

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode 1: Tarana Burke
Sexual Violence Is A Kind Of Death
Air Date: September 16, 2021

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh, there's Tarana.

TARANA BURKE: Hi, hi, hi.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It's good to see you!

TARANA BURKE: Good to see you. I know right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, I'm really liking your hair up high like that.

TARANA BURKE: Oh, thank you. I'm trying to preserve it for this whole week—to keep. It's been a chore.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Okay. Let's go.

TARANA BURKE: All right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Welcome to All Ears, I'm Abigail Disney. This fall was supposed to be back to school, back to work, back to normal. Well clearly, that's not happening, and let's face it, for a lot of folks, especially women, the old normal wasn't so hot anyway. The list of crappy things we should be doing better on? Well, lemme see. Sexism, racism, unequal pay, unaffordable childcare... need I go on? This season my guests are women. Women who are envisioning a new and better normal for all of us, because lord knows we still have so far to go.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: My guest today is a remarkable activist and one heck of a good human being. I ooze with admiration for this lady. Tarana Burke was born and raised in the Bronx. She had a typical childhood in many ways. She was loved and cared for by a circle of decent and well-meaning adults. But when she was sexually assaulted as a seven-year-old, and then again at nine, she managed the feelings in a way that is all too common: all alone and buried in shame.

Tarana funneled her rage and pain into activism, where she worked for decades, helping Black girls and young women who had also suffered sexual abuse to see their own value and to overcome the shame of their experiences. Through her important

movement work, she's given us a glimpse into the possibilities of a world where those who've been raped, abused, or molested are met by an army of compassionate allies, with two simple words of profound and transformative resonance: "Me too."

On top of leading a visionary movement, it turns out Tarana Burke is a fantastic writer. Her new memoir 'Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement' is an old-school page-turner. But 'Unbound' is not a tragedy, not by any stretch. She has joy and wisdom, and momentum to spare. I'm so pleased to welcome 'Me Too' movement founder, Tarana Burke.

Tarana, thank you for being willing to take this time.

Tarana: Oh man, what a wonderful introduction, thank you!

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Was it hard to write this book? You know, I tore through it partly because I was like blown away by your self-honesty.

TARANA BURKE: It was a painful process. That's uh—just to be succinct, it was definitely hard. And the really interesting thing is, I think we have our life story in our mind, like right now, if I said, Abigail, tell me about your life. You would kind of click off four or five or six stories that you've probably told over and over and over again. Including little anecdotes, right, that we tell that kind of highlight our life. And that's how I thought about my life. But when I started writing the book, I realized how much of those stories I had not unpacked in a real way, and when I started doing that, it was like 'Yikes. I don't know if I like it here.'

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, I think an anecdote is a way to *not* unpack, you know. I mean, I was sort of raised in a house full of anecdotes, and generally what they would do is take a hard moment and then kind of package it up neatly, and then tell it over and over again. And the more you told the anecdote, as opposed to the story, the more you lost access to what had actually happened.

TARANA BURKE: That's exactly it. That's exactly, exactly it. And it feels good. And you can engage people and they either laugh or they give you some kind of reaction. But when I really, really started thinking and sitting with the stories, not just like—I would write and write and write and write and write, and then I would reread. And I was like, where did all of this come from?

I also have journals that go all the way back to the eighth grade. And when I cracked open some of those journals and saw, and I just sort of read what my twelve-year-old or

fourteen or sixteen-year-old mind was thinking, it was in direct contradiction sometimes to what I had told myself. Right? Like how I had a story encapsulated in my brain was very different than how I captured it the moment it happened. And that was fascinating for me too.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. And a little unsettling, I imagine.

TARANA BURKE: Very unsettling. I'm like, wait, why did I leave this part out all of these years when I kept retelling this?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

TARANA BURKE: Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Your grandfather and your mother are very towering figures in your life growing up. And you describe yourself as being raised in a really pro-Black household. So can you, can you tell me about that?

