Unbound

What’s in it for me? Learn about the roots of the #MeToo movement, and the remarkable woman who founded it.

We’ve all heard about the Me Too hashtag, but most of us have no idea of the scope of the movement, and how it all began. Much more than just a passing Twitter craze, the Me Too movement was founded years ago by activist Tarana Burke as a way to help survivors of sexual abuse heal. Today, millions of people have been empowered to share their experiences, and work together to hold perpetrators to account. What inspired Burke to create such a movement? And what gave it so much momentum? That’s what you’ll discover in these blinks. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how dealing with sexual assault as a child made Burke determined to support other survivors; why she was initially horrified when #MeToo went viral; and how Burke stood up to her own community when they failed to hold abusers accountable.

The #MeToo hashtag went viral, prompting millions of people to share experiences of sexual assault.

Tarana Burke was awakened one Sunday morning in 2017 by her phone. It was exploding with messages. The hashtag #MeToo had gone viral on Twitter. Thousands of women were sharing their experiences of being sexually abused, and using the hashtag to signal solidarity. Burke was shocked. She had been building a movement to support survivors of sexual assault for years, using the slogan “Me Too” to represent how important empathy among survivors is for healing. But she’d had nothing to do with this Twitter storm. The key message here is: The #MeToo hashtag went viral, prompting millions of people to share experiences of sexual assault. The outpouring of reactions was a response to news stories about movie executive Harvey Weinstein’s decades of predatory and abusive behavior toward young actors – behavior that had gone unpunished for decades. Burke applauded the fact that Hollywood actors were stepping forward to share these experiences, and inspiring others to share theirs, too. But she couldn’t help but notice that the vast majority of those women were white. Where were the voices of Black women, or Latinas? Burke had spent her career trying to create space for marginalized survivors of abuse. But now they seemed to be getting squeezed out of the movement she’d worked so hard to create. Burke was also concerned that women were being encouraged to share very raw experiences without any follow-up to check if they were OK, or support in processing those declarations. As the day went on, she kept checking Twitter. By then, there were hundreds of thousands of responses, all sharing experiences using the hashtag #MeToo. One particular response touched Burke especially. A woman shared an experience of being sexually assaulted in college. She’d never told anyone about it, she said. But seeing everyone else share experiences had made her realize she had nothing to be ashamed of. She wasn’t alone. Burke started crying. The woman’s words moved her deeply, and made her realize that while she hadn’t chosen to turn her work into a viral hashtag, the Twitter outpouring did have the potential to help survivors, and spread the work she’d been developing her whole life.

#MeToo was reaching hundreds of thousands of people around the world, showing how deeply toxic and ubiquitous sexual abuse is, and showing survivors that they aren't alone.

At a very young age, Burke's life was shattered by a sexual assault.

When she was just seven years old, Tarana Burke was raped. She'd been outside playing with some friends near her home in the Bronx, in New York City, when an older boy took her by the hand and led her into an abandoned building. It was getting dark, and Burke was afraid to be going so far from home, but she felt like she had to go along with him. He ordered her to lie down on the cold floor, and then raped her. Afterward, he dropped her off at her apartment building, and she went upstairs to where her mom and stepfather were waiting. Here's the key message: At a very young age, Burke's life was shattered by a sexual assault. They asked her what was wrong. "A boy messed with me,'' Burke replied. Suddenly her stepfather's face changed, and he looked furious. "Who was it?" he demanded. Burke wanted to tell him, but she was very scared of getting into trouble. She knew that something bad had happened, and felt like she was to blame. After all, her parents had told her never to go out after dark. Or hang around with older boys. Or let anybody touch her private parts. She'd broken all those rules. What's more, she'd seen what happened when her stepfather got angry. He was a community leader, unafraid to mete out justice when he felt it was called for. Not long before the assault, Burke had witnessed him and some of his friends savagely beating a local thief to teach him a lesson. If her stepfather found out what had happened to her, he might kill the boy who had abused her. And that would mean that he would go to jail. Burke adored her stepfather, and didn't want anything to happen to him. So, even though she was only seven, she made the very adult decision to stay silent. But her silence had a price. From that moment, Burke felt like she was always acting a part. That the good girl her stepfather and mother thought they loved was just a charade. The real her was bad, dirty, and unworthy. Burke had never heard the word rape, and would be an adult before she could contextualize what had happened to her. All she knew was that she had broken her parents' rules and done something terribly wrong.

