

Survivors on Campus: A Dialogue about Sexual Assault

by Laura Gray-Rosendale and Kirsten Dierking

At a conference last fall, I came across *College Girl: A Memoir*, a book by Laura Gray-Rosendale that tells the story of a brutal sexual assault she experienced as a college student. I purchased a copy, but it sat unopened on my desk for a while; I, too, had survived a brutal rape in college, and I wasn't sure what kind of impact the book would have on me.

When I began reading in early January, my first thought was how familiar it felt; the material was difficult, and at the same time, oddly comforting. It made me feel less alone—less lonely—in my experience as a survivor. We had similar thoughts during the attack, similar experiences in the long recovery process afterward, and I too wrote a book about the crime (*One Red Eye*). Instead of retreating permanently from campus life, we both ended up as college faculty. I began to

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Kirsten Dierking is the author of three books of poetry; *Tether*, *Northern Oracle* and *One Red Eye*. Her poems have been heard on *The Writer's Almanac* and have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems*, *American Places*. She is the recipient of a *McKnight Artist Fellowship*, a *Minnesota State Arts Board Grant* for literature, a *Loft Literary Center Career Initiative Grant*, a *SASE/Jerome Grant*, and a writing residency at the *Banfill-Locke Center for the Arts*. Kirsten teaches humanities courses at *Anoka-Ramsey Community College*. In 2009, she received the *Building Bridges Award in Education* from the *Islamic Resource Group of Minnesota*, and in 2011, she received the *NEA's Excellence in the Academy Award for the Art of Teaching*.

wonder; how did Gray-Rosendale's experience of violence affect her work in the classroom? What did she think about sexual assault reform on campus? I contacted Laura through her website and proposed an article written in the form of a dialogue, and she immediately and graciously agreed to participate. We conversed by e-mail over the course of the next four weeks, sending thoughts and questions back and forth.

Coincidentally, our first conversation occurred on January 22, 2014, the same date President Barack Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum establishing the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault. In April

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2014, the task force published their initial recommendations, four steps that include conducting campus surveys, preventing assault (including engaging men in the process), helping schools respond effectively when an assault has occurred, and improving enforcement of existing legislation that applies to sexual assault. These are important actions that will help reduce the number of rapes on college campuses in the future.

And yet, the public conversation about sexual assault tends to revolve around reports and statistics, and too seldom reveals the personal dimension of this crime. In sharing this conversation with *Thought & Action* readers, I hope we will contribute to a public dialogue about sexual assault that recognizes the human cost (and courage) behind the reports and statistics. In higher education, many of those "statistics" are sitting in our classrooms and department meetings.

Kirsten: We have so much in common with our experiences, but one of the major differences in our stories is that your attacker was caught and prosecuted, while mine was never identified. I had desperately hoped that my attacker would be caught, and I used to fantasize about a trial, and a long prison sentence. I always thought that getting "justice" would have made my experience more bearable. But reading your story and the partial, watered-down punishment your attacker received (where he didn't even have to acknowledge that he had committed rape), made me rethink my whole view on this.

Laura: "Justice" is a strange word in situations like ours, I think. I sometimes wonder: Is there ever really, finally, justice for any survivor of sexual violence? Perhaps you can confront your perpetrator. Perhaps you can even testify against your perpetrator in a court of law. Perhaps you can see your perpetrator serve jail time. Perhaps you can pursue a civil suit and seek some sort of other form of restitution. And these are good steps along the path to justice. But these steps can

never take away what happened to the person—the aftermath of sexual violence. Images and experiences from these violent acts will continue to haunt a survivor all of his or her life. They will never go away completely. I wonder about a term like “justice.” I wonder whether it’s ever really possible. Instead, I think we need to seek something like “coming to terms.” We have to face what happened to us, realize that no justice will ever be enough, and make our own uneasy peace with that, I suppose. I think that’s a very difficult thing to do.

