

Bodies and Minds The Wide, Wide World

## Twenty-Five Years Later

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The past few weeks—scratch that—the past few years have been triggering for many women. Most recently, at Harvard, a bunch of powerful professors closed ranks around one of their own who was accused of sexual harassment. In the sociological research around rape victims, the data suggests that “institutional betrayal” —when colleges participate in various forms of protecting the assailants — increases rates of sexual dysfunction, anxiety and depression among victims. Let me also venture that for victims of less violent but still consequential forms of sexual harassment, institutional betrayal is a big part of how the harm goes down.

It has taken me twenty five years, in a way, to write this essay. The institutional betrayal at issue here happened to me in high school, and I’m now a college professor and a mother of daughters. I wrestle on a day-to-day basis with how to care for my students while also advocating for myself in the increasingly shitty realities of academia. My experience of sexual harassment and institutional betrayal as a teenager did not make me into someone who went through life always knowing how to stand strong with the sisterhood. In fact, I internalized the harm in ways that contributed to its perpetuation. That’s what I’m writing about here.

I felt compelled to publish this essay, to name my high school teacher after all these years because, while I want to think carefully about complicity and words and mistakes and violence, I suspect that some harm somewhere in the personal histories of those powerful people at Harvard made them feel they had to pander to power to stay safe. Of course, they don’t need my compassion. But maybe they need to hear that **the institution will never love you.**

I have come to recognize, at this late date, that sometimes choosing yourself over the institution means claiming not only your mistakes but your own unpleasantness. I’m naturally a people-pleaser, but I’m also outspoken. For this, I have been repeatedly punished by a culture that values women who are unfailingly pleasant. Often, simply for withdrawing my pleasantness, I have faced a great deal of masculine anger.

Again, it has taken me twenty five years to write this essay.



When I found out I was pregnant with a girl, I cried for three full days. I was totally unprepared for the waves of fear crashing over me, the inner sirens wailing *I won't be able to protect her*. I already loved her, and I couldn't protect her. I had digested my anger and fear, I considered myself *over it*. I was tough. I had moved to Rio de Janeiro and trained capoeira in the favelas by myself. I had started over in seven different cities. I could do anything. Having a kid was something I wanted. Pull it together.

I knew how to *ride it out*, I could tamp down my own emotions, but the physical fact of pregnancy, my inability to run from the changes in my body and my life, began to disable that dissociative strategy before I even started to show.

Moving back in time: The story in high school is banal, clichéd to the point of bathos, and neither a rape nor a violent incident. It's an adolescent psychodrama. My high school teacher: Forty-five years old at the time, single, watching his Robert Redford good looks fade into an unsung middle age among the blackboards at a high-powered prep school. Me: a very young senior who had been waiting three years to get into his creative writing class. I knew the rumors about him — *he always has a special favorite, he likes to talk about sex in his lectures*. It sounded kind of cool. I was a bright, energetic musical theater nerd. I thought I was so grown up. I was in awe of a man who knew poetry. He wrote racy things about sex in the margins of my stories and told me he could see my underwear when I sat a particular way in class. He lived near me. I walked my dog to his house in the evenings and he lit candles and showed me his journal entries about me. I was convinced he held the key to a life lived with passion and literature. He never really touched me; we kissed precisely one time.

I thought it was love.

I tried to tell my best friend. He had asked her out on a date, a month or two before he started things with me. She went to the opera with him, once, if I remember correctly. Then she stopped talking to him. I, however, had taken the bait. It wasn't candles that he lit, actually, it was these little glass oil lamps. They were the most romantic, adult thing that had ever happened to me in my life. He paid attention to me. He said he couldn't stop looking at me in my flowered dress.



I told my friend I thought we were in love. She told me she hated me. She left me a note on my car saying all she could think about was how I had rung his doorbell and not been thinking of her. When I told him how alone I was, the teacher got spooked. He told me to stop talking to him. He told me to remain silent. After I lost him and my best friend, I had a week or two of dramatic unraveling. Already deeply eating disordered, I had my most overt episodes of self-harm and what a therapist later called “suicidal ideation.”

I hate admitting to this. I am attached to my self-image as tough and together. But that image is connected to my rage, it is the flip side of rage. The neat demands of pulling it together answered the messiness of grief and rage.