TARANA BURKE: Oh, yeah. My grandfather is, you know, it's funny. He wasn't even six feet tall. He might've been like five, nine, just small in stature, but such a giant. I will never forget in the seventh grade he saw me reading a copy of *Roots*. My mother's copy of *Roots* by Alex Haley. And he said, 'You know, most of that is, that's not real. That's—half of that is fiction.' And I said, 'No, that's—this is his true story.' You know? I was like, 'This is his true story.'

'No, no, no, no, no, that's not—I'm going to show you the true story. You ready to get the truth?' And from that point on, he would take me down to this bookstore in New York called—it used to be in New York—called Liberation Bookstores, like one of the blackest stores in the city. And he would—this is like, it's funny, I think about it now, it predates podcasts. Do you remember scholars used to make cassette tapes of their lectures and now we just call them podcasts, but this is—you can go and buy a cassette tape that would have like Dr. John Henrik Clark, or Dr. Ben Yosef, all of these different people. And we would drive around and listen to them. And then he gave me 'Before the Mayflower' he gave me 'They Came Before Columbus' and I was in Catholic school. I was very into being Catholic and he told me, 'I'm not going to stop you, you know, from doing what you want to do. Just promise me that you'll read these history books alongside that Bible.'

And I was like, 'Okay, granddaddy,' you know.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's some wisdom right there. Just read it with it, then make your decisions.

TARANA BURKE: Exactly, yeah. And he just always said, I just, I need you to understand if you're going to walk in this world who you are, like, what does it mean to be Black in America? What does it mean to be a Black girl in America and this world, like how you're situated. I need you to understand, I don't need you to be blind. That's—my granddaddy would say stuff like that all the time.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Wow.

TARANA BURKE: And then my mother was his child. So, you know, just followed suit.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I mean, it's so powerful to have somebody who wants you to have your eyes wide open. And especially a girl, you know, we don't always get told to bring all our critical faculties to everything.

TARANA BURKE: Right, yeah, yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I love the way Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison make their appearance in your story. Can you talk about that? What they opened up in you?

TARANA BURKE: Oh man. So my mother—going back to my mom. She was, uh, just a prolific reader and she read Black feminist literature. So I grew up with all of these books all the time like surrounded by all of these books. To the point where I didn't even really, I don't think I ever realized that Maya Angelou was a real person. I was fascinated by her books because of what they looked like, to be quite honest. Right? Her first edition books are really colorful and they have—she had these great names and I was fascinated by them. But I found such a connection with Maya Angelou as a child because she had also been sexually assaulted. And just a lot of what she went through, I just got it, right. I connected with it. And I just didn't know anybody else in the entire world who had been through it. So yeah, I fell in love with her. And then later on, when I found out that Maya Angelou was a real person and we were now studying her, I was just like beside myself, because this is my friend in my head.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, yeah.

TARANA BURKE: So that experience—I had to write about that experience because it was so pivotal to me specifically around Maya Angelou. I remember watching a video and watching her laugh and watching her recite poetry and thinking, how has she cracked this code?

Right. I had created my own little way of existing in the world. Of like faking it till I made it, right? You just kind of push your way through. You do really good, you get good grades, nobody will bother you. And this woman authentically, very authentically had figured out how to live life. And I was just like, what –somebody help me, help me understand this.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So, I'm going to, I'm going to ask you about these early sexual assaults, just as much as you're comfortable if you could sort of take us through that only because, it helps us understand everything that follows.

TARANA BURKE: Well, I mean, I think the long and short of it is I was—at seven years old an older teenage boy from the neighborhood who was probably between sixteen and eighteen at the time, chose me from a group of kids. I was in the candy store with two of my friends and took me from that group and had me to go with him. And he raped me at seven years old. And I didn't have any language for it. I didn't have any understanding, I didn't know about sex, not in a real way. And it's funny because that happened I don't have a memory of what I knew before then and what I knew after I just kind of knew that it was wrong. Right. You know, I had those rules that I had been told to follow about protecting my private parts and things like that. And it made me feel so dirty and so bad.

