Everyday Atrocities and Ordinary Miracles, or Why I (Still) Bear Witness to Sexual Violence (But Not Too Often)

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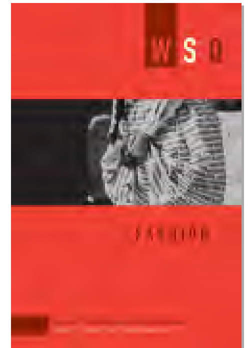

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EVERYDAY ATROCITIES AND ORDINARY MIRACLES, OR WHY I (STILL) BEAR WITNESS TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE (BUT NOT TOO OFTEN)

SUSAN J. BRISON

Seventeen years after having been jumped from behind, beaten, raped, strangled into unconsciousness, and left for dead at the bottom of a ravine in a rural area in the south of France, I still—as I just did—occasionally bear witness to the assault. Why do I continue to tell this story? It certainly isn't because I enjoy doing so: at this point, telling the story is neither therapeutic nor retraumatizing. Frankly, after telling this story hundreds of times, to perhaps a million people (if one counts the readers of the *Sunday New York Times*), I'm bored by it. [1] But I continue to tell it, albeit with decreasing frequency, because doing so is bearing witness to something much larger, and much worse, than what happened to me personally: namely, the atrocity of widespread and ongoing gender-based violence against women around the world. I also mention it, somewhat paradoxically, to reassure other victims of sexual violence that I've moved beyond it and don't feel the need to talk about it regularly anymore.

Looking back on the several years before I was attacked, I see now that I was living a charmed life. I was newly married and had a full-time job I loved, teaching philosophy at Dartmouth, and enough energy and drive to teach additional courses at both New York University and Princeton, while sitting in on law school classes at NYU, taking tap dancing lessons in SoHo and musical theater classes in Greenwich Village, and singing jazz occasionally with friends in piano bars in the city. One term I managed to teach five days a week at Dartmouth and still spend every weekend in New York City with my partner going to cabarets and jazz concerts and Sunday night swing dancing at the Cat Club. And, then, wham! I lost it all, just that suddenly, and for a very long time, but—I can now report—not forever. In spite of my having

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written, years ago, that I died in that ravine, I now have more in common with my preassault self than with the person I became for more than a decade afterward.

Although I originally described my preassault life as a quite sunny one that suddenly went dark, I stopped thinking about it in that way after someone pointed out what he saw as the "gothic novel" structure of the tale I was telling. I became quite suspicious of the "reverse-conversion" narrative I found in many rape stories (including my own) and made a point of downplaying any contrast between my preassault happiness and my postassault misery. But now that I have emerged from the latter, I think I *was* genuinely blessed with joie de vivre and fortunate circumstances before that fateful day.

There are many different reasons to tell a trauma narrative, and I'm guessing that, over the years, I've told mine for just about all of them. The very first time, I told it (mentally) to myself, as it was happening: "What *is* this? This is a nightmare. No, this is a rape. No, this is a murder." The purpose of that narrative was to keep me alive, and by sheer luck, it did the trick. After my assailant had dragged my body to the bottom of a creek bed and choked me one last time, I played dead until he left, which enabled me to scramble up the ravine to a roadside, where I was rescued by a man in a tractor who took me to his nearby farmhouse.

My next attempt to bear witness to my attack was met with incredulity, as the people who gathered around me decided initially that I must have been hit by a car, even though I kept saying that I had been attacked by a man. After I repeated my story to the police and the doctor who had been summoned and my account started to gain plausibility, someone said, to general agreement, "It couldn't have been anyone from around here." As it turned out, my assailant was a young man who lived right across the road. But whatever I said fulfilled the function of the narrative at the time, since it brought the personnel necessary for my survival, including EMS volunteers with an ambulance, who took me on the forty-five minute ride to the Grenoble hospital where I spent the next eleven days.

