

Learning to Listen:
One Man's Work in the Antirape
Movement
- Richard S. Ertan

PART I

MY TELEPHONE RANG AT MIDNIGHT. The rape hotline volunteer told me that a woman was waiting at the emergency room for a rape exam. The volunteer had been trying for an hour to locate someone to go and be with her. I was the only person available that night.

I had been on staff at the Austin Rape Crisis Center for over a year and knew that this moment might come. Even though my job focused on school and community education, I had been trained, like all staff and volunteers, to support rape survivors in crisis situations. I had done crisis counseling via the telephone, but I had never been face to face with a rape survivor shortly after the assault. My stomach tightened at the thought.

The most practical—and most difficult—part of rape crisis center training for me was the role playing, where trainees are put into unscripted scenarios similar to those they would encounter on the telephone, at the emergency room, or in other face-to-face encounters with rape survivors, their family members, or medical and law enforcement professionals. The crisis intervention skills that are taught in training get tested through role-playing. For me, it was like trying to walk through a minefield. I thought that if I failed to say the right thing, if I failed to anticipate correctly the needs of the survivor, I might set off emotional mines. No real harm was done in role-plays, but what was about to happen would not be a role-play.

I now understand that what most people need in such situations is to feel genuine concern and empathy from a helping person, to be listened to, to be allowed to express feelings (or remain silent), and to have their questions answered. But as I drove to the emergency room that night, I was only aware of how nervous I was. I went over in my mind all the do's and don'ts I had learned in training. And I had one additional concern: Having just been raped by a man, the woman I was about to meet might not want to deal with me, another man. Crisis center policy required that a female volunteer be provided in these situations, but none was available that night.

As I walked into the emergency room I saw a young woman I will call Sandy sitting on a bed dressed in a green hospital gown. A nurse stood behind her doing something to her hair. As I got closer I saw that the nurse was cleaning dried blood out of Sandy's hair and I saw a dozen or more stitches in her scalp.

I introduced myself, certain she could hear the pounding in my chest. I asked her how she was feeling. She smiled and said she was doing better now. She seemed calmer than I was.

That afternoon a young man had approached her in a mall parking lot and asked for help. His car wouldn't start, he said, and he needed a ride to a friend's house a short distance away. Accustomed to helping people out in the farming community she had recently left, Sandy agreed to give him a ride. She ended up in a ditch outside of town, raped and beaten.

In addition to stitches in her scalp, Sandy needed to undergo a rape exam and get an X-ray of her skull. As we waited for these tasks to be completed, we talked about many of the things that come up in such situations. Why would someone do something like this? What was going to happen now? What would the police want to know? What would happen if they caught him? Was she going to be all right? What would this do to her life? How could she tell her family what had happened, and how were they going to react?

I was greatly relieved that Sandy accepted my presence. Like many people in her situation, she seemed to appreciate that a stranger would come to the hospital in the middle of the night to be with her—someone whose only purpose was to support her and advocate for her.

After spending four or five hours in the emergency room Sandy needed to decide where to go now that she was about to be released. She was new to Austin and had not made many friends yet, and her family was in another state. Her employer and his wife were the only people she knew well enough to call. She asked me to call her employer's wife, explain what had happened, and ask if she could stay with them that night. I made the call and we left the hospital.

We arrived at her employer's home around 5 or 6 A.M. Sandy went to bed right away, and I stayed a moment to talk with her friends. The sun was coming up as I left. I felt strange. Fatigue, I thought. I was numb from the previous six or seven hours. But about halfway home the numbness ended and I broke down. One moment I was fine, the next I was sobbing uncontrollably. I hadn't seen this coming and I was unable to control it when it did. I was shocked and frightened at what was happening to me. I had never experienced anything like this before and now here I was, driving down the highway at daybreak, falling apart.

This was the first of several experiences I had in the late 1970s and early 1980s through my work with the Austin Rape Crisis Center that began to expose me to blank spaces in my awareness of the world. These blank spaces, which I attribute to growing up male, represented my lack of awareness of the world as women experience it, a world that in varying degrees creates in women a sense of being at risk simply because they are women. Though it took me years to fully assimilate the significance of these experiences, they ultimately had a profound impact on the way I view the world—as if I had entered a different dimension.

