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Exile

And a year of trying to find a road back from personal and public shame

By [John Hockenberry](#)

If you know anything about me, John Hockenberry, it is probably that I am a familiar voice from public radio. You likely know that I use a wheelchair because of a 1976 car accident and the resultant spinal cord injury, received in the twilight of adolescence at age nineteen. More recently you may know of me as a correspondent for ABC and then NBC News and finally as the host of the public radio program *The Takeaway* from 2008 to 2017, when my contract was not renewed. Possibly you are aware of me as the father of five children: two sets of twins—three girls and a boy, aged twenty and seventeen—and another eight-year-old boy.

A cluttered storage unit in Brooklyn now contains fragments of the life I no longer live. My Emmy awards for work in television and my Peabody awards, framed pictures from travels all around the world, a signed statement of service from President Obama from my time as a member of his Commission on White House Fellowships, are all ghoulishly visible through plastic wrap and tape. A corner filled with camping equipment and spare wheelchair parts constitutes my sole Plan B at this point. The rest of the boxes I wonder whether I'll even open in the years I have left. I once more silently list the names in my mind: anyone whom I have somehow hurt. For my work colleagues I have said my piece and have run out of energy. I have also faced unrelenting anger from both male and female colleagues. Or, more common and more painful, I have faced their stony and, in my view, cowardly silence. Only one of my accusers reached out or responded to my heartfelt queries. She had very useful and meaningful things to say, for which I am grateful.

In 2007 I joined a public radio team that wanted to develop a show to take on NPR's audience and fund-raising behemoth *Morning Edition*. It was one of the hardest tasks imaginable at a time of great uncertainty in journalism, with many bitter editorial fights. In the end we made *The Takeaway* a successful new program broadcast around the country to an audience of 2 million. We failed at challenging *Morning Edition* in a drive time, though, and the consequences of that failure left painful memories. I recall those days with exhaustion. People who remember me in those rough times as condescending and bullying got the chance to revisit tough editorial battles

from years in the past when I ended up in the bitter discussion of sexual assault, powerful broadcast hosts, and powerless women employees that began last fall.¹

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Asked why Hockenberry's contract was not renewed, a spokesperson for WNYC declined to comment on "confidential personnel matters," but confirmed in an email that he had been officially reported for sexual harassment by co-workers and contributors, that there were HR complaints against him, and that there was an internal investigation following his departure.

I have never been accused of anything that, in my view, could be construed as criminal or coercive. But in the blink of an eye I have gone from being someone recognized on the streets of New York City as a journalist, author, and advocate for people with disabilities to someone who fears recognition and trembles at the prospect of running into some radio listener who has come to find me an object of pity or reproach. My mission here in part is to let you know a lot more of the truth about me and to deny what you may have heard that is false but gets repeated over and over without challenge.

I am surely guilty of bad judgment. I have learned in the hardest way the price of not understanding or caring how my actions are perceived by others. Despite acknowledgment by my accusers that I am no rapist or sex offender, the unarguable discomfort and anguish of my co-workers have thrown me into a category in which society at large chooses, for whatever reason, not to distinguish between the charge and act of rape and some improper, failed, and awkward attempts at courtship. This blindness isn't just about me; I believe it has roots in other social problems in America. This country has always been an uneasy and often contradictory fusion of sexual puritanism, social progressivism, secular tolerance, and the extreme zealotry of intolerance. Throughout our history, these contradictions have constrained and crippled our attempts to achieve gender equality, racial justice, and true democracy.