My determination to speak publicly about my assault first arose while I was being transported by ambulance to the hospital. I vowed that, if I survived, I would dedicate myself to doing something (I didn't know what, but *something*) to help other women who had been beaten. At the very least, I would bear witness to sexual violence against women—

speaking out not only about my own assault but also about the countless other gender-based crimes that occur daily around the world.

Before I could bear witness in any politically significant way, I needed to tell doctors and law enforcement officers the story of what had happened to me. It came as a huge relief when I was able to do so. For the first thirty hours in intensive care, however, while doctors and nurses waited to see whether surgery would be necessary, I was not allowed to eat, drink, or sleep, and, to breathe, I was dependent on an oxygen mask that included an anti-inflammatory drug to reduce the swelling of my fractured trachea. So I was silenced, not for political reasons, but of physical necessity.

When my life was no longer in danger, a steady stream of visitors came to my hospital room to ask me about what had happened: first, the doctors—that was relatively easy and straightforward—and then the police who came to take what turned out to be an eight-hour-long bedside deposition. They apologized repeatedly for putting me through the ordeal of recalling the brutal assault I had so recently endured, and I repeatedly replied, "No, you don't understand. I feel so much better when I'm *talking* about what happened." At that point, I had two options (well, three, if you include sleep, which, blessedly, came, finally, when chemically induced): lie awake in bed being bombarded with sensory images of the assault—in effect, being forced to relive the trauma—or narrate it, out loud, to a present listener, which, at least temporarily, gave me some small feeling of agency and control, since I was the one deciding what to tell and how to tell it.

That was the first time I recognized the healing potential of bearing witness, although I was not, at the time, doing it for that purpose. Talking to others about what had happened gave me a reprieve from the onslaught of passively experienced, and largely somatic, traumatic memories. In the next day or so, I also had the opportunity to tell the story to a psychiatrist, who stayed by my bedside listening to me for two and a half hours. This, not surprisingly, was the most therapeutic of my early narrations.

I was extraordinarily lucky for a victim of such a crime, not only because I somehow survived, in spite of a fractured trachea and multiple head traumas, but also because my subsequent recountings of the assault were believed. There was ample physical evidence that I had been attacked in the ways that I described, and the perpetrator, who was

apprehended not long afterward, confessed to the assault. At the trial, two and a half years later, even the defense lawyer accepted my version of the facts of what happened, and he congratulated me on my strength and courage as he tried to get my assailant off on an (ultimately unsuccessful) insanity defense.

Although my account of the physical facts of my assault was believed, my intention to bear witness to sexual violence—that is, to an ongoing group-based phenomenon of gender-motivated violence—has been continually thwarted. There were, for example, a few distressing moments as I gave my deposition to the police. When I mentioned the fact that, as I was thinking, "Why bother to struggle to stay alive?" I had a vivid image of my partner finding my dead body, which galvanized me to do what I could to stay alive, the officer taking my deposition said that it was a good thing I mentioned my husband, since my assailant had claimed, in a statement to the police, that I had provoked the attack. Under the circumstances, this was too ludicrous for anyone to believe. But had the circumstances been different—in any number of ways—my assailant's claim might have been credible, to some people, anyway. I guess the police officer was at least somewhat concerned that a jury might find his claim plausible, had I not evinced some concern for my husband. One can only imagine what a jury might have considered plausible had I not been married, thirty-five years old, dressed in baggy jeans and a sweatshirt, and walking in broad daylight in a "safe" place. [2]

Although my purpose in telling my story to the police officers was to help to apprehend, indict, and ultimately convict and put behind bars the man who raped and nearly murdered me, I very quickly realized that my bearing witness to my assault would also serve an educational purpose, that of raising awareness of at least some of the causes and effects of sexual violence. Whereas most people around me were determined to see what had happened to me as an inexplicable, random, isolated incident (firmly entrenched in the past and now best forgotten), I—still hearing my assailant's vile antifemale epithets and still seeing, feeling, and even smelling the sexual degradation he subjected me to—viewed myself as having been very nearly murdered by misogyny.

