

Scapegoating The Sex Offender

by Wayne Northey

Bobby Oatway in the past has committed unconscionable sex crimes against children. Many of us have known him for several years - both while he was in and outside prison. I serve as Director of the M2/W2 Association, a prison visitation program that has been offering friendship and reintegration resources to prisoners and ex-prisoners in BC for over 30 years. Bobby Oatway has been part of our program since 1986.

Mahatma Gandhi was once asked: "What do you think of Western civilization?" He paused, then replied: "I think it would be a good idea!" *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "civil" as: "adequate in courtesy and politeness: MANNERLY."

Three famous writers, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Winston Churchill, and George Bernard Shaw, have all expressed essentially the same sentiment concerning social outcasts. They each wrote that the measure of civilization for any nation is the treatment of its prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Cultural anthropologist René Girard, in his forty-year study of societies past and present, concludes that all cultures are founded upon violence. Social unity, he says, in Western culture is achieved through scapegoating designated minorities.

The ancient Incas practised grisly sacrificial rites. Captured war victims amongst others were carefully groomed until one day their hearts were cut from their quivering bodies and offered up as sacrifice for the peaceful survival of the community. When community after community scapegoats the sex offender, we Canadians show ourselves to be closer to those terrible rites than we care to imagine.

Anytown Canada - **Clinton BC** most recently in the case of Bobby Oatway – doubtless likes to think of itself as "courteous, polite, and mannerly", a congenial place to attract similarly courteous, polite, and mannerly residents to settle in. It no doubt often is such. But is Clinton (or are most Canadian communities) such nice places after all when confronting an "alien"? When 200 residents chant outside Mr. Oatway's residence, "Die a slow death, Oatway!", Gene Pitney's song rings too true: "It isn't very pretty what a town without pity can do."

The residents of many Canadian communities reflect too often the latent violence of Western "civilization". The crowd at the Clinton Town Meeting July 11 cried in effect: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" This was not unlike previous treatment of "witches"; lynching blacks in the deep South; the expulsion of Jews in Nazi Germany.

Bobby Oatway has served his prison time. He is seeking a peaceful existence in *some* community. A wise Prophet once confronted with an angry mob over another's sex crimes said: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone...."

Then he said to the offender: “Go now and leave your life of sin.” Safety, yes. But scapegoating, no.

Can one hope that some Canadian communities will refuse to scapegoat, and develop safe ways of working with sex offenders in their midst? In fact, that is what has emerged in the past four years through Correctional Services Canada funded community agencies. “Circles of Support and Accountability Programs” have now worked with over forty sex offenders across Canada and are growing.

When will Canadian communities put an end to our own sanctioned societal violence? Shame on us all in Anytown, Canada. We have it in us to do better!