

9

A story of survival¹

by

Kate²

Kate gave a keynote address at the inaugural Dulwich Centre Publications' Narrative Conference in Adelaide, February 1999. Her address was based upon this paper.

So often, stories told about rape are stories of shame, humiliation and secrecy. I think it's so important to tell the other stories - stories of survival. I'm not proud of being raped. But I'm proud of the way I've survived rape and the ways in which friends and family have stood with me.

I didn't feel dirty or ashamed after I was raped. I was scared, freaked out, and then really, really angry. I remember at the time just wanting to scream and let out a kind of roar of rage. At the end of the night, after going back to where the rape had happened with the police, after medical examinations and after talking with the police for hours and hours, I finally came home and had a shower. But it wasn't because I felt dirty or embarrassed or ashamed, it was because I was so tired and water can be so soothing. I knew the rape was not my fault and I guess this has shaped my whole experience. I knew I had nothing to

be ashamed about.

The reason why, I think, I didn't feel any shame was that I was the victim of a kind of 'classical' rape. It was a violent attack by a stranger, there was a weapon involved. I was walking along a beach in daylight. I was on a holiday with my family. It happened eighteen months ago. It was just after I had finished school. I was seventeen. It couldn't be my fault. In some ways I think this made it easier to deal with. That's not to say that there weren't invitations to feel ashamed or guilty.

Talking to the police

While I was being raped I emotionally and physically switched off. My brain just took over. I was recording all the details, what he looked like, what he sounded like, and I was thinking in my mind what's the next question I'm going to be asked. I gave all false details about myself, my name, my age, where I lived. It came automatically. Afterwards I could recall all these details. When my parents said we must call the police, initially I said no, as I had promised him not to, but then, as I'd done such a good job at remembering everything, it seemed a waste not to tell the police!

The ways in which the police asked questions didn't make me feel any better. During the rape I could see a woman in the distance. She was in her fifties and wearing like a pink tracksuit. I think she was going for a jog. She was at such a distance that I couldn't tell if she was running towards me or away from me. When I had to say my statement to the police, the policewoman asked, 'Oh, well, you know, if there was that woman there why didn't she help you then?' It wasn't so much an accusation. They just wanted to be straight about the facts. But there was an insinuation: '... well, if you were wrong about that woman being there maybe you were wrong about the rape as well, maybe it wasn't rape ...' There was a sense of suspicion that maybe I had got it a bit mixed up. The ways they asked questions could invite shame.

Counselling

What stood out for me when I went to my first group counselling session was that when the women could tell their stories in *their* way the perpetrator didn't take up much of the story. The emphasis was on how they were feeling. We didn't want to know what this guy looked like, what he did, who he was. We wanted to talk about how we felt, how we dealt with it. With the police I was the victim. That's all I could possibly be to them because in their view there is only the perpetrator, the offender, and the victim - therefore I must be the victim. That's the only space they had available for me. Whereas where I have had counselling, I was a survivor from the beginning.

Sharing the story

I knew right from the beginning that I didn't want this to be a secret. My parents told my brother when we finally got home that night at 2:30am. The next morning I remember that my grandmother came over and gave me a hug. That's when I started crying.

I think I was lucky that I felt I had friends I could tell. I wasn't a thirteen-year-old who hated herself and didn't live with her parents and therefore felt like she had no-one to tell. And I didn't have a wild reputation that might have meant people wouldn't believe me. You often hear of children who've been sexually abused telling their parents or somebody and the person refusing to believe it. I never had any of that. That would be so hard to deal with.

Telling people wasn't as easy as I thought because once I'd told people, or my mum had rung various members of my family, then when I saw the people who had been told they didn't say anything to me. That was pretty hard to deal with. I guess they felt that maybe I didn't want to talk about it. Even if people were open to talking it could be complex. When a cousin from England rang me and asked how I was going, it was at a time when I was feeling like nothing had happened. It was a time when I was really stable. I told her that at other times I was really upset and how it fluctuated. It kind of surprised people when I appeared normal. So many different things could get in the way of talking about it. But I kept telling people.

