

GRACE TAME'S ADDRESS TO NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

3/3/2021

- This is an edited version of the address delivered at the National Press Club on 3 March 2021.

In April of 2010, I was battling severe anorexia. Truth be told, I still am. This illness had nearly taken my life the year prior and seen me hospitalised twice, bedridden and tube-fed. Bone thin and covered in fine down hairs from malnourishment, I was picked on for the way that I looked.

I just stopped living with my father for the first time since I was born. And my mother was eight months pregnant at 45. I was a 15-year-old student at a private girls' school in Hobart.

One morning, after an outpatient check-up, I arrived later to discover the rest of my year 10 classmates were attending a driving lesson off-campus that I had completely forgotten about. Lapses like these weren't uncommon at this time. I was barely there.

One of the senior teachers noticed me walking around aimlessly in the courtyard. He was well respected, the head of maths and science, at the school for nearly 20 years. He taught me in Year 9. I thought he was funny. He told me he had a free period and asked if I'd come and chat with him in his office. He asked me about my illness. I talked, he listened. He promised to help me, to guide me in my recovery. As a teenager with no frame of reference, and therefore thinking nothing odd of this, I told my mother about our conversation when I came home that day. My parents had a meeting with the school principal soon after, requesting the teacher stay away from me. But in the meeting that I then had with the school principal and this senior teacher, I remember having to apologise. I had to apologise to him for putting him in this position in front of the principal. I was told I had done something wrong. Baffled though I was, I believed I had.



Tasmanian sexual assault survivor Grace Tame named 2021 Australian of the Year

Thus, the first seeds of terror, confusion, and self-doubt had been sewn in my mind. Indeed, it didn't make sense. In secret, he was adamant that I still come to see him to talk. My parents were against me, he insisted. I was not to tell them, because they simply wouldn't understand. Pregnant women, he said, were full of hormones. That must've been why my mother and I were arguing. He gave me a key in his office where there was always music playing, and it was always the same music, Simon and Garfunkel.

Over a period of months he built my trust to a point where I felt safe sharing my fears and past trauma that underpinned my illness, like my experience with being sexually abused as a six-year-old by an older child who told me to undress in a closet before molesting me. He told me he would never hurt me. Until he did by way of a masterful re-enactment I didn't see coming, with a closet and an instruction to undress. Most of you know my story from there. That is, how I lost my virginity to a 58-year-old paedophile and spent the next six months being raped by him at school nearly every day on the floor of his office.

When I finally reported him to police, they found 28 multimedia files of child

pornography on his computer. But as per the lasting impact of intense and manipulative grooming, and a mere four months after the abuse, I effectively defended him in my statement. Still only 16 then, I was terrified he would find out that I had betrayed him and that he would kill me. He was sentenced to two years and 10 months in jail for maintaining a sexual relationship with a person under the age of 17.

Repairing myself in the aftermath of all this was certainly not a simple, linear undertaking. For every step forward, there were steps back, to the side, and some almost off the edge. I saw counsellor after counsellor, but I also abused drugs, drank, moved overseas, cut myself, threw myself into study, dyed my hair, made amazing friendships, got ugly tattoos, worked for my childhood hero, found myself in violent relationships, practised yoga, even became a yoga teacher. I starved, I binged, and I starved again.

One of the toughest challenges on my road to recovery was trying to speak about something we are taught is unspeakable. I felt completely disconnected from myself and everyone around me. Many people didn't know how to respond. That said, the ones who listened, the ones who were eager to understand, even when they couldn't, made all the difference.

Still, the doubt lingered. How could I have been so stupid, as to not see what this man was doing from the outset? Was it my fault? Should I have known it was a lie when he said that he learned more from me than any of his other students? Maybe I should have been more alarmed when he asked me if I knew where my clitoris was and then laughed at me when I said no. It was when the perpetrator was released after serving only 19 months for abusing me almost every day – correction, maintaining a sexual relationship with me as a 15-year-old, and then spoke freely on Facebook and to the media about how awesome and enviable it was, that I realised we had this all around the wrong way.

