

REMEMBERING OCTOBER 18TH: THE LEGACY OF THE MURDER-SUICIDE

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It was a Monday, but a day that turned out very much like this one, sunny and warm. Another Michigan October, and the trees were doing their thing, and the air smelled of smoke, and the wind blew the remaining shreds of summer right out of your head. The first-year students were acclimating, starting to look and talk and act—and *study*—like K students. The seniors were complaining about their SIPs. It was another fall term, another year underway.

We moved into the brilliant heart of October, and then it was Homecoming weekend. That Friday, October 15, Maggie Wardle, a sophomore from Plainwell, about ten miles north of Kalamazoo, met with Dr. David Barclay and talked about her intention to declare a major in history. The next day she played her worst golf game ever, but she laughed about it with the team in the van on the way back to campus. That night she went to the Homecoming dance with a guy she wanted to date for a while. Her ex-boyfriend, Neenef Odah, a junior from Seattle, saw them together and became enraged and distraught.

Maggie spent the next day at the library at Western, studying for a test. She had plans to join friends to watch “Sleepless in Seattle” that night. Neenef’s friends saw him at dinner and said he seemed fine. They knew he’d been very depressed over the break-up with Maggie, but that night he told them she was coming over later.

It was around midnight when the students in Dewaters heard the noises. They thought it was a desk being swept clean of books, a computer falling to the floor. They thought someone was hammering a wall or pounding it with a fist. They thought it was

a soccer ball kicked into a wall. They thought it was anything but what it was. As one of them later said, “This is K, so that couldn’t be a gun.”

But it was a gun. A shotgun, firing three times. The first two shots blew Maggie Wardle out of a life filled with love and promise and anticipation. With the third, Neenef Odah ended the misery in which he’d been drowning for years.

And with those explosions, this little college community became something else. That Monday morning became a watershed for all of us, even those who, like me, didn’t know either Maggie or Neenef. It was a defining event, as trauma always is. It forced us to demonstrate some of our greatest strengths. It brought out some of our persistent weaknesses. None of us who were here will ever forget it.

But now, nine years later, it has almost faded into ancient history. Partly that’s because colleges are places of turnover, and there are very few of us left who were here at the time. I began to think about this three Octobers ago when some of us met, as we will this morning, at Maggie’s bench outside the chapel. Words were said. And then Maggie’s step-dad wondered aloud, “Is there some way that this story is passed on to new students? Are there seminars or presentations of some kind, so that they can find out about it?”

There was a long silence, and then someone said something about this story being part of the story of the College. And I stood there thinking, “That’s not true. We don’t pass it on, unless we’re asked, unless some first-year student or new staff member says, ‘That bench by the chapel—what’s that about?’ or ‘Is it true there was some kind of shooting in one of the dorms?’”

The reason I think the story of October 18, 1999, must be part of our story here is that Kalamazoo College exists for one singular purpose: the development of teenagers into adults who go on to lead meaningful, healthy lives that make the planet

a better place. When something utterly devastating occurs, among us or in the world around us, we have a responsibility to teach and learn from it—to take it in and turn it into fuel for our lives. So the question is what we can learn from the deaths of Maggie Wardle and Neenef Odah. And the answer lies within another question: How did their relationship get to the point where those gunshots exploded in the midnight air? If we can answer that, we can perhaps prevent this from ever happening again.

When we talk about what is often called “domestic violence,” a scenario plays out in our heads. I wonder if it’s playing out in yours right now. And the story I have to tell will contradict that scenario at many points. First of all, I bet many of you are imagining this as a violent relationship. Would it surprise you to know that, as far as we know, Neenef was not physically violent to Maggie before the night he killed her?

I wonder how you are all imagining Neenef. Do you imagine him physically imposing, dominant in personality? He was 5’ 9” tall, 140 pounds, small build—a slight young man. The word that has come up most often when I’ve asked people about him is “quiet.” He was a computer science major who loved gaming.

From his name, have you concluded that he was probably Muslim and therefore probably a misogynist who believed in women’s subordination? Many believed this, after he died. On the police report, Maggie is identified as white, Neenef with the letter “U,” which I assume means “Undetermined” or “Unknown.” He was racially ambiguous in a deeply racist culture that does not like ambiguity. In fact, he was Catholic, from an Iraqi Assyrian family who emigrated to this country when he was about twelve. The Assyrians were among the earliest Christians, and they have been a persecuted minority in Iraq. Neenef did tell friends that in his family and in his culture women were subordinated; it was hard for him to ride in a car with a woman driving, for instance. But he was also aware that this bias was at odds with the culture most of his friends were coming from.

