as the only accepted method for knowledge validation. As Collins notes, “such criteria ask African American women to objectify ourselves, devalue our emotional life, displace our motivations for furthering knowledge among Black women, and confront in an adversarial relationship those with more social, economic, and professional power” (p. 256). Through the epistemology proposed by Black feminists, subjugated groups are encouraged to express “partial, situated knowledge” (Collins, p. 270) that is “truth” for that group. Black feminists do not claim that their epistemology is more valid than others or that the truths they speak have more weight. They do not propose that each layer of oppression results in a potentially

more valid standpoint. Instead, they propose that each group has claim to its own partial vision that leaves room for others. Indeed, even within Black feminism, there is room for diversity of views and positions as each woman is entitled to her own unique partial truth.

### **Core Components of Black Feminist Epistemology**

Collins (2000) lists four essential components of black feminist epistemology for research with African American women. These components are the wisdom of lived experience, the primary role of dialogue, the ethics of caring and the ethics of accountability.

Above all else, African American women value wisdom from lived experience over knowledge achieved from detached learning through traditional academic paths. As Black females, wisdom has been essential to their survival in the world. Knowledge may be useful for those with access to power, but it is wisdom that allows African American women to navigate the obstacles of oppression in their everyday lives. “As members of a subjugated group, Black women cannot afford to be fools of any kind, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women’s survival” (Collins, 2000, p. 257). Many African American female academics have enlivened and enriched their own research through the incorporation of their own personal experiences and wisdom. Experience, itself, carries credibility and so-called experts who remain aloof from their subject matter are not taken very seriously.

The second component for Black feminists is the primary role of dialogue in conveying wisdom and knowledge (Collins, 2000). The emphasis on dialogue mirrors the

egalitarian and holistic view that all are connected and that knowledge can only be discovered through a co-created voice. “A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2000, p. 260). The wide spread oratorical device of call-and-response that is so prevalent in African American churches exemplifies the belief that, even when there are defined roles of speaker and listener, the listener must be an active participant and must expressively voice either agreement or dissent (Collins). Although black feminists lead the way in their emphasis on dialogue, white academicians, such as Belenky, Field, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), propose that the more collective orientation of women predisposes them to dialogue while men prefer a more linear and hierarchical way of thinking.

Next, Black feminists insist on an “ethics of caring” (Collins, 2000, p. 262). This ethics of caring contains three elements: the incorporation of emotion as a proof of validity, the expression of empathy, and respect for the unique expressiveness of each individual. Although these elements are seen as proof of credibility among African Americans, they are frequently dismissed in the dominant culture anywhere outside the family unit. In fact, emotion and expressiveness are routinely seen as denoting a lack of rigor and can actually undermine credibility in institutional structures. In contrast, Collins (2000) states “Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument” (p. 263). Again, Belenky et al. (1986) point out that these preferences reflect values of women in general but have, for the most part, been invalidated by the dominant culture at large. Respect for the individual and unique modes of expression are direct reactions

against the depersonalization that comes with subjugation. Collins admits that white women are also controlled by depersonalizing stereotypes, but “the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance” (p. 100). The ethics of caring provides a safe environment for African American women to defy stereotypes and reveal who they really are.

Similarly, black feminists insist on an “ethics of accountability” that proclaims “all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal” (Collins, 2000, p. 265). The personal ethics, values and character of the researcher are important evaluative aspects aside from the perceived benefits of the research itself. Collins illustrates this point by recounting her experiences teaching college classes to African American women. The students would not evaluate research without information on the researcher’s background, life story, and motivations for the research. The research would not be held as credible until the researcher was determined to be a caring and ethical human being.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

In keeping with the ethics of accountability, I will present the salient parts of my own lived experiences and my motivations for this research. For thirty years, I was married to a man who was emotionally and psychologically abusive. I know what it is like to believe that abusive behavior is normal and that if I would just become a better wife, the abuse would stop. I know the pain of suffering and watching my children suffer and feeling helpless to overcome the situation. I have experienced the shame and confusion that comes with the realization that something is terribly wrong in the relationship and the family dynamics. Despite this dawning realization, like most abused

women, I was unable to reach out for help or support. The isolation and powerlessness that comes from living through abuse is very difficult to combat. For me, it took years of therapy and finding a totally new support system before I was able to leave the marriage. I was lucky to have the money and the time to invest in developing my own resources. As part of that development, I went back to school to become a counselor myself. After leaving the relationship, I realized that the process of self-development had become a new way of life for me that did not end with the escape from the abuse.

As I look back now, I am strangely grateful that I suffered the abuse. If my marriage had been calm and peaceful, I might resemble some of my friends from that period of my life. They have become bored, “empty-nest” house wives whose lives are largely devoid of growth or challenge or imagination. Driven by the intensity of my desire to escape abuse, I have built a life that is richer, wider and deeper than any I would have imagined possible otherwise. The abuse that might have broken me instead broke me open so that I could wonder and grow and reach out to others in need. I have told my story of abuse and growth to many people in the intervening years and I have been blessed to have heard in return many stories from others who have also experienced trauma in their lives, trauma that ultimately brought a reinvention of how to live.

During my career as a counselor, I have been drawn to work with populations who have also experienced abuse. First I worked at a long term residential treatment program for adolescent boys. Many of the boys had been emotionally or physically abused by their parents and many of the parents had been abused themselves as children. These boy’s psyches were already so badly damaged that they spent up to a year in residential treatment and, even then, many did not recover fully functioning lives. After

two and a half years at that facility, I went to work for a domestic violence agency and conducted long term therapy with women who had suffered from domestic violence. I found that some women seemed beyond reach and would potentially not recover from what had happened to them. However, there were women who not only were in a process of recovering, they were also growing and striving in ways that defied what had happened to them. Their experiences of flowering in unexpected places fit my own experience of growing beyond what I would otherwise have become.

My interest in the African American experience of domestic violence is a little harder to articulate. However, I can point to an early life experience that provided a seedbed for this focused interest. When I was 13, I was attending boarding school and was allowed to visit my older sister at Duke University for a weekend during the 1960's. My sister was highly involved in the Civil Rights movement in Durham and took me to a rally and then to picket at a local drug store that had a segregated lunch counter. During this experience, I directly encountered issues of injustice and oppression. I was overwhelmed by the solidarity among the Civil Rights workers and the beautiful uplifting feeling I got joining in the singing of We Shall Overcome. Although I can not compare my own experiences of not belonging or not being included with the experience of racial oppression, I realized for the first time that the loneliness and despair that I felt came from a sense of inferiority and isolation. I had never felt like I belonged anywhere and I was deeply touched by the sense of community that the civil rights activists created through inclusion and a shared purpose of social justice. Given the particulars of my upbringing and my nature, I was a mute observer through the weekend, and was not even able to process this event with another person. However, I rode the bus back to boarding



school carrying a raw awareness of racial inequalities, an uplifting experience of solidarity and a deep longing to overcome my own loneliness. I began to understand that a common struggle invites the creation of community. Year later, I find that a driving force in my life is the pursuit of social justice for all, and in particular, for the African American race with whom I first felt the energizing impulses of solidarity.

As I have completed assignments in the doctoral program, I have written literature reviews on African American women and domestic violence and on “womanism,” the African American counterpart to feminism. Thinking back to my work at the domestic violence agency, I was shaken and humbled by my own lack of cultural awareness during my work there with African American clients. Although I attended trainings during my employment and stayed abreast of domestic violence treatment models, I never encountered any culturally specific or relevant information pertaining to the experiences of African American women. I developed a resolve to help educate counselors and service providers about the African American experience of domestic violence.

As I continued to pursue the literature around domestic violence and African American women, I remembered that many of my clients who seemed to be flourishing after escaping abuse were African American. Perhaps this anecdotal observation has no particular validity, but it piqued my curiosity and further focused my developing academic interests. Almost as a random occurrence, I ran across the literature pertaining to posttraumatic growth and immediately saw parallels between posttraumatic growth and womanism. All of this information taken together has set up many wonderings in my mind about whether the unique experience of being an African American woman predisposes towards posttraumatic growth. Although this is too big and broad a question

to answer directly, I became interested in studying the phenomenon of healing among African American women to begin to get insights into the area. This research will be a first step in that direction and will yield important preliminary information. It will also serve to further educate white domestic violence service providers about the need to move beyond a color blind approach to services. As I have moved through my life from one stage to the next, I have become more and more aware of my privilege as white, middle class and well-educated, and I have also deepened my commitment to working for justice for all people, especially those who are invisible or overlooked. Bringing together the issues of domestic violence and racial injustice is a natural fit for my purpose and passion in life.

### **Research Question**

This research was driven by one central research question: How do African American women's narratives present their healing processes after they experience domestic violence? The research question was purposefully broad and the inquiry was exploratory and open. Little is known about the healing processes of African American women following domestic violence. Even the larger field of healing from trauma contains much uncertainty, gaps, and conjectures. Although the literature base around healing from trauma provides theories and concepts that may prove to fit with the interview data, the parameters of the research were purposefully broad to allow new ideas and insights to emerge. Through analysis of the collected data, new perspectives into the healing processes of African American women were attained. Consistent with the Black feminist viewpoint, the data and subsequent analysis encompassed a socio-culturally embedded consideration of the phenomenon.

## **Research Methodology**

Research methodology provides the necessary rationale, structure and parameters for the actual research procedures. Before turning to a description of the proposed procedures, some key points about the theoretical methodological approach will be presented. Narrative analysis is the methodology that will be used for his research and it provides a good fit with the research question. This section will provide a brief overview of narrative analysis, justification for the use of a narrative method, and implications for the interview protocol that arise from the narrative focus.

### **Narrative Analysis: A Brief Overview**

Narrative analysis is based on the belief that narrative is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988). When events are juxtaposed in a story, a relational significance appears that provides the meaning and purpose that reside in the story (Polkinghorne, 1995). Interview data often takes on narrative form even when the questions are close ended (Mishler, 1986). This phenomenon speaks to the belief that story is a deep and engrained structure that is built into the way we think and talk and find meaning in day to day life. Thus, stories provide a rich avenue for arriving at a deeper understanding of complex human processes.

Given the nature of human meaning-making and significance, stories also present creative challenges to the research process. Issues of “truth” and stability of the data arise. Just as people are not static objects that can be analyzed and understood, stories that convey meaning continually evolve as the person grapples further with existential issues (Polkinghorne, 1988). People arrive at stories through cognitive processes which

means there is ongoing activity that continues to evolve. “The meanings are continuously being reconstituted as the rudimentary perceptions of consciousness change”

(Polkinghorne, p. 7). If interview encounters take place over time, it is expected that the story will evolve and transform through the passage of time and through the influence of the interview process itself. The fluidity of the process can yield significant insights into the creation of meaning and the seemingly parallel process of healing growth, but it also demands that the researcher be cognizant of ways in which the interview is conducted and the researcher presents herself (Mishler, 1986).

### **Justification for the Use of Narrative Analysis**

The larger theoretical framework for this research is Black feminism. Black feminism postulates that narratives and storied accounts are apt vehicles for communicating the wisdom of lived experience (Collins, 2000). Stories have been passed from generation to generation to depict the oppression that has been endured and the resistance and perseverance that have prevailed despite the oppression. As a subjugated people, African Americans have relied on stories to preserve their racial history. Formal accounts of history are created and controlled by the dominant culture. Stories are a counter-narrative to formal history that contains both the wisdom and the resistance of the subjugated race. Sojourner Truth famously used narrative accounts of her own life to deconstruct prevailing stereotypes about women and to bring a measure of self-definition to the knowledge about African American women (Collins). By highlighting the narrative account of a woman’s experience, the researcher moves the woman from object to subject and liberates her from the indignity of objectification.

As the individual story deconstructs stereotypes, it simultaneously allows the expression of the unique humanity of the story teller or the protagonist of the story. Stories are the ideal vehicle for the wisdom of lived experience and for the unique expressiveness and emotional fabric of the individual. Black feminism emphasizes the need for research to present a holistic picture of the individual, including vernacular or colorful means of expression, idiomatic ways of viewing the world and unique characteristics of personality (Collins, 2000). Stories allow participants to come to life as they are and not as they are viewed through the thematic lens of the researcher. Stories can convey context and the interplay between the storyteller and the people and situations around her.

Posttraumatic growth is an important component of theoretical grounding for the data analysis process for this research. As such, the fit between posttraumatic growth and narrative analysis provides additional support for the use of narrative analysis. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) have specifically proposed that narrative methods be used for further research into posttraumatic growth. Their rationale for narrative methods is threefold. First, there is a need to better understand the cognitive processes by which a new world view is constructed after traumatic events. The construction of a new world view is seamlessly interwoven with the process of constructing a new life narrative. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) refer to the “trauma narrative” and suggest “that the struggle with traumatic events can lead, along with the possibility of posttraumatic growth, to a revised life narrative” (p. 12). To more fully understand posttraumatic growth, it seems necessary to pay attention to the stories people create to make sense of their abuse and subsequent healing. Secondly, given the relative newness of the concept of posttraumatic growth,

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) propose that narrative research would bring a broad perspective that would allow for the unfolding of previously unrecognized aspects to emerge. Finally, Calhoun and Tedeschi point out that the impact of cultural context on posttraumatic growth is presently unknown. Through narrative accounts of healing, the researcher can enter the contextual world of the participant and begin to see connections between context and trauma narratives.

### **Narrative Analysis and Interview Protocols**

Narrative analysis brings theoretical implications for data collection as well. Although participants in any form of research routinely answer interview questions with narrative accounts, the narrative researcher can take steps to actively encourage and empower the narrative data collection process (Mishler, 1986). Mishler contends that “meanings are contextually grounded” (Mishler, p. 117). Meanings are grounded in both the context of the interview process itself and in the larger panoramic context of the person’s life. Thus, areas that narrative researchers need to address are the power structure of the interview and the scope and parameters of the material covered in interviews.

The issue of power in the interview process has many facets and ramifications. Mishler(1986) focuses on the stimulus-response nature of the interview protocol and conjectures that with standard interview protocols, “respondents stories are suppressed in that their responses are limited to ‘relevant’ answers to narrowly specified questions” (p. 68). The respondent is hemmed in by the directives and suppositions of the interviewer. Although the impact of the relative roles of the interviewer and the participant cannot be removed, the process can be made less hierarchical and more intentional. Mishler

proposes replacing the pursuit of an unrealistic, “expert” stance of neutrality and objectivity with a stance of interest, passion, respect and curiosity. This stance fits well with Black feminist epistemology as it replaces the mechanistic paradigm of positivist research with a shift towards the ethics of caring and accountability and a process that more closely resembles dialogue between equals. Curiosity replaces preconceived interview questions and allows participants freedom and power in their responses. The participant is allowed to emerge in whatever unique form she may embody and the questions prod continued active reflection rather than rote recall. A hermeneutic circle emerges where the interviewer continually assimilates new and perhaps unexpected information that becomes the basis for questions that encourage participants to reflexively explore their own narratives (Mishler).

With an interview stance of curiosity, the scope of the interview widens. The interviewer no longer assumes that she knows the right questions to focus the research data. Instead the researcher uses more general open ended questions that trust the participant to take the interview in needed directions and to provide the relevant data. The interview process allows for a widening of the dialogue to cover contextual issues that have significant bearing on the topic being explored. Mishler (1986) describes a process where “the answers given continually inform the evolving conversation” (p. 97) and encourages conceptualizing the interview process as a combination of focused attention to the topic and a consideration of the life history. In the interview, there is attention to the micro events that surround the specific research topic, the macro events that form the larger context and themes, and the middle ground that straddles the distance between the

two. Through reflective dialogue, the participant is encouraged to make deeper connections and to actively pursue meaning in the moment (Mishler).

## **Research Procedures**

### **Sampling and Participant Selection**

In qualitative research, each participant is of vital importance to the findings and must be carefully chosen (Glesne, 2006). A small group of participants (6) was invited to participate in the research, with a goal of four or five of the participants carrying through with the interview process until completion. Each woman was asked to commit to a series of three interviews in order to gain an initial, in-depth understanding of a phenomenon that affects millions each year. Each participant was chosen purposefully and with the help of professional counselors and professional employees of domestic violence agencies. Purposive, snowball sampling was used to attain a relatively homogeneous sample who, despite an array of differences, share essential characteristics or criteria. The selected criteria for sample members included three elements: (a) African American women born in the United States from parents who were also natural born citizens, (b) experience of domestic violence that includes either a history of chronic physical abuse by an intimate partner or at least one major episode of escalated domestic violence, and (c) in the process of healing according to the self-definition of the woman and the judgment of the referring professional. This healing was evidenced by at least one of the following achievements: a safe place to live, supportive relationships, a new job, a new self-definition or new hope for the future. Beyond this minimal criteria, the definition of healing was left to the individual interpretation of the participant. Healing and posttraumatic growth can take many forms and are not measured by the absence of



distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Elements of healing include such markers as increased sense of well-being, hope for the future, deepened spiritual connection or relationship connections, and increased appreciation for life. Allowing the participants to self-identify as “healing” respects their wisdom and their right to define their own experiences.

Professional service providers from two domestic violence agencies in the Southeast were enlisted to recruit participants. Selected counselors in private practice were also invited to identify clients who fit the criteria. The agencies and counselors invited to help identify the participants were selected because of personal relationships of mutual trust and understanding. I provided the recruiting professionals with a written script about the research to ensure consistency and full communication in the recruitment process. As each woman was identified and agreed to participate, the next step was phone contact. The participant was given a choice of contacting me or having me make the initial phone call. Interviews started as soon as participants were selected and continued until in depth data had been collected from each participant (Glesne, 2006). Six participants were recruited and interviewed with a goal of obtaining thorough data from a minimum of four to five.

The participants recruited through domestic violence agencies were expected to share a socio-economic status as lower middle class or below, the population that depends the most heavily on domestic violence agencies. Referrals from private counselors primarily came from the middle class. Given the social justice thrust of this research, it was important to ensure that lower socio-economic segments of society were included. It was not expected that the healing process differed significantly across social

and economic lines, but, for lower income women, obstacles were greater and services were more limited.

### **Informed Consent**

As part of the initial screening process, each participant was given a copy of the informed consent agreement. I discussed major points from the consent form with each participant. The difference between confidentiality and anonymity was explained and I ensured that the participant understood that the stories she told and even some of her actual words would be a part of my final written document. However, I also emphasized that her identity would be closely guarded to ensure anonymity. Story details that might reveal the participant's identity would be omitted or changed. Before we begin the first interview, a pseudonym was identified for each participant to be used throughout the process. This pseudonym was the only name attached to the tape recordings and written documentation and transcripts. Pseudonyms were also chosen for other people or places that were discussed in the interviews. The technical issues of data collection, tape recording and data storage were outlined with full explanation of measures to safeguard the material.

The participants were each informed of the risk that the interview process may stir up painful memories or uncomfortable feelings. She was encouraged to identify sources of support to utilize in case she needs them. A list of additional resources for support was provided to the participants. Each participant was reminded that she could withdraw from the study at any point if she wished with no repercussions from the researcher or anyone involved in recruiting her. At the end of the discussion about informed consent, the

participant signed one copy of the consent for my records and she was given a copy to retain herself.

### **Data Collection**

During the initial telephone contact with potential participants, a time was set to meet in order to discuss the research, go over the informed consent and allow each participant the opportunity to ask questions. Enough time was set aside to allow for the interview to proceed that same day if it suited the participant. The interview process was unstructured although a list of topics guided my inquiries (see Appendix A). There were three separate interviews with each participant. The interviews were scheduled several weeks apart to allow the participant time to ruminate on her interview responses. After each interview, I transcribed the data and spent time reflecting on the narratives that were emerging. Initial interviews with at least three participants took place before any of the second round of interviews were scheduled. Reflecting on these initial interviews allowed me to make any needed adjustments to the list of topics and allowed a deepening of the research process through critical self reflection. A peer reviewer, who is experienced at qualitative research, also read the three initial interviews and provided critical feedback about both the content of the interviews and the interview process. The third and final interviews with each participant did not take place until all participants had engaged in the first two interviews. Information gathered from the first two interviews impacted the topics covered and questions asked in the final round.

I attended to building personal relationships of trust and familiarity with the participants in order to facilitate the exploration of personal and potentially painful material. Counseling skills that build rapport and convey empathy were utilized to create

a safe and non judgmental space. However, I also monitored my questions and responses in order to maintain the role of researcher and not slip into a therapeutic stance. Questions served the purpose of curiosity. The peer reviewer monitored for my adherence to the role of researcher as she read the transcripts. A neutral and private interview locale was available to suit the participant's needs. Otherwise, the participant was able to specify where she wanted the interview to take place as long as it would also provide the privacy needed.

The interview protocol was influenced by the needs of narrative analysis and attention to the power relationship between the researcher and the participant. I asked the participant to relate the abuse and the subsequent healing by asking "what happened." Given the narrative emphasis of this research, it was important to invite the participant to create her own boundaries to the story and not be guided by what the researcher wants or expects to hear. Minimal encouragers, such as "tell me more about that," were used to advance the narrative. Probing questions encouraged the participant to reflect deeper into key points. A list of interview topics (Appendix A) allowed me to probe for omitted material and to ensure some degree of topical consistency between the various participants. Additional questions were used when necessary to explore critical areas. During the interviews, I assumed a conversational tone and responded with empathy, interest and curiosity. Although the hierarchical nature of the interview process cannot be denied, I moved away from a structure of sequenced questions and answers. Instead, I attempted to convey to the participant that she was the one who knew the parameters of what belonged in her story.

It is estimated that each initial interview lasted about 60-90 minutes. During this first interview, I reminded the participant of the topic that I was exploring and asked her if she would rather start with the abuse and the aftermath or with more general information about her life and important events. From previous experiences, I expected that the women would be eager to tell the story of abuse and the aftermath, but I allowed them to choose their own comfort level and begin with less intense information. Second and third interviews were scheduled in order to gather rich narrative material over a period of time. In the subsequent interviews, the participant was invited to comment on previous interviews and any thoughts or reactions that may have occurred. Over the course of the three interviews, I made inquiries that encouraged responses about the abuse and subsequent healing and about the larger context of core beliefs, world view, pivotal experiences, social and cultural influences, biographical material, and any other related material that the interviewee provides.

All interviews were audio-taped. I augmented the audiotapes by noting observations about the participant as she spoke. Although emotion was certainly apparent in audio-taped narratives, I expected to pick up on additional information about the participant's inner processes through visual cues and reactions. I recorded significant words, phrases, facial expressions and body language, and I also made notations to document my own personal reactions as the listener. To present a full picture of the participant, details of physical appearance were also noted. After the interview was complete, I took time to record further details, thoughts, or reactions in a reflexive journal. These notes were transcribed along with the audio tapes and were part of the

research data. At the beginning of the initial interview, I explained my role as interviewer to the participant, including my use of notes to augment the audiotape process.

During each interview, I reflected to the participant the major events and themes that I heard and asked her if I had heard her well. By giving her this immediate feedback and asking her to respond, the researcher furthered the hermeneutic process between the researcher and the participant (Ezzy, 2002). This process also allowed the participant to continue with the construction of her narrative through the interactive interpretation. As Ezzy points out, narrative accounts are created within the context of the interview. The presence of the interviewer, conditions that exist in the physical context of the interview, and the participant's particular emotional and psychological state during the interview all contributed to the narrative that was constructed. Rather than pretend that the narrative is objectively "pure," Ezzy encourages a dialogue about the narrative that makes this co-creative process explicit and deepens the understanding of the narrative for both the interviewer and the participant. The influence of the researcher or the impact of contextual factors can come to light through this discussion. The participant was given another chance to alter or elaborate on her narrative once the transcript had been typed. She was given a copy and invited to respond to amplify, correct or alter her account.

### **Narrative Data Analysis**

Within the realm of qualitative research, narrative is one means for gaining an understanding of human experience and the meaning that people attach to events and actions (Riessman, 1993). The plot of a story underlines the relational significance of events and advances the process of meaning making (Polkinghorne, 1995). As participants tell the "stories" of their lives, their experiences of abuse, and their healing

processes, the way that they chose to construct their stories will convey deeper levels of meaning and significance than they would express in abstract terms. The stories convey their world views, their beliefs about what was important, and the path that they have taken to get from point A to point B (Polkinghorne, 1988). The temporal progression of external events will parallel the internal progression from trauma to healing. Narrative data about the life panorama brings the participant to life as a human being with a rich, thick history and an existing world view both before and after the trauma. Through the exploration of biographical material, narrative data will also provide an account of cultural forces and outside agents that impact the progression towards healing. Given these considerations, I chose a method of narrative analysis outlined by Polkinghorne (1995) that keeps the emphasis squarely on the narrative itself.

### **Narrative Data Analysis Procedures**

There are many differing methods of data analysis that have been used in recent years (Ezzy, 2002; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Some methods focus on the linguistic structures within the stories and others focus on thematic analysis. Polkinghorne (1995) describes a method where the end product of the analysis is a narrative that has been reconstructed by the researcher:

Narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by narrative integration allows for the incorporation of the notions of human purpose and choice as well as chance happenings, dispositions, and environmental presses. The result of a narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective, having linked past events together to account for how a final outcome might have come about. In this analysis, the researcher attends to the temporal and unfolding dimension of human experience by organizing the events of the data along a before-after continuum. (p. 16)

As this description explains, the researcher identifies the basic plot behind a narrative that addresses the research question, and then identifies which elements in the data move the plot line forward (Polkinghorne). The plot provides the temporal and concrete structure through which individual events take on meaning and significance. The re-creation of plot begins by identifying the end point or denouement. From the vantage point of the denouement, the researcher can sift through the data to identify elements that contribute to progress towards the end point or that present obstacles along the way. One or more elements along the way will stand out as “turning points” in the action. Putting together the elements through a process of “narrative smoothing” (Polkinghorne, p. 16), the researcher recreates a storied explanation that illuminates the research findings. Although plot is the vehicle for the narrative meaning, it is important to arrive at an understanding of the person behind the plot and the accompanying actions and events. Drawing on Labov’s earlier work on structural analysis of narratives, Mishler (1986) underlines the importance of the evaluative process that moves the storied account from the plot to “the soul of the narrative” (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966, p. 239, as cited in Mishler, p. 81). In this movement from pure plot to “soul,” the unique humanity of the person is allowed to emerge.

Thus, the analysis of the data is the process of conceptualizing the structure and meaning of the story and then identifying the components of the story that impact the unfolding, both positively and negatively. These components are woven into an account that presents a coherent and plausible story line that that is true to the essence, or “soul”, of the narrative data as a whole. Although sections of the collected data may contain complete, storied accounts of episodes within the large narrative, the job of the researcher



is to use expertise with the specific topic under exploration to sort through the collected data and identify what is useful for understanding the emplotted story (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, the process of narrative analysis involves interpreting the data, synthesizing it in to a congruent whole, and producing a storied account that provides a proposed answer to the research question.

Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1995, p. 17-18) description of this specific process of narrative analysis, I conceptualized the analysis as five phases with unique steps within each phase. Although Polkinghorne does not specifically refer to the process of utilizing a reflexive journal, I integrated that modality into my analysis procedures to enhance the work that was done at each step. The process of data analysis began as soon as the first taped interview was conducted and continued after the entire interview process was complete. Ezzy (2002) emphasizes the importance of beginning data analysis while interviewing is still occurring so that initial questions or insights can be integrated into the ongoing interview process. The following steps were applied to the narrative data collected from each participant as a unique process with each one.

#### Phase One: Collecting and Transcribing Data

1. *I recorded thoughts, ideas, reactions and observations immediately before and after each interview in order to capture self reflective data.*
2. *I transcribed each interview myself in order to immerse myself in the actual words and unique emotional expressiveness of the participant.* Notes were added to the transcript to capture expressions of strong emotion or the unique oral delivery of narrative sections. Each interview was transcribed as soon as it was completed in order to begin the analysis while interviews were ongoing.

### Phase Two: Encountering the Data as a Whole

3. *I listened to the audio tapes and read the transcriptions in order to encounter the data from each participant with an open and uncritical stance.*
4. *I recorded my own reactions and reflections that arose as I listened to the tapes as “whole” stories.*

### Phase Three: Analytic Procedures

5. *I analyzed the data to identify the outcome, or denouement, for each participant. The denouement, paradoxically, was the starting point in the analysis and provided the rationale for selecting data to include in the final storied account.*
6. *I identified plot elements that provided support for reaching the denouement and elements that impeded progress towards the denouement. These plot elements were not limited to external events but will include cognitive processes, observed personality characteristics, the actions of other people, background and cultural influences.*
7. *I looked for causal relations between elements in the data and temporal sequencing. These relationships helped to highlight issues of purpose and meaning. I constructed a time line to order the data chronologically.*
8. *I noted in my reflexive journal any thoughts, insights, resistance, or reactions that occurred while identifying the causal elements. I monitored for resistance to the data by noticing emotional or physical (body) reactions or defensive thought patterns. I strove to see beyond the limits of current literature and my own preconceived beliefs about the topic.*

### Phase Four: Reconstructing the Narrative

9. *I described the cultural context for the story.* Diverse elements, such as familial, geographic, religious, socioeconomic, political, racial, gendered, social and specific cultural influences, were considered and included if they seemed germane to the progress of the plot. Given the Black feminist theoretical grounding of this research, special attention was paid to the racial, gendered, social and political influences at work in each woman's life.
10. *I described the participant, paying attention to physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual features that helped to bring her to life.* Each participant was presented as a dignified whole who is much larger than her story of abuse and healing.
11. *I identified other "participants" in the plot who affected the progress and outcome.* Since social support is a frequently cited factor in healing, the presence or absence of support was noted.
12. *I identified and clarified the choices and actions that the participant engaged in as she reacted to and acted upon the unfolding plot of her own story.*
13. *I identified preceding experiences that influenced the participant.* Past history may be an important precondition for healing.
14. *I organized the story with a beginning, a middle, and an end and inserted the various identified story elements in their proper temporal order.*
15. *I critiqued the constructed narrative for coherence and persuasiveness.* Despite the need for coherence and persuasiveness, I checked for the inclusion of important divergent or contradictory elements.
16. *I consulted and analyzed my reflexive journal to bring greater insights to the story and to monitor for bias or omission of important observations in the analysis process.*

17. *I incorporated elements of each woman's unique style in the writing of the narrative through the use of colorful language, metaphors or expressions that bring her to life.*
18. *I incorporated direct quotations in the narrative where preferable.* Key statements that succinctly convey meaning, personality, beliefs or pivotal actions will be integrated into the story verbatim.

These procedures will provide an orderly and consistent method for analyzing the data and producing storied accounts that will carry explanations of the phenomenon under exploration. In Chapter Four, each story is presented as a self-contained unit followed by a concise discussion of major story elements across the stories. Chapter Five, the Discussion section, moves from the individual stories as self-contained units to a cross narrative consideration that connects the stories to the larger body of literature about healing, coping, resilience, and posttraumatic growth.

