

## The Voice of Date Rape

This is a story about date/acquaintance rape, one that happened almost forty years ago. During the last couple of years, while I have come across articles pertaining to rape, rape survivors and their stories, the voice of date rape is rarely represented. This invisibility exacerbates the difficulty women experience as they try to recover. Because of the dearth of individual voices that address this crime, I am compelled to speak out. I hope that young people will feel that they can address their realities and begin the healing process long before they reach their 40's or 50's, as in my situation.

My name is Janet. I am 55 years old, and my first sexual experience, at the age of 16, was date rape. I met a young man, a couple of years older, while on a ski trip with my family. We went out for supper, then to his place, which he shared with friends. We went to his room, and as young people do, began to kiss. When he got more heated and carried away, moving his hands towards my pants, I asked him to stop. I told him that I was a virgin, and not ready for intercourse. He stayed on top of me. I tried pushing him away. I kept saying,

“No, no, please don't do anything.”

“I won't hurt you,” he answered and I wanted to believe him. Then he added,

“I won't do anything you don't want me to.” I was frozen, and repeatedly implored him to please stop. Soon, he looked at me and declared,

” You're not a virgin anymore”.

Shocked, and with the adrenaline of anger, I pushed him off me. After re-arranging my clothes, I fled the house. Stunned, frightened, and alone, I found my way back to our hotel. I never told anyone.

I wanted to erase the experience, and hoped that if I pretended it hadn't happened, the complexity of feelings would dissolve. My biggest fear at the time was being found out. Bad enough to have lost my virginity, but what would my parents think? They'd be so mad at me, blame me, how could I, what if I got pregnant. I prayed to God to please not let that happen. I'd be good.

I was in a state of shock, mixed with horror, anger, embarrassment and fear.

The first year following the rape I carried on as usual. I recall wondering if people could tell that I was no longer a virgin. When my peers talked of their boyfriends and sexual encounters, I found a quick way out of the discussion. I remember at age 18 moving to Toronto and being terribly lonely. I kept to myself, and never made any close friends.

Being raped at sixteen had enormous influence on issues relating to trust, safety and intimacy. For many years I was unaware of the impact. I developed patterns of trying to please, doing what I didn't want to do because I wanted to be liked, and tolerating verbal and emotional abuse. I

thought that if a boy was interested in me, I had to have sex with him. If I didn't, he might not like me.

I recall that in my mid-20's, out for an evening with friends, the conversation turned to date rape. I listened quietly before disclosing that I thought this had happened to me. I remember brushing the event off, reluctant to delve into unresolved territory. I wasn't certain that I had been the victim of rape, since I "knew" the person, albeit not very well. The trauma remained unexplored.

During my mid 40's, I noticed that certain situations of conflict triggered a similar "freeze" response in my body, as had occurred on the night of the rape. I was exploring bodywork, and for the first time since age sixteen, I began the process of releasing what had been stored within me for so many years. It was another seven years before I began to face yet another layer regarding the impact of the trauma.

In my fifties, I came across an article on survivors of rape. The piece introduced me to an organization in The United States that offers an outlet for rape victims to tell their stories. I completed an extensive survey, and for the first time expressed my story, the experience itself and the aftermath. Through the process of writing about the short and long term impacts of rape, new insights emerged regarding aspects of me that I had never clearly understood.

With hindsight, I see the profound psychological effects of the rape experience. My confidence was shaken by not being heard, my self-esteem took a blow, and I had no sense of my own voice. After all, I had said nothing. I hid within myself, afraid to speak. The effects of that decision had painful and limiting repercussions. Had I believed in myself enough to tell someone at the time, I could have had the help I needed to dissolve the trauma, before it layered through my psyche.

In the article on “Perspectives of Date Rape”, author Dr. David G. Curtis, Ph.d B.C.E.T.S. states: “The consequences of acquaintance rape are often far-reaching. Once the actual rape has occurred and has been identified as rape by the survivor, she is faced with the decision of whether to disclose to anyone what has happened.... The percentage of survivors reporting the rape is so low for several reasons. Self-blame is a recurring response which prevents disclosure.”

There was no doubt in my mind that I was to blame. If I hadn't gone back to the boy's house, I would not have been compromised.

When I finally spoke out 30 years later, friends were supportive. They were shocked, regretted that I'd experienced such an assault, and were troubled that I had been too afraid to speak, fearing my parents' reproach. No one passed judgment, nor claimed that what I had experienced was not really rape, as I had believed. They said rape is rape.

I was impacted by the words of Judy Katz, who stated the following in her book, "No Fairy Godmothers, No Magic Wand, The Healing Process after Rape".

"A woman does not "recover" from her rape.... to recover assumes that one somehow gets over it. More realistically, a woman must learn to integrate the experience into her life..."

In retrospect, I see that my involvement with dance throughout my life helped me to restore my self-esteem following the rape. I channeled my emotions and energy through my body. The momentum of rhythm carried and comforted me and I felt safe in my body. Often I have thought that dance "saved me". This was something I could do well. Dance gave me the sense that I had control of my body, and was my vehicle of expression.

Years of verbal therapy, bodywork and various healing modalities, have also helped me come to terms with the rape. At the same time, I realize that at a core level, I continue to carry a multifaceted range of feelings about the assault. While I understand that no one asks to be raped, at times, I continue to experience feelings of humiliation, shame and guilt.

As I continue to come to terms with the impact of the trauma, I understand that I am the woman I am because of my experience; compassionate, artistic, expressive, strong and empathetic. The sense of isolation arises less frequently, and I am now better able to focus on my positive attributes, rather than the negative one of having been raped.

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I wonder about other women my age who have struggled with their rape experience, and the young women, the same age I was at the time of being raped. Do they experience self-doubt and bury what happened to them beneath denial, or wish, as I do at times, that they could go back to the day of rape and change the experience? Are there feelings of wanting to curl up and hide, to tell people to leave them alone, afraid to be seen and known?

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Recently I came across an essay written by a woman about her date rape incident. Although difficult to read, I was heartened to know that I am not alone. I was inspired to keep writing about the rape.

We are beginning to speak, and by so doing are alerting women to the burden of carrying their pain. The healing process begins with finding our own voices, developing our inner resources, and then recognizing ways in which we have helped ourselves to heal. This allows us more ease in living with the wounds that may remain.

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Those who have suffered rape have experience and wisdom to offer to people who are sexually assaulted. Based on my situation, I can offer you the assurance that: You have done nothing wrong. Rather, you were violated and abused. Talk to someone. Go to a rape crisis centre if there's one in your area.

You are good, beautiful and precious and you deserve a loving ear.