

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**Sexual Abuse:
Breaking Silence,
Breaking Hearts,
and the Courage to Heal**

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READING

from *Betrayal: The Crisis*
in the Catholic Church
by the investigative staff of *The Boston Globe*

This morning, I want to talk about sexual abuse, especially among children. This, I'm afraid, is one of those sermons I don't want to preach and you probably don't want to hear, but in spiritual community we are sometimes called to deal with difficult truths. So, I thank you for being here.

The current crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, promulgated by felonious priests and negligent bishops, has resulted in a sexual abuse scandal of astounding proportions. Many of you are former Catholics, and probably all of us count Catholics among our friends and neighbors. So, this crisis brings pain to us all.

This is no time for Catholic-bashing, however. It is a time for sober reflection – upon our own house as well as upon Catholicism.

Our Reading for this morning is taken from a new book published just a few months ago by the investigative staff of *The Boston Globe*. It is called *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church*. Of this book, *The New York Times Book Review* says, "It provides the fullest account to date of the egregious priestly and Episcopal mistakes, sins and crimes that occurred at the epicenter of what almost immediately became a national crisis."¹

I am sorry to say that it is a heartbreaking book to read, but it is, I believe, reliable and reasonably current.

By most accounts at least fifteen hundred priests have faced public accusations of sexual misconduct with minors since the mid-1980's.

The costs so far have been high. Donations to the Church have fallen. Few people have sworn off their faith, but many have sworn off the hierarchy. Harder to measure are the human costs to the victims. There was the eleven year old who, during confession, was asked by a priest whether he masturbated, then was asked for a demonstration; the thirteen year old who was seduced by his priest and, in an era of far less tolerance toward homosexuality, was left to wonder whether he was gay; and the boy who has handed train fare by a priest who had just anally raped him and left him bleeding.

If there are any heroes in this squalid tale, they are the victims, who found their voice, who found the courage, after years of suffering in silence and isolation, to step into the light and say, as one did, "This happened to me, and this is wrong." . . .

"To those who ask that we forgive and forget, please understand," [Peter Pollard, a "survivor" of clergy sexual abuse] wrote in an opinion piece for the *Globe*. "The survivors, each of us in his own way, have spent our lives trying to move on, always weighing those two options. For some of us, suicide, substance abuse, or violence ended the struggle early.

"To varying degrees, those of us who have survived have begun to heal. We reclaimed dreams, earned degrees, formed families, went to work, even sought solace in spiritual practice. But we cannot escape the effects of the betrayals that were committed against us in God's name. They are inexorably woven into the texture of who we have become.

"That betrayal may not be a chargeable offense in a court of law. But there is no statute of limitations on its impact. And there should be no forgetting."²

SEXUAL ABUSE: BREAKING SILENCE,

¹ Appleby, R. Scott, "Earthen Vessels," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 14, 2002, p. 8.

² Investigative staff of *The Boston Globe*, *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2002), pp. 8-9.

BREAKING HEARTS, AND THE COURAGE TO HEAL

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

“While he served...in Hingham [Massachusetts],” writes the investigative staff of *The Boston Globe* in their book *Betrayal*,

[Father John J.] Geoghan found time to befriend Joanne Mueller, a single mother of four boys who lived in Melrose, twenty-three miles away. Mueller’s mother knew [Father] Geoghan from his days at Blessed Sacrament, and she introduced her daughter to the priest.

Soon Geoghan was a familiar figure in Mueller’s home. As with some of his other victims, he took the boys for ice cream. He read them books at night. He helped get the boys in and out of the bathtub. Mueller would slip out for errands, and Geoghan would baby-sit for an hour here or an hour there. “He was our friend,” Mueller said. If Geoghan disappeared upstairs into the boys’ bedroom, she didn’t give it a second thought.

One night in 1973, when Geoghan called asking to come over for a visit, the reaction of Mueller’s third son, then seven or eight, surprised her. The boy did not want Geoghan in his home. He grew increasingly upset when his mother pressed him about his reluctance to see the priest she considered a valued friend.

“And then finally he broke out in tears...,” Mueller recalled. “He kept saying, ‘No, no, no, I don’t want him coming down.’ He was insisting and I shouted back at him and I said, ‘Why? What? What is it?’ And he said, ‘I don’t want him touching my wee-wee.’ I hate to be so blunt, but that’s what he said.”

Mueller was shocked. “I said, ‘What? What do you mean? What are you saying?’ You know, I didn’t understand. And then the next thing he blurted out was, ‘I don’t want him doing that to my wee-wee.’”

