

the revolution starts at home

CONFRONTING INTIMATE VIOLENCE WITHIN ACTIVIST COMMUNITIES

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FREEDOM & STRATEGY / TRAUMA & RESISTANCE

Timothy Colm

In 2007, I attended a workshop at the Trans Health Conference where the facilitator told a story about a guy who, after having top surgery, threw a party at which he burned all the pictures that existed of him before he physically transitioned. People have all kinds of ways of relating to their past selves. Like the boy in the story, I'm a trans guy. But this story unsettled me for other reasons.

When I was fourteen and fifteen years old, I was in an abusive relationship with my best friend. Eventually, after my other attempts to end the abuse had failed, I decided to stop talking to him and going to his house. For a few months I managed to avoid him, until mutual friends of ours visiting from Georgia came to town and stayed at his house. On their last night in town, he convinced me to stay over too. The next morning, after they left, we

were folding up sleeping bags and he started touching me. I managed to stop him, and left his house. This was the last time he tried to mess with me. But for the next three years we still attended the same high school. Our classes overlapped. We still had all the same friends.

The story of the photograph-burning party stayed with me because it reminded me of when I wanted to destroy the person I used to be, to burn up the remnants of my past and start fresh. I wanted to become a healthy, whole person, the person I pretended I was most of the time. For a long time, I hated and feared the girl I had been at fourteen. I was afraid she would show up someday and ruin everything that was important to me. For so many years, I never talked about what had happened when I was fourteen. I was afraid if I told the people I loved, the people who loved me, what had happened, they would see me as the person I had been then. I believed this would drive them away from me.

Here is a photograph of me at fourteen: I'm laughing at the camera, standing outside in the grass. It's early autumn. I have a brand-new buzz cut. I'm wearing a bright green sweatshirt, his sweatshirt. He took the picture. I never had a copy of it, so I can't show it to you now. The image comes back to me as a surprise, a marker of a moment I'd forgotten: before the abuse started, back when he was still my best friend.

When I think of myself at that age, I feel fiercely protective. I remember this loudmouth shy-eyed kid, kind of a dyke but still figuring it out. I had just cut off all my hair; I was trying out being at home in myself.

When I was nineteen, the boy who abused me wrote me a letter explaining that all the awful things he did to me were part of his desperate attempt to be a "successful heterosexual man." (He identifies as queer now.) I'm not sure if he was asking me to absolve him for what he did. Part of me wants to cite examples here, give you a list to prove how awful it was. But I don't remember it as a list. I don't remember it as a narrative. It's a flash of many moments, lay-

ered on top of one another, without much order or sense. What he did to me, during the abuse and for years afterward, caused me pain and disgust and a deep sense of shame. It was all senseless, out of context, and it got all over me; I couldn't disentangle myself from the awfulness. I didn't understand it as, "what he did was terribly wrong, and it hurt me." There was no clear logic to how it lived in me: the terribly wrong and the hurt and me and him were all jumbled up together.

I didn't respond to his letter. But years later, I would write him a letter of my own: *I believe it's possible for people to change, and that you've changed in some ways. I hope you have people in your life who will support you but also be critical of you, who will hold you to standards of accountability. The best way you can show me that you've really changed is by respecting the following: (1) I don't want to see you. What this means: If you know I'm going to be somewhere, don't come. If we're in the same social situation—a party, a bar, whatever—it's your responsibility to leave. (2) I don't want to talk to you. Don't talk to me, or look at me like you expect me to talk to you. (3) I don't want you to ask people we both know, or friends of yours with whom I've interacted, for information about me.*

My letter would come later. When I received his, I was nineteen, mired in college activist work with another boy who'd assaulted me. He lent me Borges's *Labyrinths*, burned me a free-jazz Coltrane album. Then he persuaded me to sleep in his bed when I didn't have a place to stay. I woke up to his hand down my pants. I avoided his gaze for many years, through meetings of the white anti-racist group where we'd talk about building trust with each other, reaching out to other white students, accountability to people of color. Afterwards, I'd go home with the sweet girl I was dating and freeze up and shake while talking in her bed.

I joined a campus support group for survivors of sexual assault and abuse. There I started to realize that the considerable difficulty I had owning my experiences and integrating them into my sense of myself was not

due to some special personality defect, but was in fact a typical repercussion of trauma. I found that other survivors faced similar difficulties processing the abuse they had experienced. This was when I first began to use the term “survivor” to talk about myself. In the support group, I found comfort and solidarity, but I also had to sacrifice pieces of who I was to access the space. Statements were regularly exchanged about how we were all women and that made the space so safe, while I bit my lip and stared at my hands. It took me a full year after coming out as trans to tell the group. I didn’t think I could be there anymore if they knew I was a guy.

