

**Report from the New Orleans Superdome, V-Day
April 11, 12
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Thousands of women (30,000-40,000), plus many men, gathered in the New Orleans Superdome, April 11-12, to mark the tenth year of Eve Ensler's extraordinary work of bringing to light violence against women, Vday. Twelve hundred of those women, through Eve, had on the opening morning returned to New Orleans after their displacement as a result of hurricane Katrina and the diaspora. Present were also women from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Kenya, the Congo, Bosnia, and many other wounded countries around the world, including many women from America who have experienced rape, physical and mental abuse, and fundamental misogyny.

The two days of intensive presentations, panels, and performances wove around two great contemporary tragedies that focus on violence against women: Katrina and the Gulf South, and the violent rape of women in the Congo.

Hurricane Katrina exposed what was going on in New Orleans and the Gulf South: the shocking lack of resources, total lack of care for its poor in general and its women in particular. People of New Orleans were abandoned, and as I traveled through the Ninth Ward, saw the decaying houses with spray painted x's, indicating how many had died and saw the amber waterlines on the crumbling buildings, I thought I was looking at a war zone. The degree of neglect of the people of New Orleans is not to be ignored. And the direct and indirect violence toward women and children is profound. I kept saying to myself: "This is America. This can't happen here...." But it has happened and is happening.....

This extraordinary event brought to light not only the great suffering in New Orleans and travesty of our government, with the Superdome being a national symbol of horror, but also in many other places, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which itself is being raped for its vast natural resources, and its women and girls being sexually brutalized by invading armies. The hero of V-Day and Eve Ensler's friend, Dr. Denis Mukwege, Founding Physician of the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu in the Congo, heads up the only center for victims of sexual violence in eastern Congo and currently is overseeing the work being done on the ground to create the City of Joy, a refuge for survivors of rape and torture who have been left without family and community.

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-sawyers/eve-enslers-vday-voices_b_36455.html)

Ann Veneman, extraordinary Executive Director of UNICEF, also at the conference, is collaborating with Eve and Dr. Mukwege on the City of Joy project. I think few of us realize what is going on in the Congo at this time. I personally was horrified to hear of the extent of the violent sexual abuse of women of every age. I was reminded of the daylong panel I led in Nanjing on rape as a deliberate weapon of war. The women of Nanjing whom I meet in November feel as if the trauma of rape will never leave them, even after seventy years since this terrible invasion happened. The work that Dr. Mukwege, Eve, Ann and their team is doing in the Congo is heroic beyond measure. Please take note of this endeavor and support it.

And in the mix, slam and rap poets, dances, the Vagina Monologues, the Mahalia Jackson Choir, and gorgeous young girls who were going through a rite of passage graced our presence. At the end, Jane Fonda brought the house down with her brilliant and radical concluding speech on art and radicalism. This woman takes no prisoners!

In addition to the rich presentations, the upstairs lounges were filled with women meeting each other and receiving support. The faces of many of the attendees bore the scars of their experience, and Ensler, knowing that many of the women who would be attending have not had access to medical care and respite, brought in friends from all over the country to provide services, from medical screening to yoga and massage.

The event concluded with a splendid performance of the Vagina Monologues in the New Orleans sports arena. More than twenty thousand people gathered and roared with laughter, cried, and clapped wildly as local women and Hollywood's best collaborated in what has got to be one of the bravest, crazies, realist, and most wonderful events in the history of the planet: The Vagina Monologues. No prisoners taken here either.

I am including here a letter written by Eve Ensler to all the "performers" in V-Day. Also included is a text of the opening I did for the event. It was a great honor and joy to contribute to this historical gathering.

I thank sangha member Jane Fonda for encouraging Eve to invite me to contribute. It was totally wonderful to be standing on the stage of the Superdome, in my deep magenta Zen robes, and meeting thousands of women in that moment and for the two days that followed. I feel inspired, educated, and now am clear why our work at Upaya with women, both in our daily sangha and in the powerful gathering every year, In the Shelter of Each Other in July, is a total necessity at this time.

Read Eve's letter below. The mental and physical abuse of women continues. When at the end of the Monogues, Eve asked women to stand who had been raped, I stood along with thousands of other women. My own experience of rape in my twenties is not something I have shared with many. But to share it with so many brought great healing to me. I am sure that every woman there, whether a victim of rape or not, felt the same.

RJoan

Letter from Eve Ensler:

Dear V Warriors,

I am on my way to San Francisco, the last city of the V to 10th tour before New Orleans. It has been a wild, inspiring, disturbing journey. I have spoken at nearly 22 places—colleges, conferences, auditoriums, theatres. I have traveled on some main roads, but mainly I have been off the beaten track in small towns like Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, Clemson, South Carolina, and Florence, Alabama. I have spoken to crowds of hundreds and thousands. I experienced nearly seven snowstorms, a hail storm, one blessedly hot day in Austin, Texas. I have stayed in places with names like the Sleep Inn, Apple Butter Inn, and The Mansion.