The interesting thing is I never went through feeling like I wouldn't be believed. That wasn't the issue for me. The issue was that I *would* be believed. I actually had an enormous support system, an incredible support system. But the thought of my stepfather, or even my grandfather, finding out this had happened, meant that somebody was going to die and somebody dying meant somebody was going to go to jail. I understood that fundamentally at seven. And so I made this really adult decision to just not tell.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It's extraordinary to me that you had the capacity at seven to think that all the way through to the end. That's just mind-blowing to me. Had you seen examples of that happening or is this just something you kind of knew?

TARANA BURKE: No, I think, what I'm also trying to say in telling that to people, it's not because I was some extraordinary kid. It was because I was an ordinary kid living in extraordinary circumstances. I lived in an urban community that was over-policed. Where I saw a lot of violence and I saw a lot of police interaction. And I also was raised—one of the first big words I learned when I was a kid was “consequences”. I can still remember my mother mouthing it out to me, “Con-Suh-Kwen-Says”. So I understood very well cause and effect. And I'd seen an incident where my stepfather and some of the men in the neighborhood had beat up a man who was like burglarizing

the apartments in the community. I also didn't want to be responsible for that. It wasn't just like the person who molested me going to jail, but it was also, I don't want to be responsible for somebody dying or—They beat that man so badly. Especially because I did this, right. That's the really important piece. I don't want people going to jail or people dying for something I did. I should have known better, done better, something. This is clearly my fault.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, you just, you internalize the blame so completely, you didn't even stop really between, you know, the thing happening and then knowing it was you. I mean, do you think that's social or do you think that comes sort of hardwired?

TARANA BURKE: That's a good question. I think a good part of it is social. I think the messaging that we get from very, very young—particularly girls, is that we are responsible for our own safety. And if we are responsible for our own safety, that means that there is something to feel unsafe about, right? There's something happening—there's a danger out there that we have to protect ourselves from. And none of that is really ever unpacked or explained in detail. There's so much sort of like terrible messaging around sex and power and violence. That is just a big tangled web that I think leads us to feel some of these things that we feel when we experience sexual violence.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Have you, in retrospect, looked back at the adult women in your life and wondered 'Who's living in this shame?'

TARANA BURKE: Oh, absolutely. Not only have I thought about it, I can almost sense it. It's like a sixth sense. Right? One comment, one look, you know, my family has never talked about the things that happened to me. Most of them don't know. Right. I didn't tell my mother until I was 32. And even then I only told her about the one thing, the first thing that happened when I was seven, I didn't tell her about the boy who was molesting me from nine to twelve. And so when I started talking about 'Me too', back when I was in my thirties, I remember my aunt came forward and told me this sort of story. But again, it was a very mild version. My mother told me a mild version of a story. My cousin told me a mild—so everybody had a little something. These are things that I could almost smell on them. I could feel it. You know, everybody has a story of some sort.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. To go back to your storyline. You were very interested in a role in the church when you were younger. What was calling you there?

TARANA BURKE: The church, the Catholic church, I was called I think because the sort of rigidity, the uniformity. You know, I needed something to give me structure. Not

that I was—my mother's incredibly structured. I had an incredibly structured household, but there was something about it that there was an outcome. My mother was structured so that I could be a good productive citizen in the world or whatever, but there was something about the immediate gratification of being good as a Catholic. Right? I could define it right away. Well, I'm good because I said my prayers, I delivered the good news, I read my scriptures. Right. I could run down this list. I made my confession, I've checked off all the boxes. So therefore I am good, at least in the eyes of Christ, Right? At least in the eyes of my priest. Yeah, and it just gave me a real immediate feeling of like, I can do this. There's just these rules. This is it. This is the list. Got it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *laughs* Yes. Oh, how it looks good when we're young.

