

# Traumatic Experiences and the Role of Friendship in Healing: A Theological Reading of Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling*

**Roz Lawson**

Revd Roz Lawson graduated from the Scottish Baptist College in 2022 and is Assistant Chaplain at the University of Glasgow.

roz.lawson@glasgow.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

In this study of trauma and friendship, focused around Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling*, I investigate the friendship between Brian Keenan and John McCarthy, who were imprisoned together as hostages in the late 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War, as described and celebrated within the text. Three recurring motifs of friendship — solidarity, prayer, and community — are used to identify the theological underpinnings of friendship. Drawing from the literature of trauma studies, particularly Shelly Rambo on 'witnessing' and 'remaining', I explore whether friendship as an embodied spiritual practice is a fitting response to trauma, itself an embodied experience. This, by extension, has important ramifications for communities of care like the church, especially when the Johannine Christ implores his disciples to 'remain' with each other, and invites Thomas to touch his bodily wounds. By acknowledging and 'touching' trauma, I find that close, interdependent friendship that avoids erasing wounds is paradoxically most able to help restore the wounded.

## **Keywords**

Trauma; healing; friendship

## **Introduction**

When I was ten years old, in April 1986, a thirty-five-year-old man from Northern Ireland called Brian Keenan was taken hostage by Islamic fundamentalists in Lebanon. It was a news story which my family followed with interest for the entire period of his captivity, which ended as abruptly as it had begun in August 1990. Keenan, a lecturer in English literature, along with John McCarthy, an English journalist, were two of

around a hundred foreign hostages kidnapped between 1982 and 1992 during the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

I thought no more of that news story until a few years ago when I read Keenan's story of his four and a half years in captivity, *An Evil Cradling*.<sup>2</sup> It is a brutal, honest, and profoundly moving autobiographical account of his ordeal in which he was kept, blindfolded, and often in total darkness, in tiny, squalid underground cells. Following an initial period of solitary confinement for several months, Keenan was imprisoned with John McCarthy, a man with whom he became close friends. For the final three years of Keenan's captivity, they were bound by chains on their ankles and wrists, which were bolted to a wall.<sup>3</sup> In the centre of a narrative about this traumatic experience, Keenan somehow shaped a love story: the power of friendship in the midst of trauma.

During their long captivity together, Keenan and McCarthy's friendship grew and developed such that when Keenan was eventually offered his freedom by his captors, his initial instinct was to beg to speak to McCarthy, who ultimately was not released until almost a year later. Keenan's deeply moving account of his thought process while held next door to McCarthy prior to being freed includes this question: 'For how much freedom can there be for a man when he leaves one half of himself chained to the wall?'<sup>4</sup> The idea of a friendship which is so close that the friend feels like part of oneself is deeply fascinating, especially within the context of trauma.

Trauma is incredibly prevalent, far-reaching, and destructive in our world today.<sup>5</sup> In response, it can be easy for 'community' to be brandished as the answer to all life's brokenness, especially in theological/church circles. But, like Keenan, 'I am somebody who

<sup>1</sup> Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 1, 86–108.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling* (London: Vintage, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 292.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Vincent Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, Valerie Edwards, Mary P. Koss, D. Williamson, A. M. Spitz, and James S. Marks, 'Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14, no. 4 (1998), 245–258.

enjoys questions rather than answers. I don't have a lot of time for answers.<sup>6</sup> In this exploration of trauma and friendship within *An Evil Cradling*, I will ask how the friendship between Keenan and McCarthy developed and how it helped them both to survive the experience of captivity. Bessel van der Kolk, an expert in traumatic stress, acknowledges that certain therapies such as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) and certain anti-depressants seem more effective than others in trauma survivors although neuroscientists and psychiatrists do not know why. Intriguingly, he then says, 'We likewise don't know precisely why talking to a trusted friend gives such profound relief, and I am surprised how few people seem eager to explore that question.'<sup>7</sup> This article is my response to this perplexed observation.

James McClendon asserts that 'theologians may do better work [...] through a certain attention to other people's lives'.<sup>8</sup> McClendon argues that the importance of biographical study lies not so much in its 'usefulness' but rather that the power lies in the ability of a real person's story to explain something theological which could not be imparted propositionally.<sup>9</sup> In selecting the biographical subject, therefore, McClendon suggests that we should like, or be struck by, our saints' stories, and that it is their embodied doctrine which is so compelling. In all these respects, Keenan seems to qualify as one of those lives worthy of such theological attention. Although, in his honest and highly self-aware text, Keenan self-consciously rejects 'sainthood' or links with religion, he consistently reflects Christian values of forgiveness, self-sacrifice, care for the other, and the self-discipline of friendship, often in explicitly biblical terms.

It would be tempting to apply this exploration of friendship and trauma in a prescriptive way. We might state, for example, 'Strong

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<sup>6</sup> 'Interview with Brian Keenan', Guardians of the Flame (GOTF) podcast, 12 January 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u92I6K7jRo4&t=1284s>> [accessed 25 May, 2023].

<sup>7</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 262.

