

The Wyckoff Journal

The Child I Was



We read recently a lot about child sex abuse: Jerry Sandusky, the disgraced Penn State coach, being vilified and convicted of child molestation; the conviction of Monsignor William Lynn in Philadelphia for allowing known pedophiles to continue active involvement with children; the

allegations against Syracuse coach Bernie Fine and a flawed 2005 investigation....And on the other side, the hero of 2012, the Texas father who beat to death with his own hands a man he allegedly found raping his 5 year old daughter during a party at the child's home.

It is encouraging that between 1993 and 2005, the number of sexually abused children dropped 38 percent, but it is often estimated that most cases of abuse continue not to be reported. Estimates of the number of sexual abuse cases that are reported to authorities vary between 5% and 30% - the vast majority continuing not to be reported. So, the issue of child abuse rising in the American consciousness does serve an important purpose.

Stranger Danger Myth

Most importantly, awareness continues to rise that most children are familiar with their abusers. Parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, religious leaders, coaches, teachers, these people who share our joys, burdens, triumphs and defeats are the circles where predators feed. It is in these circles where we are taught to feel safe, taught to trust, where we grow into our values and personhood that the most damage occurs.

Great emphasis is often placed on warning children about "stranger danger". We warn not to talk to strangers, not to get into a car with a stranger, not to accept gifts from strangers - all good advice, but not something that will occur according to statistics. The attack by a stranger occurs, and those instances can often lead to greater physical brutality, but the percentage of child sex abuse by strangers is usually estimated at less than 5% of the occurrences.

It is those to whom we have entrusted our child, who the child is taught to trust, that is where the greatest danger exists. It makes the subject of child sex abuse all the more difficult, disconcerting, and the impact of any abuse is all that much more damaging....When a trust is betrayed, it adds a new element to the crime.

Our values, our place in the world, is often formed through our social interactions. Our religion, our parents, our friends, our teachers, our coaches, our neighbors play important roles well into what are considered the adult years. While no doubt people are significantly influenced by others well into old age, it is the young who are more susceptible to having that influence dramatically alter the path their lives will take.

The college student who experiences an epiphany because of a particular professor, or the young intern inspired by the work of an established professional can have their lives altered in both positive and negative ways. But for the younger child, a negative experience will undoubtedly alter their entire life.

The Man I Would Be

Albert Camus commented, "L'homme que je serais si je n'avais pas été l'enfant que je fus!", which roughly translates into "The man that I would be if I had not been the child that I was!". And in that statement rests the greatest fears, dangers, and horrors intrinsic to child sexual abuse.

The victims in the Sandusky trial who came forward as men in their twenties, exemplified how the abuse has continued to impact their lives. Similarly, the situation with the Catholic Church shows numerous adult victims well passed middle-age who continue to grapple with the abuse suffered decades ago.

How does one test if a spirit has healed? How does one enter into the psyche of a child, or the adult victim of child abuse, and determine when the healing process has completed? How does one register the impact of child abuse, especially sexual abuse, as it relates to the adult victim? "The man that I would be if I had not been the child that I was!"

According to the American Medical Association, a fifth of all victims develop serious long-term psychological problems. This is compounded when the victims know that others in authority allowed those acts to be committed.

Aftermath of a Math Teacher

A survey of former students of Bergen Catholic High School in Oradell, NJ sheds light on the situation of many other victims who suffered abuse through church, school, or sports.

To the outside observer, the abuse may seem to have no present day relevancy, but to the victims the wounds remain green - and this can be related to the concept of trust being betrayed. It was a trust betrayed by the perpetrator, trust betrayed by those who protected the perpetrator, and the trust betrayed by those who continue to protect them.

In the case of Bergen Catholic, credible allegations have been laid on the Christian Brothers concerning teachers who worked in the school in years stretching from the 1960s to the 1990s. Acts of sexual molestation and physical abuse have been levied and confirmed by students against [Brother Charles Irwin](#) in the 1960s; then there is [Brother Salvatore Ferro](#) whose abuse was detailed in a lawsuit filed by a Catholic priest; and the infamous [Brother Thomas Cuthbert Ford](#) who taught at Bergen Catholic while on the run from Canadian authorities for beating unconscious a 14 year old boy in the showers.

The evidence that abuse was tolerated, that abusers were protected, and that the Christian Brothers put the religious order above the welfare of Bergen Catholic students is *modus operandi* throughout the Catholic Church, and now surfacing in premier institutions such as Penn State and Syracuse University.

For the Christian Brothers, the organization hopes their bankruptcy filing will close the book on accusations of child abuse and cover-ups. The courts have imposed [a deadline of August 1, 2012](#) for victims of Christian Brothers to come forward and report their abuse.

The courts are not the last resort for victims of abuse, and it is unlikely that the courts can deliver what many victims are seeking, which is acknowledgment. In the case of Bergen Catholic, the school continues to deny any failings or responsibility for allowing abuse to occur and for continuing to put students at risk by providing a safe haven for known abusers.

More information on the Bergen Catholic situation, which revolves primarily around the math teacher Brother Charles Irwin, can be found at <http://www.bergencatholicabuse.com/>

Throwing Out The Baby

Those who put protecting an institution over the rights and dignity of child might rely on the idea of “throwing out the baby with the bath water”. They express genuine concern that the reputation of an otherwise humane organization will be damaged due to the crimes of a few, but that argument does not hold water. It is in essence throwing out the baby and keeping the dirty water.

But the sins of the Catholic Church are not unique to their religion. Abuse in the Catholic Church is comparable to abuse accusations in other religions. Protestant ministers are also routinely charged and convicted for criminal acts involving sexual abuse - at an even higher number due to America being a predominately Protestant nation.

With regards to acts of abuse occurring in the Jewish community, one case exemplifies the challenges faced by victims in all religions. In 2009, Justice Guston L. Reichbach expressed his disgust for spectators in a Brooklyn courtroom who had come out to support a convicted pedophile, by saying “While the crimes the defendant stands convicted of are bad enough, what is even more troubling to the court is a communal attitude that seems to impose greater opprobrium on the victims than the perpetrator.”

There are numerous reasons why children will not report child abuse: fear, guilt, humiliation, retribution - the list is endless as to why children will not report the abuse to their parents or another adult. The list of why an adult would not report the abuse to authorities is shorter, and inexcusable. Protecting the abuser because of social reasons, because of a football program, because of a church - there is no excuse.

The phrase “The end justifies the means” is a popular rationale for those who feel forced to make difficult decisions under difficult circumstances. It is used to rationalize atrocities, injustice, and the idea that inhumane acts can serve a greater good in the end. It is a flawed reasoning, the morally correct statement would be - “The means justifies the end”.

Going Forward

As a nation, America turns a blind eye towards countries abusing children in the labor market; America turns a blind eye while their tax dollars are used to purchase boy prostitutes for Afghan warlords; America turns a blind eye to the ritualistic abuse of girls and women in Muslim and African nations; and America too often turns a blind eye to their own native sons and daughters.

Nations, institutions, communities, and organizations that deny victims of human rights abuse - and the sexual abuse of children is a human rights issue - the acknowledgement and recognition they deserve are inherently corrupt. Criminal prosecution and civil lawsuits are only superficial remedies that can mitigate isolated incidences - they cannot remedy the moral corruption - the evil- that remains.

Saint Augustine said "The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works", and that is the best place to start going forward.

**Submitted by Charles McCormick
Bergen Catholic, Class of 1982**