### **Validity**

Both qualitative and quantitative researchers must be concerned with issues of academic rigor which are routinely measured through verification procedures and assertions of validity (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Qualitative research is inherently subjective and cannot be evaluated through systematic measurement. For much qualitative research, the final verdict on validity and integrity is only reached through judging the utility of the research over the passage of time (Reissman, 2008). Considering the difficulties of judging the rigor of qualitative research, the primary concern becomes establishing "trustworthiness" (Glesne, 2006; Reissman, 1993, 2008). Qualitative research is subjective and exploratory by nature; therefore, trustworthiness must be carefully built through attention to varied aspects of the research methodology and

implementation. A variety of these concerns are presented to underline my commitment to producing rigorous research.

### **Truthfulness/Authenticity**

First of all, any discussion of trustworthiness in qualitative research must grapple with the issue of “truth.” Historical truthfulness is not a useful guideline for qualitative research that focuses on personal narratives. Narratives are assumed to have many layers of subjectivity that are influenced by both the immediate purpose of the narrator and the interactions with the researcher (Ezzy, 2002; Reissman, 1993, 2008). For narrative based research, the issue becomes the “truthfulness” of the subjective reporting of the participants. “The ‘truths’ sought by narrative researchers are ‘narrative truths,’ not ‘historical truths’” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479). Narrative truth corresponds to authenticity as understood by the counseling profession (Bankart, 1997). Thus, the questions asked aim to evaluate the authenticity of the interview process. Is there congruence between the narrative and the inner experience of the participant? Does the participant feel safe and supported enough to “tell the truth” of her own experiences? Does the research situation itself create “participant bias”? Does the authenticity of researcher promote trust and full disclosure from the participant? Although there is no way to measure success in these areas, I used my clinical skills as a counselor to monitor and maximize the trustworthiness of the narratives. After more than ten years of experience, I trusted my instincts to know when a dialogue reached the sacred space of authenticity and personal truth and when there was avoidance of what is real. Authenticity is marked by congruence between the words spoken and body language, facial expressions, and voice inflection. I used my reflexive journal to note how much

confidence I had in the authenticity of the narrative and I reflected on and recorded the possible meanings of avoidance. I also used my clinical experience to dig beneath the avoidance through carefully phrased person-centered responses and probing questions. My aim was to build a space where the participant felt safe from judgment.

### **Correspondence**

Attending to the *correspondence* of the data adds another layer to the trustworthiness of the research (Reissman, 2003). Correspondence is the degree to which the narrative produced by the researcher reflects the actual lived experience of the participant. As a simple matter, the recursive nature of the interview process provides an ongoing process of member checking for correspondence. Participants had recurring opportunities to comment on or correct previous interview data. Going deeper into the issue of correspondence for narrative research, Polkinghorne (2007) points out that there are four specific threats to the validity of the correspondence that must be acknowledged and addressed. He also provides strategies for minimizing the impact of the threats. First of all, words can never convey the full depth and texture of the person's experience. "The experience itself is more intricate than can be articulated in language" (Polkinghorne, p. 480). To address this limitation, Polkinghorne suggests that the researcher can encourage the narrator to use metaphors and figurative speech to expand the expressiveness of the narrative. As a counselor I have come to rely heavily on metaphors to conceptualize clients' experience and check my understanding with the client. I utilized metaphor in the interview process and encouraged participants to reach for figurative speech in their narratives.

Secondly, there are limitations to what any person holds in consciousness about the meanings buried in experience (Polkinghorne, 2007). What ever is known is only a partial truth. Again, the interviewer helped the narrator arrive at deeper and deeper understanding through allowing time in the interviews for reflective exploration and through revisiting narratives over time. I used probing questions in the interviews and scheduled interviews with each participant at least one week apart. Encouraging continued reflection and allowing time for consciousness to shift increased what is “known” to the participant through the process itself.

A third obstacle to correspondence is the participant’s desire to tell a socially desirable story (Polkinghorne, 2007). Repeated contacts with each participant built trust and allowed the participant to move into more vulnerable material. I also used responses that minimized any perception of judgment in order to facilitate authentic stories.

The last obstacle to correspondence is the researcher herself. Researchers who listen for a predetermined story will produce that story (Polkinghorne, 2007). Instead, a researcher builds credibility by assuming an open listening stance and carefully attending to the unexpected and unusual participant responses. I used my reflexive journal to bracket expectations before each interview and used the journal to monitor resistance and reaction to individual participants and their narratives. I also used a peer reviewer to read interview data and my constructed narratives and provide feedback to me about blind spots, distortions of the data or poor fit between the data and the story. The reviewer is a doctoral candidate versed in qualitative methods and familiar with the dynamics of domestic violence.

Several additional steps were taken to increase confidence around correspondence. I used member checks, at various points, to assure that the data had been accurately transcribed and understood. During the interviews, I frequently checked with the narrator to ascertain if I was correctly hearing both the events and the meaning in her narrative. The reflective listening skills of paraphrasing and summarizing provided a convenient method for checking with the participant at frequent intervals within the interview. Following the interviews, the completed transcripts were submitted to each participant for her review and correction.

### **Credibility**

In order for the research to be believable and persuasive, certain procedures were utilized at different points in the process. The credibility of my own interpretations were strengthened through my immersion in the culture of domestic violence and its aftermath. I have previously worked within a domestic violence agency for a year and a half and provided individual and group counseling to women following their experiences of abuse. I continue to counsel women who have been abused as part of the general practice in which I am engaged. I have read and studied extensively about the dynamics of domestic violence and I have spent time reflecting on my own experiences with abuse and healing. I expected that these intense, first hand experiences would help me develop trust with potential participants and would heighten my ability to understand and interpret the data. In order to keep these previous experiences separate from the process of data collection, I bracketed those experiences before each interview and used the peer reviewer to monitor suppositions or biases.



I also triangulated the data by using three interview sessions, multiple theoretical perspectives, and peer reviewers (Glesne, 2006). The data consisted of the narratives themselves, interview observations contained in the field notes and reflections contained in my reflexive journal. As I encountered the data, I considered the various lenses of posttraumatic growth, resilience and hardiness, posttraumatic stress syndrome, womanism and feminism. Although I was the only investigator conducting interviews, I utilized a peer reviewer to provide analytic triangulation.

Credibility is paradoxically enhanced when negative cases are presented and alternative points of view are considered (Glesne, 2006). It is possible that one or more of the participants will deviate from patterns established through the data analysis. Such deviations were thoroughly presented and discussed in order to guard against researcher bias and to allow independent evaluation of the analysis.

To further guard against researcher bias, I made entries in my self reflexive journal throughout the research process. Given the cultural differences between myself and the participants, I paid special attention to areas where I felt resistance to the narratives and where I experienced “turning points” in my own understanding. The peer reviewer was also utilized to provide debriefing and to offer any observations about researcher bias.

Finally, elements of an external audit were provided through collaboration with members of my dissertation research committee and the peer reviewer. They were given my reflexive journal, the transcripts, and analysis procedures. The peer reviewer and the research committee have their own differing perspectives about the topic and the

literature base. Their input allowed me to explore alternate interpretations and to continue checking my own biases and preconceptions.

### **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the proposed research methodology beginning with the theoretical underpinnings of Black feminists. A brief overview of narrative analysis has been presented, including implications for data collection strategies. I have outlined the formative experiences from my own life that provide the motivation for this research. The procedural steps were outlined from sampling procedures through the final data analysis. Finally, issues of validity have been addressed. Throughout this research, there is a common thread of concern for the human dignity and unique perspectives of the participants. The methodology contains sensitivity for issues of social justice and respect for personal experience. The research product will be presented in the three remaining chapters. Chapter Four will contain a presentation and analysis of each participant's individual narrative followed by a discussion of the major themes. Chapter Five will contain a discussion of the theoretical ramifications of the narrative analyses and will relate the narratives to the body of literature pertaining to the healing process from domestic violence. Areas needing further research will be outlined and recommendations for improved services for female African American victims of domestic violence will be offered.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE HEALING NARRATIVES

### **Introduction**

The five individual narratives compiled from the research data will be presented in this chapter. Each narrative was crafted by following the steps outlined in the research design in Chapter Three. Although each narrative is decidedly unique, for ease of comprehension, they all follow a common structure. The opening paragraphs present the interviewer's initial perceptions about each participant, including a brief description of her home (where applicable), her physical appearance and her individual personality characteristics that create a first impression. The narratives, themselves, then begin with pertinent information about formative childhood experiences and basic family information. Next, there is a description of how each woman's relationship with her abuser began and progressed, including some representative descriptions of the physical and emotional violence. The narratives then focus on the healing aspects of each woman's journey, including external events, the presence or absence of key elements of support and her evolving cognitions and beliefs about herself and her experiences.

During the interview process, six participants were selected and interviewed. However, after completing the interview process, it was apparent that one of the participants did not meet the criteria of experiencing physical abuse. Although she spent months in a domestic violence shelter after leaving her abuser, she experienced only ongoing emotional abuse and rage. By her own descriptions and stories, she was

completely demoralized and “beaten down” by the abuse, but was never physically harmed and felt no fear for her physical safety.

The participants were all given a choice whether to meet at a convenient office location or to meet in their homes. Three very readily decided they were most comfortable having the interviews conducted in their homes. Two participants, Mercy and Faith, opted to meet at an office location and were interviewed in a counseling office that was rented specifically for the interviews. Seeing the other three women, Joy, Hope and Blossom, in their home surroundings provided extra insight into their personal lives that was not available during the office visits. However, the reasons the women gave for preferring the office reveal aspects of their lives. Mercy lives with her aging mother and did not want to explain the nature of the interviews to her mother. Faith stated that her home was in disarray and that she stays “on the go” and said it would be easier to meet elsewhere.

The interviews were all guided by the list of sample interview questions outlined in Appendix A. All questions were covered with each participant at some point in the interview process. The participants were given the choice of whether to start with the abuse or with more general information about their lives and important events. Four of the five participants wanted to tell the story of their abuse first and spent much time relating the events in roughly chronological order. Blossom, who endured extreme abuse as child, started with the prelude to the first incidents of childhood abuse. The participants all appeared to be at their most engaged and animated while talking about the abuse. They included many incidents and details and would search their memories to make sure the story was complete. When questioned about the healing elements, it

seemed harder for them to relate the events as “narrative” and their answers became shorter and less animated. Judging by the different rhythm of the dialogue and perceived engagement with the process, it seemed that the women put much more emphasis on what happened to them than on how they have been changed by the experience. To honor the importance of the story of “what happened”, the constructed narratives themselves include ample details about the abuse itself.

The story of the abuse is also crucial to the understanding of the healing process. Cognitive restructuring, spiritual growth, and increased self esteem all show up in the contrasts among the participants’ world views before, during and after the abuse. The women, themselves, need the contrasts to make sense of their stories, pointing out how their views have changed. They express pride in their ability to survive and grow and need to relate the abuse in order to accentuate their own healing.

The narratives differ somewhat in length, texture, and complexity given the differing cognitive and story telling styles of the women. They also differ depending on the degree to which each narrative is unitary and focused or contains some ongoing contradictions. For ease of comprehension, the narratives are presented in the order of complexity, beginning with the one that is most clear cut and dramatic, and ending with a narrative that contains elements of ongoing confusion and rumination. After the five narratives are presented, the chapter will conclude with a brief summarization of the major commonalities identified in the healing journeys.

### **Blossom’s Story**

“Yeah. It happened. Ain’t nothin being made up. It’s just the truth.”

Blossom (age 40) lives with her two youngest children in a small subsidized apartment a few blocks from the main intersection in a rural community. The apartment complex is tucked away from the busy roads and is a quiet, peaceful place, surrounded by tall pine trees that sway in the breezes. Blossom's front door prominently displays a cross with flowery embellishments around it. The interior of her apartment is amply sprinkled with framed Bible verses, prayers, more crosses and framed photos of her two youngest children. Her oldest son, now in his twenties, has lived most of his life with his father's family and remains in the Northeast. The next son, in his early teens, lives with a different father farther down south. He lived with her until a few years ago when she realized how much he was being emotionally abused by the man she married. Blossom has been trying to get this son back but has not succeeded yet. She proudly shows off smaller photographs of these two sons but has no large portrait pictures of them on display.

Her apartment is neat and well-furnished with serviceable although mismatched furniture. She exclaims how proud she is to have her own place and enthusiastically shows the interviewer every room. Blossom seems young and immature for her age, with her emotions changing quickly and visibly. She can go from excited chatter and awed exuberance to despairing tears and back again. She is slightly overweight and her round face beams with joy when she is happy. She has little education, not finishing high school, and she tells her story in a confusing non-linear style that makes it hard to trace the actual flow of events. This style fits with the lack of stability that she describes in her life since birth and it seems likely that the exact sequence of events is not at all clear in

her own mind. As we talk, Blossom sometimes reaches for the worn Bible lying on the couch between us and holds it, as if for comfort and strength.

Blossom's story of abuse started in childhood and extended up until March, 2009 when she finally escaped to a domestic violence shelter. She grew up in an urban area in the Northeast, living in low income housing. Her mother was alcoholic and left her and her siblings alone at home much of the time, only to return with male friends who used to sexually molest Blossom. There was no structure to their days and the children would sometimes go hungry. She has no knowledge of her father and doubts that her mother even knows who he is. Starting at the age of 8 or 9, Blossom found other places to live, bouncing from one place to another when things would go bad. First, she was befriended by a childless woman in the neighborhood who gave her cookies and orange soda. Blossom went to live with that woman and she provided at least more stability than her mother, but very little nurturing or attention. She seems to remember the cookies and soda as the highlight of the relationship.

So one day she said. You want some oatmeal cookies? So she gave me a big ol' oatmeal cookie and I was hungry 'cause I hadn't eaten. And a glass of Sunkist soda!

*Interviewer: I can see by your face it hit the spot!*

It was good!

However, as Blossom began to mature, the woman's husband let her know he expected sexual favors in return for supporting her.

Lizzie [the woman] went to work and I...I...I think we had to go to school a little late that day and he throwed out a money clip with money in it. I said

what's this for, for me? Wow! I was happy 'cause I had to go shopping for school clothes. He said that's for me and you. Me and you? For what? He said come in the bedroom. I said come in the bedroom? For what? So he wanted me to sleep with him and I said no.... unnnuunnnh. And he grabbed me and was touching on me and stuff, threw me down there, so I pushed him and I ran out of the house. I ran and I went to school and I was upset and so my guidance counselor, she was real nice lady, and I told her what happened and Katie, my best friend at school, she said, well, you can't go back there. I said I don't have no where to go.

Katie's mother agreed to let Blossom come live with them and she stayed there until the family became aware that an older brother was molesting Blossom and she was blamed for it. The brother would sneak into the girls' bedroom at night and touch Blossom in her sleep. Blossom was afraid to say anything and endured in silence.

I thought I was dreamin'. Is that somebody touchin' me? I wake up and he'd be gone. Then one day I saw him and I just laid there. I was scared to say something. I thought they was going to kick me out of the house. So then one day his sister, she woke up and she said, you been coming into this room and you been touchin' her? And she say, why didn't you say nothing? And I say 'cause I didn't want them to kick me out. That was kind of frustratin'. I'll try not to cry. (tears come and she stops talking)

*Interviewer: You can cry. You can cry all you want. It's ok. You've been through a lot. (Keeps crying for a few minutes.)*

I was still going to school and everything. (anguished voice)



*Interviewer: Still trying your hardest.*

I was going to school and I wound up getting pregnant. I wound up getting pregnant and then after that... Where was I at? I'm confused now.

Blossom completely loses her train of thought after speaking about this incident. The pregnancy she refers to happens a few years later. In a subsequent interview, she comes back to this story with Katie's brother and tells the sequel. She finds out later that the same boy was also molesting his little sister and when the family discovered that, he was abruptly thrown out of the house. It still stings Blossom to this day that the family did not believe her innocence and did nothing to protect or support her, but acted so quickly on behalf of their own daughter.

Blossom goes on to admit becoming sexually promiscuous at an early age and readily links her activity to a search for attention of any kind. She became pregnant at 17 and lived with her oldest son's father off and on. He was physically abusive so, at times, she would leave and find other places to live. Since her son's father lived with his mother, who provided some basic childcare and stability for the child, Blossom left her son there, knowing she didn't have the necessary resources by herself.

Staying with him and I was working and he was....his problem was.... he was a little abusive and I'm working and he's staying home. He started hitting me, but I didn't like.... one smack.... that's alright. I can deal with that. It was only a smack. So I was.... I was.... I found my mother.... we got separated. I found my mother 'cause I was staying with my oldest son's father at the time so he started hitting me and I found my mom. And I went to stay with her. She was still drinking. I had to come home to that. I had

nowhere else to go so I put up with it. I had a little part time job in a store called Alexander's Department store. And so I say something gotta give.

Blossom routinely downplays the abuse she has endured. She repeatedly says that John's father was a "little" abusive but in one anecdote, she reports that "He hit me a few times. Jumped on my head and stomped me and stuff."

She managed to keep various jobs, working retail or fast food, and earned a small amount of money on a regular basis. In 1992, she made an attempt to stabilize her life and found a small apartment that she rented for herself. She attempted to bring her son to live with her but her son's father used sexual pressure and physical abuse to block her attempts.

I said I want John to come home. I got my place and everything. His father came over to my house and said we got to talk about it and I said that's fine. He brought over a steak and baked potato and I said, well that's good. I thought he's changing his ways and everything. We sittin' there eatin' and then he went in the bedroom I had fixed up for John. I had gotten.... I had fixed up this little.... blue curtains with Spiderman and little things... so I saw he pull out some condoms. I say what's this for? He say for us. I said I didn't call you over here for that. I call you over here so we could talk about John coming back home to me because I got my own place now and I want my son home. He start cursin' and asked if I am not happy and this and that. He say I abandon him which I didn't. I had to get myself situated and I couldn't stand him hitting on me. Let's see.... now I got a court paper that I abandon my son and it was a mess. But we went to court for John. John was

big enough to say who he wanted to go with and he say, momma, can I please stay over at my father house with my.... with my grandmother and I come over here on the weekends cause all my friends are over here. So at that time I'm not thinking. I didn't have no.... I didn't have any support. I wish I had my mother by my side, but I didn't.

Blossom agreed to let her son stay at his father's and gradually the weekend visits decreased until she lost her son entirely.

Sometimes you make the wrong decision and I think I made the wrong decision by saying Ok because I wanted to please him. So I said "yes" just to please him and let him stay over there and I told the court people he can stay over and every other weekend he come over and that didn't happen so I just, I just let that go and I just led my life. And with me letting it go, they wouldn't let him come over every other weekend. And I got on drugs.

Blossom began using cocaine to ease her pain but managed to remain functional and kept her job and paid her bills. During this time, she met another man, started seeing him, and got pregnant again with her second son.

One day when I was going shopping, I met this other guy, started seeing him, got pregnant by him. That's my middle son, Tommie. He's 14. I got pregnant. I had him, his father said it wasn't his, the baby wasn't his. I said, well, I'm going to raise my child. I'm going to raise my son, raise him and after I raised my son, a few years went by, and a friend of mine in New York, I'd rather not talk about this part, but something happened to a friend of mine. He was like a brother to me. He got murdered and everything and that

is what changed me as far you know, sometimes they say something good come out of something bad and it helped me. It took my mind.... it like took my mind off of drugs. So my sister called me and said maybe you need to move [down here] for a change. I packed up quick, I said I got to get out of here. What I was doing was running from what had happened. I didn't grieve it so I carried that with me. So I came down [here]. And my sister told us we could stay with her. So we were both drinking and everything and then my sister, she goes both ways, so I said Carley.... Well, I won't say her name, but anyways, I said I really don't agree with that. I said that's....to each her own but I don't.... I don't..... so she cursed me out and threw me out of the house.

Having no other options at the time, Blossom went to live with her sister's godfather who was supposed to be a preacher. She admits trusting him too readily, believing that he would treat her and her son well. She eventually married him and they had two more little children together, a boy and a girl who still reside with Blossom. Blossom's marriage was marked by extreme power and control with occasional outbursts of overt physical violence. It was easy for her husband to keep her at home and isolated because Blossom did not know how to drive and they lived out in the country. He kept her away from family and friends and wouldn't even let her go to the doctor when she would get sick. He would accompany her to stores for shopping and would dictate what they would buy and who she could speak to.

It was more control and verbally and emotionally. He grabbed me a few times and made me sleep with him when I didn't want to. That's the most of

it that hurted me cause I felt this way, you treat me like a child and you're sleeping with someone you're treating like a child, it's like sleeping with your father and I said and he said I supposed to sleep with him because I was his wife and I couldn't deny him. At times I wasn't feeling well. I was pregnant like sick, throwing up, he made me. Like I had to sleep with him and stuff. He made it real hard for me. He really, he really messed up my mind. And he made me, a lot of times I still look behind me sometimes I still look 'cause I'm still frightened by things. Every time I see a white pick up truck I still look.

However, despite her assertions that the abuse was not that physical, she does go on to describe an incident where he burned her arm with an iron and another time when he pushed her down, would not let her get up and squeezed her arms so tight she had bruises on them. She continues to have terrifying thoughts about him and has flashbacks when there are familiar triggers. When the interviewer asks what constitutes physical abuse, Blossom replies "Punching your eye, stomping you in the face. My mother used to get her teeth knocked out."

The fear, isolation and degradation completely demoralized Blossom and after several failed attempts to leave, she began to think the only way out was to die.

I thought the only way I could get out was if I could die..... I tried, I tried so many things. I tried so many things and seems my husband caught on to things. He stopped me and I said well I said Lord, the only way I guess is, I said I guess there's nothin' but to stay here with him and take this abuse. That was.... he said, my husband told me the Lord sent you to me and this

and that and I believed that. I said for me to be hurting like this, I said, I thought the Lord don't want us to be.... I know he want us to go through our things, but he want me to suffer like this? I was sufferin' and I couldn't even take care of my kids. My son was sufferin'. And I thought Tommie, it was getting to the point that I was getting afraid. Cause Tommie started sayin' I hate him. I hate him. He started having this look on this face. I say he goin' to.....And I say I pray to the Lord that Tommie going to start....'cause Tommie went to sleep with me in the room. So I say I got to do something. I don't know what to do, I don't know where to turn so I started looking in the phone book. It's some mentors. I find me somebody to be in this household to see what's goin' on. That's the only way. Cause he couldn't have company in the house for so long. Only his daughters who came over and controlled everything, so I got this mentor and he argued about that and he tried to change in certain ways. But you can't last too long when you got that bad stuff in you. Eventually he let it out.

Driven by her son's suffering, Blossom brings a mentor into the house and tells the mentor to write down everything, to begin to document what is going on in the house. Her husband resists having the mentor come and accuses the man of looking at his wife in an improper way. Blossom notes that the stress on her is turning her into somebody she does not know.

He got to the point, it got the point I started sayin', Law, I hope he have a car accident today. I started sayin' mean stuff. I said I go in the room and he not

be breathin'. I said every doctor report come back as negative. I just started thinkin' all kinds of things 'cause I said that's the only way I can get out.

*Interviewer: Right*

I can't drive.

*Interviewer: You thought something had to happen out there because you couldn't do it.*

I couldn't do it and I said I'm turnin' into this monster. I said I don't think bad things about nobody. I had .... I had , I had to forgive me. There would be times when we would go to the store together, I would jus be looking at people and sayin' I wish I could say can you come and take me and... from bein' abused? Can you take me somewhere? But I said no (deep heavy sigh). I just think those things. I would want to go in a store and get lost and tell the police to send me to a shelter or send me somewhere.

Seeing Tommie's growing distress, Blossom later decides to let Tommie go live with his father and his father's new girlfriend. Over the years, Tommie's father had decided to admit his parental role and was eager to have his son with him.

Blossom speaks with gratitude about the support she got during these traumatic years from her brother who always reminded her of her strength. She remembers one time that she was allowed to visit her brother and he told her to hold on to her dreams.

My brother said I could do whatever I want, I could be whatever I want to be cause my husband say I'm too old and God made me to have kids and stay home and just shaming little things and my brother said you could be a nurse. Ain't too late. You could be whatever you want to be. My husband said I was

living in a fantasy world. My brother said, no, you can do whatever you want to do. You could put your mind to it, go back to school and you could try it, you could do whatever you want to do.

She also shares how much her faith in God sustained her. She read the Bible and she went in the bathroom to be alone and pray.

I spoke to God. That's who I talked to. That's why I started talking to one person that wouldn't go tell nothing. The only person that would comfort me when I was going through what I was going through. I started going in the bathroom and talking to him and just being patient. I knew that one day I was going to.... he would give me strength to get out of it.....I would talk to God and I would talk to Him and something came to my mind that said read Isaiah 54. I would just meditate and just realize and just read and read and read it.

She made eight or nine attempts to escape before finally making it to a shelter. Sometimes her husband would foil her attempts by sending police after her to bring her back on the grounds that she had kidnapped his children. Other times she would return on her own because she had no good options for a life elsewhere. She also remarks that people would tell her she needed to stay with her husband instead of helping her to escape.

You dumb. You stupid. That's what I'm told. You stupid. You dumb. You need to go back with him. My mother said that too. He ain't goin to hurt you. Go back with him. (uses a harsh voice to impersonate) 'Cause she went back, she did that, she got beat up and stuff.



Blossom notes that the chance for escape finally came through her doctor at a large medical center in a nearby town. Her motivation came from her children, seeing how the abuse was impacting them.

And I believe my husband was trying to kill me and I was getting to the fact that I didn't want to wake up in the morning and I started thinking hatefully and I am not a hateful person. I would start saying in my mind, I hope he crash today. If it was raining, I hope he have an accident. That is the only way I could get away from him, 'cause I couldn't get away. I said, I started saying I got to do something about this so every time I went to my doctor's appointment when I had to beg him I need to go to the doctor. I made them write letters saying she have to come. It got to that point. I was telling my doctor about everything, about everything. He wanted to come into the room. I said, no, I need my privacy with my doctor so I could tell him what was going on. So that the ninth time, the ninth time, I said I'm sick, I'm really tired. I looked at my kids faces and I said this is about them, it ain't about me.

When she went to the doctors, that day, she insisted she needed some privacy with the doctor and kept her husband from coming back with her. She opened up to them about the abuse and they arranged a cab for her to a domestic violence program. They helped her leave by a different door while her husband sat in the waiting room getting more and more irritated at the wait. She says that was the last time she saw him. She went to a shelter with her children and lived there for about a year before transitioning to her own apartment.

Blossom's road back from abuse has been long and hard and some days, she still feels like she has miles to go. She expresses effusive gratitude for the shelter she stayed in and shows moments of child like wonder that her life is turning out the way it is: a quiet, clean home for herself and her children, food to eat, driving lessons and a car waiting in the driveway for when she gets a license, the chance to get either a high school diploma or a GED and then the opportunity for steady employment.

When Blossom talks about her experiences in the shelter, she becomes scattered and overwhelmed trying to be clear about all the aspects of that experience that helped. Her first words about it are that "I felt safe." She goes on to elaborate:

We had our space and .... I had to get used to that. I had to get used to the....  
I had to get used to knowing I'm in a safe place..... And my kids they were so happy, they go on the playground out back. I say, yeah, go play, and the toys.....

She frequently touches back on the awe she feels just being safe.

I got a clean place to live and nobody touching me and makin' me sleep with them and I walk around the track and when I look outside in back of the shelter, it look like a....it remind me of a garden. I think of the Garden of Eden (giggles). I call it the Garden of Eden (laughs). It's so beautiful to me! Its' just perfect sittin' in the swing, hearin' the little birds and..... (at a loss for more words)

Adjusting to safety has been a slow process. Blossom goes on to describe how panicked she became at first when her children would get the shelter toys out and spread

them around. She expected the shelter staff to yell at her for the mess. It took time for her to relax and realize her children were allowed to play and act like children.

Speaking about her children leads her to the subject of parenting and she expresses gratitude for the help she received in how to parent. She acknowledges that she had learned to try to discipline her children through fear and now she realizes that respect is the most important aspect of parenting. She also notes the respect and lack of judgment among the women and staff at the shelter in general. She began to speak up and share with the other women and develop close, trusting relationships.

And you became close to one another. We, we was like we was a family.... like nobody would stay separate and everybody had respect for one another and some people did and we had an understanding and we had group meetings in the shelter to teach us.... to teach us ways of how to deal with abuse, how to talk to one another, how to respect one another and how to take care of our kids and so that helped. The meetings, the group especially, the communication with the staff, it helped because you felt constantly to talk about what is on your mind, when before you feel that, in my case, I felt that why should I say something I'm gonna be wrong anyways.

She finds another important source for ongoing support when another resident of the shelter, a white woman, asks her to go to church with her. Despite being the only black woman in the congregation, Blossom feels immediately at home and that church has become an extended support system for her. She reaches out to them for help when she needs some heavy work done. In telling this story, she reveals that she still struggles

with looking a man in the face because of a lifetime of abuse and her husband's accusations of promiscuity.

They will come and help me 'cause they know I'm a single woman. I ask the pastor, could you please.... The first time I felt uncomfortable because you don't know how.... I can't look at them any more in their face. They came and brought the washing machine over here. They was talking to me. I was looking this way. (looks away and down)They said Blossom..... I said, I can hear you. They say look. I look and I was nervous. I couldn't look at no man's face. And like I would get blind from lookin' at him.

She goes on to tell about a breakthrough moment with her pastor.

I couldn't look at them and then when I came to church after I had my surgery, my pastor.... I was going to shake his hand like this.... And he said, can I have a hug, Blossom? I was kind of nervous. but I said all right. So I hugged him. It sort of broke something. Sort of broke something inside of me and ... and I jus.... Now he see me, he say hey Blossom and hug me and shake my hand and I jus shake their hands and....

*Interviewer: So when you say it broke something inside you, it broke something in a good way?*

In a good way. It broke down that wall I had up against what my husband had said about me.

*Interviewer: That you were promiscuous. That you were.....*

Promiscuous and ... I must be ... going to the store, I must be going to see somebody else. Stuff like.... Little stuff that he made up in his head.

For Blossom, it has been tremendously affirming and freeing to be herself and see that she is still accepted and loved. She describes a process of coming to realize that she would not be blamed or shamed by others simply for who she is.

It helped a lot doing things you never had a chance to do. Having your own.... being human.... being a human being, we had a chance to be a human being. I'm a human being. I'm not a robot. I'm not a puppet.

*Interviewer: You're not a maid or....*

Yeah none of that stuff and no more strings attached. It's was like one day I jus' wanted to go (makes a loud exuberant yelling noise)! I can do what I want to do! I can do....( Shakes her hands in the air and wiggles from the waist up like she is dancing and then giggles again with a little embarrassment. )

*Interviewer: 'Cause you really felt that relief.*

Unnnhuh I really felt it and the kids.... I said ya'll play, ya'll have a good time now!