I have seen the faces of hundreds of activated, vital, committed, diverse women and men who are literally giving their lives to end violence against women and girls. Women and men who have changed their cultures, told their stories and helped others do the same. I have met the V-Day activists who have raised money, raised hope, raised hackles, raised the V flag in community after community. I have seen the most beautiful original posters, t-shirts and buttons. I saw Megan's red and black skirt in Alabama, where she sewed the V-DAY logo as a design. I heard 200 women chant "Cunt!" in Alma, Michigan. I spoke in several churches, one called Beneficent, which is my new favorite word. It means "loving kindness". These churches and the feisty spiritual women and men who run them or work in them gave refuge and support to V-Day when other churches or religions tried to censure the productions.

I signed a woman's hip at Slippery Rock University so she could get a tattoo and drew a red V on a woman's back in Alabama so she could do the same. (This woman had already had a vagina and uterus tattooed on her entire back after her first V-Day.)

I heard the stories of three women in the military, April Fitzsimmons, Suzanne Swift, Dorothy Mackey, who flew in to Austin Texas to be honored at a V-DAY in an Enchanted Forest. I learned from them that one out of three women in the military will be raped and that very few men are ever held accountable. I learned that there is something called Military Sexual Trauma. This is a condition in which, after suffering terrible trauma on the battlefield leading to PTSD, women -and some men- are then raped by their own comrades who they were trained to trust. This secondary betrayal and violation throws them into multiple layers of trauma, often resulting in severe depression and suicide.

I heard stories of great success. In Clemson, one of the most conservative colleges in America, they began V-Day 5 years ago. Initially they experienced strong resistance. One of the organizers even got spit on when she was handing out fliers. The first year they had 100 people in the audience. This year there were 1000 and it has now been established as an annual event. I visited places like Dartmouth, where tenacious women are fighting to keep the women's movement alive in the face of resistance and apathy, and places like Stetson College, where there is a wildly supportive and active administration and teaching body.

I admire and am profoundly grateful to professors in Women Studies programs across this country who keep Feminism alive, often with very few resources or support. I was moved at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee to have the evening include a discussion on race and gender. And throughout the country I was deeply moved by men: how much things have changed, how honest they were in the q and a's when they talked about wanting to be part of this movement, wanting to take a stand against violence, wanting to find a way out of the current tyranny of masculinity.

At Clarion College one young man talked to me about how hard it had been coming from a home where his father hated his mother and sisters. He grew up trying not to hate women as his father had. I heard men say how much they needed to cry and be

vulnerable.

I met many women from local beneficiaries who have been supported by the local V-Days for the last years and heard stories of how that money had kept shelters open, developed new programs, changed laws.

In Toronto, I was able to get a taste of the scope of the V-DAY movement throughout Canada. I got to participate in a most wonderful evening called FEMCAB, filled with theater and music where great Canadian women artists gave voice to all kinds of issues with passion and humor.

And I was crushed by story after story of women who have been raped, beaten, incested, date-raped, or who have daughters or friends of daughters who were murdered. Whether it was the 18 year-old in Providence, Rhode Island, who told me that at 15 she had gone to a doctor, been raped by him under anesthesia, developed a dangerous eating disorder and was sent to a clinic where she met many other women who were there because they, too, had been abused, such as the anorexic girl who was actually pregnant with her father's baby. Or the woman whose sister had become a serious drug addict since her father raped and sodomized her and was now in a lock-down facility. Or the 18 year old woman who broke down in my arms because she had only learned recently that she was the product of her mother being gang raped in the army.

I would say that at least one out of every three women told me stories of abuse. This was in front of a camera as we documented the tour. In some places almost every single woman told a story of abuse.

I know that our movement has had huge victories, even the ability of women to tell these stories is progress, but I must say that after 22 states I feel shell shocked.

I no longer believe violence against women is random, individual or accidental. After 50 countries, 10 years, thousands of women's stories and this 22 state tour, I know there is a global pattern destroying and undermining women through violence.

Many would like to think that this type of systematic violation of women does not happen in America. I want you to know that indeed it does. In homes, colleges, streets and armies, thousands of women are being raped, beaten, dishonored, and undermined.

I am not sure the language has yet been invented to describe the breath, depth and insidiousness of violence towards women. This global pattern of raping and abusing one out of three women in every village, town and city on this planet (a UN statistic), has got to be named. Femicide is a word that was used by the brave and visionary women in the early feminist movement to describe the systematic killing of women. I want to enlarge the definition to include the innumerable violations that destroy not only women's bodies, but their souls, their spirits, their dreams, their ability to trust, love and prosper.

