

December 13, 2018

What a difference a year makes.

One year ago today, I was in the middle of rehearsal for a planned 30-city multi-media stage show celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his assassination.

My phone pinged with an urgent message to immediately call my longtime attorney. I asked the crew to take five, but looking at his watch, our line producer suggested that we break for lunch. I remember giving an assistant my lunch order, the fish special, and quickly rushing off to a private room to dial up my attorney.

As my attorney was speed reading the letter he had just received from PBS firing me, my phone pinged again, alerting me to an exclusive story PBS had leaked to VARIETY about my firing. I put my attorney on speaker, and while he was reading the letter, I was reading VARIETY, which, interestingly, had far more detail about my firing than what PBS had shared with us in its official correspondence.

While the crew was away at lunch, I quickly grabbed my things, jumped in my car, and headed for home, feeling like a character in one of Spike Lee's signature dolly shots, where the subject is standing still, but everything around them is moving really fast, whirling wildly.

Things would only spin faster and faster over the next 24 hours and in the coming days, as I was compelled to publicly respond to false allegations from anonymous accusers. The worst kind of character assassination, I might add, when invective is hurled by invisible hands.

And, then, all of a sudden, everything just stopped.

No television show. No radio show. No podcast. No columns. No books. No speeches. No tour. No nothing.

One year later, I'm still waiting for the truth to be told, as we move ever closer to my day in court. Tragically, it is only because I sued PBS that I know anything at all about this case, save what PBS president and CEO, Paula Kerger, has coughed up in her myriad interviews and speeches.

If I had just accepted my fate and gone away quietly, I would have no knowledge of how badly this case was bungled and biased from the very beginning.

Question: What do everyday people do when they don't have the resources to fight back against unsubstantiated and uncorroborated lies?

Answer: They get crushed.

It's taken every bit of energy and ingenuity I can muster to fight this fight.

They fired me citing "multiple credible allegations of sexual misconduct," and yet they continued searching for many months thereafter, harassing co-workers and colleagues with menacing phone calls. They had no takers.

They realized that their "sexual misconduct" case was falling apart, so they hired an independent accounting firm to audit my books, going back years. They came up empty.

They have repeatedly delayed depositions and threatened to shield Ms. Kerger altogether, arguing that she was too busy and knew nothing. They backed off of that threat.

After a year of legal wrangling with the folk who brought you Mr. Rogers, Big Bird and Barney, I regret to inform you, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of public television, that the “most trusted network in America” can no longer be trusted to be truthful or transparent.

Sadly, we are a nation that has become accustomed to, indeed anesthetized, to abuses of power in private sector America. But we must never normalize abuse of power in the public sector.

And this is why, one year later, I’m still fighting.

The truth matters.

Onward,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tavis Smiley' in a stylized, cursive script.

Tavis Smiley