Kirsten: I understand what you mean, and I’ve felt much the same. It’s an expe-

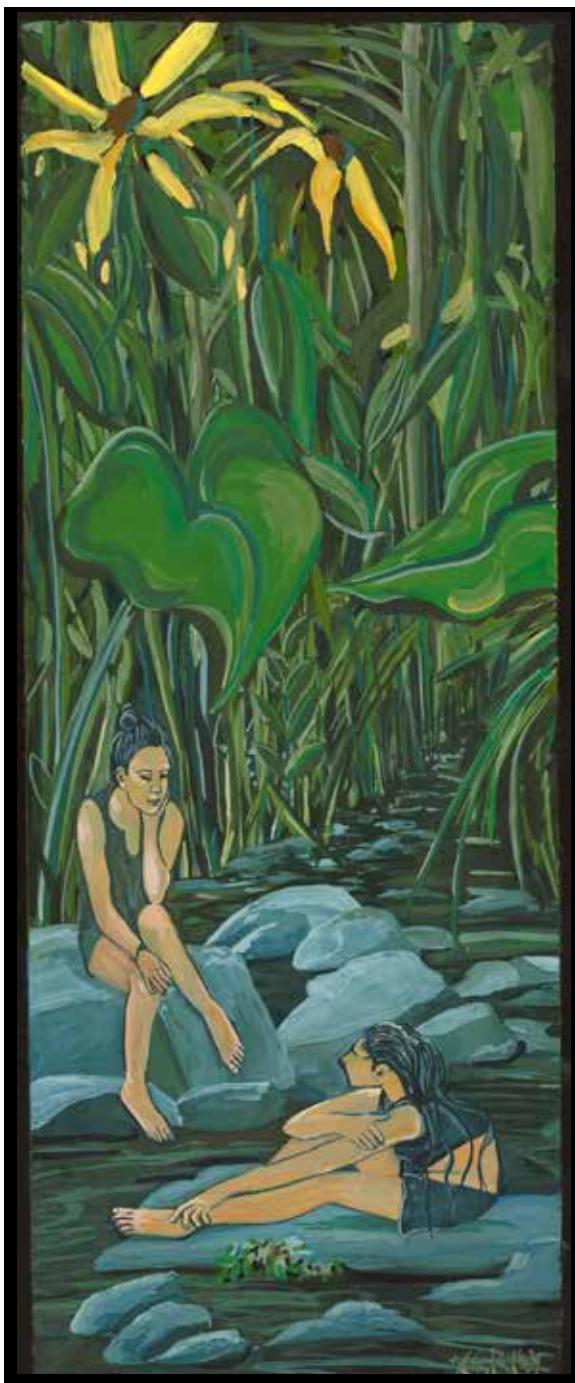
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rience you have to work hard to learn to live with, and part of that may be dealing with the idea that the person who derailed your life will never be adequately punished for their crime. One of the things that really struck me in your book was that your assailant ended up pleading to a burglary charge. This seemed a little ironic, as rape has often been traditionally looked at as a crime against a man’s property, for example, stealing his daughter’s virginity.

Laura: Rape does have that awful history. In my case the perpetrator ended up pleading to burglary “in satisfaction” or in lieu of all of the other charges against him, including rape. This meant that the first crime one would see on his criminal record was burglary and not sexual assault. There are lots of rape cases that are still pled this way to get convictions. I am quite ambivalent about this practice. On the one hand, it helps to secure convictions when survivors are afraid to testify against their perpetrators. This is often the case when a survivor knows her perpetrator. On the other hand, it doesn’t acknowledge the real crime committed—sexual assault. And pleading a case as burglary “in satisfaction” has other impacts as well. Often rapists are treated like burglars in the criminal system, not like sex offenders.

Kirsten: That is a really disturbing practice. You know, if you hadn’t written this book, I wouldn’t have known about this issue. So let’s talk here a little about writing and trauma, and the importance of having these stories out in the public sphere. I was recently at a writing conference where I served on a panel that discussed writing about trauma in college, and I was surprised to learn that some writing programs do not allow students in their composition courses to write on trauma-related topics. I understood their reasoning, in that they felt that composition instructors weren’t necessarily equipped to deal with traumatic issues, however, I found this troubling. I began writing about rape in a creative writing class, and I was absolutely terrified at the time about “going public” with the topic.

Indecision is by Karen Savage-Blue, an adjunct professor of art at Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College in Minn. For more, visit www.ksbluearts.com.



My instructors were hugely supportive (granted this was in graduate school), but I think if an instructor had shut me down at that point, I would have been too frightened to try it again. And writing about the rape ended up being an absolutely vital element in my recovery process. What do you think of this? I know you also had an instructor who worked with you in writing about sexual assault, and although your work was academic in nature, you seemed to feel that this played a key role in your healing process as well.

Laura: Yes, I had an instructor who helped me a great deal, Dr. Linda Alcoff,

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who is now a professor of philosophy at Hunter College. I think that in any writing class it's important that students find their own voices and write about what they know. For many survivors of sexual violence they cannot find their own voices unless they write and speak about these kinds of experiences first. I don't mean that they need to write about them to get it over and done with so that they can move onto something else either. Instead, they need to make sense of what happened to them and write about it because it suffuses everything they do, everything that they are. I do think that writing teachers, however, need to have ready access to information about counselors for their students.

