PREY TELL
WHY WE SILENCE WOMEN WHO TELL THE TRUTH AND HOW EVERYONE CAN SPEAK UP
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PART 1

WHY WE SILENCE WOMEN WHO TELL THE TRUTH
The problem has never been the ways that victims don’t tell, so much as it has been that some victims aren’t seen as valuable to protect.

—MIKKI KENDALL, HOOD FEMINISM
EVERYTHING IS JUST FINE

There he was, ten feet in front of me in broad daylight. There was no mistaking him for someone else. To my advantage, I spotted him from behind the tinted windows of my car, where he couldn’t see me, yet I could watch him. Of course, I knew the day would come when our paths would cross, but I never guessed it would happen without him ever knowing.

Truth be told, up to that point I feared his presence so severely that I avoided his local haunts and had been successful in maintaining my distance. Yet there he was. With a pounding heart and shaking hands, I held my breath and clenched the steering wheel as he crossed the street in front of me. As he passed, one step in front of the other, the most remarkable thing happened—I survived. Time froze so I could be afforded a moment to realize that his hold over me was gone. Before he vanished from sight, I whispered, “I won’t give you power over me. Not anymore.”

I found it terribly odd that, the very same day I saw that man walking down the street when I sat crouched in my car, I had read a lengthy piece about a publicly beloved man’s
untoward actions behind closed doors. Women who had previously worked for the well-known icon disclosed stories that painted him in an unfavorable light in the country’s most distinguished newspaper. Their stories reminded me that my own story was not to be despised but rather to be honored for how it had given me a deep commitment to justice, truth telling, and accountability. Yet for me, the penny was still in the air: That man on the street, by the looks of it, was going to get away with all he had done with zero ramifications or consequences. It seemed as though he had won—and I had lost more than I would have ever dreamed. He held the power; I did not.

You see, for the majority of my life I had made it my mission to keep men who held power in my life pleased with me, to stay on their good side, and to do as I was told. I played by their rules and hardly questioned their authority. Every boss I’ve ever had, except for one (thank you to the beautiful Korean woman who managed the Quiksilver outlet), has been a well-resourced white man. Every pastor I’ve ever had, including my grandfather, has been a white man. On top of that, in nearly every setting I grew up in, I was the only minority, the token brown girl in a sea of snow white. My nickname in high school, printed on the back of my cheer sweatshirt and cat-called through the halls, I kid you not, was “brown girl.” As an agreeable, conflict-avoidant woman of color, rather than voice any concern when I spotted discrepancies or experienced othering, I mastered silencing my own voice in order to be of value to the world around me, especially to the men who employed or pastored me. This is what postcolonial theorist and Columbia University professor Gayatri Spivak describes when minorities, in an effort to have power, contort themselves to manifest it in a way that is recognizable and acceptable to those who ultimately hold it. ¹ I could fit your definition of acceptable to ensure you felt comfortable with my presence.
As an adopted girl from East India raised in a rural white community with white parents and male siblings, I never thought to question the hierarchy, as I was conditioned to believe that the world was ordered for men of means to hold power and for people like me, those who didn’t fit the order, to fall in line and take whatever scraps were given to us. This implicit belief was reinforced in textbooks, in movies, by the government, at hourly wage jobs, from the pulpit, and even on notoriously racist billboards along the highway. Women were second to men, and minority women sat at the end of the line. Men set the rules, defined their meaning, and enforced said rules. Growing up, I wish I’d known of the strides women had made worldwide to be recognized as equals, to be seen as dignified and worthy of respect—how women marched, lobbied, and fought against patriarchal practices in the halls of power that demeaned, silenced, and slandered them. I wonder if I would have gleaned from their strength and stories, believing that another way was possible: one where women, even marginalized, minority women, have a place that is not inferior but necessary.

Even if I did learn of Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Savitribai Phule, the Grimké sisters, or Sojourner Truth, it was hard to believe that equality was possible when one of my earliest, most terrifying memories was playing in the yard of the neighbor girl’s house when her dad, with a shotgun in tow, screamed at me to get off of his lawn and “go back to where you came from.” I heard him loud and clear and ran as quickly as my little legs could carry me through their field, across the street, and up my driveway, straight into my house, where I hid in my room. I was seven. The very next day at school, my friend said nothing of the encounter between her dad and me. She never spoke of it, and neither did I. I, as a young brown girl, was inferior, and that white man, forty years my senior, with
his shiny black gun, was superior. I would not be convinced otherwise.

