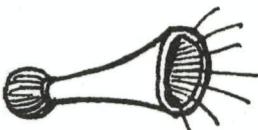


# "WITNESS PROTECTION" OR "I'M A SEAGULL... NO, THAT'S NOT RIGHT."

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*A person can spend twenty-some odd years teaching social work practice and almost forget those not-so-painless memories of life in the profession (or in the trenches). Then real life intrudes. Face to face with a public display of child abuse and a semi-private enactment of arrested mental illness, the witness meets up with real life and discovers his own social work.*



I kept the car radio off for over an hour. That's how I knew that The Incident had hammered me into some kind of numbness, the kind that requires a soundless ride home. Somehow news, weather, and top forty seemed unbearable to the ear. The Incident required no soundtrack; the screaming made background music unnecessary, and my own head, snapped back by what it saw, could endure no music—or any sound—whose source came from outside my own head.

I always play music in the car. The music spouts out full blast, often to keep the sound outside the car at bay. After The Incident, the music became a part of this outside world and that world, too, had to be kept outside. Sound became an intruder to a place that could abide no intrusions. Like offering drink to the drowning man or cheesecake to the retching, the possibility of radio jingles threatened my ability to tolerate my own thoughts. That's how awful it was. No thirst and no appetite, just a numbness that needed to remain that way.

Just to get it out in the open, I'll state here what it was. A man in the street beat up his daughter. The details will come later, if you'll stick with me. But first I want to write about the hockey game I attended on the night of The Incident because it was that hockey game that disturbed that numbness so that I could feel again.

But then again, it's not really about a hockey game but rather about containment. Surprisingly few hockey players ever get hurt despite the game's reputation for violence, a reputation well earned, one might add. The very language of hockey speaks to the game's violent nature—hitting, checking, forechecking, bumping, shooting, blocking, and, of course, the quasi-religious "saving." Virtually all the penalties, though, are designed to reign in violence; penalties for cross-checking, high sticking, kneeling, boarding, tripping, and, my favorite, slashing, assure that nobody gets hurt. Even in a fight with bare knuckles striking either face or solid helmet, neither face nor hand nor helmet gives out. Or so it seems. Which is probably the reason crowds love a fight on the ice. A man slips on a banana and gets up; that's funny. He slips and breaks his spine; that's tragic. Neither funny nor tragic, hockey violence is contained. Hockey has containment. Sixty minutes and no more; inside the oval rink and no further; under the watchful eyes of three officials or stranded in the penalty box. All this plus the ethics of fair play bring containment. At the corner of Brandywine Avenue and Odell Street, there was no containment and so I needed the radio off or a hockey game on to help me cope with what I saw. It was awful. Here goes!

Does it matter that it all happened on a

cloudy Saturday afternoon the weekend before the election, Roy Orbison on the radio, on my way to pick up my wife Judi's new skis, and all without a care in the world? Probably not. But there I was in the left-hand lane glancing at the right-hand sidewalk where a family of four was walking all in a line, Mom pushing a stroller, Dad pushing a little girl. At first, they seemed to be laughing at innocent and playful rough housing. Not sure, though, I watched a tad longer until they turned the corner up Odell where the father's pushes escalated and came into clearer focus. A quick U-turn in a convenience store's parking lot enabled me to drive up Odell Street to do what I could to stop the beating—the grabbing of a little girl's hair (or was it the back of her neck?), the pushing of a little girl, screaming, to her knees while he pummeled her from above with his free hand, mother and stroller nearby. By the time my car sidled up next to the family, the beating was over. The crying and the yelling continued, however, with him pursuing her down the street with long and angry strides, a stalker after his own child, full speed ahead, a man driven by a purpose up to no good. And it was awful!