TARANA BURKE: Right. You know, with the naive eyes of a twelve-year-old, I was just like, this is doable because being good in life felt so not doable. And I had felt like I had mucked it up so badly already that it was like, I'm just going to be a really good Catholic to try to make up for what I couldn't do.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *But when Tarana got to high school, she gave up on being a good Catholic girl and started to get into fights at school.*

TARANA BURKE: When I got into high school, I decided I wanted to be less Catholic. I went from Catholic school, first of all, to public school. Intentionally. I wanted to do that. And it was such a big shift for me, my mother did not like the shift. So she wanted me to keep wearing skirts and dressing modestly. And I caught the attention of some of the girls in the school. And that's what started me getting into fights and it's like tasting blood, you know?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *laughs*

TARANA BURKE: It was like the zombie that gets a little taste of blood on their lip. I was just like, oh, 'Wait a minute. I like this.' And I got a taste of it and was like, this is who I want to be. Now. I'm going to be this now, you know, and I was, I was very reinventing myself.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You were impressive, man.

TARANA BURKE: *laughs*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I was impressed. You really took some girls on. And some boys too.

TARANA BURKE: Yeah, some boys too. I was suspended like six or seven times in my freshman year. It was just—it was really bad. And my mother who had never dealt with this, right. Was just kind of like, ‘Come on Tarana, what is happening? Where is my honor student? Where is my good kid?’

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you ever wonder why it didn't cause her to maybe consider something deeper was happening?

TARANA BURKE: Yeah, I do. I definitely do. I also think that—I was—it's a different time. And my mother was quite focused on keeping the lights on and keeping food on the table. And when I turned 16, I think my mother was turning 40. So whatever my mom was dealing with in her late thirties and early forties, I think was about—she was trying to get her own self together. Right. And find her own footing. And I think she gave me everything within her capacity. I don't think she spared a bit of love and protection or anything within her capacity. She just also didn't have the capacity to see that I needed more. And I just, I don't hold that against her. Not now.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, yeah. I mean that's a really important moment in a person's life. When you come to a recognition that they did the best they could with everything they had, even if that was limited for you. Then the relationship begins again.

TARANA BURKE: Yeah. And that's what it actually feels like. And here's the thing: There's still a lot of work. We could go on to therapy and do a whole bunch of work still. We have never talked about it. We've had a few really heart-to-heart conversations that have been like life-changing for me. But again, whatever my mother has given me, even in the last 10 years, is her pushing herself. And I see it, I see the work. And I appreciate even the effort to be bigger or bolder or better than she was. And doing that just simply because she knows I need it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, that's probably the best way to know someone loves you.

TARANA BURKE: Yeah, right?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *Even when she was getting into trouble, Tarana was a good student. So, after freshman year, she transferred to a new school and settled down. Instead of fighting, she started to channel her frustration and anger into activism. She got involved with a group that trained young, Black students to be community leaders. That decision would end up shaping the direction of her life.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So you got involved in a leadership program and community organizing.

TARANA BURKE: So, by the time I got to high school, I was really into Black consciousness and that kind of thing. It was also at the same time in New York, there was... You know, I liken it to this moment that we're having now, this reckoning because there was a lot of uprising going on. Yusef Hawkins was murdered in Brooklyn. Similar to Trayvon Martin. You know, we had a lot of police brutality cases, it was just a lot going on. And I was so amped up by it, but I didn't know how to do anything. Right. I could recognize injustice. I could call it out. I could talk about it, but I had nowhere to put these feelings and what have you. And then I was introduced to this organization, the 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement.

It feels dramatic to be like it was just life-altering, but it really was. It gave me purpose and it helped me figure out how to do something with all of this information and this energy that I had. And I just, I was in, lock stock and barrel.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *One of the founders of the 21st-century leadership movement was a legendary civil rights organizer named Faya Rose Touré. She was the first Black judge in Alabama and a powerhouse.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. So, who is Rose Sanders, and how does she figure into the story of the leadership program?

TARANA BURKE: So, Rose Sanders or Faya Rose Touré is just a monumental figure in the post-civil rights era in the south.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: But Rose really helped you get into college. I thought that was an incredible story.

