

Here is a Hard Place¹*(a poem © Anne Morrell)*

What I have just read is the opening poem from Anne Morrell's *Bread and Stones: Genesis of a Soul*. 'When bread turns to stone, what is there left to live on?' This question lies at the heart of this honest account of personal experience of ministerial marriage break-up, brought to life in word, image and sound recording. Anne's book charts, through poetry, the journey of her soul as, tossed back on her own resources, she began to gather the pieces of her fragmented life and, in time, discovered a new way of being in the world.

Any divorce brings fragmentation and great loss, but the ending of a partnership where one is a clergyperson can bring special difficulties with it. For when a clergy marriage fails, the spouse loses more than the relationship: she or he may lose all or some of their income, their home, their status in the community, their church, their sense of self as the partner of a priest or minister. Parishioners may blame her or him for the "failure" of the marriage as they are invested in their relationship with the clergy person. The spouse may suffer ill health from the stress of it. She or he may feel betrayed not only by their partner but by the church and/or by God. One's whole framework of meaning can shatter.²

I conduct research in the area of clergy sexual misconduct. I came to the subject when I emigrated 15 years ago and was asked by the United Reformed Church to sit on a review panel for a complex case of clergy sexual misconduct that had wide ramifications for over 30 years. In the course of conducting that review, I took a position training ordinands at the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme (STETS) in Salisbury and became interested in how we educate priests in training about sex and professional ethics. It was clear to me that simply telling ordinands the rules was not effective. For the last few years, I've also been researching trauma in congregations with a team from the University of Exeter. In my talk today I will draw on both subjects – clergy sexual misconduct and trauma - for insights that I hope will be helpful in thinking about how we recover from the trauma of the end of a clergy marriage or partnership.

Although it is difficult to assess the full scope of the problem as much goes unreported, a number of studies suggest that the incidence of clergy sexual misconduct³ is quite high. In a survey of Church of England priests in the year 2000, twenty-five percent of the sample reported inappropriate sexual contact with someone other than their spouse.⁴ A study of American Lutherans indicated that thirty-seven percent of ministers were involved in some kind of clergy sexual misconduct.⁵ James Poling, one of the leading experts in the field, estimates that a minimum of between 10 and 20% of clergy have at some time

¹ Anne Morrell (2106) "Bread and Stones: Genesis of a Soul" (Lisnalarach Press), pp. 12-13.

² Ann Legg and Derek Legg (1995) "The Offender's Family" in Myer Hopkins, Nancy and Laaser, Mark (eds.) *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), pp. 140-154.

³ "Clergy sexual misconduct" may be defined as a person with ministerial authority engaging in sexual activity with parishioners or employees, sexualized behavior with parishioners or employees (jokes, touching, inappropriate gift giving), or sexual harassment. Persons with ministerial authority include but are not limited to: ordained clergy; commissioned lay persons, elders or deacons (ordained or lay); church school teachers, youth group leaders, church musicians or camp counselors, whether paid or volunteer. Such behavior violates the ministerial role and relationship and exploits the vulnerabilities of individuals and structures of religious organizations (AEPPP accessed 2008). See, also, URC (2006, 3-7) for a more fulsome description of clergy sexual misconduct and discussion of how such behaviour is a misuse of authority and power. See Benyei (1998, 59-63) and Friberg and Laaser (1998, xi) for further definitions of "sexual harassment" in this context.

⁴ Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (2002) *Time for Action: Sexual Abuse, the Churches and a New Dawn for Survivors* (London: CTBI), p. 84.

⁵ *Time for Action* (2002), p. 83.

sexualised a pastoral or mentoring relationship with an adult to whom they have a duty of care.⁶ Another expert, Karen McClintock, estimates that thirty percent or more of clergy are at risk of crossing a sexual boundary at some time in their career, the risk increasing with the number of years of service.⁷ Finally, a study in the United Church of Canada suggests that the rate of ministers' transgression of the sexual boundaries of someone in their care is twice that of secular counsellors.⁸

The impact of clergy sexual misconduct is far-reaching, like the ripples of a stone thrown into a pool, with not only "primary" victims but many "secondary" victims. The literature refers to clergy spouses as secondary victims but as I've looked at the impact on victims, I've come to believe that spouses particularly may be primary victims of the misconduct given the double betrayal of trust and severe losses involved. The role and power of the minister leaves people touched by the events questioning their faith and querying God's nature and agency. The impact on the victims can be severe, leaving them feeling that their soul has been "burnt out".⁹ Congregations can suffer long-term dysfunction, with trust in clergy compromised.¹⁰ Finally, with the Church's own house out of order, the ability of the Church to say anything to the culture about sex is severely compromised.¹¹