Being hired by the Austin Rape Crisis Center (ARCC) in 1978 was a lucky accident, though at the time I considered it only an interesting opportunity to do something different for a while. In the year or so that preceded my encounter with Sandy in the emergency room, I had learned a lot about rape from books, from the staff and volunteers at ARCC, and from several rape survivors who were volunteers. I had spoken frequently to school and community groups about rape awareness and prevention. I had helped train volunteers for ARCC.

Yet until that night, rape was only an idea to me. My connection to it was mostly intellectual. During the drive home at dawn, I felt it in my gut for the first time. Sandy's experience made it impossible for me to protect myself any longer from the emotional impact of sexual violation—something I had not allowed to touch me before. That experience put me on a different track and sent me into uncharted territory.

In August 1979, I attended the first conference of the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Held at a rustic camp, the conference was attended by about two hundred people. I was one of six men. I knew that male involvement with rape crisis centers was a controversial topic for many, perhaps most, women doing the work, and that it was relatively rare at that time for centers to solicit male volunteers and practically unheard of to recruit male staff.

The Austin Rape Crisis Center had included a small number of male volunteers ever since its founding in 1974. Sylvia Callaway, who became executive director in 1977, embraced this policy wholeheartedly. She believed that the challenges male volunteers and staff might present were worth the effort. The long-term effect of meeting those challenges would be to educate a

group of men about rape from a woman's perspective, and those men would then educate other men. The antirape movement's goal of ending rape could not be accomplished without male allies, and Sylvia was committed to creating male allies.

Lake Geneva was a different environment than anything I had experienced in Austin. I halfway expected to be challenged verbally, or worse. Nothing like that happened. What did happen was more subtle and indirect: I was mostly ignored. My clearest memory is of sitting in a workshop for an hour and a half, participating occasionally but not feeling part of the group. By the end of the session, I felt a combination of alienation and confusion, though I doubt I could have described my feelings so clearly then. I remember a frustrated conversation with Sylvia that evening, in which I tried unsuccessfully to understand the source of my feelings.

What was unfamiliar about that experience, as I began to understand later, was that I felt invisible. My presence was largely unacknowledged. The workshop proceeded without my influence. I might as well not have been there.

Many years after that first NCASA conference, I was at a conference for profeminist men. One of the keynote speakers, Harry Brod, was talking about his experiences with men who viewed feminism and feminists as anti-male. His comments on where this attitude came from took me back to that Lake Geneva workshop. He said that what many men most misunderstand about feminism—a misunderstanding that leads them to view feminism as antimale—is that it is not about men at all. And this, he said, is what is so frightening about feminism to so many men.

What those women were doing in that workshop at Lake Geneva was not about me, and although I did not experience it as being *against* me, I did experience their way of being together without including me as something completely new, and I did not know what to make of it. It had not occurred to me before that gender might be part of what determines how a person is treated. I had not experienced the discriminatory behavior that females often do. This was largely invisible to me until the Lake Geneva conference, and it remained confusing and blurry in my consciousness for a long time afterward. To this day, I have to remind myself that women's experience in the world—women's reality—is not always the same as men's.

Another experience, this time at the second NCASA conference in Austin in 1980, exposed even more dramatically the blank spaces in my life as a man.

One of the keynote speakers suggested that we show a new film on rape made by a group of Canadian feminists, and as an organizer of the conference I ordered the film and scheduled it for viewing. It arrived at the last minute and we did not have a chance to preview it.

As I recall, the film began with a didactic section, then shifted abruptly to a rape scenario. A woman walking down a sidewalk was grabbed by a man and thrown into a van, where she was terrorized and raped. It was highly realistic. The woman's terror permeated the viewing room. As the scenario progressed, women began to leave. Finally, someone stood up and demanded that the film be stopped. Many women in the room were survivors of rape or childhood sexual abuse. Several were outraged that they had not been warned about the content of the film. Some thought that such a film should not be shown at all. Others, while agreeing that the film was extremely difficult to watch, wanted to finish it, finding value in being able to confront it. After a brief but intense discussion, the women agreed that those who wanted to finish watching the film would do so, then join the others for a processing session.

I felt both responsible for what was happening and helpless to do anything about it. Many women were clearly in pain because of the film. Again, I felt myself sliding into unknown territory.