<sup>8</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, p. 161.

friendships are the best way of healing from trauma.’ However, the desire to fix, prevent, transform, or even redeem trauma will need to be suspended, avoiding what Shelly Rambo describes as the ‘redemptive gloss’ which is often placed over suffering.<sup>10</sup> This study will contextualise the specifics of the friendship between Keenan and McCarthy, before focusing on three main theological motifs for friendship within the context of trauma. Following an exploration of scientific and other readings of trauma, I then investigate whether there are theological ways of responding to trauma. Finally, I discuss the spiritual practice of friendship, both between Keenan and McCarthy as well as more broadly, and its political and sociological implications, especially as they align (or do not) with the biblical witness. The embodied experience of both trauma and friendship will be central to this brief study.

## **Theological Dimensions of Keenan and McCarthy’s Friendship**

### *Context of the Friendship*

It was a long journey which led towards Keenan’s eventual friendship with McCarthy as hostages in Beirut. Keenan’s early years were spent in a tough area of Belfast, the Antrim Road. He had a difficult relationship with both his parents, particularly his father. Although Keenan admired his father (who had been in the air force during the war), he found him distant and disliked his politics as both an Orangeman<sup>11</sup> and a Freemason. When the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ erupted when he was aged nineteen, Keenan saw friends disappearing into a mire of sectarianism which he likened to Albert Camus’s *The Plague*. He was living in Derry as a student with an older Protestant couple when Bloody Sunday happened in January 1972 — a shooting of twenty-six unarmed civilians by the British Army, in which thirteen Catholics died. The

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<sup>10</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> An Orangeman is a member of the Protestant fraternity, the Orange Order, which is named after William of Orange, who defeated the Catholic King James II in 1688. Orangemen are strongly associated with sectarianism in Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland.

devastation and shock of the woman he was staying with had an impact on him and he decided he ultimately wanted to leave Northern Ireland.<sup>12</sup>

Keenan himself notes that arriving in Beirut in early December 1985 to teach English at the American University of Beirut, might be a case of ‘frying pan to fire? Another Belfast?’<sup>13</sup> Armed bodyguards greeted him at the airport and many civilians in the streets were armed with AK-47s. Within weeks he was kidnapped by fundamentalist Shi’ite militiamen. Initially, Keenan was held in solitary confinement in a small underground cell. He discusses the process of ‘traumatic transition’ to this new and unwelcome situation as one that minimises danger. This is connected to the phenomenon of denial, which he describes as ‘a normal and necessary human reaction to a crisis which is too immediately overwhelming to face head on’.<sup>14</sup> Keenan convinced himself he would only be held for two weeks, but after two failed escape attempts, reality sank in. During the period of being held underground in the dark, with only one visit to the toilet each morning and a small amount of food and water given daily, Keenan experienced many strange emotions. Euphoric highs were followed by crashing lows of depression, strange dreams, haunting memories, and exhaustion. He had an almost mystical experience of this solitary confinement, of being on the edge of madness. One senses that this experience shaped his response to McCarthy when they did finally meet.

Keenan and McCarthy’s unwitting initial meeting came when the hostage-takers moved them to another location and put several prisoners in the back of a van. All were blindfolded, but Keenan felt another prisoner touch his foot for reassurance; he responded by putting his hand on the other man’s hand, ‘a strange first human touch conveying such warmth and companionship’.<sup>15</sup> Keenan later discovered that it was McCarthy who had touched him, having firstly reached out to touch the person on his other side, with no response.<sup>16</sup> Following the journey in the van, Keenan and McCarthy were put in a cell together

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Interview with Brian Keenan’, GOTF podcast.

<sup>13</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 92.

and met after tentatively removing their blindfolds. McCarthy, an international journalist, had travelled to Beirut to make a film about Keenan, describing that as ‘the worst mistake I ever made in my life’.<sup>17</sup> For the remainder of Keenan’s captivity, he was held with McCarthy, mostly just as the two of them, but at one point towards the end of their confinement, they were both held together with three American hostages.

After four and a half years, Keenan was offered his freedom first and he recounts his indecisive wrestling with whether to take it or not. ‘Great love has weakened me’, he writes, and ultimately decides that it would belittle McCarthy to return to his chains: ‘I know that the deep bond our captivity has given us will be shattered if I return.’ Keenan sensed that because of the growth he had observed take place in McCarthy, it would be an insult to him if he (Keenan) refused to leave him — as if, by implication, he was saying that McCarthy needed him in order to survive. He writes that their mutual respect ‘demands of each that we take our freedom when it comes’. Yet, when Keenan did so, he had the sense ‘that my arm had been wrenched off my shoulder and was suddenly missing’.<sup>18</sup>

### *Theological Motifs of the Keenan/McCarthy Friendship*

In a rich, dense text like *An Evil Cradling*, there are a number of aspects of embodied friendship which can be seen as theological. However, for the purpose of this piece, I will focus on three main motifs of friendship in the midst of trauma which are emblematic of Keenan’s text, and pertinent to a theological study of friendship and trauma: solidarity, prayer, and community. I have arrived at these motifs by considering carefully three of the many striking images used within the text, which for this reader acted as snapshots, fragments, or ‘still lifes’ of Keenan’s imprisoned self. It is notable that Keenan does not shy away from self-consciously making biblical and theological references in his work. Focusing on the three motifs of solidarity, prayer, and community should not imply that it is possible to thus encapsulate the entirety of their friendship. However, the motifs and the images within them reveal

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<sup>17</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 292.

aspects which cannot be expressed propositionally through a doctrinal study of friendship alone.

