

'Physician, Heal Thyself'

4. The Victim of Violence

BY JULIA FLACK AND JOHN FLACK
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Julia Flack writes:

In October 1995, while undertaking a routine task as a probation officer working in a prison, I was held captive and attacked by a notorious prisoner. Although I was rescued within a relatively short time, the effects of that attack will always be with me in some way. But what effect did it have on my family, and my husband's job as an archdeacon?

I need to start by giving you a glimpse of a professional disagreement between me and my husband. Only the night before the attack, at a dinner party, he had been saying that he did not think that offenders should be sent to prison – they should all be in the community. My protests led to a heated discussion. Perhaps the most realistic objection was that my husband, in the job he was currently doing, rarely talked to people who had been victims of serious crimes. Or if they had, they did not discuss it with him. His encounters were seemingly all with people who behaved in a respectful way to archdeacons. Even before that, he had been in middle-class parishes where most of his experience was with churchy matters, so that he did not have the chance to experience some of the more cruel facets of our society. When I got home after the attack, in a confused and angry frame of mind, some of that anger was directed towards him for the naïve comments he had made the night before. Is it because, as Christians, we are supposed to love everyone that people who are usually intelligent and sensitive have such an unrealistic approach to some situations? No, of course it isn't. It is much more complex, but I do think that issues of repentance and forgiveness in the light of our focus on the feelings of victims deserve serious theological thought.

Because my attacker was a notorious offender, the Press quickly got hold of the story and within an hour or two of the attack it was headline TV news. The next morning it was front-page news on all the national dailies. Members of the media camped outside my home for twenty-four hours and my family – who, as it happened were all at home – were subject to unwanted and intrusive media attention. What would my family have felt about their presence if I had been killed? The media reports described me as the wife of an archdeacon. No credit was given for the fact that I was a professional person doing my own job when it all happened. This is all the more ironic when I knew after three years of being an archdeacon's wife that there is not actually a role to fulfil unless you

personally want to make one (many do, and I admire them – am even envious – but somehow it did not fit in with me).

Being the focus of so much media attention meant that I was inundated with faxes, cards and telephone calls for ages afterwards. In the few days after the attack, this gave me such support that it made me almost euphoric, because I did not realize so many people thought so much about me. Many people who have suffered trauma have told me that the attention you get is welcome, but it is too much to take in. I also found that I was too tired and confused to respond properly, especially to telephone calls, and my family felt the same. Furthermore, for months afterwards people my husband met always asked after me. I felt quite sorry for the Archdeacon – for the first time in his life there was more interest in me than in him!

The time came for the children to go back to work – and to go our separate ways after facing such a trauma together was painful. I dare not contemplate the size of the phone bills! My own recovery tottered along slowly and with unimagined set-backs. I even had to put up with some very unpleasant hate mail. 'Funny', said my husband one day, when for me the trauma was particularly painful, 'I didn't think you would let a thing like this get you down so much.' Now he would never have said that to anyone he was helping in a pastoral situation. Why can't we face in our nearest and dearest the pain we can share with others on a professional level?

It is nearly two years since the attack happened. I still think about it every day in some way. I haven't discussed this article with my husband. I wonder what he will say about it.

John Flack's Response

On the day of Julia's attack I was out having a working lunch with another clergyman. We got into some deep issues and it was 3.00 pm before I arrived home. On my answerphone was a message from the Bishop's Chaplain asking me to ring him urgently. Like most archdeacons, I feared the worst – a church building on fire or a vicar involved in some scandal or other. So I couldn't quite believe what the Chaplain said to me – 'Julia has been attacked by an inmate in prison and is being attended to by doctors and the police'. I rang the prison and was told to stay at home and wait and that Julia would be brought home in a couple of hours.

The next few days are now a blur in my mind – the press and TV people camping in our drive; friends and colleagues of both of us calling to offer help and sympathy; Interflora ringing the doorbell twenty times in one day; the police and prison authorities interviewing Julia for long hours; the local GP calling to examine her. The last time a doctor had called to see Julia was twenty-three years before when our youngest child was born! It is no too much of an exaggeration to say that the two weeks following Julia's attack were the strangest time in the whole of our married life. As the confusion in my mind gradually began to clear, I found myself asking three questions:

