

## **Donna Zerner, The Shadow Behind The Light**

*Video: Donna Zerner, The Shadow Behind The Light.mp4*

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### Speaker

Donna Zerner

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*Portland Story Theater*

*Presents*

*Urban Tellers*

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When I heard that the Mick Jagger of the Jewish spiritual world was looking for an editor, I jumped at the chance. I was in my early forties, living in Boulder, Colorado, editing spiritual and self-help books and wanting to make a difference in the world. And that's when I met a rabbi and bestselling author who I'm going to call by the name Mike Rock Me. That is not his real name. Mike was incredible. He was like a brilliant mind like no one had ever seen before. He was really handsome and sexy, well, for a rabbi, and he just, he oozed charisma. I mean, I would watch him like strut across the stage as he was doing like these amazingly profound teachings about the union of the divine masculine and feminine while he would like modulate his voice like an evangelical preacher and whip audiences up into a frenzy. He was amazing. I mean, he was turning thousands of people on to sacred wisdom. In other words, he was living my secret dream, the one I would never be brave enough to go for.

So I ended up editing Mike's book, which was about Eros. And then we actually became friends. I remember the first time he stayed at my house. He was in town for a conference. And we were sitting in my guest room and I was telling him, he was asking me about my last relationship, and I was telling him about how horrible it was and how I was feeling really undesirable and not good about myself at all. And I looked over and he had a tear running down his cheek, and he said, "Donna, I think you are incredible." And he took my hand and he said, "Can I show you how sexy you are?" O. M. G.

Mike did not stay in the guest room that night. It was a little weird. I mean, he was a spiritual teacher and, I don't know, but this was Mike Rock Me, and it was so exciting and I was just, I was smitten, I was hooked.

I started getting more involved in Mike's world. I joined the board of his organization, and I was helping a lot behind the scenes. He had this obsession with becoming a superstar on the wisdom-tainment circuit. And it was happening. I mean, he was hooking up with all the A-list celebrity teachers. He was hanging out with Ram Dass and becoming best friends with Integral bald guy Ken Wilber, and he was doing dialogues with the Dalai friggig Lama. It was so thrilling. And I was part of it. I was the one often driving him to events, and I would get to meet all these cool

people. And I was the one who, when he was teaching, I would bring him his Diet Coke. Wow! I felt so special. I was in Mike Rock Me's inner circle.

One morning I woke up and turned on the computer, and I found this website that was saying that Mike Rock Me, decades before, had molested teenage girls, including a 13-year-old. And this was spreading like wildfire all over the Internet. Holy shit! This was bad. I was devastated. But Mike was all like, "Donna, Donna, don't be naïve. You have to understand there are people who are jealous of my success and they're trying to bring me down. It didn't happen like they're saying."

And he spent hours and hours explaining what really happened with the girls and how the 13-year-old was actually 14 going on 35 and they were in love and it was totally consensual. And he just went on and on and on. He was so sincere, and he looked me in the eye, and he swore on a Bible, and he just bombarded me. And I didn't know what to believe. I had no way of connecting with these nameless girls and finding out their side. And finally I just thought, you know what, why should the world be deprived of this man's brilliance and his profound teachings just because of something that may or may not have happened 25 years ago?

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And so even though I had some weird twisting in my gut around this, I joined this team of people, and we were sending out these documents signed by lots of very prominent rabbis and spiritual leaders, attesting to Mike as a man of 100 percent integrity. And we were doing everything we could to discredit the people behind the websites that were attacking him. This was very time-consuming, very exhausting, but it was also really exciting, because we were on a mission. We were fighting for justice here. I was helping Mike Rock Me. And Mike Rock Me was changing the world. Therefore I was changing the world. It was really thrilling.

But as time went on I had to work harder to kind of compartmentalize other things that were going on. Like, for instance, it became clear that Mike was actually addicted to sex and especially sex that was all about humiliation and degradation. It was a lot more extreme than I could handle, and sometimes I would try and stop it and say, "Mike, I actually don't enjoy it when you call me a whore." And he would say, "Don't be so unsophisticated. We're in the holy of holies here. I'm giving you a transmission from the divine feminine. Now, tell me you're a slut. Say it."