When things seem hard for Blossom and she is getting discouraged she turns to others to lift her spirits again.

Sometimes I would feel like I would come to a dead end. I would call them [the women at the shelter] and they would be there for me, saying the right words to me or something. I mean to have some where to go to be able to speak to somebody and go to group and thank God for that.

While she was staying at the shelter, Blossom develops a serious health setback, one that could have been fatal had she not gotten away from her husband. She was

diagnosed with colon cancer and needed surgery. The shelter rallied around her and helped her through that difficult time. She finds it hard to express adequately the appreciation she feels for all the support she has received.

They helped me. They were there for me through the surgery. I wouldn't have made it. I can't thank them enough. I can't stop saying thanks. There's no words that can .... thank you is.... thank you.... but I can't.... I need to say something more....

*Interviewer: You have so much gratitude there aren't even words for it.*

They helped me. They set up day care. They helped me with my medicines. And got my place. They helped me with furniture. They just.... they just helped me.... helped me become who I am today. They helped me with me also.

Blossom developed such an attachment to the shelter and the women there that it was hard for her when it was time to move on.

I was so happy I didn't want to leave there. I was happy and it was time for me to go and it was time for me to go and I was kind of nervous. I said I'm movin' out and I was cryin'. I said I don't know if I'm going to make it on my own. I don't know if I can do it. There were plenty of times when I first moved in here when I said, I can't do it. I'm goin' to go on back. Let me go on back and then I said no I ain't goin' to go back . I said my kids.... I'm lookin' and I see my daughter and I said not her going through that and my son.... I said oh no!

Now that she has fallen in love with her apartment, she worries that she won't be able to stay there. However, she receives a housing subsidy, food stamps, and money from Work First which pays for day care for the children, a small monthly stipend and money to pursue a high school education. When she gets discouraged or depressed, she picks herself up by remembering how far she has come.

Some days when I sit in here and I start feeling down because I am by myself, I imagine where I was at a year ago today, a year ago today. I was in the shelter but I was still going through my..... I was nervous and I say thank God for this! I am here! And no one can tell me I can't do this. I can do it and I did it with the help of people that have helped me. I've been around people, positive people, just, just, just the people. I thank God for them.

Blossom has big plans for her future and defines herself in ways that seem empowering. Her thoughts about the future constellate around being a good mother to her children, seeking more personal growth and using her experiences to help others.

I want to spend a lot of time with my kids and teach them and get them in positive things and let them know there is more out there than to sit around and I'm not just settling for what's in front of me. I'm going to go out there and get what I need to get.

*Interviewer: Wow. That's a powerful statement right there*

The things you can't see is what you need to go and reach for. And that's what I plan on doing and you gotta seek it. You don't know what's out there unless you go and you got to seek it and that's what I've been doing lately

and that's how I know there are great things ahead. For me and my kids.

Great things ahead.

Blossom feels particularly drawn to helping others through the experience of domestic violence whether it be through working directly in domestic violence services or by sharing her story with others.

I really want to work in the shelter. I want to do something that.... I been through the abuse, so I want I feel in my heart.... it's easy to.... um help somebody that's in your situation.

*Interviewer: Yeah, you understand.*

I'm gonna write a book.

*Interviewer: Wow! What do you want to write about?*

About my life, my abuse and children and stuff. I'm going to start from growing up. The abuse started from when I was smaller. And I'm going to write. It may take me twenty, ten years (laughs). But I'm going to do it (with great conviction) even if it don't even edit or nothing, it's going to be MY BOOK. It's going to be my own book. I'm going to do that and I'm, I'm going to give it to my nieces. They have teen age babies. They have babies and their boyfriends are not around and my mother, she just so negative. They this and that. She jus'...my momma's not like mamma material. I don't mean no harm. I know she means things nice, but the words that come out of her mouth, I, I surprised .... And I pray to the Lord, I pray that she change her ways. And I'm gonna, I'm gonna get my nieces.... and I'm.... they the next generation and I want to give them those papers. I want them to have



them and read them. And you can raise your baby. You got your daddy with you, one of them. It just going to be hard. It's a hard time cause I cry in here sometimes. Like (makes a childish wailing noise). I can't.... you know what.... I thank God for this. He don't keep you down for too long. I just pop back up ((laughs)).

Despite the hard life that Blossom has had, she has developed what appears to be a decidedly upbeat philosophy.

My husband started telling me things.... I started doing it. He started telling me, you can't.... he said I was living in a fantasy world. (laughs) He say living in a fantasy world. Ain't no fantasy world. I say, well, life is better than this. Life is better than this and it can be better. It's what you do with your life and you can have a better life. I have a lot of things, I have a lot of things in my head and thoughts. I may not accomplish all of them but I'm gonna get a taste of little bit of what I think I'm going to accomplish. And I'm going to accomplish some of them. Eventually, I'm going to do it. I, I, that's what I m going to do and I m going to teach my kids that they can do things and don't let nobody stop them.

Blossom expresses gratitude for her story and an awareness that she can turn the suffering into a meaningful gift.

Yes, it sure does help me a lot and I know I sound..... there is some people that it may sound funny to say but I'm glad I went through that. Now I can say I'm glad. I can say that now although I hurted and my kids had to suffer but if I hadn't went through that then I wouldn't have anything to say about

it. I wouldn't have anything to say.... I wouldn't have anything encouraging to say out of it and when people hear about these things, they got to hear something that's positive.

She goes on to add:

I'm grateful for it and I probably wouldn't have said that last week. I probably would have had a different attitude but in all reality, in my heart, I went through it and I know it's for something. Something good is going to come out of it. Something good already came out of it but in the long run, for someone else, it'll help someone else. Let's see, young kids coming up like my nieces, I'm going to use my nieces, I'm going to use my kids I'm gonna.... you know, if their momma and daddy don't like it, they need to read the truth. It happened to me it happened to your auntie. It happened to me. It's real life. It could happen to you too.

### **Mercy's Story**

“The Bible says you stay, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be.”

Mercy arrives at our appointed meeting place precisely on time. She is dressed professionally in a dark business suit and heels and carries her height with assurance. As we begin to speak, I immediately notice that she seems to choose her words carefully, speaking slowly and enunciating some of them as if she is savoring a rare delicacy in her mouth. This way of speaking seems to convey a sense of thoughtful and serious attention. Throughout our interviews, she continues to speak with this slow precision and provides the bare framework of her story with little embellishment, even with encouragement to speak more. Although her story is peppered with words or usages such as “ain't” that do

not conform to formal English, she is well aware of proper grammar, enunciates carefully, and seems to use those expressions to bring color, authenticity and emphasis to her narrative.

Mercy was born in the South and raised in what she describes as a “normal” environment. She was the oldest of three girls. She readily admits that her father was alcoholic early in her life and that she was a “peacemaker” but does not dwell on the common connection between those two realities. Her mother had a high school education and worked outside the home in a day care setting. Within the home, her mother called the shots and modeled the role of a strong matriarch. However her mother was a fixer herself and taught Mercy by example that love was about self-sacrifice. As Mercy describes it “she [her mother] just gives and gives and gives and gives and gives and gives and gives.”

Mercy describes her early life in the following passages:

Well I grew up in.... both my mom and dad were there. They were married for years so my growing up environment was pretty normal. My father abused alcohol in the early years of my life and then he just stopped.

She comments that she never saw her mother as oppressed within the home:

You know, the thing that is funny with that is growing up, my momma was the one that really ran the household. She worked outside of the house but she made every decision in the house and she would just tell my daddy and he would say, ok, honey, if that’s what you want to do and it was done. But she

cooked. Daddy cooked every once in a while. She worked like I said, she worked outside of the home so I was brought up seeing both sides of that.

From an early age, Mercy was aware that she was the one trying to keep the peace, paying more attention to the needs of others than to her own feelings and needs.

But the environment I grew up in, I felt I was always the fixer, the peacemaker trying to make things ok for everybody, which is part of my personality but it also um those situations sort of escalated or exacerbated those behaviors. So, as I progressed in life, the husbands I chose were always those who needed something. They needed help and I felt I could fix them, help them and, you know....

Despite her assertions that her early environment was “pretty normal,” Mercy has realized, through counseling, that her early life contained the seeds of her life long struggle with low self-esteem.

I think that with my counseling with Reverend Mary, it definitely goes back to my childhood. I’ve always known that I was loved by my parents but I think, you know, it’s subtleties, like, um..... let’s see, like, I’m not sure. I’m just going to be honest with you. In my family, I’m the darkest and then there’s.... I’m the oldest but I am the darkest and then there’s my sister who is lighter and then my younger sister, so I’m the darkest. . . . I’m the same complexion as my mom but my daddy was a lighter complexion soooo when I think... because of the... um...things within our culture, if you look a certain way, then you are less than, or you’re not as good, or you’re not as pretty and there was that subtle stuff going on in my family even though no

one ever voiced it or said it right out, it was there. . . . Yeah it was just kind of there and it was always said that I was the smart one because I was intelligent but never that I was pretty.

She describes one occasion where she tried to get her father to tell her that she was at least cute and her father refuses to even give her that.

One time . . . . my daddy. . . . there was something about me and my daddy said . . . . . you were a smart baby, and I said, but daddy, I was a cute baby, wasn't I? You were a smart baby. He never said I was cute. . . . You couldn't get him to say that because he didn't believe it. So that, I think, was the beginning of it all. You couple that with I felt. . . . to my family I was always having to do. . . . to prove, to make up for not being pretty, to look as good you know, whatever. So I think that's sort of the beginning of it all. Plus part of my personality is wanting perfection, wanting to do the best, so that just sort of added on that whole thing but I've only gotten there through my counseling with Reverend Mary.

Despite the lack of self-esteem, Mercy, in her earlier years, was the most adventurous one in her family. She enlisted in the Navy just one week after high school graduation and went to boot camp in the deep South. She spent some time stationed in California and then lived for four years in Sicily. As she thinks back to her time in the Navy, deep joy spreads across her face and she exclaims through laughter, "Loved it! Loved it!" She got married for the first time while still in the Navy but decided to leave the Navy when their first son was born. She had another son while in her first marriage and then divorced and married again. She got a college degree in business while raising

her sons and has thrived in a corporate job for many years, working her way up through self-described diligence and playing by the rules. She has tremendous gratitude for her mother and sisters who helped her with her children since she was between marriages when she completed school. After college she went to work for a major bank and describes her career with a seemingly characteristic understatement.

I started out in the mail and I went from the mail room to the wire department from wire department to corporate trust and then from there to capital markets and now I'm in wholesale operations and I'm able to use my accounting degree to sort of, like we call it, trouble shoot. We research problems between different systems and reconcile and different things such as that.

Work never seems like a burden or a worry to Mercy and she describes her corporate job as a helpful escape for her while she was suffering from abuse. She would put on her professional façade and enter the corporate world and feel some relief.

I could leave a very heated argument on my way to my job and when I got there I could put on a different face and be a different person. I could be a successful person. I could be around people who we could laugh together.

She continues to present a corporate image and to have a persona that exudes confidence, grace, and effortless efficiency. However, as much as she achieved during those years, there were also personal losses. Looking back, she realizes she lost her sense of adventure and joy while raising children, focusing on her work and enduring unhappy marriages.

I actually became a different person....um.... I lost my joy. I lost my sense of who I was, not that I really knew who I was, but who I thought I was. I lost that. I....um....started conforming to whoever it was that I was with at that particular point in time, my girlfriend here, my sister here, my momma here to where I didn't even know who I was.....I was lost, totally lost, totally lost, sense of confusion all the time, sense of sadness, unhappiness, that's what I became.

All three of Mercy's husbands have been substance abusers. She realizes she was drawn to needy men and was hooked by the thought that she could help or "fix" them. With her third husband, the only one who has been physically abusive, she ignored the early incidents of abuse and stayed with him for 14 years. She makes sense of this by relating it to her low self esteem and her persistent life philosophy that she could fix things through hard work and sacrifice. She makes frequent references to her "rose colored glasses," that helped her deny reality and believe things would get better.

Mercy has vivid memories that her husband hit her for the first time before they got married. They were in the car and when an argument became heated he just reached over and "backhanded" her. Since she took the blame on herself, she did not see the incident as a reason to doubt the relationship.

It was very shocking but I honestly felt that I had done something wrong and every time after that, when those little situations would occur, I felt that I had done something wrong and that I had caused it to happen. If I had not.... you know.... all of it came from arguments and stuff. So if I had not said this, if I

had kept my mouth shut or been quiet or what ever, that....um....it would not have happened.

Throughout their courtship and marriage, they had fierce arguments that would escalate to screaming and door slamming. She engaged in these arguments, thinking she needed to defend herself verbally against him because he had a “strong personality.” Many of these arguments ended with physical attacks on her. After the incidents were over, she would blame herself for talking back and she would tell no one what happened. The abuse occurred sporadically throughout their 14 years together although sometimes they would go months with relative peace and harmony. Of course, these relatively peaceful lulls would feed her optimism that things were getting better.

Mercy describes a typical incident this way:

I remember one situation where we got in an argument before I went to work and I was in the bathroom and I was going in or coming out. I can't remember which it was, but he pushed me down, he pushed me down in the bathroom on the toilet and this bathroom was really small and I remember just trying to push him off of me. He hit me, but he never would hit me where there were marks on my face. I mean he was smart enough to not hit me that way so nobody really knew it. If you didn't hear the scuffling and stuff going on, you would never know it. Another time that he hit me, and this time was one where he actually busted my lip on the inside, and he was hitting me, hitting me. I don't know if he was slapping me or what but I remember saying a scripture and I left and went to work. I even put on this facade which



is what I am very good at doing. But I put on this facade and went to work. I was totally emotionally a wreck inside....um....but I went to work.

She describes another situation where the police were summoned, but she decided not to press charges.

There was another situation where he choked me and I was actually out. He choked me as I was coming out of the house and one of my neighbors saw me, saw us and she asked if I wanted her to call the police and I told her yes. They came but I never pressed charges against him so....um....it's been situations like that.

The final incident stands out in her mind and it is notable to her that something seems to click inside her husband. Despite her intuition that he has somehow come to his senses about what he is doing, she knows that she has crossed her limit and that she wants out.

The one that really did it for me was the time before the last argument that we had and he came, we were arguing and when I walked out of the bedroom, I slammed the door and when I did it I knew I really shouldn't have done that. That was a mistake. But he came up from behind me and he grabbed me by my neck and he came up behind me with such force that we both went forward and the kitchen counter stopped us and my head hit the top cabinet, um.... and I really lost it. I started screaming and yelling and crying. I just really lost it at that point. When I turned around, I was prepared for the rest of it, and he just looked at me and he was in total shock and he didn't touch me after that. He left me alone but I knew then, I knew then that I cannot

continue to live like that. But I stayed maybe a month after that and then I left. And then, after that.... um.... he came home while I was getting my second set of stuff and....um....he threatened me with a gun and even though he didn't have one, by that time I didn't even know if he did or he didn't. I just knew what he said. . . . He said I'm going to end this right now and I ran, never noticing, never looking to see. I just ran because so much had built up, you know. So one my of my neighbors was coming out of their driveway on their way to church that morning and I went to their house and I haven't been back.

After Mercy left, she moved in with her mother who is 82 years old. She longs to have a place of her own again but right now is thankful that she can offer companionship and support to her aging mother.

As Mercy talks about her inability to leave the marriage earlier, she returns again and again to the fact of her two previous failed marriages. With her acknowledged tendency to be a perfectionist, it weighed heavily on her that she had failed at marriage twice already.

It was my third marriage and I felt such a burden....um....in that, you know, because my mom and dad have been married for all those years and here I was on my third marriage and I really felt that I was tainted.... being my third marriage has meant I failed again and just.... you know.... what people will say. You know, just, you know, people have, the first thing they say is, Mercy, what'd you do this time! You know, it's me. Um so.... that's been

that was one of the most difficult things about .... Um.... not being with him but I got over that pretty quick.

Her strong religious belief system posed another considerable obstacle. For Mercy, the Biblical scripture states very clearly that a woman is to honor and obey her husband and to stay in her marriage. Early on, Mercy believed in the literal meaning of these biblical passages. Her beliefs were reinforced by her husband's skillful use of guilt and scripture to keep her subservient. To counter and complicate her search for independence, Mercy's husband, an intelligent man, quoted scripture to her and threw her previous marriages in her face.

He would throw scriptures from the Bible. That I shouldn't leave, you know. Marriage is sacred. You know, we went before God and we said that we would, you know, marriage is supposed to be forever. He would say this is your third marriage...

*Interviewer: Lay the guilt on you....*

Yeah, lay the guilt. You might want to look at yourself and make sure you know... see what it is about YOU because the one thing in common in those three marriages is YOU. So he would throw things like that in my ear.

When her husband would pressure her, the rose colored glasses would kick in again.

She acknowledges that her tendency to be unrealistically optimistic prevented her from facing reality sooner. For years, she believed that if she would just try harder, things would improve.

“And I would go ok.... maybe.... ok.... I can do this.... I can try. We can work through this. Not realizing that nothing, nothing had changed.”

As time went on, she began to wrestle with her growing sense that God would not want her to stay in a marriage that stymied her spiritual growth. As she talks about her inner struggle, she interweaves her new beliefs with the old.

The other part is.... if God put us together, we're supposed to stay together and work through all of our differences and make our differences work was another piece of pressure put on me and another one was he [husband] would come to this through a spiritual perspective and say you know I'm the head and you're not respecting me .... um.... you know, your thinking is different than what the Bible says about that so that put pressure on me because I really felt that what was happening was not what God would want to happen in a marriage so I struggled.

With purposefully casual language, Mercy sums up her growing awareness that the literal meaning of scripture and her understanding of God's intentions do not always match up. “The bible says you stay, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be.”

Although Mercy does not identify it as a problem, another factor that seemed to hinder her efforts to escape was her reluctance, even to this day, to let others know about her situation. She states that she wanted to protect others from being involved. Although she never speaks it, it would be normal for her to hide the situation given the stigma of failure that she was wrestling with. The fear of revealing the abuse shows up in several different ways.

I would start planning where I would go and who I would talk to because it became important to me that those around me didn't get involved because I didn't want them to be put in uncomfortable situations. So I just started to think of different places I could go where people would know I was ok but they wouldn't really know where I was and I could still go to work and come home and go to work and whatever. so I guess that is what people who are in domestic.... who are abused do, I don't know, but that's what I started doing.

She has never told her mother about the abuse and her two grown sons only know the small amount that they observed while living in the home and not the full extent of the abuse. She has no friends that she was able to confide in. She has confided in her sisters to some extent, but admits "they don't know the depth of what I have gone through."

Mercy found her first real outlet for support when she started seeing Reverend Mary during the last six months that she was with her husband. She chose a pastoral counselor from another church to keep anonymity for herself and her husband to protect the two of them from the opinions of others. It is mainly through counseling that Mercy has been able to identify the abusive cycle and to find the strength and the conviction to leave the relationship. She knows about domestic violence resources in her community but has not utilized any of them and has not talked to other women who have been through similar experiences. She states the purpose of counseling was to pursue a spiritual breakthrough. With Reverend Mary, she learns to interpret the Bible through her own sense of the Spirit being within her and trusting herself to know.

I sent her an email.... gosh, I can't think.... it would be almost a year now and said to her I need a spiritual breakthrough because I felt that I was so bogged down and so cloudy and so just overwhelmed with emotion and thoughts and that I just really didn't know whether I was coming or going and it was really interfering with my spiritual walk so my approach was a spiritual breakthrough. That's how I started it. I had no idea. The marriage wasn't initially even part of the equation but as we talked, you know, she gave me a couple of books to read as we kind of got through that, we sort of zeroed in on what the real issues were.

As she and Reverend Mary work together, Mercy begins forming very definite opinions about how to interpret scripture.

The bible says you stay, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be.

*Interviewer: Something is wrong.*

Something is wrong with that. There's a contradiction here. But now what you said about the wife not leaving is where he goes because that is actually scriptural and it says the wife is not supposed to leave the marriage so he has been throwing that out which.... uh.... Initially, it definitely did bother me because I really wanted to be in line with the scriptures, but I've since kind of gotten over that because I know that the primary objective is for my relationship with God to be good and strong and for him to help me to be the person that I should be and if that is the only way that I can do that is to be away from him, then I yield to a higher power. I yield to God and if this is

supposed to happen it will. So that's how I put it. He says I'm justifying and not in accordance with scripture, but to me it's neither here nor there.

Her rose colored glasses begin to crack and she sees that she cannot fix things:

I was always....um....I guess you could say, I was a people pleaser and....  
um....happy go lucky, you know, easy going. I looked at things through, you know, I call it rose colored glasses. That's what my husband said. You look at things through rose colored glasses meaning I always looked for the best in all situations and if things weren't good, I explained away the bad, you know, justified it.

*Interviewer: So that everything fit.*

So that everything fit these glasses and....um....as my marriage progressed....um ....so much became obvious to me. The primary thing is that I couldn't fix it. There was nothing I could do. I tried and tried. I couldn't fix it. I couldn't make it right. I couldn't give enough love to make him be happy or help him deal with situations. I just couldn't do it. That became obvious and the second thing is when I tried to fit that stuff into those rose colored glasses, it just wouldn't go. I mean, you know, how can someone say they love you and put their hands on you. How can someone say they love you and they say all these mean things to you or they say that they love you and they call you terrible names?

Her spiritual connection to God brings her to a specific turning point where she clearly hears God telling her not to worry, that He's "got this."

The next morning I said a prayer which God speaks to me through my devotion, my meditation. I said God I really don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I know what I am supposed to do because you've told me to go. But I really believed that it's going to cause problems with the family. And He said to me, "I got this. I got this." And I can tell you that, that was one of the breakthroughs.

Mercy recognizes that the counseling is bringing her gifts of insight bigger than just the clarity to leave an abusive relationship. She is learning to turn her gaze inward, to question her habitual ways of thinking and acting and to redefine herself and her life.

She [Reverend Mary] has really given me insight into me. I've never really looked at me, never really thought about me, never really honestly addressed me. I just.... cause I always felt I was the problem, that I had the issue, that I needed to fix myself or fix it so....um....but I felt in the marriage that no matter what I was doing, it just wasn't enough. There was always an issue, there was always something I should have done or shouldn't have done.

*Interviewer: So it sounds like before you saw her, you did focus on yourself but only as other people were telling you that you were instead of...*

Yes yes. I, I, I based my emotions, my thoughts, my actions on other people's perceptions and opinions and I never really found out what I wanted for me or what worked for me, whether this person liked it or didn't like it so....and in my marriage and that was something I told, I told my husband. When I married you, I didn't marry you coming from a strong place. I loved you and I thought whatever our problems were I could fix them and that the problem



was me and all I needed to do was fix myself. But fix myself according to what he wanted and not according to what I am. So Reverend Mary really...um...helped me to look at myself and value myself and...um...and make a determination on using the Holy Spirit within me as my guide, as my barometer, as a place of peace for me and my... the person I am to please is God and not other people because one day they could be here and one day here, but he's always consistent, always the same so that's the...the... what I have gotten through my healing with her which has helped in my healing process with the abuse I have suffered in my marriage. It has really helped me to see how I have contributed to it by not being true to what is in myself and setting strong boundaries to what I will and will not accept because I have to have a strong base for that and I didn't before. And it has also helped me to...um...identify what true love really is and what it looks like and what it feels like...um...so that's what I have gotten through that process with her.

Although Mercy now identifies herself as a victim of domestic violence, at the time that it was occurring, she resisted that definition. Like many women, she thought the injuries needed to require medical intervention before the behavioral pattern rose to the standard of domestic violence.

But I think um parts of me just didn't really want to accept it because it really didn't look like what I thought it would look like..... I'm not in the hospital, you know.... No broken bones so it's not really.... So I think that's what I told myself but in actuality, it is, you know.

She believes that her low self-esteem was the cause of her willingness to endure abuse and a big part of her healing has come from being able to turn her focus inside and get to know and value herself. She doesn't think that healing is different for African American women in today's times, but does think that African American women in her mother's generation had fewer options for financial security and that money issues kept them trapped. She also believes that spiritual faith is the basis for healing and that if other ethnicities are less strong in their faith, that will impact their ability to heal.

Mercy expresses deep joy with her life now. She believes she has changed so much through her healing that it is overwhelming for other people. She talks about the joy of feeling clear and focusing on her own life. The following exchange illustrates the freedom and relief she feels.

What brings me joy now? (*with surprise, thinks a minute*) What brings me joy now is being able to think clearly, you know, being free of emotional baggage, being able to.... um.... it's just.... to go somewhere and sit down and read this paper (holds up some papers in her lap) and focus on it and not think about.... I'm here doing this. That means that I'm not taking the time that I need to think about, you know.... there is something that Sam may need. There is something that he may want that I'm not doing. I probably.... I probably should be trying to fix, figure out dinner for tomorrow night, you know.

She is very succinct about the meaning she finds in life now. "What gives my life meaning right now is discovering what it is the next phase of what God wants me to do.....My growth and my spiritual path."

Mercy mentions several times that she would like to find a way to help girls, especially African American girls, develop more self-esteem. However, in more general terms, she looks forward to getting her own place, traveling and “peace....just peace....however that form takes.” These words are spoken very slowly and with grave emphasis.

### **Joy’s Story**

“God will give you back all that you have lost, and more. He gave me more. He gave me so much more!”

Joy greets the interviewer at the door and enthusiastically ushers her in, offering the warmth of her broad smile and the hospitality of food or drink. We sit in a family recreation room complete with big screen TV and large sofa for easy viewing. The energy in the home is simple, quiet, organized, and calm. Joy is now living the life she always wanted: strong marriage (her second), children (one of his and two of hers), a secure job, a comfortable home and dreams for the future. She is petite and vivacious and her brown eyes sparkle with intensity and personality. She is bubbly, energetic and warm and has a quick intelligence and a hearty laugh that punctuates our conversations at frequent intervals. Her life has had its full share of pain, struggle, and hard work, but the memory of the hard times keeps her heart full of gratitude and joy for the quality of life she has finally achieved.

Joy’s early life was marked with abuse. Her father was an alcoholic and abandoned the family when she was young. A stepfather came into Joy’s life who was both physically and verbally abusive to her mother.

Um.... my mom was married to my father, my oldest sister and I, she was married to our father. And.... um.... then.... um.... they never got

divorced, which was crazy, but, you know, they separated and went separate ways and then met my youngest sister's father and then we all lived together with him and that was eight years so.... we saw a lot of abuse. Now my dad was an alcoholic too. I didn't know that until I got older.... that he was an alcoholic. So he was abusive in his own way to my mom. So she'd been through a lot of stuff that I didn't know about and children are not to know that anyway, but with my stepfather, we did see a lot of physical abuse, a lot of verbal abuse, emotional stuff.

The abuse started when Joy was about five years old and continued until her mother ended the relationship roughly six years later. Joy remembers knowing the abuse was wrong and wanting her mother to get out. Watching the abuse was frightening for her and she took it upon herself to try to protect her mother.

I was afraid for my mother. I just wanted.... if I could see her and know that she was ok, I was ok. Um.... and I did not play. You know how a lot of kids play outside. I did not play a lot. I just wanted to be right up under her and make sure she was ok all the time. My mom would argue with me and say, you need to go outside. No. I am ok. Go outside. I would just sit out on the porch and wait for her to say, ok, come on inside. And then I would watch a lot of Elvis movies. I saw a lot of Elvis movies.

Despite saying that she knew the abuse was "wrong," she remembers thinking that her mother must have done something to deserve it. "It's like, I know she must have

done something for him to hit her. It's like, what did you do? Did you do something wrong, you know? What did she do?"

When questioned about other early experiences that impacted her, she responds rather casually, "Oh yeah, lots of those [experiences] were negatives. I was molested several times. Two were female cousins and one was a guy, some neighbor of my grandfather's or something weird. It wasn't anything traumatic. But it was enough."

Despite the pain inevitably linked to these memories, Joy concludes that her childhood, overall, was not bad.

It was ok. It was a very.... it wasn't a bad childhood. I was always taken care of. My momma always took care of us and I always see her as a strong person. I've never seen her as weak even though she was going through the abuse. I never saw her as a weak person. I always saw her as a strong person because she did get out of it. Um.... and I had the usual aunts and uncles and grandfather.

However, Joy does see the impact of not having any positive male relationships in her early life as a contributing factor to low self-esteem and the abuse she suffered in her first marriage.

Then the self esteem and you just want to belong and I don't know if it had anything to do with it, but my dad not being around and him dying when I was nine and there was no man after my stepfather in the house. So twelve and up, I didn't have a male figure there. My uncles.... but they were always, you know, out of town and not a stable, everyday man there to teach me how a woman or girl is supposed to be treated....

or how a woman is supposed to be loved or treated. So I always felt like.... like a lot of girls. You gotta give up your body to.... like.... make this guy like you and stay with you.....And I remember I always felt like all the men in my life left me for some reason. My father died, my stepfather was gone, my grandfather died, my uncles died. I had no men in my life (slowly and emphasizing each word).....I felt like all the men in my life left me. Why? And I always felt like I had to do something to make this one stay. Oh! Nobody's going to stay with me.

After high school, Joy moves in with a roommate and starts building a stable life for herself. She describes how she fell into a relationship with her ex-husband without a lot of thought.

An uh, I had my own place. I had a roommate.... she's my best friend. We've been roommates for almost five years by this time, and we were doing really good. We had no problems. We had good credit and we had cars that we paid off and just ....

*Interviewer: Living the good life.*

Living the good life. Yeah. We both of us had two jobs at the time and I was at [a local community college] at the time, so we both of us just doing the good stuff and..... uh..... let me see.... I met him at the club and started dating him. And soon after, he just, you know, the toothbrush comes, the clothes start coming in and now you have a drawer (laughs)and.... um.... my roommate was cool, "that's fine, um,

whatever.” So eventually he moves in and I asked if that was ok and she said it was fine.

Thinking back, Joy remembers that there were some clues that she overlooked that might have warned her to think twice about the relationship.

I didn't see any bad signs.... um.... I did see some things like he wasn't working (laughs), you know. That was, should have been the number one clue. But um.... wasn't working..... um.... lived with his parents and that was fine and all that and then when he moved in with us.... um.... I could see little things and I'm trying to remember that far back and I can't remember what clues but I knew they were there.

Joy's mother cautions her not to get married but she dismisses her mother's concerns.

So anyway, so then we decided to get married, went to the Justice of the Peace. My mom said, don't do it. She said, I just don't have a good feeling about it. Nothing against him. I just, I just don't think you should do it....Oh, you don't know what you're talking about. Went down to the Justice of the Peace and came back married and she said, well, if that's what you wanted to do. You know you're a grown woman. There's nothing I can do about it.....And right after, he said I want children.....So I got off the birth control pills and then that summer of '96 we had our first incident and we were, I mean he was literally, you know, grabbing me and pushing me and, you know, one time I was on the floor like.... you know.... like, you know.... what's going on? I'm

not used to that. You know. Well, I AM. My mom was abused by my step father, but myself, I hadn't come across anything like that, so anyway.... um.... I go back.... um.... by this time I'm like, ok, I gotta make sure I get back on birth control because I can't have children by this man.....Well, I go to the doctor. It's too late.

