News
Appreciation



Barbara Blaine, right, with Pam Spees from the Center for Constitutional Rights, at a press conference in Rome, in 2011 (Courtesy of Peter Isely)

by Peter Isely

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"*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.*" — Virgil

This quote in Latin is not a Catholic one. It is from Virgil, the great first century Roman poet. It can be translated in various ways, most literally, "If I cannot deflect the superior powers, then I shall move the River Acheron," and more commonly, "If I cannot bend the heavens, then I shall move the powers of hell."

This is the epitaph I would give to my generous, difficult and "mad" friend of over 25 years, Barbara Blaine, whose sudden death Sept. 24 I am still finding incomprehensible. I place Virgil's defiance, spoken by the goddess Juno, an infinite distance from Archbishop Wilton Gregory's quote in The New York Times obituary for Barbara: "May God have mercy on her soul."

Sigmund Freud famously placed Virgil's quote on the title page of his masterwork, *The Interpretations of Dreams*. It is the motto for any radical change. It points to the need for disturbing and interrupting the unexpressed, underground structure of our daily life. Of all forms of violence, the one with the most catastrophic consequences is not personal or interpersonal but "systematic": the kind of violence imposed by the fluid, seemingly natural functioning of our economic, political and religious systems.

It's one thing to try to change the written laws, difficult as that is (as Barbara knew very intimately from years of trying to push for reforms in sexual abuse statutes), but real change only erupts when the unwritten laws of a system are disturbed. It was Freud who, through his clinical work on the unconscious, recognized that what bonds and binds individuals to a system are its secret, half-spoken, shadowy rules. What really cements group loyalty and submission is not the open agreement on which laws to keep but the "somehow always already known" ones that everyone secretly agrees to break.

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My favored translation of Virgil's saying is, "If you cannot move the upper regions, dare to move the underground." Was this not Barbara's supreme wager and ethical act? If you cannot move the upper regions of the Catholic Church, its pope and hierarchy, then dare to move the underground of its child sexual abuse survivors.

Create a path for the upsurge from within its actually existing hell, not the one of theological fables, but the real one where across the centuries the bodies of hundreds of thousands of children have been sexually violated and dumped into the great black hole of institutional Catholicism to suffer and disappear. Bring these stories from hell to the surface, raise them up, speak to them: Shake the underground.

Gregory and his fellow bishops had a lot of difficulty with Barbara. Mine was not theirs. I shared in her madness, even when I didn't want to. And by "madness" I mean what the ancient Greek poet Aeschylus meant: "One must love to the point of seeming madness." Barbara's madness was the madness of a love for justice. What else, but a kind of mad love for the impossible would drive her to spend decades battling the Catholic Church to bring justice for survivors of childhood sexual assault, to bend the clerical upper regions and change what is arguably the single most unchangeable object on earth?

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Barbara, in our friendship, could be quite difficult, unyielding and intransigent while extraordinarily kind, gentle and vulnerable, inextricably, sometimes in the same moment. Her message was often simple. She was not. She was complex and compound. This had nothing to do, really, with personal strengths or failings. It was her madness. What was uncompromising, inspiring and irritating about that madness was the desire which animated it.

Often, I simply couldn't keep up. Hers was purer than mine, stronger. When she was asked over the years, as many of us are in our peculiar "work" with clergy sex abuse, "How do you possibly keep going at this?" her reply was quick: "We must." Mine, slower, much more ambivalent: "I don't know." Where Barbara's first instinct was to always rush into battle, mine is to draw back. That's the difficulty she had with me. But Barbara had difficulty with herself, as well. Don't all survivors? When to speak up and when to be silent? When to push harder and when to let things go? When to live a "normal" life and when to charge oneself into the whirlwind of trauma, courtroom and media battles?

Many people didn't see or feel the price Barbara paid for her love of justice. Yes, there were the victories, the moments of praise, the deep satisfaction in making a difference; but there were also sleepless nights, the toll on the soul and the body, the sacrifice of family and privacy, the deep hurt when dismissed, criticized or attacked.

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Baptized a second time

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The hierarchy's difficulty, with Barbara's desire for justice as its cause, is that their endless cover-ups of pedophilia scandals and sex crimes are not simply to "save their reputation," something they have been more than willing to sacrifice. In defending itself, the church has always been defending its innermost, obscene underground secret. Isn't identifying oneself with this secret underside still not a key component of the very identity of a priest? We all know if a priest seriously (not just rhetorically with pastoral clichés sent from headquarters) denounces these crimes and cover-ups, he thereby excludes himself from the ecclesiastical community, he is no longer "one of us."

It is not simply that the church does not fully participate in the investigation of criminal cases and is an accomplice after the fact. The church as such, as an institution, has to be investigated globally with regard to the way it systematically creates and recreates the conditions for such crimes. That is only beginning to happen in full earnest in countries like Australia with its multi-year governmental commission on institutional child abuse, but also globally at the United Nations, where the Vatican has finally been called to give an account of itself before two major international commissions.

Barbara's last text to me, a few days before her death, and out of the blue as always, was asking if I would speak at a conference of survivors in Warsaw, Poland, for which she was helping to gather presenters. There were no national or religious boundaries for Barbara when it came to survivors, no ocean or mountain range that formed impenetrable obstacles. Each survivor had a voice, a story, wherever they

came from, whatever their language, whatever their age, whatever their sexual orientation. She was determined that each be heard. She was impatient with interpreters and protocols. We were all citizen survivors, witnesses and bearers of a precious and priceless testimony that might protect and save children.

> Like so many survivors of childhood sexual assault by clergy, however, my first encounter with Barbara, unknown to me, was another kind of baptism.

