

Wounded Healer

Category: Stories

written by Jamie Sweigart | September 7, 2018

Jamie Sweigart ~

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon on my urban college campus. I'd been sitting on the grass outside a lecture hall where my premed classmates and I would study together on weekends. This particular weekend, I was alone. Campus was empty, except for a man with a backpack who occasionally passed by.

Finished with studying, I started walking down a deserted sidewalk back to my apartment, a few blocks away. On the way, I dialed my best friend from home, Laura, and we began chatting.

"Hang up the phone," said a man's voice behind me. I felt the cold blade of a knife against the side of my neck.

I hung up my cell phone.

It's the man with the backpack, I realized.

"Go where I tell you, or I'll kill you," he said.

My body went numb. Slowly, I walked where he told me to go. He took me up the zigzag handicapped entrance ramp of an abandoned church. Then he leaned back against the ramp's waist-high concrete wall and had me crouch so that I wouldn't be visible from the street.

I'm going to die, I thought.

He made me kneel. My dress wasn't long, and I felt my knees scratching against the pavement.

"Dressed like that, you were asking for it," he said.

Still holding the knife against my neck, he forced me to perform fellatio—but he couldn't get an erection. The longer I tried to do what he wanted, the more agitated he got. The blade pressed harder against my neck.

This is it, I thought. I might as well say goodbye to my family, my friends, my life. Hopefully someone will find me back here, even though I'll probably be dead.

In that moment, I said goodbye to myself, too. I knew I'd never be the same, even if I made it out alive. I'd accepted my fate.

Then I felt a moment of absolute clarity.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked. "Did someone do this to you?"

Abruptly, the man stepped away from me. Big tears started rolling down his

face. Sobbing, he slowly lowered himself until he was sitting next to me. He looked at me through a stream of tears.

"You must be an angel," he said. To my bewilderment, he continued to weep, muttering, "I'm so sorry," over and over.

"It's okay," I stammered. I felt unsure if this was part of his plan, and afraid that any misstep would result in a swift slice to the neck. I tried to console him, offering words of forgiveness to this dangerous but distraught stranger. Although my life was at stake, I genuinely felt bad for him. Finally, his tears subsided.

"So, what's your name?" he asked.

"Jenny," I lied.

"What are you studying?"

"I'm in nursing school." Another lie. I didn't want him to know anything real about me.

He was silent for a few minutes.

"You got any money in your bag?" he asked, almost as an afterthought.

"No," I responded, honestly this time. He took my word for it.

"I'm gonna let you go, Jenny. But I will take off first. I want you to wait here for five minutes before you come out, okay?"

In stunned disbelief, I agreed.

He thanked me, and then, like a gentleman at the end of a date, kissed my cheek. He stood up, put on his backpack and calmly walked away.

I hid for I don't know how long; it felt like forever. I feared that if I peeked up over the cement wall, he'd pop out and grab me again. Finally, I got up the courage to look.

Fifty yards away, I saw a woman standing with her grocery bags by a bus stop. *Safety.* I ran to her as fast as I could. As I reached her, I tried to explain what had happened, but it came out as panicked babbling. My frantic state and the bloody scratch along my cheek alarmed her enough that she dropped her bags and flagged down a police car.

It was then that I learned that the campus police were already out looking for me: My friend Laura, hearing me gasp and hang up, had immediately notified them.

The next part is a blur. I was put in the back of the cop car, and they radioed the other police and asked me what the man looked like.

"An orange shirt and black shorts," I said. "He had a backpack."

Secretly, I hoped that he'd get away. In that moment, I believed that he'd experienced a genuine insight and was now a changed person.

Then we turned the corner, and I saw him pushing open the door to a dilapidated house. He'd taken off the orange shirt. I started to panic, thinking that they'd put him in the car with me. Then I saw three other police cars pulling up.

The police arrested him. His backpack held all the evidence—the knife, the shirt, an empty liquor bottle.

The court proceedings lasted well into the fall of that year. I dropped out of my classes and put my plans for medical school on hold. I couldn't sleep; I felt numb inside.