Solidarity. The first striking motif to focus on is a moment of resistance to the guards, who plan to shave off Keenan and McCarthy's beards. Keenan objects strongly as a point of principle, as he feels robbed of his dignity. As McCarthy panics and starts speaking quickly about whether they are going to be shot, Keenan stands up and pretends to shoot an arrow from a bow. McCarthy instinctively copies him, as if they are a couple of children playing a game. Comparing themselves to David and Jonathan in the Bible, Keenan writes, 'That instinctive mimicry, with excitement, the fear, the adrenalin coursing through our bodies, was an inarticulate gesture of mutual support.'<sup>19</sup> Quite apart from the obvious biblical imagery, this gesture seems to capture something of the solidarity between the two. Earlier in the text, they share stories of each other's lives and listen closely to stories from childhood. Keenan describes how they have 'exchanged each other's friends and families until they became our own. [...] We began to move into each other's lives.'<sup>20</sup> This sharing of each other's selves illustrates how interconnected friends can become. For example, when Keenan was beaten, he recognised that he had in some strange way, caused suffering to McCarthy: 'He endured every blow that I received.'<sup>21</sup> One person's suffering became another's, as if they were one body, with both being wounded. Therefore, alongside the biblical imagery of David and Jonathan, this image also demonstrates something of the body of Christ being united but having many interconnecting parts.

Prayer. The second motif contains imagery that is less pleasant than that of two friends united in solidarity. In a particularly gruesome passage, Keenan has a case of diarrhoea and uses a bag as a toilet multiple times very close to McCarthy's face, due to their small cell. The illness goes on for two weeks and eventually Keenan is too weak to get to the bag in time: 'Lying exhausted, with an agonized embarrassment I watched my friend clean the mess off me without complaint.'<sup>22</sup> Later, Keenan

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<sup>19</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 142.

<sup>20</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 246.

<sup>22</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 250.

feels McCarthy gently place his hand on his stomach and realises McCarthy is praying for him: 'I was overcome. [...] I wanted to join him in prayer, I wanted to thank him for this huge and tender gesture.'<sup>23</sup> The twin aspects here of prayer and care for the other, including touch of someone who is literally 'unclean', is reminiscent of Jesus's healing touch.

Keenan describes how, in the early days, they prayed 'unashamedly, making no outward sign. We simply knew that each of us did pray and would on occasion remind each other to say a prayer for someone in particular among our families and lovers.'<sup>24</sup> When McCarthy was facing interrogation and a beating after an altercation with another prisoner, Keenan prayed 'not for John's strength nor for his courage but for his safety', commenting that 'one needs to believe that someone, somewhere is thinking about you when you are in a dangerous situation'.<sup>25</sup> In this way, a deep connection between the friends was instinctively manifested through prayer. Even when they are separated at one point, Keenan comments that through prayer, 'we were apart but somehow we were in communication'.<sup>26</sup>

Community. The third theological motif from Keenan's text is connected with the small community that was formed when Keenan and McCarthy were eventually held alongside American hostages Terry Anderson, Tom Sutherland, and Frank Reed. Reed, in particular, had been brutalised by their captors such that he would remain with his head under a blanket, unable to communicate with the others. When the guards came in he would crawl into a corner, terrified. Keenan repeatedly and unsuccessfully urged Reed to get up and McCarthy firmly told the guards to stop beating him.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, through the strength of the friendship and humour of the others, 'Frank emerged from behind his blanket slowly, tenuously. As he did so, so did we. [...] It was a restoration of meaning for all of us.'<sup>28</sup> This image of a de-humanised

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<sup>23</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 251.

<sup>24</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 196.

<sup>26</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 286.

<sup>28</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 288.



man hiding under a blanket and eventually being restored by friendship is at the heart of this exploration of trauma. It is an image of what the church could be and, as with the bow and arrow image, highlights the interconnectedness between people. Keenan recognises this interdependence: ‘It struck home to me then that when we participate in another person’s suffering, we in part heal ourselves.’<sup>29</sup> The friendship between Keenan and McCarthy was therefore not inward-facing; it also became ‘a prop for others’.<sup>30</sup>

Illustrated in the three motifs of solidarity, prayer, and community, there are clear theological connections to be made about the nature of friendship. In terms of trauma, although we cannot draw from Keenan’s text how the pair managed to cope with trauma many years after their captivity, what is clear is the *embodied* nature of both the traumatic experience and the friendship. As we turn to an exploration of trauma, especially through the contributions of neuroscience and psychiatry, we will note some of the methodologies used for healing from traumatic wounds. Sometimes these hint at the possibility of socialising and friendship as a help without fully making the connection. But is the neurological aspect of trauma studies limited in its application by treating the social as useful only in an instrumental way, as a function of healing the individual?

