

Every Breath You Take¹

By Grace Poore

In 1964, a woman named Catherine Genovese was stabbed to death by a serial rapist in Queens, New York. She was a bar manager returning home in the early hours of the morning when the attacker surprised her. The first person who heard her cries for help raised the window of the apartment and yelled out at the unseen assailant, "Let the girl alone." Subsequently the attacker drove off. But he returned to find Catherine trying to get into her building and stabbed her again. During the 30-minute period between when she was first stabbed and when she finally died, 38 people saw or heard what was happening and did nothing. No one called the police. No one stepped out to assist Catherine. No one stepped in to confront the killer. And when one person eventually called the police, it was too late. The middle class white neighborhood where this situation unfolded was made up of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and included many European immigrants. When reporters asked the 38 people why they did nothing, their responses ranged from: "I didn't realize how serious it was" to "I thought it was a private matter," to "I don't know." But mostly people said, "I didn't know what to do."²

In 1968, John Darley and Bibb Latane first raised the notion of bystander apathy. Their studies along with others showed that bystander apathy occurs because people assume someone else will do something, someone else is more qualified or better equipped to intervene, they wait to see how others respond before they make a move, they're not sure if their help is wanted, and some are concerned about being embarrassed in case their assistance is rejected.

In a 2005 study³ submitted to the Department of Justice, researchers found that bystander response is less about apathy and more about preparedness. People are willing to take action and be socially responsible if their awareness is raised about how harmful and undeserved violence is, and if they are taught to recognize signs of violence and, most importantly, if they are trained how to make interventions before, during and after violence occurs. With the right attitude and the right tools to respond appropriately, people, who are bystanders in a situation, can be made to feel more

confident about taking action. They can be empowered so they don't have to look away or disengage. In other words, bystanders can be considered an untapped resource with the potential to be allies and agents of change.

On some level, bystanding is like breathing. We engage in it on the conscious and unconscious level. It's premeditated and also instant, instinctual. We can take big breaths, little breaths, or hold our breath. If we do any of these things often and long enough, they become a pattern. For instance, the conscious act of holding our breath can become so automatic that we no longer realize when we're doing it. Adolescents who repeatedly hear, "You're getting fat, suck in your gut," will learn to contract their stomach muscles and condition themselves to, perhaps, become shallow breathers. Eventually, their diaphragms and lungs will adapt to their distorted breathing pattern. Imagine how much distorted breathing occurs when children are being sexually abused on a regular basis. Their bodies will learn to adapt to the anticipated encounters with the perpetrator. Fear will mark their breathing patterns. Voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious will become entwined. How will all this alter the way in which their organs function?

A few years ago, a South Asian mother in Massachusetts slit her 4-year old daughter's wrists and then her own after she discovered her husband sexually abusing the daughter. Would the woman have looked for another way out if bystanders in her life had made it possible for her to even have a conversation about what was happening? How many times did this mother hold her breath when she found her husband with the child? How many times did she hold her breath when she sensed something was strange even before she caught him abusing their daughter?

In the late 90's, a 12-year old South Asian girl was discovered pregnant in her second trimester because her brother had been having sex with her. Would her trauma have been eased if the bystanders in her life had looked out for her differently?

This raises the question: Who are bystanders? The first people that come to mind are the family members. But there are many many others as well. For instance, in

the case of the South Asian mother who attempted to kill her child and herself, one key bystander was the South Asian women's organization in that area. They had consistently refused to deal with child sexual abuse within the South Asian community and said it doesn't happen to us -- "Not in our community, not by our men, not to our children." When they heard about the case, their first response was shock that someone in our community could do something like that. They were quoted in the newspapers saying, we cannot believe something like this could happen in our community. What a message to put out to other South Asian women facing a similar situation of trying to protect their children from violence?

Another bystander in that mother's life was the state domestic violence and sexual violence coalition that had an office about an hour away. They had not worked sufficiently to build alliances with the South Asian community. They had not done outreach to possible South Asian allies in the area. They remained a predominantly white organization despite talk of cultural diversity.

Bystanders were also the media who ran the story of the horrific details of the attempted mother-child suicide. It was an exotic murder attempt by a foreign mother whose foreign husband was abusing their daughter. Where were the stories about what the woman would have gone through to get help before she made the incredibly desperate attempt to end the violence by choosing death for her daughter and herself? Where were the stories about the child whose parents were in prison for attempted manslaughter and attempted child sexual abuse?

In the case of the 12-year old girl, the by-standers were her teachers in the school she attended -- who said, they had no idea she was pregnant because of the loose clothes she wore. They felt that they were being culturally sensitive by not noticing what was going on with this girl. Was pregnancy the only sign this girl put out that she was being sexually abused by her brother? Is it possible that there were no other signs? Why didn't others notice the changes in her? How many times did this 12-year old's breathing change when she had to deal with being the strange foreign girl in school, the

strange foreign girl with a secret that no one else knew about except her 17-year old brother who shared her room.

Psychiatrist Judith Herman who is best known for her books, *Trauma and Recovery* and *Father-Daughter Incest* says that bystanders in a situation of child sexual abuse are not outsiders but part of the same family. Some of them may also have been abused by the perpetrator. All have some kind of relationship with the victim and perpetrator. Nobody can remain neutral even if they wanted to. People take sides.

Let's understand that we will all constantly cross the line between being a responsible and irresponsible bystander, between a bystander who engages and stays engaged and one who engages and then lets go because we've taken a side. This is part of the double bind that by-standers get caught in. We hold our breath. And if we don't get out of our double binds, we become part of an ongoing cycle of double binds; we create double binds for others. We cause others to hold their breath.

I would like us to breathe properly -- where breathing is a metaphor for making social justice a comprehensive right and not a selective right, where we dismantle the forces that cause us to become irresponsible bystanders, where we change the ways in which we have learned to adapt to distorted versions of safety and community and accountability, where we question the sides we take and find ways to unlock the double binds, undo the double jeopardy that people in our communities face as they deal with the many aspects of violence in their lives.

(Also see "By-Standing Is A Choice" - http://www.shaktiproductions.net/By-Standing_Is_A_Choice.pdf by Grace Poore for more information on responsible by-standing in child sexual abuse.)

NOTES:

¹ Title of a song by Sting.

² These notes are from various media reports on the case.

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