



Transcript of Public Lecture:
Changing Military Culture Through True Stories
Dr. Kelly S. Thompson

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Eichler: So, welcome to Mount Saint Vincent University and to today's exciting event with Dr. Kelly Thompson. My name is Maya Eichler. I'm a faculty member here at Mount Saint Vincent University and I'm one of the co-directors of the Transforming Military Cultures Network, together with my wonderful colleagues Nancy Taber and Tammy George, who are sitting right there behind the camera. Thank you.

So, the TMC, Transforming Military Cultures Network, is hosting today's event. Our event has received financial support from the Department of National Defense through its MINDS program, for which we are grateful. I want to begin by acknowledging that we have the privilege today to be gathering on the unceded ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq People and in this context, and looking forward to Heritage Day, which we're celebrating on Monday, February 20th here Nova Scotia, I also want to acknowledge the important work done by Mi'kmaq Elder and poet Rita Joe. You'll find Rita Joe commemorated, actually in the atrium, on the Riva Spatz Women's Wall of Honour. So, she is there in the top row, the second from the right, so I would encourage you to go check out her plaque during the reception. You know, institutions like the military, and just like Mount Saint Vincent University, are beginning to grapple with their role in colonization. Rita Joe actually attended the Shubenacadie Residential School and the Sisters of Charity, who are our founding mothers, and former owners of Mount Saint Vincent University, were also involved in the Shubenacadie Residential School, so there's a very close connection between the Mount and that history. And I think that the work of reconciliation and decolonization that we're doing in the universities is really not that separate from the work that needs to be done within the military in terms of transforming military culture. Because the military is, of course, an institution built on colonial structures and part of its problematic culture, that we're all here together to try to address, is really tied to that colonial history and legacy. So, I would like us to keep that context in mind today and the Calls to Action for Truth and Reconciliation as we hear and learn from Kelly this evening.

Kelly will talk to us about changing military culture through true stories. So, the word truth, you know, is very meaningful in this context as well. Kelly is a writer, an editor, an educator, and a veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces. She's also a mentor for the MFA, the Master in Fine Arts program in creative non-fiction, at University of Kings College. In 2019, she published her memoir, *Girls Need Not Apply: Field Notes from the Forces*. That book became an instant Globe and Mail bestseller. It was listed, in 2019, as one of the top 100 books. Her new book, which, unfortunately, I don't have a copy here, but it's being sold out there. I'm using your copy, Kelly, right? I should have really been more organized. Anyways, her new book was just released last week. *Still, I Cannot Save You* explores Kelly's relationship with her older sister, Meghan. It is already receiving much attention and critical acclaim. It's a bestseller this week I hear. Amazing. One of the reviewers writes, "It's a rare book that manages to reveal the darkest and most painful parts of being human while also providing light and joy," and Kelly does a lot of that, as you will



find out in a few minutes. So, I think, you know, that's amazing and I'm so excited you're here today. Both of the books are for sale. The book table is already there so when you go out make sure to secure yourself a copy and get Kelly to sign it. We won't let you leave the building without. We're watching. So please join me in welcoming Kelly Thompson to the Mount.

Thompson: It was all I had to do. Just the 'on' button, couldn't even get that far. I left the military long ago and I was saying that in a symbol of my dedication to changing military culture, I am wearing pantyhose for you all today and have forgot how much spandex is involved in that experience and I will regret it shortly, I'm sure, as I continue. But all this to say, they've even brought me Kleenex because everyone who's been in my workshop so far knows I will cry at you. So, prepare yourselves for me today. I'm really honored to be here as a writer, in the military, it was not a place where I felt like I fit in quite, and would often get a lot of raised eyebrows about my decision to take a degree in professional writing and then to join the Forces.

I always wanted to be a writer, it was always a thing I wanted to do with my life but 9/11 happened and I am the fourth generation on both sides of my family in the military so it seemed like the thing to do. And I'm not saying I regret it, but it's been a, it was a ride. So, also a ride when in the early 2000s, to be someone who really loves lipstick, and showed up in basic training with nail polish on. It was definitely not the experience that I thought I was going to have, necessarily.

So, throughout the book, or throughout the lecture, I'm going to read a couple little sections from the book to give some context to different experiences and so I will set the stage with my first little bubble. 246. Unlike today, I wrote my notes to myself for the pages I wanted to write in font about seven thousand so that I could easily find it for you.

So, this is a moment, this was pretty late in my career, I'm just sort of about to leave the military and I had just bought my first house and I was really proud of myself, so I would have been 22. And a bunch of the NCMs invited me out to have drinks with them after a retirement ceremony and I was pretty excited about it and then I was like, let's continue on at my house. Pretty pumped because they all wanted to hang out with me. No one really wanted to hang out with me when you're the only person who's in their 20s in your unit.