### Individual, Social, and Theological Approaches to Trauma

Keenan and McCarthy clearly went through a prolonged traumatic experience. People have always experienced trauma, but without necessarily naming it as such. It was in the late nineteenth century that Freud’s early definitions of ‘hysteria’ and an understanding that it may emerge from the sexual abuse of children paved the way for many modern psychoanalytic techniques, such as the ‘talking cure’.<sup>31</sup> However, the study and treatment of trauma is relatively new, with the phenomenon and symptoms of returning Vietnam war veterans leading directly to the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in

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<sup>29</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 176.

<sup>30</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, p. 181.

the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSMIII) in 1980.<sup>32</sup>

Although Keenan's text cannot be mined for details of how the trauma affected him many years later, since it was published within two years of his release, the prolonged nature of his traumatic experience gives rise to questions of how he coped *within* it. When Keenan was released he eschewed counselling, preferring instead to move, alone, to a rural location in County Mayo in the Irish Republic for a period of three years.<sup>33</sup> However, it is notable that documented within his time in captivity, Keenan appears to instinctively turn to techniques and treatments for trauma which have been only subsequently discovered and developed by neuroscientists/psychiatrists. For example, the use of imagination and play has been found by trauma specialists to assist with healing, especially as used in communal movement/rhythm, as well as theatre.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the positive touch between the friends, such as McCarthy laying a hand on Keenan in prayer, resonate with modern 'bodywork'.<sup>35</sup>

Understandably, much of the literature on trauma focuses on individual psychiatric and neurological treatment of the physiological/psychological consequences of traumatic experiences, but a few notable exceptions have opened the field to broader considerations. For example, Judith Herman's groundbreaking *Trauma and Recovery* situates trauma as a political and social phenomenon,<sup>36</sup> while Cathy Caruth uses history, narrative, and literary theory to approach the experience of trauma.<sup>37</sup> Herman and Caruth have enabled trauma to be

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<sup>32</sup> Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, p. 137.

<sup>33</sup> Siobhan Breatnach, 'Beirut Hostage Brian Keenan: 30 years on from the Irishman's Unimaginable Kidnapping', *The Irish Post*, 12 April 2016 <<https://www.irishpost.com/news/beirut-hostage-brian-keen-an-30-years-irishmans-unimaginable-kidnapping-85914/>> [accessed 25 May, 2023].

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Emma Heard, Alyson Mutch, and Liza Fitzgerald, 'Using Applied Theater in Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence: A Systematic Review', *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, 21, no. 1 (2020), 138–156.

<sup>35</sup> Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, p. 216.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 20th anniversary edn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2016).

conceived of as an individual, neurological, psychosocial, historical, literary, institutional, and collective phenomenon; but can it be theological? According to Shelly Rambo, it can. Citing the example of a New Orleans minister coping with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Rambo asserts that trauma can be expressed as ‘an encounter with death’.<sup>38</sup> This could be a shattering of a person’s world and how they experience it, rather than a literal death. Keenan’s world certainly shattered when he was kidnapped at gunpoint in April 1986. The Christian desire is often to find a redemption from death and to rush from Good Friday to the resurrected life of Easter Sunday, bypassing Holy Saturday, a place in which death has occurred but the redemptive life has not yet begun. In doing so, there is an assumption that suffering can be circumvented. Instead, Rambo argues that the appropriate response to suffering is to witness it and to faithfully remain, such that the relationship between death and life is reconfigured.<sup>39</sup> Rambo’s thesis situates both witness and woundedness within Holy Saturday. This resonates with Keenan’s discussion of feeling stuck between death and life, sometimes wishing to embrace death which seemed seductive to him.<sup>40</sup>

Rambo’s argument lays useful groundwork for this article in terms of what a witness is and does. She firstly takes two dominant ideas of what witness is — proclamation and imitation. The ‘proclamation’ understanding of the witness concerns the judicial/legal idea of an observer who can relay particular events to a third party, usually in words. For example, early followers of Christ perceived themselves to be witnesses to Jesus’s words and actions. It was therefore incumbent upon them to give testimony on his behalf, especially in order to convince others of Christ’s message.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the ‘imitation’ version of witness is about following Christ’s love and actions, even if it means persecution and death — an embodied witness rather than a verbal one. This development was centred in the persecution of the early church into the second century and the need for the message of Jesus

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<sup>38</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 38.

to be not only proclaimed but inhabited: ‘A witness literally became, in body, that message.’<sup>42</sup> Although Rambo acknowledges that these understandings of the witness have biblical and historical/traditional roots, she considers them inadequate when it comes to witnessing trauma, since they assume that the witness can understand what they are seeing. Instead, Rambo posits the idea of witnessing ‘from the middle’, by which she means that the witness can ‘see truths that often escape articulation’ and experience the ‘continual elisions that make it impossible to see, hear, or touch clearly’.<sup>43</sup>