In three weeks, we will be in New Orleans with V to the 10th. We will take back the superdome and throw the biggest mega event of our times. I am fueled by this tour, this journey into this wild, spreading movement. I am enraged and heart broken by the

violence. My commitment has only become surer and deeper. I am more brave today because I have absorbed the bravery of the women who are fighting for their lives and their sister's lives on the front lines—in conservative towns, in liberal cities, in living rooms and bedrooms where leaving the battery means going without income, leaving means taking children and finding your way alone, leaving means building the new world: V-World.

Ten years ago, there was one production of *The Vagina Monologues* in one city. This year there are 4000 productions in 1500 places. We are growing and spreading. We are fierce and loving and strategic and full of sexuality and humor. And we are winning.

For those of you in places I wasn't able to visit, I am with you in my heart. I thank you for standing up and for not being afraid.

I know there are buses and trains and planes and cars filled with V-Day activists on the way to support our sisters in New Orleans. This will be our moment to gather and celebrate and mourn and heal and inspire each other. This will be our moment to escalate this movement and layer our vision and amplify our creativity and include more warriors as we move towards victory in the next ten years. It will be our moment to push the edge and stand firmer and speak louder and love deeper.

I can't wait to see you all there.

V to the Tenth!!!! Eve Ensler

THE LOTUS OF NOLA OPENS

Roshi Joan Halifax

There is a great vow,
a holy promise that we are called to make:
*For as long as space exists
and the world abides,
may I too remain
to dispel the suffering of this world*

Thus are we here

Just as a lotus, rises from the mud of suffering
making her way through gloomy waters,
so too is New Orleans rising up from the shadows of sorrow,
ancient and recent.
As well, courageous women are gathered here from every world quarter
to heal and move through and past the shadows of violence and neglect.

Like the lotus, you have been resilient and beautiful.
You, like the lotus, have risen through and above the murky waters
of hatred, betrayal, neglect, terror and violence.
You, like the lotus, are compassion in its female form,

saving beings from suffering.

You have perceived the cries of the world.
You, with hearts open and brave, have responded in myriad ways.
You have shown up in spite of it all.
You have taken a stand.
And we bow to you, all of you.....

Lotus-like, the superdome also now arises from the mud of suffering
See her now opening to the light
She was a vessel of sorrow.
Now she is a lotus of hope.

And as we are taught in our Buddhist holy scriptures,
the red lotus symbolizes feminine love and compassion,
the human heart and healing.

New Orleans is a holy place where this healing is happening
through the courageous efforts of women in communities.....
Women who have manifested patience and determination
Women who are filled with mercy and charity
Women focused on relationships and commitment to rebuilding their communities
Women who have blossomed as leaders
Women who are fearless peacemakers
Women determining that if they survived, they would contribute
Women who stayed through it all
Women as defenders of community—finding their dispersed neighbors and bringing
them home
Women who returned
Women as inventors of processes to assist people to deal with the tangled bureaucracy
Women dedicated to making resources available
Women of courage and resilience
Women ignoring the politics and insisting on strategies that build community
Women as protectors of children, each other, neighborhoods, communities, the earth

Even after months and years of frustration, trauma, heartbreak, exhaustion, illness,
women have kept going against seemingly insurmountable circumstances.
Thus it is with women; we will never give up!

You must be praised.
You have turned the tide of violence and despair in New Orleans,
and from these tidal waters, you have blossomed and caused much to bloom.

Others of you have turned the tide of violence in your own communities and families,
and you have watered the seeds of hope and courage.

It is important to understand that it is people and communities who are the lotuses
growing from the mud left in the wake of Katrina,

and also in the wake of generations of the abuse of women, power, and basic goodness
in every part of the world

We honor all named and unnamed women warriors and saints,
mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and sisters,
who have worked to end violence, neglect, despair and abuse.
To all those who have risen up in the face of the complete failure of our government at all
levels

We are gathered to honor those who have vowed to change their cultures, told their
stories and helped others do the same
To honor the compassionate ones
who are bringing about healing in the great city of New Orleans
and are bringing about healing in communities and families far from here

We are gathered to honor all those taking a stand to end violence
against women, children and the earth.
It is an ancient and pervasive story
and this story must end
Can end
Will end
We must bring it to an end
by bringing it to light.

We must celebrate and we must mourn in order to heal.
It is our moment to stand firm, send our voices, and love deeply.
It is a moment to actualize compassion, knowing that we cannot separate ourselves from
the abuse and neglect of one woman, one girl, one neighborhood, one city, our very earth.

New Orleans is a sacred place rising up like a great lotus from the mud of human abuse
and suffering, thanks to each person gathered here today.

Chant:
MAY WE EXIST IN MUDDLY WATER,
WITH PURITY LIKE A LOTUS.
THUS WE BOW TO ALL OF YOU.