TARANA BURKE: Oh yeah. So when I was going to college, I didn't have the money to go to the school that I was accepted to, and so, I was going to sit out. I had these 17-year-old fantasies of raising enough money by my summer job to eventually pay for college. And she would check in on us. I was in the New York chapter and she happened to call and check in and I ran down my plans for her. And she said, no. And she basically said, every kid, I know that sits out, that doesn't go right when they, you know, should go, never goes back. You won't go back. And she was so frantic about it, right? Like so adamant. And I was just like, I don't have the money. What am I supposed to do? I can't just make money appear out of somewhere. And she did what she does, which is magic.

She made some phone calls. She called me back and she's like, fax this over to here, call this person, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I did it. I thought, I just, it was a really pivotal moment. I think I wrote this in the book. But she essentially said, 'Do you trust me?' And I have no memory of an adult ever asking me that prior to that moment. Right. I think there was just an assumption that you trust the adults that are around you. But it made me stop and pause and actually acknowledge, right? Like, I do trust you. And I guess this is what trust looks like. And so she—with a, you know, snap, crackle, and pop. I was accepted into Alabama State University and I got my stuff together and went on to school, which changed the trajectory of my life once again.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *After college, Faya Rose Touré intervened again in Tarana's plans. She convinced Tarana to come to work in Selma, Alabama, where Touré and her family had been working for years with Black communities there. It was in Selma where Tarana learned about being a community organizer. And it was in Selma where she started to notice that the needs of the young girls in her community were being seriously overlooked.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: When you got to Selma and started doing community organizing you pretty quickly recognized that Black girls needed to be paid attention to. What had you thinking that?

TARANA BURKE: You know, I ran an after-school program for all, for all children, community children. And just one day, or maybe over a few days, watching the people who worked for me interact with the kids and watching them interact with the girls versus the boys. Meaning everything the boys did got attention. If they did something that was unruly or against the rules, then they got punished or they got reprimanded or what have you. But if they did something good, we heaped all of this praise on them like, 'Oh, you guys are so great. Look at you, cleaning up. That's wonderful.'

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah *laughs*

TARANA BURKE: And for the girls, it was just a foregone conclusion that they would do these things. And if they acted up, it was almost as if World War 2 would break out, right? It wasn't the same kind of patience we had with the boys. And I mean, this was coming, this was, we still have this narrative—but this was around the time when the narrative was really, really strong around protecting Black boys. Right. And the chatter, the community chatter was often about protecting Black boys, which was true.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: What exactly do you mean about that? Why do they need protecting?

TARANA BURKE: It was, there was a moment in the country and I think, you know, it's an ongoing situation, obviously. But there was either some research that came out or books that came out, or maybe a combination that just talked about how detrimental the situation was for Black boys in this country. And the language—it was like the language of endangered species. Right. That Black boys wouldn't live past a certain time. Their educational opportunities were limited. This is when people started paying attention to over-policing and over-incarcerating. And Black boys are at the middle of all of those things. And so the focus became largely on Black boys and Black girls started to fall through the cracks.

And it just started becoming a pattern that I saw happening over and over again in our program. And I would say to my girlfriend, we need to pull out and do something specific with the girls. Because if we don't these girls are gonna slip through the cracks. I wasn't talking about sexual violence, mind you, at the time. I was just thinking about leadership development and just attention, like literally giving them better attention than what we have been doing. Equal attention. Right? Like creating some more equity around the way we interacted with the girls or pulling them out and doing something really specific.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right. Did you have a certain kind of leeriness or suspicion about capital F feminism at that point?

TARANA BURKE: Yeah. Oh, for sure. This was probably the time of my life when I would say I'm not a feminist.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Tell me why. Tell me why.

TARANA BURKE: Well, because it was in my mind largely associated with white women, who did not see Black women and see the very nuanced and specific ways that patriarchy affects us, that oppression affects us.

I was just like, I don't want—those white feminist girls, I didn't want to be associated. I'm an organizer. You know, my identity is Black, that's it. *laughs* I mean, this has always been my—I feel like my assignment is around centering Black women and girls. And beyond that, it's like circles that go out and keep going out and out, beyond that, um, folks who are pushed to the margins. And that thinking has always guided me and has never failed me because it never leaves anybody out. It never, ever, ever leaves anybody out. There's not a single white woman who will not benefit from my work, by my work being grounded in or centering Black women and girls.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *Through her work with women and girls in Selma, Tarana started to realize just how pervasive the problem of sexual violence was. Time and again, she*

would find out that a majority of the girls in her workshops had survived or were surviving sexual trauma.

