Alexa Klein-Mayer Capstone Project Background:

For my capstone project, I decided to work on creating a zine series about relational ethics and relationships as spiritual practice. This topic has been a core one for me throughout my studies at HDS, syncretizing my coursework in sexual ethics, decolonial theory, Buddhist practice, embodiment, and utopias; I decided to call the series *FELT* to center somatic and embodied experiences of relationality and body wisdom practices.

I’m interested in what imaginative currencies we need to cultivate futures in which there is less suffering, oppression, degradation of life and ecosystems. How can I/we learn other ways of being and relating than the ways I am/we are now? My studies and ministerial training at HDS has focused on how we are in relationship, how we define relationship, how we learn how to be *in relationship*, how we learn *how to be* in relationship, and how we shift our ways of relating to one another and to all beings more broadly. In his class on sexual ethics, Professor Jordan so clearly connected ethics, relationships, and education as these inseparably enmeshed endeavors, each “one” looping back into and containing the others. How did we learn to relate to each other, to other beings, to our ways of knowing and being in these ways? And how can we learn how to be otherwise? These questions are ones I know I will carry with me past graduation and are ones that I wanted to center in my cumulative project.

I was drawn to the zine format for its ethics. As I have understood it, zine culture is built around sharing information, interests, and passions in a horizontal way, offering opportunities for members of marginalized communities and subcultures to bypass the blockades of traditional publishing. Before there was widespread access to self-publishing, there were zines -- hand-made and photocopied assemblages of text and visuals on innumerable subjects, freely offered or sold at a low price, circulated to friends and strangers alike typically on a small scale. They represent to me a commitment to the notion of a creative commons: creating work for people and communities to be used and distributed freely by them.

I wanted to work on a project that would live beyond the walls of Harvard, that could be left in public spaces, and open to a broad audience. I hoped to create something that could meet a wide range of readers, regardless of their higher education background or financial means. I aspired to make something that would share resources I find vital and compelling in ways that could make them more accessible and available to others.

The first issue, which is what I am submitting to the library, focuses on frameworks for recognizing emotional and verbal abuse. The topic of this initial issue was generated from a highly personal place, as I have been in the process of recovering from an emotionally and
verbally abusive relationship this year. It has been difficult for me to find resources on abuse that helped me make sense of my experience as a queer person who experienced non-physical abuse in a relationship with a female-identifying person.

In the US, “abuse” is often associated with physical harm and violence. If you have ever looked for resources on abusive behavior, you have likely found that there is an abundance of materials on physical abuse. But abusiveness is as varied in its scope as intimacy. Just as you can share emotional intimacy or spiritual intimacy with someone, you can experience emotional abuse or spiritual abuse from them. Someone can act abusively towards you without ever touching you, and their non-physical abuse can have lasting physical impacts.

“Abuse” is also still often framed as a problem primarily between cismen and ciswomen in monogamous romantic, sexual relationships. While cis+straight men are responsible for an enormous amount of violence against women, abusiveness is not limited by someone’s identity or the type of relationship. People of all ages, racial identities, gender identities, sexual identities, abilities, religious identities, socioeconomic statuses, education levels, etc. can and do act abusively. And abusiveness can be present in any kind of relationship, whether with a family member, friend, romantic partner, spiritual teacher, co-worker – and our relationships with the more-than-human world as well.

Emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse are often not recognized as abuse by the people experiencing it, their friends and family, or even their mental health supports. As a result, people are less likely to be able to access resources, support, frameworks, and communities that could help them recover their well-being and prevent future harm. It is for this reason that I wanted to focus the first issue on expanding our understanding of what abusiveness can look like outside of physical harm, and outside the context of straight/cis romantic relationships.

While I don’t explicitly talk about how my spiritual practice as a Buddhist informs my understanding of abuse in the issue, it is a key framing for me and ties back into the broader theme of **FELT** as the spiritual practice of relationships.