This is not to say that history gets me off the hook. In a painful time as my marriage was coming apart, I outrageously suggested to a married co-worker that we have an affair. I also pathetically confessed romantic feelings to a brilliant young producer I worked closely with while in a hotel room I had invited her to and watched her leave, upset, when it was clear she wanted nothing to do with me.² However misguided I was, there was no physical coercion, no groping or attempts at pushing beyond being told no. My respect and regard for these women did not ever become persistent sexual demands. I deny being a racist bully in the tough editorial days of the birth of *The Takeaway*. I was overbearing and obnoxious and was called out for it, as my employment record shows. I also deeply regret adding to what was a very difficult time. I certainly lost plenty of editorial arguments and carried out my duties as a host to reflect the consensus of the team rather than my own megalomaniacal impulses. I deny directing my strict editorial demands only at women employees. Any lapses in my emotional intensity were dealt with internally at work, and I readily expressed my remorse in front of the staff. In the end my main accuser wasn't an employee of *The Takeaway* but a former guest who took some friendly emails from me and made them into something in her own mind that I can neither dispute nor confront. Writing in *New York* magazine's *The Cut*, Suki Kim says I made her feel "uncomfortable."³ I'm sorry I ever gave her such an impression. I never sought or wanted a relationship with her other than as a contributor to our show, which, I believed, needed the voices of smart women.

² Both women dispute the characterization of these events in this account and claim they have been downplayed.

³ In an email to *Harper's Magazine*, Kim wrote, "My reporting on John Hockenberry's actions when he was a host at WNYC has already been vetted, fact-checked, and published in a national magazine. I stand by the facts in my article, which wasn't about Hockenberry and myself but about many women at WNYC who strenuously objected to his behavior, and a station leadership that failed to enforce a safe work environment."

I understand that I have to confront bad judgments and mistakes I made in my personal and professional lives. I freely admit that during some very hard times I betrayed my wife of more than twenty years. We had spent much time working in couple's therapy to resolve our troubles, which were not unusual for married people under considerable stress, let alone with a disability that significantly impeded all kinds of physical intimacy. I would say, looking back, that we needed therapy and a language for discussing our physical and emotional needs much earlier. As a disabled man taking on "normal life" as an adult in the Seventies, I now see that my own confused sexuality needed some personal guidance long ago.

I hope that in offering some kind of context for my misfortunes I can also provide a basis for the beginning of a constructive conversation about sexuality in the twenty-first century. Among my many discoveries over the past year is that I now think we need to begin to fill a void of human understanding created when the centuries-old, flawed, repressive, and degrading traditions of courtship manners and sexual decorum were wiped out at the end of the twentieth century. Do I dare make a spirited defense of something once called romance from the darkness of this exile, at a nadir of my personal credibility, at a moment when all of civilization seems to be in turmoil, over what is a plausible narrative of male/female attraction? Not only do I dare, knowing what righteous anger is out there, I really believe I have no choice. Who cares what I think? Possibly no one, but whatever you may know about me, I can assure you that I didn't vanish once I was cast adrift in public scandal. I have five children who need to understand and learn from their father's misjudgments, and I have to learn how to go on after such a complete repudiation. Whether or not others are interested, I have no choice but to make sense of recent events.

For almost a year I have lived as a pariah facing cold silence or open hostility in public. I have watched presumed friends vanish. I have listened to colleagues, lawyers, and PR professionals tell me that I am unemployable. "You are no longer a person, you are an archetype," said one supportive male friend. "You are caught in the overcorrection of this revolution," a supportive female friend told me over dinner. "All revolutions have their overcorrection." These are difficult realities to accept, let alone argue with. Even Thomas Jefferson at one point supported the Jacobins' Reign of Terror in France. I may not support the zealotry with which I have been dismantled, I may deny being some officer or agent of the patriarchy, but I wholeheartedly endorse the higher cause of gender equality and a better means for men and women to communicate.

In the past year I have found it impossible to get serious business meetings based on anything other than sympathy. I have watched as freelance work has been canceled. Less than a week before accusations about me appeared in the media, I was having lunch with people eager to produce a new program to replace *Charlie Rose*. Then I was swept away as completely as Rose,

at one point even being implicitly cast as an understudy for his own improper behavior. Offers to ghostwrite under a different name or no name at all have been refused or canceled. For a time the only employment I could contemplate was detailed on an email list seeking disabled senior citizens to be greeters at Walmart stores in Utah and Georgia.