When the fifty or so women came together after the film, I remember what happened mostly as a succession of images as I might have seen them through a gauze screen, not as words in a narrative. Even more than in the hospital emergency room with Sandy, I felt completely unprepared for what I was experiencing. I was witness to an emotional outpouring that astonished me, frightened me, and left me dumbfounded. Nothing in my thirty-plus years had prepared me for the next hour or two.

The situation felt chaotic. Some of the women were angry that other women would watch the film. Others thought that seeing it allowed them to confront their own demons. Rape survivors did not have a consistent response. Some found it a test of their recovery, while for others it was a nightmare relived. Individuals made impassioned statements. Small groups came together for support. The film had ripped off the veneer of safety for many of them, and their vulnerability and outrage were on display in such a graphic way that I could not possibly intellectualize, rationalize, or compartmentalize my response. I was confronted by the reality of women's vulnerability in a way that made me feel helpless and completely unsure of myself, as if a

very large person had picked me up by the shoulders, shaken me violently for a few seconds, then put me down and walked away. Nothing looked or felt the same.

I could not fully absorb the meaning and importance of these three experiences when they happened. I did not have the emotional awareness or vocabulary to talk about them, but they burned deeply into my consciousness.

Working at the rape crisis center, I was confronted daily by the world women experience, from petty injustices to fear to actual assault. I always had the option of filtering out what I was hearing, and I often did. But the cumulative effect, year after year, of exposure to this women's world gave me information about women's experience that men rarely acquire. I had information about what the fear of male violence, as well as the actual experience of it, does to their lives. Constant exposure to this information forced me, slow as I was, to open up to my own feelings—not my thoughts—about the fear and violence that many women live with simply because they are women.

Being bombarded with information from this parallel world could be tiresome and difficult, and I didn't always want to hear it. Sometimes the information was full of anger, and the anger might be directed at me because I was a man. Women's anger was a powerful force that pushed the movement for change forward. Indeed, one could argue that women's anger was the foundation upon which the antirape movement was built. But dealing with it was never easy. I often got defensive.

Defensiveness is, still, something I have to be conscious of when challenged by women. When women express their experiences and feelings honestly, it may be difficult to hear them. Their words, coming from this parallel world, may feel assaultive and hurtful. Denial and defensiveness can be reflexive responses in such situations.

I may hear a woman's truth as an accusation, not as an expression of her own experience. I may feel threatened by the new frame of reference she is challenging me to acknowledge: hers. The tacitly accepted values of the world I live in support my need to be right because I am a man. Defensiveness and denial are tools I can use to keep from having to confront my ignorance of and insensitivity to women's experience. And they can support my complicity in maintaining a man's right to define reality in a way that excludes or diminishes important experiences that women have.

The situation may be further complicated by the dual, sometimes contradictory, effect of anger. A rape survivor's anger may be the only piece of strength she has to assert herself in the immediate aftermath of being raped, the only way for her to say "I am a human being and I demand to be treated with respect!" Hearing and acknowledging the collective anger that many women feel about their at-risk status can reveal an important perspective on the world we all inhabit, a perspective largely ignored or otherwise discounted in male-defined reality because it is so uncomfortable to deal with and challenges so much in our culture.

On the other hand, anger alone does not create change. It can become destructive if one side or the other becomes stuck there, making it an end in itself. Overcoming this anger, in my view, requires a willingness to acknowledge the validity of its source instead of denying it, and to hear it as something more than personal accusation.

As challenging as it sometimes is for me to hear what women are saying, the effort has, over the years, made a more complete and caring human being out of me. Many women have been and continue to be a part of my educational process. None has had a greater impact on me than Sylvia Callaway, the woman who hired me in 1978. Sylvia's philosophy of "loving anger" bridges the opposing forces in antirape work. It allows her to condemn the act of rape and all that supports it in our culture while acknowledging the humanity of the rapist and the necessity of understanding how such a personality comes into being. For her, rape is a "rip in the spirit" for both the victim and the perpetrator. Her philosophy of antirape work acknowledges the needs of everyone in the community, including the perpetrator and his family.

