

COMPLICITY

Tom Givón

In a recent review of a biography of the late Howard Cosell, David Remnick writes: "Sports, not religion, is the opiate of the people. Think of it in terms of time. Mass takes about an hour. You're lucky if a Monday Night Football game is over in three. The average Yankee-Red Socks game last year ran about the length of the Second Vatican Council..." (The New Yorker, 11-28-11, p. 75).

At first blush, the story of Jerry Sanduski, Joe Paterno and Penn State is about crime and punishment. The justice system will grind its wheels, and will bring some closure to both alleged perp and alleging victims. On further reflection, the story appears to be about the institution and how it put its political and financial expediency above civic justice and human ethics. But how about those of us who partake in institutions? Or in the politics that makes institutions possible?

There's a sweet old lady who attends San Ignatius Catholic Church with me. Her comment on the Penn State story was telling--if chilling: "...now they are lifting a page from the Church's book, aren't they..." Does sitting silently in the pews make one complicit?

The individual level will sort itself out somewhere at the intersection of law and morality. We are all prone to sin and temptation. The Old Testament recognized this early on in God's warning to Cain: "...for whether you do good or do not do good, sin is forever lying at your door, and you will crave it but you must control it..." (Gen. 4:7). Likewise, the Gospels warn us: "...why beholdeth thou the mote in your brother's eye, but consider not the beam in thine own eye?..." (Matt. 7:3). And later on: "...he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone..." (John 8:7).

What worries me most is our complicity, as citizens and voters, in what institutions do. In the case of Penn State, the top of the hierarchy--president, vice president, athletic director, head coach--conspired to suppress the evidence of crimes in the interest of institutional survival. But what exactly is an academic institution? Its appointed Governing Board? The state legislators that appoint them? The teaching faculty that meekly goes along with the primacy of athletics over academics? The poor students who rioted in the streets over the firing of their beloved coach? Or is it us, parents and voters, who put up with over-crowded, under-financed schools for our children?

A respected past president of a well-known public university whose owner state pays but 5% of its budget but retains 100% control over its affairs told me recently: "...I am quite sure I raised more money for academic purposes in the President's...Skybox than in any other geographic place in the world, from people who enjoy a game as a bonding event, but who give to the academic side exclusively or primarily... [a billionaire alumnus] gave our first major academic gift, the [endowed] professorships to every School and College..."

Fair enough, but here is what the president of the student body at the same university had to say more recently: "...the culture at this university [is that] a stronger emphasis is put on athletic success than on academic success..." The students apparently know this, as do the faculty, who--deeply, viscerally-- resent the crushingly dominant status of athletics on their campus. Could it be that the generous private endowments and their putative trickle-down effect merely paper over the state's virtual abdication of support of its nominal "startship" research university?

Closer to home, we go along with the state of Colorado's massive disinvestment in the education of its children and the working conditions of their teachers. My local school district, and the parents who pay the bills and vote the Board in, put up with sub-standard education for their children, but cheer in the bleachers. Sports is one thing they--and I--can be proud off. I suspect sports is the distractor that allows them to vote for school boards that divert attention, if not resources, from academics. Will we re-elect our state representative, an ex-school-board president, if he came out for decent school funding and--God forbid--the requisite level of taxation?

An old friend of mine has fallen from grace and is paying for his sins, having been tried and convicted in a court of law. I could hardly condone what he is reputed to have done, even as I am bound to uphold his right to repentance and redemption. But his transgressions took place, I am told over years, in a little town that has no secrets. Shouldn't his nominal supervisors, the elected politicians, have known? Was the workplace atmosphere inside their town-hall so hostile that the victims just couldn't afford to complain? For fear of job-loss or other manner of retribution? And who is responsible for that?

If there is one thing we can learn from the recent financial crises, it is that when you give anyone in authority--be they politicians, bankers, administrators or coaches--too much power, the temptation to abuse it is nigh overwhelming. This is the old story of emperors and dictators, indeed of human nature. But in a democracy, aren't we who vote our politicians into office, and let them appoint our institutional administrators, also obliged to watch over them like a hawk? And if we tire, or are distracted, or given inducements to turn a blind eye, aren't we then complicit in their misdeeds? Could it be that, to quote a classic Pogo, I have seen the enemy and it is us?

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His novel "Sasquatch", vo. 2 of
The Boz Trilogy, has just come out.