

## Episode 45 - Dr. Sharon Bowland: Strength and Struggle: Spirituality and Recovery From Interpersonal Trauma (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson. And I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcast you can now rate and write a review of each episode of Living Proof rate or write a review of a podcast just go to our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast) and click on the create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Part 2 of 2 episodes on spirituality and recovery from interpersonal violence in Part 1 Dr. Sharon Bowland a licensed clinical social worker and assistant professor at the Raimon Kent School of Social Work at the University of Louisville discussed the quantitative findings of her intervention study on the effects of a spiritually based intervention on recovery from interpersonal violence among older women Dr. Bowland found significant improvement in post-traumatic stress symptoms depression symptoms and symptoms anxiety as well as improvement in spiritual well-being. In this episode Dr. Bowland delves more deeply into her findings by presenting the qualitative results of her mixed methods study. Dr. Bowland discusses emerging themes such as forgiveness isolation and strength in the myths of struggle.

[00:01:56] Dr. Bowland also notes the utility of a feminist critique of the harmful and helpful aspects of faith traditions in relation to the experience of interpersonal trauma as well as the need to make space for discussions of religion in social work. Dr. Elaine Rinfrette licensed clinical social worker and adjunct professor at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with Dr. Bowland by telephone. So you have quite a few qualitative findings from your study and if you'd like to talk a little bit about those. One of the things I want to talk about is how women define spirituality and religion because there's interesting debate of course about how do we define these terms and there's movement within religion and spirituality research to put the terms that religion and spirituality together because unfortunately sometimes there's kind of a dichotomized thing that goes on where we talk about religion over here as something that's totally disconnected from spirituality and religion is bad and spirituality is good and spirituality is seen as something that happens outside of a congregation or community life. Well and that may be true for some people that it may be more of a personal experience with a higher power or with the sacred. But for many other people there is a connection sometimes between their faith their their tradition and their spiritual self. They find their spiritual needs are being met within a religious tradition. So it's important not to dismiss the religious tradition. I think that some source probably has a good take on this which is that you can think of religion as somehow overlapping with spirituality. Maybe if you think of it as a ven drawing diagram that religion is somehow has an overlap it may not be the same thing as spirituality but there are points of intersection.

[00:03:52] So to dismiss it particularly if you're working with a with a group of older adults might be really missing the boat because many of them do participate in religious kinds of institutions and that seemed to be true for women in my study. One of the things I found was that while I imagine that a lot of women would be disgruntled and have given up on their faith tradition that many of them had continued to be in a congregation even though they might have struggles or difficulties that they continued to be in it. So the majority of participants in my study had some kind of connection with a faith tradition. So that was important I think as social workers as practitioners we often dismiss people's experiences in congregations or were afraid to talk about them but particularly working with older adults. I think that's really going to be essential. There is research that says we need to try not to dichotomized Marljar and Haddaway have an interesting articles then

Bauer has an interesting article on this phenomenon. So I want to underline that I was working really hard in the group to try not to dismiss religion but to make space for talking about that in the context of your spirituality. I think another lens that we looked through was the women that I worked with my co-facilitator from the community who were excellent all had pastoral training they offer pastoral care training. Most of them had been theologically trained. Some of them were actually in a religious tradition. They were critical thinkers. They were people who had questioned their faith and questioned the belief that were being taught in a religious tradition.

[00:05:33] I had the privilege of training with some well-known feminist theologians and so was able to bring in a feminist critique as one way of thinking about scripture or thinking about your religious tradition. It was another lens if you will through which to look at experience. Not everyone would say that that's something that's meaningful to them but it provides a way to step back and say wait a minute is this something that I really believe in and what does that mean for my life and for my health. And one of the criteria that we used was what kinds of beliefs are harmful to people what kinds of beliefs are helpful that feminist critique is one way of beginning to look at that. So that's another through which we looked at. The work we were doing. Can you say something about your qualitative findings in regard to what the participants talked about. As far as their early and current trauma I was consistently surprised when they talked about trauma that they often talked about their early experiences. If we were to think about the focus that while their relationships their current relationships might be problematic from that many of them talked about what had occurred to them as children. And while the focus of the group wasn't on talking about her traumatic experience per se people needed to tell their stories and that they would talk about these in the context of know some of the topics we so focused on. For instance loneliness or anger or depression the sessions really focused on different topics like that and experiences that women had had really in their lives.