From her, I learned that doing antirape work is mostly about teaching respect to counter the disrespect taught by sexism—a disrespect that, in its most extreme form, becomes gender-based violence. Rape is an ultimate act of disrespect, yet it is a common occurrence. It is vital that we understand why it is so common and the real extent of the damage it does to our society. The path toward a rape-free society will lead men, in particular, through unmapped areas in our consciousness and into some challenging personal encounters. This journey will take us very near, if not actually into, the world as women experience it—the world of women at risk.

PART II

I left a downtown building late one night many years ago. I had just spent several hours training new volunteers for the rape crisis center. I was in a hurry to get home and my car was parked in a lot across the street. As I left the building, I saw the traffic light turn green and I started to run toward the intersection, about thirty yards away. A woman walking ahead of me toward the same intersection suddenly turned and looked at me like an animal frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car. I stopped and for a brief instant we stared at each other. In her eyes, I saw a mixture of surprise and terror. She turned and hurried across the street. I didn't move until she was out of sight.

As I stood there, I felt foolish and hypocritical, as well as responsible for her distress. By then, I had spent several years talking about rape prevention to groups of all kinds, yet apparently I had not absorbed the full meaning of my own words. While I had talked about the distancing phrases we may use when thinking about rapists—"not normal," "not one of us"—I had not yet understood that a woman might view my normal behavior as threatening. Never mind that I had no intention of harming the woman on the street that night (or any other woman who might be distressed by my behavior, intentional or not). The lesson I learned that night, at that woman's expense, was that her feelings of vulnerability to sexual violence had been largely invisible to me, even though I might claim, with some justification, to be sensitive and enlightened.

I started talking about that incident in my presentations as a way of illustrating how easy it is for men to threaten women simply because we aren't paying attention, because we don't experience the world in the same way they do. Later, I used another illustration of the different ways men and women experience the world:

Imagine walking down a sidewalk in a part of town with which you are unfamiliar—not what's considered a bad part of town, just unfamiliar. At first you appear to be alone—no one else is around. Then, a block or two ahead, you see a person coming directly toward you on the same sidewalk, someone you do not know, someone of the opposite gender. The distance between you and the other person slowly decreases until you pass within a few inches of each other.

I have used this exercise around a hundred times, mostly with college

and high school classes. After presenting the scenario, I ask individuals in the group what they would be thinking or feeling as they passed the stranger on the sidewalk. I invariably get the same responses. A woman always responds first, saying she would feel anything from mild discomfort to nervousness to outright fear. The majority of women say they would be on their guard, a few say they would employ avoidance tactics such as crossing to the other side of the street.

When I ask the men to respond, there is often a long silence. After I press the issue, a man usually volunteers that he would not be thinking or feeling anything in particular, implying that he doesn't see anything remarkable about the situation, that it is not anything he has really thought about. Occasionally a man will say that if he found the woman attractive he might try to start a conversation. This usually creates a negative reaction from several women, who say they would feel even more threatened if that happened. Once in while a man says he would feel a little nervous passing the woman because he would know she feels nervous. Some say they would consciously avoid eye contact or even cross the street to avoid making the woman uncomfortable.

I live in a relatively safe suburban environment. I would think nothing of taking a long walk in my neighborhood by myself in the middle of the night. Most of the women I know would not do that. Indeed, a woman who did and was assaulted would certainly be asked, "What were you doing walking by yourself in the middle of the night? Don't you know better?" Some people would blame her for what happened, while the actions of her nameless, faceless attacker would be taken for granted. Blame would not be placed where it belongs.

The classroom exercise I described above hardly constitutes a scientific study, but the consistency of responses it evokes shows that women as a group feel more vulnerable to harm than men as a group, even though men are victims of violence more often than women. Some men grow up in dangerous urban environments and fear walking to school or to the corner store. But the issue here is the threat of violence as women experience it and how that threat affects their lives.

For an instant on that night after volunteer training, I embodied that threat for the woman at the crosswalk. For me to argue that I did not intend to do harm would be true but irrelevant. The fact is, I did do harm.

I chose to acknowledge the experience instead of denying, ignoring, or

forgetting it. It became an(other) important lesson, clarifying how invisible this women's reality can be, and challenging me again to learn to see the impact of the threat of rape on women's lives. Experiencing sexual violence is a debilitating experience, but so is living with the threat of it over a lifetime.