During college I was also a counselor on the sexual assault response team. I led workshops on consent and assault for new students. At any given moment in the cafeteria or at a party, I could typically point out at least four known perpetrators of sexual assault. But, all that time, it never felt possible to stand up to the people who had assaulted me. I never knew I could write a letter that said, *Stay the fuck away from me, stop smiling at me, and stop talking shit about me to my friends.* I never knew I could tell the boy who assaulted me in college that I couldn’t do organizing with him, that he needed to leave the white anti-racist group and stop coming to my friends’ parties. What I found in the survivors’ support group helped me feel less lonely and unstable, but it didn’t include a vision for transformation. None of the work I was doing at the time gave me the courage and momentum to challenge the world around me to become a place where survivors of abuse could live fully and wholly, and be believed and respected.

Just before I turned twenty, I lost my dad to cancer. I needed all the love and support I could get. For a while, I tried to just get over my abuse history and move on with my life. I had already lost so much community and connection solely because I was trying to avoid the boy who abused me in high school. I was sick of having to choose between protecting myself and seeing people I loved. I was sick of distancing myself from old friends because they were still friends with him. Some of them tried to talk to me about him, even arguing with me from his perspective, or at least as he told it: “He said he thinks you two were in love back then. You know, it’s hard for him to see you, too, especially when you ignore him.”

fast forward a year and a half. It was summer. I was at a picnic—a top surgery fundraiser in Prospect Park for a guy I barely knew. I’d come with a new, wonderful friend. I knew she went to college with the high school abuser but we never really talked about it. I just told her we had fucked up history and that I didn’t talk to him. I was having a good time. After the picnic, she and I were headed to a music festival at Coney Island. But then he showed up, the high school abuser, with other friends from high school, the ones I’d been keeping my distance from but really loved and missed and fuck it, I just wanted to be normal and so off we went on the subway to Coney Island, the whole group of us together. I was fine. I was fine. Except when we got there and started drinking, I freaked out and ran into a dirty sweetheart art punk that none of them knew and wandered off with him and we got Coronas in brown bags and drank them on the beach and I just kept saying, “I’m so glad I ran into you. I hate that boy I’m with.” He nodded with soft eyes. I never explained and he never asked. Then I met back up with the others, and we took the subway to a tiny, boring party and then left quickly again, because someone was driving—driving!—back out of the city and they could give us a ride home on the way. Except I was stuck in the backseat of the car, four across in a space made for three, and pushed up next to me was the high school abuser. His body against mine, I was suddenly flooded with memories of the abuse, how he used to force me to do things while his hands were all over the back of my neck. So that years later, it still makes my skin crawl sometimes when people touch me there.

A few years later, I moved to Philadelphia and started meeting people doing radical organizing around sexual assault, people whose visions of possibility were informed by this work. I joined a group called Philly’s Pissed, whose mission is to work against sexual assault in our communities by supporting survivors. There I found myself, every week, in meetings with people who had baseline politics and beliefs that lined up with my own: Part of healing

is taking back power that's been taken from you. The criminal justice system will not protect us or end the violence in our lives. People of all genders experience partner violence and sexual assault. Maybe most important of all, there were other trans people in the group. During this time, I experienced many things that might seem small but were actually hugely important. For example, I had friends and lovers who validated my sense of betrayal after the weekend home when a friend invited me to a bar without telling me the high school abuser would be there: "Wow, that's not okay. You don't have to see him. It doesn't have to be a secret. You might want to just tell a bunch of people at once. And you can ask them not to invite him to their parties."

When I'd done survivor support work and sexual assault education in the past, it had been with people with wildly variant political outlooks and personal investments. So it felt different to be doing this work with Philly's Pissed. I felt safe, alive, energized. These people really for real had my back, and not only because they loved me and saw how my past was destroying me, but also because they knew survivors of abuse and sexual assault need to be able to speak about their experiences and articulate what they need, with the knowledge that they will be believed and supported.

After years of keeping quiet, holding so many awful secrets, and being challenged by people I considered my friends when I did talk about the abuse, I had found a space where I could speak from my experiences of trauma and begin to extract wisdom from them. I have so much love for the few dear friends who held me and listened while I whispered memories during the worst years. But hours spent in their beds couldn't undo the rest of the world. In Philly's Pissed, we were doing the work of supporting survivors together, out of a collective vision of transforming our communities and ending sexual assault. For the first time, identifying as a survivor felt like a source of power, rather than a site of trauma.

This process of coming into collective power was how I came to finally write my own letter to the boy who abused me in high school. It took him three months to write back. In the interim I figured that was that; he was going to continue showing up in my life, over and over, sitting across the table

from me at some hipster bar, staring at me while I tried to talk to my friends, trying to talk to me, shifting around awkwardly when I didn't respond. All the while, my body shivered with so many flight-desires, so many fucked-up memories.

But even if he refused to change, I knew that in writing him I had shifted something forever. Now it was on the table. I had called him a perpetrator of rape and sexual assault; I had called him on his manipulative and abusive behavior. I didn't phrase it as an accusation, a confrontation; I just said it casually, a matter-of-fact accounting of our history and dynamic. Now I had some steady ground to speak from, if he showed up at a bar, at a party, in my friend's living room. Now I could say, "I asked you not to be here, I asked you to leave if you saw me." That kind of confrontation still terrified me, but I'd laid some groundwork to help myself no longer stay silent.