I never told my parents what happened. Other teachers at the school definitely knew. They protected him. I managed to call an older friend, Jen, an alum of my school. Jen came over that night to help me out. She drove me around in her car.

When Jen heard what was going on with my teacher, she told me: everybody knows about this guy. She told me, it's OK that you had feelings for him, you're 17. But this isn't about you, this is something *that this man does*. Everyone knows about it. She told me I was not alone. And then she got me on the phone with another woman, four years older, who my teacher had harassed a few years before. At the time, it was both enlightening and sustaining for me to speak with another woman with a similar experience. She said at the time that she stopped studying philosophy after it happened— she had been taking his philosophy class. I thought about the rumors, the fact that he had approached my best friend first. I listened to this other woman. I realized I had been a fool. A naïve and stupid girl. I felt ashamed and idiotic.

Jen encouraged me to step forward and tell the school's administration, to get my best friend to go to the administration with me. Jen spoke to the school first. And the school — the fancy “keen minds together and a space to grow” elite California prep school — they promised her the moon. That year they had gotten 13 kids out of a class of 75 into Harvard. They had a reputation to protect.

They promised Jen I would get counseling, that they would introduce the trainings and policies that she laid out for them, which she had brought to them from work she was doing at Princeton. They promised Jen they would fire all the perpetrators at the school, that they would make public amends.

So, my best friend and I made up, kind of. We went to the administration together. We sat in the office, with its wooden beams and its big windows looking out over the courtyard. My high school prided itself on having no hallways. Not a panopticon — a community! We sat clearly visible from the central courtyard, our backs to those big big windows, and I took a deep breath. I told a vice principal — older white female — everything that had happened, mostly reading from my diaries, which I kept religiously. She listened in uncomfortable silence. I remember her saying almost nothing. At the end, we got up and left.

For a brief moment, it seemed like maybe I had done the right thing, and that I would be OK. I remember somehow getting the teacher to walk outside the school with me. I told him that I knew that he had done this before with other girls. I told him he was wrong. He was in the wrong. He was angry. He kicked a pebble at me, on the dirt path near the eucalyptus.

And then the school hung me out to dry. The story is actually even more complicated, in the ways that they betrayed me, but they also broke all their promises to Jen. They asked the teacher to

leave quietly, and they gave him references. He has been teaching ever since, mostly at an all-girl school in the South Bay.

His friends closed ranks around him, and the institution and most of the people in my life communicated to me: 1) I was complicit in what had happened; 2) it wasn't that bad, think of his future, and; 3) be ashamed that everyone knows you got this popular teacher fired. Obviously, people had seen us in the vice principal's office. Those big windows. But more than that, of course people knew – everyone in my small class knew I had been spending time with him, they saw the way I looked at him, and then they saw him disappear while I came apart.



The school was: The College Preparatory School in Oakland, California. I am reasonably certain that Bill Smoot, my creative writing teacher, was one of three male staff who left the school for improper conduct with students during my time there, but those other stories aren't mine to tell. My friend, Jen Rothman (who agreed to be named here, and who is a law professor), has told them, almost every year since the mid '90s, that she does not donate to the school because of these broken promises. The school hasn't cared, of course. They have gone on getting people into Harvard and Yale, I was successfully silenced, and we weren't about to get them a new gym or anything.

The lesson I learned at 17 was that leadership — perhaps especially but not exclusively older and whiter leadership (I'm AAPI) — would judge me first and harshest and lie to my face about wanting the best for me. I told myself to be tough: trust no one. When I eventually became a reporter and then an academic, I was sometimes able to turn older men's propensity to underestimate me against them. Sometimes, but not always.

Institutional betrayal taught me to exist in a defensive crouch, to remind myself constantly that I was on my own. I reminded myself regularly that everyone around me would throw me under the bus before they went up against power. After high school, this made me turn my anger inwards, it made me highly unwilling to speak with my professors, and ultimately, it made me gravitate towards powerful men who seemed like they might protect me.

Perhaps it is obvious to say that this strategy backfired.