By now probably most people in America have gone back and asked themselves whether events in their sexual past are truly settled. Men and women have shared in this reexamination, even if their motives are vastly different—women looking for evidence of victimization, men looking back largely to confirm their exoneration. Memories of key events in virtually everyone's personal sexual development have reopened to a fresh, sometimes frightening, sometimes even public view. Whatever my own lapses in judgment, the events that forced me to look again at behavior I had thought settled or accounted for are but a small episode in the vastness of the #MeToo movement's recalibration of millions of events.

What passes for personal guidance on sexuality today is a lexicon of jargon with the goal of avoiding STDs and perverts, and warnings about those child kidnappers parked up the street in the white vans that moms and dads of the Eighties mentioned in their “no talking to strangers” speeches to their now grown-up kids. The concern for safety is worthwhile. But as a substitute for the elaborate emotional zone called romance, it is not worthwhile. I am not going to confuse matters of the heart with capital crimes. Being a misguided romantic, or being born at the wrong time, or taking the wrong cues from the sexual revolution of the Sixties or having a disability that leaves one impotent at the age of nineteen—none of this is a justification for offensive behavior toward women. But is a life sentence of unemployment without possibility of furlough, the suffering of my children, and financial ruin an appropriate consequence? Does my being expunged from the profession in which I have worked for decades constitute a step on the road to true gender equality? Is my life a reasonable price exacted in the pursuit of justice, or is my situation an injustice born of a deeper dysfunction in the matters of gender and a fear of confronting anything beyond revenge, purges, and humiliation?

I meanwhile have had to rethink events going back to my days in middle school in the Sixties. I also reexamined movies I saw, books I read, conversations I had, and romantic and sexual milestones of all kinds. I grew up in the time of the Vladimir Nabokov novel *Lolita*, considered pornography before it was declared a work of art. How is *Lolita* thought of today? I embraced the freethinking spirit of Zorba the Greek when I played him onstage in high school. Was this wise? I read the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Did I gain anything from that early Mother Earth candor about vulvae and clitorises? I witnessed the growth of feminist voices in literature, politics, and pop culture. As I look back at it all, some of my youthful admirations hold up, some decidedly do not. Quite by surprise, and maybe the biggest shock of all, in this past year I have become a huge fan of the radical feminist author Andrea Dworkin. More about that later.

The anger mobilized against me has also become a fear of being seen defending someone “like me.” My own teenage daughters have experienced this fear. It is not pleasant for a father to experience. There has been no public defense of me or much of an effort to salvage someone who spent a lifetime devoted to serving the public and seeking accountability for the powerful. The accused stand accused, the victims have told their stories, but a broader conversation feels

like it has yet to begin. We stand today in silent shame along the spectrum of genders, across a chasm without a useful language for redemption and, even worse, with no language for building relationships other than ones filled with suspicion and confusion. The traditional cues of romance and modesty—as flawed and hypocritical as they were—have been replaced by dry discussions of orgasms, genital size, and the limits of misogynist hip-hop lyrics.

I would easily bow out as the obsolete old man at the family reunion if I had any sense that this new, angry language was an improvement on anything, or if I hadn't spent years listening to people express their contempt for dating scenes, bar scenes, bedroom scenes where the cheerless courtships of our time play out. I would happily dismiss myself as an old stupid if I thought any of today's stories of love and heartbreak rivaled the power of traditional romance, which has been declared dead and replaced by the well-documented hookup culture. What scene of today can make any sense of these overdressed words of passion from Lord Byron:

When lover's vows
Seem sweet in every whisper'd word;
And gentle winds, and waters near,
Make music to the lonely ear.
Each flower the dews have lightly wet,
And in the sky the stars are met

Emailing something like this to a co-worker could get you fired today, if anyone even understood it.