Despite the severity of potential consequences, historically the institutional response to clergy sexual misconduct has been what one survivor calls DIM: denial, ignorance and minimization.¹² Priests who denied all allegations were believed. Those who confessed and showed contrition were moved to another unsuspecting church or institution, or asked to resign. The primary concern has appeared to be the reputation of the Church and protection of the clergyperson, something we've seen in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse in the Church that has been going on in recent months. Fortunately this kind of institutional response is on the wane as denominations have begun to strengthen disciplinary procedures and policies.¹³

Why is clergy sexual misconduct so prevalent? There are a number of factors at play.¹⁴

1. Priests/ministers are **powerful** and **susceptible** people: powerful in that they have education and resources and the blessing of the Church on their leadership. Priests are powerful, yet they often don't feel powerful. Leading a parish (or these days more than one) is a complex matter more akin to herding cats. The pressures can be overwhelming, leaving clergy feeling powerless. But the fact remains: priests have power and there is a power differential between a priest and a parishioner such that a parishioner is not capable of consenting to a sexual relationship with the priest. In other words, what may feel like an "affair" between "consenting adults" to the priest is not an affair; instead it is an abuse of power and sexual misconduct.¹⁵

⁶ Poling, James N. (1991) *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press).

⁷ McClintock, Karen A. (2004) *Preventing Sexual Abuse in Congregations: A Resource for Leaders*. (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute), pp. 103, 106.

⁸ *Time for Action* (2002) p. 83.

⁹ United Reformed Church 2006. *Preserving the Integrity of the Body: Sexual Ethics within the United Reformed Church*. London: URC, pp. 9-10 citing Orr McDonald 2000.

¹⁰ *Preserving the Integrity*, pp. 12-21.

¹¹ Graham *et al* note Pope Gregory I of Rome's conviction that the integrity of the Church is part of its witness. Graham, Elaine, Walton, Heather, Ward, Frances (2005) *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press) p. 175.

¹² *Preserving the Integrity*, p. 13. Marie Fortune (1989, 120) identifies three dynamics in the institutional response that prevent justice being done: "shooting the messenger", misnaming the problem, and "blaming the victim", each of which is an "automatic, institutional response to the revelation of internal injustice" reflecting the patriarchal nature of the church.

¹³ Benyei, Candace R. (1998) *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems: Scapegoating, Family Secrets, and the Abuse of Power* (NY and London: The Haworth Pastoral Press) p. 60. See also McClintock (2004, 131-160) for a discussion of "policies that protect" and sample policies.

¹⁴ *Preserving the Integrity*, pp. 5, 8-9; *Time for Action*, pp. 84-91, 99.

¹⁵ Liberty, Patricia, "Why It's Not An Affair", <http://www.advocatweb.org/publications/articles-2/clergy/affair/>, accessed 10 April 2018.

Psychological susceptibility to sexual misconduct can arise circumstantially, such as when the clergy person's identity or agency is compromised or weakened or when their relationships are in trouble – in those times they are more vulnerable to acting out sexually as sexuality is a place where human beings come to a sense of identity and agency and express relational needs.¹⁶ Susceptibility also can arise from the clergy person's personality or personal history. Five relevant factors stand out: sexual shame, sexual confusion, developmental uncertainties, narcissistic damage and addictive compulsive behaviours, including sexual addiction.¹⁷ Most of these factors are rooted in narcissist damage. It's been observed that there are high levels of narcissism in clergy in general.¹⁸ Narcissism includes a proclivity to loneliness, low self-esteem, boundary ambiguity, grandiosity, chronic envy and the need for admiration. The priestly role masks the diminished inner sense of self; behaviours soothe an inner sense of discomfort and neediness. Many people have experienced some kind of narcissistic damage in their childhood; it's not unusual. But when the need to be needed is strong and the person's sense of self-importance is distorted, it can make one susceptible to sexual misconduct – using sex as comfort and affirmation.