Many of the resources I encountered as I was trying to process my experience of abuse operate within a dualistic framework of abuser and survivor. I wanted to create a resource that did not reify that binary for a couple of reasons. First, as a practicing Buddhist and as an abolitionist, I feel called to honor the humanity and the more-than-humanity of all beings, aspiring to live from a place that is rooted in our interdependence and non-separateness from one another. From Buddhist teachers I’ve learned that all beings suffer and want to be safe, free, well, and happy, and that the fundamental unit of life is the
relationship. From abolitionists I’ve learned that conflating a being with their actions dehumanizes them and supports opportunities to justify horrific violence against them. From these places, I believe that abusive behavior does not belong to a category of some bad people out there, separate and distant from the good rest of “us”. As disturbing as it is, we all have the capacity to act abusively, to treat others in harmful and damaging ways, to relate to others in ways that are rooted in asserting control and power over. And yet, thankfully, not all people are abusive. Many writers on abuse identify it as being underpinned by an orientation and attitude -- a belief system driving harmful and violent behaviors. I think spiritual practices and traditions have powerful wisdom for transforming our attitudes and cultivating other ways of being in relationship with ourselves and others.

The second spiritual dilemma I found in the abuser vs. survivor dichotomy is that it did not help me hold or make sense of the reality that there are people who are survivors of abuse and who treat others abusively. In these instances, “survivor” and “abuser” can’t be neatly separated. Very few resources speak to this complexity, or leave space for people to identify as someone who has survived abusive behavior and acted abusively.

In issue one of FELT, I attempt to write about abuse in ways that do not perpetuate the conflation of abusive behavior with someone’s personhood, nor the dualistic division of “abuser” and “survivor”. This issue about recognizing emotional and verbal abuse is going to be followed by two further parts in a sort of mini-series on abuse within the broader FELT series; part two will focus on resources for recovery, offering frameworks and tools that I’ve found helpful on my own journey. Part three will be a more explicit theological reflection on control and power, drawing on Buddhist teachings and practices.

I plan to print and share copies of the zines with friends across the country, as well as in Free Little Libraries and community spaces in Cambridge/Somerville. If there is interest, I may also hold some virtual gatherings to discuss and reflect with others on the questions and materials.

I hope that, through this project, I have created something that may be of service to others!

*Please note that the version included here is formatted to be accessible in the DASH system, and isn’t the version laid out for printing and distribution in the zine format.*
“Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one ‘object’ of love. If a person loves only one other person and is indifferent to the rest of humanity, their love is not love but a symbiotic attachment, or an enlarged egotism...

If I truly love one person I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, “I love you,” I must be able to say, “I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.”

-Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving, p. 36
Hello! Welcome to FELT, a zine dedicated to relationships as spiritual and political practice.

This issue is the first in a three-part mini-series focusing on emotional and verbal abuse, emerging from my process of making meaning of my own experience of being in an abusive relationship. Pt. 1 is centered on resources for recognizing abuse. Pt. 2 will focus on resources for recovery, and pt. 3 on spiritual resources for relating to control and power in relationships.

In what follows, I’ve gathered resources and frameworks that I have found to be helpful provisions on the long road of understanding abusiveness and recovery.

I write with the hope that this offering may meet you where you are, whether you are someone currently trying to make sense of a difficult relationship, someone who is out of an abusive relationship but still grappling with the impacts of how you were treated, someone who is trying to support a loved one facing abuse, or someone who is coming to terms with your own patterns of control, domination, and history of harmful behaviors.

Please take what you need and leave what you don't! We all can benefit from having more awareness of abusive behaviors; it will take all of us to shift our culture of abuse.

May it be so!

- A
Engaging in material about abuse can be intense. Remember that it’s ok to take whatever time and space you need as you read!

Before diving in, it might be helpful to take a moment and fill out the Emotional Safety Plan on the next page and identify some supports you could draw upon if needed. Below are some grounding techniques that might help you to stay in the present moment, and regain a feeling of safety and control.

**Mental grounding**

Describe your environment in detail, using all of your senses. Describe objects, sounds, textures, colors, smells, shapes, numbers, and temperature.

Play a categories game. Try to think of “TV shows”, “songs”, “ice cream flavors”…

Say a safety or coping statement. “My name is _______; I am safe right now; I am in the present, not the past; this feeling will pass”

Say kind statements, as if you were talking to your best friend. For example, “You are a good person going through a hard time. You’ll get through this.”

Remember the words to an inspiring song, quote, prayer, or poem.

Visualize a place that is calming and safe.

**Physical grounding**

Touch various objects around you: a pen, keys, your clothing, a table, a wall. Notice textures, colors, materials, weight, temperature.

Dig your heels into the floor. Remind yourself that you are connected to the earth.

Carry a grounding object in your pocket - a small object (stone, ring, coin, piece of cloth, beads, etc) that you can touch or hold.

Stretch. Extend your fingers, arms, or legs as far as you can; roll your head around gently.

Clench and release your fists.

Eat or drink something. Describe the flavors or notice the temperature in detail.

