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OF MYTHS AND MONSTERS: THE PLAGUE OF SEX OFFENDER PANIC

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By Derek W. Logue

Ignorance is not always bliss, nor is knowledge power. Even in this so-called "Age of Information," we rely on Mass Media to think for us, reminiscent of the scene from the film "Wall-E," where we let computers do everything for us. We forget Mass Media is a big business, and relies on sensational stories for ratings and advertising dollars. One of the most tragic stories we can think of is a murdered child, and every one of these tragedies keep us glued to the televisions in fear and anger. Fear sells, sex sells, and sex offenders sell.

The media reports covering the Somer Thompson case stated they were "interviewing 160+ nearby sex offenders" (interviews of registrants are typically standard operating procedure for Law Enforcement, as it was the original intent of the sex offender registry). Then the Mass Media suggested we check the maps at Family Watchdog; after all, if Oprah endorses it, it must be good. Alarmed by "blood red" dots and statistics with huge numbers implying a global epidemic, the average reader comes to the conclusion to be hyper-vigilant while watching the red blips on the radar. After all, they're "always on the verge of re-offending" and "we're powerless to stop them," Mass Media says.

"Knowledge" brings "fear," but not always "rational fear." It depends on what you find in your search for answers. In our fear and anger, we search for a solution to what bothers us; after all, our myriad of laws aimed at registered former sex offenders were birthed from reactions to tragedies. Every law in place targeting sex offenders, from publicly accessible registries, to laws dictating where registrants live and work, to laws dictating who a person can date, came on the heels of one of these high profile but rare tragedies. These tragedies spark public outrage, which in turn calls for a demand for some new panacea for our fears; politicians are pressed into action, creating new laws or expanding existing laws to cater to their constituents; without a single debate or "nay" vote, the new "panacea" passes and the world is at ease. At least until the next high profile tragedy hits the national airwaves.

When I was a child (as young as age 8 as I had an older brother), it was not uncommon to walk down to a friend's house down the street to play, or go into the woods to play "War," or to even be home alone while mommy and daddy went to town to run errands. We were taught to do chores around the house, how to answer the phone and take messages, and what to do in emergencies (like how to call 911). Those responsibilities I was taught as a child is now called "child abuse and neglect," which will land you on a registry under the Adam Walsh Act.

I watched society slowly change over the years, beginning with the death of Adam Walsh in 1981. At first the changes were small; we were taught "secret passwords," "don't talk to strangers," "walk with a buddy." Then the sensational media reports of "Satanic ritual abuse" in America's daycares began (which eventually turned out to be false), followed by the high-profile disappearances of Jacob Wetterling and Megan Kanka, which led to a public registry of persons convicted of "dangerous sex crimes." Rather than grant us the "rational knowledge" to protect ourselves, we became even more fearful. Helicopter moms and dads hover over the child's every move; only under the watchful eye of the parent can the child surf the web, play in the yard, or attend public social events. Now, little Johnny cannot go play by himself, lest he be kidnapped or molested.

Fear tends to hide the truth from us. Most of what our society believes about sex offenders is not true. Below are just a few of the beliefs we were taught that are either misleading or completely untrue:

- Epidemic of rape-murders: The Somer Renee Thompson case is a tragedy indeed, but is a very rare tragedy. In the NISMART-2 study from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, only 115 "stereotypical kidnappings" occurred in the year of the study, with only 45 of those cases ended in death or were permanently missing [1]. Your child has a far greater chance winning a multi-million dollar lottery or dying of Swine Flu than dying at the hands of a registered sex offender.
- All registered sex offenders are pedophiles: Pedophilia is a mental disorder and is exceedingly rare; only a very minute portion of sex offenders are "true pedophiles." To make matters worse, our zeal to fight this "epidemic" has led to some other tragedies—Teens landing on registries for consensual sexual relations with their peers or "sexting" (sending naughty pictures of themselves to their boyfriends). The Dallas Morning News recently compiled a list of over 4000 Texas registrants who landed on the registry as juveniles, some as young as age 10 [2]. Another recent case in Utah involved a 12 year old boy and 13 year old girl on the registry for "sexually assaulting" each other [3].
- Sex offenders are highly likely to re-offend: Studies have consistently shown sex offenders, as a whole, have a far lower rate of re-offending than any other crime type. Even long-term studies by reputable researchers found low rates of recidivism (between 2%-10% in most

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studies as long as 15 years) [4]. For every ultra-rare tragedy like Somer's, there are thousands of "blood red dots" on that registry who have no involvement with that case, or another case, for that matter.

- Most sex crimes are committed by sex offenders: The registry leads people to believe sex offenders are the only ones committing sex crimes, but stats show the vast majority of sex crimes (between 87% and 96%) are committed by someone not on a publicly accessible registry [5]. Furthermore, the people most likely to molest a child are the immediate family members or closest acquaintances of the child, nearly all of them are likely not on a public registry, either [6].
- Sex offenders cannot be cured: Many treatment programs are available, and studies show treatment works, reducing recidivism rates by at least half or more [7]. Unfortunately, treatment programs for sex offenders are rarer than the tragedies which spawn sex offender legislation.
- Sex Offenders have 117 victims on average: The stat is a misinterpretation of a result from a study with relied on self-reporting and polygraph examinations, which came on the heels of the ill-fated Daycare Abuse scare of the late 1980s/ early 1990s [8]. Again, while some pedophiles have had many victims, the vast majority of sex offenders have had one victim, not counting the cases involving streaking, public urination, or consensual teen relations.
- Tougher sex offender laws are the solution: Sex offender laws come with a heavy price; vigilante violence, homelessness and unemployment, social ostracism, and stress are just a few of the negative consequences facing not only those forced to register, but also those loved ones who support the registrant [9]. The city of Miami recently made international headlines for forcing recently released former offenders to live under the The Julia Tuttle Causeway, with powerful lobbyist and head of the homeless trust Ron Book spearheading the movement to keep them there [10].

