

lin6 Thursday: "Good" and "Evil"...Not So Fast

March 22, 2012 | BY PETER POLLARD | FILED UNDER [JHF BLOG](#) >

"Good" and "evil" always seem like handy labels, especially when describing those involved in incidents of child abuse.

So depending on your point of view, I was either blessed or cursed by lessons I learned 25 years ago from Roger, a complicated man who upended any certainty I had that the distinctions between "good" and "evil" are actually so sharply defined.

Roger was 24. He was the first man to ever tell me that he'd been sexually abused as a child. It was 1987. Men didn't talk about such things then. Roger's openness and my subsequent research about child abuse enabled me to start looking at the impact of my own experiences of having been sexually abused. I was able to reclaim a fulfilling life. He wasn't so fortunate.

I was a newspaper reporter, writing about an incident of near-fatal child abuse, for which Roger had been arrested. He said he'd contacted me from the county jail because, unlike other news accounts of his arrest, mine hadn't portrayed him and his wife as "monsters." Our first of what became many conversations lasted four hours.

Roger didn't present the information about his sexual abuse as a reason or an excuse for his violence, or even a cause of his problems. He didn't ask for sympathy. I'd inquired about his life and he simply mentioned the incidents of sexual abuse as asides in a long litany of traumatic experiences. They included the loss of his birth family and his adoption at age two, the failure of that adoption at 12 and a subsequent series of foster homes and residential programs, where he was physically, sexually and emotionally abused. (I later confirmed the details of what he told me through state records that I accessed with his permission.) He was shuffled along until his 18th birthday, then discharged—alone—from a child-protection system that failed to protect him, into an adulthood, where he was all but destined to fail.

When I met him six years later, he stood accused of physical abuse of his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Laura—a terrible abuse which left her permanently injured. Roger's wife, Janice, whom he once described to me as the only person in his life who ever loved him, was also charged.

For many in my small community, Roger's name still conjures images of evil incarnate. And if you consider just the successive assaults that climaxed in a snow-bound trailer in a tiny rural town in January 1987, one would be hard-pressed to argue the point.

He was eventually sentenced to 50 years in prison for that and previous incidents of serious abuse. Despite my horror at the incomprehensible injuries for which he was convicted of inflicting, by then, I'd also gotten a glimpse into his life beyond the frame of those violent acts. I'd come to know a part of Roger that revealed one of the most self-reflective, insightful and sensitive men I have ever met. Recognizing his complexity was a life-altering event for me. Recognizing our collective responsibility for the consequences of failing to help children like Roger changed the way I view good and evil.

I remained in touch with him for several years, until his ongoing incarceration and the tugs of my life parted our ways. But what I learned from him has consciously informed all my work since. Over the years, I've spoken publicly about how he influenced me and about my gratitude for what he taught me, though I never really thanked him well enough.

I learned recently that Roger died last summer in prison, at the age of 49.

Throughout my 15 years as a child-protection social worker, my years as an advocate for adults who have experienced sexual abuse and my work with men who have physically, emotionally and sexually abused their intimate partners, I have always kept Roger in mind—both the terribly hurt child and the terribly hurtful parent.

I've never considered traumatic history as an excuse for violent or abusive behavior. It can *never* be a justification for causing harm to others. But I have been guided by the insights that I gleaned from knowing Roger—that people can be different from their behaviors, that childhood violence shapes people's responses to life's challenges in ways that they may not understand or know how to control. And I've been guided by the fact that men who don't get help to deal with the emotional upheaval that comes with those boyhood experiences of abuse and neglect **are at higher risk** for a host of negative physical, mental and behavioral consequences that profoundly affect them and those who are close to them.

Of course, it's tempting to succumb to the relative simplicity of dividing the world up into "good" and "evil" *people*, rather than examining *behaviors*. But ironically, that "either/or" thinking actually makes things more complicated. Because when we do that, when we want to confront a "good person" about their harmful actions, we first have to

sort through our own conflict and confusion about shifting them into the "evil person" category. That creates a much higher bar for taking action.

In my experience, that misguided prerequisite for challenging unacceptable behavior—the need to first see a person's character, their core being, as "bad," rather than simply confronting their behavior as "wrong"—is the single greatest barrier to preventing abuse of all kinds. And it often discourages victims of those otherwise "good people" from getting help for the experiences that hurt them.

It's why I find such satisfaction in the work we at [1in6](#) do to support those who've had unwanted or abusive experiences to begin healing [without having to define the experience](#) in any particular way.

I have no doubt about the rightness of holding Roger accountable for the appalling harm he caused, regardless of his past. No one—least of all those directly affected—needs to forgive Roger for that harm.

And though it may be unsettling for some, I've realized that the most important lesson I learned from my relationship with Roger was the ability to experience two seemingly conflicting feelings at once: an unwavering commitment to holding those who commit evil acts accountable; and a certainty that we can do so without negating their humanity, without having to first view *that person* as evil. Roger showed me that we each carry the potential for doing good and bad in us; that none of us is exempt from making terrible mistakes. And he helped me believe that, with the right kind of help, we all have [the capacity to begin healing and to change our negative behaviors](#)—all lessons which I've woven into my work serving others over the last 25 years.

And so, I will always regret that I never let Roger know that his troubled life—a life which he once told me seemed like a complete waste to him—continues to be such a profound inspiration to me.

<http://joyfulheartfoundation.org/blog/1in6-thursday-good-and-evilnot-so-fast>

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The mission of 1in6 is to help men who have had unwanted or abusive sexual experiences to live healthier, happier lives. 1in6's mission also includes serving [family members, friends and partners](#) by providing information and support resources on the web and in the community.