



Café (boldcafe.org) is a monthly on-line magazine for and with young adult women made possible from support from women’s groups active in Women of the ELCA (welca.org), the women’s organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

THINK

by Sunday Saari

I walked down the street on the way to meet my friend for dinner and noticed a lovely summer sunset. It was a street I had walked down hundreds of times before. As I passed a church on the usually crowded street, I noticed three men tumble out of the bar just up ahead. Instinct kicked in, telling me to keep my head high, eyes forward and move quickly past them. I had dealt with guys like these before. I figured I would pass them and go on my way.

Only, this time was different.

As I walked by, they looked at me and laughed. I then felt one of them grab the back of my arms and pull me toward them. Whispering words into my ears that I’m not going to repeat here, there was a sudden and fierce attempt to drag me with them—their hands reaching for all parts of me.

My brain went into autopilot. I pushed back and used self-defense techniques I had learned. Maybe because they were drunk and not anticipating so much resistance, I was able to get out of their grasp. I ran down the street, heart pounding in fear. I remember wanting to scream and cry but instead pulled myself together and tried to shake it off and appear as pleasant as possible. I told an abbreviated version of the event to my guy friend at dinner and I laughed it off.

It was a different story when I got home that night.



Staying alone at a friend's house, I remember feeling like I was in shock. I was so angry with myself. Why didn't I do more? Why didn't I say something? Why did I laugh? Should I have reported this to the police? That need to appear fine.

Why do we do this? I eventually called and told my parents and my sister, but it took time. I kept trying to tell myself it was no big deal; something worse could've happened. That night, I couldn't shake off the sense of feeling violated, dirty, and empty. I remember I had a stream of enraged thoughts running through my head: "What makes them think they can do that to another human being?" "What gives them the right to touch my body?" "What makes them think they can put their hands on me?"

I couldn't sleep. Instead, I grabbed a pen and paper, sat down at the piano, and started to write. Lyrics and music have always been my remedy for emotions too large to keep inside, so for me, it seemed to be the most natural and helpful thing to do. I spent the rest of that night writing lyrics, coming up with the melody, piecing together a chord structure, and finally— having the rough draft to the song now published as "THINK."

With the development of this song, I knew two things: I wanted it to have a jazz-style brass background to create the overall feel of the song. I also wanted an accompanying music video, comprised of elements that boldly exposed the effects, reality and capacity of sexual assault.

Additionally, I knew I couldn't do this alone, so I hoped to comprise a team of creative people: The majority of strong women who could be the backbone of this entire project. I am proud to say all the pieces fell into place due to the capability and generosity of my incredible colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University.

As I began sharing this project idea with my female colleagues, including two of the most powerful and hard-working female directors I knew on campus. They shared their own heartbreaking stories of sexual harassment and sexual assault. With these stories came the realization that the video could be more than just one person's experience. We would create a composite sketch representing what we had all experienced and felt. Together, we came up with a team of independent, diligent, fierce women which was set to be the binding agent of the entire process to create this statement piece.

I knew I needed a budget for the project. I took the idea to the head of the School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon. He loved the idea and set up a meeting with the Dean of the school. My meeting with the Dean was inspiring. He believed in our project, and graciously agreed to fund the entire effort.

Soon enough, the dream became a reality. This was a true collaboration of lifting up the voices, strength, and experience of women in my community who have the courage to share their stories and who refuse to accept abuse, harassment and assault as the norm. Although my college, Carnegie Mellon, has a strict no-tolerance policy against violence or harassment of any kind, these types of offenses still occur in the performance industry where I live out my vocation. There is still a strong message, especially to women, that other women are competition and that men are able to behave how they want because they hold the power and are our ticket to success. Stereotypes abound that pigeonhole us by height, weight, class, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and more.

We are subtly taught that our worth is based on society's standard of beauty, that we need to be charming and accept hurtful behavior. This is a tragedy that harms us all, but it does not need to remain our reality.

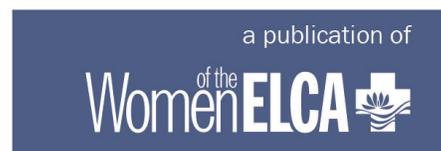
The team of women, as well as the men who came alongside us, are proof of what can be accomplished through teamwork, love, tenacity and courage. At the end of the project, our lighting designer, Truly Cates, shared her feelings when she said: "Working on a team lead by women who were determined to convey a message, and are survivors themselves, made for an inspirational and exciting experience with an impactful outcome." Our hope and intent with this project are to share our story with others: those in our industry, students on college campuses, or anywhere gender-based violence and harassment occur. Our message is that you aren't alone. You can stand up and share your story and things can change. I want to thank *Boldcafe* for giving me the space to share mine.