Focus on your breathing, noticing each inhale and exhale. Take deep belly breaths.
My Emotional Safety Plan

What are some of my triggers?

When I’m triggered I…

I can self-regulate by…

I can call these people for support

Affirmations I can tell myself
recognizing abuse

It is often extremely difficult to recognize what’s going from within a relationship that is abusive.

A person who is treating you abusively may be the most affectionate and caring person in your life in one moment, and then rage out and attack you the next. And then repeat that treatment in ways that somehow feel both inevitable and unpredictable.

This switchback of abusive treatment is deeply disorienting and confusing -- and confusion is central to how abuse functions and is perpetuated.

Abuse loses some of its power when it is seen, recognized, and named, when the confusion is dispelled.

Here are some framings that might help you be able to recognize abuse and make meaning of what’s going on…
a working definition:

on the interpersonal level, abuse is a **systematic** and **chronic pattern** of behaviors where one person non-consensually uses power to try to gain or maintain control over the thoughts, beliefs, actions, body, and/or spirit of another person.
Dream House as Deja Vu

She loves you. She sees your subtle, ineffable qualities. You are the only one for her in all the world. She trusts you. She wants to keep you safe. She wants to grow old with you. She thinks you’re beautiful. She thinks you’re sexy. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something stunningly filthy, and there is a kick of want between your legs. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the luckiest person in the whole world.

- Carmen Maria Machado
  In the Dream House, p. 29
Abuse is not about a single event; it is the consistent recurrence of abusive behaviors.

An abusive behavior is any behavior that is rooted in disrespecting, controlling, insulting, and/or devaluing another being. When these behaviors are chronic and repeating, they accumulate into abuse.

The repeated and continuous nature of abuse means that it often happens in situations of close and ongoing contact with people we know, love, live and/or work with -- people whose voices we may trust immensely and/or who we may depend on for care and support.

Abuse tends to operate cyclically, alternating between four basic stages…
The Cycle of Abuse

*the calm / honeymoon / idealizing period*
This is usually how the relationship starts. The abusive person can be charming, charismatic, sincere, and extremely attractive, showering the other person with intense affection, care, gifts, and flattery. If a rotation through the cycle has already happened, this is the period when one or more of the following tend to happen:

- the abusive behaviors stop
- the abusive person acts like the abuse never happened
- the abusive person may follow through on promises they’ve made in the post-explosive period
- the abusive person may give gifts or show lots of affection to the other person
- the person being treated abusively believes or wants to believe that the abuse is over or that the abusive person will change

*the post-explosive period period*
The abusive person tries to prevent the other person from leaving. The abusive person may do nice things for them, give gifts, take them out, or apologize for the abuse. They may claim, “This will never happen again”, pledge to get help, or blame the abuse on drugs, alcohol, stress, mental health, or other factors. These seemingly kind actions are still attempts to control the person who is being abused, aiming to keep them in the relationship and drawing them back into the cycle.
*the tension building / devaluing period*
Tension builds as the abusive person starts to use controlling behaviors like guilt, blame, or cruel, degrading, condescending remarks. They may start to get increasingly angry. Communication becomes difficult. In this phase of the cycle, people being abused often become hyper-aware of their own behavior and try to do things to avoid conflict, upsetting, or “getting in trouble” with the abusive person.

*the explosive period*
Any type of abuse occurs; the abusive person uses a tactic or multiple tactics of abuse to control the other person. At this point, the person who is treated abusively may start questioning the relationship and themselves on a deep level, and may consider leaving the relationship.

*Note: The cycle of abuse may look different for abusive behavior in familial contexts as opposed to relationships with more consensual beginnings like friendships or romantic relationships.*
Life within a cycle of abuse is often a dizzying wave of the highest highs and the lowest lows. While it may be difficult to accept, it is important to remember that the exciting good periods and the calm periods are just as much a part of the cycle of abuse as the painful periods of verbal, emotional, physical, and/or sexual assault.

Usually, we expect that things will get better over the course of a relationship; we will learn how to navigate challenges together better, learn more clearly what we and the other person need in the relationship, and become more skilled over time at communicating and working things out.

In an abusive cycle, things tend to get worse over time as the person being abused becomes more and more damaged by, afraid of, and numb to the harm, and more and more desperately attached to the “good” times in the cycle.