Drawing from the Johannine text, Rambo notes that Mary Magdalene and the beloved disciple as witnesses to the resurrection are fairly unreliable in a judicial sense. For example, in Mary’s encounter with Jesus at the tomb, she has limited vision due to her own tears plus the fact that it is dark, and she only has a partial look into the tomb.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the beloved disciple, who arrives first at the tomb, does not enter it but instead peers in. Thus, these texts ‘underscore a gap between seeing and believing’.<sup>45</sup> Jesus’s own words in his farewell discourse (John 14–16) prior to his death and resurrection are seen as suggestive of this gap. For example, in John 16:12, Jesus indicates that the disciples will experience his death but they will not understand it at the time. However, critically, the paraclete or Holy Spirit, will be with them in his absence.<sup>46</sup> By translating the Greek word *menein* as ‘to remain’,<sup>47</sup> this allows Rambo to build on the idea of a middle spirit, the reliance on the Spirit as a witness. This pneumatological stance of Spirit as teacher/guide/witness enables the disciple to remain in a place of love, as commanded by Christ, despite the paradoxes of death and life between which trauma is situated.<sup>48</sup> Rambo suggests that the urge to push through trauma to arrive at redemption is an unhelpful dominant narrative, with particularly troubling implications for those who are not

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<sup>42</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 39.

<sup>43</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>45</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 92.

<sup>46</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>47</sup> Other scholars do likewise. See, for example, Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), eBook, p. 8d.

<sup>48</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, pp. 102–105.

able-bodied, for example.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Christian disciples are called to be persistent and perpetual witnesses to suffering despite the pull to derive meaning from it, and the work of the Spirit is to enable us to be attentive. The trauma survivor, therefore, acts as a witness to the experience of suffering and sits within the reality of it despite it being hard to grasp.

A critique of Rambo's text is that she is perhaps *too* keen for trauma survivors to remain in or be perpetual witnesses to suffering without the necessity for healing. This raises the question, Could this cause an 'eternalisation of suffering'?<sup>50</sup> Could Keenan and McCarthy have metaphorically held their 'bow and arrow' position indefinitely? How long could one bear to be with a man who is literally and figuratively hiding under a blanket? However, a later text by Rambo helps to imagine what might be involved in remaining.<sup>51</sup> In it, she draws from the example of the French drama series *Les Revenants* (*The Returned*), in which people in a small town who had died years earlier suddenly begin returning to the community, seemingly unwounded. For Rambo, this emphasises 'bodies as the loci of trauma'<sup>52</sup> and connects with the resurrected body of Christ, particularly in his encounter with Thomas in John's Gospel. Jesus's return bearing the wounds of death means that life stands in the midst of death, similarly to the 'afterlife' of trauma carrying the woundedness of 'death' into the survivor's ongoing life. Later in *Les Revenants*, the people who remained experience wounds appearing on their skin, which Rambo links to the clinical need for wounds to surface in order to be addressed.<sup>53</sup> By utilising Thomas's insistence on witnessing Jesus's wounds, acknowledging that they are 'part of the history of this body',<sup>54</sup> Rambo focuses on the significance of wounds, avoiding their erasure.<sup>55</sup> She places special significance on Jesus's offer to Thomas that he touch the wounds. This, alongside the

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<sup>49</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, p. 147.

<sup>50</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, 'Suffering Unto God', *Critical Enquiry*, 20 (1994), 611–622 (p. 619).

<sup>51</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, p. 150.

<sup>55</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, p. 11.

community of disciples being gathered around the wounds, helps us recover the centrality of the body to the narrative, and creates in the Upper Room, ‘a place where wounds are touched, and where shame, grief, and anger are released’. The Spirit’s breath given to the disciples gives an awareness of the wounds, which in turn helps form a collective, which brings healing to the ‘after-living’.<sup>56</sup>

Although Rambo’s texts do not offer any practical examples of how healing might be achieved in the ‘after-living’, they do offer a framework for seeing bodily woundedness as something to be acknowledged rather than glossed over. It is also a helpful corrective for some who see woundedness as something to be literally erased or ‘forgotten’ in the eschaton.<sup>57</sup> The critique of attempting to circumvent suffering and instead jumping straight to redemptive language is profound, partly because such language can cause distress, guilt, and self-doubt to trauma survivors. The attempt to negate experiences which remain with survivors in the present day, despite their struggles with them, has serious pastoral implications. The subtle shift of emphasis towards remaining whilst still holding to an orthodox view of redemption is a necessary counterbalancing of an eschatology that holds that all things have already been fully restored. This has wider implications for hermeneutical frameworks and how Scriptures (and experiences) which do not ‘fit’ can be interpreted. Rambo ably demonstrates how the Johannine text focuses on ‘remaining’, or abiding, alongside woundedness as constitutive of community. Rather than suffering being eternalised, as Johann Metz argues, the trauma survivor as witness is simply being affirmed in that position of being between death and life which is akin to the position of God’s kingdom being both ‘now’ and ‘not yet’.