While I was still in the hospital, my own lawyer (whom I'd retained to help me through the legal morass of my assailant's prosecution and trial—and who had been recommended as the best lawyer in the area for sexual assault victims) said to me, "Don't think of your assailant as a

man, a human being. Think of him as a lion, a wild beast." But I couldn't help but think of him as a man, a man who harbored enough rage against all women to want to rape, torture, and kill me. Two years later, before my assailant's trial, the attorney general with whom I met about the case admonished me, "When the trial is over, you must forget that this ever happened." As if I were the only woman who had ever been—or would ever be—the victim of gender-based violence. This sealed my conviction that I must tell the world about sexual violence—not because it happened to me, but because it happens to so many other women.

It is hard for most people to see rape or sexual murder as group-based gender-motivated violence against women: people tend to think of victims' rape testimonies as individual stories of either interpersonal violence (and thus, completely explained by the particular relationship between the victim and perpetrator) or random violence (and thus totally inexplicable). We do not, generally, use the words "testimony" or "witnessing" in discussing rape narratives (unless we are speaking of courtroom scenarios). Holocaust survivors give their testimonies. Political prisoners bear witness to the torture they endured. Rape survivors tell their stories.[3]

The very prevalence of sexual violence can, paradoxically, render it invisible. It is unlike those phenomena that prompt moral outrage—relatively discrete geographic and historical events, such as the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust—in that it is diffused: it is inflicted on victims spatially and temporally distant from one another. This can make different instances of gender-motivated violence appear to be unrelated to one another and to the gendered roles of men and women.

We can find an example of this in the campuswide reaction to the kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder of a female student at Colby College in October 2003. (The woman had been abducted in the parking lot outside her dorm while getting into her car at 7:30 in the morning.) The discovery of her body in the woods a couple of miles away sparked widespread alarm; an appropriately high level of concern on the part of the administration; and at least one oddly inappropriate, though well-intentioned, campus response, which was that the football team started up a service escorting women around campus at night. A week after the body was discovered, the assailant was apprehended and confessed to the crime. (There was also sufficient physical evidence that the police—and the rest of the community—were confident that the perpetrator had

been caught.) Subsequent memos stressed that the perpetrator was not a Colby student and that this was a "random act of violence." The escort service provided by the football team stopped and, for many students, things quickly returned to "normal." But many, if not most, women on campus had had their earlier sense of security shattered. Some of them told me that their male friends quickly became exasperated with them for still being afraid after the perpetrator was caught: "What's the matter? They found the guy! It was just an isolated incident. It's not going to happen again." That it was clearly a gender-based sex crime against a woman—part of a larger pattern of such crimes—was a terrifyingly obvious truth to some and a faintly ridiculous proposition to others.

Furthermore, unless she has a feminist consciousness, even the victim of sexual violence may view what happened to her as a "private" trauma, rather than an instance of group-based victimization. It can make a survivor of sexual violence feel less isolated and less crazy to realize that she is not alone, not the only one to have had her life shattered in this way. ("It didn't just happen to me.") It can motivate her to speak out, to take action. However, that same realization can, especially when she is faced with others' lack of concern, make her feel even crazier, more overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem. ("It didn't just happen to *me*!") It can lead to paralyzing demoralization.

Attempts to bear witness to sexual violence can also be frustrated by the fact that society seems to hold, simultaneously, two contradictory views about this kind of crime. On the one hand, many people seem to believe there is no such thing as gender-based violence. Yet on the other, at some intuitive level they regard sexual violence against women as something that is to be expected, that is only natural, that makes sense. These contradictory effects may be fostered by a culture in which violence is sexualized and sex is increasingly bound up with the degradation, humiliation, and brutalization of women. The sex-violence link is now being touted by some scientists as a phenomenon grounded in evolution, a genetically hardwired feature of human nature. Whether or not there is a biological basis for this link (which I'm inclined to think is largely culturally forged), it is reinforced (and trivialized) by pornography, prostitution, and other forms of the commodification of women's bodies.