Two pedestrians arrived at the same time. They scolded him and demanded he stop. "You can't do that to a child! You keep off her!" One of the men wore a head brace, one of those metal squares attached to head and shoulders designed to immobilize the skull. Courage incarnate, he served as my surrogate as I remained safe at the wheel, one finger on the button that with a single poke could raise my window and muffle my heart pound. I shouted agreement with the man who

unwittingly had stepped in as my mouthpiece. Small wonder that his headgear is called a halo, for that man was an angel on a mission. Somewhat secure that the public nature of the act and the public nature of the sanction would end it all, I began to drive away, hopeful that the incident had ended. But without so much as a tip of the hat to my training in social work and the code of mandatory reporting, I decided simply as a citizen to call the cops just in case. A half dozen fellow citizens were standing in the parking lot of the store—witnesses all—each shouting alarm at what they had seen. "Anyone calling the cops?" "Yeah!" At the edge of the lot we coalesced into an instant posse (a gang of five on ice) to demand intervention, justice, and punishment. A mob in the process of becoming.

We could all see a car stopped dead in the middle of O'Dell Street, and we could all see the fistfight that had spilled out from the family into the road where yet another Samaritan had tried to intervene, this time to the tune of slaps and groans and half nelsons. Minutes later we learned that the family's wife-mother had dragged a teenage girl out of a Toyota in order to stifle the teen's "Leave that girl alone!"

You see, there was no containment there. Not the public realm, nor parental love, nor shouting citizens, nor a one-ton Toyota could contain the violence which not only happened but also escalated and spilled-out, white liquid splashing from a broken milk bottle onto the gutter below, oozing its contents onto the boots of the onlookers. I admit I could barely contain myself. I wanted to join the mob. I wanted to grab and knee and shake some sense into the abuser. With these sensations building up inside, two miracles occurred. They weren't really miracles, but they did snap me into a state of perspective. First, a police car drove by, heading in what appeared to be the wrong direction. I ran parallel to it, shouting, "Officers! Hey, Officer!" These shouts enabled me to discharge some tension,

as did the very presence of the cavalry, so my fury became a bit contained when the second miracle—or should I say coincidence—occurred.

My daughter drove into the parking lot, out of the clear blue sky, a cavalry of her own. "What's wrong, Dad? Your car broke down?" She wanted an explanation for the sight of her father, arms flailing, flagging down a cop car. I heard myself censoring my language. Not wanting to lay on her even a hint of violent or uncouth speech, I traded decorum for accuracy. "Some guy beat the daylights out of a little girl." DAYLIGHTS! Hear that? "Daylights!" That's not the word that begged to rush across my lips. "DAYLIGHTS" doesn't do it. He hadn't beaten the "daylights" out of anyone. In my heart and mind—even in my own muscles—he had beaten the you-know-what out of her. I censor that word here as I did then, but thank heavens others did not. And that amazes me. Each witness used the same crudity that I had avoided to describe what had happened. The universality of the imagery used suggests that only one truth existed for The Incident: that man beat the s\*\*t out of that little girl!! The pregnant suburbanite, the store clerk who had heard the girl's screaming from inside the store over the gas pump intercom, the street kids just passing by, all testified to the police with the same words: "He beat the s\*\*t out of her, Officer." Yes, language creates reality but today reality created language.

We don't know the rest of the story. The police allowed the family to remain together at their home, the child denied the beating, a report was to be filed, a social worker called for our respective testimonies. Maybe the system worked. Yet, so far we don't know the rest of *my* story because it unfolds day to day, like all stories. I do know the phrase I used at home to describe the impact of the event: "It hurt me." That's what I took with me to the hockey game—a sense of hurt, of having been bloodied somehow. That milk

all over me. I no longer know what "innocent bystander" means for I feel neither a bystander nor an innocent. So leave the radio off so that quiet can do its job of containment. Got hockey?

### Prologue

This prologue stands out of place but, then again, this whole affair seems out of place. That is to say, I can't decide whether I was in the wrong place at the right time, the right place at the wrong time, or the right place at the right time. All I know for sure is the fact that this incident was not the first one to have occurred and in the same week. The previous Monday Hillary Clinton—First Lady, New York's most recent immigrant bypassing Ellis Island to a multimillion dollar mansion near the Hudson, campaigning or carpetbagging her way to the Senate (depending on one's political persuasion), and eventual victor for Pat Moynihan's vacant seat—had swung by St. Rose to rally one last time in the state's capitol. Long after she left, a lone supporter and a stranger on campus sat solo in the faculty lounge. Well dressed in her wool camel coat, buttoned to the top for the hours she sat, a woman of indistinguishable age (forty-ish?) stared at two Polaroids that she held in her hands. She smiled at me each time I brushed through the lounge, and we began to expand on the pleasantries with each brush through. "Hi" became "How ya doing?" which became "nice day" until we began to talk. She was eager to show me her Polaroids, and she did. They were most remarkable in their unremarkable-ness. The first photo captured Hillary at the podium. The candidate had raised her right arm, no doubt to punctuate some rhetorical instant. The photograph was not so much out of focus as out of kilter. The woman had tilted the camera, surely by accident because no artistic slants resided in the frame, just a mistake slight enough for the viewer to wonder, "What's wrong with this picture?" But it's the second photograph that



haunts me still.