Christian theology ought to offer much to the field of trauma studies because of the focus on the cross and the wounded, resurrected Christ at its centre, which should correspondingly put wounded people at its centre. Although it is impossible to avoid the fact that Christian

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<sup>56</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, pp. 151–153.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 3rd edn (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), p. 142.

theology has done some of the wounding,<sup>58</sup> it also has the capacity to add much to the study of trauma (and friendship) because it sees the body not solely as neurological or social, but as tangible and real. This is what makes Keenan's account so compellingly theological in relation to trauma — because it unflinchingly expresses an embodied experience. But how can trauma relate to friendship, and how can Rambo's work help us with this relationship?

### The Theological Relationship of Friendship to Trauma

Thus far, I have described some theological aspects of Keenan and McCarthy's friendship, before moving on to how trauma has been analysed. But what is the relationship between friendship and trauma? Can friendship be viewed through a theological lens, as trauma can? And if so, what does this mean for us today?

It does appear that trauma can be the seedbed for friendship, and that the conditions of captivity may actually be conducive to friendship. Shared trauma may in fact form the *basis* of close friendships because of the heightened reality of living through it together. The trauma of prison or captivity in particular can act as a catalyst for close friendship. For example, quoting from Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, that 'prison is an incubator for friendship', Doaa Embabi suggests that this is why solitary confinement within prison is so devastating, since it 'denies the person one of the key aspects afforded by friendship, i.e., the assurance and recognition of the self that a friend provides'.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, nurses made 'captive' by their role on the Western Front during the First World War, found ways of coping with the trauma of male patients harrowingly wounded in battle through strong friendships with each other. In her study of women's war diaries, Bridget

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<sup>58</sup> Particularly to women — see, for example, 'body theodicy' and the effect of a purity culture theology on women's bodies in Katie Cross, "I Have the Power in My Body to Make People Sin": The Trauma of Purity Culture and the Concept of "Body Theodicy", in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture and Church in Critical Perspective*, ed. by Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross (London: SCM, 2020), pp. 21–35.

<sup>59</sup> Doaa Embabi, 'Friendship and Solidarity in Prison: Mandela and Habashi', *Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 36 (2016), 107–139 (p. 119).

Keown finds that the ‘sisterhood’ which emerged between nurses, gave ‘the potential for healing and closure’ which enabled nurses to endure.<sup>60</sup> In another ‘captive’ situation, John Perkins, a black civil rights activist, describes how his life was repeatedly threatened when attempting to help register black people to vote in Mississippi. When he told his neighbours, around a hundred men from his local community came to protect his home each night. Perkins writes that ‘traumatic experiences have a way of creating bonds that are unique and lasting’.<sup>61</sup> In these situations of actual captivity (that is, imprisonment) or effective captivity (for example, the inability to leave the war front or the oppressed community), friendships can flourish.

This leads one to wonder if an appropriate response to the embodied experience of trauma is the embodied experience of friendship. Perhaps our images of both Keenan and McCarthy’s traumatic experience and their friendship are two sides of the same coin. Our first image of solidarity in the mimicry of the bow and arrow posture is self-consciously compared by Keenan to that of the biblical David and Jonathan. This iconic story of friendship immediately lends itself to a theological exploration of the subject. Eugene Peterson’s meditation on that biblical friendship, recounted in 1 Samuel 18–20, is a good starting point for these considerations. Although Peterson does not frame it in this way, David certainly experienced what we would now consider to be trauma: stalking, repeated murder attempts, forced into the wilderness as a fugitive from the royal courts. It is in this context that ‘Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul’. The friendship between them was risky for Jonathan as the son of the king, but according to Peterson, it ‘bracketed and contained the evil’.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bridget E. Keown, “I think I was more pleased to see her than any one ‘Cos she’s so fine”’: Nurses’ Friendships, Trauma, and Resiliency During the First World War’, *Family & Community History*, 21, no. 3 (2018), 151–165 (p. 154).

<sup>61</sup> John M. Perkins, *He Calls Me Friend: The Healing Power of Friendship in a Lonely World* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), eBook, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 53.



Peterson then makes further illustration with an encounter between Martin Buber and Douglas Steere where Buber said to Steere that ‘the greatest thing any person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing in him [...] to see what’s most deeply there, most fully that person and then confirm it by recognizing and encouraging it’.<sup>63</sup> This notion of confirmation of the other is picked up by Peterson and parallels well with Rambo’s idea of the witness. Friendship, then, as a witness and confirmation, is at the core of David and Jonathan’s friendship. Jonathan confirms and is witness to God’s anointing of David, whilst David confirms and is witness to Jonathan that his character is not dependent on that of his father.

It is at the point of describing a playful aspect of friendship, the ‘inarticulate gesture’ of pretending to shoot with a bow and arrow, that leads Keenan to draw the comparison with David and Jonathan. The playfulness is a consequence of the friendship rather than being constitutive of it. The mimicry of the other, the instinctive solidarity, resonates with the idea of confirming or witnessing the other. Within trauma, friendship acts as a witness to the experience of the self and of the other simultaneously. Friends continue to point to the essential goodness of each other, a goodness which cannot be subsumed by the traumatic experience; a goodness given by God.