2. in **stressful jobs**: Ministry is stressful. Priests may feel on call 24/7. Pressures come from the parish and from the wider church. The social status of the clergy and of faith has been devalued over the decades in Britain, which can also be demoralising. The Church of England priests surveyed as reported in *Time for Action* identified neediness, loneliness and stress as primary cause of sexual misconduct.¹⁹ Our theology can be unhelpful: self-sacrifice is lauded; Jesus gave his whole self on the cross. Family life can be denigrated: think of the passage in Matthew chapter 10: *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.* In contrast to this, it is good to remember the Great Commandment: *Love the Lord God with all your heart, mind, soul, strength; and love your neighbour as yourself.* Self-care as an expression of self-love is one of the most important skills a priest and a clergy spouse can develop.

3. working without clear **boundaries**: Boundaries are the containers for interpersonal relating that keep relationships safe. Ministry is full of boundary confusion and complexity. The place of work is unbounded: work is done in the church, in the hospital and residential centres, in people's homes, on the streets. The hours of work are often unbounded. Relationships may feel unbounded: People will think of the priest as their friend, although that relationship is a professional one that is one-way...directed towards the parishioner's needs. An additional complication for boundaries is that the priest's spouse and children will have "normal-like" friendships within the parish. Compare the work of a secular counsellor: it takes place for 50", during business hours, in a particular place; there is no confusion of that relationship with friendship. The boundaries are far clearer and easier to maintain. Although boundaries are more confused and complex for clergy, it is nonetheless always the priest's responsibility to set the boundaries. One of the boundaries necessary to the fulfilment of the priestly role is no sexual contact with people in their care and, if they are married, with anyone not their spouse. Sexual misconduct is a violation of the Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of Clergy.²⁰

4. without having received adequate **training**: A secular counsellor or therapist will have received long hours of training on the complexity involved in interpersonal relationships – things like transference, countertransference and projection. They will have been required to spend time in therapy themselves, to build their self-awareness and knowledge. In contrast, a priest will maybe have a course or two on

¹⁶ Grosch-Miller, Carla A. (2013) *Making sense of sex and faith*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Chester, pp.86ff.

¹⁷ *Time for Action*, pp. 86-89.

¹⁸ *Time for Action*, p. 88.

¹⁹ *Time for Action*, p. 88.

²⁰ Church of England. (2015). *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of Clergy*. London: Church House Publishing, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Clergy%20Guidelines%202015.pdf>, accessed 10 April 2018.

pastoral care which may make no or very little mention of psychological concepts. There is no requirement for an ordinand to have done the kind of self-searching therapeutic work required in secular counselling. Yet self-awareness, along with self-care, is an essential tool in ministry that enables clergy to keep the boundaries and navigate difficult situations. An awful lot of clergy sexual misconduct happens when the clergyperson has not been self-aware or aware of the complexities of interpersonal relating.

5. working without **supervision**: Clergy for the most part work unsupervised; secular counsellors, psychologists and therapists are required to have supervision. A supervisor is a trained professional who enables clergy to reflect on how their work is triggering or impacting them personally, so that they can respond more professionally. Supervision would be a safe place for clergy to discuss and work through sexual and relational issues that arise in their work. The Methodist Church now requires all ministers and deacons to be in supervision and to have it at least six times a year.

6. invited into **intimate situations**: Again, priests are trusted confidants, invited into people's homes and into their inner lives. Our spirituality and our sexuality are the most intimate parts of who we are; and they are linked. Both involve our sense of self, our capacity for relationship, our capacity for transcendence. Our sexual lives or sense of sexual being have been shown to be arenas for our spiritual development.²¹ The closeness of sexuality and spirituality leads to the possibility of people confusing intimacies, with a sense of spiritual closeness engendering sexual feelings.

7. operating in an **ecclesiastical culture** of sexual shame and secrecy that is built on a biblical ethos of women as sexual and domestic servants. That's a mouthful. When I teach in this area, the students survey what the Bible and the tradition have had to say about sex over the centuries. They quickly discover that biblical sexual ethics come from a culture where women were property whose primary role was to bear children. In those times a fertile woman had to give birth to five live children just to replace her and her husband. Men were allowed multiple wives, concubines and access to any woman who was not owned by another man – such was the pressure to encourage procreation that male sexual aggression was more than acceptable. The theology that grew out of those ideas about gender and sexual ethics can be very unhelpful in situations of sexual misconduct. In the book *Victim to Survivor*²², a number of women tell their stories. One clergy spouse reports being told to work harder at her abusive marriage (as if her husband's offenses were her fault); other victims were told to forgive and forget despite the lack of justice. Moreover, the Church's basic approach to sexual matters has been *don't ask, don't tell* as if our bodies and sexual being were shameful. If an ordinand or priest struggles with sexual matters, the last place they would go would be their training institution or an archdeacon or someone in the hierarchy. They know it would put their vocation in jeopardy.

