

# Failure to Act

*By Philip G. Monroe*

Outrage. Befuddlement. How *could* he not stop the abuse of a child when he encountered it? How could some choose to meet only the legal obligations but fail moral obligations of protecting vulnerable children?

We are righteously indignant. We want the heads of leaders who knew but didn't act to stop abuse.

Right now, in most of the country but especially in Philadelphia, you cannot turn on the television or listen to the radio without encountering such comments about the Sandusky/Penn State sexual abuse scandal. What people are talking about is, (a) why didn't those who knew something was amiss do more to investigate abuse, and (b) what should happen to those people who failed to stop the abuse.

What would *you* have done?

If you are like me, you imagine that you would have acted to stop the abuse. You would have grabbed the boy out of the shower. You would have screamed bloody murder until someone took notice. You feel righteous indignation that no one seems to have had the moral fortitude to deal with this issue head on.

And you would be right to feel this way. But while we are holding leaders accountable for their failure to act and to protect (as well we should!) let us take a moment and address some of the reasons why we might not be quite as action oriented as we imagine ourselves. By doing so, we may make it more likely that we will respond correctly should we face the unfortunate situation of reporting someone we know to the authorities.

Here are some of the reasons we fail to intervene when intervention is needed.

## **Self Protection**

Worry about personal consequences can hinder our taking action. Thinking about how we will be treated, viewed, responded to can cause us to pause and not act. *What if I get fired? What if this abusive person targets me? What if someone were to make an allegation about me? I wouldn't like that so I don't want to stir up trouble for this person.*

Have you ever wondered why so many drivers flee the scene of a pedestrian/car accident—even when they were not at fault? We want to avoid facing the possibility that we might have done something wrong.

### **System Protection**

We sometimes worry about how the organization will be treated or viewed if abuse comes to light. Far too frequently individuals have covered up the sins of church leaders for fear of ruining the reputation of the congregation. This reason is also seen in the next two reasons. We don't want people to turn away from God so we cover up what happened.

### **Groupthink**

We'd like to think that with a larger group of individuals, sensibility will prevail. But my experience with institutions dealing with a sensitive issue suggests that once a group is deciding how to respond to abuse, it devolves into who has the loudest voice in what should be done next. Unfortunately, the loudest voice may be about liability (vs. morality) or outer reputation (vs. protection of victims). Also, groups often fail to address pertinent issues and alternative responses due to groupthink. Some of the reasons why this is the case can be found in [this definition](#). One other thing about groups: we have ample evidence that individuals in a group setting are less likely to intervene when they witness violence happening to someone else. We're more likely to act if we witness this when alone. Why is this? We may feel less responsibility when others are around.

### **Denial**

We like to keep the good people good and the bad people bad. When those who are considered good do bad things, we can fall prey to denial. It is not possible. I know him. He couldn't possibly do that. Thus, we deny what we have seen and that leads to the next reason.

### **Self-Doubt**

Have you ever witnessed something troubling but then wondered if you really saw what you thought you saw? Maybe you catch a glimpse of an adult smacking a child in a parking lot as you drive by. Do you stop and confront? Well, maybe you didn't really see that. Maybe there is some other explanation that might make this acceptable. When the abuse is done by someone we respect, it is easy

to think we must have misconstrued it. And once we hesitate, it is that much harder to activate to do the right thing.

### **Winsomeness of the Abusive Person**

It is important to remember that the most dangerous abuser is the person who is inter-personally winsome. The reason why a person can have access to others and can get away with abuse is often due to their capacity to put others at ease. Most abuse is not done by those who are revolting to others just because they don't get opportunity. I know of individuals who were caught in acts of child abuse, questioned by authorities, and so winsome that the investigation was dropped before completed. They provide plausible even highly believable explanations that help the questioner feel at ease. They appear to be open and concerned. They are so good they convince most that such abuse could never happen by their hand. It takes a very expert examiner to catch them in the subtle lies they tell to themselves and to others. Check out [Anna Salter's book](#) on predators if you want to see what she has learned from decades of interviewing known, convicted sex offenders.

It is easy for us to sit in the chair of judgment when we hear of cover-ups and failures to act. These failures to protect children do need to be judged and we ought not shrink back from administering restorative justice for abuse and for the inaction of others. However, let us remember that the work of being light in the midst of darkness has many enemies. Our own weaknesses plus the pressures of our community and the manipulative actions of offenders conspire to make inaction the easier choice.

May we take the high road as we encounter abuse in any form.

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