Instead of the traditional romances, I see the narratives of porn and victimization drawn out in blogs and confessionals that seem to promise little pleasure or fun. My own children often speak of a generalized and oppressive sexual tension over all encounters, dates, and flirtations. Alcohol and drugs dull the awkwardness, and to my great surprise my own progressive teenagers and their peers (both boys and girls) report they quite often have no clear indication where things are headed or whether anyone has made a decision. In the workplace, there's no place for Byron's "gentle winds, and waters near [that] make music to the lonely ear." But by today's standards Byron was an incestuous misogynist, hardly a model date.

In the course of my exile I have had time to ponder over things that go unquestioned, through the anger and snark, in what passes for aggressive and supposedly healthy candor about sex and gender. A few months back, a writer on the website Medium thought I needed to read "the numbers" about oral sex for women, to look at specific techniques diagrammed in a PDF I didn't have the courage to download, or to read the chatty blog post "What's Up with Going Down? Let's talk about oral sex equality."

Hey, let's not. As a paraplegic man whose total lack of sensation has motivated a certain amount of adventurous improvisation in order to have any kind of sex life, I hardly need a primer on sexual techniques. But this bloggy clinical discussion of bodily functions dressed up as feminism is no replacement for the traditional language of romantic modesty, unless it's the romance of a medical textbook. This is the opposite of romance, a word that barely has meaning today.

Unlike the blunt and bracingly honest-seeming, sexually explicit comedy of Amy Schumer or (now discredited) Louis CK, romance does not get to the point or get down to business. In our time the language of modesty and manner—with all its coy stops and starts, excruciating digressions, and flirty delays that stalled the pure physical release of sexual intercourse—has been replaced by no lead-up, no delays, and lots of confusion. The hookup narrative starts with a blowjob, continues with a parade of sex toys and orifices that flashes by in a few seconds (nanoseconds if the couple is drunk), and ends at worst in accusations of rape and lifelong regrets, or, at best, with the interminable discussion of who should have done what to whom and why. Did I actually say yes to that? Did you say thank you? What shade of gray was that? This agony of sexual indecision and bewilderment is how my kids and their peers often describe their sexual experiences. As I listen I am horrified but thinking with a tiny sliver of parental relief: a more effective form of birth control I cannot imagine.

I have watched this year from my solitary confinement as stories besides mine emerged from the #MeToo movement. I saw how they were seized upon and chewed through a din of hateful blogs and tweets just as I had seen myself, in online comments, equated with Harvey Weinstein or called a sicko and much worse. The female physical therapists I had been going to weekly for years looked back on their encounters with me and decided they could no longer treat my arthritic joints after they read the reports about me. This was unbelievably hurtful, but there was nothing to be done. I read online comments from public radio listeners, perfect strangers who now claimed they always suspected I was a racist predator. I recall, most painfully, being compared in a comment to the most degrading and reprehensible disability stereotype in the movies: wheelchair-using Mr. Potter, played by Lionel Barrymore in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

It was open season on me, just as with others, in the public radio world. The inchoate anger of #MeToo was suddenly given license to target me, to make me an example, whether intended or not, to characterize me as the symbol of a tolerant radio culture of abuse, to see that I never worked in public radio again, to make sure any young women I met were cautious and vigilant and kept their distance. It has worked. But this isn't only about me. Even if I conceded the worst possible view of my own behavior, #MeToo does not seem to consider the effect my being tossed out onto an iceberg has on my five children, especially my three daughters. Witnessing their bewilderment over my public disgrace and watching all my kids emotionally veering from fury to pity over issues of dating, the workplace, romance, and sex while I have barely any credibility to help or guide them is a pain I wish on no one, not even my accusers.

There is an element to all this that feels generational, and tripping over the increasingly incompatible languages of the young and the old is hardly unmapped territory. Call me crazy, but I am convinced that if in a collective culture something is being hauled out as garbage in the crucial domain of human gender relations, social equity, and norms of love and mating, then something new probably needs to replace it. This generational piece has been referred to in the tepid and rare critique of the way things have played out since the ground-zero Weinstein revelations (i.e., from actress Catherine Deneuve), but very little else has.

