

## Telling Rape

*"Telling Rape" describes my experiences with telling a personal story in my writing classes — my story of being a rape survivor. I begin the article by explaining the student-centered and feminist pedagogy that supports telling this story and then describe how I have told it in different contexts and with different consequences. I go into the first two tellings in some detail to show the kinds of issues and student responses that come up in classes and the learning I do about how and why I want to tell this story. Then I describe the effects of this teaching on my life when I join a sexual assault survivors group and learn more about the consequences of the rape for me and what telling it in classes represents for my recovery. I conclude by describing more briefly the experience of telling my story in two more classes, developing further a sense of the differences in each telling and the factors that contribute to positive outcomes for students and myself.*

by  
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Anne and I were sharing one of our weekly lunches when she said, "It's really getting to bother me that there are things I can't write about in my classes." We were teaching assistants in English at a university where the composition faculty encouraged student-centered and feminist teaching. The composition courses we taught were built around students choosing their own writing subjects, which most often were about life experiences. In our department many composition teachers write along with their students and read their writing aloud, as students do, so we practice what we teach. Now Anne was feeling acutely a contradiction between our philosophy and practice, and we talked specifically about the taboo against teachers sharing anything in a classroom related to the whole realm of sexuality in our lives. As we talked I realized, in a way that felt like a bell going off in my head, that I had an important story to tell and I really wanted to tell it. In an instant something changed for me, a possibility

opened up, and I made a mental leap that led directly to a new practice: "coming out" in my classes as a survivor of rape.

Why in the world would that be a good idea? I don't personally know anyone who's done it, but the logic for it is there in the underpinnings of my own and others' composition teaching. Participant-observation research I'd done in classrooms and interviewing students strongly suggested to me that when students are given a chance to bring themselves to their writing and discussion, two major concerns emerge for them: learning about themselves and connecting with others. I saw how harnessing a class to those felt needs energizes students and strengthens their language use because it becomes intrinsically compelling to stretch themselves, to reach for what they want to say. Engaging actively with language helps them move in a direction they really want to go. So I gear my teaching to what makes students want to write and talk.

In all my teaching strategies I work toward creating a safe space for students to explore whatever is on their minds. That includes knowing and accepting and respecting each other enough to share meaningful talk and writing about subjects that are controversial or sensitive for them. As I explain to students in my syllabus, "Reflecting on experience, processing it through writing, talking, and listening, gives us more from it, helps us discover and communicate our values, ideas, feelings, questions. This meaning making is a powerful form of learning. And we learn from each other, including how we're similar and different and what we think about that. This connected learning helps us tune in to others and ourselves and raises issues about how we relate to the world around us, from university to society to planet and our many locations and communities in between."

When Anne raised the issue of what stories we don't bring to our classes, I made a connection to a type of story that women students often feel they can't tell, and I realized that in my classroom I could help break silence for women about this story: the experience of rape. I knew from my own experience and from observation and reading that women often get responses that blame and shame them when they try to tell how they've been violated. And I'd

written papers about strengthening women's voices in the public sphere, where our experience has traditionally been underplayed or ignored until recent years with the explosion of feminist scholarship and activism. Returning in my forties to school for a Ph.D., I had been galvanized into a new career of writing and teaching by the discovery of my own voice on my own subjects.

During this time ideas in women's studies about the power of story were in the air, and I'd written a statement about purposes for women of telling and writing stories of our lives. **Private purposes**, I saw, were meaning making, increasing the sense of being the subjects of our own lives, hearing our own voices, and saying forbidden things ("historically women have been strongly discouraged from expressing certain kinds of feelings like anger, ambition, desire for power—so they go underground; we become more who we are when we say and hear the truth of our inner lives"). **Public purposes** included society's need to know what women's real experience is, increased connectedness and community, and connecting private meanings to social issues in working for social change. Anne and I had written a conference paper, "Feminists Teaching Men," about ways that we saw feminist teaching benefiting

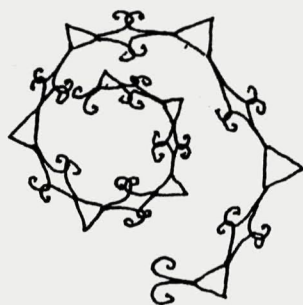
male students, including their hunger for the kind of "real talk" about life experience that *Women's Ways of Knowing* found in women's relationships and in what the authors call connected knowing.