In 2017, I connected with ground-breaking freelance journalist and fellow survivor, my dear friend, Nina Funnell. I felt I needed to share my story publicly under my own name

to raise awareness and educate others about sexual abuse and the prolonged psychological manipulation that belies it. Yet after months of recounting, re-traumatising details, tirelessly transposed by Nina, we discovered we were barred from sharing them by Section 194K of Tasmania's Evidence Act, which made it illegal for survivors of child sexual abuse to be identified in the media, even after turning 18, even with their consent. Using my case as the foundation, Nina created the Let Her Speak campaign to reform this law. We were then joined by 16 other brave survivors who lent their stories to the cause. The law was officially changed in April last year, almost 10 years to the day from the beginning of my story. It is so important for our nation – the whole world, in fact – to listen to survivors' stories. Whilst they're disturbing to hear, the reality of what goes on behind closed doors is more so. And the more details we omit for fear of disturbance, the more we soften these crimes, the more we shield perpetrators from the shame that is resultantly misdirected to their targets.

I'm a survivor of child sexual grooming. It took me 20 years to know it wasn't my fault

Gemma Carey

When we share, we heal, reconnect, and grow, both as individuals and as a united strengthened collective. History, lived experience, the whole truth, unsanitised and unedited is our greatest learning resource. It is what informs social and structural change.

The upshot of allowing predators a voice but not survivors encourages the criminal behaviour.

Through working with Nina, finally winning the right to speak, and talking with fellow campaign survivors and countless other women and men who have since come forward, it has become clear that there is the potential to do so much more to support survivors of child sexual abuse to thrive in life, beyond their trauma. And more so, to end child sexual abuse. It is my mission to do so. And it begins right now.

As a fortunate nation, we have a particular obligation to protect our most vulnerable, our innocent children, and especially those who are further disadvantaged through circumstance, being part of a minority group, or geographical location. And there are three key areas that we can focus on to achieve this.

Number one, how we invite, listen, and accept the conversation, and lived experience of child sexual abuse survivors. You've heard me say it before, it all starts with a conversation.

Number two, what we do to expand our understanding of this heinous crime, in particular, the grooming process, through both formal and informal education.

Number three, how we provide a consistent national framework that supports survivors and their loved ones, not just in their recovery, but also to disempower and deter predators from action.



Grace Tame at the 2021 Australian of the Year Awards at the National Arboretum in Canberra. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/EPA

So, what is it that we must do? First and foremost, let's keep talking about it. It's that simple. Let's start by opening up.

Every story is imbued with unique catalytic educative potential that can only be told by its subject. Let us genuinely listen, actively, without judgement, and without advice to demonstrate empathy and re-ensure it is and never was our fault.

Further to this point, while I must express my unflinching gratitude for this newfound platform and the unique opportunities for learning and growth that come with it, I would like to take this particular opportunity

to directly address the media with a constructive reminder - the need for which has become starkly apparent to me this past month. Hosts, reporters, journalists, I say to you - listening to survivors is one thing, repeatedly expecting people to relive their trauma on your terms, without our consent, without prior warning, is another. It's sensation. It's commodification of our pain. It's exploitation. It's the same abuse. Of all the many forms of trauma, rape has the highest rate of PTSD. Healing from trauma does not mean it is forgotten, nor that the symptoms never felt again.

Trauma lives on in ourselves. Our unconscious bodies are steps ahead of our conscious minds. When we are triggered, we are inevitably at the mercy of our emotional brain. In this state, it's impossible to discern between past and present. Such is re-traumatisation. I cried more than once while writing this, just because I've been recognised for my story does not mean it's fair game anywhere, any time. It also doesn't mean it gets any easier to tell. I may be strong, yes, but I am human, just like everyone else. None of us are invincible.

By definition, truths cannot be forced. So, grant us the respect and patience to share them on our own terms, rather than barking instructions like take us back to your darkest moment and tell us about being raped.

On average, it takes 23.9 years for survivors of child sexual abuse to be able to speak about their experiences. Such is the success of predators at instilling fear and self-doubt in the minds of their targets. More so than they are masters of destroying our trust in others, perpetrators are masters of destroying our trust in our own judgement, in ourselves. Such is the power of shame. A power, though, that is no match for love.

Certainly, talking about child sexual abuse won't eradicate it, but we can't fix a problem we don't discuss. And so, it begins with conversation. Which brings me to my second point, from there, we need to expand the conversation to create more awareness and education particularly around the process of grooming.

Grooming - it's a concept that makes us wince and shudder and as such, we rarely hear about it to the benefit of perpetrators. While it haunts us, and we avoid properly breaking it down, the complexity and secrecy of this criminal behaviour is what predators thrive on. In turn, we enable them to charm and manipulate not just their targets, but all of us at once, family, friends, colleagues and community members, and this must stop.

