

ANGERED INTO ACTION: A WOMAN'S STORY OF RECLAMATION

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In this narrative, the author describes her daily struggle to thwart the damaging self blame that threatens to creep into her psyche and assault her efforts to rediscover and recoup her wholeness. By writing about the attack, she seeks to empower herself and help other survivors channel their anger into action.



Facing Taciturnity: Voicing My Story

It was a hot, dry summer. I was in New Mexico with my mother, who was attending a conference in the dome-shaped Holiday Inn. We were twenty-four miles from the Navajo reservation, where I had spent my past few summers basking in the heat. I had learned so much there. I had learned to lasso, though only fence poles, as moving objects still escaped my growing abilities. I had spent hours of multiple days surveying the many elders and their silver-smithing techniques. I was mesmerized by the turquoise stones and the process of heating and cooling. I envisioned draping myself in brightly woven colors and elaborate turquoise jewelry, as if I were in the role of a healer or *Hatatii*. I would roam the land in search of spiritual connections I had only read stories about. I loved my time there. Accompanying my mother in her hotel stay would signify the end of my pubescent summer adventure.

The conference was not for young girls in the throes of adolescence, and so I, like many peers, were relegated to the hotel room and all of the hotel amenities. This being the third year in the row, I felt I had grown up with many of the youth that hung out in the public hotel spaces. Knowing them well solidified my coming of age in many ways, as I had developed tremendously during my stay on the reservation. One girl in particular had become my confidant. We were inseparable that summer; we met every morning for pancakes in the restaurant, relishing the final moments when the check came and we could say, "Just

charge it to my room." We felt free and adult like. However, this summer was slightly different than the previous ones. This summer her older brother joined his family in this now yearly tradition.

He was three years my senior and I was a raging, hormonal girl, eying shyly his natural, beautiful, physique when he would dive into the indoor swimming pool. He had a cultish following of young pubescent and pre-pubescent girls, who gathered at one corner of the swimming pool, some lying out on lawn chairs as they had seen grown women do. And, then there were others, like me, shyly in their one-piece bathing suits submerged in water up to their necks. Yes, this summer was different and I was different. My close friend, her chaperoning, beautiful, older brother, and I were together constantly. Within a few days my shyness had mostly worn off and I felt free to playfully tease and laugh with him.

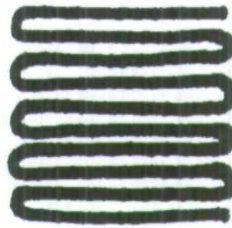
Two days before the conference ended, all three of us had come in from a swim and were watching purchased movies in their hotel room. The two of them shared an adjoining room with their mother, leaving me to pout with jealousy a bit. The room was typical: two full beds, a couple of lamps, a dresser, and hideously patterned curtains that led out to the covered courtyard and indoor pool. My friend and I lay on our stomachs, our heads facing the TV, legs swinging in the air. He rested on his back on his bed, watching TV casually and teasing us about the scenes in the movie that made us giggle.

Sometime later, she and I grew bored with the monotone room and the complicated plot, and she set off to go convince her mother to give her money so we could go to the arcade. When she left, he and I continued to finish the movie, while he teased me about my now encroaching shyness when a kissing scene came across the screen. "Haven't you ever kissed a guy before?" "No! No. Not like that," I said, shifting from somewhere between an emphatic answer and a shy, soft response. He moved over to the bed I was lying on and told me in a soft voice that he wanted to be my first. He wanted to show me how. I remember becoming instantly over-heated; my heart raced, as the blood rushed to my face and my body became rigid. He touched my face, stroking it from the corner of my left eye, down my cheekbone, to my chin. Then he kissed me softly on the lips. I was ecstatic and scared, but mostly ecstatic.

He kissed me again, pressing his lips harder and faster upon mine. I became uncomfortable but instantly questioned whether this was how it was done. I remember thinking that I was so lucky: *he chose me*. The kissing then became...harsh and disenchanting. He began forcibly, convulsively grabbing at my body, as I tried to grip his hands to push him away. It was as if we were playing an unfortunate, unnerving game of Keep Away. I managed to push my head back from his, though he had one hand securing my ponytail, pressing it toward him. I said "Stop!" I was ignored. It was only seconds later that my clothes were ripped and my skin was exposed. I was in an impossible position now and mostly I remember feeling defeated.

