

## Reflections Vis-à-vis Today's SNAP April, 2018

### *Silence Implies Consent*

There is an ancient principal I learned in my early childhood: *if you disagree with something, the onus is on you to say so*. In my birth family, pouting and passive-aggressive acting out simply were not tolerated. To have integrity, one needed to speak one's own truth to the best of one's ability. On one memorable occasion when I was eight or nine years old, my father took me aside and said something like this: *the way you are behaving – this rudeness towards your mother, your pouting and your anger - is not acceptable in this family. Say what you have to say but say it politely. Do not treat your family in this mean and rude way. If you disagree, tell us why you disagree. I promise you I will listen to you and hear you out. But right now in your life your mother and I have the final say about what you are allowed to do*. The short form of this message was that I was not expected to agree with all of the day-to-day parental decisions and I could argue for another outcome. But mean-spiritedness and rudeness towards others would not be tolerated. In my family, at least, these rude behaviors were counter-productive. Power struggles with my mother about expected behavior did not yield a desirable end. In fact, I both could and did get grounded for intra-family rudeness and general bitchy disagreeableness.

As an adult I have learned that speaking out when I disagree is not always easy nor is it always comfortable. But it is the moral pathway to developing personal courage and integrity. It is the honorable way to proceed in conflicted situations. This principal of speaking out in situations of injustice is similar to the principal of watchfulness vis-à-vis abuse inside any given religious community: *If you see something, say something*.

In the past month, I have been struck by the issue of silence, a kind of social dead space, inside the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). I have been a member of the SNAP community since 2014 and have been a systematic donor for the past three and a half years. During those years I have seen SNAP as the best hope for survivors of clergy and religious leader sexual abuse to find and then use their protest voices in a supportive environment of peers and professional helpers. I have seen it metaphorically as the flagship of the sexual violence advocacy community.

The SNAP community was a rich international environment of support and activism on behalf of sexual abuse survivors. SNAP was beginning to find, it seemed to me, a way to address religious-cultural differences, skin color differences, and even linguistic differences in the clergy abuse sexual survivor's community. In 2014, it was beginning to open its welcoming doors to other-than-Catholic survivors. In August, 2015, SNAP formally welcomed a group of twelve Mennonite and Mennonite-related sexual violence survivors and activists into its community.

I now find myself in a position of confused disagreement with SNAP's current board of directors and their policies of silence and lack of transparency regarding intra-SNAP disagreements about policy, management practices, finances, and other divisive issues - issues which go un-named and therefore, unaddressed. .

In early April, 2018, Tim Lennon, the current chair of the board of directors sent a letter to SNAP members advising them that Mary Ellen Krueger (former board chair) and Mary Dispenza (board member) had resigned following a conflicted board meeting. The letter went on to say that SNAP's executive director Barbara Dorris had also resigned her position as of March 30, 2018. She would remain a member of SNAP the letter implied but would no longer be the Executive Director.

Mind you, despite having attended the past three national conferences and having spoken at two of these three, I was obviously not considered a member of the SNAP community and did not receive this letter. Rather, it was forwarded to me by someone who did get the letter. Exclusivity rather than inclusivity was clearly the path chosen by the board for these informational announcements.

A second letter followed from SNAP's office – this time announcing Barbara Dorris resignation as Executive Director. This letter also came to me by way of a third party rather than directly. Another letter soon followed – this one from Barbara Dorris announcing her resignation and commenting on her need to follow her internal moral compass. Both of these letters were forwarded to me by others. I again did not get them from SNAP.

Recently a second friend told me that a third electronic letter was mailed to individuals from Tim Lennon, the SNAP board chair. In this letter he clarified that Barbara Dorris not only had resigned from her position as

Executive Director of SNAP but had simultaneously removed herself from membership in SNAP. Once again, I did not receive this letter but I, also in this situation, have not seen it. So, I cannot personally validate the issue of whether or not this third letter existed. Not having seen the letter, there is no way for me to know its contents.

On April 6, 2018, Brian Rowe wrote an article for the *National Catholic Reporter*<sup>i</sup> about the changes in direction being undertaken by SNAP in the wake of resignations of SNAP board chair, Mary Ellen Kruger; SNAP board member Mary Dispenza; and SNAP Executive Director Barbara Dorris. The article also announced the immediate resignation of SNAP's long term Western Regional Director Joelle Casteix.

According to the *National Catholic Reporter* Dispenza and Kruger commented:

*This was a painful decision, but frankly the situation has become intolerable. It has been increasingly clear that our board and our executive are deeply and evenly divided on the most mundane and serious operational matters, the kinds of policies and practices that contribute to good governance and our fiduciary obligations as board members.*

Kruger's and Dispenza's letter of resignation took effect ten days before Barbara Dorris' March 30, 2018 resignation.

In addition, *NCR*'s Rowe quoted Barbara Dorris as saying that she was no longer connected to SNAP in any way.

