

Sexual assaults in sanctuaries create wounds within wounds

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Here's the thing: Sexual assault is sexual assault wherever it happens. But when it happens in sacred space, the violation and desecration increase. Why? Because sacred space is where we go to heal and be safe, and in sacred space, there is implied protection from the norm. Whether that space is a Catholic Mass, Baptist church, Buddhist temple or sweat lodge — it is always sacred space.

In those sacred spaces there is the implied promise of safety and the opportunity to turn those wounds into healed scars that can help the next person via their joint experience. This space, thus, grants the opportunity to turn a negative into a positive. So when that space is violated, desecration reaches a whole new level.

So here we are, you and me, and I have to say right now I'm looking at very dark places. They are surging upward out of my own newly created nightmares, and I am hoping against hope that if we look at this together we can come up with a more viable solution. Certainly, while the current solutions make a dent they are not even close to solving the problem. As a woman who lives both inside and outside (when mood and circumstance strike) my first viewpoint is always toward the frontlines. I always wonder what this looks like to other urban gypsies.

If I simply look out at statistics, I become alarmed and then slip into an overwhelmed stupor and end up resigned, thinking, "that's just the way that goes." Falling in that place doesn't do me or anyone else any good whatsoever. It doesn't work because there are women just like me, looking back at me, from the reflection of my own mirror. What do I say to them?

That brings us to our central question: What happens when a human being goes to a spiritual space to heal from a lifetime of bad choices and violence and gets violated there? Because we all handle things differently, I can only speak to the experience I have seen other women go through in these communities.

In order to solve the problem of people being violated in a spiritual space, I have seen survivors approach people within that space and ask for advice. And they've actually taken it. If at that point, nothing changed then what would happen? Many survivors feel they can't leave because it would leave the space vulnerable for future people searching for healing.

Another option is the community could mediate it and handle the situation on its own. That wouldn't work, however, due to several mitigating factors: The community

itself is wounded and doesn't have anyone appointed to mediate. It would easily become polarized in a "he said/she said" popularity contest.

There is also the question of whether the survivor is new to that spiritual discipline and thus an outsider. If that's the case, the survivor ends up on the losing side due to fears of the spirituality itself being questioned. The "what ifs" begin to outdistance the "what could have been's" and soon the questions begin to sound accusatory, asking, "Who do you think you are?" In this situation, rather than looking toward solutions of how this can be stopped from happening again, future safety doesn't come up.

So, with the option of in-group mediation or having the victim's faith questioned off the table, then it seems the only option is going through a system that is broken, at best, and designed to re-victimize the survivor. Well that fucking sucks.

I've seen survivors take the logical next step. They speak the truth. At best, it's often a complicated, gray case. But the most powerful and important requirement is that the victim tells the whole story, not just the parts that make the victim look good. As a result, the perpetrator doesn't always get investigated or arrested. The survivor only asked for a restraining order, which the perpetrator chose to contest. A restraining order hearing is not a trial, it's simply intended to establish whether there is a case for that individual to not be allowed within a certain range of the survivor. In some cases, however, where assault has occurred in a sacred space and the people in positions of power are often, I assume, afraid of the spirituality being questioned or shut down, they choose to back the predators. They have a part in perpetuating this culture of silence, which protects the predator and allows the violations to continue.

Because of the broken American legal system, the victim might soon find out that the predator (if they were acting as their own lawyer) has the right to cross examine the survivor as to the validity the restraining order, hence allowing them the right to re-violate the survivor in front of an audience. How shocking is that? So, surrounded by pressure and silence, the survivor may choose to let the case drop and go back outside the system for protection.

So what is the survivor to do? Now the survivor is, in fact, vulnerable again to the potential of retribution and has not been able to make the space safe for themselves or the ones coming after.

I did some checking, spoke with advocates, and spoke with survivors from many different communities. Right 2 Dream

Too, the homeless layover at Fourth and Burnside, leaves four spaces open for women experiencing sexual assault or domestic violence. Space is hard to come by. R2DToo never said, however, they said they will make room when necessary. Next, I spoke to Monica at Portland Women's Crisis Line, who is the outreach worker for Portland's unhoused women experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault. What a champ that woman is! I have witnessed her walk many individuals in similar situations through the system's maze. I have seen her support survivors through many of the spurts of progress and strength and the stumbles into weakness and indecision without judgment.

Slowly, out of this quagmire of misery and betrayal comes the thought that if the system doesn't work and the community isn't trained, couldn't we create space and time to make one that does. It could be modeled potentially after other communities who are helping and healing outside the system. What would that look like? I don't know yet, but I'm gonna try. The thought that our current solutions don't work and our system leaves me neither with good sleep nor with answers.

My solutions may look different than yours because, no doubt, our experiences are different. Nevertheless, here are mine. I want social workers specifically trained in trauma to teach community-appointed mediators how to advocate for survivors of domestic violence. I want to be able to trust the communities where violations are occurring to change the conditions that allow the violations to occur. And if they can't, I want them to be open to someone helping them do just that.

I want the system to stay away from this and us to stay away from it because it perpetuates blame and shame and doesn't solve shit. It's not something anyone can just stuff away. Unless we are prepared to watch prey become predators we need to be willing to do something different. I propose the radical idea of letting the survivor choose to see that through. I propose that for unhoused women, we introduce several designated RVs under bridges where safe space is guaranteed, with advocates right there on the spot able and willing to drive away right then. That, combined with the spaces at R2DToo is a start.

What if we then asked survivors how they wanted this plan to look? What if we left open the door to healing for both parties if it's an incident of domestic violence? What if we demand a loosely based network of all the organizations coming together to help in a way that is directed and makes sense to the survivor? What would that support look like?

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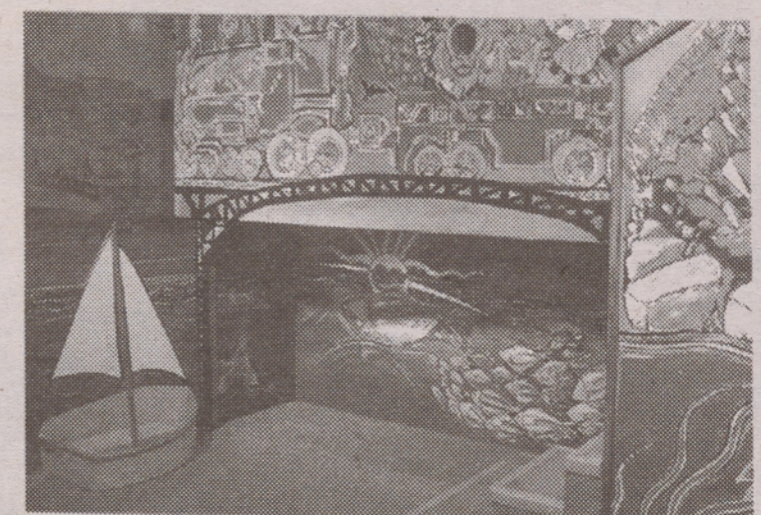
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