At her new Catholic school, Burke wrangled with shame and tried to atone.

One evening when she was a kid, Burke was washing the dishes. She got lost in her thoughts as she dreamily washed cups with a dishrag, soaping first inside each mug, and then along the rim as her mother had taught her to. She tried to rinse the rag, but it just produced more and more soapy suds. Suddenly, Burke had an irresistible urge to taste the soap. Tentatively, she let a drop of soapy dishwater land on her tongue. Just then, she heard her mother screaming her name. Her mother screamed that she used the dishcloth to clean filthy pots and kill roaches. And then she asked a question that Burke would never forget: "Is that what you are? A dirty, nasty, used-up dishrag?" Tears streamed down Burke's face. She was shocked at her mother's rage. But, even more than that, she was ashamed that her mother seemed to have guessed exactly how bad

she was. The key message is this: At her new Catholic school, Burke wrangled with shame and tried to atone. Burke shouldered enormous amounts of shame. She felt she couldn't tell anyone what she'd done, so she was very isolated. Going to a strict Catholic school was the only thing that provided some comfort. At Sacred Heart Primary School, there were rules for everything, from going to the bathroom to what you were allowed to play at recess. Far from feeling restrictive, these rules were reassuring to a girl trying desperately to make things right. As Burke recited Hail Marys and Our Fathers, she felt like she was finally able to atone for some of her sins. She couldn't confess to a priest what had really happened to her, so she would invent a cover sin, like lying. And then she would double the number of prayers the priest had given her for penance. Confession gave Burke some hope. She had sinned, but God was merciful. Perhaps if she worked hard enough, He would forgive her. Burke started to get more and more involved with the church to make up for a lack of support at home. She and her mother had always been very close. That changed when her mother got a new boyfriend who seemed to hate children, and regularly told Burke to shut up. As she and her mother became estranged, Burke leaned on her church community for support. But a timely intervention from her grandfather would start to make her look at the church's teachings more critically.

A crash course in Black history provided Burke with a change of course.

Burke's grandfather watched his beloved granddaughter's religious fervor with increasing alarm. Born into a West Indian family, he himself had been raised as a Catholic. But when he was abused while living at a Catholic boys' home, he left the church. He still had serious reservations about the church, and how it had treated Black people throughout its history. He decided that he needed to give Burke an education that would make her look at her religious community more critically. He took her to the Liberation Bookstore in Harlem, and bought her two books about the history of the church and how it had treated Black people in America. Burke read them quickly, and then asked for more. One book at a time, her radicalization had begun. The key message here is: A crash course in Black history provided Burke with a change of course. Burke started questioning the role of Catholics in the slave trade, and asking critical questions about why the church didn't try to help enslaved Africans. She decided she'd had enough of the Catholic school system, and begged her mother to let her transfer to the public system once she entered high school. At her new school, Burke stuck out immediately. The girls were all wearing the latest hip-hop fashions, like huge hoop earrings and colorful leather jackets. But Burke's mother made her wear long, modest skirts that made people think she was very religious. The girls in her homeroom teased her mercilessly. Burke's mother had always taught her that she must confront bullies head-on. So Burke decided to fight back; she punched the ringleader of the homeroom bullies in the face. At that moment, Burke felt powerful for the first time. She didn't need to be a good girl anymore. She could be dangerous instead. From that day, Burke was constantly getting into fights – and getting suspended. One day, she became involved in a fight that would haunt her. Burke had been involved with a boy who was part of her social circle. But one day, when she arrived at a friend's house, she found everyone gathered in a state of great excitement. Another girl in their group had had sex with Burke's boyfriend, they explained. Egged on by her friends, Burke started

screaming at the girl. She beat her so hard that there was blood everywhere, and the wire on the girl's braces poked through her lip. It was only years later that it occurred to Burke that the sex might not have been consensual – that the girl might have been raped, and then beaten up and shamed by the people she thought were her friends.

