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ACCOMMODATING EVIL

by Jay C. Howell

We were all elated at the recent discovery of the Salt Lake City teenager who had been missing for nine months. For most people, however, the excitement turned to surprise when it was revealed that she had been living a vagabond street existence with her captors. The trio had traveled from Utah to California and back, and the initial evidence left many with a disturbing reality - the teenage victim had many opportunities to escape the custody of the kidnapers and to report herself to authorities as a missing child. Even in the final instance, while in the custody of the Sandy, Utah police, she repeatedly insisted that she was not the missing teenager. How could this be?

The recovery of this child brought two sharply distinct realities to the surface. One concerned the transformation that apparently took place in the child's mind after months of captivity. The other reality was a reaffirmation of an important principle that we have come to rely upon - pictures of missing children and suspected perpetrators are successful tools that should be increasingly deployed in our society.

Actually, the victim's reaction to her kidnapping and her captors was not shocking to professionals familiar with the dynamics of trauma and victimization. Concrete examples of similar transformations have regularly come to our attention. People remember Patricia Hearst committing bank robberies after she was abducted. Often lost in our memory is the fact that she was kept isolated and deprived of all but essential human contact and care in a closet where she was locked for over two months. The "Stockholm Syndrome" entered our understanding of crime victimization after a 1973 Swedish bank robbery where the hostages sympathized and identified with their captors. Younger children who are victims of kidnapping or who are exposed to repeated abuse in their own home, often resort to a similar safe place in

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their mind - the creation of a second identity. The young mind is better able to deal with the trauma if it can identify a second imaginary child who is the real victim.

The Salt Lake City teenager may have adopted the only survival strategy that made sense - accommodate the threat to her, and possibly to her family, by adopting a cooperative role. A harsh judgment of her behavior ignores what we have come to understand about violence and trauma.

Two decades ago, my friend Roland Summitt, a Los Angeles Physician, first offered the concept identified as the "Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome." This analysis was based upon an often observed phenomena where the abused child reports a family member or caretaker as an abuser and then withdraws or recants the report because of fears of retaliation raised by the close proximity of the perpetrator and the critical commentary often offered by relatives and friends. Dr. Summitt's conclusion was simple - in order to accommodate the threat of disapproval, rejection, and retaliation, the child simply reverses her course and states that the abuse never occurred.

In its natural state, the mind is fragile enough. When exposed to trauma and violence, an adjustment must be made to effectively co-exist with the threat of evil.

More than one citizen in Sandy, Utah reported the existence of the trio to their local police. They had seen pictures of the suspected perpetrators displayed on America's Most Wanted and also the significant media coverage of the child herself.

A separate reality affirmed by this unusual case is the proven success of pictures. In the early 1980's, I was the first Director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Washington. The first time we displayed pictures of missing children on national television was in 1983. It was the first showing of the NBC television movie "Adam," which described the ordeal of John and Reve Walsh after

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their son's kidnaping and murder. NBC agreed to run 55 pictures of missing children at the end of the movie. The National Center did not yet exist so we set up a makeshift hotline operated with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in Tallahassee. As we waited, in silence, after the last picture was shown, none of us had any real idea whether or not it would work. The phones that rang that night and which continue to ring after public displays of missing children or suspected perpetrators now have a proven viability as a searching resource.

The almost two decades of success with photographs combined with the demonstrated vulnerabilities of the mind of the victim lead to one troubling question. How many other minds, through violence, kidnaping, or trauma, have been stripped of their natural defenses, leaving the victim unable to assert their own identity? Who else is out there?