I meanwhile have had the time to look back on virtually every sexual encounter or milestone in my life, all the influential books and movies that helped shape my character and conduct as a

man and see them through a revisionist prism. Was I an aggressor, a manipulator, a wielder of the crude weapons of the patriarchy; was I a rapist? Did I consent to what happened? Did I have consent for what I did?

Today I'm not so sure about forgiveness or redemption or what constitutes an appropriately confident male personality on any level. I have reread a lot of books that either discuss or build a story line around the sexual norms of the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties. I have developed a small personal canon of works and experiences that I have had to or chosen to reexamine.

I reread *Lolita* and became completely certain that Nabokov would have been arrested if it were published today. Surely Nabokov's marital transgressions would have been made public and would have changed the context of the novel. I was worried that even being seen with the book in public would confirm my offenses. I carried it on the subway once, and the impression that everyone was staring at me was so palpable that I got off at the next stop and went home by bus.

Nabokov celebrates the brain stem arousal that defines the character of Humbert and tells the story of how it leads to suffering and destruction. *Lolita* was shocking in the Fifties. The novel generated an outrage that largely came from how it violated a language of appropriate sexuality as well as publishing norms, norms that seem as remote today as a distant galaxy. It was later recognized as a legitimate work of art, but back then *Lolita* was, at worst, impolite and recklessly ahead of schedule in the evolution toward modern sexual norms. It was not a celebration of criminality in 1955; an obscenity, not a sexual assault.

I feel absolutely certain that *Lolita* would never be published today. In 2018 the most heinous obscenities are all about children. Any content that suggests child sex trafficking is categorized as extreme criminality, even while everything else is permitted in the banal world of pop culture and twenty-first-century online porn. *Lolita*, once a novel about a man powerless to control his lusts and lorded over by a tragic teenaged sexual superhero, today feels like a literary invitation to rape the powerless girl intern whose attractions are claimed by the patriarchy in the form of a middle-aged, all-powerful white male.

Lolita doesn't really hold up in our time as an exploration of universal passion and romantic obsession, but it has found a new life. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi's courageous memoir, Nabokov's novel becomes a surrogate for all that is forbidden in religion-enslaved Iran. The book's sexual details become navigable landmarks on a journey to self-awareness for some young people there. Nafisi makes the book serve as a talisman of the forbidden, but its sexual qualities are simply part of the details of the story rather than pornographic sparks waiting to be censored. Nafisi finds within *Lolita* a useful guidebook for recognizing how complicit we might become in our own imprisonment.

I found the women described in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* refreshing pioneers of intellectual freedom and stewards of reinvention in their potentially unshackled nation. Whereas the women in my presumably unshackled America seem to be more like the religious police of Iran in ways that they themselves cannot see, or refuse to see, right now. Again, I do not dispute the sources of the anger from centuries of gender inequality. I do question as dubious the value of letting anger stifle a language of reconciliation between men and women. *Lolita*, in the end, had

nowhere to go, Nabokov writes again and again in his novel. To my great surprise, in 2018 I find myself identifying with Lolita, her innocence lost along with any identity other than sexual. I say that knowing it may bring down a wrath from my critics and accusers much greater than what I have endured up until now.

In looking back at what I think of as the defining sexual experiences of my youth, I am struck with how private they all were. I had somehow received the message that such issues weren't to be discussed, although those years are seen as times of striking sexual candor. I can recall no evidence of that candor now. I never told my parents about getting molested by a strange bald man in a white sweater in a movie theater in Syracuse, New York, as an eighth grader while I was watching a matinee of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The man went for my zipper in the dark theater, and my terror was matched only by the size of my involuntary erection. My own body was apparently ready to jump in his lap, but my brain had a veto and commanded me to jump up and get away from him. It taught me the fear of speaking up, a fear that is not exclusive to one gender.