My insides would be all knotted. Don't you wish he was your spiritual teacher? Yeah. Good guy. No, I would just feel nauseous inside and really scared his energy would get really dark and intense, but I didn't know, how do you say no to Mike Rock Me? I didn't know how. I desperately needed to process what was going on, but he had sworn me to secrecy. He said, "If anyone finds out about us, it will destroy me and the movement and it'll be your fault." So I couldn't tell anyone. I was holding a thousand dark secrets, and I was feeling more and more isolated.

Over time I was just seeing more and more that was hard to handle. It was just harder to reconcile the huge gap between his public holy man persona and the private, strategic,

manipulative narcissist that I was seeing behind closed doors. But I thought, you know what, I can fix him. I'll be the one to change him. So, you know, I would try, and sometimes I would say, "Mike, maybe part of why all this scandal and everything is happening is because, you know, maybe you just need to take a little more responsibility around this." And he would just blow up at me, and he would say, "You just don't get it. This is my fucking life on the line." And then he would go on and on until I would end up being the one feeling totally ashamed. And then the next day he would call up and say, "Donna, you're my best friend in the whole world. You're the only person I could trust. I need you. I love you." It was totally crazy-making.

So over time I just found myself more and more weirdly addicted to the constant non-stop drama and chaos that was Mike's life. It kind of filled up the empty places inside of me. And I was feeling like he was in my head all the time. It was like my brain was very foggy. I couldn't think clearly. I felt like I was in a trance. I was neglecting my work. I was lying to my friends all the time. I didn't make time for my spiritual practice, and I just felt totally ungrounded, uncentered. And then I got sick. I had a menstrual period that was unbelievably heavy that went on for 40 days, to the point where I was totally anemic and fainting. I literally felt like my life force was being sucked away by an energy vampire. I desperately needed to get out, but I felt so entangled in his web and I just, I could not figure a way out.

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One day about three years after I first met Mike, I got a call from his assistant at his organization. She was crying and she told me that several women had started talking and it turns out that Mike had been sleeping with and sexually abusing students and women on his staff. I was totally shocked and not surprised at all, at the same time. All hell was breaking loose. This became an enormous scandal and it was headline news all over the place. The organization and movement that so many of us had worked so hard to support totally crumbled. This finally, though, was my way out, and I cut off all contact with Mike. Yeah.

And that's when my head started to clear. The veil started to fall away. And I could start to see, look back and realize all the ways that I allowed myself to be used by him, all the ways, all the times that I had ignored my intuition, all the times that I had betrayed my own integrity. I did it again and again and again. I felt so much shame. And then I started talking to some of the other women that he'd been involved with. At first there was three, then eight. I've eventually talked to 15 women, and I know of well over a dozen more. Mike was not Mick Jagger anymore. He was Bill Cosby. So, I thought that would get a laugh... Lighten up, everyone! I'm okay!

Anyway, talking to the women was so amazing. I mean, like me, each of them had been led to believe they were the special one. Each of them had been sworn to secrecy. We had all been silent in some way, but now we were talking, we were telling the truth, and it felt so good. We connected with each other. We exposed so many lies. There were so many lies. And so many of the women had gone through really, really severe trauma, but we helped each other and we befriended each other and it was so beautiful the healing that came out of these amazing connections. And I thought, you know what, this right here, these connections, this is the real divine feminine. Yeah.

I also was able to finally identify and track down the two women that Mike had molested when they were teenagers, and it was great to hear their stories, which were very different than the versions Mike had shared with me—big surprise. But one thing that was a really important piece of my healing was I got to say to each of them, “I am so sorry for what I did to cover up the truth of what you experienced.”

So it has been exactly 10 years since Mike’s world blew up and I cut off contact with him, and I’m still trying to come to terms with that whole thing that happened, and part of it, part of my process is actually standing up here telling this story, because for a long time that period of my life was just the most shameful thing I’ve ever experienced, until I finally realized that I just needed to reframe it as an initiation of power. I gave my power away to someone who was all too happy to exploit it for his own ends, but now I’ve been taking it back, and part of taking it back is just feeling like I need to stop hiding and I just need to tell the truth. Even though at this moment I feel very vulnerable and very exposed, it just feels like it’s time to bring all of myself to the world, including that part of my history, and say, “I’m okay.” Thank you.

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