Moira’s Story

by Rev Moira Finley, used with permission

When I was thirteen, the summer before I started high school, I went to a summer camp at a university in another state. It was great to be that far away from home without my family, to find the beginnings of some independence, and it was great to be around people who were dorks like me, who gladly gave up weeks of their summer vacation to sit in classrooms and learn new things.

It was great, for the first week, but then there was an attempted mugging on campus and so they gathered everyone together and gave us a speech about safety. They told us not to walk alone, particularly after dark, to always let others know where we would be, who we would be with, and so on. My mother had always given me a lot of freedom and so I had never doubted my safety, but something in what the leaders of the program said that day stuck in my thirteen year old brain.

So a few days later I was at the library after dinner and the person who was supposed to meet me there couldn’t and I found myself alone, with no one to walk with me back to the dorms. I looked around, trying to find someone I knew, and I found one of my instructors. He seemed the perfect choice, after all we tell our children they can trust their teachers.

So I went over and asked him if he would walk me back to the dorms. He paused and said he’d be happy to, but he had to make a call first. Seemed perfectly reasonable. He went off to make the call, and a few minutes later we left.

He asked me if I minded if he stopped by his house to leave his backpack before we continued on to my dorm. Since it was on the way it seemed to make sense.

When we got to his house, I waited in the entryway while he went upstairs. He was gone a long time, and I was starting to worry that I would miss curfew.

Just as I had decided that it would be better to risk walking the rest of the way back to the dorm myself, the doors on the other side of the entry hall opened and five men I had never met before approached me.

The phone call my teacher had made was to let his friends know that he had succeeded in his mission – to find someone to rape.

Over the next seven hours that’s exactly what they did, things my thirteen year old self couldn’t even begin to imagine, things designed to hurt, and humiliate, to degrade, and to try to separate me from my soul.
When they were done, in the small hours of the morning, they wrapped me in a sheet and put me in the back of a pick up truck. They drove me to an isolated dirt road outside of town and left me by the side of the road, convinced that no one would find me, that I would die.

That didn’t happen. An incredible man named Michael happened to be driving to town and saw what he thought was a pile of trash lying on the side of the road. He stopped to pick it up, and found me instead.

He drove me to the hospital and stayed with me. He held my hand through those first most terrifying hours of doctors, and nurses, and police officers, of questions, and questions, and more questions.

My mom was eight hundred miles away and so it took her the rest of the day to get to me, arriving late in the night, sobbing at my bedside.

I spent a long time in the hospital, with broken bones and other injuries, and I have spent the last more than twenty-eight years putting the pieces of my life back together. I struggle with the after effects of what they did, to my body, and my mind, and I fight every day not to give in to their voices, the words of the men who raped me who said I was worthless.

Thankfully I had, and still have, some incredible people surrounding me, getting me a psychiatrist to talk to in the hospital and a lawyer who helped advocate for me in the legal system. Thankfully my mother was my greatest strength, and we had a community of support who held me together through incredible darkness, who held our light, and hope, and love when I couldn’t see it myself.

And yet, there is not a day that goes by when I don’t think about what happened, when there isn’t some memory, some trigger, a smell, a sight, a sound, that drags me right back to that room where everything in my life changed.

On the outside I may look like a reasonably normal person, but on the inside there is a struggle going on to stay present, to live in this moment, to believe in the goodness of the world, and that if we all put our hearts, and minds together, we could spark a revolution so that no one ever had to live through what I did.

I truly believe we can help that new world be born, but it’s going to take a lot of work because, even with the most conservative numbers, one in six women in the United States, and one in three women worldwide face every day, along with one in thirty men have a story like mine.

But we aren’t statistics. We are people, human beings who have faced the horror of someone else deciding that they had the right to take control of our bodies. We are people who have
been through some of the most terrible things that one person can inflict on another. We have lived through it, we are standing here with you today, sitting next to you at work, at school, at church.

And the worst thing we have to deal with is not the memories of what happened, not the nightmares, the flashbacks, the nagging self-doubt, or the questions about why us, or what we could have done differently. The worst things we have to deal with is the shame that society thinks we should feel, and the crushing silence when we try to tell our stories.

When my survivor sisters and brothers try to tell our stories we are met with questions – what were you wearing, why were you there, are you sure you didn’t ask for it? We are made to feel the shame and guilt that rightly belong to the people who raped and assaulted us.

And I understand some of it is a defense mechanism. If we were raped because of our short skirts, or because we were walking home late alone, or because we dared to go out and drink, then it can’t happen to someone else. But we don’t need that. We have enough of those questions, and doubts in our hearts and minds already.

What we need, from those of you who don’t bear the scars of rape, is for you to listen. We need for you to listen to our stories, to not turn away. Yes, it will be uncomfortable and yes, it will break your heart. We need you to deal with all of that, all of your own discomfort, so that you can listen to us, support us, encourage us as we deal with the winding, difficult journey of healing.

We need you to listen to our fears, to try to understand our anxieties. We need you to be patient with how we tell our stories, with the stops and starts, with a sudden flood of memories that come and have to be shared or they will overwhelm us. We need you to hear the details, the awful specific things that happened, and we need you to understand that sometimes we can’t share those details with you, or with anyone.
We need you to try and understand what it’s like to live with post traumatic stress disorder, to need to sit on a particular side of the table, or triple check the locks on the door, or a thousand other things that help us navigate our days while our brains, and hearts, are torn between the present and the past.

We need to know that we aren’t a burden to you, that you’re in this with us for the long haul, that you’ll stand with us in the good days when we are enjoying life, because we do have them, but also in the dark days of self doubt, fear, anxiety, and despair, because we have those days as well.

We need your voices, the voices of allies in this struggle, to stand with us and help us change the world, to create a future where no more people face the sleepless nights burdened by memories of what someone else inflicted on us, a future where saying no is respected, and a future where my friend Ashley’s beautiful children have to ask “momma, what was rape?”