Becoming aware of these realities was like entering an uncharted sea without knowing that I was in a boat or on an ocean. Nothing had prepared me for the gut-level experiences, in an emergency room and at gatherings, that placed me on unfamiliar ground, in the blank spaces that came from experiences I never had or information I did not absorb because I grew up male.

Concern for my safety does not restrict my freedom now to the extent that it does for many women I know. The full impact of this threat on women is not something we talk about much—or at all—in public. Women's at-risk status is a given in our culture, something we tacitly accept as inevitable. I do not have to see or experience the world as women do. I can usually go through life with my blank spaces intact and suffer no negative consequences. If I am affected by women's vulnerability to sexual violence, it is usually because women I care about are hurt by it. A rape survivor is not the only person affected by the rape.

I learned to see the impact of the threat and experience of rape on women's lives by being willing to acknowledge and confront the blank spaces in my own. Doing this required humility and a willingness to listen to women in a way that was new to me. It required that I be willing to experience some of their vulnerability.

My blank spaces distanced me from the lives of the women I knew, allowing me, if I wanted it, the option of not thinking about their realities or doing anything about them. This distancing also allows me, if I want, to believe that the threat of sexual violence is not a serious problem, and that rape only happens to certain women and is perpetrated only by certain men—men who have nothing in common with me. It gives me deniability. I can stand on the sidelines of the issue and condemn rape without any understanding of how it looks or feels to those at greatest risk—without hearing their voices at all.

It has been hard to acknowledge that some important realities may have escaped me, or that I may have screened them out. Listening to women talk about the casual affronts and terrors they endure has challenged me.

Sometimes I don't want to hear these stories because I feel helpless, or I choose to ignore them because I can, because I have no parallel experience.

A friend told me once about being stalked and harassed on the highway by a man in another vehicle while she was driving alone. He tailgated her, then got in the lane beside her and made obscene gestures. This continued for miles. Listening to her story, I felt outraged and uncomfortable. I empathized as best I could. At a certain point in our conversation I no longer knew what to say, so we just dropped the subject. I could escape back into my own relatively safe life, but she would take those feelings of terror with her forever.

The man who harassed my friend must have engaged in similar activities on other occasions, and he must have known that he would get away with it. His chances of being held accountable were remote. He had crossed a line, but it was surely not the first line he had crossed with women. His highway terrorism may have been preceded by more subtle or customary aggression, like making women uncomfortable by the way he looked at them, by commenting about their bodies, or by being physically aggressive. Perhaps he had already raped.

If we deal with this man at all, we call him a weirdo, a psycho, or a sociopath. We may not connect his extreme behaviors with the less extreme visual and verbal intrusions into women's lives that may have preceded the highway incident. And we might not want to acknowledge the acceptability of such behaviors—the fact that men are rarely confronted or held accountable when they engage in sexually harassing behaviors. In such a world, rapists find acceptance, if not for raping, then for the harassing behaviors that lead up to their rapes. This acceptance makes what they do hard to see for what it is, which is one reason they can get away with it.

The crowning sadness of this event is that my friend not only had no access to justice for herself, but also probably told no more than a handful of close friends what happened to her. Silence overwhelmed her story, as it does so many others. Surely this silence is related to the blank spaces in men's lives.

The silencing of women also allows us to avoid a fundamental reassessment of the relative power of women and men in our society. Such a reassessment could put at risk power arrangements we take for granted in a

male-defined reality, power arrangements that help hold in place our blindness to—or disregard for—women's vulnerability to harm.

As I became more aware of the parallel world women often inhabit, I could no longer avoid responding to it. Instead of spending all my time in the familiar public world largely defined and controlled by men, I was in a rape crisis center, an environment defined and controlled by women that deals with tragedies largely hidden from view in the male-defined world. Because the women who worked there treated me well, I felt at ease from day to day. But over time, the issues we dealt with put me into a mental and emotional frame of reference that I could not control, and that compelled me to deal with issues in my own life. I had to confront my own sexism. I had to acknowledge that I was not always the model citizen I wanted to believe I was. I had to absorb the meaning of the term male entitlement. It was then that I began to be aware—vaguely—of the blank spaces.

