

NOT OVER IT, NOT FIXED, AND LIVING A LIFE WORTH LIVING: TOWARDS AN ANTI-ABLEIST VISION OF SURVIVORHOOD

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To all survivors today: your time is precious, your energy is precious, you are precious. Your love is precious, your relationships are precious. And I don't mean precious like cute. I mean precious like invaluable like massive like power like transcendent. —Hannah Harris-Sutro

Healing is dangerous work. Healing is about going into the struggle. When trauma happens, we go away from that space in our body where it happened—and when we go into it, it hurts so much as it wakes back up. I'm interested in creating the place where the body can remember itself, even though it hurts to do it. Where feeling better is part of it, but it's not the goal. Struggling better is the goal. —Susan Raffo

UNFIXED, EVADING CAPTURE

Recently, I was auditioning a new therapist who, during the intake interview, asked me in all sincerity, “So, do you think the therapy you got in your twenties resolved your childhood sexual abuse?”

I stared at her with my mouth open for a solid thirty seconds.

I'd had such high hopes for that therapist. She was a woman of color with a Cesar Chavez quote on her website; she worked at the local healing justice center. She said she was “trauma-informed” and listed working with survivors as one of her areas of expertise. That was good, right? Plus, she was cheaper than the therapist I'd been seeing for seven years, who was one of the smartest, weirdest healers I'd ever met but still lived in Oakland, where I'd been priced out of. Maybe seeing a therapist in person, not via Skype, would be a good thing? But here I was, in her office, with my mouth open and the rug pulled out from under me.

As it turned out, we had some really different understandings of trauma, healing, and survivorhood. She really thought that childhood sexual abuse was something to manage, something you could get over and “move on” from, a cut you stitch up with butterfly bandages. I thought, *My abuse is not something to resolve, a number on a pain scale, a simple wound that can go away with Neosporin. My trauma is a fucking five-act opera, a gorgeous and tough dress made out of my best scars, a seed library, a Gutenberg Bible, a thunderstorm to climb and buck in a small plane, a mountain range, a supernova to map.*

When I composed myself, I managed to say something like, “I don't really think of it like that—I think that I'm on a lifelong journey of learning from and healing my trauma. You know what I mean?” *You know what I mean, right?*

She smirked at me with that *Poor dear, sure, let her think that* look. And I didn't go back. That therapist wasn't rare. The idea that survivorhood is a thing to “fix” or “cure,” to get over, and that the cure is not only possible and easy but the only desirable option, is as common as breath. It's a concept that has deep roots in ableist ideas that when there's something wrong, there's either cured or broken and nothing in between, and certainly nothing valuable in inhabiting a bodymind that's disabled in any way.

It's also an idea that's seductive to survivors. We want the pain, the trauma of surviving sexual abuse or assault to be over. Who wouldn't? What's the problem with that?

Survivorhood is everywhere, yet it's barely spoken about. As I write this essay, the #MeToo movement—a movement encouraging survivors to break our silence and name our survivorhood, first created by Black survivor activist Tarana Burke in 2006, and then Columbed but also re-spread by several white North American actresses and media figures in late 2017, which then took on a life of its own as it was claimed by many everyday survivors who spoke, thought, argued, and organized around survivor issues—has toppled senators and many other famous white men but, more importantly, has created an explosion of survivors telling our stories. The thing I like most about #MeToo is how it, for this media moment, at least, has transformed the experience of being a survivor from one that so often feels freakish and lonely, like I am the only weird one who didn't have a happy, safe family and wants to talk about it, to one where the truth that rape and childhood sexual abuse are the norm, that most people are survivors, is out there.