[00:07:08] One woman discussed her experience in being molested by a youth pastor Aland that when he had molested her and that came out that he was forgiven and he was being approached by the members of the church. And welcome back. And so on but she on the other hand was left alone. She had no support and she felt isolated. This was something that she's wrestled with for the rest of her adult life. She's constantly concerned about how she fits into the congregation and how she can take claim her power. She's working at claiming her power in a congregation. Susan currently she's director of the ad board and she still feels that she's struggling to be seen and to be heard. These are things that she's carried through her life challenges and struggles she's carried through a life and still trying to work that out in a congregational setting. Women who for instance grew up in a Catholic tradition who are still questioning whether they should have gotten a divorce. One woman in an abusive marriage with four kids who after 10 years divorced her husband still questions. And this is 53 years later whether she should have gotten divorced whether God sees her decision is wrong and this is a person who has a strong prayer life is involved actively in working with other women around their prayer life and providing spiritual care. This is a place in her life that she really struggles.

[00:08:40] Even though she has these other things that are really strengths that a theme that occurred over and over again which is that I guess in the beginning simplistically that women would have struggles in and they have strengths the same person wouldn't have struggles and strengths I bound out something different from what I was expecting that here's a woman who has a real prayer life and is really deeply devoted to God but is feeling still at 53 years later like she somehow did something wrong and other women express those kinds of sentiments too that they made decisions particularly at a time when society didn't honor or support women who were getting a divorce that they had made decisions to leave a marriage that was abusive and they didn't feel the support and now are still struggling with the ramifications of that for their spiritual life. So trying to give them an opportunity to discuss that to to open up about that to find the places this woman was able to

provide support to other women in the groups around their prayer life. But then they were able to provide some support to her around her long term experience of blaming herself around having left a marriage that was abusive. Did the women by and large participate in the same congregation they'd always been in. Yes. They seemed to be in the same congregation that they've always been in I would have thought more women would have left. One of the things that happened in the groups was there were some women who said oh you're telling me that you left your congregation and went somewhere else and tried to find a better place or a better fit. And now I'm going to take that as permission that I can do the same thing. I'll go and I will find a congregation that might be a better fit Riley said. Finding a congregation is like like kissing you have to kiss a bunch of frogs until you find a prince.

[00:10:35] You have to be prepared to go and look somewhere else if it isn't meeting your needs. I think some women had kind of by default landed in a place and they stayed there and it was like a wakeup call to say Oh nothing's happening here that really meets my needs. There was a dialogue in most groups about this congregation doesn't have any real supports for older women. A lot of times the focus is on how we can care for others. This whole a kind of acculturation into being caregivers versus finding out what people need and addressing their particular needs. Having an opportunity to sit down and talk about things that are really impacting their lives. So this sense of community that came from the group seemed to be a counter to this lack of community that they experienced many times in their congregations. So in that instance it certainly sounds like the group really gave them some important permission to think about what they needed and they actually did go and looked for it. Yes I think that if there's one thing I would say about the group that was really a key the groups was that people were able to give each other permission to talk about taboo topic talk about feelings and experiences that they were having their current relationship with the congregation. There wasn't an attempt to try and solve things for people. It was more of an opportunity to talk about these experiences and then to develop some new resources for trying to address them. So when and shared a lot of different resources that they had used.

[00:12:10] Like poetry or one woman was a yoga instructor and she shared breathing as a way to connect with kind of a sacred source. We in one group we brought in some women said they had never read any other version of the Bible. When the King James version. So we brought in a number of different versions of the bible and just looking at those people said like their eyes were opening up saying oh there are other ways of interpreting some of these scriptures and it was fascinating because they were saying well I'm going to go out now and buy this version or when or try something different. Whereas I think people just previously had been locked into kind of this is the way it is without questioning. All of a sudden they were given permission to question. So they were beginning creatively to think about what is it I need how am I going to get what I need. Very exciting. Can you talk a little bit more about the therapeutic group components and the therapeutic experiences that participants had. I think one of the things I haven't mentioned is the work around forgiveness forgiveness was an issue that seemed to kind of permeate the groups many of the groups and particularly forgiveness of self. There was discussion of forgiveness of others or perpetrators. But it seemed to me that the focus came back to this was a theme we've identified as we've done some of the qualitative analysis that forgiveness was something that continually emerged as something people needed or this capacity to let go to stop blaming self to move beyond events. These were all things that were very critical in the recovery process in Session 9.