Flashes of skin and terror are mostly what I recall from there. I hit him with something glass because it broke and cut me in the process. I can still feel the sharp, stinging heat coming from my face, as it collided with his fist. Within moments the back of my head felt equally the same. I recall pleading, "Please...please." His mouth was moving, but very few sounds were coming out. The only words I seem to recall are partnered with his hateful, yet pained, eyes. He was holding me down by pressing on my throat and collarbone, when he whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

The soft words did not match the angry thrusting. I turned my head and focused on the rust colored paisley pattern imprinted on the curtains. Maybe they weren't so bad. When he released the pressure of his body and hands, I fell, and then I ran. I never looked back. I spent the rest of the day in the shower, and the rest of the conference in my hotel room.



Shame and Guilt: The Silence of Our Sisters

I spent years battling with devastating questions and self-blaming statements. Why me? Was I chosen or convenient? What do I do with his *apology*? I shouldn't have flirted with him. I wanted his attention. I wanted him to kiss me; what does that say about me? Sometimes, when I felt really self-destructive, I would unwaveringly, outright blame myself for being a tease, for wanting him, for being female. I had been programmed along the way, as a girl, as a woman, to instinctively criticize my part in this curse. Later, in my early 20's, when I began counseling rape survivors, I would still hold the heaviness of what happened and occasionally pick apart my culpability in what occurred in that Holiday Inn so many years ago. Combating the shame, guilt, and damaging self thought was still a daily struggle, even though I now knew the rhetoric and the statistics and had a deeper understanding of my perceived place in our patriarchal society.

I did not disclose, discuss, or acknowledge what happened to me that summer for over a year. In my waking life, it had simply not taken place. I had no such memories. My dreams were haunted by sounds and voices back then. I hated to sleep and often opted to stay awake for days on end. When I finally opened my mouth about that summer, it came out in a torrent of screams and panic, spastic speech.

I had been with a group of friends and my current boyfriend was teasingly chasing me across a field, with the rest of the pack close behind. He grabbed my wrist, turning me around, and as I frantically began pulling away, instantly becoming anxious, he grabbed the other wrist. At that moment, I could feel the anxiety and terror creeping through my body, rushing out in the form of tears and creating flashes of scorching fever rushing through my chest, neck, and face. The more I fought him to let go, the more conquered I felt, the more the tears ran, and the more I knew I was in peril. My begging him not to hurt me, buckling my knees, creating dead weight, must have stunned him into letting go. As soon as he did, I dropped to the earth, staining my jeans with grass and dirt, and took off running in the opposite direction.

The shaken crowd, including my bewildered beau, did not follow. I ran into a nearby department store and barricaded myself in the handicap stall of the women's restroom. I eventually realized where I was, and what had happened. I sobbed on the floor for many minutes, shaken and ashamed. Sometime later, one of my oldest friends found me in the back stall of Sear's Department Store. She begged me to let her in and when I did not, she crawled under the door. After a moment of crying on her lap while she stroked my hair, she asked for understanding. I told her; I told her everything I remembered. She displayed no signs of shock or surprise; her face, while thoughtful, showed instead a genuine expression of indifference. She merely handed me a string of toilet paper squares and said, "It happens to all of us eventually. It's okay. You just have to move on." Seconds later, she got up off the ground, reached out her hand, as a gesture to help me up, and simply stated, "Let's go. Everyone's waiting." The fact that her smile seemed sincere made my oncoming nausea that much more potent.

Claiming Anger: Moving Toward Reclamation

Pamela Fletcher (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005) in *Transforming a Rape Culture*, discusses a personal story in which she was accosted by a man in a bar who refused to

listen to her when she sternly told him to let go of her. The shock and teachable moment for her came in two waves of realization. The first was that her body was viewed as property, and the man who felt he had a claim to it disregarded her completely, only backing down when another man came to *claim* her. The other realization that took her by surprise was that the women she was with did nothing to protect her or to stop the man from accosting her. The women later justified the man's violating behavior by telling Fletcher that this happened "because (she) was so exotic looking." Hearing women accept and expect to be subjugated to the worst displays of sexist behavior continues to anger me into action. I spent years apologizing to myself for my part in *letting* my attack happen to me. I wallowed in sadness and turmoil, I tried to ignore that piece of my life story, and I lived in fear and terror of what was around the corner. But, none of that self-loathing, disparaging, and detrimental mindset made that piece of me disappear—that foreign object that exists attached to my spine, gripping my core, yet sitting just below the surface. I regularly fight the urge to cut it out, knowing that I cannot, but still desperately wanting to do so. No action or inaction could change what happened years ago. So I decided to accept this change in me. No, not accept, endure and acknowledge this foreign part of me that I cannot expunge.