“And that I will never forget. Because it was dawning on me, just shock and horror, that, you know, he’s saying this. And, I mean, this isn’t just a normal thing he’s saying, and for a kid to say that. So now it dawned on me. I mean, this is awful. I said, ‘What?’ And he literally threw himself on the floor and sobbed. He was completely hysterical.”

Soon, so too was the entire Mueller household. Her five-year-old dissolved into tears. She summoned her two other boys, who were upstairs. When their mother asked for details about Geoghan’s conduct, they stood speechless at first. And then they began to cry. Her oldest boy told her, “Father said we couldn’t talk about it and tell you, never to tell you because it was a confessional.”

Mueller was overwhelmed – Geoghan, at that very moment, was on his way to her home. It was raining. The weather was cool. She grabbed some jackets for the kids and headed for her local rectory, St. Mary’s in Melrose, where she and her boys met with [the] Rev. Paul E. Miceli, a parish priest who knew both Geoghan and the Mueller’s family.

Mueller said Miceli counseled her sons “to try not to think about this; to forget about it. ‘Bad as it was,’ he said, ‘just try. Don’t think about it. It will never happen again.’...He said, ‘He will never be a priest again. It will never happen again,’ he reassured me.”

[However,] Miceli, until recently a member of Cardinal Law’s cabinet, contradicted

Mueller in a court deposition. He said he did not recall her name and never received a visit of the sort she described.³

Nearly 200 people have stepped forward, filing claims against Father Geoghan and his supervisors, saying he raped or fondled them. According to *The Boston Globe* staff, experts say that he probably molested three to four times as many people as have come forward.⁴ Thus, for thirty-four years, Father John J. Geoghan laid waste to literally hundreds of young lives while a succession of two cardinals and numerous bishops failed to insure, as Miceli had promised, that “it would never happen again.” Indeed, every few years, Geoghan’s lecherous crimes would be discovered. He would be slapped on the wrist, sent to a Catholic-run facility for treatment, and then reassigned to a new parish, often without even so much as a warning that he should be watched and kept away from children.

Even after reading books like *The Boston Globe’s Betrayal*, it is hard to comprehend how the Church – the traditional protector of the poor, the weak, and the defenseless – could so callously turn its back on so many victims, sometimes quite literally. Consider Peter Pollard, from whom we heard in our Reading, as described in the *Globe’s* book *Betrayal*:

For Peter Pollard, [a] moment from 1967 is indelibly imprinted in his memory. The sixteen-year-old altar boy and the Rev. George Rosenkranz were alone in the church basement just after midnight on Easter Sunday morning, in the obvious early stages of a sexual encounter, when the [head] pastor of the parish walked in on them.

...Monsignor William McCarthy pretended not to notice Pollard and Rosenkranz.... McCarthy side-stepped the opportunity to put a stop to it. As the Catholic Church has done for so long, McCarthy turned his back on the victim. “Could you put out the light when you are finished?” Monsignor McCarthy asked nonchalantly as he turned and walked away from Rosenkranz and his quarry.⁵

I can’t speak for you, of course, but I am simply dumbfounded with shock and outrage at such travesties and, believe me, the book *Betrayal* is full of them. As the columnist Hal Crowther writes, “These priests – the shepherds become wolves, the fathers devourers, the sanctuary a slaughterhouse for the Lambs of God.”⁶ And just beneath my sense of shock and outrage lies a deep, aching sadness for the legions of victims.

II

As diocese after diocese slowly yields up its secrets, scores – hundreds – of weeping victims are coming forth, lumps in their throats, handkerchiefs in hand, to bravely tell their stories. Some coming forth are hopeful, for the prospects now are better than ever before that this time maybe they will be heard. Maybe they will be believed. Maybe their horrific journey into years of silence and confusion and hidden shame and humiliation will be validated at last.

I am not sure whether anyone knows the scope of this crisis at hand just yet. *The Boston Globe* staff argues in their book that Geoghan and Rosenkranz are not mere anomalies. Rather, the *Globe* argues that, unfortunately, they are merely the better-known examples of a much deeper and more pervasive problem. In the

³ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

⁶ Crowther, Hal, “Visible Darkness,” *The Populist Press*, July 15, 2002, p. 20.