"You're nice. So nice." Byron helped me by my shoulders, the air thick with his beer breath. But then his balance began to give way, or he made some intentional, determined choice. Byron leaned forward with his mouth agape, hands up and splayed wide in front of his chest like he was going to give someone a push. And then, as though it were the most natural acceptable thing in the world, he clasped his fingers around my breasts and squeezed, tweaked, massaged, and I stood there like a fucking idiot and let it happen. "Wow. Nice. Real nice." His hands swirled around, right then left. Back and forth, groping through my cotton button up that I'd changed into.

As a civilian packed into crowded bars, I was known for fighting off lecherous drinkers, able to handle myself. But as Second Lieutenant Thompson, I said nothing, maybe even offered a nervous titter of laughter with a relative stranger's hands groping my chest. And Civilian Kelly could never forgive her silence.

“Whoa, okay there, buddy.” When Sam realized what was happening, he stepped between us and pushed Byron back up towards the door. “I think it's time we wrap this party up. Ma'am, thanks for having us.” He glanced around like I had hidden cameras somewhere; surreptitious and nervous. Ma'am. Any softening of the barriers between us now reverted back to stuffy formality. And I had put up with all of it for nothing

I shut the door behind them and cracked open Byron's beers, depressingly calm after the assault because I saw the action as drunken male bullshit, to which I was nearly immune. Besides, I was lucky, no? I was safe, I hadn't been sexually assaulted like so many other women I came to know, both inside and outside the forces. The harassment I'd experienced was on a different level of suffering, so much lower than some of my colleagues, and suffering in the military is relative. Yes, my experiences were the lesser of so many evils.

As I poured the hoppy liquid down the sink, I repeated one of the tenets I learned on my harassment advisor course. The person ought to have known that the other person would be offended. Byron should have known, right? I've been so caught up in the warm feeling of acceptance that it had only then crossed my mind that being welcomed into the fold was only permitted when my youth, gender, and body were part of the ideal. The message had been received loud and clear with no encryption required.

So that was right near the end of my career. It was one of the times that I really remembered feeling impossibly wounded and it wasn't necessarily because of what happened, it was because up until then I thought they just wanted to hang out with me. And I was devastated. Where do I click? This direction? This direction? This direction?

So, I talk a little bit about, a little bit about me. You kind of got my, sort of, background. I had eight years in the Forces. I eventually, although I was a logistics officer, I eventually worked at the, they call it something different now, but the Integrated Personal Support Center. Working with injured and ill soldiers which was, like, my dream job. So, we always used to joke that I was like the spray-on hair commercial guy who was like, I'm the president and a member too, you know, that was me because I was also being medically released at the time. But my degrees I always pursued were in writing, so when I left the Forces medically released after a knee injury, a knee injury ironically in basic training, I ended up going on and doing my master's degree in creative writing and for most the people who did my workshop, my PhD was also in creative writing, but also how we write about hard thing.

I'm a fourth-generation military. We have, basically a few... if there's been a war, Canada's been in it, since we've been a country, my family was in it. My grandpa, who's a World War II veteran, is currently still alive today at 99. It felt like a really big legacy. But what I never really considered in that, was that legacy was male and very different from what my experience would be. And I now work as a writer, editor, and university instructor, and so I'm really lucky to continue to see a lot of the stories that continue to come out from people who are brave enough to share their truth.



Baby Kelly. 18. I always talk about what I had the expectation of what my military career would be. Joe, remember this girl? Wasn't she cute? My husband and I met in basic training. I broke my leg, he carried me for three kilometers. If you ever do a book club, usually everyone just wants to meet my husband. They don't give shit about why I'm there.

So, this was what I thought it was going to be like. I thought there was going to be glory, not war glory. I thought I was going to be giving something bigger than myself and that excited me, and I also thought that I was going to be taken seriously because I was going to bust my butt to do a good job, and that's all I wanted to do, was help people. I also, because I grew up in a military family, thought I already had this essence of what military life would be like and I think that's why so many of us continue on in that life after our families have been in, because we think we know what it's going to be. And yet, on top of the fact that everyone has a different experience because they have a different personality, like I said, my family's legacy was a male lens, which was obviously not mine. I also wasn't yet educated at the time at what my privilege afforded me in terms of feeling like I was an outsider just because I was a woman. When we now are more having the conversations about how people feel on the outside for a million different reasons and how a lot of marginalized voices that have been silenced are now being brought more to the forefront, which we need more than ever.