[00:14:00] There was a ritual we enacted a ritual where women wrote on a piece of paper something that they wanted to forgive or something they wanted to let go of. We did not suggest that women should forgive their perpetrators. We had a dialogue or discussion about that. We presented different points of view on that. Women discussed the focus again I think I mentioned earlier on some scriptures and supports around forgiving as quickly as possible and what we know and working with trauma survivors is that often it's something that comes at the end or maybe doesn't

come at all that sometimes people have to move beyond events and let go some kind of forgiveness is possible particularly if you think of forgiveness as something that happens in a relationship oftentimes a perpetrator someone may die or they may be unwilling to acknowledge the harm that they've done. So sometimes forgiveness isn't possible and sometimes it's not possible because you are unsafe you're in an unsafe relationship. Maybe the current relationship where to forgive means things and put yourself in a vulnerable position. So we talked about this the kind of vulnerabilities that come with forgiving and also the kind of need to let go and move on. How do you move on with your life. What do you need to do. So this ritual helped to work with a piece of that with some component of their struggle that they wanted to let go of or that they were choosing to work with. And one of the most poignant stories that came out of that was a woman who had experienced being raped at her workplace a man had come in and hidden in the building. Everyone went home.

[00:15:45] She was the manager she was closing the restaurant and he came out and essentially raped her at knifepoint at gunpoint and she had talked about this in the beginning it in the clinical interview and hadn't said much about it in the group. But toward the end of the group's sessions she acknowledged that she had grown up as a Catholic. This was a woman who at the current time of the group was only recognizing nature is the place in which you encountered the sacred and had no formal connections with the Catholic church any longer. But she was adamant that she was struggling a lot related to her early upbringing her early kind of belief system. And in this case she had been taught that the virgin saints had died rather than become sexual victims. Many of the Saints were martyred due to some kind of sexual assault or kind of assault on their person. They refused. And so they died. And she had not struggled during the rape. This man had a gun in her head. She had submitted and blamed herself for many years about this and in this group for the first time she seemed to be able to acknowledge that she's held this deeply secretly held kind of struggle and began talking about how she was going to let go and stop blaming herself. But it was only when she named after she named it and she didn't name it during the clinical interview or in the beginning is that something that emerged during the group. So that's an example of of how long held early beliefs can impact current functioning.

[00:17:27] That's a really dramatic story and certainly says something about the power of the group that she was able to reveal that after all that time so types of spiritual resources used to address these issues or to deal with spiritual distress I think that's a good question because a lot of the things that we did worse things that emerge from resources women had in the group. And we also brought in things like we brought in poetry they brought in poetry we brought in prayers types of prayers or meditations that they might use again as examples of these are the kinds of things you used to meditate or to put yourself in an attitude of connection. There was a lot of talk about different books women consistently wrote down books that we brought in that had been helpful particular types of situations. There were a lot of him or songs that were shared. One of our co-facilitator had played the dulcimer and she brought in music as a way to talk about the value of music in spirituality daily devotional books. Different things were shared. It definitely was a creative endeavor it wasn't just a canned kind of this is the book it was based the real needs are situations of the people that were coming in.