Within this context, telling my rape story seemed a powerful means of bringing to my students an awareness of ways that women are shamed and silenced, privately and publicly, when it comes to telling rape. Something fell into place for me as Anne and I asked what stories we wanted to explore in our classes that we felt we couldn't. I decided that with this story I could and would. And within a month, I did—and did again in the three following semesters, with different results each time. In this paper I tell the stories of these four tellings and what I make of them.

### First Telling: Anger and Amnesia

The campus was buzzing—word was out that a national TV show was doing a program on sports and violence, and our school was on it. The university football team was incredibly successful, and feelings ran high—to be so dominant was intoxicating for hundreds of thousands of fans across the state.

When the show aired, I was at my friend Rene's house and not sure I wanted to watch because of the violence. Our football players had had considerable trouble with the law that year, and one was all over the news lately for beating up his



ex-girlfriend and ramming her head against a wall. We decided to watch because we knew our students would be talking about the show, and as feminists concerned with violence against women, we were interested in learning about connections between aggression on the field and off.

It turned out that one segment of the show focused on rape, including interviews with two young women who had filed rape charges against one of the football players, and their tearful statements registered as 100 percent true to me. I remember the player as a huge, paunchy-looking White student with a crewcut and an enormous neck, and although he looked nothing like the slight Black teenager who had raped me, I felt absolutely repulsed by the sight of him. I don't remember the details of how the women's accusations were handled legally, but I had the impression that he was basically free to do the same again. In some ways it doesn't matter what actually happened, I think now—what was relevant for my teaching was my visceral response to the issues he represented. The program also showed that the coach had talked with the ex-girlfriend who had been beaten by the other player before the police were able to see her, which we thought was out of line in terms of her interests. We had no big beef with the coach, but neither did we think that he cared as much about her experience as about his player. She did not appear on the program.

It was the player accused of

rape who especially chilled my blood. I remember feeling tremendous anger about his ability to rape, go free, and rape again just because he was a starter on a spectacular football team. I saw no reason to believe that he had learned anything from these experiences. And we had a sense that the two women who were interviewed ran risks, in our state, just to suggest on TV that he had done anything wrong. Even now I can feel my blood boil when I recall seeing him on the show. I am a pacifist, but I wanted to kill him. I never would kill anyone, nor would I support any violent punishment, but my anger was very present, and I can still feel it now. Rene and I talked long about the violence against women on this show and ways that women's stories are often muted. We wondered what would happen the next day when we went to our classes.

Sure enough, when I walked in my classroom the students were already in heated discussion about the show, and I decided to allow time to thrash through the issues it raised. As I later learned, Rene did the same, but our discussions evolved quite differently because of the way that we as teachers spoke.

In both of our classes the prevalent opinion was that our team was being picked on unfairly just because it was so successful and that the star player who beat up his ex-girlfriend deserved another chance to play because "everyone makes mistakes." In my class of 24 students, two women objected, say-

ing that not enough attention was going to the damage that violence and rape had done to the victims. A couple of men said that violent crimes should be punished severely no matter who did them. But the majority were outraged by the persecution of our team. The intensity of emotion was high, and I felt increasingly agitated as I listened, chiming in briefly now and then with my concerns. Then something happened that broke things wide open for me.

One student's voice stood out to me suddenly, as though just he and I were in the room. I don't know who it was, but I heard him say, in what sounded like an effort at humor, "Well I wouldn't know, I've never been raped." I heard myself respond loudly, "Well I *have* been raped, and I *do* know!" The flurry of words in the room continued to swirl for a moment while I collected my thoughts, and then I said, "Wait, let me go back to what I just said and explain it, so you don't wonder what that was all about." As soon as I said that they stopped and got silent, and I remember thinking, "That did bother them. It's important that I come back to it."