The acknowledgement of this change in me, of this newly crafted me, was a painful process. I had to start by learning to tolerate small glimpses of this new woman, barely glancing at her through my peripheral vision when passing shiny surfaces. As the ongoing façade began to fade, I began to spend time staring at this new being with intention. These moments were the hardest, assessing the damages and tolerating the outcome, often leading to sobbing emotion and eventually into the resemblance of strength. My identity had changed, someone had altered it without authorization, and I was left staring at what first seemed like scraps. It took a long time for me to recognize myself in the bits and pieces left over. I fought myself, my thoughts, with a purposive determination to claim this new me. Once I shifted my mindset from sole views of

wreckage to an active resolve of endurance and ownership, I surprisingly found myself smiling at my reflection, almost smirking at my newly established strength.

In owning who I am, all parts of who I am, I am making myself whole again. I am focused on helping other women go back to being whole. Lisa Cosgrove, in a book review of "After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back," quotes Nancy Raine, "I could not dwell within myself as I once had. I was, I now understand, homeless" (Cosgrove, 1999, p. 22). The description of homelessness I take to mean a disconnect, a divide, with who you were and who you are post-rape. I am no longer, what Raine terms, my pre-assault self (Cosgrove, 1999). I must live with who I am now and continue each day to assure that I am whole, complete, unbroken. Healing this type of open wound is not easy, but with each outcry of outrage, angst, and truth it becomes easier to live with, a little easier to incorporate in my identity. Rape and sexual terrorism survivors must be given room to speak, to scream, to protest. By writing my story, by assigning words to the violating act he did to me, I somehow feel a power shift takes place. I can still determine my story; I can still determine who I become. I did not relinquish that, and as long as I continue to voice my experience, the healing continues and the power remains mine.

Inside Out Intersections: Personal, Political, Professional

I have worked with survivors of sexual violence since 1999. As social workers, we are often first responders to the terrors women live through. We must not perpetuate the silence of our sisters. A rich understanding of the initial shame and guilt society can burden rape survivors with is a must. We must understand the dichotomy that is felt by rape survivors when they begin to voice their stories and are told to "move on" or to "get over it." We must further understand that the very people who say they support us may give us the impression that it is too hard for *them* when we talk about it (Cosgrove, 1999). Social workers and therapists need to make an active effort not to shy away from this

characterization. Social workers must make training and understanding a priority. The importance of survivors being believed and heard are not myths. A basic comprehension of myths, facts, and common best practices is crucial.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) released its related policy statements in the 2006 book *Social Work Speaks*. Within this public and professional policy statement on "Women's Issues," NASW calls for all social workers to actively screen for violence against women in all psycho-social assessments. The standardization of such screening could assist in breaking the silence of survivors by providing an opening to begin the healing process with the assistance of a professional, and by systematically informing survivors that they are not alone in this recovery. Furthermore, the NASW, in its policy on "Crime Victim Assistance," advocates for the mandated and continuous funding of Victim of Crime Assistance (VOCA), including government payments for rape kits and sexually transmitted disease testing. Increasing and assuring VOCA funding would guarantee survivors some financial support, allowing their energy to be focused toward their healing process.

My inner optimist wants to believe that these and similar policy changes will themselves call for some form of systemic change, decreasing sexual violence against women, but the daily work reveals a need for something more drastic, more demanding. With my voice and recent reclamation, I would like to join past revolutionaries in their cries, imploring men to stand up and take on accountability for their brethren. Andrea Dworkin explained it best in her speech, "I Want a Twenty-Four Hour Truce during Which There is No Rape" (1983). Dworkin takes the view that women have been fighting this fight continuously and that there is no time left. "We don't have forever. Some of us don't have another week or another day to take time for you to discuss whatever it is that will enable you to go out into those streets and do something. We are very close to death. All women are." She argues that men have to

talk to other men and that until this occurs the ongoing brutalization of women will continue. I too am tired of picking up the pieces, my pieces, other women's pieces—it never ends. Men addressing men are not only needed but are crucial to ending sexual terrorism. Dworkin implores men to begin by drawing a truce for twenty-four hours; I am willing to start with an hour.

According to the 2006 Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), quoting the Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey, there were 272,350 sexual assaults reported in 2006. This equates to a sexual assault taking place about every two minutes in the United States.¹ With the frequency of sexual violence being this high, it is hard to understand how I could have felt so alone for so many years. We need to talk to each other about rape and sexual violence. We need to discuss sexual violence with our male co-workers, co-advocates, family members, and community. We need to help others facilitate their coming out process, rediscovering their wholeness or entirety after the attack. I need to reclaim my power, and writing about my process and my story continues me on my healing journey. I vow to eternally acknowledge all of myself, and to use my freshly retrieved power to bring about awareness of the daily struggle. I can no longer sit in silence, and I seek to help others harvest their own anger, by transforming it into action.

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(Footnotes)

¹ This statistic does not include children 12 years old and younger.



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