Encountering Maya Angelou's work made Burke feel less alone as a survivor.

Sometimes the people who have the most influence over your life are the ones you've never even met. They're the people who give you a glimpse of other worlds through the books they write. While Burke's high school was violent and chaotic, she found refuge in her honors classes. She'd always been smart, with strong academic abilities. In the advanced classes she constantly scored good grades on exams, and her teachers appreciated her inquisitiveness and engagement. Her favorite class of all was honors English. Burke grew up in a house full of books, celebrating Black writers like Alice Walker and Tony Morrison. Her mother always encouraged her to read and think critically. But there was one author her mother forbade Burke from reading until she was older: Maya Angelou. Here's the key message: Encountering Maya Angelou's work made Burke feel less alone as a survivor. One day when she was twelve years old and alone at home, Burke's curiosity got the better of her, and she picked up one of Angelou's books, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. She soon discovered why her mother had banned the book. It included an explicit account of Angelou being sexually abused when she was just eight years old. Angelou's experience was very similar to Burke's. But it wasn't upsetting to read; quite the opposite. Burke had always thought that she was to blame for her own abuse – that she deserved it. But reading Angelou's account made her see what had happened from a different perspective. Angelou had been innocent and blameless, and she'd been assaulted anyway. When she was in high school, Burke again encountered Maya Angelou. This time, her English teacher showed the class a video of Angelou performing the poem Phenomenal Woman to a crowded theater. Burke watched, transfixed. Angelou beamed at the audience in her black and silver dress, boldly enunciating each word. She seemed so profoundly confident, so at home in her own skin. Burke couldn't believe it. Angelou had experienced terrible sexual abuse. So why wasn't she soaked in shame? Why wasn't she angry? Since being raped, Burke had tried pretending to be good, and tried putting on an angry, untouchable facade. But she hadn't yet managed to tap into her own authentic power. Seeing Angelou gave her a taste of what that could be like. The hope that she would one day be able to find that kind of peace and joy would sustain her for many years to come.

A leadership camp allowed Burke to come into her own as an activist.

After all the fights and suspensions in Burke's first year of high school, her mother had had enough. She decided to transfer Burke, after only one year, to another public school with a good academic reputation. Burke had another chance at reinvention, and the chance to plunge into her studies, without having to spend so much energy on fighting or defending herself. At her new school, she joined the track team and found a good

group of friends. And she started becoming more and more outspoken about the racial injustices she saw in the world, and the entrenched racism in so much of what she was taught at school. Her passion caught the attention of a program administrator at the school, who asked if she'd like to attend a leadership camp for youth in Washington, DC, all expenses paid. The key message is this: A leadership camp allowed Burke to come into her own as an activist. When Burke and the other high schoolers from New York arrived in Washington, they were immediately ushered into a hall where a pep rally was taking place. Burke had never seen anything like it. Kids were singing at the top of their voices, and playing djembe drums. The excitement in the room was palpable. Then, a small woman stepped into the middle of the room to welcome them. She was dressed in bright clothes, with her arms covered in beaded bangles. She shouted to the crowd, "How many of you are leaders?" No one had ever asked Burke that before. The woman was Rose Sanders, a legendary racial justice activist and partner in Alabama's largest Black law firm, along with her husband, State Senator Hank Sanders. The leadership camp Burke was attending was hosted by the 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement – 21C – an organization founded by veterans of the civil rights and Black Power movements of the '60s and '70s who wanted to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. At the camp, attendees were taught how to organize within their communities and develop political strategies. They were also showered with a love and affirmation that many were missing at home. They were told that they had valuable contributions to make – that they were powerful. Burke had found her place. Activism gave her a new way to channel the rage she'd felt for so long. And going to university gave her the chance to really develop her voice as a leader.

Moving to the American South gave Burke the chance to flourish as a leader and organizer.