So I did, but I've wracked my brain and I don't remember what I said. In my memory it remains a blur (like the rape itself). I know I talked about my experience of being raped for a fairly long time, maybe 10 or 15 minutes. I would have told how in 1970, when I was 26, in my first year of marriage, and living in Berkeley, California, a Black teenager walked along with me from the bus stop, mak-

ing small talk, and I didn't try to get away, not wanting to act out of stereotypes, and not believing anything bad could happen to me. He was small, and I thought if he gave me any trouble I'd just push him away. Instead, when we got to my apartment he easily pushed his way in. When I realized what was happening, I fought back and learned quickly that that didn't work—he was much stronger than I. He said if I did that again he'd kill me, and I believed him—I thought he had a knife and if I angered him he might use it. Thinking fast how to save myself, I figured that he wanted to feel he had control over me, and I played to that, submitting and saying "yes" when he said, "You want this don't you?" I hoped he'd decide then that he'd gotten what he came for and leave, and he did, pulling out the phone and putting me in the bathroom before he ran out.

I stood there shaking for maybe 15 minutes, fearing the rapist would return, until my husband came home from a jaunt with our dog. We were both at a loss, completely at sea about how to respond to this. I think now I was in shock. We went out for dinner an hour or two later with two friends, and I told them almost casually, "You won't believe what happened to me today." They persuaded me to go to the police, who berated me for waiting so long (about six hours) to report the rape and were completely insensitive to the state I was in. They did catch the rapist, who had subsequently attacked two

other women. I was the only one who showed up to testify, and the prosecutor warned me that my conduct would be on trial and I should lie about agreeing with the rapist when he said I "wanted it." But the public defender didn't mount any kind of defense, and the rapist was convicted. (I have since learned how "lucky" I am: only one percent of rapists are caught and taken out of circulation, which probably helped lessen my fear about the future.)

My husband and I didn't speak of this again for many years, and even then without appropriate feeling. At the time he seemed to concentrate on feeling that he and his home were violated and that I had not done enough to head off this attack. There was reality in those reactions, but hurtfulness too, and we never talked our feelings through. The two male friends I'd told never spoke of the rape again either, no doubt waiting for my cue, and I told no one else for four years, until we moved to another state. Everything went underground, unprocessed and unresolved. I didn't know any better and neither did anyone around me, even the therapist I began seeing months later about things that were going wrong in my marriage, ways my husband and I didn't connect.

This would have been the bare bones of my story. I don't remember if or how I linked it to the TV show or related it to any relevant context, though I think I must have made a stab at that. Perhaps I talked about the ways that women who have

suffered sexual assault are silenced by people around them who are shocked and disgusted. Maybe I talked about how this crime is drastically underreported because of women's experience of being disbelieved and blamed by the criminal justice system. I might have said that this is a piece of women's experience that the whole culture conspires to suppress. Or maybe I didn't say any of this, or said something else. I don't remember if the discussion continued or if this shut it down, or what happened for the rest of the class period. I know things got very quiet while I spoke, and the next part I remember is rushing to my adviser's office and telling her breathlessly what I'd done and asking what she thought of it. She said it was probably a good thing, and I left feeling that I probably hadn't done actual harm.

When I asked Rene and Anne, in our writing group, to help me reconstruct this telling so I could write about it, they both remembered that it was "rough." Rene said I compared notes with her. Her students had talked at length, and finally several asked her what she thought. She responded that in a sense it was true that our team was being picked on, but that's what comes with success, and if our team has these kinds of problems, whether they're picked on or not, they should get their house in order. She felt good about her response—she acknowledged the students' concerns and calmly expressed her differences, helping them take in an alternate point of

view. I, on the other hand, was worried.

I felt I'd blurted out my story without a clear sense of what to do with it. I wondered if I'd been irresponsible and what students had taken away from our discussion. I decided it might help to check back with them and get a sense of what they were thinking, so at the next class I asked, "What was that like for you? Do you have concerns about what I said?" A leader of the "opposition," whom I liked and who had been a glamorous, often injured, and totally committed high school football player, said good-naturedly, "No problem, 'nuff said." I looked around, asked again, the students didn't seem upset, and no one responded. So we moved on. We were only a week away from the end of the semester, so I didn't have a chance to learn more about how the students had reacted to my story in the course of other exchanges with them individually or as a group.

