

NYT 3/15/94

On My Mind

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The Way She Died

She died on the street, near her house in Queens, stabbed to death in the early morning of March 13, 1964. It wasn't much of a story; an editor in the New York Times newsroom held up a thumb and forefinger, meaning keep it short.

Four paragraphs appeared, written by a young police reporter. Even in the newsroom they were barely noticed. But two weeks later Catherine Genovese's name became known around the world.

For 30 years now, the half-hour before she died of her wounds has been studied in classes from grade school to universities, dissected in graduate seminars and related in church sermons, all in the search for some meaning.

A few days after the murder, I had lunch with Police Commissioner Michael Joseph Murphy. I was metropolitan editor of The Times then and we had talked occasionally about public apathy toward crime.

That day, at Emil's, near City Hall, he told me a story that made him shake his head. We checked it out, and on March 17 a story by Martin Gansberg appeared on the front page. It began:

"For more than half an hour, 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens.

"Twice the sound of their voices and the glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead."

If any of the 38 witnesses had called during the first attack, the police said, Catherine Genovese, 28 years

Catherine, and her witnesses.

old, might have been saved.

When reporters talked to the witnesses, some said they did not want to get involved. One man said he was tired. Most, asked why they had done nothing, just said, "I don't know."

Later, some of the witnesses and their neighbors became angry. They told the reporters it was unfair how they kept writing about Austin Street, where Catherine Genovese died, and how they were giving the neighborhood a bad name, go away.

Reporters then consulted "experts." Mostly the answers were what you would expect — blahblah-blah. A theologian said blahblah maybe the city was "depersonalized." Then he said: "Don't quote me." That was the only funny thing that happened.

The police arrested a man called Winston Moseley. He was convicted, and received a life sentence. He is in the Green Haven correctional institution in Dutchess County, New York.

But how could it happen — 38 witnesses keeping silent while Catherine Genovese died? I get letters, some of them from children studying the Genovese case in fifth or sixth grade. A teacher wrote that her children wept when they heard the story.

Sometimes I write to the children that maybe the fact that Catherine Genovese is remembered will mean that fewer people will turn away.

That's unctuous nonsense. It is difficult to say to the children — no, her death has not helped diminish apathy. But that is what I believe. In our city and country, there is more violence, more apathy toward it, not less.

For a while after Catherine Genovese died, reporters came up with a string of "apathy" stories. Ten years ago, when we printed a story about neighbors doing nothing during a courtyard shooting, the reporter mentioned her name.

But the thing is, "apathy" is not really news anymore. Every week, sometimes often in one week, somebody gets murdered before witnesses in our city — an execution on a drug corner, or death in a drive-by splatter of bullets.

When I see the scene in my mind, I know that there must have been lots of witnesses — in the streets, or watching from windows.

But the thought that they walked away or pulled their heads in does not startle me anymore. I take it for granted. If I were still an editor I would probably not bother to send reporters to search out witnesses, it seems so commonplace now, silent witness.

These years, when I think of how excited we all got about the story of neighbors who refused to get involved while a woman was killed, and how everybody was startled that it could actually happen, that time seems very distant, almost naïve.

But how can you write that to children who cry at the memory of Catherine Genovese, and the manner of her dying? □

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