After I graduated from high school, my understanding of a woman’s place in the world expanded as my grip on justice tightened, but I still held to this conscious, and subconscious, belief that if I held even a shred of power, it was because someone with privilege (in my case, white male privilege) had given it me. Many of my pastors, bosses, teachers, and mentors, to their credit, were outrageously gracious, kind, and generous. To them I owe so much. They believed in women, married strong women, and gave me opportunities I would have never had otherwise; however, they still remained in charge of women. Many of them treated that power with the utmost respect; others abused it beyond what I could have ever imagined.

Like many other women, I’ve made excuses for the men in my world. *He didn’t mean it like that. That wasn’t his intent. He’s a good guy. I’m sure he has my best interest at heart. He is the one God chose to lead me. He sees the whole picture. He knows change takes time. He means well, but boys will be boys.* I made excuses until I couldn’t. Until my convictions outweighed my loyalty.

**Faux Egalitarianism**

From the first moment we meet him, we know he is different. We can’t help instantly liking him as he comes in for a tight handshake, one hand in ours and the other nestling our elbow. A smile spans ear to ear. In a world where women are ushered to the back seat, ignored, or hired as a token of inclusivity, it’s a surprise to meet someone who enthusiastically welcomes women as equals. His presence is refreshing, and his charm, palpable. Even better, we never went looking for a boss/coach/mentor/pastor like him. He found us. He tells us
how humbled he is that we would entertain the opportunity of serving him.

As we get to know him, he asks questions about our personal story. He’s caring and fascinated about how we have collected the life experience we have. He might ask about our family or if we are dating anyone. You know, normal get-to-know-you stuff, we tell ourselves. Even though he probes into our personal life, he makes us feel like he cares about knowing us beyond our skill sets, gifts, connections, and references. With everything he says, every question and comment, we feel more and more at ease. Free to be our honest self: not a woman attempting to fill a man’s place in the world, but a woman with skills, passions, and knowledge to excel. He doesn’t seem aloof or out of touch with how the world treats women in the workplace, in politics, in sports, in entertainment, in education, or in the church. He condemns those who do not treat women as equals, and he’s the kind of man with power and privilege we dream of, one who will use it to advance the place of women—or so we think.

Right out of the gate, he makes it clear to those around him that we are capable, worthy of respect. A force for good and a welcomed asset in his life. He gives us opportunities that we are shocked to receive and take ever so seriously. If he ever receives pushback from others over our place in his orbit, he defends us. His commitment to a woman’s place in the system is more than theory. He knows what we are capable of and pushes us to be the best version of ourselves. He makes time for conversations that always crescendo with encouragement of the woman we are becoming. He does everything in his power to advance our trajectory in the world. We are in a perpetual state of fangirl joy as his personal warmth relentlessly matches his public praise of us.

Perhaps another perk of serving, working, or partnering with him: he regularly asks for our opinion on what could be different. It isn’t unusual for him to ask for feedback, and
Why We Silence Women Who Tell the Truth

together we collaborate on improving the system we are in. There are only a handful who are privileged enough to be asked what they think, and we are honored to be among them.

Referring to the men in his world, he mentions that they don’t get him like we do. They’ve been around forever and are set in their ways. He needs us to get where he wants to go, and we understand what it takes. He convinces us that we have a special connection with him that is unlike other connections with the men and women in his life. He tells us that together we can move the needle; we know how to do it, and we have what it takes.

Truthfully, we admit, he is everything we want to be. Relentlessly creative, sharp, successful, a visionary, and appearing to dignify the existence of everyone he meets. He doesn’t present himself as untouchable but comes across as a man interested in the well-being of others. His approach becomes the gold standard for us. He seems to care for everyone he meets—he memorizes names, recalls complex details of someone’s personal story, and checks in on a regular basis. He positions himself as not only a boss, coach, professor, or spiritual leader, but also a mentor and promoter. He introduces us to people with power as if we are their equal and praises our accomplishments in front of strangers. Anytime we are around him, we feel proud to be associated with him. Everyone’s ways are antiquated, but not his. He understands the power of a smart woman, and by his own admittance, he lets her run free. He is the champion that every woman pursuing equality hopes for.