Such fear notwithstanding, my blank understanding of what sex was and how to approach girls in the late Sixties took place amid the swirl of radical change taking place in music, permissive dating, and the shirtless utopia of Woodstock. Being a nerdy, bookish sort, I conflated the verses of Byron and Shelley and Yeats with the Beatles, Dylan, politics, puberty, and Vietnam War protests. It all seemed to go together in a joyful heroic dance of discovery and empowerment.

Now all of that has been unhinged by my current iniquity. I have had no job for an entire year for the first time in my adult life, and when I am not filling out forms to receive social benefits for unemployed disabled people with lost income, my focus of creativity has been piano lessons and learning a piece by Romantic composer Johannes Brahms. Intermezzo in B Minor, Opus 119 No. 1 has been my companion. Written close to the end of the composer's life, it is a summation of Brahms's musical ideas on Romanticism, a somber look at mortality and, as I discovered for myself, his own troubled life and tortured loves.

Had I not been accused of being a sexual harasser I doubt I would have ever looked into the emotional life of Brahms. I would not have learned that he found sex with people he loved an agony and that it was only prostitutes who satisfied the hunger of his libido and were his preferred sexual partners. At a piano recital in June, I played my pieces along with a bunch of children, including my two sons, who were the stars of the concert. For me this became among the most stressful public performances of my life. The arty hipster venue in Bushwick, Brooklyn, was packed with parents who looked as though they had just contributed to the public radio pledge drive on their way over. I was challenged to ignore or evaluate the staring of the parents, and I could do neither. All I could do was sit at the end of a line of kid performers like some lost grandpa at the pediatrician's office. Were all the stares plain old wheelchair gawking, or was it "that's the guy" recognition? I kept my eyes down and waited for my turn to play.

The Romantic composers were not known for their tolerance of women or clarity in relationships. What would the narcissistic Chopin and his destructive relationship with George Sand make of the #MeToo movement? How would undisciplined Schubert, wracked with syphilis, answer an accusation of sexual harassment? The famously misogynist Brahms surely

would have dismissed the liberation language of women in the workplace as bluntly as any Taliban mullah. In 2018 the brilliance of the Romantics suddenly looks more like a musical roofie from the nineteenth century to get women to swoon and submit.

All of this added to my anxiety, but in the end Brahms's Intermezzo in B Minor was a success, if not exactly a triumph. I received welcome and enthusiastic compliments on my playing from some of the formerly menacing-looking parents in the audience, who commented on the emotional power of the music. Reports of the death of romance are apparently premature.

Two final reexaminations of my own life experiences in the past year of #MeToo purgatory delivered the most powerful evidence to me of not only how deeply and irrevocably things have changed but also how urgently those changes need to be addressed. For nearly all my adult life, the memory from my senior year of high school of being cast as Zorba in the musical based on the classic novel by Nikos Kazantzakis has been a proud one. The 1974 show is still talked about in my hometown.

Whatever theatrical talent I had, coupled with a distinct shortage of Mediterranean swarthinness in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, suburb where I lived, meant that a clumsy blond dork from the high school debate team would get the chance to play one of the most famous romantic figures in twentieth-century literature. At the tender age of seventeen I was playing the role of an aging free spirit who danced, chased women, and talked openly of his sexual conquests to anyone who would listen. The passion and freedom of Zorba became a model for romance and manhood in my life, something I consider now to have been a case of dreadful mentoring or at the very least some nasty bad luck. Kazantzakis makes his Zorba both a critic of the modern scientific repudiation of pagan traditions and demons and someone who embraces a progressive world of free love and romance. Zorba makes love at the drop of a hat. His claim that he worships women by sexually conquering them would undoubtedly get him a chilly meeting with HR and a toss to the streets today.