*Interviewer: You're already pregnant.*

Pregnant with twins, right, I'm pregnant. And then when I find out it's twins, I was like, oh, God!

Feeling trapped by the prospect of twins, Joy tries to make the relationship work. She worked two jobs throughout the pregnancy, trying to build a life for them, but her husband's lack of steady income undermines her efforts.

I kept saying you really need to be working. So he would do little odd things. Him and his brothers would always go out and do painting people's houses, cutting lawns, those kinds of things, but never worked for a.... a regular job. And, of course, the excuse was I don't want to work for the white man. Like, ok, whatever. It's whatever. I don't know that. I worked since I was 13. I don't know what you are talking about (laughs) so....

*Interviewer: You're thinking it's a pay check!*

It's a pay check, right. It's a check and we have bills. Um and in the midst of all this, I knew day care was coming. I had him on my insurance at work.... um.... bills were piling up. I had all kinds of credit cards, I mean, but I had them anyways before I met him and I would buy



something and pay it off. No big deal. I had perfect credit. Um.... I got him a truck in my name, all kinds of things like that, I mean, just, just crazy. I mean, um, I did everything I could to make sure he had what he needed for work, and for clothes....

The twins, a boy and a girl, are born and as their lives get more chaotic and out of control, the physical abuse begins. The first “hit” comes when Joy suggested a separation.

My first hit across my face. He pretty much just back handed me (slaps one hand against another) and I was shocked. I was like, because he had never HIT, like he had shaken me but never hit me. And I was like, what in the world.... you know, and by this time, I’m like uh uh! You know, and I just slapped him and I could just see it. It was coming, I knew it was coming. I could see it in his face just as clear, like, oh my God, why did I do that. He hit me again and um my roommate was upstairs and she came down and said you can’t do that and he broke the phone and he was just pissed and he said you’re going to take my family from me and blah blah blah and it was ranting and raving - a mess.

So uh I didn’t have anywhere to go really. My roommate just said you all just.... you just need to, you need to calm down. You just leave and go calm down. You can’t just hit her like that. So anyways she moved out and things were ok. You know, you always get the flowers. It really wasn’t flowers, but it was the oh, I love you and I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again. Uh let me see, after she moved out.... um.... it had got

worse because I didn't have anybody there and she was always a phone call away but she wasn't there and I think the next hit I received was.... he was.... uh.... had gone for the day like he always did and I was by myself with the kids. It was Saturday. It was warm out and in the apartment complex people were out washing their cars, kids playing, just out doing stuff. And it was nice and um I had, I mean, I had clothes everywhere, I mean, I had, I used cloth diapers for bibs and all and I had clothes washed. I had dinner cooked. I had clothes lined up cause the dryer's going and clothes lined up on the stairway just to have clothes drying....And [he]came home and he was just pissed about whatever and I think I said, you know, what's wrong, you know, I got you some dinner on the stove, you know, blah blah blah and um and he said I was mouthy. He said you mouth off too much, you talk too much. I said.... uh.... (deep sigh).... and I knew.... ok.... it's one of those days, you know, any minute now. So he said, uh, he would (jabs the air), you know, do like that, at me. Jab at me to see if I would.... and I was just like.... see.... you think you are big and bad, you know, running your mouth, you know, talking all that... I don't want to curse on your thing [tape recording] (laughs).....

*Interviewer: That's ok. Say whatever.*

Talking all that mess and smack (still laughing). I was just like, oh my God, he could hit me again. You never can.... you can brace yourself all you want to. If it's going to happen, it's just going to happen. And um so

he.... uh.... hit me. I been here with these kids all day. They're fine. They're in their little carriers, you know. And of course they are screaming by this time because they are babies. It's summertime. They're babies. They couldn't be any older than, maybe, March, April, May, June, maybe four months, something like that. Cause I just can't take it. So I went outside. I said I need a breath of fresh air. You take care of them. You do it. You know, I'm not going to argue with you. I'm just tired. So I went out the back sliding glass door. I went out back in my bedroom shoes. I know I am not going far. I never go anywhere with bedroom shoes on (laughs). So I go out. He comes storming out. I mean, there are people everywhere outside and he is arguing with me and I say, you know what, if you are going to hit me, just hit me. Just go ahead and hit me, in front of everybody, just hit me. And he did!

*Interviewer: In front of everybody.*

In front of everybody. He slapped me and I almost fell but I got my bearings. You know, on the bottom of the bedroom shoe is slippery, slick, and I'm just trying to run and I can feel him hitting me on the back of my head....

*Interviewer: So he kept on hitting you....*

He kept on hitting me while I'm trying to run and people are watching, kids are out here and I am just terrified. I am just trying to get away.

A lady in the neighborhood calls the police and they help her call her mother who comes to her aid immediately.

So my mom talked to me good and she said this is your husband. Now this is my mother who has been through it.....

*Interviewer: Right.*

Who has been beat for eight years. We saw her beat up, shot at. Um.... so she said this is your husband. You got to make a decision what you want to do. And this is where, you know.... you know.... we call it old school, old school, you didn't leave. You just stayed and took it.

*Interviewer: Exactly.*

You didn't leave. You just took it and that was not talked about and all that stuff, and....and you just didn't go. And um.... so she kept saying this is your husband and you just make your mind up. You have a home to come to. You don't have to stay. But you make up your mind what you want to do. So I wanted my marriage to work. I did and....um.... it's amazing how emotional you get after all this (she is surprised that tears start to flow).

*Interviewer: Of course you do.*

Excuse me. I'm sorry. Whew (laughs while wiping away tears with a Kleenex).

Yeah.... it's awful. But, anyway, so.... um.... I decided to go back and I went back there the next day and of course, I'm sorry and all, and what kills you more than anything or pisses you off more than anything is that they want to have sex with you after they've hit you and done you....talked bad to you and down to you. It's like, I know you don't

want to have sex with me? Right? (Incredulously) Are you kidding?

(laughs) I don't want you to touch me and you still.... you love em because you're in love with em and you can't stop that

*Interviewer: And you want it to work.*

You want it to work. It's your children, yeah, and I felt good knowing that I wasn't.... uh.... one of those girls who had gotten pregnant before wedlock, you know, and I said, I did it right. I got married first. And then I got pregnant.

A final incident leads to Joy leaving. The twins wake up in the middle of the night and Joy asks her husband to help with them.

Uh, Joshua woke up.... my son woke and, of course, when one wakes up, the other wakes up (laughs). So it was hard with twins (laughs) but.... um.... but I had them on a schedule and they woke up right before three. So.... uh.... I went in to get them and he woke up and I said, I think, I was so tired, I said can you get up and get the babies? He said, no, you get up. You know, basically, you get your ass up and you go get them. 'Cause you had them waking up at 3 o'clock. And I am like ok. So I get up and I mean um Joshua will not go back to sleep for some reason. I don't know if he was tense. I don't know if he could feel the tension. I don't know. He would just not go back to sleep. And of course he wakes his sister up so.... (laughs).... you know we got more babies. I put her down, came back in to give him a bottle for Joshua. I gave him a bottle and he said, it's your fault that they're up in the first place. When I go to

turn, to go out the door, I look at him and he, like.... he threw the bottle across the room and hit me on my shoulder with the bottle and that's a glass bottle. It's not a plastic.... It's got something in it, you know. It's hard and it hit me and I said you hit me with it! What are you doing! It hurt, you know and ooooooh! He just.... he was.... he was pissed and he put Joshua in the bed or something and he came running in there from the kid's room and.... um.... and I said I'm just tired of this. I'm just tired of this. I cannot do this anymore and....uh....I knew another hit was coming.... Um.... so I, uh, I was looking down at Julie and I said.... I said God, I just cannot do this. I just can't do it. I just cannot take any more. I'm just done and as clear as I'm sitting with you talking, God said OK and I'm like, you know, in the midst of all.... you don't realize that it's God telling you that it's alright.

*Interviewer: But you heard it.*

I heard it just as clear, just as peaceful. OK. By 3:30 I was gone. My mom.... I called my mom and he didn't want me to call and I ran and got the phone and said mama, please come and get me. And she said, what is going on? And I said please come and get me and she said I am on my way. And her and my oldest sister got over there in a flash and they were knocking at the door and I am trying to get... and he uh.... I don't know what.... I can't really remember what was happening at the time. I just know that he was pissed, he was cussing. He was everything and I am crying and I was holding Julie and that is the only thing I think that kept

me from being hit again. You know, I was holding her and he loves his kids. I know he loves his children and he never hurt them and because I was holding her, I guess he didn't want me to hurt her. To drop her or whatever.... um.... so my mom came and got me and he wasn't going to let them go. He said, no, you can't take my kids, you can't take my kids and I say, you know.... we can settle this later. I gotta get out of here. So my mama said, you go to the car and let me talk to him and she did and she came to the car and I got the kids in and we packed whatever I could, a bag or whatever for the next day and we got out of there. But I will never forget that day.

Joy moves in with her mother and with her family's support she is able to work and begin to get her life back in order.

So my mom....uh.... she was steady getting me back and forth to work. My oldest sister was on disability so she was able to stay and keep the kids as much as she could during the day and I would try to.... you know... my other sister was in college. She went to (liberal arts) College and finished up there. So we were just trying to make sure she was stable. Let's not interrupt her stuff and let's just do this here. And.... uh.... my mom's house....uh.... it's a three bedroom house. It's a small house, but my nephew....uh.... his sweet self.... he was in high school. He let me.... he gave me his room, so the kids stayed in his room and he stayed on the air mattress or whatever in the living room every night for two years (laughs ). For two years.... until my sister got out of college....

got her.... she bought her condominium and then we went and stayed with her for six months until I bought mine. So that's how God is!

Not long after the separation, while Joy was living with her mother, there was one final incident of physical abuse that happened when Joy's ex-husband came by to visit the twins just after he got out of the hospital for minor surgery. Joy recounts that incident with colorful details that bring facets of her personality and family to life.

They [the twins] were pulling up on the crib and he saw that I had no ring and he said, where's your ring? And I said, I don't know, you know. I'm thinking, God, I don't even want to get into this. I don't know where it is. I just took it off or whatever and, honey, before I knew it, we were arguing. And my nephew came in and he said, Joy, what's wrong? And.... uh....we were about to start scuffling and my sister was, like, now you got to go. You cannot come in here with that.....

*Interviewer: Causing trouble.*

Causing trouble. Everything was fine. You just got out of the hospital. You should be home resting. And.... um....so he....um, honey, before I knew it, he was standing there and he went POW (very loud), you know, up across my face, right? And I went up against the dresser and I went and I saw blood and I said oh my God! He knocked me! I mean he knocked crap out of me and my sister.... he had just had his surgery.... she had enough strength to, I guess, push him onto the bed. So she knocked him onto the bed and said, no, you can't do that! I mean my sister and my nephew, the kids were all there and my thing is.... you're



not scared of anything if you can hit me in front of somebody. My mom was there. She was frantic. She was running around trying to find her gun (laughing). I had never seen the gun before but I knew she had it. My dad's but my father had passed in 1980. But she had his gun and she was just trying to get this old gun (laughing). I'm thinking it's an old gun and I'm like, mama, please, no, mama, please, no, no, no. And she's like just get your hands off and just get out of here! And he's in the living room arguing with her and my nephew's like you stay back here. My nephew's a big dude. And he said you gotta get out of here, man, you gotta go! Grandma, no! Grandma, don't get the gun, please! And she on the phone calling his mother, my mom, and she said, I tell you what! Your son is over here and he hit my daughter and we are on our way to the magistrate's office. If you want him alive, you better come and you better get him up from over here. I have called the police already. They're on the way. Either you want him in a body bag or you come and get him. Which funeral home do you want me to call (laughing). I remember she said that! Which funeral home do you want me to call.

*Interviewer: Your mother is feisty!*

She is feisty! She has been through that. She's like, you're not going to do my daughters like that, you know. So....uh....yeah, she's a trip! My mama's funny!

Over the years since this incident, Joy has grown stronger and more resilient. She has married a man who she trusts, enjoys and respects. Together they are building a life

for themselves and their children that has the stability that Joy worked so hard for in her earlier years. However, her continuing involvement with the father of her twins through custody and child support issues brings her ongoing fear and anger with the system. She is very aware of women who have been killed by ex-husbands after they dared to leave and has ongoing fear of more violence from her former husband. On the day of our second interview, she spends the first few minutes describing her fear over the prospect of facing him in court the day before to sue for child support and then her subsequent outrage with the system when her ex does not show up. The court tells her they can't find him to serve papers on him. He continues to have regular visits with the children and Joy knows where he lives, but he gives a false name or hides when law enforcement tries to serve a warrant. He continues to work odd jobs under the table and has been able, so far, to avoid the usual legal consequences.

There were many forces keeping Joy in this unhappy and abusive relationship. Clearly, the pregnancy with twins had a big impact and she felt trapped in the marriage as soon as she learned the babies were on the way. She also voices the common concern of not wanting to fail at marriage and wanting to avoid the stigma of people knowing about the abuse. She mentions practical impediments as well, not knowing where to go without imposing on family or friends. She voices the complexity of leaving in the following passage:

It's not as easy as you think it is. It is not easy at all. I went back. You know.... my mom....I ran in the street and my mom picked me up, or my cousin picked me up, took me to my mom's. I went back the next day. Because you do get the "sorry's". I'm so sorry. I was just angry.

*Interviewer: So when you went back, those hopes and dreams that brought you into this relationship, those were still intact?*

No. Because, you know, because you are on pins and needles. When is he going to hit me again and you are trying so hard to do everything you can to please him.

*Interviewer: So what, what brought you to go back if it wasn't still your hopes?*

Well, the dreams you think the marriage is going to be, that's gone. You have a new 'Well, I'm going to try to make it work because I am married.' And sometimes even with church.... now that's a bad thing about some people at church, 'You know you need to be with your husband.' You know, 'You don't, you don't leave your husband.' (in a preachy tone of voice) A lot of Christian folk think that, you know, you're not supposed to leave you husband. The Bible says you're not supposed to divorce your husband. And they, and they shun up on that. You don't do that so you hear that all the time. But.... um.... I think I.... I just went back because I knew I.... you know, my mom's place, she already had enough, she had my oldest sister, her two children there with her. Um and I just knew my mom is a bit crowded. I didn't want to go to my best friend's house because she's got her own life. I don't want to be a burden to anybody. My youngest sister was at college, so I couldn't go with her. Live in the dorms with her. So I knew I had to go back home and try again and a lot of times you.... uh.... I know I did.... ask myself,

ok, what did I... what did I say. You know, what did I do wrong. And you're thinking about it constantly. Ok, what can I do. Ok, let me go ahead and fix dinner. Let me light some candles and try to be romantic, with two babies, uh... uh .....you know, you just thinking about.... ok, I said that wrong, I should have said it that way. So you constantly criticize yourself, you're critiquing yourself, what did I do wrong to make him hit me. It's not until you get out of it that you realize there's nothing that.... there's nothing you could have done, nothing you could have said.

Joy poignantly describes the emotional impact of trying to make the marriage work.

I couldn't tell my mom what was going on and she told me later, why didn't you tell me? You could have avoided all that. But I wanted it to work. I didn't want people to think I was a failure.....So you make up excuses. People ask you things you know....uh.... how things going? Oh! Things are great! Yeah, yeah. You know....la, la, la and we're happy, you know. And you're dying on the inside and you lose who you are. I lost....I don't even know who I was. I'm like who.... who am I? You know and it took me years to figure that out afterwards like, who am I? What do I want out of life? My goals. All my goals and things that I had before I met him, all those things were....uh.... just to the side. When you are in it, when you are just dead in the center of that mess....is all I can think of.... chaos and mess and a down ward spiral, uh, you do

feel like.... it's like you're hiding. You can't tell anybody. You do feel like you're the only one, you know and you hear about other people but you're in your stuff. You don't even think about ....

*Interviewer: You isolate.*

Yeah, you do, 'cause I couldn't tell anybody. You're embarrassed and woe is me, right? And....um.... afterward you ... because you ... if you're married or you have a partner for a long time and you've gone through this, it's like a... it's almost like a death because you're still in love with that person. You know you need to get out. You know it's not good, but you're in love with that person. Or you feel like or you thought you were in love with that person and you've been with them for over two to three years or more and it's like you start your life all over again and you pick up and where do I go? What do I do? To put the pieces together again, back into some kind of normal, whatever normal is, some kind of lifestyle and then you have the children. Um....now that piece, you do feel like you're a victim cause you're thrown into that single mother thing and lots of people, you know, look down.... you know, you're a single mother. Yeah. But I knew somewhere something has got to give. I just cannot do this, I just cannot.... I mean it's almost, yeah, you struggle with that because I want my marriage to work, I don't want to be a failure at that. Um and I....I think I did everything I could possibly do to keep him, to make him stay and then I was just like, I just don't want to be here. It was.... it was a struggle. It was bad because you

feel like I don't want people to look down on me. You think about what people are going to say. I got these kids by myself. You know I got a wedding ring on my finger. You know. Those little.... tiny.... little.... just that ring makes a difference, when people look at you and you got two children. You know what I mean? And then getting back out there in the dating scene or whatever and I'm like, oh, that's just going to be a joke! What man is going to want me with two children? (laughs) You know what I mean? But you ....you know, yeah.

Even though the responsibility of raising her two children added to her fear of leaving, they were sometimes the only thing that kept her going.

They [the twins] were the part what got me out of bed, too, cause there were days that I didn't.... I mean I was so depressed that I.... I.... remember asking God just take me from here. I don't want to be here. Just take me from here. Take me away. I just cannot deal with this and....they kept me going because I had to get out of bed. I had to get to my job. I had to keep the money coming in. I had to keep getting up.

Joy tears up after thinking about how much her love for her children kept her going through the darkest days.

When asked about a turning point, Joy is clear that her pastor provided the needed permission or insight for her to realize she could leave.

But I went to my pastor and because of him.... and because of.... because of his clear thinking, I guess.... or his wisdom, because he is older. Him and my mom, I think, are about the same age. He's going to

be seventy or something and my mom is almost seventy. Because of that, he said to me, and that was my turning point, when he said... (starts speaking very slowly and deliberately) you do not have to stay in the marriage. And he said, you read your bible clearly and I'm just telling you go home and read it for yourself. But it does not say that a man is to abuse his wife. You knew it says that a man is supposed to take care of his wife, to protect her and hitting her is not protecting her. You do not need to stay. You need to get out of there is what he told me.

Although Joy is careful to make it clear that she is not a "Bible totin' person", she identifies God as her primary resource as she heals from domestic violence.

By no means, I'm not just a Bible totin' person. I'm not a bible toter at all. 'Cause you know, you have people who tote their Bibles to church. I'm not like that at all. But I do love God.... I've grown closer to God. You stay with him because He can protect you..... When nobody else and no help [is] around, He will come. He will come and He will make it right. He will make it right. He will get you out of the situation. He will get you to a safe place so that.... yeah.... (runs out of words to express what she is feeling).

As she worked to put her life back in order, Joy used a variety of services that were helpful to her. Her pastor at church played a pivotal role in her recovery and she also made use of individual counseling through an EAP program at her job. She states that counseling was helpful because it was confidential and she did not have to worry

about being judged. Her assigned counselor turned out to be an African American man and she explains that, unlike many abused women, she appreciated having a male counselor because he helped her grasp that her husband's behavior was not typical of males. She also appreciated that counselors do not know you and do not tell you what to do.

I felt like these are strangers and I had....and I had.... that sold me on it. OK, this is a stranger. They don't know anything about me. They're not going to prejudge me. That helped a whole lot. And I go to them faster than I'll go to my pastor cause my pastor knows my whole history and he can say, didn't I tell you not to... you know what I mean? And my mom will... didn't I tell you not to do that... They [counselors] don't know me.....And that piece of it, thinking somebody might scold us or judge us....yes, that deters you from going. It's like, I'm not going. You know. Nah, I don't want anybody.... I already know what they're going to say. Right. Yeah, but the therapist sort of give you an out cause then you can talk to somebody. Your friends and your family probably get tired of you talking about the same thing. It's like OOOOH..... there she goes again. But the therapist, they don't really see you that often.

*Interviewer: Have you gotten that from friends?*

Sometimes. Sometimes I've gotten it. My younger sister was very vocal... uh... I don't know why you're with him. What are you doing? That kind of stuff. Just very down, you know. What are you thinking about? And I think one of my cousins was, like, you need to get out of



there. Just leave him alone. Now you're gone, don't worry about it, you know, and it's not that easy to just get out. You have to deal with all this stuff! Just encouragement! I don't want to hear all that. Yeah, therapy is really good 'cause they can sort of tell you, these are some things you can work on for yourself. Cause you're there for you. You're not there for the kids. You're not there for everybody else. You're just there to get yourself together.... put back together.

She used Victim's Assistance services, especially in the early days when advocates would go with her to court and help her through the legal process of a restraining order and custody arrangements. She also availed herself of the educational programs about domestic violence and she is able to insert statistics and facts about abuse into our conversations. Understanding the dynamics and pervasiveness of domestic violence helps Joy fully realize that she did not cause the violence in her marriage and that she was powerless to change it.

Joy returns again and again to express gratitude for her family and for other resources that helped.

I couldn't have done it [without my family] because I had, you know, I had somewhere safe to go. Laid my head at night. My kids, we had food. My mom was just excellent. Just always very supportive, very, you know.... My sister was good, too, because she would go to court with me and things like that and....um....Victim's Assistance. God, of course I couldn't do any of this without Him. So, all of that was very, very.... I always refer people to those sources, those resources.

Joy also talks about her new husband with incredulous gratitude: “He’s great. He’s wonderful. Absolutely wonderful.” Although she readily admits her marriage is not picture book perfect and that they hit rough spots now and then, over all, it is a deeply satisfying relationship for her. She sums it up simply:

At the end of the day, when everything else has been going on and it’s good and we’re resting and you look back and you say.... this is good.

*Interviewer: Yeah this is good. That’s a simple statement.*

It’s just good. Cause, like you say, cause God allows you to go through the bad and you have something to compare it to. If I had stayed I wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t have known it really can be good. It really can be peaceful and you have hope and you have a partner and a friend and all that.

*Interviewer: The way it is supposed to be.*

Yeah, the way it is supposed to be.

As she starts to express her gratitude for God, she amplifies her response to include her understanding of a purpose for the suffering she has been through.

I am so thankful to God. I can thank Him for all the things that He took me through, for all the things the Devil thought he took from me. I know God was standing by my side the whole time and I wouldn’t be here without Him. I wouldn’t. None of this could happen without Him.

Um.... and then I think God allows you to go through things so I am really strong in my belief with God, you know, and we are still growing, you know, I am still growing. There are things that all of us need to work

on. I am not as close as I want to be. But I am much closer than I was.....I think God always puts people through things. He put me through that so I can help somebody else. Because somebody else needs to be helped. Uh.... and over the years I find myself talking to people or they, for some reason, they confide in you or talk to you, you know, you meet people. I'm a very outgoing, friendly person so I can tell my story to somebody and they can say, you know what, I did that same thing or my sister went through that or my mom went through that. This is how I felt, cause I was the child on the other side when my mom was abused and I saw that. I know how that feels and I was being abused. I know how that feels and I am out of it now and I know how that feels.

Despite all the happiness and stability that Joy has attained in the past years, she still strives to grow and achieve and push herself in every area of life. She managed to finish a college degree as a single, working mother of two small children and now she aspires to continue her education and growth even further. She mentions a goal to get further education and then speaks about a specific way she would like to help children who are struggling by helping the homeless men who are their fathers.

Oh, yeah, always trying to [grow]. I feel like you can always be educated. Every class you can take that's free, I'm taking it, you know. I am just taking advantage of what they give. If it is free, why not. So I think the goal I have in mind is just to sort of see what my degree that I have now will take me. That's my business administration degree. I

really did not want to do anything with business. I really had no desire. I just wanted to get that paper. I just want to do something. I want to accomplish something. I'm going to finish school. And.... uh.... of course, I couldn't do that with kids and a husband and all that but that was one of my goals so I've done that, so that feels good. But I want to go back and I've always wanted my degree.... uh..... or my Masters in Library Science but now libraries are closing (laughs) so it might not be a good idea. Um.... um.... let me see.... uh..... the other things. That's educational. Um.... I will always have a desire to help homeless and domestic violence victims and because of that almost homeless thing and working at the library fifteen years, I've met a lot of homeless people and they're very, some of them are very intelligent people. And they just need that help I was saying, just need that one haircut or bath or some clean clothes and.... uh.... a job interview and I think that will just, you know, so that's one thing I have this goal. I've always had this vision in my mind, I don't like to call it a vision. A dream in my mind, it's a reoccurring dream to have, have a nonprofit organization helping homeless men, and it's homeless men, not women (laughs), helping homeless men get off the street and, in turn, that if they get off the street, get themselves a job, find a place to live and start that growth, they can always go back and help that child and pay that child support and give that son, that daughter and go back and rekindle that relationship because I just believe there are a lot of homeless people that have children out

there that need their help. Or you know, you just don't know what kind of life they're having without their father or their mother who live on the street.

She relates her passion to help the homeless to her realization that she and her two babies would have been homeless if her family has not been able to take her in. When she left her first husband, they were facing eviction from their apartment and she had no way to make it on her own at that particular time.

That is why I have so much compassion for homeless people because if I didn't have my mother, if I didn't have that support system that you were talking about, I would have been homeless with my kids. So I have a lot of compassion for people who have no support system and it is very, very hard when you don't have a support system.

In summation, Joy paints a stark picture of the difference between who she was before abuse and who she is now. She knew her present husband in high school but when their lives crossed again after her divorce, she warns him frequently not to assume she is still the same person he knew before.

Whatever you had, whoever you were, you're not the same person.

You're a totally different person. Yeah, I had to tell my husband that too.

I'm different from what you know. I'm not the same person you knew in high school. I'm not the person you knew after high school. I am....totally different.

*Interviewer: So how would you describe that difference?*

Uuuuhhh... You have more confidence. You have more.... uh.... you are more aware of what you want in life. And the things and dreams and goals and aspirations you had before you were married to this person or had to go through this, you know, you sort of reflect, what did I do, what did I want to do and that's the reason I went back to school when the kids got a certain age. I said, well, now I can go and I can leave them with my husband or my mom, in Pampers, you know what I mean. They're self sufficient. They can go and get something to eat if they want. I mean I'm not so worried about them being taken care of.

*Interviewer: You felt freer.*

Freer. A support system. Right. I was freer to do what I had to do. And he said, go for it. Go to school and so you have that support. You're free to do those things that you wanted to do before this person came in and just crushed everything, just took everything from you. You want to get those things back. Not things back.... but you want to get your self back. You know, you want to find out, who am I? And I had to go through a lot of therapy for that. You know, who am I? What am I about? Am I a whore? Am I gay? Am I....You know. Those things you question. Things that he said about you, you wonder.... am I really? You wonder and you question, you know, you ask your friends, am I really that way? You know, you ask people who know you well and I'm like Noooo! and that sort of gives you that, ok, I am ok. I am a good person. I can do this

by myself regardless.....I'm who I am because of all the things that have happened to me.

### **Faith's Story**

“If I perish, I perish.”

“There's got to be hope.....there's got to be....yeah.”

“I get up every morning, turn my eyes towards Him and I walk.”

Faith calls me on the day of the first interview to alert me that she is running late. Family issues have come up and she lost track of time. When she arrives at our designated meeting place, she wheels quickly in the parking lot, charges up the stairs and brings a small tornado of energy into the space as we greet each other and get settled in to talk. She is short, casually dressed, wears her hair, streaked with a little gray, pulled back into a long braid. Her face is wide open with expression, matching her energy, and she talks and laughs with joyful ease. She invites the interviewer to interrupt her at any time as she owns that she has the ability to talk and talk and talk. Her intellectual curiosity and desire to learn and understand shows through in the way that her personal narrative is always interwoven with self-reflection and her evolving reflections on abuse and healing.

Faith is 55, an only child, previously married but has no children. She is, however, closely connected to family members and has a natural extroversion that translates into a busy and full life. She is college educated, works for county government, and is working towards pursuing a Masters in Counseling in order to impact the field of domestic violence. She is a recovering drug addict as well as a survivor of domestic violence and uses her inquisitive mind to look at similarities between recovery from addiction and recovery from domestic violence.

Faith's early life is marked by her mother's death from cancer when Faith was away at boarding school. Her mother's untimely illness and death intensified her connection to her father, but she clearly remembers being a "daddy's girl" from the start. She sees her father as being shaped by his time in the military and continues to process the effect of his military and critical bearing as she was growing up.

I was a daddy's girl, I mean as a kid I...people said I walked like him, tried to talk like him. I looked like him and the very first time someone said I looked like my mother, I remember my first feeling was, no, I don't. I look like my daddy. And I thought that was awful, you know. Your mother is a nice person and she's pretty and de de de, you know. I had the self talk. But my first reaction was no, I don't. I look like my daddy. So I was a daddy's girl and that's why I think the criticism would hurt so much because.... and I actually asked him one time, I said why.... you don't, you don't give me praise. Why don't you tell me about the stuff I do well? And he said because you've already got that down. I point out to you the things you need to improve on. Now, what I didn't recognize until I got older, he didn't say I point out the things you did WRONG. What he said was I point out to you the things you need to improve on. So even in that, it wasn't saying, you know, you're....you're either right or wrong. It's like, you're right and here's the stuff that's not quite as right. But as a child, I didn't hear it that way.

*Interviewer: You heard he wasn't 100 percent satisfied.*



And I think that colored a lot of how I grew up, etc., and learning to trust that... that I was loved, that God did love me and that there was some assets and things.

Although Faith protests that she realizes her father had good intentions, she returns again and again to the theme of her father's criticism and her own lack of self-confidence.

Faith was just thirteen years old and had just gone away to a boarding school when her mother died. Her parents decided on boarding school to give her a different and stable environment during her mother's dying process. Her stories about this time reveal a softer side of her father and the deep introspection that she had from a young age.

It must have been '68 and I turned 14 that August and went to boarding school and she died that October so during that period...um.... when she was in the hospital and we were going to see her everyday and things like that. And I know I look back and it had to be rough.... um.... so.... um.... and it's weird because at the, time what I remember the most out of that was feeling bad because when I would go to the hospital.... I was 13.... what did I have to talk about for hours to my mother? And I remember saying that to my dad, that I felt that I didn't get to stay in there and have, you know, these conversations, these long conversations and how he would stay in there and talk to her and stuff and he actually said, I think that's Ok. I think she understands, 'cause you do come in and you do talk to her, so I think she understands that and that's ok.