My attacker had been out of prison less than a year before my assault; he'd served close to twenty years for violently raping a female neighbor in her home, slitting her throat and leaving her for dead.

The victim, Louise, now in her fifties, came to the trial. I noticed a huge scar running along her neck up to her jaw.

That could have been me, I thought.

I later learned that my assailant had also done time in a juvenile-detention center for raping a four-year-old when he was seventeen.

At the trial's conclusion, he was sentenced to fifteen to thirty years in a maximum-security facility.

For me, the months and years that followed were a journey of change and growth. At first, I couldn't accept that I would never be myself again. I turned to unhealthy distractions and gave up my dream of med school.

I could never be a doctor, as damaged as I now am, I thought. I spent most of my energy trying to block out my feelings of disappointment, grief and shame over being violated. I distanced myself from others to avoid the intensity of intimate relationships. I was quick to anger, and easily hurt.

The initial two years were the toughest: I oscillated between paralyzing fear, anxiety and despair. When I felt overwhelmed, flooded with emotions that were too intense, I'd regress back to feeling completely detached—"numbing out," as my therapist called it. Her office was sometimes the only place I felt safe.

Gradually, I was able to regain my bearings and rebuild my sense of who I am, integrating my former hopes, dreams and idealism with my new understanding of the world around me.

Before, I'd been unwilling to acknowledge the existence of evil. Now, I had to examine the dark side of life, if only to see the light more clearly. I discovered that, as humans, we've all suffered varying levels of trauma, and many of us spend our lives trying to avoid feeling the resulting pain. When I

was able to let myself feel the full spectrum of my painful emotions, especially through art and writing, a new ray of hope began to emerge.

I underwent a radical transformation, from victim to survivor. I began to see myself as someone who could be healed—and perhaps even bring healing to others.

With the encouragement of my friends and family, I opened myself back up to the possibility of attending medical school and began studying for the Medical College Admission Test.

Once in medical school, I explored the different medical specialties with enthusiasm. But my psychiatry rotation confirmed what I'd felt all along: that through my personal experience and my innate ability to connect with others, I was destined to serve in the mental-health field.

As fate would have it, I matched in a psychiatry residency program in Detroit, just blocks from the site where I'd been attacked years earlier.

Almost every day of my residency, I had to drive past the site of my assault. And almost daily, I relived the experience—not just in driving by the site but in hearing my patients' stories of rape and violence. I feel a strong connection with the deeply wounded, especially victims of sexual violence. Remembering my own trauma, which took place just down the street from my office, reminded me of the dangers facing the community I served.

I graduated last June, and I'm now an attending physician at a forensic psychiatry center.

Many of my patients have endured traumas more severe than my own, and their resilience has been an inspiration to me. Each day I feel grateful for my past, because it has prepared me for the path ahead. I may never truly understand how I knew what to say in that moment when I thought I was going to die—but in trying to understand how and why it happened, I've gained a deeper understanding of my patients, my purpose and myself.

During my assault, a terribly troubled and dangerous man momentarily saw me as an angel. I was able to connect to a vulnerable part of him—a part that might stand some chance of healing and changing. I suppose that, as a doctor, I'd like my patients to sometimes see me, if not as an angel, as someone who can help them connect with their best, deepest selves.

Though I may not share my story with them, I'd like them to know what I've learned firsthand—that trauma isn't something you ever get over, but it is something you can get through and recover from.

About the author:

Jamie Sweigart is an attending psychiatrist for the State of Michigan at the Center for Forensic Psychiatry. Having received her medical degree from Michigan State College of Osteopathic Medicine and completed her psychiatry residency at Henry Ford Hospital, she is currently pursuing additional training in psychodynamic therapy at Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute. Her

clinical interests include trauma, addiction, personality disorders and psychedelic drug research. "As I approached the end of my psychiatric training I began to reflect on the complex path that led me to my career. Writing has helped me explore my past more thoughtfully and reflectively. Now seems to be a safe time to revisit this painful part of my journey."

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