8. living in a **contemporary culture** focused on personal fulfilment eclipsing notions of duty and fidelity. Western consumer capitalist culture promotes the self above all things and people in the church are just as influenced by it as people outside of the church. Where couples would stay together out of a sense of duty in generations past, that impetus is fading out. Now it's all about the individual pursuing his or her happiness, without counting the cost.

All these factors contribute to making it more likely for clergy to engage in sexual misconduct than, say, a secular counsellor. You may have noticed that most of these elements are institutional or systemic: they are not in the control of the individual clergy person. If we think clergy sexual misconduct is all about their moral failure, we miss the opportunity to understand the phenomenon, to seek to make the institutional

²¹ Timmerman, Joan (1992) *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* (NY: Crossroad); (2005) "Sexuality and Spirituality" in Sheldrake, Philip (Ed.) *The new SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press) pp. 575-579.

²² Poling, Nancy Werking (Ed.) (1999) *Victim to Survivor: Women Recovering from Clergy Sexual Abuse* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press).

changes that make misconduct more likely and to resource clergy to help them manage their human vulnerability. The system as a whole does not promote, resource or require the self-care, self-awareness and accountability that priests need to develop. Ninety-one percent of Church of England priests surveyed as to the causation of sexual misconduct highlighted the absence of awareness training in theological colleges and continuing ministerial education.²³

I share this information not to excuse sexual misconduct or to minimise the great pain it causes. Rather I share it to give you an insight into why things can and do go so badly wrong.

The worst has happened; the priest has engaged in sexual conduct with someone else and the marriage or partnership is ending. How does the betrayed spouse make it through?

Another poem © Anne Morrell:

*'Two shall become one'*²⁴

One cannot underestimate the extent of the trauma experienced by a spouse when a priest commits sexual misconduct and ends a marriage. The spouse has suffered betrayal and multiple losses. You know better than I that the Church often is not geared towards meeting the needs of a separated or divorced spouse and the children, compounding the sense of grave injustice.

It's a long journey, and the only way through it is through it. There are no shortcuts. But there are ways we can help ourselves and each other. I'm going to draw now on what we are learning about trauma and recovery through neuroscience and the study of traumatised communities.

The word "trauma" comes from the Greek *troma* meaning "wound", "hurt" or "defeat". Events that traumatise us are those that wound, hurt and threaten to defeat us. Trauma is a whole body response to the sudden, shocking loss of something that is meaningful. It is completely normal to be traumatised by the news of the end of a marriage. That said, trauma is highly personalised. One person is not traumatised by the same things or in the same way as another person may be. Our trauma responses are shaped by our life experience, including past traumas, and the specifics of the event and what they mean for us.

One can think of flow of life as a river flowing through riverbanks which represent our natural adaptive capacity; the flow goes up or down as we navigate the challenges and joys of life. When something traumatising happens, we burst through the banks as our adaptive capacity is overwhelmed. What is happening in our brain is that neuro-hormones are released, stimulating a fight or flight response. We have no control over this; our brain does this to help us to survive.

Here it may be helpful to look at how our brains operate. Since the 1960's it has been hypothesised that our brains show their evolution and can be considered to have three general parts. The three part brain can be conceptualised using your hand: arm/wrist ANS; thumb folded in limbic system; fingers folded over cerebral cortex:

- Autonomic nervous system, brain stem (*reptilian brain*)
Survival, breathing, eating, sleeping – if try to hold your breath, using your thinking brain, your ANS will kick in and force breathing.
- Limbic system (*mammalian brain*)
 - Emotion, motivation, reproduction and parental behaviour
 - Flight/fight/freeze responses generated

²³ *Time for Action*, p. 91.

²⁴ *Bread and Stones*, p. 37.

- Includes the amygdala – the early warning system where trauma is imprinted, the hypothalamus –involved in the secretion of neurohormones, and the hippocampus – involved in the consolidation of short-term memory to long term memory and is impacted by stress hormones released during a traumatic response.
- Cerebral cortex (*neomammalian*)
 - Language, abstraction, planning, perception; rationality, imagination, creativity

In ordinary life, when something happens our feeling and thinking brains are in communication to appraise/evaluate what has happened and make a decision about how to respond. But when we are under threat, this system is disrupted.