I also saw my dad, one of the key components for me was, in my family, I saw my dad really revel in the camaraderie that came with military life, and I was hungry for it. I got there and I was like, we're all going to be best friends, we're going to know each other forever. I basically know Joe—that's not true, I have some friends that have carried on for a lifetime, but it's a very small handful compared to what I thought it would be like because the women didn't want to be associated with me because I was weak, I can't push up to say my life, and I don't want to, and this body's not made for running, it likes naps. And so, when I got to basic training, I was ostracized for not, although I was physically fit, I wasn't, like, I wasn't a runner, I couldn't do a lot of the stuff that they wanted of me. And also, I wasn't prepared for the dark side of it because I hadn't been prepared for it and because I was raised to be, like, a woman can do anything, which of course they can, everyone can do anything, that you set your mind to, but I wasn't taught that there's going to be barriers in place. I wasn't prepared for the fact that there would be limitations because of my breasts and because of how girly I present and because of certain ways of thinking that I have.

And also, the reality was my injury. My injury really affected my career for my whole life. This is after my second knee surgery, hence my pout face. It's probably also some morphine. But I broke my leg, it never healed, and so I had this whole career of disability and people would come up to my desk and say, “You know, I have to go to Afghanistan three times because you're sitting here on your ass.” A. Like I had a choice and B. Why do we value injury instead of respecting people for disability and things that make them different and what they bring to the table beyond physicality?

At the end of the day, I left the military feeling like I didn't really know what I was doing. I felt small. And I felt incapable of almost anything. There were some good points. I sound quite depressing. I got to go the Olympics in 2010. What a time to be in the military, when people are openly singing O Canada on the streets, and they wanted to buy, got a lot of free dinners, totally



here for free dinners, just because they would see us in uniform. As I was taken out on a date, Joe, there were no dates but you. The friends and colleagues. You do find those people who are like, I finally get what it means to be, like, I'll die for the person who's next to me, because we're in this together. What a feeling that is, to really have that sense of drive towards the same thing. It's powerful. I really learned what I was made of. Walking 40 kilometers on a broken leg was not a great time and I probably wouldn't do it again because it's disabled me for life, however, I really figured out, not about my own physical strength, but what mentally I could put up with, and what, mentally, I was really willing to fight for. There was some travel, there was some excitement. While I was an executive assistant and my soul wanted to die, I did see a lot of things which was really fun, while holding coats. I think I said I felt like an overpriced coat holder. But also, the giving to something beyond yourself, and I also think that applies, the older we get, the more we care about giving to something beyond our own small world. It's quite the thing when you think about how young a lot of us are when we join the military, to say, what you're willing to do to help other people, that's a big thing. I had someone say to me once, like, you're in it for the pension. I could think of an easier way to get a pension, personally. I would pick some different jobs. If people, people are mostly in it, I really believe at the end of the day, still in the military, and the reason I still care to this day, especially about what the Transforming Military Culture symposium is doing, I care because I'm still in it. I'm a military spouse. I'm a veteran, I'm... my dad's a veteran. We live it and breathe it, so I still care and really believe in what it's about. But that said, of course, there were the lows.

So, there was endless sexual harassment. It was a part of my life almost every single day. If I went a day without a creepy comment it was a bit of a miracle. I used to keep a day timer and I would put a little star if it went a day without someone saying something creepy to me. And they were rare. The injuries and emotional trauma. I think, there's a really, I know something that we get, that we talk about, and it's coming up as well, a discussion about moral injury within the military, there's something really wounding about going against what you believe is good. Because a culture is raising you to act a certain way. I felt othered constantly, whether it was, like, an arts degree. Whether it was the fact that I was a woman, which at the time, you know, we were 11 percent in the military. I think we're up to like 14 or 16, woo hoo. I felt always on the outside of something, whether it was because I was young. The military is also one of very few places that can freely discriminate for disability. So how often it was like I said, brought up that I was broken, that I was, that I was a waste of space, that I was just using up someone's desk, and kicking other people out the door. And what we teach people to do in those instances, when they're suffering, is to be silent about it because that's what's the convenient answer, and that's what being a good soldier is, is to wear it all on your shoulders and keep going. It's also one of the really weird places where rank structure often allows people to be a turd to you. Just, I see a lot of people are like, yes. Instead of where I was raised, where it's like, you just be a good human being to the people that you work with, and yet sometimes rank structure really allowed people to behave in certain ways. One of the instances in my book, I write about when I finally decided to step forward about harassment from this Lieutenant Colonel, who is the chief of staff at the unit I worked at. I was the executive assistant and I only complained because he made the administration assistant uncomfortable and she said to me, "I can't be here when you're not here, he's constantly making derogatory comments." He called me bitch all the time, I don't know why, I couldn't have been more subservient, so, but at the time, and I finally complained to my boss. And the response was for this Lieutenant Colonel to take me into the room and say I



needed to learn to take a joke. Because that was his behavior, and I just have to get used to it. And I thought, but it would never go the other way. Not just because I was a woman, but because I was a lower rank and so sometimes rank was used as a way, to not just do your job, but to grind people down under their thumbs.