Looking back, I make a connection now that I didn't see at the time. In that class, besides the football player (who only gave up the sport after 20 concussions), there was a woman student who had told the story of being injured somehow and carrying on for months before going to a doctor and learning that she had broken a rib. She was proud of her stoicism. This was a class in which we were reading an autobiography, *The Me in the Mirror*, about a severely disabled woman, and the students' resistance to the idea of disability surprised me by its

virulence—they did not like *at all* the idea of being physically vulnerable. And not only that, we were working with issues of homosexuality, because the author of the book was lesbian, and I had brought in as a speaker a man who had a spinal cord injury and who talked about being gay. The only issue besides disability that I'd seen many students so reflexively repel was homosexuality. What must they have made of my story of being raped in light of the disability and sexuality issues we'd been wrestling with? I shudder to think, and I wish I'd found a good way to ask.

I came away from the experience of telling my rape story in class feeling that I'd made a breakthrough, but I didn't know what it meant. I felt that I'd done something important but unformed, unclear, with its main importance more for me than for the students. Although this was difficult and disconcerting, I didn't conclude that I should stop telling my story. Rather, I wanted to tell it better.

### Second telling: Composure and Focus

I told my rape story again the next semester, and the cir-



cumstances and my approach made it a different experience for me and I think for the class. The immediately triggering event was the upset and angry responses of several women students in my writing class to a literature class they'd had the day before, when they felt that the teacher pushed feminism on them and wouldn't let up. I knew the teacher and sympathized with her wholeheartedly. I said, after listening a while, "I'm a feminist too, and I hope that comes through in this class." The students said yes, but I didn't make *everything* about feminism. I had mixed feelings—I was glad they could see my feminism and didn't close down in response to it, but I didn't want to participate in a comparison that cast me as a good feminist (not strident) and my friend as a bad feminist, and I wondered if students felt they could just ignore feminist ideas in my class. This discussion wasn't a full-blown one, rather one that let off steam before we began the day's agenda. I listened mostly, making brief comments several times, and was left feeling inconclusive about our conversation.

In my second class that day the same issue came up, this time in an open journal—a writing that each student does once in the semester about an issue they'd like the class to discuss. Another woman student wrote about the same literature class, saying that feminism is going too far now and she thinks it's overdone. I felt strongly that I didn't want to let that go, and I waited for an opening to present



itself. Finally, about two-thirds of the way through the discussion, I quit waiting and raised the issue of women's constant undercurrent of anxiety if they're out alone or in any situation that makes them vulnerable to attack. This seemed to touch a nerve for the women who had been silent or agreeing that feminism had gone too far, and we talked some about fears we carried with us. I saw this as a natural entry point for telling my rape story as a personal example of how feminism has made a huge difference for women since the silence I experienced in 1970, when there were no hot lines, rape crisis centers, support groups, advocacy with the police, or public information that I knew of about rape.

Again, as in the semester before, I spoke for about 10 minutes, but this time I was composed, spoke naturally, had my wits about me. The context was quite different—we were dealing with a controversial subject I felt strongly about, but I didn't feel overwhelmed by their resistance or threatened by it, as though all women's lives were on the line if I didn't speak up

powerfully and carry the day. That particular day an unusual number of people, about eight, were absent, leaving only fourteen students, so I suggested that we make a tighter circle and said we'd be an "intimate crowd." It felt to me as if we really were in *conversation*, all just a few feet from each other. I remember making an active effort to relate my experience to the open journal explicitly, to make connections to the larger issue.

I focused in particular on the issue of shame—the unfairness of women feeling *shamed* by the violation that was done *to* them. I think I asked the class to think with me about whether that was true and, if so, why. I told them my experience of telling no friends or family after the day of the rape and questioned why I had denied myself their support. I talked about how angry I was that the police and the prosecutor and even my husband blamed me for making bad choices and seemed to think this was my fault, and that this is now seen as blaming the victim. I said I thought I'd underestimated the impact of the rape on my life and that in the few settings where a woman might tell her story, the police and court systems consistently underplay the traumatic effects on the rape victim, and even my therapist had no clue about what kind of help I needed or even that I needed help at all. These ideas didn't come out as neatly and coherently as I've laid them out here, but I made the effort with a clearer head and probably covered most of this territory as I

talked.

The students listened silently and intently. The first person to speak was James, a large, muscular African-American man (one of three students of color in the class) in his mid-twenties, which made him about five years older than the other students. James said that women shouldn't put themselves in situations where they could be hurt, and if they did and got hurt, it was their own fault. My heart sank—how could he miss the point so badly and create exactly the trap I had tried to expose? And I felt hurt personally, because I had put a lot of time into helping James with his writing and responding to all of his concerns about the class. I guess I expected some special responsiveness from him in return.

