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Relying on Karma to Avenge the Wounded

As With All Hierarchies, the Biz Protects the Prominent and Punishes the Weak



Within our interview with Jeannine Oppewall (page 4) is her advice to “lick your wounds in private.” It’s an interesting comment and one that merits further attention. In an industry where abuse is rampant, what are the pros and cons of a private versus public outcry?

Three years ago, as a novice writer, I entered into an agreement with a local company to produce my documentary. The ink was barely dry, however, when one of the producers decided that it was in the “best interests” of the project that he be credited as the writer. When I objected, his response was “that’s show business.”

Two days later I found myself at an industry party. Still clearly upset by recent events, I made the mistake of answering honestly when asked how I was doing. I was posed the question by someone whom I trusted and therefore felt I could confide in. But I was wrong. Not only was I chastised that evening by another colleague for slagging off someone in public, but it came back later via the Trade Forum when my candid reply was used to argue that I wasn’t a suitable choice as moderator of New Filmmaker’s Day.

Recently, another contract I entered into was not honored by the other party and I’m told the offending producer has a track record of such behaviour. In fact, the more information I gather the more I can’t figure out how this producer is still active in the industry. Why, I wonder, is her career not swimming in the same toilet as her

reputation? Why must information be shared in hushed tones, not shouted from the rooftops? The only answer I can ascertain is this enforced silence, the licking of our wounds in private.

Whatever the issue of abuse, in almost all cases the victims I meet are either too low on the totem poll to count or too new to leave a dent. In almost all cases the perpetrator is a department head or the producer. Interestingly enough, when I complained about the situation with my documentary, those who held it against me were also at the top.

Don’t say anything at all if you can’t say anything nice. Is that the rule? Or is it just the rule for those without power? I think of the famous slagging match between Ovitz and Eisner, a very public affair between two very powerful men. Neither seemed even vaguely concerned with repercussions from colleagues. But then neither are unknowns scraping their way up the ladder. What I’m left with is a portrait of a hierarchy that, like all hierarchies, protects the prominent and punishes the weak.

As a culture we’ve finally come to acknowledge that silencing victims damages our communities and perpetuates abuse. But film is business and business has never cared much for culture. So, are there ways to break the silence safely without resorting to fearful whispers? Could those industry leaders with their integrity still intact address this issue, perhaps with an independent arbitration board to hear complaints? Or must we rely on Karma?—which, admittedly, took care of my documentary producer, last seen scrounging for a research job.

Michelle Demers