The military really highlighted for me it was a place that valued physicality above all else and I always think that if we're going to talk about how we're going to transform culture, the conversation needs to start at basic training. Sure, we want a certain level of fitness. I get that, we're in the military, we've got to be able to carry our own stuff. But at the end of the day, the fact that I can't do a chin up to save my life does not change the fact that, God I was a good leader. I cared about every single person who worked for me. I knew their names. I knew their spouses' names. Their dog needed to go to the vet, I was there rushing them over because no one else had a car that day. I cared with every fiber of me. That's what made me good at my job. Not the chin-ups. Now I didn't try out for Special Forces because I would have died somewhere on a ruck march in a ditch and just said leave me here. But I was a really great Administration Officer. And I talked in the workshop this morning, I think the first one, where I said, I used to talk down my experience all the time when people would say, "Oh you're in the military, that's great," and I'd be like, "Oh no, I just did paperwork." And I think, am I just saying that all, that people who do paperwork didn't make that same willing sacrifice on a piece of paper at the end of the day? And really, we all know we're cogs in the wheel. I would never say that to someone who I care about. Why would I say that about myself? We are all a little piece of that puzzle that keeps the machine, the big old machine, trucking along. So, I'm going on a whole tangent. I'm getting, I'm like sweating already. Is this what happens? You start getting all... I get all passionate. This has been the big theme of the day: me sweating and crying profusely.

So, after my time in the military, I had this, I slipped into the deepest depression. I, believe it or not, cried even more, everywhere I went, on street corners and finally my Veterans Affairs case manager was like, "Do you think maybe you're depressed?" Yes. Because I felt like I failed on every possible capacity that I could have. I failed as a leader because I was silent when I should have been loud about the problems that I was witnessing. I felt like I failed as a woman because I left all these women behind me who were suffering with the same thing, and I was silent for them. I failed as an artist because I entirely gave up my passion and the thing that I loved most in service of something that I thought was greater than me, until I recognized that I still have to look after this first, before I can give to anything else. It's funny that the military often looks at mission, service, what... what's the... something, something, self... but I know mission somewhere up here, and you're somewhere down here. And it's funny, where in the arts world, we're like, no, you got to fill up your own tank first before you can give to anything else, because that's what prevents the burnout and the falling apart. And, so I felt like I had failed myself, my own heart in what I really loved. I felt like I failed as a spouse. So, here's Joe, we just get married, and suddenly I'm in lots of counseling, lots of new medication changes, and attempts, none of which were going super great at the time. All I did was cry and Joe would come home and take off the same uniform that I loved, and I would have to watch him do it and it was killing me. And I didn't know how to keep going. So, I got help because I wanted to change how I viewed what is failure. What does failure mean to me? It does not mean what the military told me it was. It means me, and looking after me, and my own heart.

So, I wrote about it. I was starting a master's degree. Really great time, when you're in a chronic deep depression, is to write a really sad book. I was doing my master's degree, at the time at UBC, and I started writing it as fiction because I thought 'oh this is what will make me look like I had this sexy job, is I'll write about what I think a woman's experience would be overseas and instead my agent at the time said, "You know, like, I'm not sure it's working like this, maybe try writing about your own experiences." And I was like, "I didn't have any. I didn't have any experiences. I didn't do anything worthwhile." And then, as I started to write about it, and I started to sit with some of the stories, and I was doing some of the prompts that we did in the class, like, really trying to dig out my own stuff. And I was also doing it in therapy too. I was sitting, I was doing the work in therapy that helps you get to a place where you're acknowledging your own pain. So, a lot of the themes in the book are sexism and harassment, surprise. Mental health. I talk about the legacy of mental health in my family through generations and how that trickled down. My dad's PTSD. We used to, my sister and I, used to like lob balls of rolled up socks to wake him up from a nightmare so that he didn't hit one of us by accident, waking up from it, and my dad gave me permission to have those discussions, which was great. I talk about, sort of that military history. What my identity is as a person outside of uniform, which for a lot of veterans is a real struggle. You leave and you're like, who am I now? I think of it's, like, like parents, and your kids go to school, and then, and, and especially if they've been a stay-at-home parent, and then they go, well, what am I now? And feminism, which, oh I get a lot of hate mail for that word. Cynthia, sure you did. And a lot of people hear feminism and think I'm out to just hate men and that's not what this is about, it's about making space for all of the voices.

So, I looked at the different reasons why did I write it, and this whole lecture is supposed to be a little bit about more than me, but about what is the power of telling our true stories. And at first it was just for me. I had to write a book as a thesis so might as well write about something that I have a general grasp on. Although I could have thought of a lot more, better fictional routes that would have been a little less painful, but I ended up having this real capacity for healing. Not just myself, but as the book has gone out into the world, which I'll talk about shortly.