There was no sexual violence in that part of my story. The date rape-y experiences that I had in college were in some ways easier for me to process. By that time, I knew how to detach from my body and turn myself off inside. When someone you respect, someone you look up to and admire and even think you love, when someone who seems to hold the key to your future betrays and humiliates you, in some ways it becomes less surprising when other people suck.

People still think College Prep is a great school. And all those people from my class went to Harvard. Maybe Prep did prepare us for the corridors of power, in a certain way. The harm that Prep caused does not erase or negate other good that might have happened at the school, or at Harvard. But prestige and misogynistic forms of power create force fields that seduce people, especially people who start out without much power, into believing that if we only pander skillfully enough, we might cross over to safety.



After Prep, I held on as a lifeline to the notion that if I tamped it down and pulled it together I would be rewarded. If I managed to find that balance between being smart enough without threatening anyone, without making anyone angry, I would eventually win.... something. I felt that I had to tell other women to do the same. I told other women in college not to say anything about having been date raped. I thought it would go badly for them, and this may have been true. But the fact of my participation in those dynamics still turns my stomach. I perpetuated rape culture harm because I thought I was protecting myself and others.

When I found out that I was pregnant with a daughter, all of this came rushing back to me. I realized that if anyone did to my daughter what Smoot did to me in high school, if anyone betrayed her or hurt her even a little bit in that way, I would try to kill him. I had never felt very angry, until I was going to have a girl. And then suddenly I knew that I wanted to murder him, I wanted to murder them all.

I had become part of structures that disciplined women for speaking out, for claiming small measures of power and expertise, for calling attention to themselves, because I was so wrapped up in trying to discipline my own emotions. And then when I had a daughter, I had to start the inner work of thinking about what it really means to stop being part of that structure.

In 2016, before #MeToo but after Trump's pussy-grabbing comments, a reporter at BuzzFeed named **Katie Baker** contacted me. She is an excellent reporter who had already broken a number of stories about sexual harassment at prep schools. BuzzFeed is run by someone who went to my high school. Baker got in touch with me and asked me about what had happened with Bill Smoot.

I spoke to my high school friend on the phone to ask her if she would come forward with me. I wanted to put our names out there together. I wanted to see if we couldn't get him out of the classroom after all these years. She said she would not make her name public, and told me, "I don't want the school to suffer."

The other woman I had spoken to on the phone, who is four or five years older than I am, is now a gender studies professor at an institution more prestigious than my own (I teach, creative writing, lit and media studies at a small HSI/MSI). I thought she might stand with me. She said in email

that she couldn't remember exactly what had happened but that she didn't think Smoot had been a "predator." She said she didn't remember our phone conversation, the one that helped me see who he really was, when I was in high school. She told me that what had happened to me was "not as bad" as what had happened to other women at the school.

This is unquestionably true. But I would like to say, publicly now, that even if what happened to me was not as bad as what happened to the other young women at the school, my staying silent was part of what happened to all of us.

For this gender studies professor, the impulse to protect the institution led her to judge, evaluate as both questionable and insignificant, other women's testimony, even though Smoot was still in a classroom at an all-girls school and even though Katie Baker had spoken to other women and thought there was enough evidence to write a story if we came forward. The gender studies professor politely said she didn't want to invalidate my experience, but she declined to step forward. And I returned to my silence.



After Trump's Access Hollywood tape, and then after Harvey Weinstein, the online outpouring of stories from women has been vast. After the Kavanaugh hearings, more floodgates opened. And in academia, we are still struggling with the testimonies and the Title IX processes that circle around powerful professors who hold students' increasingly uncertain futures in their hands. Much of what I hear and read is so much like or so much worse than what happened to me in high school and then beyond. The women who came forward against the professor at Harvard are heroically brave.

I find myself feeling jealous of the picture of them where they're standing tall, in blazers, together.

The #MeToo movement has helped more women stand up and speak out together, which is the only way it works. Watching women back each other up has helped me feel less alone and has helped me notice how much I had internalized the shame, how much I carried a lifetime of feeling like somehow if I had been thinner or whiter or quieter or more pleasant, or if something more visibly violent had happened to me, then my community would not have abandoned me.