We hardly question his investment in us. We give him the benefit of the doubt and feel no inkling to question his motives. We, along with the others he’s convinced of his persona, believe in him, his upright character, and his rapidly growing vision for us.

Even if some of his comments make us feel sick to our stomach. Like when he says,
• “We really need a female perspective to round things out here.”
• “No one would listen to you if you weren’t so beautiful.”
• “You’re my proud diversity hire.”
• “Wow, you look stunning in that dress.”
• “Girlie, you get it. I know you hear me.”
• “Teach these old guys something new, sis.”
• “I love the way you wear your hair like that.”
• “Maybe we could talk about your promotion over lunch.”
• “We need to see you on the stage more. Everyone likes it.”
• “We don’t want her leading the prayer meeting, they need eye candy. Ask someone skinnier.”
• “Well, I think women have their place and voice, certainly, but we still know at the end of the day someone has to make the hard decisions and not everyone is going to agree.”
• “No one ever complained about this before—are you sure this isn’t just a personal issue or vendetta? Give us facts, not emotions.”
• “We aren’t trying to silence anyone, just appear as a united front.”
• “Of course you’re allowed to speak up, but, personally, I’ve never seen what you’re mentioning happen.”

He never makes these remarks in front of a crowd, mind you, only behind closed doors, where the one subject to his insensitive comments feels too indebted to him to speak up.

His comments pile up in the recesses of our mind. We sometimes ride the wave of his compliments just as others do. He
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makes us feel noticed and highly esteemed, even if, at times, it is for our looks, but of course we don’t always feel esteemed. We feel degraded. If he makes a low blow, others might clap back with a snappy comment about how hard they have worked to be heard, how diligently they have labored to be taken seriously, but we don’t respond this way. We don’t want to lose our opportunities. We don’t want to lose his favor. We don’t want to lose everything we have worked so hard to build. We weigh the odds, and it doesn’t seem worth it to question his comments. We receive it for what it is, because, like so many others, he is not only a mentor to us but also a promoter. We feel as though if we are going to advance in the world, it will be because of him. Faux egalitarianism at its finest.

Trapped in a Broken System

Women weigh the odds and count the costs of speaking out. They choose to remain silent in order to collect a paycheck, advance their careers, be accepted in their churches, engage in opportunities to lead, and, truthfully, stay in the place they’ve worked so hard to access. They know the drill: Look like a ten. Be the smartest person in the room, but don’t act like it. Keep your fears and nervousness to yourself. Be insanely agreeable. Laugh on command. Be nice.

In my earliest days of working in a professional setting, I learned how to “act” around my male colleagues largely by watching the women around me. I witnessed them slowly shake their head and grin in agreement with others in the room after a male colleague restated an idea they had shared moments before. I heard the click of their designer heels down the hallway and was constantly impressed by their stylish wardrobes while my male colleagues wore jeans, New Balance sneakers, and short-sleeved button-up shirts with a worn hoodie. If a man voiced a somewhat antagonistic point of view, he was seen as
a thinker, addressing an issue from all sides. If a woman said something critical, she was seen as difficult.

Psychotherapist and author Sonya Rhodes notes that these dynamics create a catch-22 for professional women. “Whatever women do at work, they have to do it nicely. But the more you back off, the more they don’t take you seriously.”2 Women are expected to comply with systems that have cut them down, report to men who have sexualized their appearance and demeaned their personhood, and be so nice it hurts. It’s exhausting. It gets a woman nowhere and is a disservice to any space she occupies. More often than not, women tell themselves that they can let low-grade sexism slide if they are given a seat or place of power, dignity, and agency. The unspoken understanding is that women have a place in the world not because they deserve it but because a man allowed for them to have a place, and since he has given them opportunities, he holds power over their time, earning potential, and bodies.

