To Speak of the Unspeakable

By Richard A. Shweder


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After the author was raped, she found no one wanted to hear about her struggle to survive.

AFTER SILENCE

Rape and My Journey Back.

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THERE are a lot of reasons people don’t like to talk about rape. They feel upset, horrified, embarrassed, polluted, even cursed by the very thought of it. You do not have to go to Sri Lanka, where the location “being shamed” is a local euphemism, or to India, where it is believed that emotions if expressed are dangerous and don’t go away, to learn that women who are sexually assaulted don’t want to discuss their experiences and certainly don’t want to seek revenge by making the rapist the subject of their next book. Even in Manhattan, among loquacious, psychologically minded Westerners who believe that the emotions if left unexamined are dangerous, one of the best ways to stop dinner-party conversation dead is to start describing what it felt like to be raped. There are few published first-person accounts of the experience of being sexually pillaged and its aftermath. “After Silence” is one of the first and, I would wager, it is always going to be one of the best.

In 1985, Nancy Venable Raine was 39, divorced and living alone in a working-class area of Boston. She was attacked and tied up in her home and for several hours violated by an intruder whose face she never saw. “After Silence” is a profound and revelatory narrative of her suffering. Raine, who is a poet and essayist, tries to come to terms with unbidden feelings of shame, with the desecration of her spiritual essence — the identity of the person she was before the rape seemed “to belong to someone else” — and with the unwelcome yet insistent belief that she was responsible for her own defilement. The book is her attempt to “drain the swamp of victim-blame” and to write her way back to wholeness and out of hell by constructing a blameless and shameless modern narrative about the meaning of rape.

Raine is so honest a psychological explorer that she recognizes that rape is different from other kinds of assault — mugging, say — precisely because it evokes feelings of perversity and self-loathing, which silence the voice of pain. Her report on the silence is poignant. Shortly after her publication of an essay in The New York Times Magazine in 1994 describing the rape, she goes for lunch at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., where she introduces herself to the “woman with the amber necklace.”

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