Thinking about it now, I can see why James might have been responding out of his own life experience more than insensitivity to mine. He was extremely mistrustful in general, and I couldn't blame him for not wanting to open himself up to who knows what from this class of often conservative white males who were going back to their farms. At the same time, at this point in the semester, about halfway through, we had all gotten to know each other well enough to gauge how others might respond, and experience with past classes as well as this one suggested to me that James would get a respectful hearing and could gain from sharing more of his opinions and life experience, and he had begun to do that. But here his

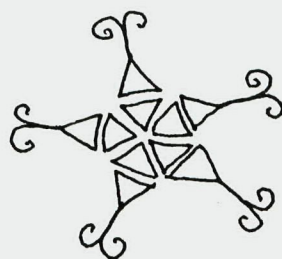
defenses were back up.

Maybe James was saying to me, in effect, "life has taught me that it doesn't pay to ever leave yourself open to being hurt; you need to protect yourself at all costs." Among other things, as I knew from a paper he'd written but not shared with the class, James had gone from weighing 300 pounds and being ignored and lonely to 200 pounds of solid muscle, and he looked plenty formidable. I think it's quite likely that he had been hurt too in ways he never wanted to visit again. At the time, though, I was mad. But I didn't respond, figuring this was a time to listen to the students' responses. I waited to see if the others would take James's cue.

This class had many more men than women when full strength, and that day we had eleven men to only three women. The students talked about issues of fear and risk, and one of the men asked if the women would be afraid if they saw James coming down a dark street toward them. There was a silence until the other African-American in the class, Tyrone, said, "Hell, I'd be afraid of James!" It's hard for me to picture how this question came up without being offensive to black men, but what I remember is Tyrone's spontaneous response, which punctured a stereotype and brought laughter all around. Only Tyrone could have saved that moment for us, as we found ourselves staring racism as well as sexism in the face.

Another comment that

stands out to me came from a thoughtful, intelligent, and extremely capable young woman, liked and respected by the farmers, who said she would rather be killed than raped. I wish we'd talked more about that. The other two women explained to the men how they felt when they had to walk outside alone at night, and this brought a turnaround for the young woman who had written the open journal—she agreed that women do carry a burden that men don't, and like the other women she got angry when the discussion came back to male contentions that the women should be more careful and always stay out of harm's way—"So are you saying we should just stay inside?!" one of the women shot back. It was a great moment for me to see the women work to articulate why that was a raw deal for women and why the focus needed to be on changing what *men* did. Altogether, thirteen out of the fourteen students spoke that day, a record for us. I felt something was happening, that it might



start new thoughts that could make a difference at some time for both women and men.

After class James walked with me to my office to pick up

a form he needed, and I asked how he thought people felt about hearing my story. He said the students looked uncomfortable, but he thought it gave a human face to a social issue and that it was appropriate. Then he turned to look at posters I had on my door and said, "You're a feminist, aren't you?" He said the class was getting interesting to him, and he smiled at his thought that other students were noticing he'd joined the class more and were probably shocked at things he said. He told me he could have gotten a medical excuse to skip the last class but decided to come anyway because he didn't want to miss the discussions. By the end of the semester, about seven weeks later, James told his personally sensitive story about losing a hundred pounds, complete with pictures of then and now, and the class responded with interest and respect for this achievement. And he wrote our last open journal, asking the class to help him with his own stereotypes about farmers and small-town people. This writing stimulated eloquent responses from several of the farmers—a highlight of the semester for me and for them. When I wrote a recommendation for James to a slew of law schools a year later, I included the story of his calling forth these important statements.

Although I couldn't be sure that anyone in this class would think differently about women and rape because of our discussion, I did notice that around this time the class moved into a new key. The students dis-

cussed their subjects increasingly vocally, almost everyone talked, they addressed each other and not just me, and they wrote more powerful papers. Two women wrote about eating disorders that they were in the midst of, and three students wrote about their serious depressions—all very significant writings for them. At the end of the semester, one student wrote that as a graduating senior he'd been coasting through, but it became important to him to take advantage of the opportunity in this class to do something real and important with his writing. In the next paper after our discussion, he wrote about a breakdown in his first year of college that had haunted him as a terrible failure, but in writing the paper he realized for himself that what people had been telling him ever since then was true: this wasn't weakness and it wasn't his fault. He was able to claim this experience as part of who he is—just as I was claiming my experience of rape as part of who I am.

