

Donald Trump and the Normalization of Rape

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As Donald Trump lashes out in defense against accusations of assaulting women, the drumbeat of denial comes down to a simple assertion that we have heard from countless men many times before: I am not that kind of man. A bad man, a man who hates women. I *love* women.

If only bad men rape and good men don't, I wonder how we separate the one from the other, which occurred to me on reading a headline a few years ago about the multiple accusations against cultural icon, Bill Cosby: "Can We Save Cliff Huxtable from Bill Cosby?"

What follows is adapted from my response—"Can a Good Man Rape?"—which is every bit as timely now.

The question had some urgency because, unlike Donald Trump, for millions of Americans Bill Cosby *was* Cliff Huxtable, the lovable all-American sitcom dad, and then it turned out that we may have gone all those years not knowing who he really was. Cosby, it seemed, was only pretending to be the friendly face behind Jello pudding pops, the wonderful father, the playful observer of children and parents and married life, and now, old age. It had to be so, we thought, because it isn't possible for both to be true. A good man, by definition, does not assault women.

And so, the good man who was embraced becomes the bad man to be shunned.

But how can this happen? How could we be so mistaken? And if it can be true of Bill Cosby, recipient of so much public affection and prestigious awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, for whom could it *not* be true? Is there a public figure widely regarded as a 'good man' for whom such accusations would simply be impossible to believe? I have tried to think of one, but cannot.

Which is why, I think, there is a lack of surprise alongside the shock whenever a man is outed in this way. It doesn't seem to take us long to adopt a very different view of him, because, I think, somewhere in ourselves we expect these things to happen, if not about this one in particular, then some man, sooner or later. And part of our chagrin is having that expectation borne out yet again.

And then there is the rush to put it all behind us, which makes me want to pause and ask what that's about, what Cosby's story—and, yes, even Donald Trump's—might have to tell us about ourselves that we would rather not know.

One clue is that most women are assaulted by men who know them, which means at some point she feels safe enough to be with him in the first place. He hasn't broken in to her apartment wielding a knife. He is already with her doing something else—on a date, maybe, or at work or a party—before he crosses the line from presumed good guy to not.

And when he does, I doubt that he thinks of himself as that—a rapist, a criminal, a felon, a predatory misogynist—even though he must be aware that he is *doing* something that if he were to ask her in the cold light of day, she would refuse, which is why he has to think of ways to overcome her resistance, to turn a no into a yes, if only in his mind, and, failing that, a silence that he can interpret any way he wants.

He sees himself as a man like so many men he knows or can imagine, just doing what a man—a *real* man—would do if it came down to that, finding a way to have sex with a woman who, to all appearances, does not want to have sex with him. The only question is, what *means* are acceptable to overcome her resistance?

Note that it isn't *whether* to overcome, does he have the right, but *how*, reflecting a deep cultural ambivalence about

a woman's sovereignty and her right to live unmolested in the integrity of her own body; to not be stalked, harassed, pawed, or preyed upon, turned into an object of a man's intention and desire; to be considered, listened to, and believed; to not know what she wants and yet still be allowed the freedom and solitude of her ambivalence, uncertainty, confusion, and doubt.

The ambivalence is reflected in the reluctance of women to tell anyone they've been assaulted, knowing all too well that if they do, how quickly they may be challenged and disbelieved, discredited and trashed, even blamed for what was done to them. Witness the large number of women who claim to have been raped by Bill Cosby, who have lived for decades in silence. There are laws against assault, but whether and how they are enforced is another thing altogether, from college administrators who take no action and prosecutors and police who look the other way rather than confront the rich and famous, to defense attorneys skilled at bring lawsuits or arguing the varieties of 'consent' and the nuances of 'force.'

Once a culture normalizes the idea of men coercing women into sex they do not want, we are in a land where men can justify to themselves getting a woman drunk or giving her drugs or grabbing her crotch or pinning her to the wall or the floor or the bed, perhaps with the help of some friends, which, he will tell himself, is what she really wanted anyway, to be overwhelmed, to surrender to his need and desire and irresistible charm.

In such a world it can be difficult to pick out the men who assault from the men who don't. I read about the epidemic of sexual violence in college dorms and fraternities, for example, where rape can take the form of manly sport, and the federal government having to go after colleges to compel them to take it seriously. And I think, if I tried to identify which young men would rape and which would not just from the kind of person they appear to be, how well would I do? Not well at all, it turns out, since half a century of research has yet to produce a psychological profile that would allow us to distinguish men who rape from men who don't.

Not to mention trying to pick them out years later when they are married and have children and a place in the community, coaching youth soccer or Little League, professionals, perhaps, doctors and lawyers, or successful in business or politics or the arts, or just the hard-working friendly neighbor next door. Imagine all those college boys who rape, imagine them in middle age and then mix them in with all the men who don't. Could we separate the 'good' men from the 'bad'? Could the people who know them best—wives, siblings, and friends—tell us if this is the sort of man who would rape?

We would get it wrong much of the time, because when a society normalizes violence against women, the line between raping and not, between talk and assault, is a line you don't have to be recognizably 'bad' to cross. 'Good' men do it all the time, supported by all those other 'good' men who are too afraid or too ambivalent or even too envious to go out of their way to stop it, like the fraternity brothers who stand by and watch or take pictures on their cell phones or turn away and pretend it isn't happening.

Not only did we not know the real Bill Cosby, but, if it's true that only bad men rape, then apparently we also don't know a bad man—or a good one—when we see him. And that would include, for all we know, the Cliff Huxtable we want to save from Bill Cosby.

We want to save him because we think we know him, and it's important that he be who we think he is, who we need him to be, the man, the father, who is unimpeachably good. But, of course, we know only what's been shown to us—he being a television character, after all—but, also, just as we thought we knew Bill Cosby until the moment we did not.

The Bill Cosbys and Donald Trumps will come and go, but what remains is our reluctance to confront the reality of what makes them both possible and inevitable, a reality found not only in the world, but in ourselves.

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