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Our bittersweet 16

By Anita Hill
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WITHIN DAYS of my testimony in Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearing, my office was flooded with them. Dear Professor Hill, "I screamed at the television set." "I sobbed throughout." "I was mesmerized." "I am still seething." Though often expressed in raw and emotional terms, the letters offer incredibly thoughtful commentary on the hearing and the issues and people involved. Today, as I reread them, each in its own way begs the question: Have things really improved since October 1991?

The letters came steadily from October 1991 until the end of 1992, the election year dubbed the "Year of the Woman." I never stop hearing from people about the hearings. Last month, when Thomas published his memoir, nearly 600 e-mails came within two days time. I have about 25,000 letters, cards, handwritten notes on bits of paper passed through crowds and, lately, e-mail messages. In them, my testimony is complimented by some and intensely condemned by others. Though certain sentiments recur, there is no typical letter. Each tells a unique and personal story and some are laugh-out-loud funny. Whenever I think I've read enough, a letter, like the one I received recently from a 95-year-old veteran, reminds me of the importance of each message and encourages me to keep reading.

Like present-day blogs, the letters show the gulf between public discourse and private perceptions and experiences. On Oct. 12, 1991, the headline from the Washington Times read: "He said, she said: Thomas and Hill state their cases." In the privacy of their homes, individuals saw chaos and a firestorm, not the ordered search for truth the paper coolly described.

As the hearing opened, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Joseph Biden, declared: "This is not a hearing about the extent and nature of sexual harassment in America." It is convened "to air specific allegations against one specific individual." Yet, from day one, for many women and men, the hearing was a test of whether elected public officials understood not just my experience but the experiences of working women throughout the country.

Today, the most immediate question the letters raise is whether the workplace has improved over the last 16 years. Working women regularly share with me their personal stories of how blatant harassment and discrimination, once the norm, has been eliminated. I also hear personal stories from women who have complained and prevailed, using policies set up since the hearings. But I still hear from women and girls and their lawyers about outrageous cases of abuse.

Despite high-profile suits, a woman's chance of winning a valid sexual harassment case is by no means certain. My letters confirm that most women can't afford or don't care to file a lawsuit. In her book, "Giving Notice: Why the Best and Brightest Leave the Workplace and How You Can

Help Them Stay," Freada Kapor Klein recommends structural and institutional changes to eliminate the entrenched discrimination that permeates corporate settings so that fewer suits are needed.

"Self empowerment," a natural response to loss of faith in systems, is a theme repeated in many of the letters. And new ways of achieving that goal have emerged. Elisabeth Babcock of Boston's Crittenton Women's Union uses technology and research to help low-income women achieve "personal and economic independence," which will lessen their vulnerability to workplace abuses. Her online forum invites women to give voice to their concerns and triumphs.

There is no quick fix or instant makeover for society, the everyday work of equality is tedious and complicated and requires a long-term commitment. One need only look at the dismal approval ratings of Congress and the president to know that the divide in political representation exposed by the hearing still exists.

In 1991, I thought the Thomas hearing was an anomaly, a byproduct of the country's combined unresolved issues of gender, race, and power disparities. Today, I see the event as emblematic of many public disappointments that eat away at our confidence in government.

The letters often begin with what the writers felt, but many end with what they did because of the hearing. "For the first time," "I talked to my daughter [or sister, or husband or mother] about my experience." "I complained about abuses in my own workplace." "I instituted a zero-tolerance policy." "I wrote my senators." "I got involved in a presidential campaign." "I felt empowered, and it felt good."

For me these individual acts of personal courage are signs of progress. The hearing was agonizing; the Senate's vote to confirm Thomas to the Supreme Court was distressing; and the extent of our progress is uncertain. Yet, knowing what I know now, if sent back in time, I would testify again.

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