

Why I didn't report

This man picked a very good moment to remind me of his power.

October 19, 2016

The author's name is withheld at her request. —Ed.

One sliver of not-horrible that has resulted from Donald Trump's words about being a "star" who can violate women without penalty: some women who have been violated are now sufficiently angry to speak. [#WhyIDidntReport](#) has emerged as an effort to support women who have been afraid to report, among other things, workplace-related assault and harassment—and to help others understand the complicated dynamics of power and intimidation at play.

I was at a professional meeting, having dinner at a convivial restaurant to honor a senior scholar. There was one man at the table I wanted to avoid. He had been backhandedly undermining my work for years. Using the buddy system, I asked a good friend to sit next to me. But when I came back from the restroom, everyone had shifted chairs, to facilitate more conversation. The only empty chair was next to this man.

I wish I had left the restaurant then. I should have risked the considerable awkwardness and come up with some excuse to leave. Instead I sat down, trying to appear composed.

In the middle of conversation, this man reached his hand over behind my butt and brazenly groped me. It was under the table. No one noticed a thing. Except that a minute later I stood up, visibly weeping, picked up my coat from my original chair, and left—making a scene that no doubt seemed like a case of hysterical female.

For the next week, I tearfully went over every detail in my mind, stuck in a loop of the wrong questions. Had I somehow conveyed that I was interested in his advances? Should I not have been wearing the outfit I was wearing? Did he think I was "the kind of woman" who has sex with men at professional conferences? What

had he heard about me that made him think this was okay?

A good friend halted my spiral of stupid. This was not about sex, his interest in me or my body. It was an act of power—of intimidation. He did this to remind me, and perhaps himself, that he has power over me. He could do whatever he wanted, because he knew I wouldn't report him. His connections and status meant that no one would believe me. I would look crazy; he would make sure of that. After all, he is a star—above the fray, stratospheric.

I told a few other friends. Their responses were complicated. People filter this kind of news through their own experiences of intimidation or lack thereof. Two good friends reminded me repeatedly that I did nothing wrong. I have many young women under my care, and I never would have said the things to them that I was saying to myself. I never would have even begun to blame them for what happened. I tried to say to myself what I would want any of my beloved students to hear.

Other responses were less helpful. One fierce, beloved woman said I should have reached over and grabbed him on the crotch. For weeks she insisted that this is what *she* would have done. But later she said she realized that she often finds herself avoiding conflict when men in her workplace try to dominate her verbally. It's hard to know what you will do in the moment if someone with power over you uses that power to make you feel shame.

A wise, older friend told me I needed to take assertiveness training. But trying to avoid a sexual predator is like trying to avoid an assassin. It is absurd to suggest that someone who has been violated in this way could have avoided the assault by being trained. All the karate lessons in the world could not have prepared me fully. Nor can I imagine a scenario in which I stand up, amid a table of happy people, and announce that this man just grabbed my ass. He picked a very good moment to remind me of his power.

And while someone can tell you all day long not to be cowed by a bully, bullying works. Less than a year later, I went to this man's institution to give a lecture. I was so nervous he would show up that I sounded like a mouse. I spoke like someone who is afraid, because I was afraid. Only halfway through did I begin to relax and enter back into my own skin, and find again my own voice.

Here is what I did do. Women around me suggested that telling at least two men would help, should this man continue to harass me. So I told two men in my

profession who know both of us and can, if necessary, corroborate that I reported this assault to them. And, thank God, both men believed me. They are very different from each other, but they both recognized this as an act of intimidation.

I am not reporting this assault to my professional organization, even though I worked hard to make sure this organization takes this kind of problem seriously. I am not reporting, because I do not have a Wonder Woman rope to lasso this star and pull him back down to the earth. I have been through too much.

But please know that many women go around not talking about what has happened to them. Many of us are polished and successful and courageous for the sake of other people we care about. And the men who use their hands and words to remind the universe that they have power over women—they come in all sorts of hairstyles and political affiliations. I do affirm that the God who created the universe is angry on my behalf. I affirm that the God who set the actual stars in the heavens also knows every hair on my head, and created my body to be beloved, never violated. I affirm this daily, like morning coffee, and pray for new ways to be brave.