- ▶ A flood of stress hormones (including adrenalin and cortisol) is released for **survival** as
- ▶ the more primitive parts of the brain (brain stem; limbic system) are activated.
- ▶ The cerebral cortex, our thinking brain, is turned off so that we can act instinctually quickly. E.g., see something that looks like a snake in the grass, jump back...moments later may realise it's a hose.
- ▶ Our body **systems** stop communicating – we don't know if we are hungry, thirsty, have to use the toilet.
- ▶ We are cut off from our **resources**, and connections are **broken** (frame of reference, sense of self, body systems stop communicating).

In a situation of overwhelm, the adrenalin and cortisol that are coursing through our bodies lead us to flee or to fight for survival, and if we are not capable of fleeing or fighting, we may slip into freezing or dissociating...as a mouse whose body plays dead when it cannot escape a cat. All this happens with no input from our thinking brains; we cannot stop or control a traumatised reaction.

As a consequence, we may feel dazed, unable to concentrate, locked in feelings of anger, depression, anxiety, panic, despair. If we have had significant trauma in the past, the trauma responses may be stronger and more disturbing. But they are all completely normal and are our brain's way of keeping us alive in a time of threat.

The majority (roughly 80%) of traumatised people will recover normal functions in 4-6 weeks as their bodies metabolise the stress hormones and the normal system is rebooted. That doesn't mean that we will no longer be angry or anxious or depressed – we still have a journey of bereavement to make and that means times of anger, denial, bargaining, depression and in time moments of acceptance that become longer– but with the end of the first shock period and the rebooting of the nervous system, we won't be too debilitated to make that long journey.

In the immediate aftermath of the trauma, what helps to metabolise the stress hormones and recover:

- ▶ **OMG: Orient, move, ground** - Orienting to time and place; move (even small movement) reclaiming the agency of your body; ground yourself in your body
- ▶ **Agency – do something.** Agency hormones (serotonin) get activated and metabolise stress hormones. Eating, having a drink of water, mowing the lawn, taking a walk...any doing will help metabolise those hormones
- ▶ **Caring – connect with others; call a friend.** Being heard and felt releases metabolising hormones and helps bring the thinking brain back on line.

This is a remarkable fact and one of the most exciting things I have learned in looking at trauma. Our nervous systems are made to be responsive to care. We are literally made for love. When we have been wounded and someone else really listens and gets what has happened – affirming that yes, something

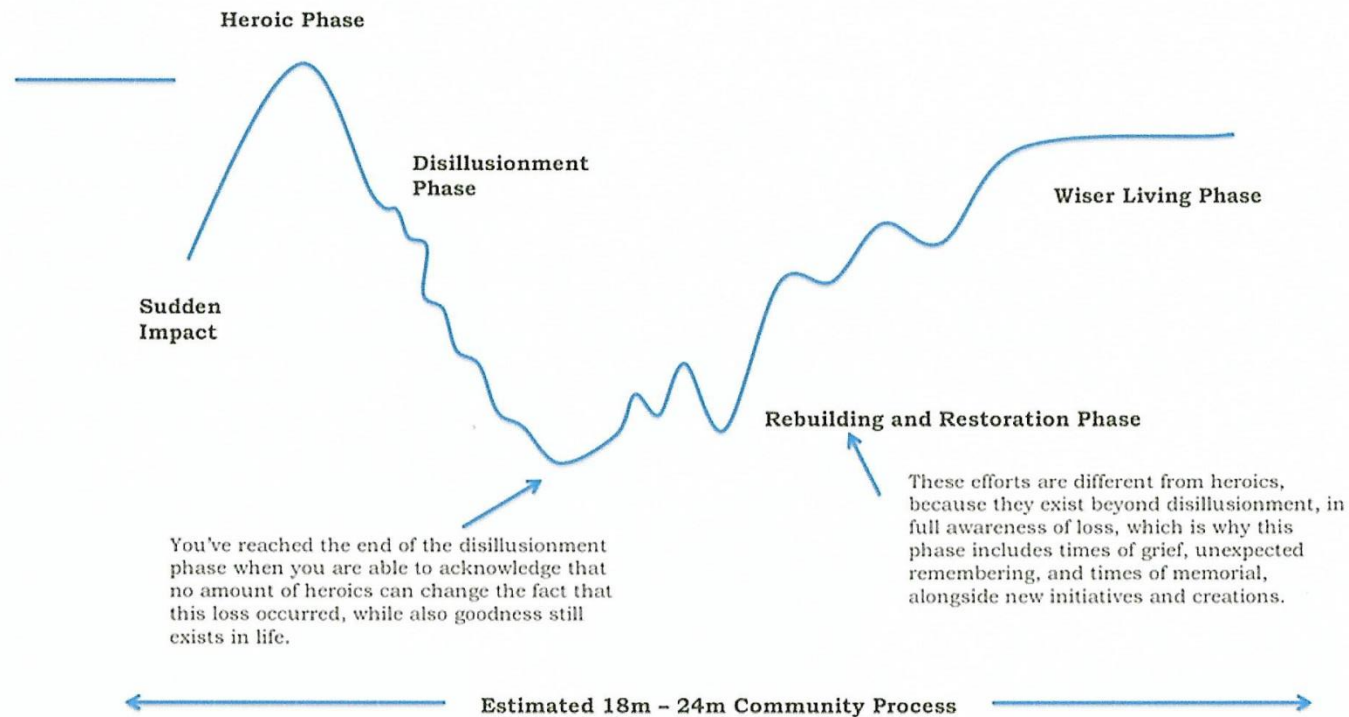
terrible has happened – our nervous system begins to reboot. Our inner lives and external circumstances start communicating. When we get active and establish or re-establish a loving connection with our own bodies and the world around us, our nervous system starts to reboot.