Our discomfort, our fear, and resulting ignorance needs to stop giving perpetrators the protection, power and confidence that allows them to operate. As a start, we should all be aware of what has been identified as the six phases of grooming, which certainly ring true in my experience.

Number one, targeting. That is, identifying a vulnerable individual. In my case, I was an innocent child but I was also anorexic, with significant change happening at home.

Number two, gaining trust. That is, establishing a friendship and falsely lulling the target into a sense of security by empathising and assuring safety. For me, that was what I thought was listening to my challenges, empathising with my situation, and providing me a safe space to retreat to when I needed it.

Number three, filling a need. That is, playing the person that fills the gap in a target's mental and emotional support. In my case, although I was surrounded by an incredibly attentive family and team of medical professionals, most of their support came in the form of tough love. The teacher thus assumed the role of sympathiser, telling me everything I wanted to hear.

Number four, isolating, that is driving wedges between the target and their genuine supporters. This involves pushing certain people away, but exploiting others.

Number five, sexualising. That is, gradually introducing sexual content so as to normalise it. In my case, in conjunction with subtly explicit conversation, I was carefully exposed to material that glorified relationships between characters with significant age differences.

Number six, maintaining control. That is, striking a perfect balance between causing pain and providing relief from that pain. To condition the target to feel guilt at the thought of exposing a person that also appears to care for them. By way of physical intimidation, combined with veiled threats, abusers scare you into silent submission.



'I challenge our education system to look for ways to more formally educate our children.' Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian

But, as we talk more about child sexual abuse, our lived experiences and what we know, our understanding of this premeditated evil will continue to develop. We need to warn our children, age appropriately, of the signs and characteristic behaviours, whilst educating how to report it, should it happen to them, or to those around them. This is a serious enough topic, unfortunately too common in occurrence for us to hope that kids know this. So, I challenge our education system to look for ways to more formally educate our children. Because we know that education is our primary means of prevention.

And finally, to my third point, we need structural change. A national system that supports and protects survivors and deals with crimes in proportion to their severity. Let's start by considering the implications of linguistics related to offences. Through Let Her Speak campaign efforts, we saw the wording of my abuser's charge officially changed from maintaining a sexual relationship with a person under 17, to the persistent sexual abuse of a child. Now, think about the difference in the crime according to the language of both of these. Think about the message it sends to the community. Think

about the message it sends survivors, where empathy is placed, where blame is placed, and how punishment is then given. We need to protect our children not just from the physical, mental, and emotional pain of these hideous crimes, but from the long-lasting, sometimes lifelong trauma that accompanies it.

In Australia, we have eight state and territory jurisdictions and eight different definitions of consent. We need to agree on something as absolute as what consent is. We need a uniform, state and federal, national standard and definition of consent. Only then can we effectively teach this fundamentally important principle consistently around Australia.

Since I was announced as Australian of the Year just over a month ago, hundreds of fellow child sexual abuse survivors have reached out to me to tell their stories, to cry with me. Stories they thought they would take with them to the grave, out of shame for being subjected to something that was not their fault. Stories of a kind of suffering they had previously never been able to explain. Stories of grooming. I am one of the luckiest ones, who survived, who was believed, who was surrounded by love. And what this shows me is that despite this problem still existing, and despite a personal history of trauma that is that is still ongoing, it is possible to heal, to thrive, and live a wonderful life. It is my mission and my duty as a survivor and as a survivor with a voice to continue working towards eradicating child sexual abuse. I won't stop until it does.

And so, I leave you with these three messages - number one, to our government, our

decision-makers, and our policymakers. We need reform on a national scale; both in policy and education, to address these heinous crimes, so that they are no longer enabled to be perpetrated.

Number two, to my nation, the wonderful people of Australia. We need to be open, to embrace the conversation, new information, and take guidance from our experiences so we can inform change. So we can heal and prevent this happening to future generations.

Number three, and finally, to my fellow survivors. It is our time. We need to take this opportunity. We need to be bold and courageous. Recognise we have a platform on which I stand with you in solidarity and support. Share your truth, it is your power. One voice, your voice, and our collective voices can make a difference.

We are on the precipice of a revolution whose call to action needs to be heard loud and clear. That's right. You got it. Let's keep making noise, Australia.

- This is an edited version of the address delivered at the National Press Club on 3 March 2021.
- In Australia, the crisis support service [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au) is 13 11 14. If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, family or domestic violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit www.1800RESPECT.org.au. In an emergency, call 000. International helplines can be found via www.befrienders.org.