As I look back on those events now, they seem to have contributed to a judgment that the collaborative adventure of journalism was a setting for powerful relationships that would include sex and romance as well as the heroic narrative of finding the truth. But the novel *Zorba the Greek* doesn't hold up in our time: the women characters are empty puppets, and all of life seems simply to be about men overcoming their obsessions with success and women applauding when they do.

What is shocking to me is how, after two generations of so-called sexual liberation and the quest to achieve equality and standing for women and other groups like gays and trans people, we seem further apart than ever. Men's and women's expectations and goals in relationships in the workplace and elsewhere barely resemble each other, and the language for communicating what those different expectations might be barely exists.

I should mention that I have been married twice and divorced once (soon to be twice), so aside from having a dismal record as a spouse, in both cases these relationships came about on the job. In the first case I married a woman who was older than me and was my boss at a health care facility after we'd spent several months secretly living together. In the second case I married

someone who was a decade younger and could have credibly fit into the by now familiar #MeToo category of young women in the media business under the power of high-profile men on the air. I was a correspondent at ABC News and she was an associate producer when we met. The clichés of network sexual drama were well known in the Nineties when I began in television. You either did or you didn't. Everyone was conscious of being thought of as the male correspondent or executive who played around after work (whether single or married) or the woman producer or executive who did the same. The gossip was constant, and enormous efforts were devoted to maintaining secrecy, some of which efforts have been documented in the recent media scandals.

In the summer of 1995, at around the same time that my fiancée, Alison, and I were making the final plans for an October wedding, the book *Intercourse* by Andrea Dworkin was rereleased in a paperback edition that contained a foreword Dworkin herself wrote. Dworkin was infamous for arguing that the nature of heterosexual sex implied domination of women by men, and the provocative language she used to make that point caused people to conclude that she was equating intercourse with rape. It was a claim that she always denied, but the radicalism of the argument ensured that she would become forever the unattractive feminist in overalls who believed that all heterosexual sex was a form of rape. It also ensured that she would be dismissed by most people outside the radical cult of admirers she attracted on liberal college campuses and elsewhere.

I discussed interviewing Dworkin for an ABC News profile in 1995. I argued that in the middle of the national obsession over the O. J. Simpson case, Dworkin offered a different look at celebrity, sex, and power. I was convinced that a conversation with an articulate radical feminist making what seemed to be an outrageous claim that she clearly had no intention of losing a debate over on national television would be great to watch. I looked for everything in her writing that would make for an incendiary on-camera interview. I suspect I was exactly the type of person she had in mind when she spoke about the people who reacted to her book when it was originally published in 1987:

People who have not read it, reduced to slogans by journalists posing as critics or sages or deep thinkers, treated as if it were odious and hateful by every asshole who thinks that what will heal this violent world is more respect for dead white men.

ABC News couldn't have been less interested in Dworkin at a time when all the networks were clawing at one another to put attractive women on TV to talk about the Simpson case. To make a long story less so, I put *Intercourse* down, got married, and over the next twenty years had five children, bounced from ABC to NBC, did a lot of freelancing, got a fellowship at the MIT Media Lab, and eventually landed back in public radio in 2008 to start *The Takeaway*.

A decade later and a few months after the scandal broke that wiped out my career, living alone without a job or the prospect of one, I came across Dworkin once again. She died in 2005, and her work was really not part of the post-Weinstein conversation about sex and violence. I reread *Intercourse*, expecting to become more depressed and hopeless about everything in my own dead white male life, but like a lot of what's gone on in the past year it was an unexpected revelation. Dworkin's words were honest, brilliant, prescient, and actually comforting.

Men possess women when men fuck women because both experience the man being male. This is the stunning logic of male supremacy. In this view, which is the predominant one, maleness is aggressive and violent; and so fucking, in which both the man and the woman experience *maleness*, essentially demands the disappearance of the woman as an individual; thus, in being fucked, she is possessed: ceases to exist as a discrete individual: is taken over.

