CHAPTER 4

GOING PUBLIC

In these years I would occasionally find myself alone, without kid or work distractions. Usually this meant driving on highway 401 in my home province of Ontario, along which I sometimes drove to work as a mediator, or taking a flight to another city to deliver a speech or a seminar. For many years, I used this alone time to return over and over again to the question that encapsulated my anxieties and preoccupations about my history of sexual violence: Could I speak up about my experiences in a way that moves the conversation forward and is empowering for others?

I sometimes made elaborate plans on these trips (for an op-ed, a speech, a call to other women survivors to come out together on the streets) but never carried them out. Looking back now, I realize the importance of #MeToo in making this an imaginable thing. Since 2017, the #MeToo movement and disclosures about sexual violence by people with public profile and influence have proven effective in advancing a different kind of debate about women and sexual violence, one informed by real people with real experiences.[1] But I was still in pre-#MeToo days, and *going public* seemed like an outrageous fantasy. A compelling one nonetheless.

Personal *coming out*—the disclosure of something that has historically been seen as shameful—has a long history in activism. The most recognizable example of this phenomenon in the last thirty years has created a seismic shift in public attitudes toward sexuality. In large part this seems to be a response to the personal stories of recognizable public individuals (an athlete, an elected representative, a media personality). Reinforced by this, personal coming out to friends or family became much more common and

this has further impacted attitudes. In 1993, Pew Research reported that 61 per cent of US adults said they knew someone who was gay or lesbian—by 2015 that figure was 88 per cent.[2]

This history demonstrates that the more people speak up about something assumed to be shameful—sexual identity, abortion, mental illness, the examples are numerous—the more the dominant culture is forced to re-evaluate the shame historically associated with it. Eventually, putting human faces to formerly taboo topics challenges prejudices and changes attitudes. But not everyone is equal in their ability to speak up. Some have good support, some have none. Some have the privilege of education and class and white skin and the knowledge that they begin with a "believability advantage" over their sisters. Some face consequences inside their families that are more devastating than others. Some have chosen for many private reasons to keep their secrets hidden. In 2013, I had many of these privileges. This meant I could not simply shrug and tell myself not to worry, someone else would do this. As a law professor, I thought my public persona might be useful in normalizing a conversation about sexual violence. I also recognized that, as a tenured professor, I did not have to worry about my job security. I had a ready-to-go platform at my disposal (my classroom and my law school). And I had learned enough from years of activism on different issues to enable me to plan a public coming out for maximum impact.

Speaking up would mean that I could live up to my own strongly held principles about using my privilege for good and challenging social constructs of shame. I was also beginning to realize that speaking up would empower me too. I was by this time working extensively as a third-party mediator in a wide range of conflicts. I often saw firsthand the power of authenticity and open disclosure and the ways in which this had the power to undermine patterns of hatred and presumption.

How might my own family respond to my going public about my history of abuse and violence? How might it affect them? Bernie and my daughters reassured me and generously told me that they would be proud of me. It was no coincidence, I believe, that the timing of my eventual coming out was just after the death of my mother in 2014 (my father was already deceased), and so I did not have to worry about her reaction.

There was just one problem—the idea terrified me.