Faith elaborates more about losing her mother to cancer.

At the time I lost my mom.... my dad and I talked about this.... I remember two prayers, two feelings that I went through, that I honestly, really, really thank God. I look and I say it had to have been a God thing that I didn't get stuck in these two particular feelings. One was that I felt guilty for not having spent more time with her because I was a daddy's girl, you know, and I thought, God, I wonder did she feel left out? Did I not spend enough time? Did I not appreciate her the way....? I think everybody knew, all my family, both sides of the family, all the friends and relatives, that's a daddy' girl, you know.... um. And then.... but I thought I wonder how she felt and also with my.... um.... the other piece was.... um.... feeling robbed that, ok, I'm 14. I've just, you know, getting the puberty and in my mind, this is the time that girls got closer to their mothers. I didn't know if that was true or not but, and all of a sudden she was gone. I could have got stuck. I realize I could have got stuck in either one of those two and really had a hard time, but I never did and my father says that I told him on the way home, cause he came to pick me up at boarding school when it happened. He, he said, on the way home, I talked about that and I told him that I didn't want to waste.... something like I didn't want to waste her memory on those kinds of feelings or something like that, that I wanted to, I don't know.... I don't even know what I said, but he said, he said that he was sitting there and I said.... I don't remember saying... and he said, oh yeah, he

said he was sitting there driving and wow! This is my daughter and I'm supposed to be the one helping her and look at the wisdom she is giving me.

Although Faith downplays the impact of her mother's death, she describes a period of time a few years later that she experienced depression and felt little desire to live. Her depression seems hard for her to understand as she recalls excelling in college and traveling overseas and having a lot of positive experiences. However, she keeps coming back to her general philosophy that "I'm going to screw up life and I just got to the point like .... no matter what I do, there's going to be something wrong with it." The philosophy runs deep for her and brings her to the point of suicidal despair.

I didn't have clinical anxiety but I never felt good enough. I always felt there was something wrong. If someone even voiced a different opinion than mine, I thought, oh, God, there's something wrong with mine! Now I got to.... There's something wrong with my thinking because I didn't think it the way they did. I've got to change something about the way I think it. Oh, I'm all screwed up because I always do this. I'm always wrong. I'm always different. That kind of thinking, I got to the point where I .... I mean I didn't even want kids because I thought.... um.... that I would screw them up some kind of way and I remember thinking I don't want to be responsible for screwing up somebody's life ....and I just didn't want to face that. I didn't want to face that idea of no matter

what I do, there's going to be something wrong..... But I just didn't want to be here. I just didn't want to face life that way.....

Faith's worry that suicide is an unforgiveable sin is the only thing that keeps her going in her lowest moments.

As Faith looks back on her relationships with men, she realizes that she was subjected to abuse in earlier relationships but did not recognize it as such. She goes on to talk about the recent relationship that brought domestic violence to the center of her life.

The one that actually brought me to understand [domestic violence] was approximately four years ago and.... um.... I met a guy that, I'm on a choir. I met a guy that had just recently joined the choir and we were both talking about substance abuse recovery. ....But.... um.... we were on the choir together and I mean he was charming, you know, very attractive. At least I thought he was attractive and had a very touching story. Um.... but I started noticing, you know, we started dating, and I started noticing what I thought were kind of exaggerated reactions to things or they were reactions that I just didn't understand. Um, you know, why is it so intense?

Faith's first experience with the physical aspects of her partner's violence came early in the relationship. She describes arguments where her boyfriend Sammy would become enraged and would intimidate her physically, threatening to punch her in the face. She would lose her bearings in the argument and remembers thinking "there is something wrong with this picture and I can't figure

it out.” Despite her misgivings, Sammy gradually encroaches on her life until he is living with her.

Faith describes the first small turning point in her journey as she stumbles across a domestic violence website on the computer.

I had started, I had gone online at work to look up something and I ran across the Women’s Commission....and, for whatever reason, which I attribute to a god, to my God, was the screen that I pulled up was where they asked if you were in an abusive relationship and they have like maybe ten questions maybe, on the front, you know, and it was.... if you answer yes to any of these questions you might be in an abusive relationship. And maybe you would want to call this number. So I actually called and said, I think I might be in that..... and again I was again blessed in this way, because my work was in the same building that the women’s commission is so that the classes that they give were in the same building. So basically, all I had to say was I had a class from work that I have to stay for, so I got to participate in those classes and it’s a 12 week course, I think, where they basically.... it’s like DV 101 for victims and they tell you about the safety plan and those types of things.

Not long after this discovery, Faith endures the first terrifying incidence of physical violence.

So anyway he.... um.... one morning, it was breakfast, so I asked him what he wanted. He said the regular, so, ok, which regular? So I went to

clarify it and he got mad because he was like, you know, what am I talking about. You're just trying to make me feel stupid and dededede and all of this kind of stuff so.... um ....it kind of got the argument.....

Oh, I know what it was. He came into the kitchen and I can't remember what and it just escalated and he threw a cup of orange juice on me and, at that point, I thought, ok, I know what to do about this. This is assault so I went to call and dialed the number and he said something about if you're calling the police and I went no, I'll call them later, right? And I always told myself I shouldn't have said that, not because I shouldn't have said it because I didn't have permission. I shouldn't have said it to alert him. Knowing now I shouldn't have said that and he said you're going to call them later and he grabbed me.... um.... pulled me into another room and he didn't slam me to the ground but I ended up on the floor and he got on top of me with his knees and I remember him bouncing and I remember the thought going through.... oh, my God, he'll break my ribs and he's, you know, heavier than me and I think he had his hands around my throat and that part I honestly don't remember because I was thinking about my ribs. And he picked me up by.... I think he picked me up by the neck and he pulled me into the bedroom and he didn't like, there wasn't slapping and stuff. He just, he put me down, pushed me down or whatever on the bed and was.... um.... like trying to hold my arms down like and stuff and the next thing I know there was a pillow over my head and he was actually trying to smother me. That was

probably the most terrifying.... you know, because he.... I remember praying and I remember him saying things. I actually remember him saying, I said, oh god, oh god, whatever and he said something to the effect of yeah, pray, bitch, you know something like that, something along that line, you know, of what about your praying self now! Something along that line and he's.... um.... a diabetic and I again, I believe it was God that pulled me out of it, and from a scientific standpoint, I think he ran out of energy. He literally ran out of energy and was not strong enough to keep the pillow down and I was always able to get a little bit of an air hole but.... um.... I mean he was actually pushing down you know and trying to um... so I got out from up under it. Well, the police came out anyway, you know cause I didn't, I didn't realize that once I called them back and said don't.... I'll call your back later or something along those lines, they came out anyway. The sad part about that was this set a precedent for the next year. He answered the door and I could hear them because my bathroom is, it's really weird because my bathroom is where you can hear everything at the door and I heard him among other things say that I was abusing him.

The police talk to both of them and then, confused about the situation, just caution them to "calm things down." Faith feels a sense of disbelief that they couldn't read her plight more accurately and that they were going to leave without addressing her concerns for safety. Not knowing what else to do, Faith goes with her partner to choir rehearsal afterwards and dutifully tells lies to hide the situation.

When I went to....we did go to choir rehearsal.... and when I went to choir rehearsal people kept saying to me.... um.... a couple of times.... they said to me gee what happened to you? You look like you been in a fight or something.... and I just said, oh, playing with the dog, playing with the dog. But I realized had the police looked at me they would have seen something, you know.

After the incident with the pillow, the raging behavior and physical intimidation continue. Faith begins to try to formulate a plan for getting out safely. At first her dogs present an obstacle and then her abuser wrecks the engine in her car.

So then I had no transportation. So then it was how do I get out of here now. I can't take the dogs on the bus, I'm not going to.... to leave the dogs here with him. He had not ever tried to do anything to the dogs but I wasn't comfortable with the thought of if I leave..... And it wasn't just the idea of getting my dogs out, you know. How do I get my dogs out with no car? The thought that kept running through my mind was, yeah, I can see me trying to leave on the bus and I got to wait on the bus, he knows where the bus stop is and that was my thoughts. Yeah, I could see me trying to trying to leave and he comes in ...

*Interviewer: Like that is ridiculous.*

Yeah, so I.... um.... I ended up staying for basically a year with the whole idea in mind of trying to survive until I could figure out some kind



of way to get out, you know, and trying to stay as safe as possible, trying to avoid as much physical injury as possible.

During the year that Faith waits for the opportunity to leave, she intensifies her spiritual journey and forms a deeper understanding of the Biblical story of Ester that speaks to her about her own situation.

Oddly enough, that was when I intensified....um.... the Bible study. I made it a major effort to go to Bible study. One reason was because, in his own mind, he couldn't stop me from going to Bible study. He couldn't stop me from going to the recovery meetings, right, um and I started doing more reading on my own, more, more just trying to study, you know and that's when I found Ester (laughs) and.... um.... just trying to, trying to buy into that.... and feel that and for some reason that's where I think somewhere along the line, maybe it was a message that said this is going to be you when you come out of this. This experience is going to be.... you're going to use this experience to help others, you know, and that's why I say I couldn't have gotten out of it without faith in God because what I finally did get to was that point of.... I just had a friend of mine, a friend of mine said this to me a long time ago. She didn't mean it literally and at the same time she did. Hers.... the situation she was in.... there had been some abuse but that was not what she was talking about. She was not with the guy but she was so emotionally tied to him, she said that.... um.... and it was just a toxic relationship. She said you have to be willing to die to get out of it and

those words kept resonating and when I finally got to the end and had studied and had finally come to an understanding of my own.... of the mythology of Ester and the Hebrew boys. The stories you hear when you're a kid growing up and the preachers preach about all the time and it's all about.... oh.... how God steps in and delivers but what I finally got out of it was.... they were willing to die and I got to..... I know I might die but I got to do this anyway.

*Interviewer: Regardless of how it would turn out.*

Yeah, and they trusted that even if they did die, you know, that that was.... it was ok, you know. Um.... it didn't shake their faith, you know, they wanted to believe that they probably would come out of it. They knew God had the power to bring them out of it, maybe that was it, they knew, they trusted he had the power but as to whether or not he chose to, for whatever reason, that was, that was not going to shake their faith and they trusted God's judgment. ....I remember when I finally, you know, kind of put everything together and got.... got things all lined up. Um.... that was the thought. I was a little scared because I know the potential. But you know, I just kept thinking to myself what Ester said. If I perish, I perish. I've got to do this thing and.... I always say that Ester is my hero. Um.... and I had read that story and I had really.... I mean I had read it before but, you know, sometimes things hit you when you're in the situation

Faith underlines how much her spiritual beliefs contributed to her healing.

And you know, I don't know how people who don't have a.... some sort of spiritual connection make it through, cause if it hadn't been for that, I couldn't have.... I mean I could not have made it through. Um and I really don't know what they do. I.... I..... I can't even imagine and I don't know and I don't mean a specific religion but something spiritual to hold on to because when there was a fear of.... Um.... fear of dying, fear of I could die in this, but there was also this thought about, yeah, but everything you've read says He'll bring you through it too.....And that was where I had to get to.

Although Faith does not dwell much on the impediments to her escape, she holds as primary the logistical hurdles of having two dogs, no transportation and the difficulty of finding outside support without her abuser's knowledge.

Trying to figure out, ok, what do I do? How do I get out with my dogs? I don't have transportation, you know, and all of those kind of things and then trying to tap into my church and being told there is only one person that can talk to you and they're not here and they are only available after 6 o'clock.

As she ruminates on how she could have gotten into the situation, she touches on some of the internal elements that make leaving difficult.

There's still this piece.... how could somebody do that? How.... how....could somebody do that and how could I have let it? What happened in that one span that I don't know how it got from being aware

and kind of, you know, aware of the signs and kind of looking for them and being in it?

*Interviewer: And not being able to get out.*

Yeah and I don't.... I don't know where that....when I look back, I don't know what happened. I don't know where....

*Interviewer: You can't make sense of it.*

How I slipped in... I just don't know. And I am sure there are a lot of other people like that. That's where some of the shame comes from. That's where a lot of the guilt comes from. That's the part that makes it hard to talk to anybody to get help because you're blaming yourself for how did I let myself get here, you know, and you can't figure it out. So all of that gets together and it makes it hard to ask for help. Um.... there's the fear factor, it is still a biggie and I don't think people really understand the level of fear. Because it's a.... you know.... it's a.... it's an incredible fear.

*Interviewer: And it was safer to stay than to risk going.*

Yeah.

As Faith has told her story, she has highlighted that the elements that helped her get out are the same elements that were a big part of her healing. In particular, she underlines her faith and the changing cognitions about the abuse and about the necessity for her to get out even if it means death. However, as she returns her focus just to the healing process, she comes back again and again to the twelve step process that had helped her kick addiction years ago. Given the centrality of faith in her life, it is

important to her that she find the parallels between the Twelve Steps and Biblical teachings.

That process.... I am a strong believer of the Twelve Step process. Not particularly of any group, so to speak, but that process itself because, one, it is so.... I find that same process in the Bible, but I didn't know it was there. I couldn't see it. It was too...I just couldn't see it. But the original Twelve Steps, if I'm not mistaken, actually, they came out of.... they were.... they were drawn from, I think it was, the Corinthians, where they have all those things.... love is various things. Someone told me.... James and the Sermon on the Mount and that verse out of Corinthians.... that, that is all.... they kind of.... that's where that came from. Um.... but, I mean, if you look Biblically, they always talk about surrendering, you know, you got to surrender. Die to self, you know. Um.... let God lead. And it's always about service, you know. Jesus.... to be a.... um.... he talked about being a servant.... serving. The way he led was by serving and how it was always about trying to help others and understanding and that's basically what the Twelve Steps do, you know.....And there's that one that talks about admitting you are powerless or whatever.... um.... and that your life is unmanageable. Well, in order to do that, you got to get honest. You got to finally recognize you don't have power.... where you don't have power. And that how constantly you're trying to control and seek power, it's making

everything else unmanageable. If you get there, what do you do? You kind of go, ok, I give up. You surrender and you accept.

Although Faith does not specifically identify literature and poetry as resources for healing, she frequently cites a favorite story or poem to illustrate the restructuring of her thought processes that aided her healing. For example, a pivotal experience for her came when she encountered a meaningful story and poem.

Someone gave me one of those calendars, Chicken Soup for the Soul, and in that calendar was this one little story about this.... they called her Angela the Angel and she had this perfect life. A husband, two kids, well liked by the community, a part of her church, on every.... everybody, if they needed anything or needed help or wanted someone that they could just depend on, they always called on Angela. And everyone gave her these accolades for being this wonderfully sweet person. And it said one morning she woke up and said, God, please let me die because she was so unhappy. And even though it didn't say why, I felt that I understood where she was. And it said she got an answer that basically changed the course of her life. And the answer was "no" and she said she realized that she had to learn how to say "no." And it ended with this poem and I memorized the poem because it gave me.... I've always had a problem saying no in that.... remember I said that other people's needs were bigger than mine. If you had a opinion, yours must be the right one. Any of that stuff. ....Well, this little poem says, she learned "No, I just don't

want to. No, I disagree. No, that's yours to handle. No, that's wrong for me. No, I wanted something else. No, that hurt a lot. No, I'm busy. No, I'm tired. No, I'd rather not!"

*Interviewer: Wow!*

And I kind of went – that's what I said. It was WOW! It was OK! And I memorized it because even though, still, I know "no" is a complete sentence and I don't have to explain, but sometimes it helps being able to give myself a reason. But all of those reasons are .....ME and they're legitimate and I was like WOW and MMMMMH! I get emotional with that! (tears well up)

Another poem describes the centrality of her faith as she heals from domestic violence.

Last night I was talking to someone and I told her about another poem called.... um.... um.... Still He Walked. It was an email poem I got. Um.... it's a beautiful poem. It's amazing. I can't quote that one but basically it's things like.... It's about, about the crucifixion and saying Jesus could have, He could have.... um.... hated the people who put Him there. But He loved them and for them, He walked. And, you know, it keeps going down and one part says that God could have taken His son down, but because He loved us, He let Him....He let His son walk. And at the end of it, it says something to the effect of.... when I am feeling all that negative stuff (laughs), it says words but I just say negative stuff, it says to show Him that I love Him, I turn my eyes toward Him.... no.... I

wake up every morning and I turn my eyes towards Him and I walk. And sometimes when it's those days when I really just wish that I wasn't here.... and I used to think.... for about seventeen years, I constantly wanted to not be here. I didn't want to commit suicide I just didn't want to live. Um.....even just thinking of it sometimes was an escape, you know. If I could just not be here, I wouldn't have to deal with all the things that are painful or whatever. Um.... and now when that happens or I wonder why am I here, you know, you go through those "what is my purpose in life" kind of things and you feel bad because you can't find one at that moment. Or things aren't going in that direction or the economy is depressing you or.... and that has a depressing effect too.... and I look at that last piece of that poem says.... you know.... the reason to show Him, if nothing else.... to show Him that I love Him, I get up every morning, turn my eyes toward Him and I walk.

During her experiences of abuse, Faith comes to a new awareness of purpose for her life and realizes how much the sense of purpose has helped her heal.

I remember thinking that somehow or other God is going to pull me out of this and it's going to be a purpose for me later. That this experience is going to be.... whether it's ministry, some kind of ministry or advocacy, some kind of way.... this experience is going to be used to help other people..... It was, it was kind of that I got the... that feeling inside that said.... the only thing it said was, you're going to come out of this and



it's not going to be just for you. It's.... something is going to come of this, whether it's a ministry, whether it's.... something is going to come of this to where you can help other people in some of the same situations..... Helping others, I mean if I can help somebody as far as domestic violence, as far as giving them encouragement.... um.... that's one thing. For me, right now, the healing piece is the trying to make the service delivery piece better and trying to get the faith community to step up because people need it.

In particular, Faith strives to impact the faith community around issues of domestic violence. She believes churches could step up on all levels: prevention, education, and outreach services. She cites a statistic that “over 80 percent of the women had never heard a sermon about domestic violence preached from the pulpit. Never.” Another statistic she found indicates that only 8% of pastors feel qualified to deal with domestic violence. The importance of increasing this number is demonstrated by research that shows that perpetrators of domestic violence are more compliant with treatment when pastors encourage them to get help. Faith concludes, “So, it's like, there's power in that institution and I think that's why I...I...I go so much towards the faith community.”

Faith has many thoughts about the intersection of race and domestic violence and the way that services might better serve African American women. Although she first downplays the impact of race on her experiences as a victim of domestic violence, she segues into racial stereotypes and the ways that they impact victims.

*Interviewer: Have you noticed anything, have you seen some racial things that need to be addressed?*

Not so much that I've noticed. I didn't notice the racial aspect as much as the just... general idea of domestic violence period. It's like.... um.... I think the perception a lot of times is that it happens in nonwhite communities more often but I didn't feel that when I was going through any of the process. ....What it appears that the service providers that they seem to be more predominately white and I don't know if that can be a deterrent and I think that is one of the reasons I would like to see the faith community step up into it more because most of the services, they may have a paid component. But a large, large amount of the services that are offered are volunteer services, you know, volunteers do them. So that, again, opens the door to the faith community that is going to be more culturally sensitive. I do think that um.... um.... it's.... I don't know that it's.... I don't see the race necessarily from the service providers.... except the police department is kind of hard to say. Yeah, it's kind of hard to say with them. I'm not as confident of them but the rest of the services would be white and in this area there are not many of them. ....And the, you know, you got to understand.... um.... that sometimes we have to go at it from a different angle and in the African American community.... just mainly a distrust of the system, a distrust particularly of the judicial system and then the.... Again, I think the biggest piece being the police department. Just not having a lot of

confidence in their ability to.... uh.... be objective when particularly with race because you could almost assume, ok, if I am going into a predominantly African American neighborhood, that is low on the socioeconomic level, that I'm probably.... this probably happens all the time.... and I'm probably going to see this. And they may not take it as seriously and instead of taking one person away like they're supposed to, they'll just kind of look at it and as long as the two people aren't fighting right then and they can break 'em up, they'll just say ya'll behave. And if you need to, call us back and that kind of thing. Um.... what I do see, possibly, more than the race issue is.... um.... race or cultural issue, is when people keep going back and they keep calling the police or tapping into those services over and over, those services get to where they.... it's like the boy who cried wolf, they just don't believe them any more.

*Interviewer: They get fed up.*

They get fed up. And that is really sad for the next person who really does need it and it may be their second time and it's not their tenth or eleventh time. But it makes, it desensitizes the police department.

*Interviewer: They think she's going to go back anyways.*

And I said that the sheriff actually said that to me. They came and served the restraining order and got him out of the house and served the restraining order, the sheriff or the deputy actually said, oh, he'll be back. You'll let him back in. He actually said that. Right there that day to me. He said, you know, cause he, they've seen it so much. But that

doesn't help. That doesn't help and um if there were more.... um.... for lack of a better word, agencies delivering services that might not be as much of a problem.

*Interviewer: Right. Get more community based services.*

More community based and, also, too, because since so much of it has to do with self esteem.... that self esteem building, that confidence building, that value building, that can't come from the police department. The legal services and the.... um.... emergency housing services can't really feed that piece that allows you to get enough courage or whatever else it takes to be able to say, ok, I don't.... I deserve better and I don't have to deal with this anymore, you know. Um.... and that there is nothing wrong with me for not wanting to deal with this anymore. That s got to come from other areas and....um.... counselors are good and that's great, but how many counselors can [the nonprofit agency] and the women's commission give? Somewhere it's gotta come from, either somebody's gotta do volunteer work, you know. Um....um.... independent counselors, they gotta get paid, you know, so somebody, you know, how many independent counselors are people that's their business or independently wealthy where they can just give their services just for the, you know, but that's what churches do, that's what faith communities do, um....

*Interviewer: So you're seeing it like getting churches involved with having volunteers, maybe even paraprofessionals or volunteers to provide support.*

Support and even if it's not counseling, even if it's not as much as the group thing, that would be the ultimate to get them to where they had groups and things that could meet and they wouldn't necessarily have to be called domestic violence survivors. But things that would, you know, that was the group it was catering to. So the group exercises, etc., and the talks, you know, that that kind of expression could come out and could feed that and at the same time making the faith communities finding some kind of way to get them to tap into some of those emergency services. Um.... it's asking a lot to ask someone to provide a safe house. But they need more of them.... um.... they need more shelters. They need more.... they need transportation, they need some kind of way to get the services to the people as opposed to the people having to come to the services all the time because sometimes they can't come.

Despite Faith's conclusions that she didn't experience racism from service providers other than the police, her musings on her own personal life point to the primacy of race and her awareness that her upbringing and life experiences are not typical.

*Interviewer: Have you been influenced at all by political events or cultural changes over your life in terms of this journey you're on?*

MMMMM Possibly I guess being African American that is always there. The quote unquote race card is always there but.... um.... as far as that

influencing my journey, not really.... um in some ways, as a kid, cause there was a lot of things that my parents.... a lot of the opportunities.... I shouldn't say a lot..... the opportunities that they put me in a lot of times, I was the only black in a situation or one of two in a situation, but that was as far as it went. That I was the only one or one of two, I didn't get a lot of negativity out of that. It didn't matter, you know...

*Interviewer: Even though you were different.*

Yeah, I was different. I was the.... I would recognize, gee, I'm the only black in the class or something like that, but nobody treated me differently.....I don't know why..... but I guess I was blessed to the point of not having to run into the really negative racism. The only times it really came up was when the two little girls at two different times asked me why are you black? (laughs) I was probably about maybe.... seven or eight and the little girl was probably five or six. It was one I would see when I would go to the bowling alley, right? And she asked me why was I black. I remember.... I don't remember what I told her, but it was something like, oh, I was born that way or because my dad.... or something like that and she was like, ok, and we kept playing (laughs).

Given her interest in pursuing a counseling degree, Faith demonstrates awareness of current trends in counseling and how they may impact the experience of African American victims of domestic violence.

Um I honestly speaking across the board for domestic violence, I think it's going to take this new buzz word everyone has .... diversity. You know, you hear it in the work place, diversity. You know, recognizing and appreciating diversity. I think it's going to take that for all people because you got a lot of African Americans that are into counseling and an African American could get an African American counselor if they chose to. A white victim could get a white counselor if they chose to. What about the Mexicans and the Japanese and the Vietnamese and the....you know and it's like because there is domestic violence in the Hispanic culture.... the Hispanic culture is very prevalent and the cultural aspect of.... of.... cause that was brought to our attention... when you ask a.... a Hispanic person, let's say a Mexican person, to leave that bad person, to leave their perpetrator, the whole cultural part of that is so huge. It's more than you're leaving this bad person. No, I'm leaving my whole ... this goes against everything. For the families. So be it recognizing that and, and again I think the identification is the biggie cause that saying what comes from the heart, reaches the heart cause when the people are sincere.... first of all when someone is looking for help, I think they are going to be more open. That surrender prayer says I'll do whatever I have to. Cause when the empathy thing comes out.... because I'll tell you honestly, the first person I spoke to was African American and that part, I mean, in a way that made me a little more comfortable at first but at the same....as soon as she started talking, I

became uncomfortable, not because she was African American, but because I felt there was this piece of....feeling like I wasn't understood or that I was being.... I felt judged..... even though she wasn't really saying too much. She was kind of like.... the idea of letting you know you don't have to go through this and you know, some of the basics and then saying well you probably need to do a plan and this and what the plan entailed about getting people..... letting this person..... having a , a , a contact person and all these different things and looking at the plan and saying I don't know any of those people and feeling like ok there is something wrong with me, you know.

*Interviewer: She shoved too much on you too quickly.*

And I don't even know if she did intentionally. She was trying to.... and I even said something to the effect of this sounds like I gotta do this and she said, ok, no, let me, let me let you understand. I'm not trying to say you should leave. What I understand is the victim's have the best idea of what's safe so understand that I'm just here to support you and help you understand your options but even that.... but I'm saying at first it felt like, ok, here's somebody telling me what I need to do and in my mind I'm already thinking I need to do this but I don't know how and then you're telling me and I'm looking and I can't do this stuff and you must not really understand and all that stuff of feeling there must be something wrong with me again and all of that. And so it didn't even have to do with her being black . It had to do with .... a way of presenting it that I



think with domestic violence, you have to tread so carefully because our egos are so hypersensitive that even the least little thing. So if you go to tell somebody, honey, it's ok, that first little touch might feel like what did I do wrong and it's like no, no, no, no, no. no! So it puts the counselors on the ... they probably feel like they're walking on egg shells and to be honest, at the very beginning, they probably need to walk on egg shells, you know. And that's hard.

*Interviewer: Well, I guess I am hearing.... that the emphasis has to be 100 percent on understanding and being curious rather than jumping to any conclusions or getting any tiny step ahead of the abused. Is that what you were saying? Just being there.*

Yeah, in the moment. Meet them where they are in the moment and I guess any kind of therapy for domestic violence .... that person centered one, where they kind of lead the... that probably is the best approach at the beginning until... building that rapport is extremely important and I think that actually reaches across racial lines so I don't think it.... I don't think it actually is... and I think women period because they've got that bond of women, you know, that kind of transcends race a lot of times, particularly when it has to do with feelings and all of a sudden I hear somebody saying.... They're expressing something and even if the situation is different, I hear them say the words that I've been thinking or the way they're expressing, I can feel the feeling. That crosses all of cultural and, you know, bonds and stuff.... um.... um.... and that I have

a tendency to be an idealist and that could be an idealistic view, but from what I've seen, it's not as much about race with what comes with domestic violence. You are scared to death or you're so mad, you can't.... you know some people are scared, absolutely scared to death. The others are mad at the same time, but bottom line is you are just at this point where somebody's got to help me, you know, I don't care who you are. If you will help me, I will listen, that kind of thing.

Faith is asked to describe aspects of African American culture that domestic violence service providers would need to know about. She immediately talks about family and the concept of fictive kin.

Family.... Family.... family bonds are very important um and what they call, and you know cause I have to think of what I've learned.... some things describe.... oh, that's what you call it.... ok.... the fictive kin. They call it the fictive kinships. For instance, I may have.... my godmother, for instance, thank God, I can label it because for me that gave it....say, she was just a friend of the family, it was bigger than that.....There is .... so some class I took, they were talking about some of the cultures and I think that's just a good idea for anybody who's going to work with um diverse populations, take some diversity courses.

As she talks about family and fictive kin, she diverges to talk about the tension that sometimes exists among African American women.

You know blood related, yeah, that's, that's a biggie in the African American culture. As far as women to women, that's tricky. That can be

very tricky. Um (long pause) Women to women, yes. But there is a, I guess, a territorial nature to women outside the clique or women outside the..... when men get into the middle of the picture, it can change the dynamics of that women to women dramatically. It becomes a ... sometimes it's great that there's still that sisterhood. Other times, it's I don't trust any of the women because they are after the man. Or maybe the man is not that faithful so I don't trust any of them because he might.... you know....even if they don't. So it can get tricky and how much that changes with age, I don't know, but that can get tricky.

Although Faith has focused on healing over the past couple of years, she still struggles at times and realizes healing embodies more than recovery from the abuse.

I just went through this period, I've been struggling this past.... probably for the past.... how long.... mmmh, I would say the past two or three months at work, because I don't.... and I'm recognizing and it's translating, it's carrying over into other parts of my life you know, everything kind of, you know, and I've been able to put a finger on it which is part of that healing process again. Learning how to kind of put a finger on what I'm feeling even if I can't necessarily identify where it's coming from or tell you exactly what the feeling per se is. I'm getting better at describing the feeling, describing what it feels like and, in this particular case, it was not feeling valued. Sort of like, I don't have value. You know.... um.... I want to believe I have value but nobody else

seems to think I have value and a lot of that from work.... um.... and even though I know that's not true.... then you feel.... when you add powerlessness to be able to change any of that or to change the circumstances that are feeding that ....I can't just leave my job you know. So I'm going to have to continue to deal with those.... the environment that feeds that feeling of not feeling valued so um.... all that feeling, all that together, it has a tendency to depress.... it depresses my spirit. It depresses me and I kind of recognize that and I did some things and I talked about it briefly to a couple of people and talking about it brought me back to one of the other things that used to feed my spirit and again it's a poem. I love poetry. That I got from my mother and I constantly see little bits of my mom. Where she, I don't know how you describe it, I remember as a kid, I remember thinking.... I don't know much about Catholics other than they have saints quote unquote.... and I remember thinking, well, I have my own private saint in my mother. You know and.... um.... and I remember when I first got into recovery and a poem came to mind that, bits and pieces of it came, and it actually fed where I was at at that particular point. And it was that poem "Don't Quit." And the middle verse, or is it the first verse.... I think it was the first verse.... but I remember enough of the words and it says something like, if things go wrong as they sometimes will and the road you are traveling is all up hill, when the funds are low and the debts are high, and you want to laugh but you got to sigh.... of course, at that time

I said cry.... when life is pressing you down a bit, rest if you must, but don't quit. And I remember just this release of emotion when I thought of that poem or that verse because it was like, it's ok to feel, it's ok to be depressed, those things just happen.