Nathan, my boyfriend at the time, was great. Nathan was the person who listened to it all. I didn't have to protect him. I just told him how it was. We went together to tell my friend Natalie. She was the first friend I told. We went over to her house. I just needed to tell somebody. Later on the same night there was a big sleepover at another friend's house. When I got there it seemed that everybody knew something. They were coming up and asking, 'How are you? How was your holiday?' I was thinking, 'Do they know?' But of course they didn't. I remember that the word 'rape' came up about eight times that night. I'd never noticed it before. The word was everywhere. It was really weird.

That night we watched the movie *Fame*. In it there's a scene in which this girl is being photographed and this guy tries to get her to undress. One person was saying stuff like 'What a stupid girl. If she doesn't want trouble why is she getting undressed?!' At this point Natalie said, 'I can't watch this', and she walked out because she knew I'd been raped. I said, 'Well maybe she feels like she has no power and that she has to do it'.

A week later, at another sleepover, I told all my close friends that I'd been raped. They were all shocked and upset and started crying. Initially this was fine but then over time no-one knew what to say, and I got really upset and angry. I thought, look, these are my best friends, why aren't they saying anything to me? So I dragged them along to counselling with me. That was really good. My counsellor asked a few questions and it was so much easier to talk as a group. I think my friends just didn't know what to say.

Some really nice things came out of the conversation in the counselling. One friend said, 'I wish it had happened to me instead of you'. At the time I thought this was really touching. Later on I found out that she'd been raped by her father when she was ten years old. I could believe it then, that this had happened to her before, and yet she still said that she wished it upon herself before me. I was really touched by that. I was the first person she had told. In some way having it happen to me and me talking about it gave her the strength to tell her friends for the first time.

Little steps

These were really important steps, but I don't want to make it sound as if it was easy. Being raped took any innocence I had about the world. At seventeen it was gone. One day I was a child and the next I was an adult. The usual more gradual process of ending high school, going to uni, changed forever. Suddenly I felt like an adult, like never before. But in other ways I felt like a child - helpless.

At times we'd go to parties and I'd just get depressed. I'd have a few drinks and end up crying for the rest of the night. It would come in waves. I remember I had to wait three months to get back the results of HIV tests. For a time I felt that it just wasn't fair. I'm seventeen, I had a life-threatening experience, and now I've got to wait three months to see if I've got HIV. For a while there I had the feeling that 'I have the greatest pain in the universe, nobody feels as bad me'. Throughout all of this, Nathan was great. He'd remind me that other people have pain too, that it's just different. You can't compare it.

The little steps were so important. I remember how going into town for the first time after the rape and walking down Rundle Mall was a massive step. One day I walked from the State Library to where I have counselling and I was really proud of myself.

Giving him a name

In order to be able to talk with other people I decided to give the rapist a name. I decided to call him Davo. If he didn't have a name, then he remained faceless, and it was almost like he didn't exist and it never happened. I thought Davo would be a good name for him. It meant that there was a language for talking about him with friends.

It's also helped me change, over time, my feelings towards Davo. At first I had this kind of knee-jerk reaction that lots of people do, you know, that a rapist should have the word 'rapist' tattooed on their forehead. That they should be publicly humiliated and locked up forever. That kind of changed over time. I have got less angry at him and more enraged at the whole problem of rape and violence against women. It's gone beyond Davo himself now.

Instead of feeling angry or scared of him I've decided to feel pity.

Because maybe he could take something positive from my fear or my anger like, 'Oh, I've got a reaction out of her' or 'She was scared of me, isn't that great, that gives me power'. But you can't take much from pity can you? I've come to see that it's pretty pathetic that the only way Davo can feel powerful is to rape. So that's kind of changed my feelings towards him.

I've kind of come to the conclusion that he's not going to be caught. It would have been good if the police had kept in contact, and had let me know what was happening all along the way but, even if he was caught now, would that make it suddenly better? Probably not. I'd have to go to court and I'd probably get annoyed and distressed at the justice system. I don't even know how I'd want justice to be served.