If you want to argue with me that the CDC and the FBI has said that a mere thirty-three percent of adult assigned-female-at-birth people and twentyfive percent of children are abused, so surely I'm wrong about the "most people are survivors" part, I ask you to consider that I didn't report any of my rapes to the cops and neither do most people I know. There are many forms of sexual abuse, violation, and violence not considered "real rape" by carceral systems—from specific kinds of sexualized abuse that disabled kids face in our families, schools, hospitals, and treatment facilities to ritual abuse, from sexual abuse of Indigenous people in boarding schools and foster care to the constant transmisogynist sexual harassment faced by trans women of color to sexual assault experienced by sex workers. There are new studies that suggest that gender nonconforming children are at greater risk for sexual abuse than cis children—a 2011 study of more than 1,000 transgender people found over fifty percent had experienced sexual violence at some point in our lives, and of those who were adult sexual violence survivors, seventy-two percent had also survived child sexual abuse.⁵⁴ Going back to the Black Codes and the Indian Act, the criminal legal system was set up on purpose to minimize what got named as sexual abuse and how much sexual abuse got reported and prosecuted, and limited the tiny percentage of what sexual abuse does get taken seriously to people with less privilege who the system wants to lock up and deport. Throughout my life as a disabled, queer femme of color, I have been surprised when someone I dated or hung out with wasn't a survivor—it was like spotting a unicorn. I've heard tell that it's not much different in straight white land. Denial of abuse's omnipresence—the belief that sexual abuse must be a rarity, happening someplace else by some fundamentally terrible person who looks obviously scary, rather than many violations created by complex, charming, gifted people we know and love, happening right next door—is a big part of what allows childhood and adult sexual abuse to keep going.⁵⁵ The latest iteration of #MeToo created space where it's known that the weaponization of sex is not a rarity or an accidental tragedy that befalls a sad handful of people; it's a system of oppression that is in the water and the air. It's also—yes, indeed expanded the understanding of what rape is to include forms of sexual violation that don't count as "real, classic rape," because survivors are finally having space to voice our own experiences of sex. And although many backlash driven writers decry this, I am incredibly glad for the bravery of survivors expanding the conversation about what sexual abuse and violence are.

All of this knowledge is dangerous information. If it got out all the way, the world would split open. And it has been, and is. As survivors, we often feel powerless, and we

often do lack power—when we can't make an abuser be accountable, when the criminal legal system is racist and whorephobic, when we are the ones who are punished for surviving. But we are also supremely powerful. Our stories of rape and survivorhood are that thundercloud, that nebula. They are huge and awesome, and if they're told, can bring rape culture to its knees.

Rape culture knows this. So it creates many things to manage and suppress survivor knowledge, to tamp it down. The survivor-industrial complex (SIC) is the web of institutions, practices, and beliefs that works to manage, contain, and/or offer resolution to survivors of sexual violence. Its reach is huge, stretching from nurses administering rape kits to YWCA therapists running twelve-week group therapy sessions, from the six-week "solution-focused" therapy that is the only kind available at the sliding scale clinic to the cops and Das who decide who counts as a "perfect victim" and who's too slutty, poor, Black, brown, crazy, or trans to deserve victim compensation funds. Its management and suppression of survivor truth and rage works much like the nonprofit-industrial complex—which many people work within with the best of intentions, and which was also invented to manage and suppress dissent during the Nixon years.

One of the biggest ways the SIC manages all those messy, powerful survivor emotions and truths is by deploying the idea of the "good" or "fixed" survivor. The "good" survivor is the hypothetical survivor you see on a talk show or a soap opera, who got three months of therapy and is all better: the abuse is a vague memory, there are no visible scars—physical or emotional—and they don't talk about the invisible ones. They have "moved on." They don't talk about the abuse or need access or accommodations about it. They don't bring their abuse into their relationships, jobs, families. They don't bother you with it. This kind of "good" survivor is someone I've never met in person, because they don't exist.

In contrast, the "bad" survivor is the one who is still "broken." Still freaking out, still triggered, still grieving, still remembering. Still making you remember. They're annoying, aren't they? No one wants to date them. They cry, they have panic attacks, they can't get out of bed, they're not "over it." And because of all of that, they're weak, aren't they? They must be weak to not be fixed. All that therapy and they are still not "better"? God. They see the secret inside of the world that is rape culture—every day, ever present and unspoken. They talk about it. "Bad" survivors are mostly absent from pop culture and everyday life yet also ever present—they are the femme with "baggage" you scroll by on Tinder because they look like too much drama, the person who kills themselves who is described later in sorrowful tones as "broken but now at peace," the bitch, the hysteric, the dyke.

The world tells us these stereotypes in a million ways, but we also tell them to ourselves. We torture ourselves with them, and also—let's be real— they're seductive. They make things feel simple. If we believe that some survivors are just too annoying or bitchy, too out of control, we can feel better about ourselves by promising we're not like that and distancing ourselves from those bitches.

The promise of cure, of a simple way to be more at peace, that lies inside the "good" survivor is tempting. Of course we want to feel better. As a young survivor, I was in torment every single second of every day, and I wanted not to be. I wanted to fuck. I wanted to stop being so gone from my body that the whole world looked like a TV screen. I wanted to not feel like broken glass. I wanted to be able to think or talk about something other than my incest memories 24-7. I wanted those things because it hurt, and because of the rolled eyes,

imagined and real, of the people around me who were impatient at me going on about all that depressing stuff all the time.