Tied in with her personal struggles, Faith frequently feels despair about the state of the world. However, she brings herself back from despair, again and again, by tapping into her capacity for hope.

A lot of times, I just have to back off thinking about the state of the world and whatever is going on, because I get overwhelmed, not just with the process but with the kids, the stuff that's happening with the youth. If I start to think about it, it will take me to a state of hopelessness. And I know that's a very dangerous place. It's a place I never want to get to again because.... um.... I guess part of my healing was recognizing that without hope.... without hope.... I don't think I can function without hope. You can't.... you just basically stagnate. That's living to die, not even living just hanging around to die

*Interviewer: So there's got to be hope.*

There's got to be hope.... um.... um.... there's got to be.... Yeah

### **Hope's Story**

“So I feel like I have gone through what I've gone through for a reason..... I have to because I could still be mopin' and cryin' right now and I always look for the positive, you know.”

Hope and her fourteen year old son, Chris, are currently living with her ageing parents in a small, neat house on a quiet street in a predominantly African American

neighborhood. When I ring the doorbell for the first interview, Hope's elderly mother comes to the door and cautiously questions what I want through a locked storm door. After I adequately explain myself, she invites me in to wait for her daughter to come downstairs. We sit in the small formal living room filled with Victorian furnishings. Family photographs cover walls and table tops and are even propped around the edges of the room on the floor. The shades are drawn tight and the room is a dark contrast to the bright sun outside. Hope's mother relaxes and warms up as she responds to curiosity about her large family. Hope breezes into the room, a tall, powerful looking woman with dramatic dread locks and a casual, youthful style. She relates to her mother with kindness and patience but there is also a hint that the roles have become reversed and that she now functions as the "mother" and the mother as the "child." After her mother has disappeared to the rear of the house, Hope talks about her mother's health challenges and what a blessing it has been to be able to help her out while needing a place to live.

Hope lost her house after her divorce from her ex-husband. She moved in with her parents and sees how much they need her. Her mother takes at least 20 medications a day and just keeping up with those is a big job. Space is tight at her parents' house and Hope and Chris feel cramped both physically and emotionally. She hopes to find employment soon as she knows her son misses having their own place. She has worked white collar jobs in business environments but doesn't seem to dwell on losing her place in the work force and voices no urgency about getting back to a pressured, but well-paying job. Hope is a curious mixture of openness and inscrutability, warmth and a slight stand-offish-ness. It has been more than seven years since she got out of her abusive marriage but the after

effects seem to linger very palpably with her. She clearly enjoys telling her story and invests energy in conveying the emotional twists and turns.

I had a pretty good childhood.... um parents from the old school. They were a lot more strict than the parents of today..... Even when I was growing up, you know, I can remember my daddy working hard and my momma working really hard, but I can remember them making sure we had food, and making sure we went to church, and we took trips every year. We didn't have a lot of money. They would have to, like.... you know.... most families would go out to eat. We made fried chicken and packed it up and took it because we.... I never ate out. People say, like, you never been to McDonald's? And I'd say, like, nooooo. Is it good? (laughs) I didn't know McDonald's till I was in high school. We didn't get to do the expensive things but we had that family love bond. And two hard workin' parents and even though they argued, they stayed together and made it work and I used to say, dang, my momma sure took a lot of crap off my daddy. But as I got older, I understood why and I really hated that I didn't possess that quality, because sometimes you just take the good with the bad and the bad wasn't really that bad. Sometimes I wonder if I gave up too soon, I don't know. But I'm just very outspoken. And I saw my mother not being outspoken, so that made me say, I don't want to sit there and get pushed around. And her not graduating from high school. Her not....um.... really ever having a really serious job to where she could take care of herself. That's probably why I thought she

stayed. But I was [the] independent one. I had the better job. I was able to do what I need to do whether I did it with or without the man. You know, losing a job is why I'm here now, but I was mentally and....I was stable enough to take care of me by myself. I never saw that in my mother. So I think I wanted to be strong enough because I didn't want to be dependent on any man to tell me that I can't go to the grocery store, that I can't buy the things that I want to buy and I'm working too. They've had a couple of arguments like that back in the day. I remember when she got her own account because she said, you're not going to tell me I can't spend my money. I said, good for you! I was like, say something!! (laughs) I can understand! So.... And then he respected what she wanted but they still worked it out. And I.... I value that about them. It's been 57 years now.....I mean, I see the love. And that's what I wanted. I did want that when I got married. I wanted to grow old with my husband, you know.

Hope's family was active in church and scouting and various organizations and she states that she rejected all that as a child and only came back to her religion and her childhood church when she took on the responsibility of raising her adopted son Chris. She describes much of her growing up years in painful terms.

I was different when I was younger because I was fat. I had ugly hair. I had acne. Big huge knots on my nose. Picked on. I would come home and cry everyday and I used to wonder why people so mean. And my momma never knew because I didn't tell her. So I was always.... head



down.... I would walk, literally, my head down like this (hunches shoulders and bows head) and I went to college that same little girl. Scared to death, never speaking up. I have not always been outspoken. You know, I used to watch my mom and daddy fuss over little stupid stuff and I would say, golly, why they fussin' and cover my ears because I didn't want to hear it. Things would frighten me.

Hope is the youngest of four siblings and she describes the ways that her siblings tormented her as a child.

I feel like I was in bondage 'cause I was the youngest child. They always picked on me. These sisters you see on the walls (gesturing round the room), my brothers, they always picked on me.

*Interviewer: Those? They look sweet, don't they (laughing).*

MMMMhuh! Made me smell alcohol, I mean, ammonia! 'Bout blew my brains out. They threw me down the steps, down the hall there. Um.... made me eat things. I threw up. Made me clean it up. Just mean, mean, mean. And....um.... we are close now. In fact, I was talking to her on the phone when you came in. The one that was the meanest to me, we're the closest. But I could tell her a thing or two. One time I said, listen, ya'll are not doing this to me anymore. And it come from being treated so badly and I wonder why I ended up dating two people who were so abusive. I wonder what drew me to them because I didn't know they were abusive at first. I didn't see those signs at first. But once I got released from that quiet shy person that allowed people to walk all over

her, that's when I became outspoken. So as a child, I didn't know that there was a bright side. I just thought that was the way it was.

*Interviewer: You didn't know you could stand up for yourself.*

No, I didn't even realize I wasn't. I had no idea.

Hope describes the exact moment, in a dorm room at college, when she “became outspoken.”

It was kind of funny. All of my friends were in the room. I'm trying to make a long story short, but we were in the room and we were always joking and pickin' on each other. Called it “joanin” on each other. That was the term. And I was always the butt of every joke. And I'm like gaaw here we go again! I can not escape this! And they used to tape us and we....we would play back the tape. We wouldn't know he was tapin' us and we would play back the tape and you would never hear my voice. You would not know I was there. They say, Hope, are you there? Yeah, I'm good. I never had nothing to say. But one day they picked at me on the wrong day, at the wrong time, and I went off on everybody. I literally cussed them all out. And YOU! You think you're this or that! Dah dah dah! It just came out! It was like it had been locked up for so long! I went around the room and told them all a thing or two! They were like, (claps her hands loudly) the dead has arisen! They clapped and they laughed! She's alive! I was wondering when you were going to come out of there! And I came out and I told them a thing or two!

Hope goes on to describe herself as becoming the “life of the party” through her ability to “bust on somebody,” to protect herself with her cutting words.

So I became the life of the party. They would look for me to say something funny or to bust on somebody, because I could cut you down so fast! They were like, dang! That was good! This one guy would say, you need to be on the stage and he would just sit there waiting for me to say something funny cause even now, I will say something funny and everybody will just bust out laughing. That’s.... that’s.... that’s just me. I’m a different person now.

Despite her transformation into an outspoken person who could use sharp words, she realizes her early life may have set her up to be in abusive relationships. Before meeting her husband, Monty, Hope had been with another physically abusive man. From the start, Monty appeared to be a Prince Charming who would make all her childhood dreams come true.

When I met this guy, I thought he was the most handsome man in the world and thought.... oh, he is so nice and sweet! And we danced on our first night when I met him. At the end of the evening, we had a little kiss.... it was like a fairy tale.

Problems within the relationship begin to surface before the marriage but Hope continues to think she is lucky to have this handsome man. Despite the early warning signs of rage and physical intimidation, Hope does not hesitate to marry Monty. She then goes on to explain that she thinks the abuse in her marriage does not fit the typical pattern

and diminishes and discounts the importance and the impact of her husband's behavior. She concludes, "He just couldn't handle his anger."

A lot of the rage from Hope's husband came from jealousy or from being unable to handle any criticism from Hope. Realizing this, Hope constantly battles with thoughts that his raging behaviors are her fault and that she wasn't sensitive enough about his insecurities.

To communicate the violence simmering beneath the dynamics in the marriage, Hope describes the scars on the walls in their home where Monty would lash out with his fists or with household items and leave marks and gashes in walls and woodwork. There were incidents that did not result in Hope being physically harmed that were violent nonetheless. For example, Hope describes him putting a gun in his mouth and threatening to kill himself. When he does that, she is vividly aware of the pattern of men killing their wives before committing suicide and fears for her life. On another occasion, Hope grabs a small kitchen knife to protect herself from his rage. He cuts his hand grabbing for the knife and Hope runs for the car to get away.

Despite Hope's frequent threats to leave and the obvious problems in the marriage, Hope and Monty decide to start a family. Hope has a good job, a supervisory position in a business setting and Monty is a fireman and also active in the National Guard. They have achieved a degree of financial success and stability although Hope has many frustrations that the bulk of the housework and responsibilities fall to her on top of her demanding job. When efforts for Hope to get pregnant fail, the opportunity arises to adopt a baby boy from a woman who

couldn't care for him. Hope describes some good months as both parents immersed themselves in the new baby. However, the abuse returns, and their son is caught in the middle of it.

We got him dedicated at church and everything was lovely. Um.... right about six months, we argued about something. I don't remember, but the baby was big enough to know that he didn't like that arguing and I was holding him and he was screaming and hollering and crying like why you guys doing this? Like WAAAAAA! And looking at us like we was crazy and Monty says, oh, let me have the baby and I said, no, you frighten him! And I was holding him and he says, give him here. Let him know that I'm ok. And I said, Monty, just wait a minute. Let him calm down and Chris is clinging to me because he was a mama's boy because Monty stay gone so much, he was used to me. Monty tried to take the boy and I say, Monty leave him alone, and I was on the sofa like this and I push back and say get off me. He hit me in my leg so hard! That was the last time that it was a really, really hard blow. I dropped the baby. I fell to the floor screaming. I thought he had broken my leg. There was permanent damage to that leg now because that blow was so hard there.... bruising.....

*Interviewer: And you were holding the baby.*

I was holding the baby and I dropped the baby. I literally dropped the baby and fell on the floor. He had to pick the baby up and he's screaming and I'm screaming. I thought he had broken my leg literally. So the

emergency room took an x-ray and my doctor asked me what on earth happened to your leg? What hit you? And I said, with tears rolling down, and I said, a fist. And he said, do we need to call someone or do anything and I didn't do anything. I said no and....um.... I never told the doctor what really happened that day but.... um... I went out of there barely able to walk and I limped probably for about a month..... And the doctor told me I had to elevate the leg with several pillows and that man still tried to get intimate. I am laying there with almost a broken leg and he still....

Both Hope and Monty are shaken that Chris experienced this incident with them and communication between them shuts down to avoid arguments. Hope realizes things are not going well despite the relative calm and encourages Monty to go to marriage counseling with her.

We tried to still maintain the household for Chris but you had two unhappy married people. He wouldn't tell me that he was unhappy, but I know that he wasn't happy. He couldn't have been. We just had a terrible marriage, He would say we're ok. No, we're NOT! I said, let's go to counseling. I don't want to talk to no counselor getting all in our business. That kind of thing. So we just kept ignoring all of that over the years and by this time....um.... I remember telling him one day, I think I am falling out of love. I'm just not happy. I don't know. So he says, just call your lawyer. So then he gets angry and we started talking about

that.... um.... but not really talking. Just making little comments about it and going on about our daily lives.

Hope realizes she has grown to dislike Monty and dreads hearing the garage door opening, signaling his return home. She talks about losing herself as she lives for their son Chris. As her despair grows, she reaches out to a man in her church who offers her understanding and affection. This liason leads to the final incidence of domestic violence that ends the marriage. The incident is precipitated by a letter Monty finds that incriminates Hope. He comes to confront her at church on a Sunday morning.

So he came....um and I was sitting there because we were on break. The service was getting ready to start and I turned and he was standing in the door. He said, I need to talk to you for a minute and I'm like, oh my God! What's wrong with this man and I said, what's happened ? What's wrong? And he said, come here, and he took me outside and he said I found this letter and I knew you was doing this and he threw it at me and he pushed me with it or something and banged me up the side of the head. Hit me up the side of the head and he dragged me around on the ground and I thought this man is going to kill me in this parking lot! And....um.... that went on for maybe five minutes and then he got in the car and drove away. I was lying in the parking lot like I can't believe that just happened! I was shaking! I got up and ran back inside and.... um.... I went to my friend. I said Monty just came and beat me up in the parking lot. He said, he did what?! Call the police. So I was in there on

the phone. I couldn't dial 911. I was just.... I didn't know what to do. And then I said, I can't do it! And then he said, let's just go back into the church. So we could pray about this thing. Because, oh my goodness, I knew I would have to go home afterwards. So what am I going to do? What am I going to do? So we were standing there getting ready to go in..... Monty comes back and he says, oh, what ya'll doing? Trying to get your story together now? We were standing in the hall right by the sanctuary. He bolts down the hall.... my friend runs through the door.... leaves me standing out there because I was going to go in too. But if I go in, he's coming in. And I said, no. So, the door slam. He pull me back. He pulled me by my hair. I had braids. I hadn't [dred]locked my hair yet, so I had braids and he pulled me by my hair and I was screaming and hollering, trying not to go. But I didn't want to disrupt the service. It was like I was trying to figure out what should I do, cause I could have broken away enough to probably run in there. I didn't know what to do and he said, we's going home. Where's Chris? We's going home. And I'm thinking, this man going to kill me for real. So we....he's pulling me out the front door and when I get to the front door, I.... just like OK.... he cannot take me home. So I drop and start kicking and screaming. Whatever I could do to get him off me. And then there were two witnesses. One, I call my guardian angel because this boy appeared. He had locks and he had a hat on. A little short guy. He had a stick in his hand, like a piece of metal or something I don't know what it was. And



he say, man, what is wrong with you? How you going to be hitting on that woman like that. He said, I think my wife cheated on me. He said, I don't care what your wife did! She don't deserve that! You want to fight someone, you fight me, a real man. And then he.... and then he said, you right. It was like he just instantly turned to an angel and he said, you're right. I'm sorry. The man said, man, are you alright?

Hope decides to call the police and report the incident and Monty was arrested. The ensuing days are filled with anguish for Hope and ambivalence about what to do.

He kept calling me and begging me to get him out because he would lose his job. He's a fireman and an officer in the military and I didn't want him to lose his job. I wanted him to be Chris's dad. I wanted him to be there in our lives. At that point, I'm still thinking, oh, that's my husband! What am I going to do? What am I going to do? But they had a order where we couldn't see each other till we went to court in January..... And basically I was....um.... at the point to thinking about letting him come back if he had counseling. Now he was ready for counseling..... Now he's ready to go to Bible studies.

In many abuse situations, the worst times for the woman come during the final months of the relationship and lead to the woman finding a way to leave. For Hope, the worst times came after this incident and the subsequent separation as she grappled with the fact of the failed marriage and her own hard decision not to reconcile with Monty. Her anguish contains a mixture of self-doubt and guilt as she realizes the impact of the

divorce not only on herself but also on their son Chris. She faults herself for the end of the marriage because the final incident was spurred by infidelity. Despite Monty's violence, she continues to blame herself.

That was the hardest thing I ever had to deal with in my life. I had to struggle with.... I want my husband! I want my husband! I don't want him to leave me! Then he started dating other people and ohhh! Then I really started going crazy....like screaming and crying and I couldn't function and I wanted to be Chris's mother and I stopped eating and I lost 40 pounds. In just like two months, 40 pounds fell off and I was like weak and sick. I felt like I could just absolutely die! And when I thought I wanted to die, I told my doctor how I felt. I didn't want to kill myself. I didn't envision cutting my wrist. Taking pills. Jumping off a building. I just wanted to be dead so I wouldn't feel the pain because the ache was so deep I couldn't put words on it. And.... um.... he gave me antidepressants. I was on those for two.... no, one year....a little over a year. But then it took everything away from me. I had no feelings. I was a stone. In church one day, I was prayin' and singin' and thought I would cry but.... no tears was coming out and I felt sure I was getting ready to cry. And my body was confused with the emotions and didn't know what to do because it had killed them. So I went to work, laughed, some people knew what had happened, some people didn't know. I was worried about who knew what, and I said the Lord is never going to forgive me, and I had to learn to forgive me and it took a long, long time.

And...um...even now, that's been six years and I still struggle, I still struggle with all that. 'Cause I feel like I let Chris down. I feel like his dad could have still been his dad from a distance – we didn't have to have a relationship but he abandoned Chris so now my son struggle and Chris is going to be 14. And he struggle because his dad has remarried and he doesn't have any interest in coming around here because he is angry at me.

As the antidepressant begins to give Hope the ability to look for other avenues for healing, she is contacted by a domestic violence agency that follows up on police reports. She becomes aware of services available to her and mentions that her ministers gave “permission” to her to seek counseling.

So at this point, by that time, I think I had pretty much gone through that spell of severe depression and I needed to find help and the ministers at the church that I spoke to said it is ok to get help from somebody else. You know, a lot of times they say that African American people think that it is not for our race, we shouldn't go lean on that, it is not customary for black people to go and get help. We need help! It doesn't matter what color your skin is. And um, I had, um, in fact, asked my ex husband could we go get help from counseling. Ain't nobody goin to be up in my business! That's how people look at it. Somebody bein' in their business. But when people are trained to try to help your mind deal with a certain situation, I'm all for it. So I called [the domestic violence agency] and I went and I spoke to her and I told her my story and she

said, oh my goodness! And then she recommended the group help.... the group therapy and I said most definitely.

The group experience turns out to be one of the most helpful experiences for Hope. She seems to draw strength from realizing that, as badly as she has struggled, she is luckier than many and able to help others through the strength of her example.

We had to go there.... we had.... I want to say, once a week, Thursday nights and it was actually a program and there was an organized agenda and at the end of the program, after you completed this number of weeks and you went through all these classes and stuff, you had a certificate and a graduation. And it was almost like a tearful moment because we had bonded with these people who had been through the same thing. And you hug and comfort people because they looked at me, I think I mentioned to you, they looked at me as if there's hope because I was up there in my little dress clothes coming from work, rushing over from work, looking very professional in my clothes. They said, well, it's possible. You can survive and keep on from there because my situation, my situation had been.... had aged a little at that point so I was looking fine. No one would ever imagine I had been through what I had gone through. It didn't show.

She refers to many of the other women in the group as "little girls" and her perception of them as young and vulnerable strengthens her own sense of herself as stronger and wiser.

I felt good for me, but I felt like I wanted to be there more for some of those little girls coming in. They were a lot younger than me. Some of them were pregnant and, really, it was rough, watching them have to go through that.

*Interviewer: Yeah. You saw how many challenges they had.*

Yeah. And it was just not the challenges of being abused. It was not knowing where they were going to live and living from place to place whether it be one of those hotel accommodations or with family members or friends and after a while people just put them out. It was just horrible.

Hope continues to talk about the group process and further develops the theme of simultaneously giving and receiving help and support.

They were compassionate because they all took turns. And when it came my time to tell my story, I didn't think I would ever cry because I had cried so much I didn't think there was no cry left. But there were times when it was my time to talk about my story and I had to get the tissue box passed to me. They were very compassionate because, as professional as I looked, they realized I was just like them. I was going through the same thing. So they showed me compassion. And they were like ooh (compassionate sound) and they were so genuinely sincere you could tell because, and it was almost like dang! It's not just us low income.... 'cause a lot of those girls were low income, waiting on a welfare check. You could tell. You could look at them, the way they

acted, the way they talked, uneducated. You could just tell. So they were.... I think it made them feel good to know it wasn't just people like them. It was people who walk around with business suits on and dress pants and go to work everyday.

*Interviewer: It helped them hold their heads up a little bit more.*

Yeah! I think it gave them hope and a couple of the girls said that I made them want to go to school and try to do something better for their lives, you know, for their life and I felt good. But I felt they supported me because they had compassion for me and I was the most outspoken one in the group. A couple of the girls spoke a lot. But I was outspoken because that's just how I had become and I wanted them to know this is my story and I got past those things and you can do it too.

Hope also values the psycho-educational aspects of the group. It was painful for her to watch videos that reminded her of what she went through, but the education brought clarity about abuse.

Then a lot of times they would even show these vi-de-os (with a lot of emphasis on each syllable). I hated those because you would sit there and watch these videos and you would see yourself on that screen going through whatever that person was doin'. I mean it was a reenactment, of course, but it looked so real and I remember going through that and they would almost define each different scenario and it kind of let you know where you fell within the.... the abuse and they categorized all different

the kinds of abuse and, some of it, you might have thought, oh, I didn't realize that was really abuse.

Despite the counseling and the psycho-education, Hope still has some inner confusion over the relationship dynamics and her wishes about making the marriage work or ending it. She spoke about developing dislike for Monty before the breakup and then she describes her emotional devastation about the ending. She also feels tremendous guilt about her amorous relationship with another man, but then ruminates that perhaps she let her husband find that fateful letter that day on purpose.

As Hope struggles to come to terms with the ending of her marriage and the domestic violence that occurred, she is hit on another front as well, losing two jobs in a row. As her previous life disintegrates on all fronts, she finds herself reevaluating her values.

I got laid off and the day that my husband filed for divorce, the next day I got laid off.

*Interviewer: Like bam bam.*

Boom boom. And I said, oh, my God! I'm like, I'm really.... what am I going to do now! So when that happened.... um.... I had to kind of like shake some of that confusion off because I said, ok, now I've got to find another job and it just seemed like from that point on things just kept falling down. And I know a lot of times God has a way of shaking you and making you realize you need to do something different.... um.... in this case, my job so demanding, I was working 60, 70 hours a week. I

didn't need to be working that much and my son called me.... he was blowing up my cell phone just calling, calling, calling. And then texting me, wondering when am I coming home and I needed to be there for him more. So it was almost a blessing that I got laid off from that job because I needed to be around Chris. My fear was, oh, my goodness, financially, what am I going to do because I was making a significant amount of money..... We end up losing the house. We come back to living here at home. That was another blessing in disguise because my mother needed me. So I had to reorganize my thoughts and it had to be about the people I needed to be there for versus me. So I'm still in a spot right now because I get laid off again and....um.... working with unemployment.

With the new values that are growing in Hope, she finds she wants to use this period of unemployment to look towards changing her career to something more personally meaningful. Hope goes on to declare that she "wouldn't even mind going to school to be some kind of counselor to help with domestic violence, I mean, seriously! I just want to do something like that."

In finding another job, it makes me want to do something where I could work to help another human being in some way. I'm not really sure what it is, you know. But I decided, Lord, I'm going to let you direct my path this time. Now if He directs me, my heart is just geared more towards doing things for other people and helping other people. And I won't make a lot of money doing that but it's not about the money because I



had that before but what else did I have along with the money – a lot of unhappiness.

Hope has strong fervor about the counseling profession and elaborates on her thoughts about race and counseling.

You know, a lot of, a lot of my black friends would make comments about black folks don't get counseling, you know, and I'm like, who said? And I never knew anybody that did get counseling as I was growing up because it was all like Shhhhhhh! But to me, I was like, yeah, I did. It helped. You need to try it because if you need to fix your situation. So I would openly talk about the fact that I went to counseling and I wasn't ashamed of it and I didn't feel like it should have been directed at helping one race versus another. What is that? So I stood up high on a mountain and said, go get counseling, go get help.....

And counseling helps. It doesn't matter what color somebody is and even the person that taught the class, you know, that doesn't matter. You don't have to be a certain color to relate to somebody's pain and abuse and violence.

Hope adds words about domestic violence being color blind. She also articulates that African American women may feel more shame about admitting the need for help.

So it's never been, you know, I think abuse has no, it doesn't pick a race, it just happens. The black people just don't talk about it. Black people won't tell you about it 'cause they're ashamed. That's why they won't go

to counseling because they're ashamed that they allowed it to happen. But the white girl's crying, saying I can't believe I let him do this to me and I say, girl, you better go to counseling! No, and then they keep sitting there letting it happen. But I think a lot of black people don't want to be known as having gotten themselves in that predicament, first of all, to be taking it and ashamed because they always think, we so tough. But then a black man will knock them down in a minute and say, you ain't so tough. You know, that wasn't my case. It was he had anger management based on circumstances. He wasn't just mean like that to come and beat me for no reason, 'cause I didn't cook dinner or nothing like that.

*Interviewer: And so you talked about that shame piece that certainly some white people feel too, but do you think that it would be even harder to do that if black people anticipate that the therapist is white? Is it harder to have to cross that line?*

Well in my opinion I would say no, because every therapist I had was white, other than my ministers, every last one of them were. And I heard the knowledge from the education they had received. I heard it come out to me and it was so logical and I was like OOOHHH! I never understood! 'Cause they gave us a lot of literature and handouts and it made me understand where I am and why I'm here, the signs that I should have seen, I mean it just showed me so much. And I don't think it even mattered, and a lot of times I hear, I don't want to go to a white doctor, I want to go to a black doctor. I prefer to go to an Indian doctor

or Chinese doctor. Honestly, I work with my own kind and they seem to be the worse in certain cases. My eye doctor, she.... it took her six months to find the right contact lenses. I left her, went to this white guy, I had a white man and white lady and just like that (snaps her fingers) they picked the right lens. So I'm just saying, it's not always a comfortable place to be around someone like myself because I think people are just as educated, sometimes even more, of different races. You know how Indians and you find a lot of Africans and Indians being from some different countries, coming in, being the doctors, you go to the doctor, most of my mama's doctors are African or Indian. Very few just plain African American or white doctors. It's foreigners, so I think a lot of times I'm excited when it's a different race other than myself. That's just me because you know the knowledge and skill.... sometimes a lot of people have that, you know, you owe me something mentality because we've been oppressed all these years, you know. I've never had that mentality. I look at where we've come from I say DANG! That was awful! But I'm thankful where we are now. But there's still some of that out there, it is, but I ignore it because you know I love all people. I dated, I dated a white guy before. It's just I love people and a lot of times your own people treat you worse than other races. I don't know if that makes any sense to you but, from my perspective as a black woman, I've had more black women treat me worse than other people because it's like they always think you want something they got or they talk about you

behind their back. She thinks she cute! I mean that's just how a lot of black woman act. They're all, they're all little.... We call it that ghetto acting you know and it's aggravating so you try to stick to people who are more educated. And there are black people who are educated and a lot of times people say you're acting white, you know, but if I'm comfortable getting my information from someone from a different race, then that's just me.

Despite the pain Hope has endured and the financial losses and turmoil, she is able to find gratitude in her current situation.

I found so many positive things from where my abuse and where I came from with all of that, so much positive has come out of it, that somebody asked me if that incident hadn't happened so many years ago on November 1, 2003, do you think you would still be married. I'm like, I don't know (like she is deeply shaken) because he was still the same man, but it just so happened that he got angry, that he found that letter that date, that one day, and I'm like, I wonder if I would still be miserably married. There ain't no telling. Maybe he would have killed me by now, because I was just getting so frustrated and I was telling him. But I think that everything does happen for a reason..... I feel like I have gone through what I've gone through for a reason and I have to look for that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I have to because I could still be mopin' and crying right now and I always look for the positive, you know. I hate that negativity. And I look at that with my life,

with my relationship and....um....now I'm not financially happy, but I think I am mentally and spiritually happy because I found something different once I left him and he....so maybe I'm thankful that I was relieved from that bondage because I was unhappy and he probably would have hit me again at some other point because he'd get mad because I was just so mean. I'm just mean.

Hope frequently expresses gratitude for the opportunity to tell her story and perhaps have her story help others. She talks about the healing that she experiences just from the telling.

It's healing, you know. They say admit it is the first step, you know. When you have an addiction or something, a lot of times, you hold stuff in. Once you talk about it, it helps you accept it and then the more you talk about it, you deal with it. And keep talking about it, now you've moved past it. Now you've taken the concern off of you and maybe you can help minister to someone else, cause I stepped out of my own problem and when this girl needed help, I was still fresh in my....mine was real fresh. But I stepped out of that to forget about me and I was eager to help her and it almost made me feel like each time I got a new layer of skin that replaced some of that which was taken from me, some of what was lost in the abuse and the depression and all of that. But I think it was healing to actually, you know, talk about it, makes me forget my own, you know? I mean I talk about it and it's like dang! And I go back and look what I have come from. I can't believe I was there, like a

little ol', I don't know, something in the corner crying, didn't know whether I was up or down and I've come so far and it doesn't even bother me. I used to cry talking about it. Sometimes I get a little.... I got a little teary today talking about it because it's hard to go back there but maybe the teariness was the goodness of being delivered from it, you know.

*Interviewer: Tears are not always grief.*

I think they could be tears of joy like ooooooh, thank God, for delivering me from that, cause that could have been the death of me seriously.

*Interviewer: It sounds like, too, when you tell the story, it helps you realize how far you are from it. Sometimes we lose track but it gives you that sense of distance.*

That's a pretty good analogy. That's pretty accurate because you don't realize where you've come from until you sit down and really go, huuuh!

My goodness, you know. It's.... November will be seven years since everything happened and sometimes it feels like it was just yesterday.

But the longer it gets, the more I get out of it, I mean, I get further and further away from it. I will never, never, ever forget it, but it doesn't traumatize me and I don't cry and I don't think about it and think I've lost anything anymore. Yes, that's very accurate.

Many Christian women who have been abused find it hard to accept at face value the Biblical teaching that the man must be the head of the household. Despite her strong independence, Hope refuses to challenge that teaching head on.

