

Debates on fairness must include everyone

Dr. Christine Blasey Ford captured the attention of people across the nation with her strength as she educated the country about trauma and memory and courage. Like so many of you

– gathered around televisions in hair salons and living rooms and day shelters – many memories have resurfaced for me.

Despite the wholeness of each of us as human beings –

our ambitions, our experiences – there have been too many times when women were simply there for the pleasure or anger or violence of some men who felt entitled to our sexuality – that abhorrent “uproarious laughter” that Ford described of assailants “having fun at my expense,” Ford said of Brett Kavanaugh and his friend Mark Judge.

One memory that surprised me, because I hadn’t remembered it in so long, was a time in high school when a boy made a cartoon of me that the school newspaper published. Perhaps this memory resurfaced because I now work at a newspaper, and certainly it is because I scoured the yearbook entries of Kavanaugh and read all the coded references that degraded women – references cast in the prose equivalent of that uproarious laughter.

I remember how I did not speak up to say how much I despised that cartoon of me – a sexualized depiction, with a caption that read something like “boys, don’t touch this” – because I would be seen as uptight, without a sense of humor. These were the same years when, on the other side of that objectifying coin, my dear friend’s name was transformed by hissing classmates into one that involved the word “slut.” This was the late 1980s, a few years later than Kavanaugh’s high school years, and it was all the air we breathed.

It is the air we continue to breathe.

What an extraordinary national conversation we are immersed in, and what love and compassion we need to extend to each other – to all of us.

Our streets are filled with unhoused women, men, non-binary folks – people who have experienced sexual trauma, and who have sexual violence perpetrated on them.

As we grapple with the ongoing #MeToo conversation, I continue to think about all the people on the streets who contend with sexual violence at higher rates than housed people, and who, with a lack of housing security, continue to be unsafe. Justice is often fleeting because cases are more difficult to pursue when people don’t have addresses for follow-up.

Their experiences must be connected to this national conversation.

Part of the calculation that people have to contend with as part of their daily decisions around survival is – which places are safe? Which shelter must they avoid? How do they survive the street? Is it worth enduring an abusive partner if it shields them from another abuse?

A number of our active vendors are women. There are ways they take care of each other. Recently, one woman did not feel safe in the shelter where she was staying, and she did not feel safe outside – which had been her only option that week. So another woman found her a tent in her camp. From their descriptions, it is a self-governed, off-the-grid space, strong with rules; maintained with security from its participants. I recently visited one such emergent camp, and the unhoused folks showed me how they patched the fence to protect each other from predators, winnowing access to one opening, which they shared the responsibility of patrolling 24 hours a day.

It is difficult as a passerby to read the circumstances around the small encampments that crop up around the city, but it is important to realize that sometimes people organize with what tools they have to take care of each other. In some encampments, this is what is happening.

These Kavanaugh hearings open up a big, national conversation, and so many of us feel rage and emotion – itself a form of knowledge. What do we do with this kind of knowledge? We watch all of this play out in the nation’s capital, and fight for the integrity of the justice system at its highest levels.

The threat that decisions around fairness are, in fact, nothing about fairness is deeply destabilizing. As we move this conversation forward, it’s important for all of us to remember that for people in our society who are at the extreme end of poverty, many of whom who have suffered sexual violence, it just never has been fair.

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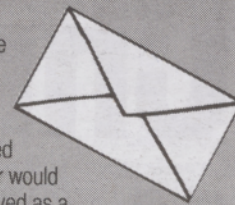
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