

# An Angry Cry for Mute Voices

BY LAURA KAMINKER

**E**very five minutes a woman is sexually assaulted in the United States. One out of every eight American women will be raped in her lifetime. Ten years ago I became one of these women. While I've always noted the anniversary of the day I was raped, the 10-year mark holds a special significance for me. When I was too depressed to move and too terrified to sleep—when I felt as though I was going crazy—I would say to myself: I've gotten through one week, one month, since that awful night. And I would think: *one day this will be 10 years behind me*, and the nightmare will be over. It was a survival technique, a way to get through the night.

Now a decade has passed. I have long since become whole again and I look back on what seems a miraculous journey. No one who has been traumatized by sexual assault would ever say, "I'm glad for the experience because I learned from it." Yet I do cherish the strength and new understanding that grew out of my recovery.

My feminist consciousness has grown so powerful and all-encompassing during these 10 years that I sometimes forget I was a feminist before I was raped—and how immeasurably that aided my healing. I knew what my therapist said was right; I let her convince me it wasn't my fault. But I often wondered about women less fortunate—women who think they are justified in blaming themselves; women whose families don't believe them, whose husbands reject them. I thought of young girls who are forced to see their attackers every day and never tell another soul; of women who have children to care for and can't take time off to recuperate.

At night I would sit up in bed with all the lights on and think about those women. Days, even hours, after I was raped, I knew I had become part of a secret sisterhood, one so hidden that there is no way to recognize other members. I remember silently screaming to myself: I don't want to belong to this group! I don't *want* to have this knowledge! But even as I resisted and denied, I also thought: one day I'll find these women, my sisters. One day I'll be there for them, and they'll be there for me.

I can recall many landmarks in my recovery, beginning with the moment I picked myself up off the kitchen floor and got myself to a hospital. There was the first night, weeks after the attack, when I didn't wake up crying or screaming. I remember the first time I said to someone—outside of my close friends and family who knew me when the assault occurred—"I was raped." And the first time I disclosed "my secret" to a man with whom I was beginning a relationship.

Another turning point came just over a year after the attack, when I was depressed. "I'm afraid that nobody fully

recognizes the gravity of my situation," I wrote in my journal. "I am approaching the edge. This is true, despite my work and my smiles and the other fronts I put up. Darkness is descending on me. I doubt my ability to make it through the coming winter." That autumn I looked over the precipice, into the abyss. I asked myself, over and over, if I wanted to die. And the answer came: No. Not a joyous, resounding song of Yes, I Want to Live. Just a feeble, frustrated little No.

That was a milestone worth celebrating. How many victims of sexual assault contemplate suicide? Studies show that a great many of us do. That's how bad it feels.

These events were all part of a natural healing process, but the next milestone in my recovery was a deliberate decision—one that transformed me forever. I found the sisterhood, and I never left.

I joined the Brooklyn Women's Anti-Rape Exchange—a rape-crisis help line—as a volunteer counselor because I wanted to help other survivors. But BWARE's three-month training period turned out to be one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

Supported by a circle of sympathetic women, I discovered that what I had experienced following the assault—bizarre, frightening feelings that I revealed to no one—are shared by most rape survivors. BWARE became a safe haven where we could speak

our deepest feelings and know that we would be understood and accepted. It was a place where we could name our fears, and in naming them, conquer them.

During the training I learned to think of rape as a social problem and the epidemic of rape as a symptom of how profoundly sick our society is. I learned about sexual assault as a continu-

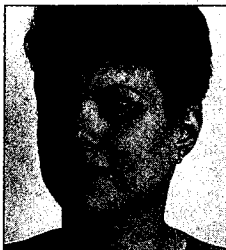
um. The whistle on the street is on one end, a rape-murder is on the other and everything else in the middle: violent pornography, a grope on a crowded subway car, a demand for sex in return for a promotion. I learned that rape has something to do with how our society defines masculinity, nothing to do with how a woman dresses and everything to do with dominance and power.

**Reaching out:** After my training was completed, I found those women I had imagined on my insomniac nights. Survivor to survivor, we reached out to one another across the telephone lines, and I reached for the right words. Of course you feel that way. No, you are *not* to blame. You are strong, and it's OK to need help. But mostly, I just listened.

I would go home at night with those women's voices, and their pain, singing in my head. The entire next day I would be haunted by these sisters I would never meet. And I imagined the same scene repeated night after night, in every town and city in the country.

Each time a rape becomes highly publicized, I pay close attention to how the woman is treated in the press and in court. Is she able to sleep? Does she have someone to talk to? I know there are millions of other women taking the same special interest. Most of them are keeping quiet, never revealing that they are members of this terrible, angry club. But a few of us are gathering our courage, and lifting up our heads.

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