I believe that.... um.... had that [man as head of house] been active in my marriage, had he taken that role, we would probably still be married, had he taken that role. When we first got married, neither one of us was into the church. I wasn't saved. Um.... I would go, but I was just going. I wasn't really getting anything from it. I hadn't confessed. You know my.... what I believe, I had not confessed any of that yet. And once I found it, I was trying to invite him along because it started feeling so good I wanted him to a part of that too. As I learned more through the bible teachings that that was what the man was supposed to do, I would get more and more frustrated because when I had invited him to come in and pray....(shakes head sorrowfully). And I would willingly slide right into that role if that's what I had. The guy I am dating now, he is on a spiritual journey and I have actually brought him so far along that....um....I don't know if he will ever be that strong to do that but I let him know that's what the expectation is when you look into the Bible as far as Christianity is. But I'm ok with it, in fact I would long for to have it, you know. I tell my man I'm going for this day and he just pray for me. I've dated a couple of guys, we would pray on the phone, he would make me get on my knees and we would pray together. I was so cool with that. 'Cause that's how it really should be so I don't feel like ... I feel like I should step back and be that type of woman. If that is the type of man I have in my life if I ever get married again.

*Interviewer: Ok, so it's based on is the man living up to his part of it.*

He needs to do what he supposed to do first and I don't mind sliding in there under him based on what he's ...

*Interviewer: It's based on his spiritual strength, not just that he's a man.*

Exactly and he needs to be a man in every sense of the word because like at my... when I was married, my husband wasn't the man or nothing, I mean he said I wear the pants. I said what you mean by that? I said women wear pants now too. You can make decisions but I want you to understand that I want to have parts of those decisions. And he said, well, you can do the inside of the house and I'll do the outside. I said that's not fair! The outside gets how much attention? Versus the inside? And it made no sense so I'm not going to sit there and say ok (in a demure and passive voice). No ! No! So if he was doing all his part and going to church.....And um he never led us there. He would try to tell me what to do with the bills and all that, but that was some component missing that was huge and I didn't know what was missing until I found it and when I found it, I wanted him to find it, but you can't make anybody do anything. If I ever do it again, it will be a Christian man that is very strong in Christianity and in his beliefs and he's going to want to do the same things.

Hope talks about the new man in her life and how she is ministering to him to help him find faith and healing.

And mine [faith] continues to grow as I continue on my journey and I'm trying to, you know.... I minister to other people, to other people a lot,



especially those who might not know God as well as I.... You've got to... it's gotta come from here (touches her heart) and you gotta believe it. I was raised this way and he [new boyfriend] says he thinks it's like a cult, like when people believe what they believe because they were told this is how it is and you don't go and research it for yourself. I said, sometimes God speaks to your heart. You don't need to go for no research. When God heals you and you're laying on that floor and you know he exists. He cried because God healed him and he was so thankful and I said, you know what, you pimped God. We had a big discussion. It almost turned into an argument. You pimped Him. You used Him for what you needed and then you forgot about Him after you got well. Why do you think all this stuff is going wrong in your life right now? You need to find Him. He's looking for you. He's trying to find you and you're running from Him.

The interviewer comments on Hope's fervor for spreading the Word and asks if she has any aspirations to become a leader in the church.

I love sitting and listening to them give me the Word, but I, I...it's in me to do something. I don't know if I want to be up there in the pulpit but if I could teach a Sunday school class or work with some young girls that need some guidance.

They wanted me to be a mentor to some high school... I think I told you that, but I was too nervous, because I was such a shambles myself. I didn't know if I could help somebody's teenage daughter going through

things. But...a little girl got in my car. Girl was making straight A's in high school. She went off the college, was one of those HBCU's and I said how's it going? Making A's and B's? Making A's? uuunnnn....Making all A's and B's? No. Making A's, B's and C's? No, well, I said, ok, now, make sure you are studying. I know it's just.... I said, listen I went to school. I had a blast but I made a 3.54 my freshman year. But I partied and I had fun staying out all night, going out to parties when my momma told me to stay home. Nobody telling me to come in! It was great! But you gotta know why you're there. And she was like, Ma'am, you're right and she said, are you on Facebook? I said Yeah! Look me up and we'll talk sometime! But I want you to make sure you stay grounded. She said thank you Miss Hope. She gave me a hug. I didn't say but two words to that little girl. ....And um just talking to her that one little moment let me know I could touch the life of some little girl not to make the wrong decision and I might be talking to Reverend Tom to let him know. He's the Youth Minister. To let him know that I might be ready to work with these girls cause I feel so much better now..... At church, at work, I just gotta find what that thing is for me. ....So many girls come up to me, say, Hey Miss Hope, cause I'm not an old timey looking mom. I'm a pretty hip.....And that's just me, you know, the hair, you know, the clothes, now I don't go too far, like I look at some of the clothes on these little girls and I'm like, oh, my God! What are they! What is that, you know, but I still keep it youthful and

fun and people tell Chris, your momma, your momma is FINE! She cute! I'm like, you better tell them to stop talking about your momma like that. They say your momma's nice, I like your momma. So when I go to church, little children just run up to hug me. Hey Miss Hope, hey Miss Hope, hey, hey I'm just huggin' everybody and they look for me and they just love me to death and they know that I'm Chris's mom, but I used to work with the youth so I might try to get back into it cause it's just so good to touch the life of not just a person, but a YOUNG person. That's huge. That's huge.

### **Summary of Major Themes**

The complex and compelling narratives told by the five women are each unique in voice, content, and conclusion. Each woman has been shaped by her own particular biography, socio-economic circumstances, and the cultural and familial influences around her. Each woman carries within her innate personality traits that influence the way she understands and navigates her own particular life. However, underneath the differences, there are also profound similarities in these stories of healing and growth. The stories all contain two separate threads: the journey of inner transformation from victim to survivor and the account of external services and supports that helped facilitate that inner transformation. The similar themes contained in those two threads of the narratives will be discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

However, before introducing the themes, it is important to provide the context for identifying the themes from the interview data. Throughout the process of conducting the interviews, a journal of personal reflections was kept that included observations and

thoughts about the interviews and the data. This record contains important reflections that informed the choice of themes.

### **Reflections**

During the interview process, the women talked eagerly about the story of the abuse. The words came quickly and fluently and they needed almost no prompting or encouragement to continue. After the story of what happened was complete, interview questions were used to encourage the participant's to reflect on what helped them heal along the way. As the questions turned to the actual process of healing, the responses became more hesitant. The participants searched to find coherent answers to questions in a way that suggested that they had never organized their thoughts in this area before.

There were pauses, and comments like "let me think about that." Observations about the healing process would then come as they would identify discrete elements. For instance, Faith declares that the "healing part" for her is to "help somebody." Joy comments that the interview process itself has been therapeutic for her, underlining the importance of telling the story and having it witnessed. The episodic nature of the dialogue about healing underscores the complexity of the process and the allusive nature of healing. The transformation from victim to survivor and beyond seems to be a slow gradual process of growth that occurs after the trauma has shattered the victim's self concept and world view.

The healing themes were identified by considering the content of the narratives, the discrete elements identified by the participants, and by following the protocol for narrative analysis outlined in Chapter Three. According to that protocol, the plots were examined to discover what elements influenced the participant towards healing. With the

input from those three areas, it was apparent that several key themes of inner transformation were prominent across all five narratives. These themes are discussed below. There was more variety in the external services and supports utilized by the participants, perhaps indicating that although healing maybe a unitary process, the external services that are effective may vary from person to person.

### **Inner Transformation**

Deepened spiritual faith. The most striking similarity between the five narratives is that all five women attribute their safety and healing to God. All five refer to God speaking to or intervening for them at pivotal points in their journeys. Rather than having their faith shaken by their experiences of abuse, they feel more strongly confident of God's protection. Spiritual references dot the interviews and faith is intimately intermingled with expressions of gratitude and of the meaning they find in their experiences.

First of all, all five identify God as actively involved with their decisions to leave. God then gives them the strength to carry out that purpose. Joy and Mercy both report that they clearly hear the voice of God at pivotal points in their relationships. Joy reports that she heard God's voice "just as clear, just as peaceful." Mercy also hears God speak directly to her. Hearing that voice, she is able to trust that God will help her through what lies ahead. Blossom has regular conversations with God and reports that those conversations sustain her when she is utterly alone with the abuse. Faith and Hope, both acknowledge that God acts in their lives in concrete ways. For Faith, it is through the little "God things" that she notices that help her find her way. Hope talks about God "shaking you and making you realize you need to do something different."

Secondly, all five women believe that their experiences with domestic violence have directly strengthened their faith. Instead of regarding their abuse and trauma as evidence of an uncaring God, they express even more trust in Him. They all believe that they ultimately reached safety because He was there to guide and sustain them.

The increased faith that the women report may be linked to their purposeful struggle with Biblical teachings and church mores. All five women strongly believe in living according to church teachings and three of them report being confused and disheartened when the teaching comes up against their own safety and well-being. Both Mercy and Joy wrestle with Bible verses and church pressure that admonish the woman to stick with her husband no matter what. Through conversations with pastors, they begin to realize they have the right to interpret Scripture for themselves and that they can reject the beliefs of external authority. Hope's struggle is a little less clear cut as she seems to be attempting to hold both the veracity of external authority and her own internal sense of power and agency.

Gratitude. The women's expressions of gratitude are closely connected to their expressions of faith. Gratitude for assistance from people, events, or groups is rarely expressed without speaking an implied belief that good things come from God. Both Joy and Blossom are especially expressive about their gratitude. Joy speaks of gratitude for all the support she got from her family, for the domestic violence services that helped and for her husband whose partnership she treasures. She attributes it all to God, saying "I couldn't do any of this without Him." Blossom finds herself literally speechless at times trying to express her level of gratitude. Hope singles out gratitude for a routine phone call from a domestic violence agency that gets her in touch with services and she is even

thankful for the misfortune of losing her job because she needed to spend more time with her son.

Discovering a new identity. All five women articulate a sense of becoming a different and better person because of their experiences. All five are aware that they grew up with low self esteem and believe that lack led them to be susceptible to abusive men. They talk about how the abuse beat them down even further and then, through the healing process, they were able to claim a new and more vibrant identity. Both Joy and Mercy describe a process of losing themselves through the abuse and then rediscovering who they are as they recover. Both express the opinion that they are stronger and freer than they ever were before. Blossom and Hope both hold themselves with newfound pride and Faith very analytically describes ways in which she is changing her habitual ways of seeing herself and relating to others. It is interestingly paradoxical that, as they emerge from the abuse, all five women are more aware of who they are and carry themselves with more pride and confidence than ever before.

Finding meaning in the suffering. Growing into a new identity comes hand in hand with embracing the meaning that the women find in their suffering. Each woman articulates in her own way that she feels called to help others who are struggling, especially when their struggles are connected to issues of domestic violence. Finding a purpose for their suffering helps the women accept their experiences and experience dignity and self esteem as they move forward.

Faith and Blossom both feel called to work directly within the field of domestic violence while Joy hopes to found a homeless shelter. Mercy and Hope are less clear but both see the connection between low self esteem and victimization among females and

want to find a way to address that problem. It is interesting to note that Joy and Blossom link their desire to help to their gratitude while Hope finds that helping makes her feel better. Faith couples the desire to help with her analytical mind and presents ideas to best empower service delivery for African American women.

Ability to Vision and Dream about the Future. The stories the women tell about their abuse are marked by feelings of powerlessness and a loss of faith in the future. At times the despair grows so large that the women contemplate issues of survival. It is notable that, from these low points of despair, all five women are able to connect to feelings of well-being in the present and hope for the future. However, these expressions of hope range from an almost grim determination to grasp onto hope to a giddy anticipation for what lies ahead. At one end of the continuum is Blossom's giddy declaration that "there are great things ahead." At the other end, is Faith's almost fatalistic contention that "without hope...without hope...I don't think I can function without hope." Joy, Mercy and Hope are all quick to name new challenges or adventures that will expand and enliven their lives. Before the abuse, hope for the future fell into traditional storylines seen through "rose colored glasses". After the abuse, their hopes and dreams come alive with creativity and vibrant purpose.

Process of Cognitive Restructuring. All of the internal changes the women experience are interwoven with a process of cognitive restructuring. Changes in perceptions about the self or about the self in relation to the world and the future all signify that there has been a change in an underlying fundamental belief system about the self in relation to the world. The process of cognitive restructuring is not always clearly articulated by the women but the restructuring itself is evidenced by contrasts between



previous and current attitudes or beliefs. The restructuring is also evident in the statements, voiced by each of the women, that they turned away from external appraisals of themselves and tapped into internal sources of wisdom and self awareness. This switch from external to internal seems to be a key component for growth and change. As they undergo cognitive restructuring, the women also grow in clarity while paradoxically embracing a more nuanced and complex view of life. As they sort their way through the chaos created by the abuse, they gain clarity about their priorities and beliefs.

Cognitive restructuring, is most clearly obvious in the areas of spiritual growth and changes in self concept, but it also influences shifts in attitudes about the future and the significance given to events. As the women undergo cognitive restructuring, all of them become more complex and reflective in their views of life. They emerge from the victimization feeling stronger and clearer and they are more able to look within themselves for their own truths rather than deferring to outside opinions or attitudes. In order to emerge from the chaos created by the abuse, they are forced to focus on priorities and beliefs that help them survive and move forward. Clarity emerges from the intensity.

#### External Services and Support

All of the women received necessary support from outside sources, including the formal and institutionalized support of service agencies and government programs, and the informal support of family, friends, and communities. Although the amount of support varies from virtually “wrap around” services for Blossom to the sole support of a counselor and a free place to stay with her mother for Mercy, it is almost inconceivable to imagine any of the women recovering without external support. Through all of the stories, there is the underlying phenomenon that the women needed validation before

they were able to move forward. They needed to hear that their pain was real, that the experience was domestic violence, and that they deserved to leave and find safety.

Beyond that, the primary concerns, for the women, were logistical: how to escape, where to go to find safe shelter, and how to start a new life.

Education about domestic violence. Although four of the five women are college educated, all five women report acquiring important knowledge about domestic violence during their processes of leaving and healing. Two of the women, Faith and Mercy, encounter information about domestic violence while still embroiled in the abuse. The other three participate in domestic violence services after leaving their abusers. Education is instrumental for all five in accepting the reality that they are victims of domestic violence as a step towards understanding the dynamics involved. By identifying their experiences within the paradigm of domestic violence, the women are more readily able to let go of shame and self-blame and see that they were caught in dynamics too big and strong for them to combat or change on their own.

Individual counseling. Three of the women utilized individual counseling as an integral part of their process of healing and moving forward with their lives. Mercy turned to a church affiliated counselor, Reverend Mary, because she had already framed the issues in her life as “spiritual issues.” Joy sought counseling both with her pastor at her church and through an EAP program at her job. She appreciates different aspects of each: her pastor gives her permission to interpret Scripture for herself and her counselor provides a safe non judgmental space to focus on herself. Hope declares herself a proponent for counseling although she is unable to articulate how she found the process helpful.

Church communities. Although all five women are active members of church communities and express deep spiritual faith, they report mixed experiences with support from their church communities. Joy, Mercy and Hope struggle with the knowledge that many church goers believe the woman should stay with her husband through any kind of hardship. As Joy observes, many church communities discourage leaving even abusive husbands. Faith quotes statistics to back up her position that the church leaders are badly educated about domestic violence and are missing an important piece of pastoral care when they abstain from addressing the issue from the pulpit. Clearly, the church and church congregations do not have a universally supportive message to victims of domestic violence. Without that clear message, it is hard for women to feel justified in walking away from an abusive marriage. However, Joy and Mercy both receive important support from pastors to interpret scripture in a way that preserves the dignity and autonomy of women.

Impact of children in the home. Three of the five women, Hope, Blossom and Joy, have children with their abusers. For them, the presence of their children impacts their reactions to the physical violence in the home. However, only Blossom senses that her children were being adversely impacted by living in the midst of violence. For Blossom, fears for her children spur her to take action to leave and keep her determined to make it on her own and not go back to the abuse. For Joy, the children were a reason to stay alive and keep struggling. She attributes her stamina to them. Hope feels guilt for depriving her son of two

parent home and a close connection to his father. This guilt interferes with her clarity about leaving the relationship.

### **Summary**

Although there are numerous concrete differences between the narratives, there seems to be an overarching similarity among the stories. Each woman admits to growing up with low self esteem and easily taking on the blame for the abuse. All five women speak about losing touch with who they are and putting the needs of other people first. Each of them can identify clear turning points where they made decisions to get out and each turned to God for wisdom, hope and support. All five went through some process of education about domestic violence and also had other forms of counseling. Although they are at different places in their recovery, all of the women can access hope about the future and can find some meaning or sense of purpose from their suffering. Despite ongoing struggles with fear, flashbacks, regrets and self-doubt, all five women feel empowered to take responsibility for their lives and to let go of any self-identity as victimized.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### **Narrative Themes of Healing**

The common themes of the healing narratives were discussed in Chapter Four. The major themes relate directly to a process of posttraumatic growth that is built upon both spiritual deepening and cognitive restructuring. The markers of posttraumatic growth are the benchmarks by which the healing can be measured while deepening faith and changing cognitions are the actual vehicles for healing and growth.

### **Posttraumatic Growth**

The five markers for posttraumatic growth provide a systematic way of measuring enhanced well-being after trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Of the five markers, four are strikingly present in all the narratives: a deepened spiritual faith, a redefinition of self to include personal strength and value, ability to see new possibilities for the future, and gratitude and appreciation for life. The fifth marker, a greater investment in relationships and a deepened appreciation for other people, is less obvious but also present. Given the strength of these markers of posttraumatic growth, the narratives support earlier research that has shown significant posttraumatic growth among the survivors of domestic violence (Cobb, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2006). Before turning to a consideration of the five markers, it is important to understand that cognitive restructuring is the process that underlies growth in all five areas.

Cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring is the adaptive mechanism at the heart of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). Restructuring can occur anytime there is a dissonance between strongly held beliefs and the lived experience of reality. However, the forces of denial can be strong enough to blunt the dissonance until a certain level of pain and fear is reached. The women report early experiences with their partner's explosive and destructive anger but they are able to deny that reality and proceed with the relationships. The acceptance of reality and the cognitive restructuring did not begin for them until they had experienced the intense fear and despair that accompanied a complete loss of self, fear for their basic personal safety, and the destruction of their previously held paradigms. It was only after their worlds seemed totally destroyed that the women were free to let go and begin the slow process of reconstructing new paradigms. These new paradigms or schemas allow the deepening of spiritual beliefs and the construction of new world views that contain more vitality and hope. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) hypothesize that as the trauma deconstructs old schemas or belief systems, new schemas will be constructed that will contain more complexity, paradox and wisdom. The new schemas will support enhanced well being and form the basis for continued growth and development.

Narrative expression of the cognitive restructuring. As anticipated by Tedeschi and Calhoun, the participants formulate their "trauma narratives" around the central action of the abuse with clear and contrasting "before" and "after" components of the narrative. In the "before" portions, they have low self esteem but they buy into simplistically innocent and optimistic views about the future. As this world view shatters, they experience loss of self, despair, and depression. In the "after" portions, the women

express confident self awareness and anticipate full and exciting futures for themselves. The hopes for the future, however, are tempered with realism within an acceptance of their own fragility and limitations.

Spirituality. Turning to the five markers of posttraumatic growth, the narratives contain an abundance of evidence that the growth of spirituality is perhaps the core element in the healing process. The connections between spirituality and posttraumatic growth have been examined from several different perspectives (Linley, 2003; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005), including the finding that there is a strong causal relationship between increased spirituality and higher levels of posttraumatic growth (Cadell, Regher, and Hemsworth, 2003) Studies have also linked spirituality with resilience and healing (Humphreys, 2000; Senter & Caldwell, 2002; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). The narratives contained in this research study clearly reinforce the connection between spiritual resources and healing from abuse. In each of the five narratives, the women express the strong, central theme that escaping the abuse and healing from the trauma are attributable to God and would not have been possible without faith in God. It is their faith that sustains them through their darkest hours when they have no where else to turn. The women cite ways that God speaks to them or intervenes directly to help them escape. They also attribute a more global responsibility for their healing to God, noting that none of it would have been possible without Him. It is striking that none of the women describes God or faith as a central organizing force in her life before the abuse, but they all come to hold onto their faith when there is little else to sustain them. Blossom talks to God in her bathroom, Faith clings to the story of Ester, and Mercy and Joy let go of literal translations of the Bible so that they can find strength from their own spiritual beliefs.

Spirituality versus religiosity. The differences between spirituality and religiosity are important; spirituality leads the women to healing while religious beliefs sometimes contribute to their oppression. At least one study backs up this differentiation. Watlington and Murphy (2006) found that although spirituality has been found to reduce depression among African American victims of domestic violence, religiosity showed no such causal connection. In fact, other studies have found that negative religious coping can actually impede the growth process (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) and that openness to religious change and existential questioning can significantly increase posttraumatic growth (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000).

Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) stress the importance of spirituality for the growth and preservation of well-being specifically among African American women. Banks-Wallace and Parks clearly differentiate spirituality from religious dogmatism. When women trust their own spiritual beliefs about God, they are able to reject church dogma as expressed by church rules and leaders and tap into their own inner wisdom.

The five narratives in this study clearly show that the shift from accepting externalized church teachings to trusting an internalized understanding of God is essential for healing. It is precisely through this shift to an internal source of spiritual wisdom that the women find the strength and conviction to heal. Mercy succinctly states that she shifted her focus to her relationship with God and was then able to see everything from a different perspective. She gave up people pleasing and hoping that her husband would change and put all her energy into “using the Holy Spirit within me as my guide.” She begins to trust her intuitive, body and spirit based wisdom instead of checking herself against outside authorities.



In order to make this shift to an internalized spirituality, two of the women (Joy and Mercy) needed the explicit permission of a pastor to look within themselves for a personal interpretation of Scripture. There is a seeming incongruity that the women needed permission to trust themselves. However, for the counseling profession, it is important to consider the timing and the delivery of the “permission.” Both women were actively struggling with the cognitive dissonance between the Biblical teachings about the commitment to marriage and their own experiences of marriage as physically violent and emotionally abusive. It is only within the context of that cognitive dissonance that permission from the pastor and the counselor were received as timely and freeing. Without that dissonance, the permission would just be a differing external authority and would stymie growth rather than promote it.

Defining spirituality. When addressing spiritual issues in counseling, researchers have struggled to identify a clear definition or explication of spirituality. To confront this issue head on, Mattis (2002) used qualitative research to explore key components of African American women’s spiritual beliefs in relation to their coping skills. The results of Mattis’ research correlate in key ways with the healing narratives of this study. In her study, Mattis outlines eight components of spirituality: encountering and accepting reality, spiritual surrender, transcendence, existential questions, purpose and destiny, trusting transcendent sources of knowledge, acting within one’s principles, and achieving growth. All eight of these components are interwoven with the narrative accounts of healing contained in this study. Five of the components show up clearly in the healing narratives and will be discussed here

Encountering reality. In each of the healing narratives, the women confront a tension between the love relationship they were expecting and the reality of the physical and emotional violence that developed in the relationships. The women initially buy into a “rose colored” view of love and marriage. With hindsight, they are able to describe how they chose to overlook the early warning signs of domestic violence and, instead, invested in unrealistic hopes that they would be able to make the relationship work. Over time, they are forced to let go of their hopeful dreams and accept the reality of abuse. Mattis (2002) uncovered a belief among African American women that spiritual faith is essential to the process of grappling with the tension between hopes and reality. Spiritual faith provides the necessary context and support for confronting the contradictions and being able to accept a difficult reality. Spiritual resources, such as Bible stories or verses, prayers, and gospels songs inspire reflection and deeper understanding. In the healing narratives in this study, it is clear that the women depend on their spiritual faith to help them navigate harsh realities and to accept their plight as victims of domestic violence. They depend on God as guide and protector to lead them out of the abuse. They use prayer, Biblical study, conversations with pastors, and conversations with God to come to terms with their reality and to find a way out.

Spiritual surrender. As the women struggle to integrate the reality of the domestic violence into their world view, they undergo a process of spiritual surrender that parallels the process outlined by Mattis (2002). The women accept their own limitations as human beings and turn their well-being over to the power and protection of God. This surrender does not come quickly or easily. They first turn to their habitual coping skills, such as people pleasing and working harder, to try to improve their situation. It is only after they

confront their own powerlessness that they surrender to God and experience the paradoxical empowerment of turning things over to a Higher Power. When the women accept their powerlessness to change the situation, they become free to choose to leave, to change their own lives and circumstances and to heal. Faith is able to use her Twelve Step background to identify very clearly the process of surrender needed for healing from domestic violence.

Trusting transcendent knowledge. As the women grapple with the tension between their hopes and their reality, they look for sources of wisdom to help them navigate the contradictions. They are well aware of culturally held opinions that women should always remain loyal and faithful to their husbands. They are also aware of all the physical risks and logistical problems that leaving will entail. However, despite these contraindications, the women choose to leave their abusers based on knowledge that they obtain from transcendent sources. Mattis (2002) describes transcendent sources as being either body based, somatic experiences or communication that comes through dreams, symbols, visions, or answers to prayers. All of the women receive and accept wisdom and guidance that comes from their spiritual questing and their internalization of the Holy Spirit within them. The guidance is deeply subjective and personal and can only be interpreted through the strength of their faith.

Recognizing purpose and dreams. Another key component of African American spirituality is the belief that everything happens for a purpose (Mattis 2002). Negative experiences are recast as opportunities for growth. Faith exemplifies this belief when she states that she recognized, early in the process of her abuse, that the abuse was happening for a reason and that she would find a purpose from it. She holds fast to that purpose

today, continuing to push her church community to more effective programs and messages to counteract domestic violence. Blossom sees her life experiences as an educational parable to teach young women about domestic violence and healing. For all the women, there is a dignity that comes from seeing that what they went through has a purpose that comes from God and that they can help others through the life lessons they have learned. The importance of purpose should not be underestimated. First of all, by identifying a purpose for their lives, the women are more open to embracing hope and more easily claim self esteem. Secondly, finding purpose in the abuse helps them construct a meaningful storyline for their lives.

Achieving growth. Another striking aspect of the narratives is the conscious determination of each of the women to embrace growth and transformation as a way life. Mattis (2002) reports that a belief among African American women that personal growth is the spiritual response to either positive or negative events. Before the abuse, the women display little conscious engagement with the idea of personal growth. The women report working hard at jobs, trying to be good wives and, in some case, mothers, with the expectation that those efforts will provide a satisfying life. After the abuse, the women articulate a hunger for greater fulfillment and meaning. They have plans to seek further education, to change careers to provide more meaning, to look for opportunities to give back and to strive to continue to grow in their faith. Their emotional lives are complex and they live fully engaged with life. This hunger for growth is directly related to their spiritual faith. They see the abuse as God's way of waking them up and insisting they be more attentive to their lives.

Role of church communities. Despite the emphasis on the distinction between organized religion (church communities) and spirituality (Mattis, 2000; Watlington & Murphy, 2006), it is important to remember that the two are not mutually exclusive. There is an important overlap and interplay between the two as church communities provide an outlet for spiritual beliefs and spirituality can take root from experiences within the church communities. Despite their distinctly spiritual belief systems, the women in this study all belong to churches and value their church communities very highly. Seeing the important role that church communities play in African American women's lives, Faith feels called to bring education and sensitivity about domestic violence to church leaders. Faith finds little support from the church itself and, during the abuse, turns to her own study of Scripture for wisdom and strength. It is a testament to the differentiation between religion and spirituality that Faith is sustained by spirituality but feels called to reform the role of the church. Although none of the women make a direct connection between domestic violence and larger issues of patriarchy and oppression in society as a whole, Faith's focus on bringing domestic violence sensitivity to church leaders shows that she understands how societal forces can work to provide covert cover for oppression.

Redefinition of self. Returning to the remaining markers of posttraumatic growth, the next marker, redefinition of self, shows up clearly as a cognitive process whereby the women describe the complete loss of self through the abuse. After escaping they are able to gradually work towards a deeper and more authentic understanding of who they are. As Joy so poignantly asserts, "you lose who you are. I lost...I don't even know who I

was.” After years, she is still questioning the depth of who she is but enjoying the process of self discovery.

As painful as the losses were, the women all find freedom and power in questioning their previous held beliefs about themselves, including the answers to the basic questions: Who am I? What does it mean to love? What is my life about? What are my priorities? How did I let myself slip into an abusive relationship? Many of the questions still lack definitive answers but the women find that there is power in asking the questions rather than accepting what someone wants to impose on them.

Hopes and dreams for the future. All five of the women are conscious of moving into a future that has unknown but exciting possibilities for them. Before the abuse, Joy, Mercy, and Hope all look forward to predictable versions of marriage, children, and household responsibilities. None of the women dared to dream big dreams or to envision themselves as capable of impact on the world. In the process of healing from abuse, the new schemas they develop include high aspirations that would never have occurred to them before. Blossom dreams of writing a book about her life. Joy has hopes of opening a homeless shelter for men. Faith plans for graduate school and envisions impacting the delivery of domestic violence services by the church communities. Hope and Mercy express more creativity in their thoughts about the future, with Hope musing about a career change and Mercy dreamily thinking about “peace” in her life and travel.

Gratitude. The hopes and dreams for the future connect very directly to the gratitude that the women feel for their lives and for their new insights. In particular, they express gratitude that the abuse they suffered has given them an experience that they can transform into a gift for others. As Blossom observes, without the abuse, she “wouldn’t

have anything to say.” She realizes that the mere experience of survival has given her a story that she can share with others to encourage them. For her, that seems like a miraculous gift. Joy also describes realizing that the experience of the abuse has shaped her into a person that she is happy to be. She sums up her story by claiming “I am a good person.....I’m who I am because of all the things that have happened to me.” Instead of taking life for granted, all the women are more conscious of how lucky they are to be survivors and they take pride in the way their characters have been shaped through their ordeals.

Relational aspects of spirituality. Although the fifth marker of posttraumatic growth, enhanced relationships, is not as overtly evident in the narratives, the spiritual connection that develops between the women and God points to an enhanced relationship with a higher power. In contrast with religion, spirituality can be perceived as primarily a relationship between the individual person and God that is not mediated by any external authority (Mattis 2000). The relationship itself becomes a highly significant dynamic for abused women (Humphreys, 2000; Lauver, 2000, Mattis, 2000). Domestic violence routinely isolates victims and cuts them off from support systems (Walker, 2000). The women in this study all report a feeling of isolation as they spiral down with the abuse. When the victim’s primary relationship is with the abuser, domestic violence is more emotionally debilitating and harder to escape. Lauver (2000) underscores the importance of relationships for women and emphasizes the relational quality of spirituality. A spiritual person experiences a direct, personal relationship with God that is not mitigated by the influence or interpretations of the established church belief system (Mattis, 2000).

The women in the healing narratives dialogue directly with God through prayer and through interpretations of Scriptures. The relationship with God breaks the sense of isolation and increases the woman's self esteem through her acceptance of God's love. The dialogue with God also allows a space for the women to question their belief systems and come to differing conclusions about their place in the world and the meaning that they want to attribute to their lives. The structure of dialogue, itself, is important as it sets up a dialectic that enhances the process of cognitive restructuring. The cognitive restructuring arising from the dialectic process between the participant and God is the major vehicle for both spiritual growth and posttraumatic growth.