I saw the effects of this pervasive socialization when I returned to the United States and began to tell friends and family members about the

assault. When I told them that I had been nearly murdered, and when they asked, "Why?" they were satisfied with the "explanation" that the attack began as a sexual assault. A young man jumping a woman from behind on a country road, beating and strangling her and leaving her for dead makes no sense. Add that the woman was sexually assaulted and, suddenly, it all makes sense! How the addition of a further criminal act (the rape) helps to explain the murder attempt remains a mystery to me, even more so because the further act was, physically, the same as the act we refer to as "making love." But the fact that a-man-raping-and-then-attempting-to-murder-a-woman *makes sense* to people reveals that we do, as a society, grasp the concept of gender-motivated male violence against women, even as we manage to deny that such a group-based phenomenon really exists.

Characterizing sexual violence against women as gender-based violence can help us to confront many of these misconceptions. It can also help to facilitate redress on behalf of victims. As we comprehend more fully the harm to the victims of such crimes and the groups to which they belong, and as we understand whatever common cause(s) there may be of these seemingly "isolated incidents," we can better craft strategies to prevent them and legal remedies to redress them when they occur.

Bearing public witness to violence against women is central to this recharacterization. As depressing as it can be to talk about violence against women, I find it, ultimately, encouraging to conceptualize it as culturally induced, gender-based violence, because doing so enables us to work toward eliminating it. If it is not a fact of nature, hardwired into our genes or coming from out of nowhere like a natural disaster; it is something we can—and should—do something about.

Finally, I still tell my story to show other survivors that it is possible to thrive even after being subjected to such extreme abuse and humiliation. I recall the woman in the support group I attended who had been raped twelve years earlier and who asked, "Does it ever stop hurting?" My answer at the time, six months after my assault, was "I don't know." My answer in 1992, when I wrote chapter one of *Aftermath*, was "Yes, it does stop hurting, at least for longer periods of time. A year after my assault, I was pleased to discover that I could go for fifteen minutes without thinking about it. Now I can go for hours at a stretch without a flashback. That's on a good day. On a bad day, I may still take to my bed with

lead in my veins, unable to find one good reason to go on" (Brison 2002, 20). My answer now is "Yes, it does stop." I don't want to sound obnoxious. I hated the Pollyannaish comments I got shortly after my assault—from people who had no idea what I was going through, but were certain that the experience would make me stronger. (One aunt actually called the whole ordeal "a real blessing from above, for sure.") But I have some credibility now, having lived through the assault and its aftermath. And I want to help others get through this, as other survivors helped me by telling their stories.

I really am over my assault. Other things distress me much more now, and rightly so: the war in Iraq, the torture our government is inflicting with apparent impunity, devastating and inexcusably unjust global inequalities. This is not to say that my assault has left no traces. I still have lingering symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. I have fractured speech and a disordered brain in stressful situations. I have claustrophobia (which I never had before) that prevents me from taking elevators unless absolutely necessary. I still take antidepressants and sleeping pills (which I'd never taken before), and I won't go for walks in the woods by myself (which used to be one of my favorite activities). But these things are pretty trivial. I *have* regained my lost self.

I wrote in *Aftermath* about the distinction between "living to tell" (staying alive to bear witness at a trial or, in some other way, to see that justice is done) and "telling to live" (constructing a narrative about a traumatic assault that enables one to project oneself into the future with some degree of hope and optimism) (2002, 106–117). I've now moved beyond both of those, to not needing to tell the story any longer. I lived to tell what I needed to tell to get my assailant convicted and put behind bars for ten years. And over the years, the story I have told about my assault in order to live has got shorter and less central to my life's narrative, until I now no longer need to tell it at all. I can make new friends without having to inform them of my long-ago ordeal. Sometimes they find out about it anyway, which is also no big deal. A musician I met at a "jazz camp" this summer read about *Aftermath* and e-mailed, half-jokingly, "Man, you got a right to sing the blues!" The assault, or, rather, the depression I suffered for years afterward, may well have added a depth to my singing that wasn't there before—and this is how the assault feels most salient to me personally right now. But I have to disagree with his assessment of my musical entitlement: one can't *really* sing

the blues while having the level of well-being and security I now enjoy.