I also wrote it for understanding. If anyone's ever heard of that Joan Didion quote, and she says, something along the lines of, I write to better understand what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling. I had no idea how I was feeling about the military when I left, other than I was hurting. And the only way to do it was to write my way through it because that's my chosen art form. That's how I process things. I wrote it also for compassion. I remember when I was handing in the first drafts and my editor said, I was telling everyone in class today, you need to, she told me I needed to go back to therapy because I was so hard on myself. It was like I needed to beat myself up to give myself validity. And instead, how about I just tell my story and give it to you, and then you take it as the reader, and do with it what you will, and see it through your own lens, and maybe heal a little part of yourself at the same time. But more importantly, I did it for change. Because where I said I felt like a failure, I felt like I had wounded people by leaving them behind, the only way I knew how to change that was to change what happens next. And while I'm not nearly so self-involved that I thought that little me would have any kind of impact, other than I'm gonna put it out there and see if it turns into some kind of gift, instead of just a really expensive exercise and extra therapy, for an MFA instead.

So since then, I've had lots of responses. These are just a few. And I publish on, you know like newspapers and stuff like that, but for the most part, people telling me that, yeah, sitting on my chair in my office so I develop bed sores, that's why I got a military medical release. That I only got the rank of Captain through connections and affirmative action. And I laughed with my husband, I was like, "Guess he doesn't know promotion to Captain's automatic." Definitely no connections. But you should be raped silent, I did not just hear that once. And once was from a woman. It was always the women's comments that wounded me the worst, like the woman who says:

I lacked the requisite experience to write about such an important topic, as a woman in the CAF, I'm frankly insulted by her attempt to capitalize on such an important subject.

I'd like to point out no one's writing books and making any money so I'm not capitalizing on shit. But also, the important thing is here, this is what we do, we value, in the military, a certain level of suffering and it's like, I didn't quite suffer enough, so who am I to write about it? I didn't quite be in the military enough, so who am I to write about it? I was talking to a friend who came to my other book launch recently and he said, oh, but I was just a reservist. You are not just anything. You are part of the Forces. You are a veteran. You are all these parts of your identity make up who you are. So, lots of horrible comments, but almost every single one of these came with... but there's no culture problem in the military. Do not tell me there is no culture problem and then in the same sentence tell me to be raped silent. One of these was from a man who was also running one of our war museums. He's not running a war museum anymore since he sent me this email. So, you don't get to say there's no problem, that we have nothing to fix. We hear lots of people on the news, like, we're working on it, and it doesn't feel fast enough for those of us on the receiving end of commentary like 'be raped silent'.

So, while I had a lot of those, I also had a lot of these:

You made me feel seen for the first time.

This is my story, and the story of countless women like us.

I'm now prompted to open up about my past.

Since reading, I'm getting mental health treatment for my military sexual trauma.

These are the things that keep us going because until we're loud about them, they always stay under the rug where people in power want them to belong. And I'm not saying everyone in power, and I'm not saying every man, and I'm not saying the system doesn't want to be better. But the reality is, this is a society that has valued physicality for a very long time, and that has often put women and other marginalized communities lower on the end of that ladder.

Joe and I had a friend who was also a female veteran, had many traumatic experiences, and her son joined the military. And she was coming back through town, we were living in Trenton at the time, and she said, "Oh can we stop in, I'm driving him back from basic training." So, he's 21. He's also a bit of a punk, but he's 21. He comes in, and he's going on about, like, "Oh stupid women and they don't do anything in basic training, they don't lift everything, and it's all up to us," and I was like, "And who did this and this and this for you? And I guarantee when you were sad, or you were scared, maybe you went and talked to one of your friends who you felt it was

safe to have that discussion with and was it one of the other men who you felt like you had to compete with? Maybe not, but we all bring something to the table.” What I'm saying is if we're always putting that as the number one criteria that we want people to meet, we're not valuing all the amazing things that we bring to the table beyond our gender, beyond the color of our skin. But also, to recognize that the gender, the color of our skin, our sexual identity, can be a big part of what makes up someone's ability to gift to you their knowledge and how that can transform you.

For every mean comment there were at least 10. I get an email at least once a week from someone. I save them all and then when I get a nasty one, I go in and read all the good ones to remind me that there is still hope in the world. And social media, we think can bring out all this horribleness, but social media has also had this power of change. Sure, it's just the words are short, there's maybe, I don't know what Twitter is anymore, Elon Musk is blowing up the world, but you know how many, how many characters can we have, I'm not sure, but Facebook, Instagram, Tick Tock, these are the generations of people who are starting to have these really hard discussions, the amazing discussions that we're having on there because they have a voice, and the voices of equal standing to the people who wanted them quiet for a long time.

So, a lot of people, and in particular, it's usually my dad, says why bother? And this is actually a poem.

Because right now there is someone out there with a wound in the exact shape of your words.

