



One such portal appeared when, as a result of breaking my personal silence on child sexual abuse and trying to imagine what justice could possibly mean for me (and also, yes, for “the perpetrator”), I ran smack into the punishing prison archetype constellated in my own psyche. Unsettled, I began to question, then openly reject, public rituals of shaming, revenge, and retribution.

I have at hand a journal from the early 1980s. Compiled and given to me by my friend [Jackie St. Joan](#), who is a poet, novelist, attorney, and former judge, it contains brief notes annotating faded, slightly blurred snapshots, most taken on the sly and at a distance. The journal documents the pivotal moment when, as an adult in my 30s, I broke the family silence around a period of sexual misconduct—inappropriate touching, not rape—by my father when I was a child.

This was at the center of memory when I said, on Facebook, “Yeah. [#MeToo](#).” Like countless other women,\* cisgendered and transgendered, I recall multiple stories, minor and major, about my own experiences with the infuriating commonality of sexual harassment, exploitation, coercion, and violence—some of it merely pathetic and crude, some of it much uglier and frightening. Even so, I didn’t say “#MeToo” without ambivalence.

We must bulldoze through the silences of domination and oppression. But the dominant US culture—irredeemably raced, classed, gendered, and (dis)ableist—constitutes fraught cultural, political, and economic terrain for those who reveal realities that shatter easy [group fictions](#) about harm, violence, and justice. By group fictions, I mean storylines that establish raced and classed hierarchies of worthiness, telling us which victims of harassment and abuse we should care about and which victims are worthless, even violently disposable. False notions about what kinds of people endorse, enable, and perpetrate sexual misconduct, coercion, and violence—and who

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\* Yes, I know full well that males can also be sexually harassed and abused. This isn’t that story.

almost always gets a pass. Supremacist mythologies and images signifying which groups of people are marked as intrinsically, criminally “predatory” and which are blessed with indwelling virtue, no matter who they hurt. Group fictions that shape and misshape how we understand “justice” and [what we imagine](#) we want from it.

Mainstream society wants perfect victims, whose innocence shines like a perpetual halo, and irredeemable Trophy Monster predators/pedophiles whose existence and visibility shield from sight the discomfiting normality of sexual misconduct and violence. It wants to downplay or deny harm against Black, Indigenous, Latina, and Asian women, elevating the stories of white women—but not caring about them much, either, except as props for white supremacy. It wants brilliantly staged show trials, lurid accounts, and public frenzy to misdirect attention away from the systemic nature of sexual violence, simultaneously providing crowd-pleasing proxies for structural change. Most of all, it tells us that justice means eradicating monsters, however they are defined. That the primary way to ensure the existence of the good society where we are safe from violence and crime is to [police and punish](#) our way to it.

These group fictions are worse than useless. They create injustice, not accountability. They compound existing and produce new harms. They obscure rather than reveal complex truths. Public outcries against real, demonstrable harms can easily, if inadvertently, morph into responses that strengthen oppressive systems. We should remind ourselves daily that [lynching](#), [assaults on Black communities](#) and [race-based policing](#) have always been justified in whole or in part by charges that sexual violence or insult was done to white women by Black men; that people of color are intrinsically predatory.

Or public naming of harms can help unravel those fictions, becoming thresholds that lead toward what Angela Y. Davis calls [“new terrains of justice.”](#)

**Justice: The evolving pursuit of trustworthy, respectful, and non-exploitative relationships, together with accountability for interrupting, preventing, and redressing violence, in its myriad forms, against individuals, peoples, communities, and ecologies.**

—Whitlock & Bronski, [\*Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics\*](#)

I’m always interested in what happens when group fictions start to come apart at the seams.

### **Breaking Silence in the 1980s**

I was living on the East coast in the early 80s, deeply connected to a larger, predominantly white, feminist (and predominantly lesbian) community of activists and organizers, therapists, educators, health care providers, and social workers. We played softball, organized defense teams for women’s clinics against right-wing anti-abortion mobs, and urged the feminist, nonprofit women’s health clinic to offer cash-and-carry insemination services. Many of us were involved a variety of social and economic justice movements. A number of us, including several of the therapists and social workers, were individually and collectively engaged in confronting our own histories of having been sexually abused as children or other forms of sexual violence. And the Right, with relentless political and cultural attack, served up as moral crusade, was [gaining momentum](#).

