Repair zone

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the January 25, 2003 issue

Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World. By Elizabeth V. Speldman. Beacon, 165 pp., $24.00.

Every morning when I look into the mirror I see a face that is not what it used to be. Fifty years' worth of gravity, sunshine, smiles and grimaces have produced what I hope is the beginning of a noble ruin, but only if I resist a cosmetic culture's blandishments to repair the damage. According to Elizabeth Spelman, who teaches philosophy at Smith College, the urge to repair is such a deeply human instinct that *Homo reparans* might be the best name for our species. Confronted with "the brute facts of the impermanence, imperfection, and fragility of the objects with which we cohabit the world," she writes, we have come up with a wide range of responses to ruination.

Take the World Trade Center, for instance, where police and firefighters displayed vastly different attitudes toward the ruins of the twin towers. According to *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, "The police represented the view that the wreckage is now cartage. To the firefighters, it is sacred space, at least until they have fulfilled their duty to recover the victims' remains." While the events of September 11 provide a vivid context for many of the reflections in this book, Spelman's broad survey of human attitudes toward wreckage goes far beyond that day.

Some of us protect ruins as monuments to memory, she points out, while others of us devote ourselves to the cathartic work of restoration. We repair some things for use and others for display, employing skills that range from knowing how to read a repair manual to engaging in the highly intuitive work of "reparative improvisation." Though the circular saw was invented by a woman, men tend to use tool boxes for their repairs while women prefer the affective skills needed to patch rifts and mend hearts in the human repair shop of the home.

In what is apparently the first book on repair, Spelman's wide net hauls up chapter-length discussions of gender differences in moral deliberation, the restorative justice

movement in Western democracies, the reparations debate in the U.S. and the shattered memories of Holocaust survivors. While each of these discussions is richly documented and thought-provoking, it is the last that is likely to raise the most questions for religious readers.

In a chapter titled "The Irreparable and the Irredeemable," Spelman writes not only about the instructiveness of ruins but also about the importance of knowing when to check the reparative impulse that strains to set things right. She cites the work of Holocaust writer Lawrence Langer, who questions "the bright rhetoric of redemption and salvation" that he finds in much commentary on the testimonies of Shoah survivors. He hears this rhetoric not so much in the accounts of the survivors themselves as in the eagerness of their interviewers to find reparative motifs: "Suffering ennobles the sufferer and edifies the observer; it doesn't have to kill you and is not so disabling that you cannot recover from it, find compensation for it, restore the rhythm of your life despite the full stop it came to."

Langer's concern about such "inappropriately redemptive logic" is its patent denial of the irreparable damage that the Shoah inflicted on those who endured it. In the words of one survivor, "You're not supposed to see this; it doesn't go with life. It doesn't go with life. These people come back, and you realize, they're all broken. Broken. Broken."

These ruins of memory cannot be razed or repaired, Spelman writes. They remain rubble that won't go away, and they roll underfoot for what is left of survivors' lives. If there is any wisdom to be gained from them, it is not about the consolation of redemption but about the obligation to confront the irredeemable harm that human beings can inflict on one another. Without that confrontation the odds of repairing human civilization are greatly diminished. Any language of repair that masks or blocks such confrontation simply extends the damage.

"Repair is the creative destruction of brokenness," Spelman writes in her last chapter. Whether the focus is a teacup, a relationship, a life or a 50-year-old face, *H. reparans* is charged with the responsibility of deciding when, where and how the reparative impulse is to be exercised. No one who reads this book will ever again be unaware of that responsibility.