1. *How had the attack on Julia affected our married relationship?*

At the time of the attack we had been married for twenty-seven years and had two grown-up children, both launched on their own professional careers and living away from home. Julia has been a working probation officer for the whole of our married life. During the early years while the children were small, she worked only part-time, but since 1983 has been a full-time officer. For Julia, 'full-time' means a ten-hour working day, five days a week. On top of this, she has run a home, cared for a family and taken a *full* part in the life of the three parishes where I served as incumbent. For my part, I have never been a 'day off' person – I have happily worked seven days a week in the parish, and enjoyed it. So our marriage has basically been a 10.00 pm to 7.00 am affair, with each of us giving 100% to our professional lives. Somehow our children appear to have survived and grown up as reasonable human beings! Julia's welfare has never had to be consciously at the top of my daily agenda. So when she came home from the prison following the attack I was not prepared for the fact that she would, for a time at least, be much more dependent on me than usual – dependent in the sense that she needed to talk at length, to cry, to be angry, and above all to be at home all day. This carried our relationship into uncharted waters and asked of me a closeness which I found – and still find – unnerving and difficult.

2. *What did I feel about her attacker?*

Throughout my ordained ministry I have visited prisons from time to time. What I had seen and encountered there led to the rash opinions I voiced at the dinner party on the night before Julia's attack – that prison was a waste of time and money and did nobody any good. So the attack on Julia brought me up with a start and made me think more carefully than I had done before. I had never met her attacker – now I saw his picture on the nightly TV bulletins and on the front of the daily papers. I began to be angry that this man had physically harmed Julia. At first I took my anger out on the Almighty. By the third day after the attack I remember going out into our back garden and shouting, 'Where in heaven's name are you, God?' I began to have negative feelings about her attacker and to look at his TV image with distaste and aversion. This – coupled with other events reported by the media around this time – led me to realize that it is simply not possible to treat people like him in the community, and that for the safety and protection of the rest of us, there must be the availability of prison. I am still shocked (writing twenty-two months later) by my continuing antipathy to Julia's attacker. As a visiting prison chaplain I always empathize enormously with prisoners. Julia's attacker has rocked me from my complacency and I find myself – at least some of the time – feeling unforgiving about him.

3. *Was my theological understanding of forgiveness changed by what had happened?*

There are a whole raft of issues here which deserve some theological investigation. What do I mean when I say I feel unforgiving about Julia's attacker? Is forgiveness a matter of changing your feelings about someone? Is it more objective than that? If I had been attacked, rather than Julia, I think I would have forgiven the attacker more easily. Why? And if her attacker should go to a prison chaplain now and say that he repents of his attack on Julia, what value could we put on such repentance? And what should our attitude be when prisoners convicted of violent offences claim that they have repented of their sins and been converted to Christ? Should we regard them as different persons, never to be violent again? After all, does not the New Testament say: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation – the old has become new'?

First, let me say that I am a wholly orthodox Christian believer. I accept the fundamental doctrine that through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Christ, forgiveness and new life are available to all. Whatever I may feel about Julia's attacker, I believe with my head that God will forgive him if he is truly penitent. In the end I need to believe that, for if God cannot forgive her attacker, then there is a chance that he won't be able to forgive me either. Among the many things I feel guilty about is the lack of care and attention I have given to Julia over the years, and that is why I wish her attacker had hit me, rather than her. There would have been more justice in that. The attack on Julia certainly brought my own guilt to the surface, and I cannot write about forgiveness for her attacker without also mentioning my own need.

And finally, what about the violent offender who turns to Christ, repents of his sins and renounces evil? How much credence can we give such conversions? Can we look on them and say, 'The old man has been put to death – behold the new has come'? Certainly we must treat with seriousness anyone who claims to repent. But it seems to me that *real* repentance, *real* change of heart, involves more than just imagining that the past is behind you. It involves a new and deeper self-knowledge, a more realistic understanding of self. If violence is part of your make-up then it is no use simply telling yourself that you will never be violent again. You need instead to understand what causes you to be violent, and to accept the fact that you will have to be vigilant about it for the rest of your life, and that you will require supervision from others in that task. There is no magic in repentance – just hard realism in making the change of heart last for the rest of your life. All those of us who work with converted prisoners have a duty to help them towards a sustainable repentance. We cannot expect God's grace to work in a vacuum. I know this from my own life. In the second half of life I am no better a person than I was as a teenager, despite much repentance and the constant grace of word and sacrament. But hopefully, I am a person with greater self-awareness and a more realistic assessment of where I stand with God. It is this more realistic assessment of where we stand with God that would be my hope for those who come to faith in prison.