**I Don't Belong to Myself**

When I started this project, I promised myself I'd be honest, but what I have to tell next is embarrassing and humiliating. It is difficult not to feel guilt and personal responsibility for the sexual relationships and casual meetings that seemed to keep occurring over and over.

*A significant factor in Geri’s healing process is her decision (finally) to be honest. I applaud her strength and courage in doing so.*

Breakfast with Philip this morning, a long-time friend from grad school, reminded me of the challenge it is for me to write about this part of the story. He wasn't just a friend. He was the longest and last chapter in a whole book of chapters, some of them very short—one night—and others a bit longer. I wouldn’t call Philip a lover because I had no real love for him, but he was the last casual partner I allowed into my life.

It was after the rape incident that I began to accept the fact that I had no other value than sexual, at least to men. It became clear to me that if men asked, I would say yes without thinking. It wasn't that I wanted to say yes. I didn’t believe I had the right to say no. I always felt a kind of sickening dread in my stomach that saying yes, while scary, was inevitable. It became a long, miserable pattern and confirmed again and again that I was amoral and wicked—just like my father had said I was. Part of that pattern may have been cultural, too, because where we lived, women really had few rights. However, I had been brought up to understand what "nice" girls did and did not do. I was not a nice girl.

*This is a huge dynamic that plays out over and over when sexual abuse has occurred. This is especially common when the abuse starts at an early age, is progressive in frequency and violation, and is sustained over time. Obviously, it is compounded by the secrecy factor. The victim of abuse loses her sense of self. She literally has no voice. As Geri says, she didn’t want to say yes, but there was not the strength of core self to assertively say no. She truly had the sense she didn’t own her own body, so she didn’t feel she had the right to say no since, in her mind, her body didn’t belong to her. It set up the self-fulfilling prophecy in her belief system that she was indeed “amoral and wicked”. When she believed that, consequences followed. She felt she had no value other than as a sexual object. Sexual abuse frequently makes victims feel like “damaged goods,” which often leads to either promiscuity or the acceptance of multiple sexual partners as inevitable.*

There were a few times I tried to get help. I remember one incident after I had been released from the hospital the first time. I had been dragged there by friends and a therapist who'd determined I was suicidal. Some weeks after my release, I was asked to pick up a visiting pianist from the airport. I was to invite Robert to dinner and get him to his hotel. At dinner, he began to drink, ordering bottle after bottle of Soave Bolla. Since even one glass of wine gives me migraines, I was taking the smallest of sips. Robert soon began reaching under the table for my legs. I became alarmed and excused myself to use the pay phone. I called my therapist, but his wife said he was ill and couldn't come to the phone. I hung up the phone and walked slowly back to the table, knowing that I was in trouble. A kind of weariness came over me, a hopelessness and a sense that I already knew how the evening would end.

When we got to the hotel, it was clear to me that he could not make it up to his room on his own. There were no bellboys to help. As a matter of fact, there are no bellboys in our whole rural town. I grabbed his suit hanger and arm while he tried to manage a small suitcase, and we rode the elevator to the fifth floor. I unlocked the door and pushed him in. Then, stepping in myself, I hung up his suit and turned to leave. But I couldn't leave. He blocked the door, grabbed me, and pushed me over on the bed two steps away. He began pulling my clothes off. I don't remember exactly what happened after that, or how it was that he raped me, but I'm sure that I did not fight back much. I just know that, as usual, I was numb, physically and emotionally.

When I got back to the lobby, I called a friend who asked me if I wanted to go to the hospital. I said no and went home. After I'd showered and felt a bit more settled, I called my friend again. She asked me again if I wanted to go to the hospital. I didn't. What would I say? How could I say that I "let someone rape me?" I mean, that doesn't sound like rape, does it? No, I would hope and pray I wasn't pregnant and try to pretend that everything was okay. I felt separated from a body that I could not seem to protect. What was wrong with me, I asked myself for the millionth time?

*The compounding shame from traumatic experiences becomes highly toxic and feeds the paralysis that perpetuates the cycle.*

The next day, I told a close friend (a member on the Arts Board) what had happened and made her promise not to leave me that night until Robert was safely in his hotel room. As we walked down the aisle to our seats for his concert that night, I said, "Well, I could rate his performance right now, before he ever plays a note!" I thought my friend was going to collapse on the spot! Of course, it wasn't true. I had no idea about his "performance." As usual, I hadn't remembered anything except realizing I had to get my clothes back on.

Later that week, in therapy, my crazy therapist was elated. This, apparently, was exactly what he'd hoped for. Huh? Somehow, he saw this rape as therapeutic. I tried to see this as the happy event he did, but it felt all wrong to me. Instead, I just felt more miserable and petrified for the next time. I couldn't convince him that what I wanted, what I needed, were ways to ensure I was safe, ways to tell the next person "No," so that it could not be mistaken for anything else.

That same therapist, Mark, had obliquely mentioned that he could arrange for me to “meet someone” in a hotel sometime. I always pretended that I didn’t know what he was talking about. Like my father who was showing me “love,” this man said he was going to help me by using sex.

*Her therapist’s inappropriate and incompetent response is inexcusable. Harm was done by this therapist. This therapist’s license to practice had already been terminated, and he had moved from the state by the time Geri came to me. Otherwise, I would have reported him to the state licensure board. It is tragic that some therapists do not know how to define “harm”. Unfortunately, some therapists have their own unmet needs and use clients as a way of meeting them. There were not many therapeutic choices in our community when Geri first began therapy. Additionally, vulnerable clients have a much harder time being assertive with authority figures so are more likely to fall prey to predator type therapists.*

Yes, there were next times. It began to matter less and less. At least, that's what I told myself. I imagined that since I didn't really believe I had the rights to myself, it didn't matter what anyone wanted or did. I believed that I was stumbling through the world with Hawthorne’s scarlet letter on my forehead. There had to be a reason for the numerous encounters that eventually included women, too. I was so confused, sometimes wondering if I were a lesbian or just so separated from myself that I would never learn who I really was.

As I said, Philip was the last one. I would like to think that he was the last because I learned what I needed to learn—that I do have the right to my own body and I *can* say no. But. I'm not really sure about that. I do know that during this time, my spiritual development, my sense of God in my life, and my commitment to maintaining that sense of His presence was a source of great strength to me.

*Geri’s spiritual development is a helpful resource and another significant factor in her ability to heal. I think this is true on a number of levels, one being that she began experiencing redemption for the first time in her life because of the reassurances of her pastor and friends over time. She had the desire to know God, and she seemed to feel deserving of His presence. This strengthened her in assertively using her voice.*

When I told Philip I couldn't handle the dichotomy of what I believed to be true for me morally with what I was doing, he said he understood.

*This was clearly a positive move for Geri, and, thank God, Philip didn’t push it.*

I guess I had always felt obliged to have sex with him because, somehow, I felt he deserved this "payment" from me for not always pulling my weight in the translation exercise we were doing together for a graduate class.

The whole issue of belonging to myself felt like a puzzle that couldn’t be put back together because I kept trying to give away, again and again, the same pieces my father stole.