



Stop It Now!

Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children

Vengeance is Not Prevention

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Stop It Now!

April 19, 2006 - The Easter Sunday murders of two men listed on Maine's sex-offender registry may be the inevitable product of an ill-conceived national trend toward increasingly harsh invective against those who sexually abuse children. But the irony of the timing of the Easter murders is surpassed only by the tragic similarity between the root of the crimes of the victims and the crime of the presumed murderer – a failure to overcome a horribly destructive impulse.

On a day when Christians and Jews around the world were celebrating separate rituals of hope and renewal, a 20-year-old Nova Scotia man, Stephen Marshall, apparently used Maine's internet Sex Offender Registry listings to identify, track down and execute Joseph Gray and William Elliot. When confronted by police, Marshall took his own life.

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I'm certainly familiar with the rage that is stirred by the realization of the harm that affected every aspect of my life. Acknowledging and voicing that rage was an important part of my healing when I confronted the man who abused me and reported him to law enforcement nearly 20 years ago. But even then I had a clear understanding of the crucial difference between vengeful fantasies and vengeful acts. That distinction has been all but lost in the public debate about the most effective way of holding those who sexually abuse children accountable for the harm they inflict. Vengeful fantasies serve as a pressure valve to safely vent feelings. Purely vengeful acts create additional harm, not justice.

And make no mistake – I believe in justice. I wanted my abuser stopped, I wanted him held accountable and I wanted to publicize his abuse of me so that others he harmed might know they were not alone. I wanted his life to be altered in equal

measure to the disruptions he had imposed on mine. To that end, I also wanted him to get treatment in the hope that someday he might acknowledge the harm he caused and hold himself accountable for helping prevent future sexual abuse. And after all, isn't preventing future sexual abuse really what our goal must be?

Like the wave of recent legislation that sacrifices the potential for long-term restoration for the short-term satisfaction of pure vengeance, Marshall's triple killings denied both his victims and himself the opportunity to reclaim a place as productive members of their communities. Like Marshall, blind rage and the fear behind it are driving us as a society to embrace solutions that may actually diminish our potential for preventing future abuse.

No doubt, rage is an understandable response to a sexual assault that robs a child of his or her rightful sense of safety in the world. But by focusing all our energy on punishment and registration of people convicted of past sexual abuse – a group that accounts for only a tiny fraction of those at risk to sexually abuse children – we fool ourselves into thinking that we're protecting our children. Eighty-eight percent of sexual abuse is never even reported. In nine out of ten incidents of child sexual abuse, the child already knew the abusive person. As much as half of all sexual abuse is committed by adolescents or children against less powerful children.

If the best plan we can conjure up is to punish our way to a world free of child sexual abuse, we've already lost. We need to expand the discussion to find new strategies – strategies that hold all adults responsible for recognizing behaviors that put children at risk and intervening before a child has been harmed - before there's a victim to heal or an offender to punish.

Our children deserve a better solution than the murderous impulse Marshall appears to have been unable to overcome. When we get stuck on punishment alone, we've accepted that sexual abuse is inevitable. It's not. It's preventable.

About Stop It Now!

Stop It Now! believes that all adults must accept the responsibility to recognize, acknowledge and confront the behaviors that lead to the sexual abuse of children. We offer adults tools they can use to prevent sexual abuse - before there's a victim to heal or an offender to punish. In collaboration with our network of community-based Stop It Now! programs, we reach out to adults who are concerned about their own or others' sexualized behavior toward children.

For more information, contact Stop It Now! at info@stopitnow.org or at 351 Pleasant Street, Suite B-319, Northampton, MA 01060. Tel: 413.587.3500; Fax: 413.587.3505.

Want to know more?

Visit our website - www.stopitnow.org - to get answers to [commonly asked questions](#) about child sexual abuse. You can also learn more about [warning sign behaviors](#) in an adult or child you care about. Because talking about sexual abuse is even harder when you care about all of the people involved, our [Let's Talk guide](#) offers tips and strategies on how to have these difficult conversations.

About the Stop It Now! Helpline

If you need additional resources and support, call the Stop It Now! **Helpline (1.888.PREVENT)**, available Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm EST. For more than 10 years, our national toll-free Helpline has provided thousands of adults a unique outlet to confidentially voice their concerns. The Helpline offers callers the support, information and resources they need to help keep children safe, and to create healthier families and communities.



You Can Help Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

Stop It Now! is an independent, national non-profit organization that depends on the commitment of courageous individuals and the investments of private individuals and organizations.

If you would like to find out more about what you can do to help or to make a contribution to [Stop It Now!](#), please contact us or visit us online at www.stopitnow.org.