What's more, I knew if he didn't do what I asked, there were steps I could take. Working with Philly's Pissed to support other survivors had expanded my sense of the choices available to me. I took the process we used, which was to help survivors identify, step by step, what would increase their sense of safety and healing, and I began to apply it to myself. I could tell more of our mutual friends about his abusive behavior, and ask them to back me up in my desire not to share space with him. There was no guarantee they'd agree, but in asking I'd be honoring this belief I hold, somewhere deep in my heart, that I deserve to have a buffer from him, to never have to see him again, to feel safe, to be safe, to have control over my life. I was willing to tell people if I had to (deep breath), and to stand firm in my belief that we all deserve to fully inhabit our bodies and lives.

I knew he talked a lot of feminist and gender theory, and thought of himself as someone who would Never Do That Again (as he said in the first letter he wrote me). He knew what he'd done was deeply, deeply fucked, and he believed that he was different now, that he had changed. He seemed to want me to witness and confirm this change, and I wasn't going to do that. What I was willing to do was tell him the simple, small things he could do to stop hurting me. So I did. And after three months, he wrote back and said he would do the things I asked of him.

To build radical communities which really, truly support survivors of rape, abuse and sexual assault, it's necessary to describe the fear, shame and terror some of us go through, to make clear why it's so important to support, hear and believe survivors. To that end, I will tell you that the month I was writing the letter, I felt pretty crazy and scared much of the time. When I decided to write it, I thought, *Oh I've worked through that stuff, I'm solid now, I'm tough and I don't dream about it anymore and I don't choke every time someone says the word "blow job" and I can have fun, casual sex without being triggered and I can refer to being assaulted without instantly floating a million miles away and/or feeling insanely vulnerable*. Writing a letter to the boy who abused me in high school that told him to step out of my life was something I was certain I wanted to do, as soon as I realized it was something I could do. But the process of writing the letter brought me right back to being the scared vulnerable kid I thought I'd left behind years ago. I hurt myself for the first time in years, I got deep into panic and fear, I struggled a whole lot. What was it? It wasn't so much digging up memories, though there was a little of that. It was more that writing the letter made me confront every one of my fears about the high school abuser and the world as it related to my abuse history. I was afraid he would tell all our mutual friends and acquaintances I was a jerk; afraid they would think I was unreasonable, that I lacked compassion. I was afraid they wouldn't believe me about the abuse and rape (even though somewhere I had a letter from him where he admitted to it). I was also afraid that they would believe me—or rather, that if they did believe me, they'd forever see me as weak, vulnerable, damaged because of it. As a trans guy, I felt especially vulnerable about people learning that I'd been assaulted when I was a girl. Maybe it would confirm their fucked-up perception of transsexuals as damaged people who hate their bodies, or their theories that sexual abuse has made us trans.

Mostly, the fear boiled down to this: he was someone who had hurt me so deeply and messed with me so profoundly, who had coerced and manipulated me into staying quiet about the things he was doing, who cleverly and persistently took away so much of my power, my voice, my ability to nego-

tiate circumstances for myself. Although it was seven years since he'd laid hands on me, I still couldn't rid myself of the sense that he had an enormous amount of power in my life. I was afraid to challenge him and was deeply, irrationally terrified that he could somehow destroy me, destroy the beautiful and good life I had made for myself. In some ways, he did have a lot of power: a rich, white, non-trans boy in a world that, by and large, doesn't believe survivors, dehumanizes trans people, and ignores the existence of survivors who are boys. So in some ways, my fear was not at all irrational. But I had brilliant, visionary people on my side, people who loved me and people who had my back because they believed in self-determination for survivors and everyone else. What's more, I knew writing to him was a small but necessary part of creating a world that believes and supports survivors and trans people, and, moreover, a world that also believes and supports survivors who are trans and/or gender nonconforming.

Working with Philly's Pissed to support survivors, and seizing back power from the boy who abused me in high school both opened up new space in my life and new possibilities for how I could relate to my past. I feel lucky I was able to get him to step out of my life a little—lucky, only because I know so many survivors don't ever get that space, not because it's such a huge thing to ask. In the end, he didn't stick to his promise. Just over a year later, he showed up in my life and space again and broke other parts of our agreement, too. But as difficult as it was to deal with his reappearance, drawing lines and making demands had irrevocably changed my power in the situation. I'm no longer afraid of what he'll do to me if I tell people how he abused me ten years ago. For years, I had to choose whether to stay numb, hovering above my body, in order to keep old friends, or to fully remember and honor my past and create a new, unrelated life. I went back and forth between these two options, the either/or, but part of writing him that letter was refusing to be the one who was pushed out. I want to be part of the transformation of our communities into places that support survivors in speaking the truth and taking up space, because we shouldn't be the ones who always have to leave. I'm working to re-member and reintegrate parts of myself I sequestered away for so long. These

pieces of my personal history are no longer just sites of pain and vulnerability, but together form a foundation for a powerful wisdom that I've built with other people working to end sexual assault. I want to keep building this wisdom together, transforming the trauma that keeps us isolated into collective resistance.