Boston area alone, as of last February, the archdiocese had turned over to local district attorneys the names of more than ninety priests (not including those priests who have died) about whom it had received credible sexual abuse complaints over the previous forty years. That was in Boston. Clearly, nationwide, there could be thousands of offending priests and tens of thousands of victims. In the meantime, the scandal shows some signs of spreading abroad, as well. Cases of bishops and archbishops being prosecuted and resigning are starting to show up in France, Wales, Poland, and Ireland, so who knows just how far the abuse may or may not extend? Some say this is a peculiarly American phenomenon; others are not so sure.

Frighteningly, we do know, however, that statistics have suggested for some years that over 30% of all females and 10% of all males are sexually molested by the age of 18. So, again, what we are talking about here is a hidden epidemic of astounding proportions.

Pedophilia⁷ is not, of course, restricted to Catholic priests. In fact, about 50% of all pedophilia is incestuous. However, there is some evidence that the incidence of pedophilia may be higher among Catholic clergy than other clergy because of their celibacy rule.

In our own Unitarian Universalist Association, while there have been a number of cases of adult sexual abuse among our clergy, there have been relatively few cases of pedophilia. Few as there may be, rest assured, within our ministry we have a zero-tolerance policy towards pedophilia.

Far back in our history, however, one of our famous Unitarian ministers was a pedophile, though few people know this. Few people know he was even a minister. Horatio Alger, the celebrated nineteenth century author who wrote rags-to-riches novels for young boys, extolling the virtues of working hard and getting ahead, was both a Unitarian minister and a pedophile. Minister of the Unitarian Church in Brewster, Massachusetts, Alger lost his pulpit in 1860 when he admitted to sexually exploiting some boys in Brewster. Going largely unpunished, he left Brewster for New York City, where he achieved his fame and fortune as a novelist.

Today, all of our students entering the ministry are required to undergo training regarding issues of sexual boundaries, abuse and misconduct. We have good resources on creating what are called “safe congregations,” which includes the kind of safe practices we observe in our Religious Education program for children and youth (the highlights of which are printed at the end of this sermon). We also have an excellent sexuality curriculum for all ages which, among other things, teaches about sexual abuse and safe practices. So, as a church, as Bill Sinkford, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, puts it, “we have been serious and, I believe, effective in addressing this issue. But we cannot be triumphant.”⁸

III

Now, who are these pedophiles and what can we do to prevent them from preying on our children?

Well, contrary to the hackneyed stereotypes, a child molester is usually not a homosexual, insane, retarded, sexually frustrated, or a lecherous old man. Indeed, the offenders are usually young, heterosexual men for whom child molestation, like rape, is *not* primarily a sexual act at all. Rather, the offender typically has problems in relating with other adults, and so turns his or her attention to children as an alternative emotional and sexual outlet. Children, the abusers find, are usually far less demanding than adults and are also much more likely to be accepting and affirming of them as persons. Frequently, such child molesters experi

⁷ Actually, most of the sexual abuse coming to light in the current crisis involving the Catholic Church does not involve pre-pubescent children, which is properly called pedophilia, but involves post-pubescent children, which some researchers are now calling ephebophilia.

⁸ Sinkford, William G., Pastoral Letter on Safety in UU Congregations, May 10, 2002, UUA website: www.uua.org/president/020510letter.html, p. 1.

ence little sense of regret or awareness of the inappropriateness of their behavior, which, of course, immensely complicates their rehabilitation. On the other hand, speaking of rehabilitation, it can do an enormous amount of good for a child to see his or her molester go to jail, for this clearly validates for the child that what the molester did was wrong, and that it was the molester's fault, not theirs. "See - what that man did to me was so wrong, he went to jail!"

Now, here is the rub, and so I invite you to pay particular attention here. Ninety percent of the time, according to at least one study, the child molester is known to his or her victim, thus taking advantage of the child's vulnerability and trust. So, we are not talking about strangers. Often the offenders stand in positions of authority, not only as priests and ministers, but as fathers, stepfathers, uncles, teachers, coaches and babysitters. While some child molesters will use verbal or physical force to gain access to a child, many will not. Many will simply pressure the child by speaking from a position of authority, by offering a reward, or by telling the child that "all boys and girls do this, don't worry about it." This type of offender, who seeks affirmation and affection from the child, will often be effectively discouraged by any signs of resistance. And, thus, it behooves us, if we have young children or grandchildren or students, to educate them about sexual abuse and to give them permission to resist anyone who would sexually exploit them. But - and this is important - if we have children in our charge, it is not primarily *their* job to protect themselves. It is *our* job to protect them. This means insuring that safe practices are observed. This means being alert to signs of possible abuse, like dramatic changes in behavior in our children. This means being alert to adults who seem to relate far better to children than to other adults. This means educating our children about sexual abuse, but, moreover, educating them in the presence of other family members (and potential abusers - grandparents, uncles, stepfathers). Remember, up to 90% of the time, the child molester is known to his or her victim.

