

Purple Ribbon

by Nikki Colodny

L'auteure relate un incident survenu en 1987 lors d'une conférence en faveur de la liberté de choix. Calomniée par des membres de l'auditoire qui étaient contre le libre choix, l'auteure explique

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comment elle a été protégée par des femmes du Comité d'Edmonton sur l'avortement qui portaient toutes des rubans mauves.

It is the wrong time to lose that ribbon. Moving cities with aching loss, I was paralyzed against the task of packing my painful regrets in with my books and chairs and candles and CDs. My sister, Pen, did the honours and packed me up. Now I sit here unpacking the flotsam and jetsam of my life in this cozy new home of mine. At the moment I am in a panic, certain that the purple ribbon has not made this particular transition of my life. Perhaps as I unpack I will find it. But I am fearful that in my haze of anger and disappointment several months ago, I actually threw it away. Or that Pen discarded it as an insignificant piece of trash rather than the powerful symbol that it is. I am fearful that the disappearance of the ribbon will be one more reminder of the painful losses of that last while.

That night (Alberta, 1987) as I finished speaking and began to turn away, they rushed the lectern. They yelled my name with threats of violence to my body—fists shaking, spitting their anger, eager to use the force of their hands to stop me. Witches we have spoken, notwithstanding

pointed sharpened stakes through our hearts. Boldly we have spoken, hand in hand with sisters fighting.

I had spoken of our rights as women—of our birthright to reproductive and sexual self-determination. My language was geared to be heard by those who came to listen. My topic was the injustice of the Canadian federal abortion law which restricted abortions to hospitals and required women seeking an

abortion to get permission from a hospital committee. I also offered my encouragement and assistance to open an abortion clinic in Edmonton. My goal was to assist in expanding the growing movement to repeal the unjust law. A repeal would allow abortions to be performed in clinics. That would ease access to abortion and expand women's reproductive choices. The restrictions of the law were having a severe impact on women's health and women's rights. Abortion clinics already existed in defiance of the law in Ontario and Quebec. These clinics were lightning rods that provided both focus for opposition to the law and also much needed abortion services. I was an abortion provider in the Ontario free-standing clinic. I had been one of the doctors arrested and charged in September 1986 and I continued to defy the law.

I got up to leave the table with three other co-speakers. Because of the vehemence of a small but vocal group of anti-choice neighbours, the women from the Edmonton Abortion Caucus have only organized private events. They have never before had a speaking event that was open to the public. They had not yet had to marshal such a lecture.

Having carefully done their homework by talking to women with expe-

rience in other Canadian cities and preparing themselves with each others support, they line the sloping aisles of the amphitheater room, each with a purple ribbon tied to her right arm. Five anti-choice men and one woman who have already been identified by their aggressive interventions in the question and answer period rise with anger sparking from their bodies and voices. Pushing past others, they propelled themselves towards me, shouting my name, with contorted faces. Bodies arched with menace. Muscles clenched in the fury of impotence.

They have not interfered with the meeting. I came, we said our messages, we entertained questions and answers (including some of theirs) and now I was leaving, having accomplished exactly what we had planned. Their disruption was ineffective and they responded with rage.

My sisters—lesbian, bisexual and straight—defend me. Purple ribbons gleaming, they form a wall with their bodies between me and the five. One marshal escorts me out a black door into the library's hallway. I am glad to notice that the door is a fire door, thick and locked, and that the hallway where I stand with two women is separated from the amphitheater's entrance by a series of locked fire doors.

I can hear them screaming at me through the door. I hear them threatening me with physical harm. I hear my name shouted.

I am worried about my sisters. There were only five of them and two were with me. I suggest we go back out to help. My sisters dissuade me, reminding me that I am the focus of the anger; that it will be easier to calm things down out there without my presence. I see they are right. Yet how strange it feels to act for women's rights and therefore be so vilified. I convince the two allies to leave me for a bit so they can help in the main room where the noise, while still very

noticeable, has moved away from the door that separates us from them.

Those purple-ribboned women have taken care of everything, including me. Shaking, prideful, we smile into each other's eyes. Witches all.

I ask the bravest, the woman who had been most able at the time to move out with speed, strength, and clear thinking, to give me the ribbon from her arm.

I've had it for years now, always in sight in my room, tied on my desk lamp, tied on the glass handle of my closet door.

Now it's gone. It might even have been me who threw it away in the haze of my past illness of spirit.

Nowadays, I am often spirited again. I want that ribbon in my room. It is in my bones, I want the world to be a more habitable place for women. Working against gender oppression is not an affectation of guilt or longing. It is not a layering that I may some day shed. It is fundamental to the meaning of my life. I do see purple-ribboned women around me

and unless I find that ribbon in these boxes that will have to do.

Postscript

In January 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada declared the abortion law unconstitutional; a violation of women's rights. The case before the court was one of the series of criminal charges made against doctors performing abortions in free-standing clinics in Ontario and Quebec.

A few days after I wrote my first draft of this telling, I unpacked the purple ribbon. I was jubilant. Tacked to my bulletin board, it is a rumpled reminder as I edit.

This is a true story. Nikki Colodny, psychotherapist and physician, is the only woman in Canada to have been arrested and charged for choosing to practice civil disobedience by performing abortions in defiance of Section 251 of the Criminal Code. Her ongoing work as an abortion provider and consultant continues to improve access to safe, supportive abortion services.

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