For the second, the camera had caught Hillary's vacated podium. The "ghost" of Hillary must have remained behind because what struck me was the podium's headlessness. The podium was half-empty. Right in front of the podium stood the photographer herself. That no expression graced her face created the visual impression that she too, like the podium, was a piece of furniture, resting as foreground and implement to the podium-throne. One would think the addition of a person within the frame would humanize the picture or at the very least would fill the frame. It didn't. The photograph remained fully empty. But not to her. She stroked each photograph with childlike pride or perhaps with wide-eyed fascination that these were hers. No, her incessant soft smile didn't betray pride but rather something deeper, something from inside percolating to the top to land in a Polaroid moment. "I'm a photojournalist," she announced. Amidst her life story that included "training" in photography in Portland, Oregon, and homelessness here in Albany, New York, she explained that she was waiting in this lounge to find out where the college newspaper is located so that she could donate her Polaroids for publication—her gift to the school. "Yes, I'm a photojournalist."

Yes, I'm a social worker, although I deny it. My identity lies in 24 years of teaching, not in the profession I profess about and while this profession resides in the social sciences, it is in the humanities where questions of who I am get resolved. Almost any mention of identity raises for me my favorite play wherein Chekhov's Nina recites my favorite line: "I'm a seagull...No, that's not it...I'm an actress." So what is it here? Seagull? Actress? Photojournalist? Lost person? I'm not sure. But she is more than a "crazy lady" though her story contained more than a fair share of madness, to be sure, replete with medications, a string of temporary digs, and a male

caretaker of sorts whom she distrusts because he possesses an odor, she said, that stems from the wrong food unsettled in his innards, said foul vapors symptomatic of an unwholesome soul of sorts. Or so she said and I have no reason to doubt her. And I was glad she brought up the subject of smells because—how can I say this?—because...she smelled. All around her rested the whiff of rubbing alcohol, cinnamon, and something else. And I wondered if what a colleague had told me over 25 years ago was true—that people with schizophrenia have an odor. I had never believed that nor had encountered anything in the literature to confirm it, but on that Monday I remembered it and wondered once more if it were true because here before me, locked in conversation and care, sat a woman who smelled with what my colleague might have termed the scent of madness, not "the scent of a woman" but the scent of a woman gone mad—methanol and madness with a twist of cinnamon and something else.

Two months later at the height of hockey season, a January freeze hardened the city's park lake. With the summer ducks gone south, the lake seemed lifeless save for two solitary seagulls squatting on thin ice (not an uncommon sight; they are often spotted even on puddle ice in parking lots.) Still, they seemed out of place—stranded, lost, and every bit separated from their element. But were they? Only our expectations make them so. More likely, being stuck in Schenectady was merely one more resting place for their natural journey, a stop as natural as their flight.

No closing drama rests in that awareness; no epiphany from the two incidents either. No professional awakening from an ivory tower sleep or new commitments to client causes, though these do rest at the edges of what did strike me about all seagulls including my own. The striking thing is this: we must all cultivate our willingness to encounter whatever flies or floats before us. The seagull does not dip

down from one real world to another's ice, abuse or photojournalism, but rather takes on whatever life offers. Ours is a natural world after all, and it is the nature of natural worlds to act naturally—that is to say beautifully, cruelly, and unpredictably. Nature likes to tease containment, perhaps in part to see if we are paying attention. I want to pay attention now. If social work is a calling, I no longer want to just wait for the call. I might have some calls of my own to make. In any case, I must cultivate my readiness and my eagerness to act naturally in this social world.

(I am a seagull. No that's not right... I am a social worker.)



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