And, finally, it is also helpful to reassure our children, not only in word, but in deed, that they can trust us with their lives - and we need to be worthy of that trust. We need to reassure our children that we will stand by them and protect them. And, God forbid, should harm come to them, we need to be careful not to blame them, but to reassure our children that we will stand with them to comfort them, to help them seek justice, to help them heal and, eventually, to find peace once again.

CANDLELIGHTING

As a part of this service, a simple but moving candlelighting ceremony, accompanied by music, was held to recognize the victims of sexual abuse, and to honor their pain and their healing. During the first service, 63 candles were lighted; during the second, 56. The Rev. Mr. Kennedy introduced the candlelighting ceremony as follows:

Now, mostly today, I've been talking about the sexual abuse of children, of course, but for our candlelighting, I want to include the victims of adult sexual abuse, as well. So, in just a moment, I would like to invite anyone who has either been sexually abused him-or-herself (either as a child or an adult) or anyone who is personally close to someone who has been sexually abused to come forward, if you wish, and silently light a candle in that person's honor.

As we enter this simple candlelighting ceremony, let us gently

Touch with love

our unseen wounds

and the wounds of those

for whom we care.

And, supported by others here today,

let us touch the source

of our inner wholeness

that we may experience at least a foretaste of

comfort and healing and peace.

SPOKEN MEDITATION
(Following the Candlelighting Ceremony)

Briefly, let me invite you to enter a quiet place within in the spirit of meditation or prayer.

Spirit of Life, gently,
Touch with love
 our unseen wounds
 and the wounds of those
 for whom we care. . . .
Where there has been fear,
 touch us with trust.
Where there has been pain,
 touch us with healing.
Where we have been tethered,
 set us free. . . .⁹

—Pam Kittredge-Pederson, adapted

⁹ Kittredge-Pederson, Pam, “Restorative Justice for All,” Unitarian Universalist Association website: www.uua.org/cde/csm/toc.html, p. 1, adapted.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HELP WITH SEXUAL ABUSE

If you have been abused or harrassed or if you have been or are an abuser, and you are not sure where to turn for help, most cities have some sort of emergency hotline you can call for assistance. In Milwaukee, you may call the Women's Crisis Line, 671-6140, for conversation and referral to a good therapist, support group, or to other kinds of assistance. You are also invited to talk to me.

The following are the therapists listed in *Milwaukee Magazine* (February, 2001) who were recommended by their peers as being especially adept in the areas of sexual abuse/sexuality/sexual dysfunction:

- Rhoda Goodrich Moeller, M.S.W., CICSW, DMFT, AASECT-certified sex therapist, 2300 N. Mayfair Rd., 414 -475-5488
- Lynn A. Vice, Psy.D., LP, AASECT-certified sex therapist, 2315 N. Lake Dr., Suite 820, 414 271-7442
- Gretchen M. Fincke, M.S.S.W, AASECT-certified sex therapist, 2645 N. Mayfair Rd., #230, 414 774-4111
- Jon K. Meyer, M.D., certified in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, 2025 E. Newport Ave., #436, 414 961-8126
- Patricia Marchant, M.S.W., CICSW, 817 N. Marshall St., 414 224-0800

– Drew Kennedy

**CURRENT “FIRST CHURCH” POLICIES REGARDING PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE IN OUR
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMING:**

1. Background checks are made for each paid childcare staff (nursery and preschool) and for OWL teachers. (OWL stands for “Our Whole Lives” and is the name of our award-winning Unitarian Universalist sexuality education curriculum.)
2. A Code of Ethics is signed by all recruited class leaders before teaching commences.
3. Two adults are in each classroom whenever possible. If not possible due to unusual circumstances, the classroom door will remain open. Teachers and assistants are informed of this policy during orientation.
4. Field trip permission forms are used when children are to leave premises for sanctioned activities.
5. Two adults minimum at all sponsored Religious Education events, whether on or off premises. (An exception is made for events where a church staff member accompanies the children or youth.)
6. For youth conferences and other travel, no vehicle will be allowed to have only one adult/one youth. An exception may be made for church staff or a parent driving their own child.

– Beryl Aschenberg,
Director of Religious Education