In addition, writing about one's experiences artistically and using writing as therapy are two radically different things. And survivors need places to do both, I think. The artistic writing is for the classroom. The therapeutic writing may be more for journals and other private writings. Inevitably what gets written in those private journals will also inform what gets written in the classroom and vice versa. But I don't think it's really possible to keep traumatic experience entirely out of the writing classroom. This is something of a fallacy, really. Students need to write about what matters to them so that they can be passionate about what they are writing. And often what matters to them are the more complex and difficult things they have experienced.

Kirsten: I would just like to give a "shout-out" here to all the professors and instructors who hear stories like ours, and all the other difficult personal issues that students are dealing with, and who do something, anything to help, from referrals to counseling, to mentoring, to a simple "I'm so sorry you had to go through this" penned in the margin of a paper. From personal experience, I can say that you are real life savers.

Speaking of writing classes, and considering that we both deal in words for

a living, both as writers and as instructors, what do you think about the word “victim” as it relates to rape? For me, while I think the term survivor is a good one, I also don’t have any problem with the word victim. To me, to be a victim of a crime means that this was something you couldn’t stop from happening, and I feel like that’s exactly true with rape. But I also think this illustrates that rape is viewed differently by society from other crimes, even with language. People don’t think twice about saying they’re the victim of a violent robbery, or a mugging, or an assault, but when it’s a sexual assault, even the word victim has connotations of shame or blame.

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Laura: That makes a great deal of sense. But I also fear that using a term like “victim” risks robbing a survivor of sexual violence of his or her own agency. Instead, it can make the story of sexual violence one about a person to whom violence is done and gives that person no other identity. Using a term like “survivor” confers agency on the person who has been through sexual violence. It allows him or her to gain control over the narratives told about the event and the experiences she or he has had. It also acknowledges the truth of the situation. One who has been sexually assaulted has survived a near death experience and lived to tell about it. It acknowledges sexual assault for what it really is—a supreme act of violence against another human being that dehumanizes her or him.

Kirsten: I was attacked on a college campus in 1983, and I believe your attack happened in the late 1980s. We both had odd, and unsupportive (to say the least) run-ins with college administration. In your case, you had a university administrator call you on the phone to tell you how much your attacker’s family had done for the institution. In my case, when I withdrew from that school immediately after the rape—which took place in college housing—the college initially refused to refund my tuition money, even though classes hadn’t started yet for the semester. My dad had to take me to meet with an administrator, who took one look at my beat-up condition and approved the refund, but I still remember feeling humiliated by what felt like an inspection. I guess my question is: Do you think college administrations have changed or improved their attitude in regard to sexual assault?

Laura: Thankfully, I do think the roles of college administrations have changed quite a bit. I’d like to think that this has to do mainly with changes in the campus culture around rape issues. And I do think that this plays a significant part. Student activists have done a tremendous job of making these issues highly visible

locally on campuses and at a national level as well. But the changes also clearly have a great deal to do with the shifts in laws and protocols. In other words, these changes have been mandated. Things like “The Dear Colleague Letter” and Title IX made huge shifts initially.¹ The Campus SaVE Act promises to continue this.² And, Obama’s recent choice to elect a Task Force to investigate sexual violence on college campuses will demand further changes. However, there are still many survivors out there who are not seeing justice served by their universities and are being forced to take their cases to the federal government. Until we see a more wide-reaching set of changes on college campuses that uphold specific standards

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for how perpetrators will be sanctioned by universities, I think this will continue to occur.³

Kirsten: I agree with you, things have improved, some of it due to mandates, and much of it due to activism. I know there is also a strong movement on many campuses to work on violence prevention. Both of our campuses participate in the Green Dot program, which encourages people to speak up whenever they encounter violent behavior or language. I think all of these things help. Yet when I speak with college students on campuses, I realize that very often they don’t report that they have been raped, particularly if it is acquaintance rape. Some have mentioned to me that they don’t want their parents to find out, that they’re afraid their parents will make them move home, or they don’t want to confess that they had been drinking, or something of that nature. And I have heard other survivors say that rape survivors should do whatever they need to do to get through the experience, and sometimes that means not reporting a rape. While I know that reporting rape can be difficult, I always try to emphasize how important it is to report the crime, but maybe this is a little hypocritical of me as I had no choice in reporting my rape to the police or going to the hospital—the police showed up, I was in shock, and simply went along with the process. I’ve always been very, very glad the assault was reported, but I can’t say that I consciously chose that at the time.