Filling in these blank spaces made me defensive. Dealing with the consequences of male violence to women on a daily basis backed me into a corner. On some level, I felt guilty. My own past behavior was cast in a new light and I was uncomfortable.

I had to take another look at my own treatment of women. I've never been physically violent with anyone, man or woman, but male entitlement casts a broad shadow. I had to acknowledge that I had been verbally and emotionally insensitive or demeaning to women, though I would not have thought of my behavior in those terms at the time, and that I had felt entitled to behave that way. My behavior was unremarkable because it was common male behavior and therefore invisible to me. But I could no longer pretend not to see connections between different kinds of demeaning behavior, ranging from visual and verbal affronts to rape. The common denominator was lack of respect.

I came to understand how male entitlement legitimizes lack of respect in subtle ways. By giving primacy to male viewpoints and male needs, it creates unequal power between men and women, making it easier for men to ignore or belittle women's voices, particularly when they are confronting our behavior. Sexual harassment provides examples of this point. Women who are sexually harassed by men in the workplace may hesitate to make their feelings known. By objecting, they may directly oppose entrenched male power and risk ridicule and further harassment. Federal legislation and judicial

rulings are forcing employers to be accountable for sexual harassment, but the real human cost is paid by individuals, mostly women, whose lives have been poisoned by the once invisible range of behaviors we now call sexual harassment. The vast majority of sexual harassment victims suffer in silence because they do not think they will be taken seriously, and so they choose not to risk making a complaint.

Finally, male entitlement has maintained the blank spaces in my life. It has supported me in the mistaken belief that my experience as a male is a complete view of the world. Male entitlement and the disregard of women's experience go hand in hand. If I participate in one, I participate in the other. This is not easy for me to acknowledge on a personal level, because it requires humility and an openness to my own imperfections, and those make me feel vulnerable. But unless I am willing to take this step, I limit my own development as a human being.

I believe that defensiveness and discomfort are inevitable for many men when we are challenged to acknowledge women's vulnerability to men's violence and the impact that it has on them. Most of us aren't accustomed to viewing ourselves in this light and would insist that we are not part of the problem. I have certainly done that. But whether we commit acts of disrespect against women, large or small, or simply fail to notice that others do, we are part of the problem. Some may hear this as an accusation. I have experienced it as an opportunity to learn and grow as a human being.

Men have some good (selfish) reasons to get beyond defensiveness. In my case, defensiveness has been a block to learning some important things about my relationships and myself. My ego becomes a barrier to my emotional and intellectual growth when I am defensive. I have come to view the discomfort I feel when confronted with the blank spaces in my life as part of the process of reintegration with the female side of my psyche, correcting a separation encouraged in me—as it is in most boys—from an early age. Part of what creates our defensiveness in the first place is the loss of control we experience when we can no longer so easily define reality in our customary way. The very idea that there might be another, female-defined, reality that parallels our own can be threatening. We are forced by that knowledge into a role reversal in which women's realities challenge our own, and this is unfamiliar ground for most men.

Defensiveness seems inevitable to me when men grow up with blank

spaces in our awareness of women's vulnerability to men's violence and then are confronted with the need to respond to it. Whether we are rapists, saints, or something in between, we must account for gender-based violence that normally casts men as offenders and women and children as victims.

Fortunately, this dilemma pushed me in the direction of self-examination and self-discovery. Filling in the blank spaces has helped me become more empathetic. By dealing with my defensiveness, I became more willing to open my heart and accept as a part of my reality aspects of women's lives that I had not previously acknowledged. My defensiveness and discomfort eventually led me to an honest awareness of women's vulnerability to men's violence. Once that honest awareness was in place, it required a moral or ethical response in my behavior. It became a moral imperative for me to be proactive in helping to create a different world, a world in which women's lives are not seriously eroded simply because men choose not to pay attention to the power imbalances that cause women so much suffering. Altruism aside, this journey has benefited me emotionally and spiritually beyond measure.

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THE DATE RAPE PLAY

A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

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CAROLYN LEVY

We thought we were prepared for the response, but we were amazed at the outpouring of emotion from spectators. They greeted the play with joy and pain. For some, it reaffirmed that they were not alone in their experiences. For others, it opened a topic for discussion that had previously been closed tight. For still others, it raised questions about behaviors and attitudes.