There was more. I wanted to interrupt the cycles of abuse and intergenerational violence in my family. I wanted to grow up to have relationships that weren't violent. To know pleasure, not martyrdom. Most of all, I wanted to be happy, and I wanted to know freedom, joy, and liberation. Even though, and especially because, I had no idea what those things actually felt like.

These are powerful, fierce survivor freedom dreams. Dreams like these are where I see many survivors in our fiercest power as revolutionaries. There is revolution in survivors remembering the omnipresence of rape, insisting that we remember shit right, and using our deepest dreams to create new worlds that we have never seen.

There's nothing wrong with wanting less pain, or a different experience of it. There's nothing wrong with wanting to transform generations of passed down trauma. But what gets more complicated is when those desires bleed into the ableist model of cure that's the only model most of us have for having more ease and less pain. That model and its harsh binary of successful and fixed or broken and fucked is part of what contributes to suicidality and struggle in long-term survivors. I've seen survivors, including myself, struggle with feelings of failure and self-hatred when we're thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, and older and we're still triggered, grieving, and remembering—when we haven't reached that mythic "cured place." In writing this essay, I want to speak to how the thing that keeps me alive and thriving is my work as a disabled survivor to undo pick apart that binary and to name its poison as ableist. To bring together crip and survivor struggles and knowledge. To map a new model of survival where my scars and my still being crazy in adulthood are not signs that I've failed.

CURE, CRIPS, AND SURVIVORS

My friend Blyth Barnow is a white, working-class, femme survivor priest. A couple of months ago, an Instagram photograph she posted blew me away. It was an image of big flip-chart paper in a workshop, with writing that said, *How do survivors' skills translate to ministry?* Underneath, there were words like *boundaries, finding healing moment in texts, nuance, destigmatizing mental health, process of finding healthy self-worth, and self-grace.*

Skills. Survivors' skills. Survivors as people who are good at things. Survivors as leaders, because of and not despite our survivorhood. Blyth's post was the first time in my life, after more than twenty years of being deeply integrated in survivor communities, that I'd seen survivors described as being good at things. As having specific skills that emerged from our survivorhood.

There is a deep parallel between the way being a survivor is seen only as a fault, never as a skill, and the way ableism views disabled people as individual, tragic health defects (if you doubt me, think about how disabled fetuses are never referred to as disabled fetuses but as birth defects). When I lead disability justice workshops, one of my toughest teaching moments is always to get people to step out of the deficiency model of disability. When I talk about disabled wisdom and skills, or about disabled people as having histories, cultures, and movements, the blank looks in the room kill me. It's damn near impossible for many abled people to think of disability as anything other than an individual tragedy and a state no one would choose to inhabit.

In the deficiency model of disability, there's nothing good about disability, no skills or brilliance. We are just a fault to be cured. The only good crip is a cured crip, one who has ceased to exist. Cure is healing is elimination.

And cure infects survivor dialogues. Survivors longing for healing hit the medical-industrial complex in search of it, only to confront the idea of cure as the only way to heal from abuse. This belief promotes the binary of fixed or broken, and shame. This binary stops us from being able to imagine survivor futures where we are *thriving* but not *cured*.

When I was a young survivor, I would ask my counselors when "it" would get better, when "it" would be gone. By "it" I meant something between "having flashbacks every day and feeling constantly in trauma land" and "having any trauma memories or experiences at all." I was horrified when one gifted and lovely therapist gently told me that "it" would never fully go away, but my life would and could transform so much I wouldn't even recognize it, and my experience of pain, trauma, and abuse memories would also transform.

My counselor was trying, as best she could, to convey what I would later learn through years of listening to and shape-shifting chronic pain: our experiences of pain and trauma can completely transform when we have access to community, tools, support, and different stories and narratives.

But as that young survivor, the vision I was given from most sources—including some therapists and feminist abuse books—was this: if I performed healing correctly, by the time I was thirty or forty, I would be a survivor who had no visible signs of survivorhood. One who wasn't crazy anymore, who never panicked, never jumped when she was touched the wrong way, who was never brought to her knees by anger or grief or sadness or fear or freezing. The abuse would be gone, and I would be good as new, or as good as someone who had never been abused. It was a vision of survivorhood that mimicked the "good" survivor archetype, albeit with a feminist, anti-oppressive coating.

In this worldview, if I ever had flashbacks, trauma, pain, or triggers, that meant I was failing. At survivorhood. At healing. At fixing it. At "breaking the cycle." This was my life's work, the goal that everything else hung on.