Not coincidentally, this was a time—lasting for several seemingly endless years—when public attention was galvanized by what almost instantly became a roiling, sensational, often conflicted, and sometimes wildly frantic and damaging national discourse about child sexual abuse and sexual violence against women. The psychic charge of naming child sexual abuse, particularly,

was profound, sometimes for the better, but often for worse. [Made-for-television movies](#) appeared. [Books](#) were [published](#). A real harm—sexual violence—was being named, but that naming also became a way to reinscribe it, to fuel [sex panics](#) that expanded already powerful processes of [cultural criminalization](#). [Day care centers](#) were [falsely](#) declared to be sites of serial, sometimes Satanic, child sexual abuse. President Reagan’s attorney general, Edwin Meese, convened a [right-wing commission on pornography](#). Some feminists insisted that pornography, by its very nature, [constitutes](#) sex discrimination and actual harm against women. The Right continued [naming queers](#) as sexual predators and pedophiles. US history is replete with examples of how sensationalized grievances (both real and imagined), played out within a harshly punishing paradigm of “justice,” produce terrible ceremonies of persecution that inevitably zero in on members of already-marginalized communities.

The early 1980s saw [feminists at serious odds](#) over how to address not only the particular nexus of sex and violence, but the complexities surrounding sexual agency, pleasure, desire, power, fear, and danger. A [flashpoint](#) of that conflict came in 1982, with Barnard’s The Scholar and Feminist IX conference, “Towards a Politics of Sexuality.” (For an excellent introductory essay, epilogue, and collected papers and presentations from this conference, see Carol Vance (ed.), [Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality](#).)

With McCarthyite zeal, [New York’s Women Against Pornography](#) (WAP) led the effort to discredit both the organizers and the conference, which they saw as promoting female victimization and anti-feminist discussions of sexuality. They leafleted conference participants and pressured sponsors, alleging that the gathering promoted “sexual institutions and values that oppress all women.” They launched smear campaigns against specific “sex-positive” feminists (designated Trophy Monsters) for promoting consensual sexual choices Women Against Pornography

considered inherently oppressive, woman-hating, and violent: “butch-femme sex roles,” sado-masochism (S/M), and more. [Dorothy Allison](#), who would go on to write the highly acclaimed novel [Bastard Out of Carolina](#), was only one of their targets. In an [essay](#), she wrote, “I was fighting to keep my straight job at a publicly funded arts organization which had received a series of anonymous phone calls demanding that I be fired, while invitations to speak, publish, and edit were systematically withdrawn.”

All of this was bubbling up in the early 1980s. And yet I convinced myself that breaking my personal silence could only be liberatory; that I could finally be in control of my own life, experience, and history. Because I often spoke publicly about various justice issues, many friends and colleagues encouraged me to appear on radio and television, at a community women’s tribunal, and more. And I did.

I deeply regret much of it. Not naming child sexual abuse as part of my history. I rue my surprisingly naïve participation in public arenas where I no longer had control over my own story. But mass media predictably went for the ratings. I was ashamed of myself. How could I, a seasoned organizer, have failed to anticipate the effects of media pressure to conform to a kind of shallow, simplistic, and sensationalized narrative template for talking about victims, perpetrators, power, sexuality, and violence?

By the time I spoke out personally, I’d already long been active in work to end sexual violence against older girls and women. In the early 1970s, a period [falsely cast](#) by [some](#) as “the birth of the anti-rape movement,” I co-founded a rape crisis center. Many of the women who came did not want to report assaults to the police, for a host of valid reasons. Too often that included fear of publicly identifying law enforcement officials as assailants. Several women, including a couple of sex workers, told me privately about egregious misconduct by an especially zealous

county prosecutor, whose approval was required in order to obtain the rape crisis center’s funding. The hypocrisy embedded in this was compounded by the fact that the only real funding stream available to us at the time was through the [Law Enforcement Assistance Administration \(LEAA\)](#), which sought innovative approaches to improving state and local law enforcement through the [administration of grants](#) to government agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations. Eventually disbanded, LEAA helped set the stage for so-called [“community policing.”](#) The center’s various services undoubtedly helped many women. But it also, through the heavy law enforcement influence, hung vulnerable others out to dry.