Reclaiming the night

We were so young. Maybe at the time I might have felt that some of my friends could have done a better job but we were only seventeen. And with my girlfriends I think it was too close to home. We never thought this could happen and when it did I think it opened the possibility in my girlfriends' minds that it could happen to them too. It made it so hard to talk. We were so close that it was just unbearable for it to have happened. They didn't want to think about it too much, it was too painful.

Sometimes if we couldn't find ways to talk about it, it was better to do something together. When 'Reclaim the Night' came around it seemed like the perfect opportunity. I felt like we should all go together. We do lots of things as a group and I thought it was really important that we did this together because then they'd feel like it was a good way of them helping me without having to say anything. Nearly all of my friends went. It was really good. Lesley, Nathan's mum, came too. It was just great to be out there walking and making a difference, with people honking their horns and clapping in support. It was a really good way to bring my friends together. At the end of the night I rang my mum and asked her to pick me up because I didn't want to catch the bus home in the dark. I guess it was taking care but it felt kind of strange too. That night meant a lot to me.

Marking the anniversary of survival

By the time the one year anniversary of the rape was coming up I felt I had to do something to mark the occasion. To say, 'Look, I'm still here. I haven't forgotten about it and it's just not going to go away. But I have survived.' The dominant way of viewing rape is to see the woman as a victim who feels ashamed and that she's got to forget about the rape, to get over the story of humiliation and shame, to bury it, to get back to normal. Whereas, if you believe in telling a story of survival then it's always progressing and ongoing. You're not going to forget but you're going to be moving along.

So on the anniversary of the rape I asked my friends out to dinner. When I first suggested this, I was nervous and I think the way that I invited people confused them a bit. I kind of announced it by saying, 'You know, the 15th of January that's my one year anniversary, I thought we could go out to dinner to celebrate'. And my friends thought what?! Celebrate that you got raped!?! And then I could explain, 'No, to celebrate that I've survived'. I don't think we're used to talking about survival and so it can be confusing at times. Pretty quickly they understood that to stay at home on that night and watch videos would have been conforming to the victim role. It would have been staying inside away from the street, mourning what happened rather than going outside, being a part of life and saying, 'I'm still here'.

So we went out to dinner together. After we'd eaten, Nathan read out a speech which talked about the importance of friendship. He spoke of my courage too but mostly we wanted to stress how friendship had so helped the process of survival. One of the guys there then said that he thought I was one of the strongest women that he knew and how all of this had changed his attitudes to a lot of things. He spoke about how any tolerance he had once had for sexist jokes and all that kind of stuff had now completely gone. He said once he may have half-laughed and just let it go, but now he won't stand for it. He won't tolerate it at all. I was really glad that he could say that.

Another friend, who didn't come to the march, said something really helpful. I had been going on about how Davo had got away with it and she said that she hadn't spent any time thinking about Davo, that she didn't see the point. She said, 'I haven't thought about him at all because that's not important to me. It's you that's important to me. How you're coping. He doesn't deserve any of

our attention in any way.’

It helped a lot. It made me think about one of the women in my counselling group. When the guy who raped her was being sentenced we stood outside the court and she just read her poetry - poems of her survival. There was a group of people, and the media was there. She was determined to take the attention away from the perpetrator. There’s always so much attention on him. She wanted to focus some attention on the survivors and the stories of survival. That felt really good.

Another one of my friends, Fiona, who is really quiet and didn’t say anything at the dinner, came up to me later. She said, ‘I’m not religious, but I’ve been praying for you and thinking about you’. Fiona never says very much, she keeps to herself. When she does say something it’s worth listening to.

Paul, another friend, came up to me some time later and apologised for not being more of a support. He said, ‘I’m sorry but I’ve had a rough year myself. I just told my parents I was gay so I’ve been kind of dealing with that.’

Somehow we have all built up the trust between us. They are very special friendships to me. We have shared such rich histories. They are so much a part of my story of survival.

Sharing this story

Telling this story here, having it published, is like offering it to other people - hoping it might help. I think it is so important to share stories of survival.

Notes

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