

Learning to Listen:
One Man's Work in the Antirape
Movement
- Richard S. Orton

PART I

MY TELEPHONE RANG AT MIDNIGHT. The rape hotline volunteer told me that a woman was waiting at the emergency room for a rape exam. The volunteer had been trying for an hour to locate someone to go and be with her. I was the only person available that night.

I had been on staff at the Austin Rape Crisis Center for over a year and knew that this moment might come. Even though my job focused on school and community education, I had been trained, like all staff and volunteers, to support rape survivors in crisis situations. I had done crisis counseling via the telephone, but I had never been face to face with a rape survivor shortly after the assault. My stomach tightened at the thought.

The most practical—and most difficult—part of rape crisis center training for me was the role playing, where trainees are put into unscripted scenarios similar to those they would encounter on the telephone, at the emergency room, or in other face-to-face encounters with rape survivors, their family members, or medical and law enforcement professionals. The crisis intervention skills that are taught in training get tested through role-playing. For me, it was like trying to walk through a minefield. I thought that if I failed to say the right thing, if I failed to anticipate correctly the needs of the survivor, I might set off emotional mines. No real harm was done in role-plays, but what was about to happen would not be a role-play.

I now understand that what most people need in such situations is to feel genuine concern and empathy from a helping person, to be listened to, to be allowed to express feelings (or remain silent), and to have their questions answered. But as I drove to the emergency room that night, I was only aware of how nervous I was. I went over in my mind all the do's and don'ts I had learned in training. And I had one additional concern: Having just been raped by a man, the woman I was about to meet might not want to deal with me, another man. Crisis center policy required that a female volunteer be provided in these situations, but none was available that night.

As I walked into the emergency room I saw a young woman I will call Sandy sitting on a bed dressed in a green hospital gown. A nurse stood behind her doing something to her hair. As I got closer I saw that the nurse was cleaning dried blood out of Sandy's hair and I saw a dozen or more stitches in her scalp.

