

Negligent bystanders to sexual abuse

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One of Jerry Sandusky's victims sobs in court as the more than 40 guilty verdicts are read last month. (June 22, 2012) (Art Liens / REUTERS)

By Charles Pascal

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Two organizations have recently made themselves more than eligible to be inducted into the hall of shame when it comes to the sexual abuse of powerless children. And the negligent bystanders who knowingly ignore the immorality of it all and those who spend too much energy on not knowing, continue to be a large part of the problem.

A few weeks back, Penn State's former assistant football coach, [Jerry Sandusky](#), was found guilty on 45 counts of child abuse, gross in the number and extent of his actions, simply disgusting and horrid in the details.

And in our own Canadian backyard, [Scouts Canada](#) has been found negligent in dealing with, and the reporting of, cases of child abuse over the past 63 years as a result of a KPMG report. Remarkably, this so-called "arms length" report, paid for by Scouts Canada, concludes that there wasn't a systemic issue at play when it comes to keeping the reporting of cases under the sleeping bag. Just a sloppy organizational problem. Give me a break.

The commissioner of Scouts Canada concluded that his organization needs to "rethink how it handles sexual misconduct." No kidding! Six decades of messing up and now it's time to figure out how to protect kids caught up in

the powerless trap of predators. Holy insight!

Looking at Sandusky's career, it's almost difficult to judge whether he was primarily a coach who also had a deeply rooted sickness that led him to go after boys under his charge or whether the sickness drove him to choose a convenient profession. Hard to say, but Sandusky's son, one of six adopted kids, has indicated that he was also abused by the former coach. OK, enough. Sandusky is one sick puppy and he has messed up the lives of tons of innocent kids.

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What makes my blood boil, though, are the negligent bystanders who by intention, ignorance or fear stand by while the vulnerable are abused by the likes of a Jerry Sandusky or a Graham James, our own Canadian poster boy for the preying coach. It is very easy, very natural to take out our collective heartache and ire on these "monsters" when it comes to imagining the awful life altering acts they have committed.

But what about the non-monsters who turn their heads or cover up the serial acts of one individual or the systemic cultures of abuse of entire organizations?

At Penn State, a former athletic director, former president and vice-president were all grossly negligent bystanders having decided in 2001 to keep Sandusky's behaviour quiet; and given that there are likely a ton of stories and cases that have not come forward yet, I have little doubt that there are so many others who might have — should have — had the courage to blow a whistle of exposure and prevention. Naturally, they should all be seriously punished for their cover up. Sadly, the late great coach Joe Paterno, the most successful college football coach in U.S. history, is no longer great, his memory sullied by his complicit inaction when it came to his assistant coach.

The remarkably persistent and destructive instinct to cover up these horrible acts of human behaviour requires far more whistles along with protection and rewards for those who use them.

The hall of shame should reserve a wing for these negligent bystanders. And if there were ever a natural host for this "hall," the Catholic Church would be a perfect choice given its well-documented commitment to cover up. A few years ago, a friend of mine and I were chatting and seemingly out of the blue, he started crying. He was one of 10 children from a small-town Quebec family. When he was 9, he came home to his mother and said that Father X was touching him in private places, to which his mother slapped him across the face and screamed, "How dare you say such bad things about our parish priest!" Amid his tears, he told me that Father X had died the previous week, falling off his roof while doing repairs, robbing my friend of an adult opportunity to confront the abuser of his childhood.

Negligent bystanders can be shame-avoiders like my friend's mother and Sandusky's wife, who had more than an inkling about what was happening, a university president wanting to avoid the wrath of donors, and a young teammate afraid of the consequences of being a tattletale. And let's not forget scoutmasters worried about the hypocrisy of bad things taking place in an organization that has embedded in its pledge an exhortation "to help other people at all times."

There is nothing wise about the monkeys among us who see and hear about the evil of sexual abuse of vulnerable children and fail to speak. How much more evidence do we need when it comes to the notion that sexual predators are deliberate about finding their way to environments and circumstances that fuel their sickness? How long will it take those in charge of these places to create cultures where more and more whistles will be comfortably sounded . . . and heard?

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