Laura: I didn’t make a conscious choice either. But I completely agree with you. Reporting an act of sexual violence is so important. Research shows that most of these perpetrators are repeat offenders. Though it can take a great deal of courage to do this, if one person reports a sexual assault it has the possibility of preventing many other sexual assaults from happening as well as allowing other survivors to have the courage to speak up.

Kirsten: I was attacked the week before school started, and I ended up withdrawing from that school and returning to my old campus, a couple states away,

where I started classes right away again. You also stayed in school, but at the same campus. First, how did we manage to stay in school at all? And secondly, I was frightened much of the time I was on campus, imagining my attacker had tracked me down and would kill me, as he had promised. I don't know how you did it, staying on the same campus, the courage it took to do that is extraordinary. If my only choice would have been to remain on that campus where I was attacked, I know I would have dropped out of school.

Laura: I understand your decision completely and nearly made it myself. I was very afraid too. He had threatened to kill me. And for part of the time that I lived

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in Syracuse after the assault, he was on bail and wandering the streets. Still, I felt a deep need not to let the perpetrator have any more control over my life than he had already taken. I didn't want him to derail my hopes and dreams for my life. I guess I felt that if I left Syracuse, I would have been letting him have further control over me and my life. And I wasn't about to let that happen. I was also quite angry about what he'd done to me, who he was, his family's connections to the university. It turned out that he was the grandson of the president of the Board of Trustees at my university. I did not want to be chased out of that city by him or by them. Instead, going back was a kind of reclaiming of my own life. There were many times I thought to drop out—but I had a great, supportive group of friends there as well as mentors and I think they saw me through those rough patches. My family also supported my decision fully.

Kirsten: My family and friends were also really supportive, and having that support system is vital, I think. And, sometimes, crucial support comes from the community. In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the police officers and hospital workers were all very kind to me, and there was a volunteer at the local women's shelter who somehow got me through that tough first day. I'll never be able to repay her for that. But I do think about how I can contribute something positive to the community in my own way, and this leads me to our work as teachers: do you think your experience affects your work in the classroom?

Laura: I have had several conversations about this with fellow survivors who are teachers. And we have realized that our teaching shares more traits than we ever might have imagined. I would not want to suggest that this is the case for all survivors—but it has been the case for a number of people with whom I've spoken. We have found that it makes us a bit more likely to be empathetic, to teach with

students' voices in mind, to make our classrooms open, safe, and free spaces for the exploration of knowledge. One of my fellow survivor friends, a sociologist, believes it has made him more pragmatic in the classroom, made him provide more real-life situations for students. Another, who works in psychology, believes it has made her more able to connect with students who come from difficult backgrounds or who are facing struggles of their own. She feels she can make the study of psychology come more alive for her students because she has faced traumatic experiences herself.

Being a survivor is not something I disclose in my classroom. But it probably impacts many of the things I do. I create assignments that allow student investigation and discovery. My assignments are student-driven and student-centered. I also use a facilitative teaching style. Though I bring specialized expertise to the table, I am not the only expert in the room. My teaching style is all about honoring students' perspectives and helping them to communicate these perspectives most effectively. I suppose I teach this way because as a person and a survivor, I wanted and still want to be treated this way myself.

Kirsten: I love what you said here, and I agree. I think, or at least I hope, that it has made me more aware of the student who is on the verge of disappearing from college. I tell myself that maybe something as small as an encouraging word, or an offer of extra help might make a real difference. Sometimes students will confide in me that they have survived rape, or some other type of violence, and they sometimes tell me that just seeing me there in the classroom, demonstrating that I have built a good and happy life for myself, gives them hope. And I think we both do that - show that it's possible to not just survive sexual assault, but to move through it and beyond it, and thrive. 

ENDNOTES

1. The "Dear Colleague" letter of April 4, 2011, published by the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, clarifies that "sexual harassment of students, which includes acts of sexual violence, is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title IX."
2. The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act is a companion amendment to Title IX. It directly addresses sexual violence in higher education by requiring increased transparency in reporting of sexual assaults and crimes on campuses. It also enhances victims' rights, standardizes institutional procedures in response to sexual violence, and supports sexual violence prevention through educational programs. Schools participating in federal student aid programs must implement the SaVE Act by October 2014.
3. A good source of information for faculty, staff, students, and other community members working to make their campuses safer is Not Alone, a web-based project published by The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. This website includes a wealth of resources, including legal guidance, information on developing sexual assault policies and procedures, and sexual violence prevention information. It also will help readers to understand individual and institutional obligations around FERPA (The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), the Clery Act (also known as the Jeanne Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act), and Title IX. Numerous resources for victims and survivors of sexual crimes are listed here as well.

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