

**Dr Caroline Taylor's speech**  
**Heather Osland Fundraiser**  
**April 20, 2004**

I would like to thank the Victorian Women's Trust for privileging me with the opportunity to speak with you this morning at this very important breakfast. It is fabulous to see so many women here to support Heather Osland.

I want to start by focusing on men's experiences. Seems a funny thing to do I know when speaking at a function focusing on women, but I hope that as I progress, the need to start on this footing first, will become obvious.

I have observed with keen interest the way in which society values certain experiences. More explicitly, the gendered valuing of knowledge and experience. In a keynote address I gave to the Townsville International Women's Conference in 2002 I posed this question: "Why is it that women's experiences are so often marginalized and considered anecdotes, while men's experiences are accorded the status of expert knowledge and experience. Women's voices and experiences require the imprimatur of the male 'expert' while men's experiences are uncritically acclaimed as having expert status."

To extend upon this I have used these analogies:

When men climb mountains they are forever considered the experts on those mountains and on mountain climbing in general. When we need expert advice we go to those who climbed and survived those mountains. We marvel at their experience, knowledge and insight. We appreciate and accept that they conquered that mountain or mountains and want to draw upon their knowledge and acquired skills.

When men go to war their experiences are enshrined in our history, films and literature. Men who go to war are regarded as having expert knowledge of survival, courage and character. Senior men of rank who went to war are considered to have advanced leadership skills, vision, courage and survival strategies that stand them apart from others. Indeed in the US – senior military men have been flouted as presidential material on the basis that they experienced and survived conflict – and so their skills of survival provide the type of character building that is needed for leadership and insight.

I have yet to see anyone confront a 'digger' and challenge them that their memories are subjective; are only real when an 'expert' defines them as real; that they may well have exaggerated their experiences; exaggerating the trauma or survival skills needed; and that their memories cannot be trusted, especially with the passage of time and because they can't be verified by 'corroborating' evidence.

Yet, the opposite is generally true for women. Our experiences and our survival are treated as anecdotes at best and open to conjecture. When women speak of their survival of men's violence they are deemed to be speaking with biased and subjective views. Their views are only accorded status and the stamp of 'validity' or 'truth' when a male speaking subject confirms them as such.

This is true in psychiatry and law, in medicine and media and society and religion. Women's experiences, our voices are subject to critique, to review, to scrutiny through the male gaze and the male system of filtration. This practice is pervasive and endemic and greatly affects women. Especially women, who encounter endure, suffer and survive abuses of all kinds perpetrated upon them by men.

In law, women's experiences of sexual, physical and emotional violence don't count unless accorded as 'real' experiences by men. Their experiences are not 'real' or 'valid' unless the expert, usually a male defines them as such.

Therefore, women's responses to and experiences of violence don't count unless and until the male authorizes them.

Women speak – but the male speaking subject has more status, more power and more credibility. Whether he speaks as offender, judge, lawyers, victim, survivor, juror, psychiatrist.....

I don't know Heather Osland personally but Heather is one profound example of the entrenched disbelief accorded to women and their experiences.

Victim/survivors of sexual violence area another category.

As women we are objectified and when an object speaks – it only has validity when accorded it by the male speaking subject.

I know these facts, these stories, these experiences, these realities both from my own professional work and my own personal experiences. Like so many women and girls, I speak with the valid authority of lived experience. Yet I am also in the position of having the title 'Dr.' and having a strong national and international publishing record which means that I am often accorded the status of 'expert'; of having a 'credible' opinion. However, I have experienced the strange phenomenon of being an 'in-credible' woman on some levels. When some people know of my professional reputation and my personal knowledge – they respect my words enormously. However, I have had the strange experience of some people and professionals (often males) who suddenly find that my professional credibility is in question because I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. Rather than the experience enhancing my professional work, for some it seems to detract and worse still, some consider it to be a factor that may be used to embarrass me or denigrate my work.

I can identify with not being heard when one speaks of their experiences – though unlike many others I had what would generally be considered a positive outcome in that the offender was convicted by a jury and gaoled.

Notwithstanding this outcome, I experienced a legal system that endorsed legally sanctioned abuse towards those courageous enough to confront the legal system with their story of abuse.

I found a legal system that wanted to appropriate my story, subject it to extraneous filtration in order to determine what parts of my story could be told and what would be deemed irrelevant, excluded and deemed as 'damaging' or 'unfair' evidence to the accused. In my case, like so many others, what was deemed 'unfair' or 'damaging' to the accused and thus was excluded, was often time evidence that corroborated my experiences.

The deeply entrenched and historical suspicion and bias directed at victim/survivors of child sexual abuse was directed at me with all its fury. My lack of formal education as a child; my preference to turn inwards in response to the trauma, my deep love of animals and my lack of social skills and social life were used to portray me in a cruel way.