When I first met the then relatively unknown Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who was plotting his churchly rise after his new appointment as Archbishop of Milwaukee in 2002, Barbara and the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, were long on the Vatican's "enemies list." SNAP, the New York cardinal wrote to Pope Benedict XVI, knows how to organize and they're a real a problem for us. Indeed, we had organized a public and unforgettable listening session with Dolan, church and local officials with survivors in downtown Milwaukee, what would be the only one of its kind, because they were certainly never going to agree to that again. Hundreds of survivors attended and testified. It was covered nationally. Barbara came from Chicago to support us. One of my favorite photos of her, which was on the front page of The New York Times the next day, was of the back of Barbara's reddish blond hair asking Dolan a question.

I asked Dolan during our first encounter months before that: "What day do you think is the worst day in a survivor's life?" He leaned, or rather, lunged forward in his chair, put his elbows on his knees and scrunched his face. He waited, as a good politician, for me to give him the answer. "The day we were baptized," I said: "Unknown to us that day sealed our fate."

Like so many survivors of childhood sexual assault by clergy, however, my first encounter with Barbara, unknown to me, was another kind of baptism. The first, as an infant with my parents and family, was into the official church; the second was into a mad love for justice, with Barbara and my fellow survivors.

Fate is unavoidable, or the concept makes no sense. But, paradoxically, we can choose our fate, which amounts to choosing what difficulty we want in life. We can, as it were, step back up to the table, or baptismal fountain, and roll the dice again into the madness of a fighting and egalitarian community of justice. For me, that community, my "church," belongs to my fellow survivors and anyone and everyone who joins us to stop the next assault of a child. With this baptism comes no

guarantees or dogmatic safety nets, no dreams of eternal life, no mythical justice beyond the grave, nothing to compensate or soften the hard edge of the injustices occurring right here, right now.

Treasuring time together

Barbara, it seems to me, had a good life. It was not all struggle and conflict. Luckily, over the past year, I've gotten to spend more quiet and unhurried time with her than all the previous 25 years. I was surprised how little I actually knew her. We hosted several unforgettable survivor gatherings with New York SNAP leader Megan Peterson in Philadelphia and St. Paul.

And I was fortunate to be invited with her to spend over a week in Germany, at a conference hosted by German survivors and the German Parliament. During that week, we spent many long days together. We saw the astounding city of Berlin together, talked for hours about our families and lives, and shared memories of triumph and defeat. We had much in common, both us raised in devout Catholic homes, both having seven brothers and sisters, and both of us twins. During our days together, we visited the Jewish Museum of Berlin, the Topology of Terror, the archival house for the documents of the Third Reich, excavated on the former headquarters of the Gestapo and secret police, and the Holocaust Memorial Museum. All of these were unforgettable, indelible.

But what I treasure most was our final evening. Barbara insisted we spend it at the open air Christmas Mart outside the opera house, a magnificent setting. We ate delicious food, the best bratwurst I've ever had, which is saying something coming from Wisconsin, spiced wine and hot chocolate. We chatted and sang songs with people and families from every corner of the globe.

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> Barbara knew that.

Her choice, her legacy

The crucible of Barbara's life and mission were forged in the absolute worst her church had in store for her as a child. Yet, she entered her young adulthood serving the poor and homeless in Chicago through the Catholic Worker, and later commanded three graduate professional degrees, all from Catholic institutions, in divinity (Catholic Theological Union), in social work (St. Louis University) and then law (DePaul University).

To paraphrase French philosopher Albert Camus, I believe Barbara wanted to only love her church and still love justice. She did not want greatness for it, particularly one born of sexual violence and falsehood. The only thing she wanted was to see a church that was kept alive if it would keep justice alive. Clearly, at the time of her death, that has still not been done. And it was not done for her.

Unlike the church, which erects barriers and rituals to include and exclude, Barbara and the movement she was so instrumental in founding, have no such lines of division. The only line of division is between justice and injustice. Justice is something altogether different from teams and sides, political and ecclesiastical winners and losers. Justice doesn't have teams. It doesn't take the side of the exploited, the oppressed and the dispossessed because justice is the exploited, the oppressed and the dispossessed.

Survivors are not a team. We are those without a team. Any true social change in the church and society to stop clerical sexual abuse has to originate with us. Barbara knew that. This calling was her burden and her blessing. We are the part of the church that has no part in the church. We occupy the empty place of the system of the church, the social and political space where the law has been annulled, vacated or subverted. We survivors, paradoxically, who represent no one, no faction and no particular interest are, unknown to ourselves, the actual church, which may be why the official one has never had a place for us and doesn't know what to do with us.

In reality, what the cardinals, bishops and popes simply do not understand about survivors is that when presented with the choice between love for the church and love for justice, we are going to choose justice. Barbara's long and fierce opposition to them, as a survivor and a woman, was always and only that. What she longed for, and never lived to see, was a day when that choice would no longer be necessary.

In the end, Barbara's legacy is not what seems the most obvious, founding with survivors a movement that would shake the foundations of a global church, bending

the heavens towards the suffering it had hidden and forced underground. Rather, her legacy was that of a sometimes broken, imperfect, human being, who reached back into her childhood and took a small girl by the hand, bringing her out of the darkness. By sharing that child with the world, and exposing the agony of her soul, other children could step forward and do the same.

While it is easy to find flaws and imperfections in any human being, real or imagined mistakes or missteps, just as it is to exaggerate the qualities we happen to like or identify with, one truth cannot be denied Barbara Blaine: because this person walked the earth, many have been freed of the shame and secrecy that bound them, and many who would have harmed others did not.

[Peter Isely is a founding member of SNAP and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School.]