

# The Primary Colors of Our

by Elise Toedt

*“Harm, fairness, community (or group loyalty), authority and purity...these are the primary colors of our moral sense. Not only do they keep reappearing in cross-cultural surveys, but each one tugs on the moral intuitions of people in our own culture.”\**

## **Preface**

Assessing the church from an outsider’s perspective is much like understanding the church from the perspective of the children of our congregations. They do not know the theological underpinnings that direct how churches function. They only know what they see and hear, and, from that, they discern the church’s perspective on harming others or protecting them, on fairness, on loyalty, on authority, on purity. They learn these things from what they experience among us; it is this experience that they internalize. This story therefore is about the collective responsibility of the church—male and female alike—to examine the type of environment we create not only through our theological stances, but also through our daily

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\*Quoted from “The Moral Instinct” by Peter Singer, *New York Times*, 2006.

actions and interactions, so that we may make the church a safe and healthy place for girls and women.

## **Harm**

Suzi rolled up her sleeves today. I noticed because it’s the first time I’ve seen her bare arms. I knew she cut her arms, but I did not know what it would look like. Her wrists, covered in pink scars, remind me of a painting of Jesus, of his back after he was whipped. Red lines thin as pencils criss-cross across his tight back. It is kind of pretty, like a bird’s nest of crimson twigs. I cannot say that Suzi’s wrists are exactly pretty, but they are not shredded like I had imagined.

“I just got out of the hospital,” she said to me in the hallway. They had just begun singing the first hymn in the sanctuary. She looked at me with her dull eyes. I looked at all the coats hanging in the closet behind her and said, “Oh.” She rolled up her sleeves. I tried not to stare at her arms.

“Why were you in the hospital?” I asked.

“Because I wanted to die.”

The Scripture reading started in the sanctuary then.

“I have to go,” I said. I was afraid to be late for service.

Suzi shrugged and walked away. She’ll hide in the bathroom until service ends. I already knew why she was in the hospital. Her mom is in my mom’s Bible study and they prayed for her the



# Moral Sense

night the ambulance came; the night she took a whole bottle of Ibuprofen. They had to pump her stomach.

My mom told me about what Suzi did: “Committing suicide is the most selfish thing you could do.” She scrunched her face like she does when we say the word “throw-up” during dinner.

“What is wrong with that girl?” she said.

The service is very long so I count the bricks in the side wall when I start to get tired. Or I make up stories about whoever sits in front of me. I try to imagine what it’s like to be Bradley and what he would do on the weekend. I imagine he is at the drive-in theater with another girl and then I pretend that girl is me but some things are not good to imagine especially in church. So I try to think of what I would say if I was pastor. I picture myself as a man with brown starched pants and a maroon tie.

Pastor Tim reads 1 Timothy 2 where Paul says women should be silent in the church.

“It is a loving act of submission” he says. “It is not like he is enslaving you; it is not like men are saying, “Hey women, you can’t even think. All you can do is have babies.”

Everyone laughs, especially the women. Then I see people scribble notes on their bulletin; I start to draw little boxes starting in the corner of the page. Pastor Tim explains that being silent in the church doesn’t mean we can’t talk or something like that. It just means that men should be the head of the church,

just like dads are the heads of a family and just like Christ is the head of the church. I hope I can fill the whole bulletin with squares before the service ends so I start to make them faster and faster and my mom nudges my hand because she can hear the pencil swish on the paper. Pastor Tim starts to pray. Jen Janzen who is four years younger than me is in the pew two rows back and I hear her say, “All-men” instead of “Amen.” She thinks that is what we are supposed to say.

After our church service we have a spaghetti lunch in the church gym. When we kids finish eating we walk quickly out of the gym; once we get to the door we start to run and run through the church hallways and out the front doors of the church so we can play hide and seek tag. As I run I am careful because I am in a skirt. We—my mom and I—wear skirts to church because we need to look our best for Jesus. But, “You have to be modest” the ladies at church say. “You do not want to cause the boys to lust.” They are looking out for us girls because if we cause the boys to stumble it would be better to have a millstone tied around our necks and be thrown into the water. Or it would be better for the boys to pluck their own eyes out rather than lust after us. I shiver when we read these Bible verses aloud. Luckily no one would really tie anything around our necks. It’s just to show it’s very bad.

Suzi counts first because she doesn’t like to hide. I go to hide behind a van in the parking lot and the rain spits down as I run

and speckles my grey shirt like dark little polka dots. When I get to the cars I am surprised because there are white flyers fluttering from the windshields. I think, *It is too early in the year for the car washers to advertise* because usually they only do that in the summer. So I read the flyer and I can't believe what it says.

It says "Suzi is mental" and has a picture of her on the bottom. She doesn't even look mental on the picture; it is just a school photo. I am so surprised reading this I crinkle it up and slink down like a slinky folding to the wet pavement so that my skirt gets a big wet spot on the behind.

