

29 January 2018

Dear RCAH students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends,

I think that it has become clear to us in the last week that we are in the middle of a very sad chapter in the history of our university. It is not over by a long shot. In fact, that is the nature of events like this, and it is always hard to predict where the story will lead. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt has observed, the unavoidable “unpredictability of human action”

arises directly out of the story which, as the result of action, begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past... [W]hatever the character and content of the subsequent story may be, whether it is played in private or public life, whether it involves many or few actors, its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended (*The Human Condition*, 1958).

At the center of our story now are the young girls and women who were the victims of a sexual predator, Lawrence Nassar, who used the power and prestige of his office as an MSU faculty member and physician to perpetrate atrocious acts of violence over an extended period of time. As perverse as his actions were, we should not ignore that there are patterns to sexual violence. The authority of the doctor, the teacher, the CEO, and the priest plays an important role.

This particular story began in the privacy of the doctor-patient relationship, but gradually as young women courageously questioned what was being done to them, the story entered the public domain; first within the rules and regulations of Michigan State University and more recently through the criminal justice system.

As these women have claimed ownership over this story and faced Nassar in public, together their voices have become more important; they are no longer individual powerless victims.

We know that survival after this kind of trauma is complicated and not all of Nassar’s victims – for many reasons – have been prepared to confront him in open court. We should also recognize that complicity in a crime like this can take many forms. Some looked the other way. Some sought to control what they saw as potential damage to the institution. Some reported to the designated authorities, where investigations then led nowhere. There is a pattern emerging here as well, and we should attend to it carefully and fairly.

As the story has become more public, sincere expressions of horror, compassion, and concern have been expressed. Even those who were complicit, to one degree or another, have expressed feelings of remorse and shown compassion for the victims of this sexual violence. These expressions are not cynical, but I worry that they shift our attention away from the patterns of violence and toward the grief of the bystanders and responsible parties.

Beyond expressions of remorse and compassion, their story has elicited a concern about a culture of violence that led to this atrocity and permitted it to go unchecked for so long. I think we should be addressing this concern more than we have, even though – while elements of the culture are frighteningly clear – it is difficult to pin down exactly what this culture includes and how far the web of complicity extends.

It is also important to realize that MSU is not a monoculture. There are many ways in which RCAH faculty, students, staff, and alumni devote their lives to struggle against violence. We cannot lose sight of these other stories and the cultures of partnership and generosity that have nurtured them on and off campus. We can and should draw strength from them in times like these. They are the basis for an emerging counter-narrative to combat the culture of violence.

By my lights there are several elements in the culture of violence. Here are two that I think can be addressed now.

The first is the violence done to women when they have been victims of sexual abuse and then their status as truth-tellers is ignored. They don't have to be physically silenced, although this happens, for this violence to do damage. They can be heard and then ignored. Nassar's victims were heard and then their stories were dismissed, minimized or ignored for too long. We should listen more carefully when women come forward with these stories. We must pay attention to and correct these patterns as well as care for the victims and survivors. Justice demands no less.

The second element of this culture of violence is the emphasis placed on winning at the expense of moral respect for oneself and for others. We hear it in the images and metaphors we use to refer to our community. Team MSU. Spartan Nation. Spartans Will. These slogans suggest a cultural ideal: an Us vs. Them mentality. But, it doesn't have to be this way. As I've said, there are many students, faculty, and staff who care for others, sacrifice for others, and open their lives to others all across MSU, not just in RCAH.

Our rallying cry today should be Spartans Listen and Spartans Care. We have the people to make this happen, and I am confident that you will be leading by example as we build a more inclusive and more just university community.

Sincerely,



Stephen L. Esquith
Dean