This was amplified on a grand scale in the 1940s when America funneled its men abroad during World War II. The government ran a nationwide recruitment campaign, first with posters of glamorous women in the workplace, and then most famously with Rosie the Riveter and her slogan “We Can Do It!” to entice women into joining the civilian and military labor force. It worked. Historians estimate that six million women—of all ethnicities—left their homes or domestic jobs for employment in construction, steel, lumber, agriculture, transportation, government, munitions, and more. They weren’t, per se, wanted in these spaces, but they were desperately needed. They were invited by men to fill “men’s” roles and endured menial pay, sexual harassment, grueling hours, and less-than-safe working conditions. What was intended to be temporary work, as men would presumably regain their posts once they returned home from war, sparked a revolution of women holding positions in male-dominated spaces across
the country and led to collective agency demanding equal rights and protection. Since then, women have continued to pursue positions in male-dominated spaces and fight battles over inequitable power balances.

Interestingly, as Rosie the Riveter stood for a woman’s ability and power, another widely recognized World War II image holds an opposing message, yet this message is not as well known. As one of the most acclaimed photos of the twentieth century, the *Unconditional Surrender* photo published in *Life* magazine and later built into a statue standing twenty-six feet tall in Sarasota, Florida, depicts a sailor, George Mendonsa, passionately kissing a nurse, Greta Zimmer Friedman, to celebrate Japan’s surrender, marking the end of World War II. Thousands have re-created the iconic kiss, yet the dominant narrative we’ve come to associate with the piece—that a sailor was so filled with unspeakable joy on VJ Day that he kissed his girl—is dead wrong. Before her death, Friedman explained that the kiss was not consensual. “I did not see him approaching, and before I know it, I was in this vice grip!” Friedman told CBS News in 2012. Mendonsa himself admitted that he had had a few drinks, saw a beautiful woman, grabbed her, and kissed her as world-renowned photographer Alfred Eisenstadt caught the moment on film. Friedman is seen clutching her purse and skirt as a white man in uniform forcibly holds her head in the crook of his arm while he plants a kiss square on her lips. While I doubt either of them thought the moment would be memorialized, the day after Mendonsa died, #MeToo was spray-painted in bold red letters on Friedman’s statue leg in Sarasota. What has been romanticized for seventy-five years as a praiseworthy moment in American history, in reality reeks of sexual violence. Historically, in times of need or celebration, women have played the role prescribed to them by those with power.
For marginalized women, the issue of silence is exacerbated by the intersectionality of race, class, and sex. They are less likely to be protected from abusive power and more likely to be silenced and dismissed by their community and the justice system without any recompense for their experiences. Since the time of the transatlantic slave trade, Black female bodies in America have not been their own and have been coerced into sex acts by their slave masters (white men) without punishment. In modern times, Black women are three times as likely as white women to experience sexual harassment at work. Indigenous women are 2.5 times more likely to experience sexual assault and rape than any other ethnic group, and undocumented immigrant low-wage earning women “tend to be placed in situations of greater vulnerability and, through policy, can be denied access to justice,” according to the National Network of Immigrant and Refugee Rights. And undocumented immigrants have decreasingly felt safe to report sexual abuse. When Donald Trump became president, reports of rape in Los Angeles by Latina women decreased by 25 percent from January to March 2017, in comparison to the same time frame in 2016. The Los Angeles Police Department attributes this sharp drop in reports to a legitimate fear of deportation. The experiences of women of color are compounded by their race, class, cultural values, and immigration status, leaving them vulnerable in ways not experienced by white women, and despite the undeniable role of racism and classism in sexual misconduct, privileged women largely shape this discussion.

The inconsistent response to abuse of power has played out publicly in recent years by the varied treatment between R. Kelly, Harvey Weinstein, and their sexual abuse victims. R. Kelly’s crimes came to light in the summer of 2017, just months before the Weinstein story broke in the New York Times. Researchers Rebecca Leung and Robert Williams note that despite credible evidence, testimonies, and well-researched
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journalism, no charges were brought against R. Kelly after the story broke.\textsuperscript{11} According to Chicago-area journalist Jim DeRogatis, Kelly for years maintained a harem of underage girls of color, and his songs continued to stream from major streaming sites all over the world.\textsuperscript{12} His victims and accusers were berated for attempting to take down a successful R&B artist and for speaking up against a man from their own community. He had faced charges in the past but was acquitted on all counts. After the 2017 article that exposed his sex cult, Kelly released an eighteen-minute song titled “I Admit.” The Weinstein case prompted a different response. Weinstein was forced to step down from his company, lost credibility within the film community, and faced a criminal trial when his heinous actions were publicized. His victims, mostly white women of means and influence, were paraded as heroes, poster women for the #MeToo movement. R. Kelly’s victims did not receive the same accolades.\textsuperscript{13}