Meanwhile, back to the day of the second telling. The afternoon after our conversation in class, I saw my counselor, Gail, at the University Health Center. I said I'd told my rape story in class, and she said I hadn't told it to her, so I started to outline it and soon tears came forth. I told the whole story more graphically, cried a lot, and experienced it emotionally much more than when I told it in class. I did feel emotional about that experience too, but I was able to channel that intensity into a keen focus on the needs and

welfare of my students; the telling to Gail was different—all about me, no restraint. She suggested that I stick with this subject and not let it go after one telling, as I had always done before. I remembered that two friends of mine had attended a sexual assault survivors group at the YWCA just a year earlier, working through rapes they had experienced half their lifetimes before. With Gail's encouragement I signed up for a tour with the group at the Y. I thought it was time to figure out more fully and systematically what telling my students this story was about and what effects the rape had had and perhaps was still having on my life. I had come to feel that telling "my rape story" was a complex act, with some elements that were con-



scious and some that still were more out of reach.

### Telling Out of School: The Sexual Assault Survivors Group

I went to weekly meetings of the YWCA group for two and a half months that summer and

came to realizations that I am still taking in even as I write, almost a year later. Melissa Kopplin, facilitator of the group, suggested that I had experienced two kinds of violation: the rape itself and the response of the few people I told afterwards. I see now that it was this second violation that I was working with for myself and my students.

It was always clear in my mind that my only fault was being naive and that I may have averted more damage by thinking quickly and psyching out the rapist. I thought I'd handled it well once I realized what was happening, but I was defensive about this conclusion because of the silence following the rape. And I questioned how much it had affected me, because it could have been so much worse, it was only one event, its emotional element was so elusive for me, and it didn't stir any ongoing response from the few people I'd told—husband, two friends, and therapist. It seemed to stand apart from my life. And yet, I think I also concluded at the time, and for some years after, that it was so bad it was unspeakable. But why unspeakable—did that mean I was bad? The question sounds childish, but maybe that's the way emotional thinking goes in a "don't ask, don't tell" situation without any support or any connection with others in the same boat. I thought I might be making too big a thing of it when I did tell my story, just trying to get attention. Ah—when I write that, the sadness in it comes home.

Only just now, as I sort

through in writing what might be going on, do I see more clearly and fully that a major knowledge I gained from this group, where others who had been raped much more recently were extremely emotional about it, was the recognition that what had happened to me must have been horrible. I've only had this kind of knowledge in the times when I could bring the story out enough to reach the feelings that were underneath or behind or wrapped up in it. Without the story, there were effectively no feelings—or none that I was aware of, though I must have been acting out of the underground feelings many times when I didn't know it. But the kind of extensive telling, intensive focus, and supportive listening that could bring the feelings up usually occurred at widely spaced times and only once with each person I told in that way. It has been hard for me to hold onto this recognition in between those times.

This experience with the rape story calls to mind a paper I wrote several years ago in a class I taught that I called, "Am I Jewish?" In a sense, I am writing here a paper that could be called, "Was I Raped?" Of course I am Jewish and I was raped, but to *claim* these aspects of my experience as truly part of me seems to be difficult, fraught with the experience of invalidation that these subjects carry in my life. I concluded in the Jewish paper that I *knew* I really connected with my Jewishness when I could experience "the truth of feeling." Thinking wasn't enough; it wasn't con-



vincing on these subjects when the power of feeling was in question, seeming just beyond my grasp.

There is a way that in my first telling of the rape story in school I *felt* the reality of my experience so strongly—because of the TV show, the discussion, and the strangeness of telling it in this new setting—that I couldn't *think* it through, or at least I don't remember the thinking that I must have done. It occurs to me now that perhaps I needed to experience that emotion to be able to do anything with my story for my students. Maybe I needed to experience how real this is for me, how it isn't just a tool for raising consciousness—it's a human story with powerful emotion. Maybe that's one big reason that we need stories, for both the listener and the teller to reach "the truth of feeling."