Yet for reasons I can no longer fathom, I thought that this time, in the 1980s, things would be different because so many women were finally speaking out and organizing against sexual violence.

That is the backdrop to the moment I met my father to break our family silence.



*Kay Whitlock meeting her father*

*When we look deeply enough, we begin to see all the ways in which justice and nonviolence—as well as injustice, hatred, and violence—arise within an ever-fluid fabric of relationship. All of our various struggles for social, economic, spiritual, and environmental justice are not parallel and unrelated, but essential, interrelated components of one evolving story about human rights, dignity, liberation, justice, and community.*

—Kay Whitlock, [\*In a Time of Broken Bones\*](#)

## **PART II: Threshold**

I CALLED MY FATHER and asked him to meet in me in a hometown park in southern Colorado. He still lived in the small stucco house I’d grown up in, a space that I felt still defined me as a child.

My mother was deceased. My only purpose in meeting with my father that day was to hear myself breaking the silence in which our own family fiction evolved. The fiction that we were in all respects, apart from a minor blip or two, a happy family. In reality, we were a complicated and unpredictable mix of good intentions and terrible hurts, at once inflicted, received, and kept hidden from the outside world, sometimes even from ourselves.

Almost eighty, he suffered the multiple insults of Parkinson’s and emphysema and occasional heart problems. His hands and voice shook. I was anxious, too. For once, in a difficult situation, we didn’t verbally attack one another. I simply told him my memories, and how I felt as a child, and how those feelings remained with me. If we ever wanted to have an honest and trustworthy relationship—if that was even possible—we couldn’t go on pretending the abuse had never happened.

My father did not deny anything I said. He said he never wanted to hurt me, that everything he’d done had been out of love, and that—this seemed so out of context—my mother was the best person in the world. He mumbled that he was one of “a lot of guys” who had come back from World War II “really messed up.” He wasn’t full of his usual bravado but seemed uncertain and filled with sorrow.

In the end, there was nowhere else to go in our conversation. I didn’t expect much in the way of response that day. I was still trying to figure out what I really wanted from him, if anything—a task that would prove far more difficult than I could then envision. The next day, I returned to the East.

My father and I spoke minimally, only when necessary. Not long after our meeting, he sent a check for \$200, which he could not afford. I signed it over to a feminist group working with survivors of child sexual abuse. One of the therapists asked me if she could send him a thank-you note. Only if you say nothing more than “thank you,” I said. Anything else was between my father and me. She wrote him a shaming letter.

Within a few years, unable to bear the cement canyons of the East any longer, I returned to Colorado, though not to my hometown. Not long after, my father’s doctor told me he had experienced a series of heart attacks and could not be released home without consistent, live-in sup-

port. My father had little money. Affordable home health care was far too limited. There were no options beyond my stepping in for a time.

Oh, shit, no. I won't! I can't! Fuck this! You can't ask this of me! No! I wanted to say, “No, you worthless, hurtful old man. Fend for your own damn self for once in your miserable, bullying, dream-killing life.” Why would I coddle a monster? But something inside kept sending a different message: “If you go, you'll learn something important.” And this voice would not shut up. But where did it come from? All these years later, I've finally settled the matter. [Noble rhetoric, meet messy, complicated reality](#). All my activist life, I'd declared for the humanity and worthiness of everyone. My justice chickens were coming home to roost. In the most unexpected, enraging, and inconvenient way possible.

