

Racism, sexual predators, and my experiences with both

## **I've re-watched the footage of Anita Hill.**

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Anita Hill testifies before Congress on October 11, 1991, during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings for Supreme Court. Photo by Rob Crandall / Shutterstock.com.

Ever since Christine Blasey Ford's account of an assault by Brett Kavanaugh was published in the *Washington Post* on September 16, the news has been a barrage of #MeToo stories, many of them buried for decades. As a survivor myself, I feel both exhausted and exhilarated. Exhausted to be exposed to so much deep pain. Exhilarated at the prospect of justice being served to a prospective Justice.

I'm a Presbyterian pastor living in the Washington, D.C., area. I have all the credentials of a bleeding-heart liberal. Just yesterday I listened to public radio as I drove my fuel-efficient car to attend a workshop called "Whiteness and Privilege." Our presbytery meeting began with a prayer of confession: we confess that systemic

racism exists, and that this systemic racism is the operative ideology of white supremacy. The preacher was Catherine Meeks, an African American woman who runs the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. A black gospel choir led us in singing. *Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.*

I understand that I am afflicted by racism, as we all are. I sincerely want to disrupt the systemic racism that is part of our culture. But other thoughts tumble through my head as well. Sexual assault, which flows from systemic misogyny, is a sin that's endemic to our culture, too—and for me, the two subjects are uncomfortably linked.

Sexual assault is about the abuse of power. Racism is also about the abuse of power. Separate sins springing from similar sources. Each demands the response of justice. But it's my history that links them most profoundly, most emotionally. I was raped by a black man, and that history colors how I hear the news.

I am a white woman who was raped by a black stranger, an intruder who broke into my home and pressed his gun against my body as I sat up in bed.

I know this story is the stuff of urban legend, the cautionary tale white people use to keep people of color in their places.

I know that a white woman's cry of "rape!" was often used as justification for lynching. I read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I know that our criminal justice system is broken, that black men are incarcerated at a disproportionately high rate. I read Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*.

But I also know what I lived. Two rapists targeted my friends and me because of our skin color. They were serial criminals. During their spree of more than a year they only preyed upon homes where white people lived. In my memoir, *Ruined*, [I told the story of that trauma and the faith journey that followed](#). I tried to unpack my sense of shame, and that ephemeral thing we call spiritual healing. For me, one key to that healing was joining a multi-ethnic worshipping community. My cure was gospel music. Many times I'm overwhelmed with emotion while singing gospel music, as I was at the event on race and privilege.

This past week I re-watched the footage of Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas. It's hard to be reminded that there's someone I believe to be a sexual

predator on the highest court of our land. Does the fact that he is African American make that less egregious? Of course not.

I well remember the news coverage in 1991. I celebrated my first anniversary of ordination on October 10. Hill began her testimony on October 11. I was riveted to the television, stunned by the visual. Hill sat at a table, a lone African American woman in front of an all-male Senate Judiciary Committee. She was calm when she spoke into the microphone, bravely using words not usually spoken in such chambers.

Her courage inspired me. At the time [I was an associate pastor being sexually harassed by my senior pastor](#). I watched Hill avidly because I wanted to see if her testimony would matter. What happened, of course, was that Clarence Thomas was confirmed, 52-48.

That legacy stretches over the current proceedings like a shadow. We wonder whether our culture has changed in 27 years. We compare and contrast the stories. In the Thomas-Hill case the conflicting accounts of sexual harassment came from the mouths of two African Americans. In contention was the seat vacated by Thurgood Marshall, a towering figure in racial justice. In the Kavanaugh-Ford case the conflicting accounts of sexual assault come from the mouths of two white people. Does skin color matter? If so, how?

Like all of us, I read (and try not to keep reading) about Brett Kavanaugh, Christine Blasey Ford, Anita Hill, and Clarence Thomas. I take some satisfaction seeing a picture of Bill Cosby in handcuffs—the man who made us laugh, starred in Jell-O commercials, and also drugged women and sexually assaulted their limp bodies.

I hum the closing strains of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” And as always, I feel the weight of my own history.

I say this in a spirit of confession, both kinds of confession. I confess that I am part of systemic racism which I do not disrupt as I must. I also acknowledge that I have been guilty of a visceral kind of race-aversion in the past. So I approach the throne for pardon. I also approach to ask what I’m to do with this history that will never not be mine. God is calling me to some next step. But what?

I also confess what I believe. I confess that I love Jesus Christ and have pledged to follow him. Jesus is the brother of us all, which is not a matter of melanin. I believe that. May I learn to put flesh and skin on that belief.