And that's by poet Sean Thomas Dougherty. There is someone with a wound in the shape of your words. And by that, I mean, this is, we talked about this in class today, there is someone out there who needs your story because it is their story. There is someone out there who needs your story because it is completely opposite from anything they've ever known and understood, and they will suddenly understand by sitting with it. There has been no greater magic to me than the transformation that I have seen from people, from my book coming out, and I see it to this day, as my job is to fill that wound where I can fill it. And the wounds are ugly. No one likes wound care. My mom used to say it was the worst part of nursing. Wound care is gross. There's pus. Things are bleeding all over the place. But it's also where so much magic can heal because look at what happens when the body heals itself, over, sometimes it blows my mind what we're able to withstand, and the same can be said with sitting with a really hard moment in a book.

I realized that my definition of leadership had been told to me instead of me letting it align with who I was as a person and in doing that, if we start to learn and appreciate and value different kinds of leadership, really amazing things can happen from that because then we start to listen, a little bit more. I think I mentioned in, oh no, I was talking to Lamare and, who was it, Viv, there you are, yes, sitting together. We were talking, and I was saying my dad, who is like super army, really shocked me to find out he is not a conservative. Shocked me. My dad is like really hard army, and 35 years, and he said to me, he read the book and he's like, you know I think I was part of the problem. Best sentence ever. Because he was. And my dad's a great guy and my dad built me up and told me I could do anything. My dad also really perpetuated a lot of really horrible military culture things like playing pranks on women in power by putting, photographing their heads, and putting them on slides with the bodies of porn stars. Yes, this was

the 70s. But still, he was perpetuating it, even though he's a great guy, and my dad wouldn't want to hurt anyone, and wouldn't think it was funny, but it was because it was, you know, 95 percent men. And he said, I think I'm gonna talk to my friends and see what they think about it. Then I almost peed my pants because it was the second-best thing that ever came out of his mouth. If my dad has the capacity to reflect on himself a little bit, I can tell you anyone can have the capacity because he still calls to tell me when to change my oil on my car. So, change can happen. I also then started working with the injured and ill in the military right before I left, and it was a really great steppingstone into what civilian life was because I used to say all the time like, is this the military? We're like crying at work, we're hugging each other, there's Kleenex everywhere, there is like, we have tea so that we can talk about what's hurting us, and clients that are really struggling, and how we can help and support them, and what was sad, is I realized it was wonderful because it was so different from what I had known as a person in the Forces. And so, you know, we were talking this afternoon and I said Brené Brown's quote about brave leaders never being silent about important things... sharing our stories and putting them out in the world is not, is being brave, is being vulnerable, and it's not being quiet about those important things. And it also makes us feel seen, so, filling that wound.

So how do books affect change? I'm lucky now because I get to teach this so I get to see these whole iterations of people who are coming in and sharing their stories with me and they joke with me in the program because I usually get, of course, I'm usually the person who's assigned everyone who's in some deep wounded pain, and they're writing about it, and they're like, Kelly's your girl, and I am. And I'm here for it because I've seen the catharsis on a personal level that comes from it, I've studied it in my PhD, about the catharsis and therapy that's possible, but more than that, that healing of a wound in someone else, it extends, it goes beyond you as the author and it goes to the reader, and the person who's waiting for your book. Books affect change because we turn to entertainment and art because they feed our hearts and when we need to just escape a little bit and we want to just be in a whole another world, we have entertainment, but we're almost always learning from them. I remember my parents used to say it doesn't matter how junky the book is, in terms of what it's considered, you're probably going to learn a new word, you're going to be stepping into someone else's shoes, you're gonna be entertained. There's always a benefit from reading other people's stories.

The stepping into another person's shoes. This is why non-fiction matters to me. This is why sharing personal stories matters to me. There is nothing more powerful, and I've seen it because I sat in these workshops today with you sharing your beautiful stories and I said, "You're gonna walk away and you're going to think about these all night," but that one line that hit a little part of you too, that someone else shared, it is absolute magic, it's what I live for. And I think when you do step into someone else's shoes and properly step there and sit with what it must be like, has anyone read the book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race*? It's so good, it's brilliant and it, in particular, talks about this. That we can't keep expecting the marginalized communities to do all the heavy labor of making the change. That's why it's so exciting seeing so many, sorry guys, it's great seeing some guys here, you know, who are like, I want to make this better. I have seen the change because not only are, do the emails I get from other people telling me this is a similar experience, but I also got, I, there was this sweetheart of a guy, he came to the launch in Ottawa, and saluted me, and he had a brush cut. You could smell the military off him, absolute mile away and he said, "I'm going to read this because I'm going to



be better for all the people who work with me.” That's what it's about. You step into someone else's shoes you get a little bit of perspective.