[00:18:47] There was quite a bit of discussion about Mother Teresa and a couple of the groups Mother Teresa's diaries came out and there was a lot of criticism of her kind of loss of faith women in the groups that talked about this suggested that they saw her as a real lioness of the faith because she in spite of her doubts she persisted forward which is one of the kind of theological statements that people made that we persist in the face of our doubt in the face of our challenges. This is the kind of resilience steam that comes through that again that we're able to express their doubt but also to say we keep moving forward. We continue to try to seek the sacred and so there was a real sense of people seeking out God seeking out counsel seeking out connection. And this is in spite of some of the challenges that they were finding in their spiritual communities in their congregational

communities. So it was heartening to see how they persisted in spite of their challenges. I think another place of interest is that's related to aging is the place of their concern about their own adult children. Number of the women had daughters who were in relationships that were abusive and were very concerned about how to support them. I thought it was amazing to think about how little support they had had many of them in their own situations and how they were stepping forward to try and protect their grandchildren and trying to work with their daughters. Think about the legacy of abuse and violence. Of course the intergenerational connections I did see a real sense of concern and eyes being opened or eyes being opened around what was happening with their daughters and during the groups. Several of them had a meaningful interaction with their daughters around abuse and violence. I know I had one woman who had kept calling me to try to get her daughter hooked up with an attorney and was looking for resources and kept feeling like she could call me back and try to do that. There were also some resources in the community that people used.

[00:20:55] One of them had a spiritual base. Several of the women continued after the project to interact with a women's center a woman's place and that was very I guess it was a continuation of what they had begun in a group couple of our groups continued to meet after their participation in the study and the kinds of indications of the value of the groups for women. Yeah it really sounds like it opened up a lot of doors that either they weren't aware of or that they were given permission to look inside and see what was there that they had done that before. So I made a big difference to them. So how would you say that's your study provides implications for social work practice. Well I think there while this is a complex and important area I'm not sure where we are as a profession with discussing religious and spiritual issues and I work with clients I've spoken with. This is anecdotal information but I've spoken with I've had lots of dialogues with social workers about this and many people feel and I agree with them that we do not have enough training to really be approaching religious and spiritual issues with clients. That is I think that's accurate. We don't have enough in graduate school there's a collective spirituality working with spiritual issues with clients. A lot of what we do in that class is we tend to look at the different faith traditions and to value the diversity that exists in faith traditions. But we don't really begin to think about therapeutic interventions related to spirituality.

[00:22:30] There seems to be more permission with older adults from working with older males to talk about the spiritual and perhaps some of those of us who are in gerontology get extra training. But I think formally there's very little and we need to do some continuing education. I think it's going to be coming in the form of continuing education to become more comfortable with religious and spiritual issues. The Pacific issue that seems to be the hardest for my colleagues is that they don't know what to do when they encounter someone who has different beliefs from them. That seems to be a really key area of concern. Many of us as social workers don't have a formal tradition that we are connected with yet. I think it's important that we connect with pastors in the community who are let's say are in support of psychological needs of our clients and spiritual needs of our clients. There are people out there. I for instance worked with a pastor in a congregation who was very proactive in the community around violence against women. And there were numbers of women in her congregation numbers of couples and people in her congregation that were really supportive of that and that became a real haven for people who were struggling with those kinds of issues. And she could address those concerns and not say OK you know women have a choice about whether or not they leave a relationship. And many women don't want to leave their partners. I know I think there's research out there and some of our models really fall short when women don't want to leave or they're not prepared to leave their partners.

[00:24:09] Obviously if there is an issue of safety and it's a mortality issue in terms of risk of loss of life that's going to be an important decision. But for other people there may be ways that clergy can be trained to help them work through issues in a relationship. We need to have interdisciplinary models where we can work together to help people resolve their issues. We need to have places safe

havens for women to be when they're trying to sort through those kinds of issues. I can't think of a better place than the congregation to do that. So making connections with clergy in the community that are safe and then have some knowledge of abuse and violence and how to address family violence issues. It's really critical. I think also being prepared to talk about religious and spiritual struggles. Again trying to explore those finding colleagues that know how to work with that referring to other colleagues other community resources. When when those issues arise because they can be quite debilitating they can be issues that keep a person stuck in a marriage or in a bad relationship and they need to be people out there that we can turn to that will help persons sort through options and ways of rethinking. For instance scripture or beliefs early training that may not serve one of my participants in the study said I need to think about scripture as a mature person of faith not as a child. You know I'm left with some of these images and stories and I haven't really grown with them. I haven't. I need to transform some of my understanding to fit more with who I am now and with my life experiences.

