

The danger of the monster myth
The Drum by Tom Meagher
Updated 22 Apr 2014, 4:37pm

Article downloaded from: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-18/meagher-the-danger-of-the-monster-myth/5399108>



PHOTO: Jill Meagher introduced her husband to the issues of violence against women.
(Facebook: Help Us Find Jill Meagher)

We must not forget that most violence against women is perpetrated not by a stranger, but by men they know, writes Tom Meagher, husband of the murdered Jill Meagher.

One of the most disturbing moments of the past 18 months of my life was hearing my wife's killer form a coherent sentence in court.

Jill had been murdered almost six months earlier, and Adrian Bayley's defence team were presenting a rather feeble case for a four-week adjournment of his committal hearing. Bayley appeared via video-link as I sat flanked by two friends and a detective. The screen was to my right, mounted high up and tilted slightly towards the bench. It was uncomfortably silent apart from the occasional paper shuffle or short flurry of keyboard clicks.

I anticipated, and prepared for the most difficult moment of the day when Bayley's face appeared on the big-screen TV, looming over the seat I then occupied. When that moment arrived, a jolt of nausea came and went, but the worst was to come, made all the more

horrifying because it was unexpected. The judge asked Bayley whether he could see the courtroom. I don't remember his exact words, but he replied that he was able to see his lawyer and half of the bench.

I had come face to face with him before in court, but vocally, I never heard him manage more than a monosyllabic mumble into his chest. This was different. There was a clarity of communication, sentence structure, and proper articulation. It was chilling.

I had formed an image that this man was not human, that he existed as a singular force of pure evil who somehow emerged from the ether. Something about his ability to weave together nouns, verbs and pronouns to form real, intelligible sentences forced a re-focus, one that required a look at the spectrum of men's violence against women, and its relation to Bayley and the society from which he came. By insulating myself with the intellectually evasive dismissal of violent men as psychotic or sociopathic aberrations, I self-comforted by avoiding the more terrifying concept that violent men are socialised by the ingrained sexism and entrenched masculinity that permeates everything from our daily interactions all the way up to our highest institutions.

Bayley's appeal was dismissed, but I left court that day in a perpetual trauma-loop, knowing I needed to re-imagine the social, institutional and cultural context in which a man like Adrian Bayley exists.*

Since Jill died, my inbox overflowed with messages from thousands of women who shared with me their stories of sexual and physical abuse.

Three days after Jill's body was found, 30,000 people marched respectfully down Sydney Road. I watched on TV as the long parade of people reacted to their own anger at what happened to Jill with love and compassion - the very opposite of everything Bayley represents. I remember my sister's voice from behind me as I fixed my eyes on the images saying, "Wow, people really care about this."

After the court date where I heard Bayley speak, that infinite conveyor belt of the compassionate replayed in my mind. People did care about this, and for whatever reason people identified with this particular case, it was something that I hoped could be universalised - not localised to this case, but for every instance of men's violence against women. The major difficulties in mobilising this kind of outrage on a regular basis is that most cases of men's violence against women:

- 1) lack the ingredients of an archetypal villain and a relatable victim;
- 2) are perpetrated and suffered in silence; and,
- 3) are perpetrated by somebody known to the victim.

The more I felt the incredible support from the community, the more difficult it was to ignore the silent majority whose tormentors are not monsters lurking on busy streets, but their friends, acquaintances, husbands, lovers, brothers and fathers.

Since Jill died, my inbox overflowed with messages from thousands of women who shared with me their stories of sexual and physical abuse. Some were prostitutes who felt it pointless to report sexual assault because of perceived deficiencies in the justice system, some were women whose tormentors received suspended sentences, and felt too frightened to stay in their home town. These are the prevalent, and ongoing stories that too often remain unchallenged in male company.

While the vast majority of men abhor violence against women, those dissenting male voices are rarely heard in our public discourse, outside of the monster-rapist narrative. Indeed, the agency of male perpetrators disappears from the discussion, discouraging male involvement and even knowledge of the prevalence and diversity of male violence against women. Even the term "violence against women" sounds like a standalone force of nature, with no subject, whereas "men's violence against women" is used far less frequently. While not attempting to broad-brush or essentialise the all too abstracted notion of "masculinity", male invisibility in the language of the conversation can be compounded by masculine posturing, various "bro-codes" of silence, and a belief, through the monster myth, in the intrinsic otherness of violent men.