And voice, there is something about sharing our own stories that gives us a voice and gives us our agency and power back. For a long time, my voice was stifled because I was told it didn't matter and it doesn't have to matter to anyone but me, but I didn't even question, I didn't even feel like I had value on my own. So, writing my own book was part of reclaiming that. I also think, as a leader, if you are someone who works within a military environment, if you're in academia and we look at all these structures that have for a long time kept marginalized communities on the outskirts of those, I have more Brené Brown for you:

We desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous wholehearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts rather than uninvolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear. A brave leader is someone who says, I see you, I hear you, I don't have all the answers but I'm going to keep listening and asking questions.

And sitting with a story, with an actual story that's written as such, makes you ask more questions. You know, it's funny, where we were sharing some stories in the workshop today and someone said, “I just want to ask more, like, I just want to...,” yeah, you want to know more because that's where the juicy is. That's where the beauty is. That's where the education comes from.

When we think about change, so in my dedication, in the book, I dedicated it to my sister, who had died right before the book came out, which is the topic of the next sad book I have for you. But I also said, and to the women who see themselves in these pages, change is coming. And that was 2019. I would have written it probably early 2019 and then when we had the official apology that came out and Minister Anand said, “Things can change, they must change, they will change.” And they are changing, because you're finally hearing it in the news. We have people like these amazing human beings who are creating a whole symposium around how we're going to be better. We're talking about it. And the number of times I've heard people today say, all these discussions weren't happening, I mean, they weren't happening 10 years ago when I was in. I'm lucky enough that my husband's still in where I got to get to see that they are still happening, but it never feels fast enough for those of us who are wounded. And so, the fact that we're all here, even in this room, is a sign that change is happening, even when it feels horrifically, painfully slow.

The reality is, you know, Canada likes to talk a lot about how inclusive and diverse we are and how much better we are to our partners to the South sometimes in that regard, but I think the pandemic showed us how untrue that can be. And I think it's also shown us, shown us, look it's been a long day, and my words are leaving me, but it has showed to us, that representation matters. That seeing the stories of alternate people matter, and by alternate people I mean not the voices we're used to hearing all the time. And starting to appreciate those differences is part of what makes us the country that we really want to be and signing on a line is saying I'm going to defend that country, and those values, ideally, you want those values to align with your own, so this is a step in a really amazing direction.



I talked a little bit about, I was writing a blog for *Chatelaine* right before I left the military, so this would have been 2010 to 2011. And oh, they tried their hardest to get me to stop writing it and like I said, I was writing about like pleated pants, and mess dinners, and light things, light frothy things, and the way they fought to make me stop. And instead, ten years later, when my book came out, and they were inviting me to speak all over Canada, what a gift that has been because it has shown me that it matters. That the change does happen. So even when it feels depressing, keep going is the moral of my story.

What I learned about change through writing. I added this slide the other night so I'm going to back away so I can read my own notes. Do not compromise who you are. There was no greater injury than the one I perpetrated against myself by going against everything I believed in, by allowing people to treat me the way that they did, because I felt that either I deserved it, or, because I was a woman and I just needed to fit in because I couldn't keep up physically so I might as well be quiet and go along with the creepy sexist jokes because that makes me fit in. It didn't make me fit in, and it hurt my heart in a way that took so long to repair afterwards.

While we have joked, Seyi in particular, where are you Seyi, she's joked about, "Kelly, I just love your stream of consciousness." There's no shutting up now, the openness. I have talked about my Spanx, I've talked about pantyhose, I've talked about almost peeing my pants today. All together, the openness isn't part of some, like, grand gesture to take a stage. It's about, if we start having all the open conversations, if I keep talking about my therapy, and my pills, my legal depression pills, then we start having the discussions and we start seeing things like this set up. I recently saw a guy I did all my logistics training with, and we were in, I say recently, it was like four years ago maybe, but we were in Trenton and he was getting out of the car, and we were saying how great it was to see each other, and he said, oh you're wearing a lot of lipstick, I guess you're not in the military anymore. And I said, yeah, and you know, I'm out now, writing books and whatever, and he's like, yeah, I'm just on my way to a mental health appointment, I'm not, like, feeling so great, I've been having a hard time, I think I need to get in to talk to someone. I got my car, and I was like, well holy shit, that's the conversation of the day because to have another, and a man especially, to feel brave enough to be like, I'm just going in for a bit of a tweak because I'm not feeling great and I'm having a hard time. We start having these conversations and it normalizes it and it makes it safe for everyone to have them. And it's magic.