The goodness of God in friendship can be seen during the time of Keenan’s illness, when he comments that his friend, ‘was a man of vast tenderness, a man of compassion’.<sup>64</sup> In the grim image of Keenan suffering from diarrhoea, eventually unable to clean himself, the care shown by McCarthy is a combination of both practical and spiritual. The care is manifested in the cleaning of the body alongside the prayerful touch of one by the other. Here we may recall the way the spiritual element of friendship was expounded by the English Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx, in the twelfth century. He asserted that the foundation of friendship is the love of God<sup>65</sup> and that this love would gladly, ‘bear another’s burdens [...] disregard himself for the sake of

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<sup>63</sup> Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 251.

<sup>65</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. by L. C. Braceland, SJ, ed. by M. L. Dutton (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010), pp. 88–89.

another, [...] oppose and expose oneself to adversity'. Praying for each other, he declares, is at the heart of spiritual friendship.<sup>66</sup> This element of the devotional life is exemplified in the image of McCarthy praying over Keenan in a moment of severe adversity. One of their maxims for life in captivity became 'exercise, the companionship of friends and above these the gift of the spirit which is divine'.<sup>67</sup> The spiritual dimension of trauma allows for the 'speaking' of what cannot be spoken, whether to God, or to each other, by the embodied spiritual care of the other.

Friendship and trauma in the third image, of Frank Reed set apart and needing to be befriended, seemingly too traumatised to connect with other humans, leads us to consider the wider concerns of how trauma might be recognised and borne within community. Christian theology should have plenty to say in relation to community since the church is envisaged as the body of Christ. According to Luke Johnson, the language of friendship would have been implicitly understood within the early church even where it was not explicitly stated within Scripture as *philia*,<sup>68</sup> due to the connotations from the Greco-Roman context of such phrases as 'having the same mind', 'being one spirit', 'having fellowship', and so on, that derived from associations with the philosophical ideas of Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle.<sup>69</sup> In his study of Philippians, Johnson convincingly argues that through the use of the word, 'fellowship', which would have been read as 'friendship', it would have been clear to the church that they were being instructed to be 'a community of friends'.<sup>70</sup> The manifestation of such friendship would be the mutuality of shared possessions. Although for Keenan and other hostages, possessions were in short supply, it seems that instead, they

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<sup>66</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 125.

<sup>67</sup> Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, p. 171.

<sup>68</sup> Unlike more modern conceptions that *philia* was in some way inferior to *agape* love whilst being superior to *eros*, others reformulate these types of love as three expressions of it. See Joas Adiprasetya and Nindyo Sasongko, 'A Compassionate Space-Making: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Friendship', *The Ecumenical Review*, 71, no. 1–2 (2019), 21–31 (p. 22).

<sup>69</sup> Luke T. Johnson, 'Making Connections: The Material Expression of Friendship in the New Testament', *Interpretation* 58, no. 2 (2004), 158–171 (pp. 159–161).

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, 'Making Connections', p. 163.

shared *each other*, and this was an example of the spirit at work in their small community.

However, the experience of friendship should not be limited to a single pair of friends, enjoying the pleasure of one another's company. Instead, it should branch out to others, especially others unlike themselves. If the church as a community of friends is to reach out to the wider social sphere, Keenan and McCarthy's friendship, reaching out to Reed and the other American hostages, is an apt metaphor for the church's relationship with a broken world. Friendship should not 'remain in a fenced in, enclosed area', but instead act as a space in which the attributes of friendship can be practised so that they can be used in a broader context.<sup>71</sup> In such a framework, the 'healing' of Frank Reed came about through the love and care of the friends, and also because the friends recognised that their own survival and flourishing was inherently connected with his. They 'remained' with Reed, and this drew him out through their humour, imagination, and the courage to face such woundedness.

This type of friendship, of course, is subversive and at odds with a culture which has taken on a managerial idea of friendship as one which can be 'invested in'; barely more than a reflection of the transient and mechanised workplaces of the contemporary world.<sup>72</sup> Even in the current social climate of an epidemic of trauma, 'arguably the greatest threat to our national well-being',<sup>73</sup> we do not see a corresponding increase in close, deep, and abiding (or 'remaining') friendships. Perhaps the cause really is something as banal as a lack of time, as Paul Wadell claims.<sup>74</sup>

If friendship is a way of healing from traumatic experiences, it is important to raise the question as to why it does not seem to enable

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<sup>71</sup> Manitza Kotze and Carike Noeth, 'Friendship as a Theological Model: Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and the Trinity', *In die Skriflig*, 53, no. 1 (2019), locators 2305–0853 <<https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i1.2333>> (a2333).

<sup>72</sup> Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), pp. 206–207.

<sup>73</sup> Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, p. 348.

