

Reflection

ANGELA BROWNE

To write this reflection, I've come back to a cottage just down the road from the house at Sea Road where *When Battered Women Kill* was written so many years ago. The Atlantic Ocean stretches before me in the early sun; Star Island and the lighthouse lie directly in my view, five miles offshore.

I wrote *When Battered Women Kill* on the second floor of an old house two miles to the south, in a bow window overlooking the sea. My strongest memory is of writing the vignettes from the women's life histories. Integrating the literature into the book was easy; writing the narratives, however, was not. After conducting the original interviews, the women and their stories were etched into my heart. As I wrote I could see their faces, their hands; hear their voices, their inflections, the labored pauses during the most difficult accounts. My hands would still be writing when I realized my throat had closed from the pain of the content. At those times I would leave the writing, walk down the stairs, out the back door, across the long lawn, and over the rocks to the beach. There I would walk and walk, in any weather, silent, sometimes in tears, until it somehow seemed bearable again and I could start over. And this pain was just in bearing *witness* to their lives. I was amazed at their perseverance, heart, and courage in living those lives. The point of writing *When Battered Women Kill* was to be a channel for these women's stories, and to be an effective enough channel that others would respond with change and understanding.

I was raised in a safe family: no virtue of mine, it was where I first opened my eyes. There must have been violence in some of the homes around me in my small town of 7,000 during my years there, but no one spoke of it. I was grown, married, in college, and still living in safety before I learned that others lived in fear. That learning changed my life. In conducting 8-hour interviews with women with abusive partners, and 10- or 12-hour interviews with women charged with the death of violent mates, I heard accounts of attacks and atrocities I had previously associated only with hostage situations or prisoners of war. A newly dedicated student (I had dropped out of college the first time), I went straight to the law library for case law and was amazed to find that individuals faced with such intimidation and threat virtually had no legal recourse or protections. (This was in 1980.)

I was convinced that the majority of people in the United States were caring human beings who, if they understood the prevalence and severity of the violence within homes, would find it unacceptable and pave the way for change. I still believe that view was substantiated as the first wave of activists, survivors, and researchers communicated the urgency of these realities in multiple public venues. The rapidity with which laws and policies changed in the nation and then more broadly in democratic countries was historically noteworthy. I felt that if I died the year the book was published, being a part of that effort and shoulder to shoulder with those people would have been enough.

Now, at the beginning of the 2000s, I still celebrate those years and the critical changes that were accomplished. But now there is new—and quite urgent—work to be done. Although violence at home has theoretically become unacceptable, punitive measures

are sometimes applied to assaulted women or to their children; protection and redress are ignored. Practical resources that would enable endangered women and children to leave or to escape their assailants continue to disappear, as budget cuts remove almost all community level opportunities for adequate income, health services, work, and safe housing for those with limited financial means.

Most frightening, for me, is the change in the valuing of women, men, and children who struggle. I see no evidence that the larger society or most of its leaders value women, men, or children living in poverty, those with disabilities, or those with mental illness at all—regardless of their suffering or the glaring inequities that cause and exacerbate this suffering. Indeed, budget cuts in the early 2000s seem to run in quite the opposite direction. We live now by an “extreme end” paradigm as a nation: ignoring basic needs and supports until dramatically negative outcomes occur, and then reacting with extreme, expensive, and often punitive measures. Responses that formerly were considered a last resort (emergency or acute care, long prison sentences, incarceration of many citizens) are now often the only response.

What our efforts in the late seventies and early eighties taught me is that individuals, separately and collectively—operating in their own unique ways, but for the same goal—can make a difference, in a nation and a world. It is now time for a collaborative and unstoppable movement as large as the one documented in this book to address these new and pervasive dangers.

RELATED READINGS

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