It is often much more difficult to separate from an abusive person than from a nonabusive one because of this cycle. Many people who are being abused leave an abusive relationship multiple times before successfully staying away. Many others may be unable to leave due to extreme risks to their health and safety or the safety of other loved ones.
"The twentieth time a loved one scares us is not the same as the first. We may become enraged, or paralyzed, or numb, or all of those at the same time. We may feel like it’s harder and harder to figure out what to do."

- Lundy Bancroft

Why does it get harder to leave an abusive relationship with time?

The more time someone has to tear down our self-esteem and self-worth → the harder it is for us to believe that we deserve to be treated better.

The more time someone has to hurt us emotionally → the more likely our energy and initiative are to diminish → the harder it is to gather the strength to get out.

The more damage someone does to our relationships with friends, family, and community → the less support we have for the difficult process of ending the relationship.

The longer we have been living with someone’s cycles of abuse and intermittent, unpredictable kind and loving treatment → the more attached we are likely to feel to them, the more committed we often become to trying to ensure the good and prevent the bad.

Fear and its impacts accumulate over time.
Dream House as Deja Vu

She says she loves you. She says she sees your subtle, ineffable qualities. She says you are the only one for her, in all the world. She says she trusts you. She says she wants to keep you safe. She says she wants to grow old with you. She says she thinks you’re beautiful. She says she thinks you’re sexy. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something weirdly ambiguous, and there is a kick of anxiety between your lungs. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like the most scrutinized person in the world.

- Carmen Maria Machado

In the Dream House, p. 98
Models of health and wellness often portray various essential dimensions of wellbeing: emotional, intellectual, physical, social, environmental, financial, and spiritual. You may have other components that are key to your health. When we are well, these interconnected elements support our resilience and capacities to feel connected and alive.

As we think about the tactics of abuse, we can begin by recognizing that abuse targets these areas of wellbeing. The goal of abuse is control. It is easier to control and have power over someone who is disconnected from what supports their wellness and who is isolated from their networks of care.

**Abuse is corrosive and damaging to relationships.**

In an abusive relationship, your relationship with yourself, your network of support, places and activities that you love, your work, and/or your spiritual practices come under fire. The ways we make meaning and understand ourselves, others, and being in the world are attacked.

What is affected is not simply the relationship between two people, but one person’s whole relational world.
Control in a verbally and/or emotionally abusive relationship can begin in subtle ways: judgmental comments about our appearance, negative remarks criticizing someone or something we care about. An abusive person may start to give too much advice about how we should be living and resent when their recommendations aren’t acted upon, or begin to react negatively when we don’t share or affirm their viewpoint.

An abusive person often acts to define reality, authoritatively presenting their opinions and perceptions as the Truth while dismissing and devaluing another’s perceptions and beliefs, or punishing them for having a different sense of reality.

An abusive relationship is a more or less constant invalidation of one person’s reality at their expense and for the benefit of the the abusive person’s increased control/power over.

“Whose life has become smaller? Whose demands have grown? Whose sense of self has fallen away, and whose desires, grievances, and anger animate the relationship as a whole?”

- Hyejin Shim
Some Impacts of Abuse

A tendency to live in the future — “Everything will be great when/after …”

A loss of self-confidence and self-esteem

Hypervigilance - being in a prepared, on-guard state

A concern that something is wrong with you

A reluctance to come to conclusions

An internalized hyper-critical voice

A belief that what you do best may be what you do worst

Broken or damaged connections with yourself, places, activities, and people you love
When we suffer harsh, painful treatment over an extended period of time, we naturally feel a flood of love and gratitude toward anyone who brings relief, like the surge of affection you might feel for the hand that offers a glass of water on a scorching day. But in situations of abuse, the hand that offers the glass of water is the hand of someone who has also driven you into the heat without any water in the first place.

Some Impacts of Abuse

Uncertainty and fear about how you are coming across

A desire to escape or run away

Distrust of your spontaneity, and ability to make decisions

Shame and a desire not to be the way you are — "too sensitive," etc.

An inclination to soul-searching and reviewing incidents with the hope of determining what went wrong

A growing self-doubt

Difficulty accepting or trusting your perceptions

Difficulty focusing, or attending to needs and desires other than the abusive person’s
Dream House as Deja Vu

She says she loves you, sometimes. She sees your qualities, and you should be ashamed of them. If only you were the only one for her. She’d keep you safe, she’d grow old with you, if she could trust you. You’re not sexy, but she will have sex with you. Sometimes when you look at your phone, she has sent you something stunningly cruel, and there is a kick of fear between your shoulder blades. Sometimes when you catch her looking at you, you feel like she’s determining the best way to take you apart.