What happened with Smoot in high school was, almost exclusively, words. Words are harder to police than violent assaults. Here I think about the words used by the Harvard professor to harm his students, how he read to them from therapy reports, how he described to his student how he imagined her death. These are words, they are assault, they are retaliation for the withdrawing of attention. It is hard to isolate and assess and monetize the damage that words do, especially when it comes to the complicated structures of feeling and personality around writing and gender and

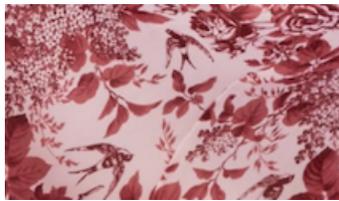
race. I have learned so much from listening to other women, other **scholars of color** who got brave and got loud before I was able to.

In the countless contexts where hierarchies are at stake in gendered stories, I have watched privileged people rationalize their refusal to listen and close ranks, for many years. But how we listen to each other— how we listen to workers with less power, how we listen to trans people, how we listen to women after they have been raped, how we listen to young and indebted and not-yet-powerful women of color— I have come to believe this is at the root of everything.

Bill Smoot is still teaching. He published a book of interviews called “conversations with great teachers,” or something, I’m not googling it, in which he included himself. Also at one point he wrote a truly strange column for *Salon* about how his marriage to a much younger woman had dissolved. He blamed her. He seems to blame her, in the essay, for breaking her vow to continue having sex with him. He was angry, and kicking a pebble at her.

For a long, long time during and after high school, Smoot lived across the street from my parents. I would see him, now and then, and I would watch him recognize me as he wheeled out his recycling bin. Neither of us ever said anything. I never told my parents.

The mission statement on the College Prep website claims to encourage “ethically sure-footed” students who are “generous of heart and spirit.”



I have vast reservoirs of regret. I wish I had done things differently, been a different person, and come forward sooner. I was not innocent, but I’ve learned from African American scholars and prison abolitionists that feminism needs to amplify the problem with innocence. At a panel of scholars gathered to honor Ruth Wilson Gilmore, one scholar talked about how she didn’t want her kids to be considered innocent, she wanted them to have the space and the freedom to be *ordinary*.

Was I in love with that man, when I was 17? Yes. Was I wearing a dress? Yes. Was I un-crossing my legs in class? Maybe? Was I foolish and naïve? Unquestionably. When **Don Hazen** hired me as a journalist, did I maybe a little bit know that he was a flirt and a bully? Sure, I was desperate for a job. Did I realize that if I did anything other than pander, that I might get fired? Yes. Sure. But remember, by the time I met Hazen I thought I was tough. I knew that sometimes pandering is the only way to survive. I was still a child when a teacher convinced me that the life I wanted would never be open to me, that I was stupid to try for it, that I had to pull it together, trust no one, stop talking and lie to get by. I deserved a little space to be young and dumb. I deserved to be ordinary.

How do we convert the explosion of sharing around #MeToo and the continued discussion of our responses to harassment into a changed culture?

How do we hold in our hearts the shattered pasts of so many people, our complicity in these shitty systems, so we can campaign and organize for a better shared future?

A few years ago, when I was trying to figure out a feminist angle to the book I'm working on, I gave my work to a more powerful junior scholar at an Ivy League institution. She didn't like my clever feminist title, and she told me to read the Harvard law professor Janet Halley's book, *Split Decision, How and why we need to take a break from feminism*. Janet Halley, recently, was one of the loudest voices defending the Harvard professor now accused of retaliation and harassment. Halley's argument, like the gender studies professor's argument to me, seems to be that what this guy did wasn't bad enough, so the women should stop talking.

So, I'm talking now, saying what he did was bad enough. And if anyone of any gender steps to my daughters or to my students like that, they will have to come through me. Halley is dead wrong. We do not need a "break" from feminism.

I published this now because I wanted to voice support for the young women at Harvard as I watched their famous teachers close ranks. I believe those young women are already doing better than I did, but I'm keenly aware that there is no guarantee that once the spotlight fades, the closing of ranks won't continue. It can be subtle and silent, the ways that power cuts people off, pits us against each other. So to everyone watching the powerful, I want to say, keep your eyes on the young people who don't have power — yet. Lift them up. Listen to them. Stay with them. That way something more promising lies, something more like culture change.

*Michelle Chihara: Team Students.*