

The Legacy of Abuse

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With the recent loss of Michael Jackson, the uncomfortable subject of child abuse has surfaced as a result of the alleged sexual abuse for which Jackson was acquitted in 1993. When issues such as this arise, I feel fortunate that it is not my job to know the complete truth and judge my fellow human beings accordingly.

Child abuse is an abhorrent act that has destroyed unfathomable potential in our world. As a professional, I've seen the destructive forces of such abuse for myself over the years. But I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to say that we may be missing a huge part of the picture when we make blanket condemnations of others.

Child abuse falls into three primary categories, which are physical, sexual, and emotional. Neglect of a child's basic needs is also a form of abuse. Every type of abuse represents a severe assault on the core being of its survivor, and those who are abused are more vulnerable to serious mental health issues. But the "entity" that is abuse doesn't appear randomly, out of thin air. Abuse is built across generations, and spread, like a pandemic, between individuals and families.

I think that one of the saddest aspects of abuse is the way it insinuates itself into the very brains of its victims, similar to that of a computer virus that short-circuits the "wiring" of our psyches. In many cases, the virus that is abuse can cause its survivors to act contrary to their own positive intentions, in a sense forcing them to become their own worst enemy, the abuser.

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Left unchecked in any individual, abuse can become a horrible legacy of disease, passed on from one carrier to the next. The sad reality surrounding legacies of abuse and neglect also offers a tremendous opportunity: every one of us has the ability to impact positive change.

I stand by the belief that I have one of the best jobs in the world. On a daily basis, I get to witness incomparable acts of courage as young people confront their pasts and choose to stop the cycle of abuse and neglect, beginning within themselves. At the risk of sounding corny, I have the privilege of observing rays of light break through the darkness repeatedly. Even one survivor making the decision not to be a carrier of the sickness impacts generations to come.

That's where we all come in. Every individual has the ability to turn the tide when it comes to abuse and neglect prevention. There is power beyond understanding in each of our refusals to sweep the issue of abuse under the rug, to oversimplify it as a character flaw that just appears out of nowhere. Whether we reach out to injured children, adults, or families, we change the world when we create a safe environment to openly discuss issues of abuse and obtain necessary treatment, while decreasing the stigma surrounding what it means to be a victim of abuse.

Another musician, who will remain nameless for the purposes of this column, recently released an album that has broken sales records. (It hasn't broken Jackson's record for *Thriller*, of course.) In this album, the musician graphically discusses his history of abuse, along with potential extreme consequences of that abuse if allowed to fester. The album is highly disturbing, and most of us don't want to listen. But we've turned our backs on this issue before, and it keeps returning. Let's listen this time. Let's acknowledge that the issue of abuse and neglect belongs to all of us; that we have the ability to assign complete blame to the individual victims of abuse; or to unconditionally embrace those same victims before the disease is spread.

For further information on issues of abuse and neglect, visit the following Web sites:

www.preventchildabuse.org , www.nami.org , www.childwelfare.gov .

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About Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network (ADMHN)

ADMHN is a private, nonprofit 501 © (3) corporation providing professional, comprehensive behavioral health care and substance abuse treatment primarily, but not exclusively, in Arapahoe and Douglas counties. We offer programs for adults, seniors, families, couples and children. These services include counseling, psychiatry, crisis services, case management, substance abuse treatment, victim services, an adult acute treatment unit, adult supported and residential housing, services to the criminal justice system, vocational and social rehabilitation, a day treatment therapeutic school and school-based services. Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network has an on-site pharmacy. We offer community education, wellness programs and a Speakers Bureau. Learn more at admhn.org.

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