Sunday Saari is a Minneapolis-born singer/songwriter. She has lived in Minneapolis, Chicago, Portland, Ore. and most recently Pittsburgh, Pa. Sunday began formal classical and Jazz vocal training at MacPhail center for the Arts in Minneapolis where she also began writing and recording her own songs with local musicians. Sunday currently lives in Pittsburgh where she studies and writes music along with producing original visual work in collaboration with other artists and musicians in her community.

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Faith Reflections: The truths we tell

by Sara Olson-Smith

Our memories are strange things. When we think we've got things filed nicely away in the back of the drawer, something yanks them out, scattering piles of memories like paper across a desk. Sometimes those rediscovered memories are a blessing, like when a song on the radio reminds you of a fabulous road trip, or the smell of baked goods pulls you into your grandmother's kitchen.

Other times, it's more traumatizing. It is disorienting and painful to have them brought out of the dark. Those memories are hidden to protect us, and it can hurt to have them triggered. For survivors of sexual assault and other gender-based violence, the news headlines and national dialogs of these last years have been like having those drawers dumped out, over and over again.

Because more and more of these stories have been told, there has been a reckoning in these past months. It was not assumed that Harvey Weinstein would face any consequences to his decades of aggression and violence, yet before his death, he was jailed and awaited guilty verdicts.

Hearing Christine Blasey Ford bravely tell her story, even as her voice shook, gave so many of us the courage to tell experiences that we've never shared. The #metoo movement's truth-telling has meant honest conversations between partners, an openness of what women (and men) experience. It is no longer assumed the perpetrators could act with impunity.

But these small advances have come at a cost. The burden was carried mostly by women like Dr. Ford, who risked everything to tell their story and others who spoke their truth, knowing their own lives would be exposed. And for survivors (of all genders), it also means being confronted with our memories and trauma, over and over again, as we hear those stories and take in the news.

As hard as it is, I am convinced that it is worth it. The more we tell our stories, the less shame we have. The more the truth is shared, the more it will be believed. The more we dare to shine a light on the experiences of survivors, the less they can be ignored.

A few years ago, I listened to a woman speak at a fundraiser for one of the agencies in my community that provides support and care for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. The speaker, Kelly McReynolds, shared her own story of rebuilding her life after rape. Kelly used her platform to call out a culture where assault is pervasive and normalized, where power is unchecked, and women are seen as objects and not people.

Near the end of her talk, she gave all of us some pretty clear instructions, "if someone tells you their story, their experience of assault—this is what you say: I believe you. It's not your fault. You are not alone."

Still, nearly four years later, those words have such power. Maybe more, because they've given me the courage to face my memories, which I've kept hidden. And they've taught me to be a better advocate and listener, as more stories have been shared in these days of #metoo. We are seeing the transformation that comes—not just to survivors, but to our culture—when we repeatedly say: "I believe you. It's not your fault. You are not alone."

Those simple statements of assurance and compassion and truth have such power. They echo words for our sacred scripture. I heard in her voice, words of the Apostle Paul, "weep with those who weep" and "bear each other's burdens." She spoke in ways that made tangible the prophet Micah's words to "do justice and love mercy and walk humbly."

I could almost hear Jesus whisper those words to that unnamed woman, surrounded by the men who were ready to stone her for her supposed adultery. "I believe you. It's not your fault. You are not alone." Maybe we can imagine the Good Samaritan kneeling next to that person beaten and robbed and left on the side of the road, "I believe you. It's not your fault. You are not alone."

As followers of Jesus, this ought to be our script when we are confronted with stories not just of sexual assault, but every kind of injustice, violence, and oppression that seeks to dehumanize, denigrate and destroy God's precious people. As we listen, we can say "I believe you" and, in doing so, move from silence and doubt toward truth and trust. We can say, "It's not your fault" and help to replace shame with worthiness. We can live the promise "You are not alone" and step forward together from isolation toward belonging.

Through the courage of survivors telling their stories, our culture is (slowly) changing. We are creating a world where survivors are beginning to trust that if they speak, they will be believed. Their experiences are not to be hid and locked away in the shame-filled recesses of our memories but heard and believed and surrounded by a community of care and compassion and transformative anger. Change, though still small, is happening. Voices are being heard.



And because of this, things are shifting. Women are speaking and being believed. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in the *New York Times*: “The most important change will be found in what we cannot measure – all the crimes that don’t happen because would-be perpetrators fear the consequences, now that there are consequences. All the potential victims know that if they speak up, someone might hear them and heed them. I want more than that, though: I want a society where the desire and entitlement to commit sexual violence wither away, not out of fear but out of respect for the rights and humanity of victims.”

We’re not there yet. We’re so far from there. But as followers of Jesus, we are part of building this vision of God’s reign. Our faith demands that we keep working together, so violence withers away, and everyone can live abundantly with joy and without fear. And until we get there, we can be people who listen and bear witness, saying, “I believe you. It’s not your fault. You are not alone.”



Sara Olson-Smith serves as an associate pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, where she lives with her spouse and two young children. While not at church (or on zoom meetings!) she enjoys hikes in the woods, family bike rides, baking bread and quilting.

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