

FATHER DOESN'T KNOW BEST: KAVANAUGH AND WOMEN'S UNSHARED TRAUMAS

[NB: Check the byline. / ~Rayne]

This weekend brought back some ugly memories, one of which involved my father. We've never had a close relationship; it was rocky at times. But in 1991 one phone conversation particularly damaged my meager relations with him.

I can't even remember why we had been talking on the phone – did he call me? Did I call him? The context's utterly irrelevant now after all this time. But we butted heads about the Senate Judiciary Committee's Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings.

Dad's not political though he's always been conservative. He's a professional in a STEM field, raised Catholic, and a post-WWII veteran. Sadly, Dad's racist in spite of being brown himself. This may come from having been raised where he was in the majority and not a minority. He wasn't overtly racist as his closest friend in college was African. He's not been overtly sexist. In my teens he argued with a small town school board so I could take wood shop. They didn't let girls take that course in the early 1970s. Nor was I punished for bringing home Cs in typing though they were the lowest grades I'd ever had. He knew I'd need nominal keyboard skills as I was pursuing a STEM education in college.

But in all that I had known about my father by the time I was 30 years old, I'd made a miscalculation.

In that conversation we'd drifted into current affairs and the Senate's hearing. I told him I was very upset. I'd hoped Clarence Thomas wouldn't be confirmed. He wasn't Supreme Court

material based on his background and Hill's testimony put Thomas' character into question.

My father said he didn't know why Anita Hill waited so long to say anything to anybody. Why hadn't she spoken out at the time Thomas was harassing her? He suggested Hill was acting in bad faith.

I couldn't say anything. Words wouldn't come. It was as if I was talking to a stranger. To whom would a black woman go to complain about her boss's sexual harassment? Especially if her boss was the chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission? Who would take a young black woman's word over that of a black man, let alone a man in charge of the EEOC? Why would a young black woman subject herself to more harassment by Senate Judiciary Committee and the public if not to protect the Supreme Court from an unworthy nominee?

At some point my understanding of the world forked sharply away from my father's. It's not as if he didn't know women faced gross inequality. The fact he had to fight for my shop class was a concrete example. He'd heard plenty of stories about gender bias, sexual harassment and assault from my mother who worked in health care. Did he think that every girl or woman had some man who could make it better by going to bat for her? That some man would have resolved the harassment Hill faced in the work place had she simply come and asked them for help?

I didn't know if he was naive. I didn't know if this was a manifestation of his nebulous racism at some level. I didn't know if it was misogyny I'd not detected in my father's makeup to that point.

It took me a long time to get over this. I don't know yet if I am over it because I struggled with the phrasing of that last sentence. I felt betrayed, as if he'd never seen the world as it was, nor had he seen me. I felt I'd betrayed myself for not seeing him more clearly.

It was some time before I realized he was as

sexist as he was racist. Not overtly, and in spite of having two daughters in non-traditional STEM education paths – but his sexism was there and I'd internalized it.

It took me a while longer to realize I'd buried an episode which should have created a more realistic perception of my father.

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When I was a pre-teen a group of boys harassed me. There was bodily contact, sexualized language, grabbing at clothing during class. The male teacher ejected me from class. He told my parents I was "precocious" which made no sense to me since I was a year younger and much smaller than the rest of my class, and I alone had been targeted. My father negotiated with the teacher and principal to let me to take this class independently – as if I was the one at fault and not the boys who'd harassed me. I was the one in the wrong because I was a girl. My father accepted this as fact. He didn't demand the teacher do a better job of supervising his classroom.

I would bet good money that if asked now, none of the boys would remember harassing me. They might not even remember I was a former classmate. The situation mattered little to them, not changing their world one iota.

I never spoke with my father again about any problems I had with boys and men. I was on my own with the boys who shoved me around and pawed at me throughout high school or stole my drafting and engineering equipment. I was on my own when I got my first job in manufacturing as a co-op student, dealing with cat calls and sexual taunts and threats of violence. On my own when I didn't get a raise when my boss said "his boys" in the department needed the raise that year.

Over the last couple of decades I've talked with many other girls and women about harassment. It's nearly universal that women face it and sometimes with violence. Let me emphasize this:

there are many, MANY women who were harassed, abused, assaulted in school and beyond who never reported it. They may never even have spoken about their experiences. But the system disempowers and marginalizes us; it maintains the status quo and actively resists change. It questions our ability to speak for ourselves. It places the value of a man's career and lifestyle above any woman's. Women's empowerment and the ability to effect positive change has been close at times but we are still celebrating so many firsts. We haven't yet a first woman president, or a first half of the Supreme Court or Congress, leaving us without adequate representation to protect our rights and interests though we are half this nation and give birth to the rest.

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The revelation of Christine Blasey Ford's name and the release of her letter to Senator Feinstein triggered memories. The harassment and abuse by teen boys, the Thomas confirmation hearings, that 1991 conversation with my father bubbled back up. Many women likewise revisited their own experiences. I've read their tweets consoling each other across Twitter. We and our traumas are finally seen and heard by each other in great numbers, but not by our government.

Like my father, this government assumes it's her fault, not his. This government will go after Ford for speaking her truth. Its proxies villified her, some for not coming forward sooner though it wasn't prepared and willing to help her back then. The system itself harasses women.

It wasn't my fault I was harassed and abused. It wasn't Anita Hill's fault she was harassed, either, nor was it our fault we didn't come forward. We couldn't. It wasn't Ford's fault she was a 15-year-old abused by older teen boys at a time when such attacks were normalized in pop culture as humor. She couldn't come forward then, either.

But now we and our many sisters can come forward together and say we believe Ford. We can say that what happened to her mattered then. It matters now because girls and women have a right to personal autonomy and self-determination. We can say that one man with a history of harassment seated for life on the highest court is more than enough, and that an admitted abuser has no right to appoint another man with a questionable history to the bench.

We can say it's enough that Brett Kavanaugh has not been forthcoming about his shady finances even when asked to reply in writing. It's beyond enough that he's been a party to hiding a majority of his work. We can say we have heard enough of his prevarications before the Senate Judiciary Committee this month and in 2006.

We come forward now and say this is enough: Kavanaugh is not Supreme Court material and should withdraw his nomination. He should not be confirmed by the Senate.

At the very least Kavanaugh's confirmation vote should be delayed. We should hear Ford's testimony and Kavanaugh's rebuttal, and as Marcy suggests, a witness to the assault on Ford.

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Call your senator and ask for a delay on Kavanaugh's confirmation; it would be better if Kavanaugh withdrew if we can't hear from Ford, Kavanaugh and witnesses. Your calls are working at shifting GOP senators' opinions.

Congressional switchboard: (202) 224-3121