My regained equilibrium sometimes induces affective dissonance in audience members when I give talks about my experience with sexual violence, or read from *Aftermath*, with what is, for them, a somewhat unsettling sangfroid. I'm reminded of the comment a therapist made to me shortly after my assault about detachment: "You talk about this incident as if it had happened to somebody else." Had I remained unable to integrate affect into my narrative, it would have been unhealthy and hindered my recovery. (I was not, at that early stage, beyond feeling, but, rather, was so overwhelmed by feeling that I could not cope with even small doses of it. And I was only marginally functional in other aspects of my life.) Now, because I have worked through the trauma, whatever narrative repetition I engage in is consciously chosen. It is far removed from the early compulsion I felt to say at least *something* about the assault to everyone I knew—and even to people I'd just met—before I could carry on a conversation about anything else. My narrations these days are aimed primarily at testifying to the pervasive character of sexual violence against women and supporting other survivors, something I am better able to do because of the overall trajectory of my life to the present.

The attack I endured no longer defines who I am. Being a singer does, and I want people to know about that. Telling the story of my assault is not, at this point, therapeutic. Singing is. And I like to think my music making gives others pleasure, too. Music, for me, is life, and making music is the ordinary miracle I hold up against the everyday atrocity of sexual violence.[4]

I now question Jean Améry's assertion that "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured" (1995, 131). It's possible that I'm able to embrace life so wholeheartedly now, in some sense, *because of* my assault. *I'm not supposed to be alive.* When my lawyer informed me of that fact, while I was still hospitalized, I resented the implication that I was to henceforth rejoice in my good fortune. But I now have to agree that there is something liberating—exhilarating even—in that realization. The day will come (and it could come at any time) when I will feel no luckier than the average person muddling along in life. Or worse. No one should covet my (current) good fortune. As the woman in Grace Paley's poem "Luck" says to an envious friend with a hard life, "Take it easy / there's time for me to be totally wrecked" (2000, 171).

I'm doing what I can to ward off that day, though. I'm trying to do

good work, treasuring the time I have to spend with my family, surrounding myself with life-affirming friends, and listening to and singing and playing as much music as I possibly can. From time to time, I still bear witness to the brutal sexual assault I survived, but no more often than I feel I have to, to help raise people's awareness of gender-based violence. I'm bearing witness at this point to show other, perhaps recent and still struggling, victims of such crimes that it really is possible not only to carry on afterward, but also to take so much pleasure in life that at times you almost can't stand it. I'm bearing witness to what's happening to others as I speak, or write, so that they might find aid and comfort. I'm bearing witness to what will happen to others if we don't speak out now and try to prevent it. But I'm no longer in the story. I've walked right out of the picture, and I'm sitting at my piano, with a few good friends, making a joyful noise.

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NOTES

1. I published my story first in Brison 1993 and, most recently, in Brison 2002.

2. It also helped that I was white, middle class, and well educated, although it did not help that I was a foreigner. The French colleagues my husband and I had been staying with pointed out that nothing like this had ever happened around there before I arrived (although the local paper reported a similar-sounding rape that same day in the next valley over). When they wrote to us a couple of months later and mentioned that another American woman had visited them, they said they made sure to keep her "on a short leash," as if I had been a bad dog, causing trouble where I didn't belong.

3. In making reference to the Holocaust, I am not suggesting that what I experienced and what victims of the Holocaust suffered were in any way commensurable. They were not.

4. I thank Naomi Scheman for helping me to formulate this insight in this way.

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