Long before journalists exposed the abuse suffered mostly by white, rich, and famous women, ordinary women who’ve worked at fast-food chains, hotels, churches, universities, athletic clubs, and elsewhere have attempted to report misconduct at the hands of abusive leaders, yet did not attract the media attention or legal defense that would have highlighted their injustices, let alone prompt lasting institutional change. As bell hooks, Angela Davis, and many other leaders and activists have noted, many Americans are primed to lean in and listen to white women—especially if they have an established platform—while ignoring, downplaying, or ridiculing women of color who speak up. The hierarchy of who will be listened to, who will be believed, who will be silenced, and who will be dismissed has been set, thus far, by the media, the justice system, and patriarchal cultures that have saturated church and state. That must change in order for all women to be protected, supported, and heard. Tarana Burke, founder of the
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#MeToo movement, shared in an interview with *Time,* “Sexual violence knows no race, class or gender, but the response to sexual violence absolutely does. Until we change that, any advance that we make in addressing this issue is going to be scarred by the fact that it wasn’t across the board.”¹⁴ Every woman deserves to be heard, respected, and dignified as she bravely speaks up, not deported, fired, shamed, excommunicated, or worse.

In faith contexts, many good Christian women in well-meaning spaces have been taught that they are the “helpmeet” (Gen. 2:20), which many interpret as an invitation to be meek, obedient, quiet, subservient beings to men, which only perpetuates a patriarchal narrative that can be harmful rather than helpful. The idea that a woman’s sole purpose is to *help* goes off the rails when a woman, in the name of God, is expected to emotionally, financially, or even physically bleed simply to meet the demands of the unjust power brokers in her world. No woman should be forced to set herself on fire to keep those who harm her warm. That is not the instruction of the Scriptures, nor does it embody the love of God. Helping as sacrifice is beautiful, but if helping bolsters an imbalance of power, it’s no longer helping. It’s injustice.

Many women around the world find themselves trapped in unjust systems, where to stay in the room or have a voice—be it in the office, the church, the healthcare system, the country, politics, education, or athletics—they must stick with and defend the one who let them in and must also continuously prove their worth. If the gatekeeper believes they hold less value than a man, they will be treated as such, regardless of the female-friendly ethos of the business, organization, church, or community. What is on paper is not always in practice. When the values etched in stone are not exercised in a consistent and proactive manner, it translates to less pay, less opportunity, and unsafe spaces, and it may be nearly impossible for
women to advance in any way, shape, or form, let alone possess a respected voice.

When a woman’s livelihood depends on operating in a broken system, she may feel as though she has no choice but to comply. And if the gatekeeper causes her harm by emotional, physical, or sexual harassment, she is forced to deal quietly with the negative social, emotional, and physical consequences for fear that she may lose her income, home, or standing in the community. With so much at risk and few options, she finds herself forcefully corralled into broken systems and unable to rise above them because, more often than not, the power players who are making decisions benefit from the broken system and believe everything is just fine. Things do not need to change. This is just the way things are. But everything is just fine only because she holds limited power with no identifiable path to balanced power. Throughout the centuries, this has become the status quo. As author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains, “If we do something over and over, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over, it becomes normal.”15 The power players are not personally hurt, demeaned, demonized, ostracized, harassed, or rejected; therefore, there is no issue. It’s only normal.

Sadly, this is not a new dynamic—women subject to the plans of men. We need look no further than the historical accounts in the Bible:

Hagar, forced into surrogacy by her slave masters, Abram and Sarai
Leah, second fiddle to her sister, Rachel
Queen Vashti, summoned to parade in front of drunken party guests
The adulterous woman, dragged into the public square, her business on display
Without agency to harness against the power players of their time, women of the Bible were subjected to the cultural norms, rituals, and humiliation that were both legal and socially acceptable in their day. They were likely familiar with the laws of the land that hindered their safety, security, and well-being, and—barring a few exceptions—they had no political or financial power to fight for rights for themselves or other women. In their day, they could not escape the consequences that came with womanhood. In our day, the systems women combat when they speak up leave them with battle scars. Little do we know how long those scars take to heal when women have been hoodwinked, hushed, and reduced to nothing.