Remarkably, it is not the man who is considered possessed in intercourse, even though he (his penis) is buried inside another human being; and his penis is surrounded by strong muscles that contract like a fist shutting tight and release with a force that pushes hard on the tender thing, always so vulnerable no matter how hard. He is not possessed even though his penis is gone—disappeared inside someone else, enveloped, smothered, in the muscled lining of flesh that he never sees, only feels, gripping, releasing, gripping, tighter, harder, firmer, then pushing out: and *can he get out alive?*

This is one of the more intentionally shocking passages, but when Dworkin argues more politically she is just as provocative. What stands out to me today is how precisely her fusion of pornography and politics predicts the present-day anxiety and confusion. She anticipates like some prophet our inability to distinguish the power-dominance component of sex from the ways in which sex might actually grant men and women physical equality. Dworkin's ideas still feel as daring today as they did more than thirty years ago, when their pure shock value sent her packing to the fringe of the feminist debate in a nation that had said good riddance to the Equal Rights Amendment a decade earlier. For me Dworkin's language and clarity underscored precisely what was so frustrating and painful about my own personal predicament. The inability or unwillingness of people in 2018 to distinguish my behavior from rape is a corollary to Dworkin's often-cited, and often misconstrued, sex-equals-rape proposition. Dworkin denied that she ever equated intercourse and rape, and I understand now her deeply subtle point that if we don't explicitly address inequality between men and women in all interactions, including sex, we are condemned to a spiral of miscues and mistrust until we can assume only the worst about one another, replacing the hope of love and romance with the forensic chill of vigilance and the fear of assault.

Would Dworkin argue today that there is a way out of all this? She certainly argued it then. Dworkin dismissed biological imperatives regarding sex and insisted that humans should explicitly modify sexuality in manners and practice to reflect modern notions of equity and justice. Might Dworkin say in 2018, If we are not willing to explicitly state the rules of gender equity and create in those rules an alternative romantic construct, then we are doomed to live and relive the primitive rape and possession identities our physical bodies are fated to deliver? #MeToo has created a presumption of rape in every encounter without seeing the urgency of supplying a new language for listening to and conferring consent or recognizing that men and women and all sexual partners in our time need a new landscape for experiencing one another intellectually, romantically, and emotionally, or must accept the fate of being brutally possessed by the biological primitivism of the sex act alone. Surely with 7 billion people on planet earth, sexuality is not about some procreative imperative anymore.

I would give anything to know what Dworkin would say about what's going on now. Would she put my foot on a meat hook and bash away at me with a bat? Would she embrace me as her

penis-less paraplegic male buddy? Would she drive this debate or dismiss the whole thing as celebrity fine print, preferring to focus on the larger global struggle for gender equality, on people like Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan and women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia? Malala, Dworkin might say, has much more important things to think about than the unemployment of an American public radio host.

I think it is not mere nostalgia to want a return to romance. My longing amid all the regret of the past year is not simply the misguided morality of a lost, humbled Unitarian journalist trying to get the world to say, "never mind." Whatever my troubles, I think it is an exciting moment at a time when so much has changed in our understanding of gender. I feel blessed to be a father at a time when my daughters have the means, like never before, to be safe and empowered as they grow sexually. I feel proud to believe that my sons will be among the most sensitive and sensual males to have ever walked the earth. To that I can add that above all I believe this crackpot-sounding imperative to reinvent romance is a mission I hope to be a part of. I can't leave it to the folks in HR and the algorithm designers of internet dating sites (even though my oldest daughter is dating a coder for Tinder right now . . . sigh). In the din of anger and rejection of me and my ideas that I expect will come, even the whisper of agreement that a new modern concept of romance might be worth pursuing could turn out to be more important than anything I accomplished in my career in journalism. Creating a new universal scaffold of love and romance is not far-fetched for a twenty-first century that needs to be suddenly intentional about all sorts of dynamics formerly on autopilot. Just add it to the to-do list along with climate change, income inequality, and racial justice. Time to get to work.