

Responding to trauma

**As religious leaders, we cannot ignore what the events surrounding the confirmation hearings are doing, especially to our bodies.**

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

October 5, 2018



So the Brett Kavanaugh vote is expected to go through, and I'm feeling *all the emotions*. Do I mind that a conservative judge is being sworn in to the Supreme Court? I deplore Kavanaugh's record on torture, his opinions on presidential authority, and so many other things, but I certainly didn't expect a liberal judge,

since Republicans are in control of the House and the Senate. This is what happens when one party wins the House, Senate, and Presidency.

Yet, even with these political realities, as religious leaders, we cannot ignore what the events surrounding the confirmation hearings are doing, especially to our bodies.

**Emotions are contagious.** We are emotionally in tune with one another. Our brains are wired that way. When we sing a peaceful hymn, we can feel the ripples of peace. When we are at a horror movie, we feed off one another's fear. If we're at a hateful rally, we can feel the anger and resentment. I accessed all these emotions this week.

My background—I'm short, about five-foot tall and curvy. I am not a physically demanding presence (which always surprises people when they meet me). I was raised evangelical in the 80s, where kindness and submission are most praised among women. Men used to grab me. More times than I can count—friends, fellow students, strangers on the streets would startle me and then laugh. I never imagined telling someone about it, because it usually happened in public, in classes, in front of teachers, and no one ever did anything about it except laugh at my fury. Add to that, I operated under an evangelical belief system that taught that men were lustful and couldn't help themselves. It was the woman's job to make sure the man wasn't tempted and to fight them off. Because of this conditioning, in spite of the fact that I wore all of my clothes two sizes too big, I thought it was my fault.

This history of assault is not only my truth, but the truth of many women. Women and men carry these realities in their bodies—their step father, their cousin, their uncle, their friend, or a complete stranger has grabbed, attacked, felt up, or raped them. (One of the most difficult things about being a pastor is the reality that incest in our country is *much* more common than I ever knew.) If you are in a room with four women, chances are that an assault has happened to at least one or two of them.

**When these traumatic events occur, about 20% of the time, they don't get filed with the rest of our memories into the dark corners of our mind. They are present and stay on top of the desk. Then the traumatic events intrude on our daily lives through our nervous system with an accelerated heart rate, cold sweats, rapid breathing, palpitations, hypervigilance, and**

**jumpiness.** I usually sweat and shake. We respond with survival instincts of fighting, fleeing, or freezing. (My friend, Jesse Quam, is a therapist. He sent me [The Body Remembers](#) which helped me understand all of this.)

I had a consulting call during Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony, so I missed it. I tuned in to a few minutes of Kavanaugh's opening statements. I felt fear when I watched his rage as he testified. The fury of ten men rippled through my nervous system, as his attack-dog face reminded me of being hit. His palpable fear put him in attack mode, and my body responded with the fear of being attacked.

A couple of days later, I was listening to [The Daily](#) as I worked out, and they played audio excerpts of the women who confronted Senator Jeff Flake in the elevator, with all of their emotions. And again, I felt the fear and anger—their fear and my fear, their anger and my anger became this stew. In some ways, we were not just recalling those past events. Our body chemistry was physically reliving our attacks as present realities. I continued to listen as I stair-stepped furiously, trying to get some endorphins (happy chemicals) in my brain.

The next day, I was flossing my teeth, listening to NPR, when I heard the audio of President Trump mocking Dr. Ford. The audience laughed and clapped, and the painful emotional ripple happened again. I began sweating and my hands began shaking, as I saw flashes of the faces of men who jeered as I was groped.

I'm sharing the particularities of my situation, not because I wish to be an eternal victim in your mind, but because I'm a flourishing survivor. Also because we have to remember that no matter where we might be on the political spectrum, we are surrounded by people who are physically reliving their traumas, and their emotional and chemical responses may be taking over their daily tasks.

**How can we help people in the midst of this? What can we do for ourselves, if we're working through this?**

I write about this in my book, [Healing Spiritual Wounds](#), so you can explore it more there (the chapter on sexual assault is the last one), but here are a few things. Of course, I'm a pastor, not a therapist, so I'm writing from my limited vantage point. It's good to go to therapy.

**First, notice what's going on in your body.** We usually want to distract ourselves with drinking, shopping, or watching TV. But try to sit in silence, breathe

deeply, and think about how body is responding from head to toe. Do you have a headache? Is there stress in your neck? Are there knots in your stomach? Is your body warm? Breathe and try to relax your muscles as much as possible. That might mean adding some pressure on your stress points, or stretching your muscles, or yawning (fake yawns lead to real yawns).

**Try to name the physical reactions you were having.** Were you shaking? Crying? Did you have an explosive argument with your spouse? Did you inexplicably leave the office or run from a conversation? Did you get frozen and feel like you couldn't do anything? Name the reactions out loud or write them in a journal (a little bit like I did above).

**Think about what made you react.** Was it a soundbite? Was it a FB meme mocking Blasey Ford? Was it someone saying that women lie about assault? Again, say it out loud or write it down.

**Identify what trauma your body is reacting to.** Often, if we can tell the story, we can have some power over it. If you can't tell the story to someone, try to say it out loud to yourself or write it down.

**Remember the truth of God's love.** What I find difficult right now is how many women's stories, voices, and pain are being discarded as political manipulation. We are being told that our stories may be credible, but we don't matter. We must affirm God's love for us in the midst of this. Breathe in, "I am God's beloved." Breathe out, "In whom God is well-pleased." As you breathe, imagine God's presence surrounding you.

**Affirm our bodies.** As you experience the chemical reaction of that violence against your body, you will need to affirm its worth. Christianity has not always been good with women's flesh (or flesh in general), yet we do have some affirming traditions. Anointing is a long-standing religious ritual used to convey courage, strength, and power. Anoint your body, remembering, "I am a child of God, made in God's image, my flesh is good." If you need a powerful example of how to affirm your flesh, read Baby Sugg Holy's sermon in [Beloved](#).

Again, many people are feeling the rippling emotions of trauma right now. Whether it's affecting you personally or someone in your congregation, it's a good time to be gentle with one another, to affirm our voice, our stories, our flesh, and God's love toward us.