One of his female friends wrote me to say that the thing that endeared him to her was his gentleness with and his love for women—for his women friends and for the women in his family. He danced in Frelon; he played soccer up and down the hall in Dewaters; he had friends across all kinds of gender, racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries. He was One of Us. And this was the hard part: if he had fit people's mental images of the Abuser, we would have had an easier time understanding what he did. We couldn't figure out a way to say that One Of Us, a person with many lovable and admirable qualities, could also commit a crime of violence against a woman, especially one that he purported to love. So some alternate stories emerged: he was a good person who "just snapped." He was a good person who "made a bad mistake."

The problem with those descriptions is that they make the murder-suicide an anomaly, an isolated moment in Neenef's life that had nothing to do with the rest of him. But the fact is that everything we do comes from somewhere in us. To separate out that which we wish we were NOT, and to say, "That's not really me," is a quick route to denial and hypocrisy, to a dis-integrated, fragmented self.

To understand what Neenef did, we have to forget about whatever images we carry around of Abusers or Violent Men or Muslims, and look instead at actions. And this is the first thought I'd like you to take away this morning: It's in actions, not types of people, that we find our answers and can recognize the warnings that can keep us safe.

Maggie and Neenef started going out in January of 1999. From the first, he didn't really like her hanging out with anyone but him, male or female. He wanted her to himself. He made a concerted effort to separate her from her female friends, of whom he disapproved. They told me stories about the ruses she employed in order to hang out with them: leaving the dorm bundled up so as not to be recognized, using

cologne and mouthwash to hide the fact that she had been smoking, which Neenef prohibited, telling him she was going home to Plainwell for the night in order to go out with her friends. Maggie tore herself in half, trying to placate her boyfriend and not lose her girlfriends. As for male friends: Maggie and a girlfriend were hanging out one time with a guy friend who remarked, “If Neenef could see this, he’d come after me with a club.”

Research tells us now that the most significant warning sign for violence against women is male jealousy. Some experts prefer to call it “sexual proprietariness” rather than jealousy: we all feel jealous sometimes about the person we love, but not all of us insist that we have the right to control that person’s movements, social interactions, feelings, and body. “Proprietariness” signifies ownership, a claim to rights. And it’s not just Maggie’s friends who provide evidence of Neenef’s proprietary claim to control her.

The police report preserves the Instant Message record between Maggie and Neenef over the summer of 1999. I read it two years ago with a terrible sense of mounting anxiety and dread: His obsession and rage over the time she spent with anyone other than him are completely over the top. Friends remember screaming fights, constant tension. As early as spring, they recall, Neenef was passing Maggie notes in class, calling her Whore and Slut-- those names that have no male equivalent but are used only to identify and punish women who are seen as transgressing the boundaries. Over the summer, Maggie tried hard to talk to him about independence within a relationship, allowing each other space, acknowledging each other’s involvements with friends and family. In response, he wrote that he had once seen her as a “god-sent angel,” but now “all of a sudden you’ve turned into some feminist telling me this that and the other.” Now, I know the opposite of “angel,” and I don’t think it’s “feminist.”

Another warning sign is past violence. No, he never hit Maggie—at least not that we know of—but he hit other things. He was constantly fighting with male friends and acquaintances, or challenging them to fights, or bragging about past altercations or his prowess with karate. When a woman he had dated three times ended the relationship, he put his fist through a window, tearing up his hand. After a fight with Maggie, he put his fist through a closet door in his room.

But the past violence is often violence the perpetrator himself has experienced as a victim. In fact, violence suffered or witnessed in childhood is one of the most reliable predictors of adult violence among men. Neenef told friends that his father physically abused his mother and that Neenef himself was beaten when he brought home unacceptable grades.

Which brings me to the third warning sign over Neenef's head, one that comes from his family story. It's the story of an immigrant family who invested a lot in their son's academic and professional success in America and a very patriarchal father who exerted way too much pressure. One of Neenef's friends told me that very few K students could have understood the kind of pressure he was under because of his family's ethnic and immigrant background. But on another level, this story is shared by a lot of college students who struggle under inordinate pressure to "succeed" academically. Over the summer of 1999, Neenef didn't know whether his father would allow him to return to school; he wasn't satisfied with Neenef's performance in his sophomore year. Neenef negotiated his return, but only on the condition that he get a 4-point in the fall—and also that he not have any women in his life. This ultimatum came precisely as Maggie, alarmed and frustrated by Neenef's jealousy, his immaturity, his rages and verbal abuse, and his constant interrogations and pressure, was withdrawing from the relationship.

