

On Being Accused



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For a variety of reasons, most justified, some unjustified, men accused of sexual impropriety in today's "me-too" climate are presumed to be guilty by the court of public opinion. Emotions bypass due-process, people choose sides, and the social media wars begin.

In any claim, evidence matters. Evidence always matters. But what happens when it's just one person's word against another's, and the stories don't agree? That's when people tend to pass judgment on who is more credible than whom. And that's when an impartial investigation can best serve the truth – and would have my full cooperation to do so.

I've recently been publically accused of sexual misconduct. These accusations have received a fair amount of press in the past forty-eight hours, unaccompanied by my reactions. In many cases, it's not the media's fault. I declined comment on the grounds that serious accusations should not be adjudicated in the press. But clearly I cannot continue to stay silent. So below I offer my account of each accusation.

The 2009 Incident

I am asked by thousands of people per year to take pictures with them. A flattering, time consuming, but delightful chore. As many in my fan-base can attest, I get almost giddy if I notice you're wearing cosmic bling – clothing or jewelry or tattoos that portray the universe, either scientifically or artistically. And I make it a priority to point out these adornments for the photograph.

A colleague at a well attended, after-conference, social gathering came up to me to ask for a photograph. She was wearing a sleeveless dress with a tattooed solar system extending up her arm. And while I don't explicitly remember searching for Pluto at the top of her shoulder, it is surely something I would have done in that situation. As we all know, I have professional history with the demotion of Pluto, which had occurred officially just three years earlier. So whether people include it or not in their tattoos is of great interest to me. I was reported to have "groped" her by searching "up her dress", when this was simply a search under the covered part of her shoulder of the sleeveless dress.

I only just learned (nine years after) that she thought this behavior creepy. That was never my intent and I'm deeply sorry to have made her feel that way. Had I been told of her discomfort in the moment, I would have offered this same apology eagerly, and on the spot. In my mind's eye, I'm a friendly and accessible guy, but going forward, I can surely be more sensitive to people's personal space, even in the midst of my planetary enthusiasm.

Summer 2018 Incident

While filming this past summer, I had a (female) Production Assistant assigned to me, to ensure, among her countless tasks, that every ounce of my energy was efficiently allocated to the production needs of the show. As part of this, she was also my driver, to and from the studio, ensuring that I arrive on time. In the car we would review details of the shoot and she would help me anticipate parts of the shoot to come. Across the many weeks of shooting she and I spent upwards of a hundred hours in one-on-one conversation. We became so friendly that we talked about all manner of subjects, even social-personal ones, like the care of aging parents, sibling relationships, life in high school and college, hometown hobbies, race, gender, and so forth. We also discussed less-personal topics in abundance, like rock lyrics, favorite songs in various musical genres, concert experiences, etc. And we also talked about food – I'm kind of a foodie, and her fiancé was a chef. In short, we had a fun, talkative friendship.

She is a talented, warm and friendly person -- excellent traits for morale on a high pressure production. Practically everyone she knows on set gets a daily welcome-hug from her. I expressly rejected each hug offered frequently during the Production. But in its place I offered a handshake, and on a few occasions, clumsily declared, "If I hug you I might just want more." My intent was to express restrained but genuine affection.

In the final week of shooting, with just a few days left, as a capstone of our friendship, I invited her to wine & cheese at my place upon dropping me off from work. No pressure. I serve wine & cheese often to visitors. And I even alerted her that others from the production were gathering elsewhere that evening, so she could just drop me off and head straight there or anywhere elsewhere. She freely chose to come by for wine & cheese and I was delighted. In the car, we had started a long conversation that could continue unabated. Production days are long. We arrived late, but she was on her way home two hours later.

Afterwards, she came into my office to tell me she was creeped out by the wine & cheese evening. She viewed the invite as an attempt to seduce her, even though she sat across the wine & cheese table from me, and all conversation had been in the same vein as all other conversations we ever had.

Further, I never touched her until I shook her hand upon departure. On that occasion, I had offered a special handshake, one I learned from a Native elder on reservation land at the edge of the Grand Canyon. You extend your thumb forward during the handshake to feel the other person's vital spirit energy -- the pulse. I've never forgotten that handshake, and I save it in appreciation of people with whom I've developed new friendships.

At that last meeting in my office, I apologized profusely. She accepted the apology. And I assured her that had I known she was uncomfortable, I would have apologized on the spot, ended the evening, and possibly reminded her of the other social gathering that she could attend. She nonetheless declared it her last day, with only a few days left of production.

I note that her final gesture to me was the offer of a hug, which I accepted as a parting friend.

Early 1980s

I entered astrophysics graduate school directly out of college in 1980. It's a grueling adventure-marathon, and many people do not finish the PhD. In fact, it was not uncommon for half the admitted students to leave after two or three years, finding some other kind of work in their lives. While in graduate school I had several girlfriends, one of whom would become my wife of thirty years, a mathematical physicist -- we met in Relativity class. Over this time I had a brief relationship with a fellow astro-graduate student, from a more recent entering class. I remember being intimate only a few times, all at her apartment, but the chemistry wasn't there. So the relationship faded quickly. There was nothing otherwise odd or unusual about this friendship.

I didn't see much of her after that time. Our student offices were on different floors of the building and we were not in the same classes. A few years later, I ran into her, pregnant, with who I think was the father by her side. That's when I had learned that she dropped out of graduate school. Again, this is not itself an unusual fact, but I nonetheless wished her well in motherhood and in whatever career path would follow.

More than thirty years later, as my visibility-level took another jump, I read a freshly posted blog accusing me of drugging and raping a woman I did not recognize by either photo or name. Turned out to be the same person who I dated briefly in graduate school. She had changed her name and lived an entire life, married with children, before this accusation.

For me, what was most significant, was that in this new life, long after dropping out of astrophysics graduate school, she was posting videos of colored tuning forks endowed with vibrational therapeutic energy that she channels from the orbiting planets. As a scientist, I found this odd. Meanwhile, according to her blog posts, the drug and rape allegation comes from an assumption of what happened to her during a night that she cannot remember. It is as though a false memory had been implanted, which, because it never actually happened, had to be remembered as an evening she doesn't remember. Nor does she remember waking up the next morning and going to the office. I kept a record of everything she posted, in case her stories morphed over time. So this is sad, which, for me, defies explanation.

I note that this allegation was used as a kind of solicitation-bait by at least one journalist to bring out of the woodwork anybody who had any encounter with me that left them uncomfortable.

Overview

I'm the accused, so why believe anything I say? Why believe me at all?

That brings us back to the value of an independent investigation, which FOX/NatGeo (the networks on which *Cosmos* and *StarTalk* air) announced that they will conduct. I welcome this.

Accusations can damage a reputation and a marriage. Sometimes irreversibly. I see myself as loving husband and as a public servant – a scientist and educator who serves at the will of the public. I am grateful for the support I've received from those who continue to respect and value me and my work.

Respectfully submitted, Neil deGrasse Tyson, New York City