It's impossible to overemphasize how influential Rose Sanders and the 21C organization would become in Burke's life. When she got back to New York, Burke founded a chapter of 21C at her high school. There were local groups all over the country, and they all met together at weekend workshops and summer camps. When she finished high school, 21C again intervened to change her path. Burke's guidance counselor had suggested she go to community college, despite her potential and high grades. Her mother seemed completely uninterested in anything she did. But Rose Sanders insisted she must go to university. She pulled strings to get Burke into the University of Alabama, all expenses paid. The key message here is: Moving to the American South gave Burke the chance to flourish as a leader and organizer. At the University of Alabama, Burke was able to find her voice as a leader. In 1991, Rodney King was savagely beaten by policemen in Los Angeles. In spite of the beating being captured on camera, the police involved were acquitted at trial. At around the same time, a 15-year old girl by the name of Latasha Harlins was shot and killed by a woman who owned an LA convenience store and suspected Harlins of shoplifting. That woman wasn't required to serve any time in prison either. Burke was distraught – and furious – when she heard about these incidents. But no one else on campus seemed to care. Burke took matters into her own hands, distributing handwritten flyers advertising a student protest of what had happened in Los Angeles. By the next day, she'd mobilized a large crowd, replete with journalists and senior speakers. When it was her turn to speak, Burke approached the microphone nervously. She'd never addressed so many people before. But as soon as

she started speaking, the crowd went wild. Burke was a natural at connecting with the audience and delivering her message. So it was no surprise that Hank Sanders offered her a job after graduation. The 21C head office in Selma, Alabama needed a fundraiser. Burke quickly agreed. She would end up doing meaningful work in the Selma community for many years, running the Black Belt Arts and Cultural Center, working for the Voting Rights Museum, and running the 21C summer camp. The work was hard, and paid very little, but she thrived. She loved making a difference in the lives of disadvantaged youth. In her personal life, however, things weren't going as well.

When she became pregnant, Burke was determined to protect her child at all costs.

When Burke found out she was pregnant, she was terrified that she would have a daughter. Her whole life she'd felt like her mother had shamed her, and failed to protect her when she needed it. From swapping notes with her friends, Burke had realized that Black women in her community experienced compounding shame that perpetuated abuse. Her own mother had grown up with a deep shame about the abuse she had experienced, but hadn't had the tools to deal with it. So she projected those same feelings onto Burke. Burke was scared that if she in turn had a daughter, she'd be similarly incapable of protecting her from the kinds of abuse Burke herself had experienced in the world. Here's the key message: When she became pregnant, Burke was determined to protect her child at all costs. As it turned out, Burke's baby was female. But she was able to become a very different kind of mother than the one she'd had. Burke had become pregnant by her boyfriend, Sean. She and Sean had been on-again-off-again since high school. They'd been a refuge for each other when they first got together in New York, able to create a little bubble where they could let their guards down and delight in each other's company. But since they had arrived in Selma, Sean had changed. He resented how busy Burke was with her work. And he resented her newfound sense of self. She no longer tolerated his bad behavior like she had as a teenager. They had violent fights followed by reconciliations. Burke had been determined to make the relationship work, but becoming pregnant changed everything. She realized that she had to put her baby first. One night, Sean restrained her and then raped her as she lay in bed, weeping. Burke knew their relationship was over. Gathering all her courage, she demanded Sean move out. She would rather raise her baby by herself than expose the child to that toxic relationship. In raising Kaia, Burke has been able to break the cycle of shame. It hasn't always been easy, but Burke's learned how to talk openly about sexual abuse in a way Burke's mother could never talk to her. Living in Selma as a single mom, Burke felt lucky to have a community around her that was so supportive, helping her take care of Kaia. But then something happened to make her question her trust in the chosen family she loved so much.

The leadership of 21C betrayed Burke by enabling sexual abuse in the community.