For Neenef, it must have felt like his life was unraveling. In the eyes of his father—and in the culture of academic overachievement that prevails at places like K—he was “failing.” And he had lost Maggie, his one good thing. His reported behavior and his writings suggest severe depression. In fact, men who abuse women are often NOT the domineering guys we imagine, but their opposites: men who are depressed, feel disenfranchised or marginalized or powerless, and are anxious about their masculinity and their power to “keep” a woman. They are often the men who will never be the Alpha Males in American culture—and that’s exactly the problem. In an email to a friend and also in his suicide note, Neenef wrote that his life had been nothing but pain for twenty years. He had been thinking about suicide, and he told his roommate that over the summer he had attempted to buy a gun while he was home in Seattle, planning to kill himself. According to statistics, there is nothing more dangerous to a woman than a partner or ex-partner who is suicidal and who has access to a gun.

On October 9th, Neenef simply borrowed his roommate’s car, drove out West Main Street to a store called On Target, and told them a tale about a prospective hunting trip up north with friends. With that and a Visa card, he was able to buy himself a Mossberg 12-gauge shotgun and ammo for \$347.62. He insisted that the shotgun be camouflage colored. He listed his address as 1200 Academy Street, with a Hicks Center box number. Why a shotgun, you might ask. Over 41% of murder-suicides are committed with handguns. But with a handgun, you see, he would have needed a permit, and that would have taken time. With a shotgun, he simply needed a credit card.

As he handed it over, was he planning to kill Maggie or only himself? Did he decide to take her with him when he saw her with someone at the Homecoming Dance? Shouldn’t someone have known that he was so close to the edge? Shouldn’t

people have known he was still harassing Maggie by email and telephone about getting back together? Shouldn't Maggie have known somehow that she was in danger?

Maggie: where was Maggie all this time, as Neenef was spiraling downwards? I haven't said much about her, and I guess that might seem strange. When we speak about violence against women, it's almost always about the women. And usually, the first question to raise its head is "Why did she stay with him?"

Which is why I've concentrated on Neenef. I am sick to death of that question, and Maggie Wardle's murder is evidence of why it's the wrong question to ask about a woman's injury or death. She didn't stay with him. She left him. And that was precisely the problem: the greatest danger for a woman is in the period just before, during, and after she has left a dangerous man. The rates of violence, including murder, skyrocket at that time--because it is her termination of the relationship, which implies her right to a life apart from him, that triggers his desperation and rage.

I have also waited to speak of Maggie because I wanted you to form a mental picture of her. What do you see? Is she small and shy, easily intimidated? Is she conventional in her views of gender and relationships with men? Submissive and compliant, eager to please? Weak and helpless?

The most surprising, and revealing, part of my research was in the way Maggie's friends explained why they, like most of the campus, had been unwilling to see her death as a form of "domestic violence": they couldn't bear to think of her, or to have others think of her, as weak: one of those pitiful, weak women who get pushed around, or beaten, or killed by their ex-boyfriends. A "victim"—the victim we all love to blame.

There is no more harmful stereotype than this one if we want to understand, and to stop, the epidemic of violence against women. Women don't get beaten and

killed because they are weak. They are beaten and killed because there is something wrong with their partners or ex-partners. That's why I've told you so much about Neenef.

What I can tell you about Maggie is that she was strong, athletic, opinionated, snarky, funny, outgoing, and very, very smart. She came to K trailing awards and prizes. She was an athlete and a musician and had just jumped the pre-med ship and fallen in love with history. She planned to study abroad in Germany, where she had family, and go on to law school. Professor Barclay thought she was the most promising history student to come down the pike in years, a true academic star in the making. Above all, Maggie was compassionate. She made friends easily, kept friends faithfully, and was one of those people who are there for you. Everybody with problems came to Maggie. It may be her compassion that kept her connected enough to Neenef, sorry enough for his suffering, to endure his verbal abuse and to go to his room the night of October 18th when he asked her to come over and "read something." She told her roommate she'd be gone ten minutes.



Every year in the U. S., over a thousand women are killed by intimate partners—that category includes boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, husbands, and ex-husbands. The perpetrator who then kills himself is fairly common: 74% of murder suicides involve intimate partners, and of these, well over 90% involve female victims and male perpetrators. The scenario is virtually always the same--and I'll quote here from a Violence Policy Center report: he typically "develops suspicions of his girlfriend's or wife's infidelity, becomes enraged, murders her, and then commits suicide."

