

The Killing of Kitty Genovese

Her public slaying in Queens becomes a symbol of Americans' failure to get involved

By Michael Dorman

It was just after 3 a.m.

A red Fiat rolled slowly through the darkness into a parking space adjacent to the Long Island Rail Road station in Kew Gardens. The young woman behind the wheel emerged from the car and locked it. She began the 100-foot walk toward her apartment house at 82-70 Austin St.

But then she spotted a man standing along her route. Apparently afraid, she changed direction and headed toward the intersection of Austin and Lefferts Boulevard -- where there was a police call box.

Suddenly, the man overtook her and grabbed her. She screamed. Residents of nearby apartment houses turned on their lights and threw open their windows. The woman screamed again: "Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me!"

A man in a window shouted: "Let that girl alone." The attacker walked away. Apartment lights went out and windows slammed shut. The victim staggered toward her apartment. But the attacker returned and stabbed her again.

"I'm dying!" she cried.

Windows opened again. The attacker entered a car and drove away. Windows closed, but the attacker soon came back again. His victim had crawled inside the front door of an apartment house at 82-62 Austin St. He found her sprawled on the floor and stabbed her still again. This time he killed her.

It was not until 3:50 that morning -- March 13, 1964 -- that a neighbor of the victim called police. Officers arrived two minutes later and found the body. They identified the victim as Catherine Genovese, 28, who had been returning from her job as manager of a bar in Hollis. Neighbors knew her not as Catherine but as Kitty.

Kitty Genovese: It was a name that would become symbolic in the public mind for a dark side of the national character. It would stand for Americans who were too indifferent or too frightened or too alienated or too self-absorbed to "get involved" in helping a fellow human being in dire trouble. A term "the Genovese syndrome" would be coined to describe the attitude.

Detectives investigating Genovese's murder discovered that no fewer than 38 of her neighbors had witnessed at least one of her killer's three attacks but had neither come to her aid nor called the police. The one call made to the police came after Genovese was already dead.

Assistant Chief Insp. Frederick Lussen, commander of Queens detectives, said that nothing in his 25 years of police work had shocked him so much as the apathy

encountered on the Genovese murder. "As we have reconstructed the crime, the assailant had three chances to kill this woman during a 35-minute period," Lussen said. "If we had been called when he first attacked, this woman might not be dead now."

Expressions of outrage cascaded not only from public officials and private citizens in the New York area but from across the country. When detectives asked Genovese's neighbors why they had not taken action, many said they had been afraid or had not wanted to get involved. But Lt. Bernard Jacobs, in charge of the investigation, asked: "Where they are in their homes, near phones, why should they be afraid to call the police?"

Madeline Hartmann, a native of France, was 68 at the time of the murder and lived in the building where Genovese died. On the 20th anniversary of the murder, she said in an interview she did not feel bad about failing to call the police. "So many, many [other] times in the night, I heard screaming," she said. "I'm not the police and my English speaking is not perfect."

There was no law, police officials conceded, that required someone witnessing a crime to report it to police. But they contended that morality should oblige a witness to do so...

Over the years, there have been various scholarly studies of "the Genovese syndrome." At a three-day Catherine Genovese Memorial Conference on Bad Samaritanism at Fordham University in 1984, City University of New York psychology professor Stanley Milgram capsulized the questions raised by the Genovese murder.

"The case touched on a fundamental issue of the human condition, our primordial nightmare," Milgram said. "If we need help, will those around us stand around and let us be destroyed or will they come to our aid? Are those other creatures out there to help us sustain our life and values, or are we individual flecks of dust just floating around in a vacuum?"

*Michael Dorman is a freelance writer
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After you have read the article, answer the following questions on a piece of binder paper. Each answer should be a minimum of three (3) complete sentences.

1. Find one quote to which you had a particularly strong response. Copy the quote onto your paper and explain your reaction. Why do you think you reacted this way?
2. Who should be held responsible for the death of Kitty Genovese? If you believe the blame rests on more than one person, assign each person with a percentage of guilt.
3. What reasons can you think of that someone might not act in the scene of a crime, like those at Kitty Genovese's apartment complex? Which are valid and which are not?
4. Do you believe we are all here to "help us sustain our life and values" or do you think that humans are "individual flecks of dust just floating around in a vacuum"? As we discussed earlier, this is our essential question of the year. Try to write from a place of logic and reasoning, not emotion. Provide examples that may strengthen your argument.