And, then and today, I see survivors struggling with feelings of deep shame that we are not "over it." I see survivors in our thirties, forties, and beyond getting thrown into suicidality when we're triggered, again—not just over the trigger, but because we're beating ourselves up over still being "unfixed." When a new memory or a new experience of trauma or grief comes to us, we think we are failing.

I believe that the answer to these questions lies in bringing a disability justice analysis of ableism into survivor culture. Survivors of sexual or physical abuse who have madness, complex PTSD, multiplicity, or other trauma-rooted psychic differences are part of disability communities. The same skills we have developed as crips, of asking for collective access and resisting ableist ideas, can be a vital part of how we create our reparations and our salvation as survivors.

When we are not fixed, not over it, still triggered, still feeling, still healing in our forties, sixties, and beyond, we are not failing. We are remembering, and we are learning from our survivorhood. We are moving from a model that gasps at our scars to one that wants to learn as much from them as possible. Traditional ideas of survivorhood think of "remembering" as a time-limited process that happens upon recovery of abuse memories and then is over. But in another survivor universe, we are continually expanding—we are always remembering, and remembering again, and thinking about what our wounding means. We are mining our survivor experiences for knowledge.

And I ask the dangerous question: What if more survivors—and the therapists and healing spaces available to us—had a Mad, crap idea of healing, one that was not about cure but about increasing possibility, about learning, about trying to love all our survivor madness, and about shifting our communities to ones where crazy was really okay? What if there were models for long-term grief? Where we had more space in our jobs and homes where it was okay to grieve—like long-term lots of paid grief time off? What would it be like if our communities really, really believed that grief was sacred and valuable, a source of life-giving knowledge, instead of a pain in the ass? What if bad survivors were good survivors? What if all survivors were beautiful in our mess?

And, even more dangerous, I want to venture: What if some things aren't fixable? What if some things really never will be the same—and that might not be great, but it might be okay? I believe in healing and I believe in it happening in ways that are mind-blowing and far beyond what anyone thought possible. But I also wonder, what if some trauma wounds really never will go away—and we might still have great lives? Believing that some things just aren't healable is anathema to most everyone, radical and not. We believe that with enough love and wonderful techniques and prayer, anything can transform. But what if some things can't?

Eli Clare writes about trying to heal his trauma from being tortured and abused by his father:

Twenty years ago I walked through the world detached from body-mind and emotion, skittish, fearful of human touch, hearing voices and seeing shadows, plotting suicide. When it became clear that I had to deal with this damage or end up dead, all I wanted was to be cured. I spent years in therapy and bodywork. I practiced self-care and built a support network. I found community. I dug into shame. I helped organize Take Back the Night marches, put together rape prevention trainings, wrote about child abuse. I never spoke directly about my desire for a cure, but really, I felt desperate to fix my broken self, to emerge into a place where the twenty-four years of torture I experienced as a child and young adult simply no longer existed. I spent nearly a decade working hard at recovery—recovering lost years, memories, selves—before I knew that I'd never be cured ... I'm grateful that triggers and hallucinations don't grab me in their vice grip nearly as often as they used to. Even so, I know the past will again pound through my body-mind ... I've come to know that there will be no cure. I claim brokenness to make this irrevocable shattering visible.⁵⁶

Clare continues, "Cure dismisses resilience, survival, the spider web of fractures, cracks, and seams. Its promise holds power precisely because none of us want to be broken. But I'm curious: what might happen if we were to accept, claim, embrace our brokenness?"

I am curious too. I am curious what might happen if I and we experimented with the dichotomy of fixed or failed. If we let ourselves know that our good, complex, messy, at times painful lives are successes.

At the funeral of our friend Amanda "Arkansassy" Harris, a queer, white, Southern femme photographer who took her life in 2017, Blyth wrote and read a eulogy, "Broken Things," where she talked about the Japanese ceramic art of kintsugi, where a broken vessel is repaired in a way that seeks to emphasize and celebrate the break, rather than hide it. A seam binding two pieces of a cup back together might be filled with a lacquer mixed with

gold or another shiny element—a “philosophy not of replacement, but of awe, reverence, and restoration.” She said, “For me, there is something very Femme about all of it. The idea that adornment is a form of reverence, of binding together. The notion that our cracks, our wounds, can be beautiful too ... In learning how to heal we have also learned how to mend. We take what is supposed to go unseen and amplify it, make it too much, put gold on it.”⁵⁷

I want to put gold all over our old bitch, still-here lives.