Educating and learning. Not everything you write in the world has to be about educating other people but if you can educate yourself and learn. Sometimes my husband will come home from work and be like, he's having some sort of thing that's going on, and he's kind of bouncing it off me in a general sense, and we're kind of coming up with ideas, and Joe said to me once, he was giving me a scenario, and he said, "I just told him, he's got to say to the guy, that's not appropriate, you can't say that." And I was like, "But it can't always be on him, to have to be the person to say it. Sometimes it has to be the other people who stand up in the room and lift him up and say, no, that's not on." And Joe went, "Oh I never thought about it like that," and then he was researching for three hours afterwards about the appropriate way to approach this conversation and I think, you got to do it, you got to do the hard work. It's kind of like getting well mentally. You have to do the work. You have to do the therapy; it doesn't just get better with the medication. Despite what our health care system would have us believe. I digress, that's a whole other story. Change is slow and it hurts. It's never fast enough when we're suffering. It never



feels fast enough. But you have to cling to your hope to where it can be attached and this is hope to me, right here. It's corny, but I feel like hate never wins. Hate, especially, doesn't win if you work at the war museum and you attach your email to the one telling me to be raped silent. I refuse to let it win because it lets broken be the definition of who I am, instead of a little bit scarred and fractured, but all the more sassy for it.

Kindness does not have to be weakness. Oh, this one took me a long time to learn. And it's funny I had a guy I worked with, and he's, well, he was coming into the integrated personal support center, and he was on his way out, and he said, "You know, we just, we're like brash with each other because it's easier to deal with our feelings that way, and you know, we just, if we treat each other like assholes, then it's a little bit easier." And I was like man, that's not easier to me, but I also understood it at the same time, because it keeps feelings at a bit of a distance. I used to hide when I got emotional about things because I thought, oh, I probably look like an idiot, and now I think I'm just owning it, I'm up here with my box of Kleenex that Maya brought down for me, and I'm gonna cry all day because I love it and I'm passionate about it and you can be emotional about things that impact you, and you can be kind, and loving to people without it being seen as something that is a flaw. Even when you're in the military.

One of the greatest things I learned on a personal level was that I own my story and no one controls it except me. And they don't get to, not only because, when I talk about truth, and my truth not being someone else's truth, people will perceive what I experienced in different ways. I had a guy that I was really close with, and, in the military, and he called me the night before the book came out and he said, "I hear you're putting out some feminist shit." Yeah, yes. And he said, "Nothing really happened to you, you were fine when it was all happening." And either, I was kind of, maybe, fine, but also hadn't really sat and thought about what it felt like to me because it was easier to just be quiet about it. But he doesn't get to tell me I was fine. He doesn't get to tell me about what my own story was because I'm the one who lived it and you're the one who lives your own story and sharing it can be a really powerful thing.

So, what can we do? I always encourage people to support one another, of course, it goes without saying, the Sentinel program exists, we have programs like this, that are starting to have a lot of these discussions, but I mean on the daily. I mean that moral injury I carry for the silence when I should have been loud and brash for the people I saw suffering. Share your stories. Have the chats. It's been so magical to listen to everyone talking today out in the hallways about... and not just like on these, really, what's the word, sort of surface level discussions, I mean having really deep, amazing conversations, not only about what they're going to change at work but about what they've already been going through. And even though sometimes it feels like what you're going through isn't changing anything just by talking about it, I had that quote that I read in class that, when you take it, that story, outside of yourself, and give it agency on the page, that means something to someone beyond you at that point. Not just on the page, but out in the world.

Celebrate successes. I was really bad at this, and the military celebrates sometimes really weird successes like wound stripes. I talk about, you know, this is an army thing, so a lot of my air force friends have been like, what in the hell is a wound stripe? But it goes on your uniform when you have an injury that's happened in combat. And I remember thinking, this is a weird award to give people. And certainly, it places a value on a really strange thing to celebrate. What



about, you went to therapy today, like Girl Guide badges. Girl Guide badge for therapy. Celebrate the successes, celebrate the moments where you come back to yourself. Listening and learning. I kind of talked about the education piece. Being kind to others but also to yourself for... the hardest thing I've had to do is forgive myself for where I feel like I failed, and like I said, it's less so to do with myself and it's more so to do with the people I feel like I left behind. And talk about it. Have the conversations in the hallway. Have the conversations with your children. With people who have lived an experience outside of your own.

But above all, protect yourself and your stories until you're ready to share them. Sometimes we also feel this sort of, like, this pressure, aka me staring at you in the workshop this morning, giving you the stare down, to share your story even when you don't feel ready. Your story can either be, literally a story on a page, or it can be sort of a personal experience, and no one gets to demand that from you. Like I said, you own it and there's never any pressure to share them. I often think a lot about how much I miss the military because I see community like this and other people really wanting to lift one another up and that's the part that I really miss. So, I don't carry lightly that I'm really lucky to have a platform now, in terms of since the book came out. But I think it says something that I keep wanting to come back and have this discussion despite the fact I didn't sleep because I was anxious about being back in a military environment. And this is the least military-ish environment I've ever been in my entire life. I've gone to dinners with Joe for his work and felt less military environment than I have here. But, it's hard to return to the places that wound us and it's hard to love an organization that has wounded us and is continuing to wound people. So, make your words in the shape of that wound. See how you can make change that goes beyond just yourself but look after yourself first, above all.