The price for speaking out also included complete rejection by my family and other relatives. I experienced homelessness and the many levels of distress and fear that accompany this abuse. But I was determined to survive and rebuild. I am proud of what I have achieved and the processes I developed, nurtured and put in place to achieve this.

The courts conducted trial by attrition as is so often the case. Reducing compelling corroborating evidence, which included medical reports detailing aspects my childhood sexual abuse. At sentencing my victim impact statement was subjected to a good deal of black texta ink cutting through and blacking out my words which the judge and defence barrister regarded as not valid; not real; of no consequence and so on. I was made to write another victim impact statement and so I made comment on what I considered to be the lack of ethics and morality of the judiciary and legal counsel. More black texta and scowls. I determined that no one would remove my truth from me. They could use the biggest textas they wanted (in fact I think they must have got these ones from Texas where everything is bigger!!). They could black the words out and throw them away – but they could not ever touch the truth that resides within me and that can never be taken away.

In a forum ostensibly designed to hear and take account of the impact of the crime on me – these men in wigs decided that my suffering did not accord with their view of the world or their view of me.

Like the beads on an abacus – the male gaze weighed up my pain against the dominant masculinist view and decided I suffered little.

In Heather's case, her years of pain and torment, abuse and terror went without intervention by police and community. At the subsequent trial her experience was molded to fit the 'battered woman syndrome' because pathologising and syndromising pain is the only way law can relate to us. Labelling women and pathologising them – labelling them and blaming women for what men do to them. Blaming them for what is perceived as their failure to not escape (They tried!) to not stop it (they tried, so often alone!) to put up

with it (they didn't!) to fail to make an outcry (they so often did!) and finally to respond in ways that no right minded normal person would do (oh really!)

Decontextualising our voices and experiences; using patriarchal stylized words and theories to break our lives into theoretical paradigms – squashed and contorted, squeezed and diminished until they are unrecognisable, even to us. At the trial I endured all those years ago – I recall being accused of the most ridiculous and offensive things about my supposed mental capacity and I remember staring straight at the barrister and saying to him: I don't even know who you are talking about anymore because I cannot recognize myself by what you say about me.

For me, there was an outcome that convicted the offender. But at what price? Heather Osland was the victim of a shocking crime and yet was tried as the offender and the outcome was horrific. However, let me make clear a few things about Heather Osland that are important:

First and foremost, Heather Osland never lost her truth.

She never let the courts or others take her truth. She paid the highest price for being true to herself. Male systems of power always punish women who hold on to their truth. Women who refuse to let it go, refuse to let it be trampled upon, made desolate, made redundant, made silent and transmuted into the dominant stock story of men. Male systems do silence us within certain dominant forums – and yes sometimes, often times they succeed in shattering, fragmenting and eternally wounding a deep part of us but they never completely silence us, nor destroy us – Heather and so many others are testimony to that.

It is a fabulous feeling to know that we have such fabulous women such as those before me – those of you I already know, and those of you I am yet to know.

How wonderful that Heather Osland has all of you women who will help to create an environment of healing and nurturing upon her release. Each of you will and I have no doubt, do remind Heather – as you remind me and so many others – that our truth and our words are not completely silenced, disregarded or destroyed.

I hold firmly to the belief that the heart that has known the deepest of pains is also capable of knowing the deepest of joys – and each of you here and the Women's Trust in particular is contributing so much to help create an environment that can be one of the joy's Heather will have upon her release.

Heather has lived with more dignity and courage, more truth and more honour than those who vilified her and refused to listen to her truth and to see her truth. Heather never let go of her truth. No doubt it would have provided an easier legal pathway if Heather had let go of her truth and played the games that men want us to play. But Heather was true to herself which is the greatest gift one can possess – to remain true to the self – regardless of the pain and hardship it may cause. She held on to something and refused to let it be taken from her and refused to give it away, she continues to possess something that no-one could take from her – her truth.

It is a tragedy that so many women and girls must hold on to their truth because so many others do not wish to gently hold it, nurture it, believe it and act justly and with dignity upon that truth. Heather and so many others though can take solace from the fact that we honour, respect and believe in their truth.

I don't think the law has grasped that when it demeans others it demeans itself. It demeaned Heather's truth in a public forum – but it did not demean Heather or thousands like her – why? Because Heather never let go of her truth; never succumbed; never abandoned the truth of what was done to her and neither have her children and her supporters.

Heather knows the secret of why a caged bird still sings and this secret is a truth beyond the law. It is a truth which the law needs to understand if it is to emulate on some level the concepts that underpin the meaning of justice.

Dr. S. Caroline Taylor  
Post-Doctoral Fellow  
University of Ballarat