When seven-year-old Kaia came to Burke crying and telling her that a man had “messed with me,” it felt like history was repeating itself. A group of men had been hanging around backstage at a concert that Burke was organizing. One of them, Malik, was like a surrogate son to Rose Sanders. But as soon as he arrived, he started causing trouble. Burke had him thrown out, but was too busy with the preparations to notice that he’d come back in. It turned out that Malik had started harassing Kaia, rubbing up against the child and whispering that he had something to “show her.” Burke was wild with fury. She immediately confronted Malik, punching him in the face and screaming at him. Everyone in the community knew what had happened, and Burke assumed they would be as angry about his behavior as she was. But a few weeks later, Burke found Malik hanging around outside the museum where she worked. The key message is this: The leadership of 21C betrayed Burke by enabling sexual abuse in the community. It turned out that Rose Sanders had sent him there to do some work because he was short of money. The same Rose Sanders who had been such an influential mother figure to Burke was now putting Kaia in danger. It wasn’t the first time that Burke had been dismayed by how 21C leaders dealt, or rather didn’t deal, with sexual abuse in their community. One Black history professor had kept coming back to the youth camp for several years despite rumors that he’d raped a girl there. Another member of Sanders’ own family was known to be an abuser, but never seemed to face any real consequences. Burke had always been very upset by the hypocrisy of those claiming to care about children while completely failing to protect them from predators. But she’d tried to rationalize her doubts away. Things came to a head when 21C invited Reverend James Luther Bevel and his followers into their community. Bevel had incredible activist credentials as Dr. King’s right-hand man. But he was also a pedophile who had sexually abused four of his daughters and was alleged to have molested other children over the course of his career. It was revealed that 21C leaders had known about Bevel’s history, and yet still gave him access to vulnerable children, including Kaia. This was the most painful betrayal Burke had experienced. She knew she had to split from the people she’d thought were family, and branch out on her own. She’d need to start advocating for abuse survivors – because no one else was.

To do the work she was most passionate about, Burke would have to confront her own trauma.

Right at the beginning of her activist work for 21C, Burke organized a youth leadership camp. At the camp, she formed a special connection with a girl called Heaven. Heaven was very confrontational and angry. But Burke recognized that, behind the tough facade, Heaven was very vulnerable. So she did her best to connect with the girl during camp. But when Heaven actually came to her for help, Burke ended up failing her. Heaven told Burke that she had been sexually abused, and asked for help. But this was too close to home for Burke, who hadn’t yet processed her own trauma. So she shut Heaven down, and told her to go and speak to someone else. The key message here is: To do the work she was most passionate about, Burke would have to confront her own trauma. Burke never forgot how betrayed Heaven had looked in that moment. She’d screwed up all her courage to confide in Burke, but Burke had let Heaven down. Burke knew that she was being called by God to help other survivors heal from sexual assault. But to do that work, she would have to finally come to terms with what had happened to her, and integrate that trauma. It was a very painful process, but Burke unearthed her

painful memories and allowed herself to experience the pain and fear. Afterward, they no longer had the same power over her. While working in Selma, Burke had created a leadership program especially for young women, which she called Just Be, Inc. The program aimed to teach young girls how valuable they were, and instill self-confidence. The program ran in schools all over Selma, where it was an enormous success. After leaving 21C and moving to Philadelphia, Burke developed the program so that it included a workshop for survivors of sexual abuse. Soon she was touring the country delivering workshops to meet the enormous demand. Fundamental to her approach was the idea that a survivor's healing happens in community with other survivors. That idea was the foundation for the Me Too movement Burke created. And the way #MeToo spread around the world to empower millions of survivors is evidence of how powerful the concept is. But while "Me Too" may have entered everyday discourse, the work of fighting sexual abuse is far from over, especially for Black and brown women. It's a cause that Burke works for every day of her life, supporting survivors and working to hold abusers to account.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Drawing on her own experience as a survivor, activist, and educator, Tarana Burke has dedicated her life to fighting the stigma around sexual abuse. The Me Too movement she founded aims to empower survivors of sexual abuse to heal by sharing experiences and extending empathy to each other. The viral hashtag by the same name has created a powerful global movement of millions of people. Actionable advice: If you suspect someone is being abused, keep asking questions As a young girl, Burke was dying to unburden herself of the secret that she had been abused. But no adult really took the time to give her that opportunity. Burke recommends that caregivers keep asking the right questions, and build trust with children so they'll feel comfortable confiding in those who care for them.