- Carmen Maria Machado

In the Dream House, p. 181
Few things are more disorienting, destabilizing, and painful than being mistreated by someone -- especially someone who we love. When a source of safety is also a source of fear, our behavior and ways of relating become disorganized. We desperately seek ways to avoid being mistreated and to be treated well, but because an abusive person’s behavior towards us is both unpredictable and persistent, none of our strategies to feel safe and have our needs met are successful.

If we are in an abusive relationship, we likely spend most of our time and energy trying to figure things out: the abusive person (how to please them, how to help and support them), on the abusive relationship (how to act, how to change or fix it), and on the abusive behavior (how to prevent or avoid the bad and ensure the good). The assumption is that we are doing something wrong, and if we could just figure out how to be better or do something better, the abuse would stop.

*If I could only better express my thoughts and feelings, then this person wouldn’t get so angry at me.*

*If I could only get more skilled or capable at _____, then this person wouldn’t criticize me for being so inadequate.*

*If I could only understand them better and be more responsive to their needs and desires, then this person wouldn’t hurt me so much.*

*If I could only prove how _____ I am, then this person would trust and respect me.*

*If I could only _____, then this person wouldn’t treat me like this.*
But abuse only stops when the abusive person chooses to stop acting abusively.

Abuse is not a product of relationship dynamics gone wrong between two equally responsible and contributing parties. Approaching abusive behavior as a shared dynamic can only confuse and obscure the harm happening as a result of one person’s non-consensual attempts to control another.

Because of this, forms of therapy that are designed to tackle mutual issues in relationships are not appropriate for addressing abusive behavior. Applying them to a situation of abuse can too easily support the notion that the person being treated abusively is somehow causing their mistreatment or deserving of the abusive person’s actions.

Unlike in many other relational issues, we cannot make things better by changing our own behavior or by attempting to manage the abusive person’s feelings or actions better in a situation of abuse -- no matter how hard we try.

The abusive person has to make the choice to turn away from abusive behaviors, and seek out resources and support to change their abusiveness. Changing our abusive patterns cannot come merely through addressing other issues like addiction, trauma, and/or mental health - abuse is not a product of them. We have to deal with our abusiveness in its own right.

Proof of change is the end of abusive behaviors in the relationship -- the abusive person’s consistent action and behavior to act non-abusively.
closing note

I hope that this first issue has provided some helpful frameworks and insights into how to better recognize and understand emotional and verbal abuse.

The next installment in this mini-series will center tools and resources for recovering from abusiveness. If you are interested in receiving that issue and future issues of *FELT*, please reach out at corpseflowerzine@gmail.com.

This series is an ongoing work in process for me, and I’d welcome your feedback, questions, input, anything you’d like to share.

Thank you for taking the time to read and engage with this content!
some sources and resources

- The Emotional Safety Plan is from Jenica Wright LLC, [www.jenica-wright.com](http://www.jenica-wright.com)
- *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado
  - A powerful and stunning memoir about abuse in queer relationships. I cannot recommend it highly enough.
  - A supplement resource to the book tour on abuse in queer relationships
    - [https://media.wnyc.org/media/resources/2020/Feb/03/In_the_Dream_House_resources.pdf](https://media.wnyc.org/media/resources/2020/Feb/03/In_the_Dream_House_resources.pdf)
- *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft
  - A helpful book that provides insights into how abuse operates. Highly gendered and geared towards heterosexual, romantic relationships.
- *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* by Patricia Evans
  - A key text that goes into detail about tactics and methods of verbal abuse -- also highly gendered and geared towards straight, romantic relationships.

Local organizations in the Boston-area (open to people nationally also)

- **The Network/La Red** - an organization that works to end partner abuse in queer relationships and support people who have experienced abuse: [http://www.tnlr.org/en/](http://www.tnlr.org/en/)
- **Emerge** - an organization that works with people who are abusive to stop abusiveness (mostly working with cismen, but I think open to people of all gender and sexual identities) [https://www.emergedv.com/](https://www.emergedv.com/)

scan ^ for a playlist of songs that provide insight into abuse
“When we suffer harsh, painful treatment over an extended period of time, we naturally feel a flood of love and gratitude toward anyone who brings relief, like the surge of affection you might feel for the hand that offers a glass of water on a scorching day.”

But in situations of abuse, the hand that offers the glass of water is the same hand that drove us out into the high heat with no protection or supplies.