Of course I wasn't the only kid to hide by the cars, and they are all finding the flyers too. Brandon Richards walks up and I unwrinkle the flyer and say, "Look at this," and he takes it from me.

His eyebrows go together like a clothespin: open, pinch closed.

I say, "We have to take these all down before the adults see them and before Karri is done counting," but he says while he hands the flyer to Bobby his brother like it doesn't even matter, "Maybe God is punishing her."

I can't believe he is saying this. I feel anger rise like I could break his shin, and it would crack! like a mirror if I did.

"Obviously God didn't make those flyers," I say. "Someone from the church did."

He shrugs and looks at me like he is so cool in his track jacket with his hair slicked back and in those Adidas shoes. He walks away confidently like that is the right thing to do. Bobby follows him like he can't think for himself.

Suzi is coming out of the church doors now and says really loud, "Ready or not here I come," but then she sees us all standing there; almost no one is hiding. Some kids are looking at the flyers or talking in circles and they don't look at Suzi. As if they aren't talking about her. Brandon even walks right by her and I bet he is going inside to tell the parents. Because he wants to be the first one. I think to myself, *He is just like his mother*. She is the contact person for the prayer chain. Suzi has gone up to a car now and is looking at the flyer. Her face looks like—well, not shocked exactly, but very sad. The way it looked when we read about the Egyptian plagues in Sunday school.

I stand next to Suzi and look at my feet. *What should I do?* I wonder and then I take the flyer which Suzi is gripping with both hands and say, "We've got to take all these down, Suzi."

She looks at me like she is looking at the blank wall in Sunday school so I say again, "We've got to take these down," and I start to run from car to car and take them from underneath the windshield wipers. I lift up the wiper and grab a wet flyer that flops like a soggy pancake.

"Quick!" I say to everyone else because they are all just watching. Sarah Olsen looks at her brother like she is trying to decide whether or not to buy something and then she decides to help and her brother Tim does too. No one else does. They watch and we run from car to car quick, like it is some kind of game—grab-the-flyers-before-the-parents-come. Everybody else just stands there.

We get them all off and we run fast with the flyers in our hands and we—Suzi and Tim and Sarah and me—rip up all the flyers behind the church building. We rip them up and I lift up the trash bags and we put them underneath and close it. Sarah and Tim are just

standing there now and look at us like they don't know what to do.

I say, "Tell everyone we threw the flyers in the bathroom garbage if they ask," and I look at Suzi and we run inside through the back door and through the church halls. We run and I grab paper towels from the bathroom and we go to the choir closet where no one ever goes. The closet is long and narrow like a train car. We sit under the long white choir robes along the wall and dry off our skin which is wet from the rain. Suzi cries now and I hand her another paper towel. I don't say anything. *Let her cry*, I think. I also think, *At least we are in the closet because that is the best place to cry and not have anyone see*.

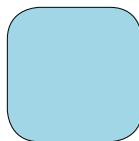
All the parents did find out about the flyers. I knew they would. At least they didn't find them on their cars because now they have to be quiet when they talk about it; they know it is gossip. Some people are probably wishing they were there to see the flyers with their own eyes; then they could talk about it all they wanted. If you are there, it's a story and you can tell whoever you want afterwards.

Mom says, "I bet Suzi made the flyers herself. For attention."

She stands at the stove and stirs her cabbage soup while she says it. She slurps some up and sucks in air through her teeth because it is so hot. She adds more salt.

"Girls like her just want to be noticed. First she tries to commit suicide, because she wants us all to feel bad for her. Now she puts flyers on all the cars so she can be the victim—the one who nobody loves."

I think she is wrong about Suzi but I can't tell her that. So I just don't say anything. I walk away from the kitchen and into the hallway and even when she says, "What are you being huffy about?" I don't say anything and only keep walking. Because I want to I close the door to my room and close the door to my closet and now it is just me.



Elise Toedt teaches IB English literature at an International School outside Jakarta, Indonesia. She has found that reading, writing, and discussing stories has often been a healing way to address gender issues within her classroom.

### Questions for Reflection:

1. Take a moment to reflect on what your church communicates to outsiders about harm, fairness, community (or group loyalty), authority, and purity, particularly as they relate to gender. Compare and contrast this to the teachings of Scripture.
1. This narrative highlights how sometimes women perpetuate the subordination of females (i.e. when the church women laugh at Pastor Tim's joke about 1 Timothy 2 and when the narrator's mother dismisses Suzi's struggle). Have you seen this in your church? What are practical ways your church can respond to this?
1. Both Suzi and the narrator experience great emotional isolation from their church body. Have you or have women in your church experienced this same isolation? How can we work to foster safe environments for women?