### **Wisdom Literature**

The literature about the development of wisdom is closely connected to the concept of posttraumatic growth. It comes, then, as no surprise that the healing narratives of the women also fit into the literature about wisdom and the ways that wisdom can be constructed in the aftermath of trauma. Wisdom is a broad concept which can develop across the life span, following trauma or in the absence of trauma. Wisdom is, perhaps, even harder to define than spirituality and many differing definitions exist. However, Linley's study (2003) contains a description of wisdom that fits neatly with the narratives contained in this study. According to Linley, wisdom can be defined as comprised of three elements: the acceptance of uncertainty, accepting natural human limitations, and integrating thoughts and feelings. He postulates that through these elements there will be an increased ability to understand and navigate life and weather normal transitions.

Acceptance of uncertainty and limitations. It is easy to see the connection between trauma and the first two elements: acceptance of uncertainty and acceptance of



limitations. The women in the healing narratives describe how the intrusion of violence into their intimate relationships disrupts their view of a safe world and introduces unpredictability into their daily lives. They never know when something they might say or do will provoke a violent outburst. Their initial reactions are to alter their own behaviors in order to restore predictability to the relationship with their abusers. They believe that if they try harder and please him more, the abuse will abate and the relationship will become predictable again. When their efforts are unsuccessful at restoring predictability, they encounter their own limitations in the situation. They internalize a sense of powerlessness that, ultimately, leads them to find their way to safety. However, even after they regain safety, they continue to be mindful that life is unpredictable and that there are limitations to how much they can affect situations outside of themselves.

There is an interactive quality between these two first two components of wisdom, accepting unpredictability and limits of power, and spiritual faith; the interactions between the components serve to strengthen each other. As people become more aware of unpredictability and powerlessness, they turn to spirituality for comfort, sustenance and strength. In the narratives in this study, the women find that their only recourse is to look within for safety and stability; they turn to their own spiritual belief systems and depend on God instead of their own human power or even the power of those around them. The more that they see life as uncertain and people as limited, the more they are drawn to their spiritual belief systems. The personal relationship with God brings a paradoxical quality of connecting them to their own limited humanity and to the limitless expanses of humanity and the source of ultimate power. Faith's engagement

with the story of Ester illustrates this point well. She believes and accepts that she could die by leaving but she feels strength and hope through her trust in the ultimate power of God. This trust does not diminish her fear of death; however, it brings her peace just to feel that connection to the power of God and know that He is her only salvation.

Integration of thoughts and feelings. The third component of wisdom is the integration of thoughts and feelings (Linley, 2003). Thoughts and feelings are frequently experienced as dichotomous or disconnected. With trauma, the intense somatic experiences do not fit the cognitive schema held about the world and there is a schism between thoughts and feelings (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Part of the experience of developing wisdom is the ability to integrate the somatic with the cognitive so that the person's experience becomes a unified and coherent whole (Linley). Linley proposes that this integration might begin with unfocused and repetitive rumination after the traumatic events. If the person does not become stuck in rumination, the person might move towards developing a coherent wisdom based narrative about the trauma that unites the somatic and the cognitive. This narrative would put the shattered pieces of the trauma victim's life into a unified story line. This story line has a chronology with a beginning and an end. It names clearly what happened and what was thought and felt during the trauma. All of these elements are important for healing and for the development of wisdom. By naming and defining what happened, the victim regains some sense of control over her life. The time line of the story allows the victim to gain the perspective that these events occurred over a period of time and now that time period has ended. The story can create a sense of chronological distance that helps restore safety (Linley).

All of the women who participated in this study commented on the sheer healing value of telling their experiences as a coherent story. Hope noted that she became more aware of the passage of time after she told the story, realizing that she has already moved into the future. Blossom took great pride in the way her story depicts her overcoming great obstacles to create a safe and promising life for herself and her children. Faith used her interview times to explore her self awareness and her theoretical ideas in dialogue with someone else. All of the women felt empowered by the story telling and hoped that their stories might inspire and educate others. The wisdom that shines through the narratives comes from the increased self awareness the women achieve and their willingness and ability to construct healthier world views after their lives are shattered. Out of the dichotomous thoughts and feelings about the abuse, the women construct meaningful, unified narratives.

The dialectic process. Within the literature about wisdom, the idea of Hegel's dialectic explains the process of cognitive restructuring (Linley 2003). In simple terms, the dialectic process involves being able to attain a synthesis of two opposing ideas or positions that are called the thesis and the antithesis. For trauma survivors, the thesis is life pre-trauma and the antithesis is the experience of trauma. Synthesis becomes the altered world view that holds the essence of both the thesis and the antithesis. Joy's view on marriage and family life provide an example of this process. Before the abuse, she believed that marriage before children and hard work would create stable and healthy family life. She pursued this prescription diligently, marrying before pregnancy and working two jobs to provide for her family. Despite her best efforts, her abusive husband brought terror and trauma into the home. Years after the abuse, Joy remarries a sensitive

and productive man and achieves happiness within a blended family. However, this family life contains the constant fears and unpredictability that arise from custody and child support issues with her ex-husband. She also has to contend with behavioral issues with her step son and concerns about the influence that her ex-husband has on their two children. Despite the success of the marriage, she acknowledges ups and downs in the relationship and a continual process of compromising for each other. Her idealism has been tempered with trauma and her new world view contains the complexities of joy and sorrow, an awareness of limitations, and the acknowledgement of both triumph and defeat.

### **Racial Issues**

The rationale for this racially specific research was grounded in the literature that professes that African American women have different perceptions, needs and experiences as they suffer from domestic violence and struggle to heal in its aftermath. This research yielded some results that run counter to key aspects of the literature about race and domestic violence. These areas of discrepancy could potentially raise issues about the validity of prior research or the validity of the current research. However the literature about intersecting identities and racial development provides potential explanations for these discrepancies. Given the complex nature of racial experiences, it is not necessarily surprising to encounter widely differing points of view. However, it is fruitful to bring a critical eye to the discrepancies between the interview data and the literature and to look for explanations that may shed light on the racial issues. Areas of discrepancy will be noted and then possible explanations for these discrepancies will be

discussed, including the race of the interviewer, the issues of intersecting identities and the possible influence of racial identity development.

### **Comfort/discomfort with White Service Providers**

The most striking area of discrepancy from the literature is that all five women stated that race was not an issue to them as they sought help to escape the abuse and to heal their wounds. Various researchers have presented evidence of the racial distrust that hinders African American women from pursuing institutionalized support after domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Kingsnorth & MacIntosh, 2004; Weis, 2001). Contrary to that research, all five participants engaged in interactions with service providers who were white and claimed that the race of the provider did not affect their trust or their ability to make effective use of the services. They all added various caveats, stating that their main concern was that the professionals act with compassion and lack of judgment. The women who attended domestic violence support groups reported that the groups were mixed race and that racial issues were not a problem for them in that context either.

Despite the unanimity of these statements, there are remarks that bring a hint of more complexity to the table. First of all, Joy describes taking her stepson to see a counselor during the process of putting together a blended family and comments that the counselor was male and black so that helped the young man feel comfortable. When the researcher pointed out the implication of that statement, she explained that she knew her stepson was resistant to the process so she was glad that he could relate so easily to the counselor. Her explanation is certainly plausible but points out that racial concerns are part of the mix. The context for seeking counseling may make the racial fit more or less important.

Secondly, Hope brings a different twist when her comments about the support group reveal that she is very tuned in to socio-economic status and makes efforts to emphasize that she is different from the “little girls” who look up to her. She is proud that she looks “together” and professional and that she can help the others through her example of strength. Hope’s interview responses reflect her determination to identify with educated and upwardly mobile people and she sometimes denigrates her own race. She makes a point of mentioning her white friends and disparages anything “ghetto” in a seeming attempt to identify more closely with the dominant white race. Given this overall perspective, it is not surprising that she says the race of the counselor is not important to her.

In a similar vein, Blossom, the only participant to utilize a shelter, reports no awareness of any racial issues at the shelter where she stayed. She describes the mixed race women there as one big, happy family. The literature is replete with criticisms of either overt or subtle racism at shelters which have historically been run and managed by white women (Bent-Goodley, 2004; Donnelly et al., 2005; Few, 2005; Watkins, 2005). The literature also criticizes the “color blind” stance of most shelters that racial issues are not a factor in the dynamics of domestic violence (Donnelly et al.). Blossom finds the shelter warm and welcoming and all the participants voice various statements accepting the color blind metaphor as useful. As a general rule, the participants all believe that domestic violence affects women indiscriminately and they accept uncritically that the dynamic is the same for all.

Joy and Faith both bring a few critical nuances to this perspective of color blindness. Joy reflects that in her mother’s day, it was harder for African American

women to leave abusive men because their economic power and opportunities were so limited. Given the hard work she invested in an education and career advancement, she did not feel the same economic barriers as her mother. In spite of this insight, Joy fails to articulate any ongoing concern that African American women may still be at an economic disadvantage when faced with escaping abuse and starting over alone.

When questioned about race and domestic violence services in general, Faith launches into a long discussion of the various cultural concerns across many different cultures, including the Hispanic culture and the Japanese. She acknowledges how culture intersects with domestic violence, particularly in regards to cultural beliefs about gender roles and family connections. She advocates for diversity training and cultural sensitivity given the reality that victims cannot realistically be matched with counselors from the same culture. Despite these observations about the importance of culture, she reports that, in her own experience, the sensitivity and counseling expertise of the provider were far more important to her than race.

### **Community Support**

A more puzzling area of discrepancy between the interview data and the literature is the lack of emphasis on community support in the stories told by the women. From the literature, the womanists, in particular, have emphasized that African American women find healing when getting support from other African American women (hooks, 1993). The literature specifically about domestic violence references the importance of group support for all victims and for African American women in particular (Crane & Constantino, 2003; Few, 2000). Of the five women, Blossom is the only participant who describes the group support as essential to her healing. Living at the shelter, she soaks up

ongoing support from several different staff members, the other shelter residents, and the new church community that helps her make the transition away from the shelter. Given the deprivation in her early life and the chronic abuse that she suffered, it is easy to understand the necessity of a network of support in order for her to heal.

Of the other women, all but Mercy participate, at some point in time, in domestic violence groups that provide psycho education and support. Hope stresses the importance of the group to her healing but the other three women seem more impacted by the psycho educational aspects of the group than the support. Mercy shares nothing about her abuse with anyone except her counselor. Of interest is the fact that both Hope and Faith report that there are times that they feel unsafe with other African American women because of jealousies and insecurities about appearances and men. They report that perceived competition among women undercuts the ability to support each other and to bond.

### **Attributing Causality**

A final area of discrepancy between the literature and the interview data is around the victim's conceptualization of the causality of the abuse. A study by Fraser et al (2002) presents a viewpoint that African American women are more likely to see domestic violence within the context of larger issues of oppression in society as a whole. According to this study, this viewpoint insulates the women from taking on responsibility for causing the abuse. In contrast to that research, all of the women in this study are quick, initially, to blame themselves for the abuse. In particular, they believe their habits of speaking up for themselves and being "mouthy" are what cause the abuser to lose control. As they learn about domestic violence, they are able to put the responsibility back on the men. However, none of them go any further towards linking the dynamic of



domestic violence to any larger social or cultural issues around gender or race and oppression. Several of the women do make the connection that the breeding ground for domestic violence is the low self esteem of girls but they see the development of self esteem as something that relates primarily to the immediate family environment. Even with curiosity from the interviewer about larger cultural issues, the women bring forth nothing in the way of political or social critique. Given that four of the women are college educated, this lack of critical thinking about the culture as a whole seems surprising.

### **Race of the Interviewer**

One possible explanation for the paucity of comments about race may, of course, be the race of the interviewer. It is possible that an African American interviewer would have gotten a different story. However, the women were able to address, in small ways, sensitive issues about race and seemed completely open about their vulnerabilities as they related to issues of abuse. Mercy shared her painful memories of being considered unattractive in her family because her skin color was darker than her siblings. Joy reports her ex-husband's refusal to work "for the white man" and reacts to that stance with her pragmatic view that work is work and you can't allow yourself the luxury of letting race deter you from earning a living. Faith talks extensively about the need for diversity training and brings out issues that she thinks are important to African American women. Given the tenor of the connection between the interviewer and the participants, it seems likely that certain racial aspects may have been glossed over or diminished but it seems doubtful that there are gross misrepresentations of the women's views.

As an added precaution, the interview transcripts and constructed stories have been read by a peer reviewer who is African American and knowledgeable in qualitative research methods. Her opinion echoes the view that the women were comfortable enough to bring a high degree of authenticity to the interviews and that it seems prudent to accept the interview data around racial issues as potentially watered down but not misrepresentative. The peer reviewer also notes the obvious influence of racial development on the way the participants related to issues of race. Research about intersecting identities and racial development help to bring perspective to the consideration of the racial elements in the interview data.

### **Intersecting Identities**

The work of Robinson (1993) and Reynolds and Pope (1991) provide some interesting considerations to aid in interpreting the data. Their work sheds much light on the with-in group differences around racial issues. Robinson names that at least four components make up a person's identity: race, class, gender, and culture. The intersection of these different variables explains some of the differing priorities, beliefs, and attitudes that are seen within any identified group. All five of the women in this study consider themselves to be upwardly mobile socio-economically. The four who are college educated have surpassed their mothers' education and employment levels and Blossom's hopes and dreams take her far beyond her mother's world of poverty and instability. People who are optimistic that the system will allow for their advancement are much less likely to look critically at the system. Similarly, people who have worked hard to successfully raise their socio-economic status may not identify as strongly with racial oppression as those who are unable to advance.

Reynolds and Pope (1991) explore the complexities that arise when people belong to more than one oppressed group. They point out the various choices people have in self-identity. Looking through their multidimensional identity model, it becomes clearer that the women in this study are, perhaps, self-identifying primarily as abused women and only secondarily as women of color. This apparent emphasis on gender was potentially spurred by the experiences of abuse and the subsequent healing journeys which illuminated their common cause with other woman of all races. It might also have been situationally deepened in the interview process by focusing on domestic violence and recovery. In addition, the participants may have wanted to connect to the interviewer through the commonality of gender rather than feeling the racial separation.

The multidimensional identity model proposes that it can be overwhelming to an individual to embrace more than one category of oppression at a time and that focusing on only one aspect of oppression can be an effective coping mechanism. The model also points out that people can chose to claim different identities in different situations as a way to fit in or accommodate those around. Given that the interviewer is white, there may have been conscious or unconscious forces at work for the women to focus more on the identity that is shared with the interviewer rather than the one that potentially brings dissonance. Whatever the underlying forces were, it seems apparent that the participants brought their stories from a “location” that is primarily colored by gender and not by race.

### **Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity development provides an even more intriguing lens for considering the responses of the women around racial issues. Using Cross’s model of Nigrescence

Racial Identity (Cross, 1971, 1995), it is interesting to speculate if the women are in the Internalization stage of racial identity development. In this stage, African Americans see good in both black and white people and move away from the dichotomy between black and white. All of the women except Hope seem to judge people by their actions and intentions rather than by their race. They verbalize concerns about the interactions between themselves and domestic violence service providers but are open to judging those providers based on criteria such as acceptance and support rather than on skin color or culture. Hope, on the other hand, seems to fit the Pre-encounter stage as she voices a more Eurocentric value system. She unabashedly states that she prefers not to go to African American doctors because she expects white or Indian doctors to be more educated and qualified. She also makes casually pejorative statements about the African American race and takes pains to distance herself from the stereotypical culture of lower socio-economic blacks. It must be emphasized that no measurement instruments were used to ascertain the racial identity stages of the participants and that the comments above are speculation based on statements made during the interviews. However, it is a valid point that racial identity affects the views that a person holds about other races and it is possible that racial identity explains, at least in part, the relative lack of importance that the participants put on race.

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

It is clear from the narratives that effective services for African American survivors of domestic violence need to be varied and comprehensive to reach a variety of needs and personal preferences. Each participant used a different combination of services and supports to navigate her way to well-being. There is an obvious and intense need for

practical and logistical services such as housing, financial support, job training and legal and protective services. All of these services may be important factors to provide the necessary stability and security for healing to occur. However the healing itself seems to come when external sources trigger or enhance internal growth. In the narratives, external sources include dialogues with pastors or counselors, Biblical study, psycho education and prayers to God. The triggers for growth are highly personal to each victim and service providers need both skill and intuitive sensitivity to provide effective stimuli for healing and growth.

### **Nonjudgmental Acceptance**

The most important message for counselors that can be gleaned from these narratives is that victims of domestic violence are very sensitive to judgment and outside pressure about what they should do and will not feel safe talking to anyone who seems to have preconceived notions about what needs to occur and when. Faith, in particular, stresses that pressure to leave the abuser before she was ready to make that move threatened to destroy the therapeutic trust. There is a fine line between encouraging women to protect themselves and coming across as judgmental or insensitive. Women living through abuse are already struggling with low self esteem and may feel increased shame when encouraged to take action they are not yet ready to take. Victims have a visceral sense that their lives are more in danger after leaving the abuser. Counselors show disrespect for this reality if they push leaving before the victim feels ready. The cardinal rule is to meet a woman where she is and to allow her to set the pace. It is more important to establish rapport through nonjudgmental listening than to offer when seems like unassailable advice.

## **Education**

Education is an important component of interventions for victims of domestic violence. All five women report that they minimized their experiences and were not able to see that they were victims of domestic violence until receiving psycho education.

Counselors can help women combat the shame they experience by opening them up to understanding that domestic violence affects women of all socio-economic strata and it crosses all ethnic and cultural boundaries. As women identify themselves within a paradigm that affects millions, they are more able to depersonalize the experience and move forward toward healing. Through exploration of the domestic violence cycle with their clients, counselors can help the women let go of false hopes and understand how little they can impact the cycle of abuse through changes to their own behavior.

Counselors can also connect victims with support groups and outside service providers who can help with logistical problems.

Despite the clear message from the five narratives that education about domestic violence was helpful, it seems prudent to remember that education can create a hierarchical structure between the “expert” and the “learner.” Taylor (1999) speaks for the womanists about the difference between disembodied knowledge and the wisdom that comes from life experiences. She cautions that a top down delivery of knowledge information can either undermine a woman’s trust in her own intuition or create distrust of the “expert.” In order to provide the needed information while avoiding these pitfalls, counselors can attune the delivery of information to the particular situation. Where possible, African American women can be referred to group educational settings where racial diversity can be expected. Group education allows for discussion and the sharing of

personal wisdom as it pertains to educational concepts. If the client prefers to rely on individual counseling, the counselor can incorporate books, movies, and other cultural mediums that are racially and socioeconomically appropriate. These sources can bring the “wisdom” of other women to buttress or personalize the educational content. Lastly, counselors can engage in supervision or enlist feedback in order to monitor the way they navigate issues of hierarchy in therapy. With sensitivity and self awareness, counselors can convey facts without creating differences in power.

### **Encouraging Spiritual Deepening**

Given the overwhelming endorsement of spirituality as a key healing factor, it is important for counselors to become comfortable with ways to incorporate spirituality into the counseling process. Robinson (2000) points out the importance of counselors being able to help African American women separate spirituality from religiosity. African American churches are frequently patriarchal in tenor and may undercut the woman’s search for empowerment and autonomy. Counselors need to develop skills to help women differentiate and to own their own power for interpreting Scripture. The narratives provide clues about how to help women make the journey towards spirituality. Mercy talks about feeling the Holy Spirit in her body and points out the importance of creating body awareness and an appreciation for the basic instincts and intuitions that can come from our internal sense of knowing. Several of the narratives illustrate the power of dialogue to create a deeper connection to spirituality. As women grapple with cognitive dissonance around issues of faith, pastors or counselors have ready openings for helping them find their way to new cognitions that contain more room for spiritual depth.

Spirituality can also be enhanced through several different avenues depending on the individuality of the client. Counselors can encourage engagement with many, diverse outside sources of spiritual deepening: gospel music, appropriate Bible stories and teachings, community support groups, nature, cultural outlets and stories of iconic African American heroes (Oliver, 2000). Transcendent sources of knowledge, such as dreams, conversations with God, symbols, and body based sensations, should be discussed and affirmed as a way for clients to trust their own personal sources of wisdom (Mattis, 2002). Within the dialogue of the talk therapy itself, counselors can practice attunement to areas of cognitive dissonance in the areas of spirituality, religion and existential beliefs. Whenever there is cognitive dissonance, there is an opportunity to invite the client to make the choice that promotes the greatest growth and attunement with inner wisdom.

Counselors can also engage with the religious leaders and communities to provide education and domestic violence and training for peer counselors or advocates. Clergy can be encouraged to enter into a dialogue about the differences between religions beliefs and spirituality. The religious leaders need to be prodded into interest in and engagement with domestic violence services.

### **Narrative Therapy Techniques**

Narrative therapy techniques are another useful tool for helping African American victims of domestic violence (White & Epston, 1990). Support for these techniques comes from several different sources. Posttraumatic growth has an obvious synergy with narrative techniques as it relies on the construction of a trauma narrative. The literature about wisdom brings the importance of helping trauma victims form a coherent story that



makes sense of disparate events and feelings and puts the story in a contained time line (Linley, 2003). Narrative therapy techniques can also be adapted to fit with several components of womanist philosophy. Womanists believe in the importance of concrete lived experience and the need to pass down the wisdom gained in the form of spoken or written stories (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Stories empower the women to name their experiences as domestic violence and to undermine gendered power through that naming (Hamlet, 2000).

### **Encouraging Cognitive Restructuring**

Cognitive restructuring is the foundation of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). It is also a component of the development of wisdom (Linley, 2003) and it underlies the development of higher levels of moral and cognitive development (Crain, 1985). Given these potentially positive outcomes of cognitive restructuring, it is important for counselors to have the necessary skills and sensitivities to support and promote the process. However, as Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998a) warn, the counselor must be carefully attuned to the client's process and not try to rush or lead the client into new cognitions. Clients will signal their readiness to move forward by struggling with periods of cognitive dissonance. Counselors can seize these therapeutic opportunities and help clients work through these areas of dissonance. Since moral and cognitive development are processes of critical thinking and internalizing power, it is important for counselors not to attempt to impart cognitive restructuring on their clients. Either the clients will resist and the process will be delayed or the clients will adopt the counselor's cognitions and remain externally focused.

### **Limitations**

As discussed in Chapter Three, there are limitations that are inherent to any qualitative research. These limitations are primarily related to the sample size and selection, and to the racial elements at work between the researcher and the participants. These limitations can undermine the validity and credibility of the research findings. Methods for addressing these issues of validity and credibility were outlined in Chapter Three and they have been incorporated into the research process.

The sample selection procedures adhered closely to the research plan. However, the resulting sample contained less diversity than was anticipated. Four of the five participants had completed undergraduate college degrees and had been employed outside the home in good paying jobs before the abuse. Since financial dependence or independence is an important variable for victims of domestic violence, the relative economic freedom of these four participants may have aided in their ability to heal. However this limitation is tempered by the fact that Blossom, lacking even a GED or a solid work history, shows some of the strongest markers of healing among the women.

Another limitation of the sample selection process was that all five participants were recruited through organized domestic violence service providers or through counselors and women who utilize those services have already shown a willingness to engage with institutionalized services or with professional counseling services. Women with a distrust of services and the counseling process were not included.

Participants commented on the impact of the interview process itself as a contribution to healing. However, none of the women were able to identify any specific areas where their thoughts or their healing process had been specifically impacted by the

interview process. Additional information might have been gleaned by interviewing the women again after six to twelve months to inquire if they had been able to identify ways that the interview process had spurred further insights or growth.

The interviews with the women left the researcher with unanswered questions about the role of race in the research process and in the women's experiences of healing. Many of the women's views and statements are at odds with literature on the subject of race and domestic violence and there is no way to accurately assess how much the race of the researcher influenced the interview data.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This research provides some rich background for future inquiries into the nature of healing for survivors of domestic violence in general and for African American survivors in particular. The exploratory nature of the research yields the need for further research to address new questions that have arisen.

Given the narrative focus of this study, immediate questions arise about the potential contrasts between the narratives of domestic violence survivors who are in the process of healing and the narratives of survivors who are stuck in webs of real or imagined victimization. Is the difference in those narratives primarily the presence or absence of spiritual faith? It would also be illuminating to contrast narratives of women from differing ethnic backgrounds to identify the impact that different world views and belief systems have on healing.

Given the connections between the creation of a narrative storyline and the phenomena of posttraumatic growth and wisdom, it would be helpful for research to document the relative benefits of creating a personal narrative. Domestic violence

agencies routinely offer support groups for victims of domestic violence. Well-being and posttraumatic growth could be measured at intervals (before the start of group, the end of group, and 3 months post group) for participants in two different support groups. One group could incorporate writing a personal trauma narrative while the other group would follow the normal protocol of psycho education and support.

There is also much to learn about the connections between healing and progression through moral, cognitive, spiritual, and racial identity development models. All of these development constructs present a process of moving from more limited and dichotomous viewpoints through an awareness of plurality and then back to a sense of a unified self and belief system within the context of paradox and complexity. Growth through these various models of development parallels the movement from external to internal locus of control, from a trust in outer authority to an internalization of wisdom and belief. There are rich possibilities for research to illuminate the connections between healing from trauma and the normal processes of developing moral, cognitive, spiritual and racial complexity of thinking.

Although the topics listed could be first fully explored through qualitative methods, there are many areas where quantitative studies could add increased focus and rigor. However, given the findings of this study, it seems most crucial that the study of healing after trauma be broadened to connect it to the larger study of human potential and well-being rather than just looking for symptom reduction and a return to baseline functioning.

## Conclusion

The healing narratives contained in this research comprise the central story that African American women, victimized by domestic violence, can tap into a process of healings that brings to them a deeper appreciation for themselves, for their lives, and for their spiritual beliefs, and that connects them to a greater sense of purpose and meaning. This process primarily consists of spiritual and cognitive development which leads to increased self esteem and an internalized sense of wisdom. Through the narrative accounts of what helped them heal and what hindered that process, the narratives contain useful information to inform and improve clinical services and interventions. As each of the women tells her story, vivid aspects of her life and personality come into full view. The stories present the wisdom that comes from each woman's "lived experience" and give the women the dignity of defining and describing their own histories of overcoming abuse. Each of the stories is individual and personal yet each fits within the collective history of African American women healing from abuse. There is pride and strength that comes from the telling itself. There is healing in constructing a narrative that traces the rebuilding of shattered lives. There is solidarity when others read and understand what it is to suffer and to heal. As Blossom so forcefully states; "It happened. Ain't nothing being made up. It's just the truth."

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## APPENDIX A: SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW

**Areas of interest to focus my responses and questions:**

What are the major characteristics of your healing process?

What factors have contributed to your healing?

What factors have made it difficult to heal and to move forward?

Describe the abuse that you suffered.

How did you make the decision to get out?

How did you make the escape happen?

Who or what helped with that escape?

Who or what impeded your escape?

What was the hardest thing about leaving?

What, if anything, has tempted you to return to the relationship?

Where have you gotten support?

What are the significant aspects of your upbringing, including social, cultural, religious, political, economic, familial, educational, and political influences?

Where do you find support for your healing journey?

What is your “life philosophy”; how do you make sense of the world?

How has your life philosophy changed over your lifetime? What events, people or ideas caused it to change?

How is your life different now than it was before the abuse?

What has been your history of abuse over your lifetime?

How do you think about or “define” yourself today? How has that changed over your lifetime?

What purpose do you see to life? To your life, in particular?

What are your hopes and dreams for the future? Are they different from what they were before the abuse? If so, how?

What makes life meaningful to you?

Do you have spiritual beliefs? How have they been changed by your experiences of abuse and healing?

What words would you want to tell another woman who was going through experiences of abuse similar to yours?

When did you first believe you were going to be “OK”?

Where do you want to go from here?

How does the experience of abuse still affect your life and your relationships?



## APPENDIX B

### **Informed Consent**

#### Project Title and Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled Healing and Posttraumatic Growth in African American Survivors of Domestic violence: An Exploration of Women's Narratives. This study will explore the dynamics of healing from domestic violence among African American women. Of particular interest will be the stories that women tell about their journey from trauma to healing and how these stories reveal the components of growth and healing.

#### Investigator(s):

This study is being conducted by Anne Dickerson, MA, LPC, NCC, Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Counseling at UNC Charlotte. She will be working under the supervision of Dr. Pam Lassiter in the Department of Counseling and Dr. Jae Hoon Lim from the Department of Educational Research.

#### Description of Participation:

You will be asked to participate in a series of three audio taped interviews that will focus on your own healing process from domestic violence and a wider exploration of your life story. The interviews will be unstructured and the interviewer will invite you to name what is important to you in the telling of your story. You will be given a written transcript of each interview and will be encouraged to comment on or correct the content of previous interviews.

#### Length of Participation

Your participation in this project will take between one and two hours of your time for each of the three interviews and they will be spaced over a period of two to four months. All interviews will be scheduled at times that are convenient to you. If you decide to participate, you will be one of four or five participants in this study.

#### Risks and Benefits of Participation:

The risks associated with this study are the potential for emotional distress from revisiting circumstances surrounding the abuse and the subsequent period of healing. There may also be risks which are currently unforeseeable. If the need for counseling support arises, the researcher will assist the participant in securing the needed support. The benefits of participation in this study are the opportunity to tell your story and to contribute to research that will provide additional information about the healing process. The final research product will include suggestions for therapeutic approaches and interventions to promote healing. It will also, hopefully, spur further research into the area of a holistic approach to healing from domestic violence.

Volunteer Statement:

You are a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you. If you decide to be in the study, you may stop at any time. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to participate or if you stop once you have started.

Confidentiality versus Anonymity:

The data collected by the Investigator will not contain any identifying information or any link back to you or your participation in this study. The following steps will be taken to ensure this anonymity: an alias will be assigned to you at our first meeting. Any third parties discussed in the interviews will also be given an alias for the purposes of transcription and written documentation. All notes, transcripts of interviews, and the research product itself will contain the assigned name rather than your real name. All sensitive information pertaining to this research, including your real name and identifying information, the recordings of interviews and transcripts of the recordings will be kept under lock and key at the home office of the primary investigator. At the end of the study process, the recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed. The results will be shared with you upon final analysis.

Fair Treatment and Respect:

UNC Charlotte wants to make sure that you are treated in a fair and respectful manner. Contact the University's Research Compliance Office (704.687.3309) if you have any questions about how you are treated as a study participant. If you have any questions about the project, please contact Anne Dickerson at 704-752-6547 or Dr. Pam Lassiter at 704-687-8972.

Participant Consent

**I have read the information in this consent form. I have had the chance to ask questions about this study, and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am at least 18 years of age and I agree to participate in this research project. Furthermore, I agree to allow the researcher to audio tape the interview session. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form after it has been signed by me and the Principal Investigator.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name (PLEASE PRINT)    Participant Signature    DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE