



EERO JARNEFELT, "CHILD"

UN-MOTHER'S DAY

BY MARY McKENNEY

May 13 was Mother's Day. Across the nation hearts were warmed by flowers, cards and remembrances to express that special love and sentiment held for motherhood.

What was in the hearts of those mothers whose children have been abused by others?

It has become rare to pick up a newspaper or hear a day of newscasting that does not include an account of child abuse.

No barometers can measure the extent of agony and suffering each case generates. Like a rock dropped in a placid pool, the shock waves ripple out in ever-widening circles.

If the fragile healing process is to be nourished and become complete, both society's attitude and the legal process dealing with abuse must come to terms with the underlying actuality of it. Will the abused innocent tot that

evokes tears of compassion today somehow in later years become tainted merchandise as society's memory blurs and remembers only a person who bears the stigma of having been molested? That fear must lay cold in a mother's heart.

Domestic abuse and abuse that occurs in certified childcare centers are two distinct and separate malignancies eating away at our society. Physical or sexual abuse perpetrated in childcare centers cannot be attributed to any degree of stress or emotional involvement. It is a coldly calculated, premeditated assault on young children entrusted to their care.

The archaic court perception of admissible testimony by children allows child abuse trials to drag on for years, and the record for convictions is shameful. Victimized children have been caught up in a cold, unyielding system geared for adults. Little has been tailored to fit their needs or insure a fair trial from their side of the law.

The concept of a fair trial is among the American basics. Minors are not tried as adults; non-English-speaking persons are accorded interpreters. The system bends over backward for special cases, and the banner for victims' rights waves vigorously. Yet the special needs of abused children have been ignored. The court system has for decades ignored the cruel absurdity of expecting children, many as young as 3 or 4 years old, to give court testimony in a coherent fashion according to the letter of the law.

The seeing-eye dog of "Alice's Restaurant" is plainly visible in existing courts. Blind justice is meted out with barely a murmur of protest or public outcry, and by our silence, we endorse it. In Los Angeles an 11 year old girl struggles to bring back to memory the particulars of the nightmare she endured at McMarten's pre-school as a 3 and 4 year old. The first McMarten trial dragged on for years and ended in dismissal.

If there is no civil liberties union willing to fight for this small minority of mistreated citizens, it is time for John and Jane Doe to exert some pressure.

We are cautious how we spend our taxes in a save-a-dime/lose-a-buck fashion. We require statistics — so many fatalities at an intersection before we install a traffic light. (There are no statistics to prove how many lives such a light might save but we know it will surely save a few.) The State of Oregon procrastinates while it gathers statistics on actual cases. A governor's taskforce on child abuse is told by Oregon mothers that it must allocate funds for prevention instead of concentrating primarily on punishment. Yet the State seems to wait for a shocking scandal before correcting a system that makes one probable.

Glib tongues and empty rhetoric parrot the phrase, "Our children are the future." It is time to comprehend more fully the impact of that truth — not just the future we carve out for them but our future they hand back to us.

Mary McKinney lives in Astoria. Her poetry has appeared in the NCTE.



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