<sup>74</sup> Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), p. 42.

friends to forget those experiences. In the later book which Keenan and McCarthy wrote together, *Between Extremes*, McCarthy claims that the experience of captivity no longer dominates the friendship, yet references to it are littered throughout the book.<sup>75</sup> Wadell also states the rather obvious truism that ‘healing takes time’. More troublingly, after listing traumatic experiences such as violence, rape, and sexual abuse, he states that friendship can help and that certain negative reactions are normal/healthy, but that, ‘they must gradually be overcome if they are not to be the overriding story of a person’s life’.<sup>76</sup> This implies a certain impatience with the trauma survivor, which is consistent with Rambo’s critique of redemption narratives. ‘How long?’ is surely a cry which echoes the Psalmist’s own, but perhaps it is the case that friendship which remains continues to sit with trauma for as long as *it* remains — and beyond — and this, in itself, is a source of healing. The friendship remains alongside the traumatic memory for as long as it is an aspect, in Buber’s parlance, of recognising the deepest thing in the other which needs to be confirmed.

However, it is right to note that the healing power of friendship has limitations. Although friendship has much power to enable the journey through trauma to continue, ‘it is not a substitute for political action or structural change’.<sup>77</sup> Friendship has much to recommend it: the solidarity with another, the spiritual element of prayer and care working in tandem, the ripple effect outwards from a close pair to the broader community. Although it cannot prevent the circumstances in which trauma occurs, such as racism, misogyny, war, and other injustices,<sup>78</sup> it still has a role to play. Keenan’s autobiographical account of friendship can be read theologically to show how it can stave off some of the effects of trauma which cannot be touched by either the micro-level of neuroscience and psychology, nor the macro-level of world politics. The three motifs of embodied friendship put flesh on the bones of how healing from trauma may be envisioned.

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<sup>75</sup> Brian Keenan and John McCarthy, *Between Extremes* (London: Black Swan, 1999), p. 32.

<sup>76</sup> Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, p. 52.

<sup>77</sup> Dana L. Robert, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), p. 185.

<sup>78</sup> Robert, *Faithful Friendships*, p. 185.

## Conclusion

In this brief study of trauma and friendship within Brian Keenan's *An Evil Cradling*, I have drawn upon three motifs of solidarity, prayer, and community to examine both topics. Trauma and friendship in the text are like two sides of the same coin. Although a traumatic situation was the catalyst for friendship, this friendship in turn lessened the effects of the traumatic situation by enabling Keenan and McCarthy to remind each other of their human dignity and worth. This then emanated out into the community of hostages thrown together by circumstances, who perhaps would not have 'chosen' each other in another setting. In a theological sense, the friendship between Keenan and McCarthy is the starting point for a chain of friendships, just as the New Testament envisages the church as a community of friends who intentionally form bonds. The two intertwined themes of friendship and trauma are intimately connected since they are both an experience of the body.

In a world in which traumatic experiences are common, and loneliness so rife, there is much to be learned from the experience of captivity (or indeed of prison or war) in which friendships, whilst not inevitable, become critical to the survival of a group. The experience of trauma, with its 'double wound' of both the trauma itself and the recurrence of it in later life, demands that the 'wound that cries out' be heard, seen, and touched. In Rambo's view, this enables healing to occur because there is no attempt to erase or eliminate the wound. Instead, Christ's call to his disciples to remain in him and in each other demands that, through the Spirit, the trauma can be witnessed, even where it cannot be understood or spoken about. Faithful 'remaining' within Holy Saturday thereby prevents a leap from the traumatic Good Friday event straight into the redemptive language of Easter Sunday, instead pausing in the Holy Saturday space where death and life sit side-by-side.

To summarise the images I have chosen from Keenan's text, the first of the bow and arrow indicates something of the solidarity of friendship; of one witnessing in the other what is truly there and confirming that to them. It shows two people mimicking one another, aiming at the same goal — in their case, of freedom. Secondly, the picture of McCarthy prayerfully cleaning up the mess of an ill man goes further and offers the idea that friendship is a spiritual discipline. In this

case friendship involved the spiritual touching of woundedness alongside the practical care and compassion for the unclean, which is reminiscent of Christ. Thirdly, the image of Frank Reed ultimately removing the blanket that he had been covering under reflects the possibility of a community of witnesses to suffering and trauma, an 'Upper Room' group of disciples who give to each other, touch each other's wounds, and enable each other to flourish despite trauma.

Although friendship may not be able to actively prevent trauma, it seems clear that close, intentional friendships have a role to play in mitigating its effects within individuals and communities. More research is needed on how the church could operate as a community of friends and what the practicalities are of creating safe spaces in which people feel able to reveal their wounds so that healing can begin. This is particularly necessary where men and women's experiences of trauma may differ. Recovery from trauma will never be achieved by forcing the matter, of pushing for a positive redemptive conclusion to the death-in-the-midst-of-life paradox. Instead, Christian theology's focus on the body, especially through the wounded body of Christ, even post-resurrection, and Jesus's words in John 15, implies that Christian disciples are called to witness, remain with, and gently touch each other's wounds. The loving nature of the relationship between Keenan and McCarthy, which is articulated and celebrated in Keenan's work, gives a testimony to friendship's power to enable survival, and indeed flourishing, in the most harrowing of traumatic situations.