TARANA BURKE: There's like waves of it. There's the people who know for sure that something bad happened to them because they were sexually assaulted, they were raped, or molested. And then there was this second wave, and when we started explaining like what statutory rape was or sexual harassment, like when we got into that, they'd be like, 'Ohh. Well yeah, me too.' And then you'd see this next wave of things. And we spent a lot of time introducing language to the girls because without the language they knew that the thing that happened was bad, that it left a scar, but they didn't know how to talk about it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *Tarana also came to realize that one man, a highly respected civil rights organizer had been acting inappropriately with children in her program. His name was James Bevel.*

TARANA BURKE: So, James Bevel, he was one of Dr. King's chief lieutenants. People probably don't know his name as well as they know the things that he organized. He was a brilliant strategist. So the Children's March in Birmingham, where there are these tons of famous pictures of the children being hosed. He was also the mastermind behind the Selma to Montgomery March. So as an organizer he was brilliant. He also happened to be a serial child molester and sexual predator.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *When Tarana brought this to the attention of her bosses, they refused to remove him. And instead chose to look the other way. Tarana was shocked that they had chosen to protect his reputation over the safety of the children.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know there's something important to explore here about women who protect the men. Who are more concerned with the potential pain and suffering of men. What do you think is happening there? What is that about?

TARANA BURKE: You know, I think that I think this is a complicated question. Well, complicated in some ways. We talk a lot about the culture of silence in our communities, particularly in communities of color. We have to talk more about the culture of complicity. Because the complicity is layered.

There is out and out complicity, right? Where it's just like, I know this thing happened, but I value this person and what they represent more than I do your humanity, your safety, or anything like that. So I'm going to protect them, right. And then there is this other more intricate and sometimes more nuanced thing of... I think people roll the dice. Do I want to take a chance? You might've been harmed, you might not have been. But do I want to take a chance on going down this road and upending whatever the thing is? Like the church or the community space or this legacy. Right?

And I think in the black community, in particular, it feels like—I don't think this is actually true—but it feels like such a dearth of heroes, of giants, of people for whom we can be proud. People who are legacy makers. That we feel extra compelled to make sure those people's legacies and lives stay intact. And that is done not just for us internally. It's done for the external world. Right? Because we're constantly trying to prove that we're not bad people.

I do think that when you get a certain amount of power and position, that people who have less to lose, like say me, right? Those of us who have less power and less positioning, there's nothing to cloud our integrity. Right? I think other people are like, I've been given a responsibility of protecting this legacy. I've been given a responsibility of being whoever I'm supposed to be in the community. And so instead of going straight to where people with less power would go, they have to take all of these things into consideration. Now you don't have to, and I'm not making excuses for them because I don't think they should have.

But I'm trying, I try to follow the logic that, you know, like in terms of trying to give people a little bit of grace, I try to follow the logic that could have led to those kinds of decisions.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah I mean, what I see you doing is offering your empathy equally to everyone in the equation. Imagine how different the world would be if everyone offered all the empathy they had to everybody in the equation, we would have an entirely different way of—

TARANA BURKE: Completely.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know one thing that you say about your work in Selma was that your work was sort of dismissed as social work, but not a movement. That pains me so much. Why do you think we tend to dismiss a movement like yours as a movement?

TARANA BURKE: I think that it's really hard for people to see sexual violence beyond the individual, for a lot of reasons. One of them, I think there's a lot of people relate it to sex. And that's a space of shame for folks. I think the other part is all the questions that we have at the point of disclosure, that make it, not... for lack of a better word, sort of legitimate enough, right? If a citizen shoots a person in the street, it's sort of straightforward, right? This person's dead. This person shot them. And people feel comfortable in those details. If the pastor at the local church is accused of molesting a child in the church, well, then we have to weigh who he is versus who that child's family is, you know, like all these other things. So it feels more complicated maybe.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I don't think—I don't know if it's more complicated. You know what I think? I think that we have a tendency to rank suffering and so one kind of suffering is more legitimate than another because we have a tendency not to be able to hold more than one thing in our heads at the same time.