Perhaps it was when I was able to believe in this truth more, without having to feel it so intensively, that I felt ready to leave the group at the YWCA. I talked with Melissa, and she and I reviewed the stages of recovery from rape and the significant work I had done in each one

over the years. She observed that the strong feelings I was having now didn't necessarily mean that I had a well of grief that had been dammed up inside. Rather, I seemed to be re-visiting the pain for a time in order to learn what it had to tell me now, what I needed to know, say, do to move forward. She saw me as not a victim—one who is stuck in what happened to her—but a survivor, who learns the lessons that the experience has for her, recognizes that the experience changed her, and takes action that is empowering and helps her use what she's learned. I was doing what came next: connecting my private experience with what needed to be done in the world. And I had learned much in these first two tellings about how to do that.

### More Tellings: Past and Future

A quick glance at the third and fourth tellings will show some circumstances that maximized student learning through telling and hearing their own stories. The third telling, in the next semester, worked beautifully in response to a student's open journal on being raped herself. Sandra pretty much said it all, and my contribution was to describe very briefly what had happened to me and mainly what I had learned in the group at the Y, including an understanding of why my husband responded as he did and the need we both had for help in making our way through this dark minefield of unexpressed

emotion. Our discussion generated important and never-told stories by two other students (one of them a young man), and Sandra both wrote and told me she was thrilled by the students' support and what she learned in our discussion. Among the responses the students wrote to her after the discussion was one from another male student, who said he'd been beaten by his father throughout his childhood. Some weeks later we discussed that subject, with more stories, in response to a student's open journal, which may have been evoked by Sandra's open journal. This was the most satisfying telling in a classroom for me of my own story, and I think it was relevant and useful for the students.

The fourth and so far most recent telling, in the following semester, was also generated by a student, Jennifer, who in this case wrote a detailed paper about being raped by her boyfriend when she had just turned sixteen. In this case I decided to tell my story to her in a written response to her paper but not in general discussion. She wrote the story in the seventh week of the semester and asked if I thought she should read it aloud when the other students read their papers. I said I didn't think the class was ready—I felt, but didn't say, that the discussions we'd had so far made me feel concerned that she would get invalidating responses that blamed her for putting herself in a position to be raped. I had returned myself, in two discussions about related subjects in this class, to a place of intense

emotion where I didn't feel safe to tell my own story. But when Jennifer told me in the fourteenth week that she wanted to read her paper then, I said it was a good idea—I felt much better about it because the class had come together, showing by now considerable mutual acceptance and respect. Jennifer did read the paper, which had a powerful impact because the story was so fully told, and the class responded extremely warmly and supportively. Although this was a reading aloud rather than a discussion, several students volunteered admiration of her courage in telling this story, and it was an enormous weight off Jennifer's shoulders to be able to share it—she wrote later that it lightened her heart. On the last day of the semester, two weeks after she read her paper, Jennifer thanked the class for listening to her story, saying that their response meant a lot to her and she didn't think she could have told this to any other group. My hope is that in the future she will be able to bring her story to light more than she has, that she will have a good sense of when it's safe to do that, and that this telling in a classroom community will help her continue the complex process of healing.

So where am I now with telling my own rape story in school? The short version of my response is that I feel free to tell it or not, depending on the circumstances. Probably the ideal context is another student's story or a student's open journal on a closely related subject—I think it works best if it follows the students' lead. But I will tell

it in other circumstances if I think that's the best way to open up students' responses to violence against women or to other feminist issues. I think I will be able to do this in a thoughtful way that focuses on the learning and welfare of my students.

I see the kind of class where such stories can be told as ideally a place where silenced groups and individuals can go from private to semi-public expression of what is important to them. This is a place to practice, with some twenty others, speaking up and being heard. It may be a place of more diversity than students experience in their friendship groups. It may be about bridging differences—not gliding over them but connecting through their mutually heard expressions. When this communal exploring develops, the classroom can be a place for what is called in India *satyagraha*, the principle that we grow in speaking the truth. Two conditions for this growth are finding an audience that will let us do that and being the audience for others. Teaching tells me that we all need to both tell and hear the stories that change our lives in order to make that change transformative—for ourselves, for others, and for the world we live in. □

#### REFERENCE

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