Our society is so plagued by myths, mistruths, and misconceptions, I could write a book about it. Actually, I did write a book, entitled "Once Fallen," a look at the "other side" of this issue, along with a free fact based site on sex offender laws and issues (www.oncefallen.com). Over the course of my research, I found we have forsaken programs that work in favor of fear-based and anger-based legislation. Even Patty Wetterling, who lobbied for a national sex offender registry, has stated we have gone too far with our laws and are in serious need of reform [11]. Exploitation of children goes far beyond abuse, as many organizations are selling fear and anger to the masses while reaping the benefits. There is no incentive to offer a rational solution to this crisis, because a solution means loss of business.

Sadly, many churches and "Christians" also jump on the bandwagon; many churches deny services to sex offenders, who are also in need of God's giving grace and salvation. Recently, the Jefferson Hills Christian Church in Imperial, Missouri sponsored a series of billboards asking, "What's Forgivable?" The general consensus in the local media was only sex offenders were unforgivable [12]. Some even stated sex offenders deserve "The Mark of Cain."

But the Bible is very clear on forgiveness, on God's giving grace, on repentance, and penance. With the exception of Christ, virtually every great Biblical hero fell short and committed great sins. Even mighty King David had one of his most faithful servants killed to hide the fact he impregnated his servant's wife. God gave punishment, but after David repented God granted mercy and favor upon him. God even granted mercy to the first biblical villain, Cain; the "Mark of Cain" was not a scarlet letter, but a mark of protection from would-be vigilantes exacting revenge for his crimes. Cain was also allowed a wife and founded a city.

Few people, Christian or otherwise, have given much thought to dealing with sex offenders in the community outside of fear and loathing. In 2006, a man used the Maine registry to execute two registrants, one of whom was a 19 year old who had consensual relations with a 16 year old. Across the country, in Washington, a similar double murder of registrants had occurred in 2005 [13]. The wife of a man accused of possessing child porn died in a fire set by the man's neighbors in Tennessee in 2007 [14]. In 2008, a Washington woman with a decade long history of violent assaults and drug crimes was canonized for an unprovoked assault with a baseball bat on a registrant, who was age 14 when he was listed on the state registry. People across the country sent this woman money and protested the woman's meager 90 day sentence for assault with a deadly weapon [15]. Message boards are filled with death threats and hatred, even on Christian sites, even this very site. None of these acts have helped to solve the issue, instead, giving more incentive for registrants to disobey the laws.

If we want to address sex crimes in America, we need an honest approach. We need to seriously consider what truly works, not what simply feeds our anger and fear and makes us "feel good." We forget sex offenders are also human beings, capable of remorse and redemption. We forget how easily we can fall into our own sins, all of which is the same in the eyes of God.

There are ways to address this issue from a realistic standpoint. We may not be able to stop every tragedy from happening, but we prevent much more sexual abuse by looking at the issue honestly. We must put aside our preconceived notions and our emotions and stick with what works. The right knowledge is power. Prevention and education programs do indeed exist, which addresses sexual abuse from a realistic and rational standpoint (such as the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center and Stop It Now!). We need to educate our youth on sexual responsibility and accountability, and not just from a fear mongering perspective. Sex education must include discussions on sex crime laws. We also need to have a balanced and healthy view of sex, meaning we can teach sexual responsibility in a tasteful manner without simply saying, "Don't have sex or you'll go to hell or jail." Remember, we are a culture that needs disclaimers on coffee cups lest we burn our laps. We also need to actually talk about sex; these days when a person is struggling with sexual idolatry, they have almost nowhere to turn. Our society shuns sexual deviancy so much, even mental health professionals who work with sex offenders or deviants are shunned.

Prevention is only part of the solution; proper rehabilitation of the sex offender is a must. Of those who do re-offend, two-thirds of them will do so within the first two years of release. Thus, transitional homes and support networks (such as www.sosen.org) are keys to reducing already low recidivism rates. Social ostracism and denial of services, housing, employment, and support has already proven disastrous for our society; all those approaches achieve is reinforcing faulty belief systems of those struggling with sexual idolatry and giving ample incentive to disobey the law. A Rand Corporation study has shown every dollar spent on prevention and rehabilitation programs save up seven dollars that would otherwise be spent on running offenders through the justice system [16].

Most importantly, we need to honor victims by helping victims of sex crimes overcome the crimes committed against them. These days, if a victim forgives his or her attacker, many people look at them like they are crazy. What good does keeping victims thinking about what happened to them and the guilt and anger they feel rather than dealing with those feelings?

The result is many more lives remain broken rather than healed, making them lifelong victims rather than "Thrivers."

In our narrow focus on the "Registered Sex Offender," we tend to forget the big picture. Appeals to emotion rather than reason helped create a legal system of perpetual brokenness for victims, offenders, and the community alike. So has the illusion of "innocence." Your child is innocent until he is thrust into the criminal justice system for crossing a line he or she never addressed or even knew about. Ignorance is not bliss, nor is it an excuse for breaking the law. McDonald's will give you a disclaimer for hot coffee in a cup. Yet no one is giving your child disclaimers on our legal system. If you don't learn to be honest with your children about sexual issues, who will?

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