TARANA BURKE: And I think—I agree with that. And I think specifically in the Black community and in other communities where, where there's so much oppression and depression and if I'm trying to keep the lights on, keep a job, avoid police brutality, you know, get out of a food desert, whatever the different things are. And then my child comes to me or I experienced this thing that feels like, 'All right, at the very least you can suck this up. Just suck it up.' Right. That is, that is the message that so many young girls get, 'You don't come to anybody with this. You just deal with this, don't bother anybody with this, we got bigger things to deal with.'

But this is why the narrative work is so important. There's not enough information about what sexual violence does to people available. Right. We have twenty-something years of Law and Order SVU. That's been a consistent message. And I think they've actually done good work to some degree around helping people, you know, understand sexual violence, whatever. But it's almost like a singular understanding of what a survivor looks like. That's just not real enough.

I used to do this exercise where I tell people to substitute the word murder for rape in casual conversation because I have actually heard casual conversations where people are talking about a guy. It'd be like, 'Isn't that the guy who... they said—didn't they say he raped a girl?' And then somebody will say, 'I don't know. He's not the type who would do that.' And I'm like, so if you are having casual conversation to say, 'Didn't they say he murdered somebody. He murdered that girl.' We would pause completely. The level of consideration shifts completely. If people understood that sexual violence is a type of death for the person who experiences it, I think we'd have a different relationship. That we are collectively responsible then for the safety of our community against this violence.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know one of the women in Bosnia that I spoke to where there'd been widespread, systemic, sexual assault against the Bosnian women said, 'When I was raped, I became a refugee inside of myself.'

TARANA BURKE: Mmm, mm mm mm.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And it was just a thing that she said that I cannot stop holding in my heart. Because it's a soul crime, it's a crime against a person's soul and spirit. Which is why I think it's so appropriate that it was a spiritual struggle for you to allow that part of yourself to reintegrate with all the rest of what you've done.

TARANA BURKE: That is such a profoundly accurate and beautiful way to describe it. 'I became a refugee inside of myself.' That is so accurate.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *Dealing with James Bevel and with everything she was learning from the girls in her workshops. It was a lot to take in. Tarana's experience of deep*

childhood trauma was finally beginning to catch up with her. One night she found herself just flooded with these traumatic childhood memories that she'd long forgotten.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I want to talk about this very interesting moment toward the end of your book. When you have what you kind of call a fit, I would call it a dark night of the soul.

TARANA BURKE: That's what Oprah said! That's so interesting.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh yeah, what happened to you in that moment was spiritual.

TARANA BURKE: Absolutely. It was some kind of reckoning for me. The memories that I had locked away and never, ever, ever tapped into started flooding back. I had come to terms with the first set of things that happened to me. When I was assaulted at seven. But I was molested between nine and twelve by the son of my mother's friend. And I felt even more guilty about that. And when I was an adult, I was, this is not even in the book, but when I was an adult, I was also raped. And so all of these things were coming back all at once. And they started coming back and I was saying, 'God, why are you doing this to me? Why are you making me face this? Why are you making me remember? I don't, this is what we don't do.' And it just was relentless. And I think I was—

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And physical too.

TARANA BURKE: I was like physically trying to fight this out of my mind. Like I was reading scriptures. I was crying. I was screaming. I was rolling around in the bed. And I'm—this is something I actually came to in the last, like, month, because I've been asked about it a few times and—you know, the way I describe what happened to me when I was a child was I felt like I split in two, in some ways. And I feel like that night was God's attempt to make me whole again.

Because when I split so to speak, it became like good and bad. Or this Tarana and that Tarana, and the two versions of myself never talked to each other. Never operated in the same space. And one held all of the stories, all of the really ugly underbelly of my experiences. And I just kept that one in the closet. And I think what God was trying to make clear to me is, 'This is your assignment. This is definitely your work, but you will not be able to do this work, you won't be successful, you won't be able to even get started, until you face each other.' Like this Tarana has to look at that Tarana and know that that Tarana is okay too.