I did some private inquiries with my SNAP-related friends about what the issues were that caused four prominent members of the SNAP community to so abruptly leave. It was like encountering a wall of silence. It was like encountering a hidden narrative which was deliberately being created to shield the current, post-resignations SNAP board. At the end of these enquiries, I was no wiser about the issues that divided the SNAP board than I was before I asked. It was like, I felt, encountering the silence of the Catholic bishops in obvious situations of injustice vis-à-vis abuse victims. It was like encountering some kind of cover-up. It did not and does not smell good to me.

In light of these personnel developments within SNAP, I recently wrote:

*In recent weeks as I've been thinking about this essay,<sup>ii</sup> I have taken to using the metaphor of a rage-fueled torpedo attack – this time misguided and self-destructive. Too many internal conflicts in too short a time have the direct consequence of killing social change alliances and of shoving away needed donors and allies. What we then see inside these torpedoed advocacy and activism movements is organizational stagnation and a failure to move forward in efforts to change the underlying culture.*

*When an activist-advocacy group splinters from within, the torpedo has found its target. When collective rage and interpersonal hostility drive individuals or entire groups of individuals to exit the sexual violence advocacy organization, the torpedo has found its target. When control needs dominate collective interactions and decision-making processes, all hopes for synergy are lost. Once again the torpedo has found its target. When groups lose the ability to listen and to work out positive and/or necessary compromises, the torpedo has found its target. When individuals and groups retreat into self-protective silence, the torpedo has found its target.*

While an enraged desire for gaining control is understandable in the wake of sexual violence and abuse, it is my opinion that it is extraordinarily misguided behavior inside social activist movements of the collective. For example, when activists fight against activists in the name of solidarity against injustice, what we see is a behavioral oxymoron. Struggling against each other in a politics of control, individuals cannot at the same time effectively and efficiently cooperate in social activism and advocacy efforts.

Publicly claiming the works of social justice activism, these kinds of private, therefore secretive, board actions represent self-other-group destructive conflict. In the case of SNAP, most organizational members have been kept in the dark about the nature of this conflict. Thus, in essence, they have no say in the outcomes of the conflict conducted in secrecy – now called confidentiality.

The same is true when survivors attack other survivors inside organizations formed to provide support to survivors. Win/lose and control/dominance-based strategies for social change, in my opinion, are highly patriarchal.

They are destructive to organizations and they are toxic to the ordinary members of these organizations – those individuals who have sought sanctuary and solidarity and those individuals who have an urgent desire to see positive social change happen.

Enraged needs to dominate and to control are, in my opinion, toxic to the work of social change and reform. Secrecy and self-protective silences do not contribute to positive social change. Instead, they weaken the collective which is the essential element or foundation of social change.

Needs to exclude and exile the other (either in subtle almost invisible ways or in dramatic overt ways) weaken the possibilities for meaningful, change efforts in the commons. These issues of intra-group rage, boundary disputes, and personal or collective control issues provide us with examples of faulty group process and faulty group management.

In short, there are no advocacy winners in these eruptive and deeply personalized conflicts and personalized attacks within organizations. There are, however, many losers. The biggest loser of all is the anti-abuse movement's ability to create allies and to gain a sustainable momentum towards lasting positive, i.e., needed, social change.

The more interpersonal or collective bridges a group destroys in the name of control and solidarity, the fewer allies it can invite to the work needing to be done.

Not only was I a personal donor to SNAP, I had also raised significant amounts of money for SNAP among my Mennonite friends and colleagues. Reading these letters of resignation, I felt very uncomfortable. I felt personally betrayed. I felt as if I were living inside a double-bind I could not exit. Having almost no accurate information about what had happened in that critical March, 2018 SNAP board meeting, I now needed to make some personal decisions about my personal involvement with SNAP. In addition, I did not wish to urge my friends and colleagues to continue to give to an organization in which there was an ethical and fiduciary management issue – as yet ill-defined and un-clarified.

Moving forward from March 30, the onus is on the newly configured SNAP board to move into transparency with all of its members – not just a selected few. It is way past time for SNAP board members to stop playing

zero-sum games in their managerial practices. It is time to stop pitting member against member. It is time to stop discarding people as non-essential elements of its organizational life. Above all, it is time for management's transparency with all of its worldwide members.

The world-wide SNAP organization and its members deserve to know what specific issues divided the organization's board members; the issues that caused the resignation of four valued and long-term members. Why was a leadership coup of this magnitude needed?

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## iEndnotes

Rowe, B. (April 6, 2018). Barbara Dorris and Two Board Members the Latest SNAP Leaders to Leave. *National Catholic Reporter Online*. Retrieve from <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/barbara-dorris-two-board-members-latest-snap-leaders-leave>

ii Krall, R. (Forthcoming). Essay # Four: Confronting the Patriarchy. Monograph: *Risking the Collective: Working Together – Justice Advocacy in Difficult Times*.

iii This essay was first published on William Lindsey's blog, **Bilgrimage**, on April 26, 2018. Retrieve with comments from [http://bilgrimage.blogspot.com/2018/04/ruth-krall-reflections-vis-vis-todays.html#disqus\\_thread](http://bilgrimage.blogspot.com/2018/04/ruth-krall-reflections-vis-vis-todays.html#disqus_thread)