## **The Home Front**

I had no idea what would constitute “justice.” Jail was out; it was too late. Even if it were possible, would I really want to send this guy to a factory for violence and degradation, including sexual violence, much of it committed by authorities, and expect him to come out better? No. Nor could my father make me rich by signing over all his worldly goods. He didn't have any to speak of. When he died years later, the house I grew up in, sold for \$30,000. I could have just left him in the hospital, where they would have transferred him to some lousy, poorly staffed place where he would lie in his own piss and die. But no one should die like that.

Besides, sexual abuse was only part of the story. Given to unpredictable rages, Dad sometimes beat me. Not my mother. Always the kid. (The sexual and physical abuse stopped before I reached my teens.) And he almost always responded with shaming ridicule when I talked about my dreams and hopes. Sometimes, I taunted him, standing running distance away: “You

can’t hurt me!” And when he lunged toward me, starting to pull off his leather belt with the big buckle. I ran away. In school and through reading, I developed a verbal arsenal to protect myself, conjuring clouds of words with which to overwhelm and confuse him. I tried to make him feel as stupid as I felt.

From time to time, over the years, my father and I fell into an uneasy peace, but there was no solid foundation to it. Nor could I make sense of the fact that my childhood was never just an unending nightmare of abuse. There also were significant swaths of those growing-up years and family time that I loved. My mother and father were both capable of great kindness, goodness, and fun: she often, with great imagination, and he on occasion. But these moments of genuine goodness and warmth could switch up in an instant. I was not yet able to comprehend this paradox in my own heart, much less in conversation with a parent.

My father was still in the hospital when I walked into our old house. It felt so small, much smaller than when I was a child. The first thing I did was take the loaded .38 revolver out of the drawer of his bedside table where he’d always kept it, unload it, and stash the bullets separately from the revolver on a high shelf in an inaccessible place. Good thing my father wasn’t unremittingly brutal. Had that been the case, I can easily imagine myself in the place of, say, young [Bresha Meadows](#) who killed her abusive father. I always knew where the gun was and, before I was eight years old, knew how to use it. This is why [I support survivors](#), subjected to physical and sexual violence, who do [defend themselves and other family members](#), sometimes killing the people who abuse them in the process.

The first thing my father said when he got home from the hospital and after getting settled into bed was, “Where’s my gun?”

Restorative justice folks often talk about justice as a matter of “restoring right relationship.” My father and I had no right relationship to restore. When I came to help, we were often resentful of and angry with each other.

But something else happened over the months, even the years that followed, when I was there full time and after I left because he recovered sufficiently to live on his own again with better home health assistance. It was nothing dramatic or definitive. “Something else” showed up as little bits of information and insight tucked into ordinary niches and corners of conversation. Conversation with my father. With his older brother. With a cousin, older than I, who had known my paternal grandfather’s meanness. With my maternal great aunt. With some of my father’s old cronies and acquaintances from the years when he was given to public brawls. With extended family members. And some of it showed up as memory of talks with my mother, both when I was growing up and especially when she was dying. Lots of minutiae that eventually began to coalesce into a larger whole.

None of this excused my father’s abusiveness. He [remained accountable](#) for that. But all of this apparent flotsam and jetsam began to cohere in ways that helped me begin to grasp the context in which his abusiveness developed, played out, and, eventually, ebbed. It helped me begin to make sense of my own childhood.

I can’t tell you how things began to shift. But they did. Slowly, awkwardly, we began to become caring adults in each other’s presence.

Beyond learning about generations of various kinds of abuse, trauma, and abandonment in my parent’s families that just got kicked on down the line, I saw that my father was the loneliest, most frightened person I’d ever met. And that my mother had stopped much of the abuse, though

she never felt able to speak directly about it. She died of pancreatic cancer feeling she was being punished for not being a good enough Christian.

For many years, I told close friends that it was as if my family had booked passage on the *Titanic*, but I was the only one who made it to the lifeboats. Now I know that none of us made it.

If justice was to come, it had to embrace all of us, and it had to do it in a way that valued our all of our lives. If [accountability](#) was possible and transformation was to happen, both individual and collective tragedies must be addressed. And it had to offer the possibility of new, just, compassionate, and generous relationships—especially where they’d never existed in the first place.