Not every traumatised person needs to be telling their story. The wisdom of trauma recovery is that **the survivor is the expert**. You will know what you need. Some people will need to tell the story, maybe several times, to begin to be able to put life back together. Others may need more solitude or physical activity. But as we move and breathe and connect with life, we begin to heal. What this means for we who have been traumatised or who befriend those who are traumatised is that we must listen carefully inside ourselves for what we need and to others for what they really need, rather than what we think they need or what worked for us.

What trauma experts are telling communities that have suffered natural or human-made tragedies is that there are three C's to recover: Calming – doing what you need to still yourself (breathing, listening to music, walks in the woods); Communicating – being able to have the information you need and being able to say what you need to say, including expressing anger and sadness; and Caring – making connections. I've been in the UK for 15 years and it wasn't until I started looking at trauma and recovery that I realised the great wisdom behind the British cuppa. Every time something happens, what do we do? We put the kettle on. It is calming and it is caring. It is an act of agency. It is an antidote to the isolation and broken connection that come with trauma.

Those who work with traumatised communities observe that there is a shape to the journey of trauma recovery. It looks something like this:

Phases of Collective Trauma Response



You've reached the end of the disillusionment phase when you are able to acknowledge that no amount of heroics can change the fact that this loss occurred, while also goodness still exists in life.

These efforts are different from heroics, because they exist beyond disillusionment, in full awareness of loss, which is why this phase includes times of grief, unexpected remembering, and times of memorial, alongside new initiatives and creations.

Whilst this charts the journey of a community, whenever I use it in my teaching, someone will come up to me later and say how helpful it has been for them in making sense of their personal journey through a traumatic time. I've found it helpful myself in making sense of personal and family tragedies.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is that it takes time – maybe 18-24 months, maybe longer; everything depends on the exact events and what resources the person has. But that is not prescriptive: the chart is not meant to tell us how it's going to be, but to be a conversation and discernment tool to help think through where we are. The journey is long because huge losses have been incurred; grief must be navigated. **We must be patient and kind with ourselves.** The first direction of movement is downwards, encompassing despair and disillusionment. One reaches the bottom and starts back up as one accepts what has happened and that it cannot be changed but that there are still good things in life. This realisation cannot be forced; it is something that happens in time. Note the shape of the line in the restoration and rebuilding phase. Sometimes it is two steps forward, three steps back. You will have setbacks; it's all part of the process. But the process leads towards greater self-understanding, wisdom and the capacity to hold a realistic hope and utilise the resources we all need to live. This is a journey through the valley of the shadow from which one can emerge intact and maybe even with a renewed sense of what one's life purpose is. In the book *Victim to Survivor*, all the women emerge stronger and wiser and some with a vocation to support others or work for justice for victims.

Another poem © Anne Morrell:

*I went on a pilgrimage*²⁵

Tragic, unfair, painful things happen in life. There is no escaping it. And they truly are tragic, unfair and painful. How we learn to live with those things, and make meaning of them, is a journey of discovery that is sometimes frightening, sometimes exhilarating, often plodding putting one foot in front of another, simply doing our best.

God bless our journeys, each one as unique as each one of us is. May they bring us to a place where we can know joy despite pain and offer encouragement to one another. God bless the work of Broken Rites. And God bless every one of us.

²⁵ *Bread and Stones*, pp. 84-85.