OLD BITCH SURVIVORS WHO CRY AND LAUGH

As a young survivor, I read a lot of survivor writing—the feminist of color, slam poetry kind, the Dorothy Allison kind. What I picked up on was that telling the raw truth could heal you. Running away could heal you. Cutting off someone’s dick could heal you (thank God Lorena Bobbitt was in the news when I was twenty). Sex could heal you, and solitude, and a closed door. Time and space and silence.

What I didn’t see much of were stories of what came after—what long-term survivorhood looked like after you’d been trying to heal for a while. Besides the vague encouragement found in *The Courage to Heal* that eventually I’d be a nice normal housewife/social worker who didn’t think about my rape much. The two options seemed to be either that or suicide.

It would’ve meant a lot to me, I think, if I’d seen stories and pictures of some middle-aged or older femme survivors who were happy and yet not done. Who were a lot less triggered than they used to be but still snapped at their partner, froze up when touched a certain way, had a great month and then a panic attack week and then had to just get the fuck out of town for a while. Who were successful on their own terms and who also had at least a few deeply shitty mental health times a year. Who had chosen queer family that was wonderful, the best, and also fell the fuck apart in completely unpredictable ways. Who thought they knew everything about their abuse story, but who then woke up one day at forty-two and thought, *Shit, maybe my mom also abused my older cousin who was like me and who she also had a “special closeness” to, or, What if I’m not just grateful to be free; I’m deeply angry and sad that I don’t have a mom?* Who had a full rich life, but one where the abuse memories were never faint.

There are still not enough of those stories, so here are some of mine: I’m forty-three and I live in a house with my amazing femme of color partner; a white, disabled, queer artist friend who rents studio space to help out with the rent; and a roommate, plus two cats, in a greenbelt strip in Southside Seattle, where there are big trees and blackberry bushes and a secret creek, and it’s also ten minutes from Wendy’s. I love my partner, and the survivor, femme of color love I get from them has transformed my heart and my cunt and my life. Living together is amazing and was also super hard in ways I never expected —moving in hit me with all the PTSD from past abuse in the world. Working through all those triggers is real. I love my friends, and I have panic attacks that lay me out for two days that I sometimes still feel deeply ashamed of but am working on it. I’m still unpacking deep shame I have around both “being crazy” and around being the survivor of childhood sexual abuse that is stigmatized (mother-daughter, happened early). By unpacking I mean sometimes it hits in a gut punch in the middle of my day, in the middle of negotiating sex or teaching a workshop.

I still feel sad about my abuse. I grieve not having a mom. And I let myself feel fucking sad, because it is fucking sad. Two years ago, my grief about not having a mom hit me right behind the knees the day after Mother's Day, and I stayed there for a long time, and I canceled shit and worked in pajamas and cried longer than I thought there were days and hated it and had no choice. I didn't know that grief was there.

My happiness is messy. It's all of it. I can be defensive and stubborn as hell. I can be wrong. I can have a meltdown. I can be frozen. I can jerk off for hours and not be able to get out of bed. I can win awards. I make dinner for friends. I have somatic flashbacks of my rape. Still. I'm still scared to talk to my family, and visiting the town where I grew up is something I never do casually or without an escape plan. I experience months of joy and weeks that get sucked under when I trip over a wire and a trap door opens. Sometimes I experience deep psychic pain. Sometimes things change.

I have a lot of tools. I have Ativan, prayer, counseling, an altar, DBT cards in my purse, and a shit ton of tinctures and crystals. Sometimes I grip my steering wheel and have no idea where I am. I perform at Princeton, Hampshire, UC Davis. I am not a supersurvivor or supercrip. I am a crip survivor with superpowers who has joy and sadness, rage and loneliness, grief and discovery.

I don't want to be fixed, if being fixed means being bleached of memory, untaught by what I have learned through this miracle of surviving. My survivorhood is not an individual problem. I want the communion of all of us who have survived, and the knowledge.

I do not want to be fixed. I want to change the world. I want to be alive, awake, grieving, and full of joy. And I am.

54 Andrea L. Roberts, Margaret Rosario, Heather L. Corliss, Karestan C. Koenen, and S. Bryn Austin, "Childhood Gender Nonconformity: A Risk Indicator for Childhood Abuse and Posttraumatic Stress in Youth," *American Academy of Pediatrics*, February 2012, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/02/15/peds.2011-1804>.

55 For some radical perspectives on childhood sexual abuse, check out *Generation Five*, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, and *Mirror Memoirs*.

56 Eli Clare, "Feeling Broken," in *Brilliant Imperfection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 159–60.

57 Blyth Barnow, "Broken Things: A Eulogy," *Femminary*, February 27, 2017, <https://femminary.com/2017/02/27/broken-things-a-eulogy>, accessed June 21, 2018