

Women and Not-So-Much Power

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Lately, it seems like I've been starting most journal entries with: "Today was". Well, I don't know what today was. Today was strange and unsettling, for starters. Not only did I wake up at 5:30a after going to bed at my usual time, but I'm in my trauma space right now and I can't get ahold of John (who is on the ship). It hurts but is probably better for self-questioning.

Last night, I began a book called *Women in Power* by Mary Beard. I thought it would be, well, empowering, especially before bed, but I was very wrong. The first section, which I got about halfway through before I had to put it down, is on the oppression of women and how men have, for thousands of years, kept women silent, professionally and physically. The book provides documentation of these practices all the way back to Greco-Roman times. It hit hard in so many ways: abusive or narcissistic exes, the music industry, passing comments and sexist evaluations of who I am and who we—women—are as a sex, and as a gender for those who identify as female regardless of sex. It hurt because it resonated with me.

Following that, I started the morning chatting with a fellow resident, D., who I've come to admire and almost trust. I asked if she had read the book (no—but others by the same author), and we started a conversation about woman-ness. I told her that the book made me think of her, because her writing is about being an "interracialness" in America, and I said that her perspective as a mixed woman would add even more telling layers to the already-disturbing narrative of the book. She laughed and said, "well, that's a whole other thing." The innocent start to this conversation turned into a significantly heavier session of story sharing, especially about harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Long story short, I shared everything about my last major workplace upheaval regarding a colleague who sexually harassed me (and triggered me in many ways). My superior in that workplace urged me to file a harassment report, as she was harassed by the same man. I filed the report; it was dismissed as petty. After I relayed the whole saga, I confessed to her: "It was the final straw. It's been six years of this bullshit and I don't think that I can take much more. I think I need to quit my job." To my surprise, her reply to all of that was, "Well, if it keeps happening to you, then it's your fault. You have to bully them back! Be more assertive! That's men's language!"

Her response left me shocked to silence. Glassy eyed, I thanked her for listening and left the breakfast table.

I realized that I haven't heard the phrase "it's your fault" in quite some time, as I choose my inner circle very carefully.

I proceeded to go about my day, which included sending a bunch of cathartic self-blaming text messages to John:

I just realized something. The [colleague] shit is all my fault. I didn't advocate for myself enough. I didn't put my foot down hard enough. I didn't stand up for myself and be brave to accept that I might lose my job

And now I'm just going to be an eternal doormat to [Agent]

I'm so frustrated

And I can't go back now and say yeah! When you locked me in your car, that fucked me up! And November through February my anxiety was through the roof! And I'm suing you for emotional distress and [colleague] for defamation of character!*

Fuck me

I have never had a backbone with predators/assholes...that's why I have no legal cases going to get a restraining order or protection after all that bad shit happened starting in high school

I feel so ashamed :(

I angry-freaked out (at myself) for awhile, and then decided that I couldn't do any work today because I am too distracted. (The only people here who have disturbed my work to this extent are two older women who I think want me to hurt as much as they had to, except that we're in a newer era of conversation and change that I happen to be experience for the first time because it *is* so new. Disturbing.)

Later on, R., (resident) and I had a good conversation about gender, generational difference and passive aggression. They (R.) were very sad and angry today about people's expectations of gender and they were frustrated that when they present in a feminine way, people tend to look at them strangely and avoid them. They made a terribly self-deprecating joke at dinner the other night while they were feminine-presenting and tonight I asked if they meant that as a joke. *See? I chose the right side of the table. I hate sitting by strangers, and nobody wants to sit with me when I'm dressed like this!* They responded to my inquiry with a deep sigh. "No, Cassandra, that wasn't actually a joke."

R. listened to me I spoke about what I call my "softening" process. After six years in entertainment, I've tried to shed some of my more masculine qualities and find a balance between the genders, neither of which I really identify. R. said that they had their own experiences like that as they settled into a more feminine gender identity as well.

I lamented that after years of trying to "unharden" everything I had to make masculine to fit into the entertainment business (my speech, the extent to which I cuss, my search for meaningless sex, my attire, my body language, even the choice of whiskey as my drink of choice) on a quest for openness, kindness, and empathy in my own heart, as well as re-finding *who I really am* (which I think is a person who is abundantly loving, perhaps to a fault?, empathetic, and very sensitive—qualities I pegged as weak ones for a long time)—that I was sitting across from another woman who was still blaming me—a victim of male aggression and subversion—and as someone who hopes for a workplace where I don't have to bully or aggress anyone. Is my desire to love and *just be good at my job* while coexisting respectfully and peacefully with my peers a "wrong" way of thinking, personally, or professionally?

I'd like to think not.

Back to Mary Beard.

I kind of brought the whole night/following day full circle as I finished section 1 of *Women in Power* with this passage in reference to cultural priority being given to the male voice over the female:

Ironically, the well-meaning solution often recommended when women are on the receiving end of this stuff turns out to bring about the very result abusers want: namely, their silence. 'Don't call the abusers out. Don't give them any attention; that's what they want. Just keep mum and "block" them,' you're told. It is an uncanny reprise of the old advice to women to 'put up and shut up', and it risks leaving the bullies in unchallenged occupation of the playground. (Bard 38)

Funny things about the work situation that D. reprimanded me about:

- 1) My agent's female business partner, who I clued into my plans to submit a sexual harassment report initially told me not to do so, and mentioned afterward that women in her generation dealt with this kind of a thing all the time, with a sort of verbal pat on the back that came out as "but it's good that your generation is making changes."
- 2) I did file the report
- 3) The report was not kept anonymous, as promised by my agents
- 4) The report was dismissed; I still had to work with the harasser

Conclusions about the work situation that D. reprimanded me about:

- 1) I beat myself up all day today for not filing reports against other perpetrators from my past
- 2) And yet, another women told me I was not aggressive enough and if I bullied these men back I would gain their respect
- 3) There is no pro-woman way to address harassment or rape, as far as I can tell
 - 3a) This intuitive response is probably why I have failed to report most sexually aggressive incidents in my life; the few I have reported have been brushed off, heckled, or insulted. I am either too loud or too quiet. Clearly I have not found the recipe for success.

**This colleague spread rumors about me after our second (forced) contract together*