So, as extraordinary as those shotgun blasts were on our little campus, what happened that night followed a very typical pattern. We had a lot of trouble talking

about that pattern nine years ago. It's hard to talk about male violence against women without seeming to say that men are the enemy or that all men are abusers. And all men are certainly not. But women's lives are shaped from childhood by the danger of male violence. Femicide, the killing of women, is only the far end of the spectrum of violence that is a part of millions and millions of women's lives, whether they experience it personally or through loved ones, or see it everywhere in the culture around them, from ads to movies to books to jokes at parties to their own fear on the streets and in parking garages and elevators. But statistically, the very most dangerous place a woman can be is in her own place of residence, because statistically, the person most likely to harm her lives there or used to live there. On the handouts available here today, you can get a glimpse of this spectrum of violence, if you're not aware of it already.

It was also hard to talk about Maggie's death as a typical example of violence against women because this seemed, to many of Neenef's many friends, to diminish his death and to cast him as a monster, instead of the gentle, kind, funny person they knew. And this may be my most important message: to be able to talk about October 18th, to make it part of our story, and above all to keep it from happening again, we have to be able to talk about Neenef as a perpetrator of the extreme form of violence against women, AND ALSO as a wounded, gifted human being whose loss was also tragic. We have to know him as a full human being, lovable and much loved, AND ALSO a deeply disturbed person who devastated two families, a whole campus, and a world of friends. That is, we have to acknowledge his humanity in all its complexity. His death, like Maggie's, is a great loss, but there was an earlier loss: the loss of the bright-eyed, softly smiling, sweet-spirited pubescent boy I first saw in the photo on his Resident Alien Card. How did he get turned into this seething mass of fear, hopelessness, and rage, who wrote to a friend on October 14, "I got screwed by a girl I

was with for 8 months so I do hate girls and think they're all bitches." By then, the rifle was already hidden in his room.



In the weeks and months after October 18, 1999, stories came out of the woodwork. Several of us on the faculty and staff talked to students who were fearful about their own relationships or those of friends. And yet it took two deaths to bring those stories into the open. Remember that many people had heard Maggie and Neenef fighting, knew the names he called her, knew he was depressed—at least one person even knew he'd tried to buy a gun that summer. The people who were worried about Maggie or Neenef were other students. And yet nobody went to an RA or a Dean of Students or a college counselor or a faculty member or a Security officer and said, "I'm worried. I think Maggie's in trouble." Or, "I'm scared. I think Neenef's suicidal."

When I tell people that I spent the past year writing a book about the murder-suicide, they often ask, "Do you think it could have been prevented?" To answer that honestly, I could talk about a having sane gun laws in this country. I could talk about a culture in which boys would be socialized differently, not encouraged to embrace violence, deny difficult feelings, and prove themselves Real Men by dissing and objectifying women. This system damages them as well as the women they hurt; after all, it killed Neenef as surely as it killed Maggie. I could talk about a culture in which girls are not force-fed crazy-making conflicting messages about being strong and independent and also "hot" and sexually available and above all not bitchy, and about the crucial importance of "being in a relationship."

But I might also talk about what community means. I think there is a code of silence that allows us to keep each other's secrets, ignore each other's danger, and do it all in the name of "respecting individual privacy." What community has got to mean

is interdependence: if we hear verbal violence, we don't call it normal; we investigate and call for help. If we know a woman who is afraid of her boyfriend, we don't leave it up to her to come to her senses, or leave it to him to get a grip. If we are exiting a relationship that might be dangerous, we form a support system and a safety net for ourselves. If we know someone severely depressed or talking about suicide, we tell someone. We ask for help. Above all, we ask for help. *We ask each other for help.* We call on the resources of this college community to help us.

A week after Maggie's death, I put together the list of warning signs that will be distributed by email to the entire first-year class later today. It comes from reliable sources I've used in my own research and teaching, though the words are mine. In the course of my interviews, I was surprised by how often former students mentioned this list—not knowing I had produced it. It stuck with them. After eight years, they still remembered it. Maggie's friends recalled reading it and identifying Neenef with almost every item on it. If they had had it three weeks earlier, would things have been different? That's why it's in your hands today, and why I'm speaking: so that maybe the nightmare of October 18, 1999, can produce the dream of a different future.

I hope you'll read it and think about it. And I hope you will join us now for a brief ceremony of remembrance outside, at Maggie's bench. In the days and years to come, when you pass the bench, maybe you'll think of her. She might have been one of you. She was one of you. But so was Neenef. They were part of us, of all of us. If we want to live together in a respectful and compassionate community—as a college, and as a planet—their story will be part of ours.