

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Rhetoric and Rape

Dr. Rosa Maria Pegueros · Thursday, November 1st, 2012

Conservative politicians Todd Akin's and Richard Mourdock's recent statements about rape affected me more than most of the rhetoric of the anti-choice movement. They managed, through their ignorance and heartlessness, to get under the guard under which I keep my heart and the stone under which I hide the rape I suffered 44 years ago.



When I was 17, I was raped by a storekeeper in a shop I wandered into. I had never met him; I had never been in the shop. I had just graduated from high school; I was slender, comely, and completely unsuspecting. I had never seen an erection. I had never seen a naked man. The closest I had come to that was seeing my baby brother when I changed his diapers. Yes, it was 1968, the summer of love in San Francisco, but I came from a very sheltered background. Sex education at my Catholic high school did not include pictures.

After I broke away from him, leaving behind my purse and books, I ran as far as my legs would carry me. After stopping for breath I realized that I did not have my purse or my bus pass, so I walked the two miles home, slipping into my house using the hidden key near the front door. I went directly to the bathroom and showered for a very long time, trying to wash that man's stink off of me. Even with the loofa, I could not scrub hard enough to wash it away. When I emerged, my mother was wondering why I had rushed into the bathroom. I told her I had lost my purse and had to walk home, and that I was so sweaty and sticky, I had to shower. It was all true but that was all I could tell her.

Nor did I tell the police. In those days, before rape crisis centers, police rape kits, and laws that recognized the victimization of women who had been raped, telling the police would have subjected me to an interrogation assuming that I, not the rapist, had done something wrong. Moreover, telling anyone in my extremely conservative household would have been an admission of guilt. Girls were assumed to say no when they really meant yes.

For the rest of that summer, I cowered in terror, waiting, first, to see if I was pregnant. There were no pregnancy kits then. I passed long, sleepless nights, wondering what I would do if I was pregnant: Would I present myself at St. Elizabeth's Home for Unwed Mothers, which was conveniently located across the street from my high school? Would I run away? What would I do with a baby? I was supposed to start college that autumn: What would happen to my education? I would fall asleep only to wake up in a cold sweat to the imagined screams of a baby crying. Abortion was not an option. It was illegal then, in the days before *Roe v. Wade*, and at my Catholic high school, I had never heard of it in any case. I had never even heard of miscarriage. If I was pregnant, the only question was, would I have it and keep it, or give it up for adoption? The rapist's

baby. Would I love it? How could I love it?

June passed into July and my period came but my second fear took up my psyche: What if he'd given me a venereal disease? It could take a long time to manifest itself. I worried continually; I checked myself obsessively for sores. I wondered where I could get a test. What if he'd given me syphilis?

I was tense and scared half out of my mind that summer before my freshman year in college. I told no one about what had happened, and as time passed, I buried it deeper and deeper in my consciousness, unaware of the other fears it had awoken.

For almost fifteen years, I kept it hidden. During that period, I married and I bore a daughter. After the joy I felt at learning that I was going to bear a daughter, the fear reared its ugly head: What if someone rapes her? I beat it down: I would protect her; I would make sure that she could always confide in me. For a while, it went away; I had never even told my husband about the rape.

Then I became involved in the women's movement. During my initiation, I joined a weekend women's consciousness-raising group. When I learned that they were going to discuss rape the next day, I nearly refused to go back. I lay awake that night, thinking of excuses I could give for not returning. The day dawned and I resolved to go but to remain quiet. When the session began, each woman told of her experience with rape. Out of fifteen women, twelve had been raped; two, by their father or grandfather. All of them were older than I was, so they had suffered through the same kinds of experiences with their parents and a patriarchal society. When my turn came, nothing would come out of my mouth. I sat and wept, sobbing silently. Finally, I began to talk, choking on the words I had kept bottled up for fifteen years.

Todd Akin, Richard Mourdock, and the rest of those callous, patriarchal politicians do not understand or give a damn about the lives of women. They cannot imagine the constant threat under which women navigate the world. They cannot imagine having always to be on alert. They lack empathy and they portray themselves as protectors of life when they are really monsters of control, and protectors of men's control of women's bodies. They are always ready with statistics of "babies murdered," as they describe abortion, but they have no clue how many women have been raped, molested, or suffered at the hands of incestuous fathers, grandfathers, and brothers.

The right-to-life movement has become a furious backlash against the control women have taken over our own lives. Some deluded women may think that those men will protect them; most of us know they will not.

Todd Akin, Richard Mourdock, and the rest of the anti-choice legislators must be voted out of office and sent back to the caves they came from. My heart goes out to the women whose lives they control. They continue to live in the nightmare that I lived in when I was young. They deserve better.

Photo: The author at age 17.

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