

**Casper Star Tribune Commentary of Oct 13, “Larry’s Place brings hope to inmates”;  
WTE of Oct. 9, “Here’s a story of one s.o.”**

The other day I sent a letter to a young man in Rawlins: “Can you tell me how you came to be labeled s.o. and what this has done to your life?”

He had sent me a murky, albeit word-processed, narrative. In response I indicated having discussed his writing “with our mutual friend, Joan, who said you lived in her house in 2011. Joan passed along a packet of recent letters from some of your coevals. Reading these, I was astonished by the number of times your name came up. Notwithstanding severe constraints, you seem to have made several meaningful connections.”

I added that Joan “worries you are overmedicated for epilepsy. When she last visited, you were lethargic and unresponsive, as if half-asleep, she says. I hope that nonetheless . . . you’ll send me details of your situation.”

Readers, you’ll want to know what “s.o.” stands for. I’ll explain in a moment; first, however, a word about Joan Schwab.

At seventy-nine, Joan is devoutly religious. The dictum of Jesus, “What you do to the least of these, you do to me,” Joan takes as her personal guideline. She and husband Larry, now deceased, devoted themselves to relieving the burden of the less fortunate. Today Joan works with Bethel Ministries, striving to create a space of peace, “Larry’s Place,” where inmates like our young letter writer, once released, may find temporary refuge.

Now to the designation s.o. It stands for sex offender.

The recipient of my letter was sexually abused as a child. He saw his father go to prison for offenses against his own children. The boy landed with foster parents who adopted him along with children of similar backgrounds; his siblings were placed elsewhere. As an adolescent, frail and small of stature, he was reported—or observed—touching the younger children in the family. His foster parents instructed him to write letters of apologies to each of the children, but once the letters were written, they passed them on to police. Like his father, the youngster was incarcerated.

Sex offenders are made, not born. Typically they were themselves sexually abused, often in households where domestic violence, substance abuse, mental disabilities, and economic hardships abound. Outsiders cannot fathom the shame, confusion, and guilt of the affected child, although certain confessional writing has brought insight into the trauma.

Some enter the priesthood, hoping a celibate lifestyle will keep their demons at bay. Others seek “masculine” careers to rid themselves of what they believe is perceived as weakness. Without guidance, counseling, and re-education, such efforts tend to prove unequal to the task.

Incarceration fails to address, much less alleviate, the problems such youngsters bring with them. When our letter writer was released, he was expected to furnish an apartment, find a job, and pay rent, but his lack of people skills, and the legal restrictions limiting his movements, made these hurdles insurmountable. Once you're labeled s.o., most employers and apartment owners won't have anything to do with you.

Joan and Larry took him in, had him tested to determine if he was prone to offend again, and found that the likelihood was slim. He had mental problems, so they worked to rehabilitate the young man. He joined a church, where he connected with a youth group.

The leader, a father himself, took a liking to the letter writer, inviting him at one point to a function at his house. Since Joan, the sponsor, was out of town, when it got late the leader offered the young man to stay the night. The guest was too scared—and too ashamed—to own up to an offense that prohibits him from ever spending the night anywhere (unless cleared with the probation officer).

A second, similar incidence occurred. Though the letter writer's conduct was exemplary in both instances, his probation officer reported him for violating parole. The judge sent him back to prison. That was three years ago.

When Penn State's assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was charged with 52 counts of child molestation, his indictment created a media frenzy. No mention that, when a university or township constructs a fancy stadium to attract high-paying fans, these fans attract an industry of prostitution providers, "prostitution" often acting as threadbare cover for child sexual abuse.

"My eleven-year-old sister is in jail for prostitution," a young man once told me in casual conversation. My god, I thought, the child needs compassion, counseling, a place to feel safe. How did she get caught in the criminal justice system?

Now 25 and in poor health, our letter writer has only Joan's occasional visit to cheer him, a woman close to eighty. He sometimes calls her "Grandma."

Let's hope Larry's Place will turn into an actual place soon.