The Canadian feminist and anti-violence educator Lee Lakeman argued: "Violent men, and men in authority over violent men, and the broader public that authorises those men, are not yet shamed by the harm of coercive control over women... Maybe we can rest some hope on the growing activity of men of goodwill calling on each other to change. When that group hits a critical mass, the majority of men will be more likely to want to change."

According to an EU-wide study conducted in 2010, one person in five knows of someone who commits domestic violence in their circle of friends and family (Special Eurobarometer 344, Domestic Violence Against Women Report, September 2010). Perhaps it's time we, as non-violent men, attempted to hit this critical mass.

Bayley feeds into a commonly held social myth that most men who commit rape are like him, violent strangers who stalk their victims and strike at the opportune moment.

One of the most dangerous things about the media saturation of this crime was that Bayley is in fact the archetypal monster. Bayley feeds into a commonly held social myth that most men who commit rape are like him, violent strangers who stalk their victims and strike at the opportune moment. It gives a disproportionate focus to the rarest of rapes, ignoring the catalogue of non-consensual sex happening on a daily basis everywhere on the planet. It validates a limitation of the freedom of women, by persisting with an obsession with a victim's movements rather than the vile actions of the perpetrator, while simultaneously creating a "canary down the mine" scenario. Men who may feel uncomfortable by a peer's behaviour towards women, may absolve themselves from interfering with male group norms, or breaking ranks with the boys by normalising that conduct in relation to "the rapist". In other words he can justify his friend's behaviour by comparison: "He may be a ____, but he's not Adrian Bayley."

The monster myth allows us to see public infractions on women's sovereignty as minor, because the man committing the infraction is not a monster like Bayley. We see instances of this occur in bars when men become furious and verbally abusive to, or about, women who decline their attention. We see it on the street as groups of men shout comments, grab, grope and intimidate women with friends either ignoring or getting involved in the activity. We see it in male peer groups where rape-jokes and disrespectful attitudes towards women go uncontested.

The monster myth creates the illusion that this is simply banter, and sexist horseplay. While most of us would never abide racist comments among a male peer-group, the trivialisation of men's violence against women often remains a staple, invidious, and rather boring subject of mirth. We can either examine this by setting our standards against the monster-rapist, or by accepting that this behaviour intrinsically contributes to a culture in which rape and violence are allowed to exist.

The monster myth perpetuates a comforting lack of self-awareness.

When I heard Bayley forming sentences in court, I froze because I'd been socialised to believe that men who rape are jabbering madmen, who wear tracksuit bottoms with dress shoes and knee-high socks. The only thing more disturbing than that paradigm is the fact that most rapists are normal guys, guys we might work beside or socialise with, our neighbours or even members of our family. Where men's violence against women is normalised in our society, we often compartmentalise it to fit our view of the victim. If a prostitute is raped or beaten, we may consider it an awful occupational hazard "given her line of work". We rarely think, "She didn't get beaten - somebody (i.e. a man) beat her." Her line of work is dangerous, but mainly because there are men who want to hurt women. If a husband batters his wife, we often unthinkingly put it down to socio-economic factors or alcohol and drugs rather than how men and boys are taught and socialised to be men and view women.

I wonder at what stage we will stop being shocked by how normal a rapist seemed. Many years ago, two female friends confided in me about past abuses that happened in their lives, both of which had been perpetrated by "normal guys". As I attempted to console them, I mentally comforted myself by reducing it to some as yet undetected mental illnesses in these men. The cognitive shift is easy to do when we are not knowingly surrounded by men who commit these crimes, but then we rarely need to fear such an attack.