I mean, this is me, like I said, I haven't even said that out loud really anywhere because I've been trying to articulate it in my brain. Like how can I, how can I talk about what that night meant to me? It was so scary. It really was not... I mean, I know it was a spiritual experience. I'm absolutely clear it was, but it was in the moment so scary. Even now,

when I think about it, I feel a little bit of like—my heart quickens. Because you don't know, like, 'Am I going to die? Like, what is what's going to happen? I don't know what's going to happen.' But at the end of this I slept again. So this is a weekend basically. And when I woke up, I had just, I had just been writing and scribbling on things and I was trying to piece everything together. And I was just trying to think. I picked up a notebook, a steno pad, and I wrote 'me too' on it. And then I sat down and I started writing out this idea for a campaign. Now, I was working on this work before. This is not how I started the work; I just didn't have a name for it before. It was just like this workshop we were trying to do around sexual violence. But now I had a name. I had been calling it 'Empowerment Through Empathy' before it was 'Me too'.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Mm. What a beautiful way to start a movement, honestly, out of a dark night of the soul.

TARANA BURKE: So when 'me too' went viral, the hashtag going viral was an elevation of an ongoing movement, right. The number of people that I've heard say things like—especially young people on college campuses are like— 'I'm so glad we finally have a movement to, like, end rape, or to like, talk about sexual assault.' And I'm like, my God, this is one spoke in a huge, huge wheel. And the work that I'm doing and the work that the people who are my colleagues and peers are doing is just to lay more groundwork to get us further along. We have not invented anything new. In this process, we may add some new elements to it, but the whole concept is just not new.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. We've been poorly served by our image in our head of social movements.

TARANA BURKE: Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Because I think that historically we've been told there's a finish line. A place you arrive at, a promised land, and this is the work of your life. It will never end.

TARANA BURKE: I try to tell people that I made a choice when I wanted to deal with women and girls. I made a choice when I wanted to move over and deal with sexual violence, specifically. Right? I have done work around so many social justice issues in my life. Everything from fair housing, to predatory lending, to police brutality, to education, inequality. I care about all of those areas because ultimately we're trying to shift humanity. We're trying to make sure that we are more connected as human beings, that we are more equitable as human beings, that we are safe, that we have autonomy, right. And that we live with compassion and integrity. That's the big, giant 30,000-foot vision of the world. When you get down closer, we have to do all these little pieces and have all these intersecting movements. You can't talk about mass incarceration and not talk about sexual violence. They are inextricably linked. I can talk about so many different social justice issues that people grasp. And then I can add how it's impacted by sexual violence, how they impact sexual violence in one way or another. We're all trending toward the same thing. We're trying to live in a different and better world.

And then here's the other part: if we woke up tomorrow and miraculously sexual violence was gone. Everybody understood consent. The balance of power was, you know, evened out. We would still have, just as we did the day after "me too" went viral, we would still have millions and millions of people whose lives were affected by this violence they experienced.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

TARANA BURKE: And that's the piece that we also don't get: if we are living in community and community means that we care about each other, what do we owe people who have experienced the violence, who will never get the accountability they're looking for, who will never see whether it's a day in court or a face to face admission, they won't get those things. So how do we wrap ourselves around those people as community members to make sure that they find some kind of wholeness again? There's still always work to do.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Thank you for that. That's actually a great way that we'll end it.

TARANA BURKE: This was a great conversation.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Tarana Burke is the author of the new memoir 'Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement.' She has also written a beautiful book with Brené Brown called 'You Are Your Best Thing'. You can find them both wherever you buy books, and also at Audible online, where Tarana reads her own book. Tarana, thank you so much for joining me.

TARANA BURKE: Thank you so much for having me.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It was a pleasure.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show is produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Wren Farrell is our Assistant Producer. This episode was engineered by Veronica Rodriguez. Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes VP of production, Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website forkfilms.com And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.