[00:25:54] So that is something I think social workers can help ask some of those questions to help to stimulate that consideration that thinking a lot of what we did is ask questions that participants then needed to step back and take a look at their faith is what God wants for you. Do you think God wants you to suffer in a relationship for thirty five years and that God really doesn't want you to be safe. Is that your image of God. Is that who you see God as being women have really mixed images of finding out what people's images are. I think is a really important part of the healing process. Do you have an image of God that's left over from the age of 9. Is your God your Father you that there may be experiences that are really tied with God representing a father figure like the father we had and some of us some of us did not have a good father. There are real problems with God if God is visioned as a father. Another finding in the study that was unexpected was the number of times women talked about their mothers as abusive. One woman in the study reported her mother had been sexually abusive to her. But many women reported that their mothers had been emotionally abusive to them and that this is something again that may need some type of intervention in terms of just the spiritual or spiritual connection with God. How do we. Somebody said well I can imagine God as a mother but my mother was abusive to me too. So thinking about images of God that are outside of those kind of parent figures how do we go about that.

[00:27:40] So people need assistance with rethinking who it is that is the creator who is the sacred image. Maybe it's not a person anymore. Some women said that they imagined God as a as a rock or they had different kinds of God as a calming presence. God is living water different images that needed to be brought forward and that could be brought forward in an interaction with a social worker who is open to talking about the spiritual and understands how we get stuck in images that may not serve us in terms of being able to live a healthy life. You bring up some challenges for social work practice. I don't know if you study even address this but any thoughts about how social workers might begin to make that transition themselves to increase their comfort level in doing this. Well I do think that I've found what I needed to do was I needed to really talk with pastors. Of course I may have gone farther than some of us need to go. But I took courses in a seminary. I felt like I needed because really when people's worlds are turned upside down we turned to the sacred. And a lot of times on working with our clients we see them turning to something outside of themselves larger than themselves that can help them cope. And are those resources there or are they in place. Are they are they problematic are they unworkable just as a facet of humanity and are homeless. We need to know about as a way to help them. I have a list of congregations that I refer to. And I don't necessarily go to this congregation.

[00:29:23] I just talk about those are some places that people are open to understanding you as a whole person and they are willing to have a conversation with you not so much to dogmatically put you in a place where there's some particular point of view but to help you sort through your struggles I think especially social workers in long term care and places of working with older adults

ought to be able to talk about spiritual issues with their clients. I had a student who was working in a long term care facility and she came to see me she had worked with a veteran. He was a survivor of trauma and abuse during World War II. And he was in the process of dying and he was talking about going to hell which is a real spiritual crisis. And there wasn't anyone that she was aware of who could come in who had the training to deal with that facility brought in pastors from the community that may or may not have been trained in Clinical Pastoral Education. It appeared that they weren't meaning they hadn't had extra training in how to address issues. I know that chaplains do have that training and often are very good at dealing with diversity and dealing with different kinds of frameworks that people bring in to some kind of interaction. Of course they're in the hospital setting usually not necessarily available to us on a regular basis but finding people that can address those issues is really critical. So here she was in this facility and she couldn't find anyone. And so she wound up talking with this guy and she didn't even have a she's not religious.

[00:30:58] He was expressing his feelings about his own kind of coming out of his own faith tradition. I don't remember exactly what that was but she began singing hymns with him. He began trying to talk about something positive that he could hold onto. And she began singing hymns it was him and it seemed that having a conversation with him about his experiences in World War II. So that seemed to ease his mind. And it's a question of being willing to step up to the plate might be trying something and then if it doesn't work trying to seek assistance finding someone who's a spiritual counselor who's on the outside of your work that you can contact and talk with about these things. Reading good books out there. There's books on spiritually integrated psychotherapy by Ken Pargament Ken Pargament is one of the leaders in working with spiritual issues in psychotherapy or in counseling situations. I think that's a really excellent set of resources that you've given us. Well thank you so very much for taking the time to do this and giving a really well rounded and detailed discussion about your work. It's very important and I'm really pleased that you could be a member of our kind cast family. I'm really glad to be there. She did our interaction I thought there were some real biological yes there and I can see that too. You too. Great. Thanks so much. Should you take care of you. You've been listening to Dr. Sharon Bowland discussed the qualitative findings of her research on spirituality and recovery from interpersonal violence. Thanks for listening.

[00:32:36] And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.