The idea of the lurking monster is no doubt a useful myth, one we can use to defuse any fear of the women we love being hurt, without the need to examine ourselves or our male-dominated society. It is also an excuse to implement a set of rules for women on "how not to get raped", which is a strange cocktail of naiveté and cynicism. It is naïve because it views rapists as a monolithic group of thigh-rubbing predators with a checklist rather than the bloke you just passed in the office, pub or gym, and cynical because these rules allow us to classify victims. If the victim was wearing x or drinking y well then of course the monster is going to attack - didn't she read the rules? I have often come up against people on this point who claim that they're just being "realistic". While it may come from a place of concern, if we're being realistic we need to look at how and where rape and violence actually occur,

and how troubling it is that we use a nebulous term like "reality" to condone the imposition of dress codes, acceptable behaviours, and living spaces on women to avoid a mythical rape-monster. Ok, this rape-monster did exist in the form of Adrian Bayley, but no amount of adherence to these ill-conceived rules could have stopped him from raping somebody that night.

When Bayley was arrested, the nightmare of the lurking evil stranger was realised. It was beamed through every television set and printed on every newspaper headline in the country. It was a reminder that there are men out there who are "not like us", men who exist so far outside our social norms that the problem can be solved simply by extinguishing this person. Bayley became a singular evil that stirred our anger, and provoked a backlash so violent that it mirrored the society from which he emerged, that the answer to violence is more violence.

Many comments on Facebook pages and memorial sites set up in honour of Jill, often expressed a wish for Bayley to be raped in prison.

Many comments on Facebook pages and memorial sites set up in honour of Jill often expressed a wish for Bayley to be raped in prison, presumably at the arbitrary whim of other incarcerated men. Putting aside the fact that wishing rape on somebody is perhaps the last thing we do before exiting civilisation entirely, there is a point that these avengers may have missed: somebody has to do the raping. Vengeance by rape, implies that rape is a suitable punishment for certain crimes. In other words, rape is fine as long as it's used in the service of retributive justice. Indeed, we would be essentially cheering on the rapist who rapes Bayley, for ensuring that justice is done. Or, if we find this rapist just as abhorrent as Bayley, we'll need another rapist to rape him, to avenge the rape he committed, and this would go on and on in an infinite loop. In essence this "rape as retribution" argument invokes the need for far too many rapists. For people like Bayley, rape is punishment; it's how he exerts his dominance and exhibits his deep misogyny through sexual humiliation. If we as a society then ask for Bayley to be raped as punishment, are we not cementing the validity of this mind-set?

I dreamed for over a year of how I would like to physically hurt this man, and still often relish the inevitable manner of his death, but wouldn't it be more beneficial for Jill's memory, and other women affected by violence, to focus on the problems that surround our attitudes, our legal system, our silence, rather than focusing on what manner we would like to torture and murder this individual? Adrian Bayley murdered a daughter, a sister, a great friend to so many, and my favourite person. I am the first one who wants to see him vilified and long may he be one of Australia's most hated people, but it only does any good if this example highlights rather than obscures the social issues that surround men's violence against women.

Since Jill died, I wake up every day and read a quote by Maya Angelou: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

What would make this tragedy even more tragic would be if we were to separate what happened to Jill from cases of violence against women where the victim knew, had a sexual

past with, talked to the perpetrator in a bar, or went home with him. It would be tragic if we did not recognise that Bayley's previous crimes were against prostitutes, and that the social normalisation of violence against women of a certain profession and our inability to deal with or talk about these issues socially and legally, resulted in untold horror for those victims, and led to the brutal murder of my wife.

We cannot separate these cases from one another because doing so allows us to ignore the fact that all these crimes have exactly the same cause - violent men, and the silence of non-violent men. We can only move past violence when we recognise how it is enabled; by attributing it to the mental illness of a singular human being, we ignore its prevalence, its root causes, and the self-examination required to end the cycle. The paradox, of course, is that in our current narrow framework of masculinity, self-examination is almost universally discouraged.

Since Jill died, I wake up every day and read a quote by Maya Angelou: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." Male self-examination requires this courage, and we cannot end the pattern of men's violence against women without consciously breaking our silence.

*Special mention here must be given to Jill Meagher (McKeon) who, many years before she was killed as a result of them, introduced me to these issues; to Louise Milligan for her endless support and encouragement to express them; to Clementine Ford, whose personal support, tireless crusade for gender equality and against violence allowed me to organise my thoughts; and to Alan O'Neill and Ben Leonard, who have shown me that many men are passionate and serious about ending men's violence against women.

This article was originally published by White Ribbon Ireland. [Read the original article here.](#)

Tom Meagher is the husband of the late Jill Meagher. [Read his profile here.](#)