

July 10, 2013, WTE Editor's Headline: "Less Profession than Survival"

Whenever I read—in the media, in socio-political rhetoric, in religious opinions—prostitution is “the world’s oldest profession,” it makes me wonder about the writers’ reasoning. Do they really believe that some young people, female and male, choose to subjugate themselves to pimps, as one might choose a vocation as plumber, teacher, accountant? Sexual servitude means to be tortured, beaten, or raped if you don’t fulfill your pimp’s quota. You’re carted to venues like the Super Bowl, where crowds of predator “clients” seek sex with minors. “Survival sex” would be a more accurate term than “profession,” but even that does not convey the horror of the victims’ experiences, which is nothing short of abuse—sexual abuse. “Clemmie Greenlee was expected to sleep with anywhere from 25 to 50 men a day,” states a HuffPost article of February 2013, also quoting Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott that Super Bowl is “commonly known as the single largest human trafficking incident in the United States.” Prostitutes numbering 10,000 were brought to Miami for Super Bowl 2010, wrote Forbes Magazine, refraining to disclose the percentage of minors.

Sexual abuse often begins in childhood, in the child’s home, such as it is. Often, the perpetrator is a family friend or “kindly” neighbor; more often than not, it’s a stepbrother or –father, even a biological sibling or parent. The child victim, seeking to escape an intolerable situation, runs away from home, looking for a less damaging existence.

Entry-level jobs are hard to come by, and an underage applicant doesn’t stand a chance. Besides, family upheaval will have rendered the youngster socially inept or combative, educationally disadvantaged, and underprepared in life skills, including how to present at interview. Today it takes decades of parental dedication (and money) before an adolescent becomes self-sustaining. Child victims of home violence, unable to provide for themselves, have no choice but take to the streets, where they are picked up by sex slavers who promise to “look after” the unfortunates.

Such was the fate of Carissa Phelps, author of the 2012 “Runaway Girl.” Pressed into sexual slavery at twelve, she saw children even younger than she in similar circumstances. Fortuitous for her, “one helping hand at a time,” Carissa was able to escape her hellish life. Eventually she finished high school and enrolled in law school. Today she is a lawyer, active against human trafficking, and supporting a network of services that offer aftercare for youngsters caught in the slavery that once degraded her. Appendices to her book, as well as pages on her website, offer lists of resources.

Similarly, a human rights organization, International Justice Mission, seeks to free people from slavery, sexual or otherwise, on an international level. “Terrify no More” is a book that details a mission in Cambodia, where the group, at great risk to its members, freed children as young as five. In a small village outside Phnom Penh, a ring of brothels operated in plain view and with everyone’s knowledge, catering to sexual predators. Some of the children had been abducted from Vietnam; sadly, once they were freed, the Cambodian government jailed them for violating immigration laws.

Because of the screwball idea of sex slavery as “profession,” U.S. laws, too, are indifferent to child victims. Fifteen years ago I spoke with a California Native American who mentioned that his sister, age eleven, had been arrested for prostitution. He was casual about it, and it surprised him when I reacted with outrage.

Talking with the man, I was able to articulate my consternation, but such was not the case earlier in my life. As a newcomer to the U.S., I was cautious in putting my views into words. Early in our marriage, my husband and I travelled from California to visit his parents and brothers in Indiana. Darold’s oldest brother and spouse had four girls; his other brother, also considerably older than he, had two girls and a small, sickly boy (who died young). These visits brought me a glimpse of American family life in the southern Midwest, with hints of American-style family violence. I thought it best to keep my own counsel.

One of Darold’s nieces, his oldest brother’s daughter, came to spend a week with us two decades later. There, she confided that her dad repeatedly molested his girls while they were small. I remembered then the hard-porn magazines stacked in the bathroom when we visited. At the time the girls ranged in age from five to fourteen. The younger of my sisters-in-law, after they’d moved to California to live near us, told me: Once she caught sight of the “reading” matter, her family never visited their older relations again. Her daughter, then in her late teens, let on privately that Grandpa, Darold’s dad, had done (or tried) sexual molestation with her and her sister. I checked the story with her mother and found that the girls’ dad had confronted his old man, but when I raised the issue with Darold he became upset, intimating I got the women to exaggerate something that happened long ago.

Many abused children run away from home. Darold’s nieces didn’t run; they engaged in promiscuity that brought teen pregnancies and too-early marriages that ended in divorces. To me, these “coping” mechanisms look suspiciously like survival sex. Of the four girls, the visiting woman was the only one who completed high school and avoided an early pregnancy. The lives of her sisters and their children must have been hell. My two sisters-in-law also married in their teens, presumably to escape a troubled homelife, and never finished high school.

Wyomingites may believe themselves free of personal trauma, but violence abounds here as elsewhere, including sexual violence. More on that in my next column.