*Kay Whitlock and [Jackie St. Joan](#)*

### **“The Fingerlings”**

Years ago, as part of an invitational “emerging playwrights” program sponsored by the Montana Repertory Theater, I wrote a one-act play called “The Home Front.” It is a surrealistic, domestic drama set in the 1980s or 90s. The main characters wear World War II combat helmets and flak jackets. A visiting director from the West Coast spoke with me after watching a staged reading. “It’s always a fascinating challenge to have an inarticulate male as a lead,” she said, re-

ferring to the elderly father (“Jimbo”) in the play. She didn’t mean the character was stupid, ignorant, or mute. She meant he possessed no language with which to describe or even comprehend his own emotions and experiences.

While I did not emerge as a playwright, that director put a name to something I couldn’t. And this helped me understand what happened, I think, during that extended time I’d spent with my father. “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant,” wrote Emily Dickinson. It was only through snatches of conversation about “other things” that necessary truths and histories began to become clearer to both of us.

For instance, I knew from the time I was a child that my father was haunted by his WWII experiences when, as an Army engineer, his unit accompanied Marines to [Saipan](#). Badly wounded, he was sent home. My mother told me he refused to talk about any of it. The only war stories he told when I was growing up were about how he and his buddies got drunk and beat each other up.

One afternoon as my father and I sat on the front porch, he began to talk about how terrified he was on Saipan. About the nightmare of seeing women, some holding their children, jumping off cliffs to their deaths rather than be captured. He recalled the horror of the caves of the island and the violent death they held. For several minutes, memories spilled out, before he fell silent. He didn’t talk about this as if it excused or explained anything; it just needed to be said. A few years later, at a Thanksgiving gathering of my extended family, he unexpectedly began to tell my partner about other terrors related to Saipan. And just as suddenly lapsed into silence.

Several times, without defending himself or asking for absolution, he apologized to me. Let me know, in roundabout fashion, that it was my mother who made him stop the physical and sexual abuse. Told me things that helped me understand some of my mother’s inheritance of chaos and confusion when she was growing up.

I asked about his life, and he began, for the first time, to ask—haltingly—about mine. The question of forgiveness never arose. Rather, this unexpected time with my father became a time of transformation—for him and for me—in ways I will never be able to describe in daylight language. But for me, it is far more powerful than “forgiveness.”

It turns out that everything really is connected to everything else. War, colonialism, prisons, policing, and domination provide the models and norms for abuse and violence and disposability in families, workplaces, and spiritual communities. My fate was connected to my father’s, and his to mine in the most intricate ways, over generations. If abuse and trauma are generational, so are healing and transformation. That’s a huge missing piece of the mainstream dialogue about sexual harassment and abuse and how to end it. But in the 1980s and beyond, I finally began to have a burgeoning sense of [what might be possible](#) if we reject the punishing paradigm. That kind of change could [crack everything open](#).

As for my father and me? Well, we continued in unpredictable fits and starts to create a new and better relationship. I visited regularly. He and I still sometimes really pissed each other off.

One evening in 1996, when I was living in Montana, he called. Recently moved to a nursing home after collapsing one too many times in assisted living, he’d been feeling frightened, lonely, and invisible. But this night, he sounded different. His shaky voice also held a note of excitement. He told me about a dream he’d had.

I won’t reveal the details here. The essence was ordinary people who get an unexpected and mysterious chance for new beginnings that are not yet knowable. His dream even came with a title: “The Fingerlings.” When he was done telling it, he said, “Do you think that’s a good story?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “That’s a really good story, Dad.”

“I don’t know why it’s called that. But if you think it’s good,” he said, “I would like to give it to you. You always were the writer and storyteller in the family. I don’t know what to do with it. Do you think you might want it?”

“I love this this dream,” I said.

“I don’t have anything else. Maybe you could do something with it some day?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure I can. Not sure when. But I love this dream. Thank you.”

We wished each other good night, promising to talk again soon. We never did. Two days later, he died. I can’t remember if we said we loved each other. I’d like to think we did.



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