

Sometimes life throws you a curveball so huge you know that nothing will ever be the same again. That happened to me two years ago. It was supposed to be a normal, happy Saturday but an early morning knock at the door and four police officers changed all that in a heartbeat as my husband whom I have loved with every fibre of my being for over 40 years admitted to cases of historic sexual abuse involving young adolescents. My shock was indescribable and I felt as though I entered a parallel universe; my heart was broken beyond words and my head was barely habitable.

For eleven months my husband was under investigation and apart from telling a few close friends, we had to pretend that everything was normal. Nothing was normal. And this period of waiting and not knowing is actually torture.

Exchanging pleasantries with people in the street was a strain. "Hi, Frances, how are you?" "Oh, fine thanks; yes, everything's great." When inside I want to say, 'I am hurting so bad I need morphine and my husband is dying of grief and remorse. How's your day?'

After eleven seemingly endless months of investigation my husband received a lengthy prison sentence along with a diagnosis of prostate cancer just days before. I have no words to describe the heartbreak of those few days.

You may be wondering why I was standing by my husband. Briefly, the reason is that I have known him for a very long time and I have seen all the astonishing good he has done in his life; I refuse to throw all that away. I know and understand him in ways that others cannot; I am still married to the kind, gentle, compassionate, intelligent and witty man I fell in love with and still see in him. There have to be reasons why such a good man commits offences like this and it isn't because he has suddenly become evil. Loving one person hard and long and well can be one of the most difficult and yet rewarding things to do. And if you knew my husband you would understand.

The press had a field day. It was in local press and nationally in the Metro Magazine along with local radio and television. The press tell half the story, exaggerate the facts and incite hatred. I don't understand why this is even legal. And my husband at this point is incarcerated, and so out of the firing line; I am bearing the full brunt of it. I received anonymous letters and a vigilante facebook page said when they found the house they would burn it down. I am lucky as I have no small children at home but I now know that this is a truly dreadful situation that many women find themselves in as they struggle to keep their children safe.

Fortunately, many neighbours were kind and I am very lucky. This is largely because my husband had gone round to them beforehand and said, "This is what I have done, I am going to go to prison and I would like you to look after Frances". That took huge courage. But this is the kind of man he is.

There were others who took a different view, those who decided that because I was standing by my husband I must have known. Oh, how that particular comment hurts. I have tortured myself with the thoughts 'Why didn't I know? Could I have done something different? Could I have stopped this? Could I have prevented so much pain to victims, victims' families, our family...?' But of course, it wasn't even on my radar. Those committing these sort of crimes even hide it from themselves. But it is pub talk and village gossip that can be so cruel. It was a hard and lonely time when I was

dealing with immense, unspeakable grief and learning to live on my own for the first time in my life.

Financially, things were hard. We had obviously lost my husband's income, but every prisoner of pensionable age has their state pension stopped as well. I have some health issues which mean I can only work part time, but paying the bills is now totally down to me. I feel very strongly that stopping the state pension is cruel. The majority of people in prison are men. There are increasingly older men in prison, which means that there are a huge number of older women who are being financially punished for something they didn't do.

So now my life is about balancing work and looking after the house and my health, surviving birthdays, Christmas and social media and visiting my husband in prison.

What I have experienced these past two years has opened my eyes to many things and I have questioned many previous beliefs. I now know there is a world of suffering and injustice that is suffocatingly vast, but beyond that there is also compassion and strength of character that is even more huge.

I hate prisons and everything they stand for in this country and yet I get so much from the visits. I love standing with that amazing, eclectic group of people at the prison gates beneath the razor wire - only we know what it feels like to have this unique set of heartbreaking challenges. The love, loyalty and sheer strength of character I have met on these occasions has restored my faith in humanity. I am ashamed of my former ignorance.

It would appear I am not at all unusual standing by my husband. There is love by the bucket load in those waiting rooms. And there are no barriers; we are all there for the same reason. I look around the visitor waiting room and I see the well-to-do, crack addicts, travellers and everything in between; glorious strangers with walking sticks and bright clothes and tired faces and plastic jewellery and posh dresses and tattoos and hope in their hearts, and stories to tell. They are an army of broken-hearted light-bearers. And I am suddenly aware that we belong to each other and all our lives are woven together and we have so much to learn from one another. Love is bigger than any grim, bleak shit that anyone can throw at us. We can do hard things. And I am in debt to every single one of them for showing me just how vast compassion can be.

One lady drives 5 hours from Sussex - a ten hour round trip and she sets off at 5.30am. A wonderful traveller lady covered in life's scars and ink tattoos told me she was visiting her husband and her son - both in the same prison. I said how on earth do you cope? She said, 'You just have to keep loving them.' I will never forget her.

On my first day visiting, I was so nervous I couldn't even get my key in the locker and a woman in her mid 20s, with scars where she had cut herself and needle marks all up her arms, and an aroma about her that implied she hadn't washed possibly ever, came up to me, put her arm round me and said "It's your first time, isn't it? I'll look after you." Angels come in many, many disguises.

My husband needed an operation for his prostate cancer and I suffered greatly by not being involved with his after care. We have, after all, looked after each other for over 40 years. Neither of us could be told when his operation was going to be in case we

planned his escape. This was a very stressful time as we wondered 'Will it be today?' and 'Will the prison remember to take him to hospital?' They had already messed up several appointments. Eventually, he had a 5 hour operation and was returned to a filthy prison less than 24 hours later, in pain, catheterised and yet still double handcuffed to two prison officers. This hurts my heart.

His cell mate - a very young man on remand for violent crimes - was an angel. Getting well is not easy in a tiny cell with no privacy, with a catheter and then extreme incontinence and limited access to laundry but, with this young man's gentleness and care, my husband made a full recovery. It still distresses me that I couldn't be there for him. But I will be grateful to that young man for ever.

Slowly and surely my previously held rigid ideas are melting away. My opinions and beliefs are being turned upside down on a daily basis. I begin to deeply question the way our society treats the poor, the out of favour, the accused, the imprisoned and those on the margins. And has there ever been a more marginalised group than those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves sexually attracted children or adolescents? I would say they are modern day lepers. And it isn't solving the problem.

What if our deeply held convictions, knee jerk reactions and demonising is keeping us from solutions? We, as a society, seem to be suffering from a 'group thinking' mentality that is possibly preventing us from seeing that we may be wrong. After all, what we are doing at present clearly isn't working. All attention is on those who have already committed a crime and the emphasis is on handing out longer and longer prison sentences. Sex offenders are decried as monsters. Inaccurate, misleading and defamatory reporting causes increased stigmatisation. Extended prison sentences are clearly failing as a deterrent and what we are doing boils down to revenge and punishment. It doesn't protect children to have a stigmatised group of outcasts living on the fringe of society.

Once an offence has been committed there is the suffering for a victim and the victim's family. There is also the suffering of the family of the person convicted of the crime - I can vouch for this. There is also the vast grief and remorse of the offenders themselves, many of whom commit suicide. How can we prevent child sex abuse before a crime has even been committed and avoid such a vast ocean of unimaginable pain?

Judging, blaming and bullying - these are such easy things for us to do. Listening, learning and acting from a place of compassion - this is much, much harder work. The more scared or horrified we are by a thing, the more I believe we should try to understand it. Even the brightest, kindest people can be prone to quick indignation, offering instant opinions rather than contemplation and understanding. We have to try to imagine lives that are not ours. Moral outrage has been so thoroughly tried. I believe it is keeping us from finding answers.

We need to make it safe for potential perpetrators to come out of the shadows and ask for help before they offend. I am not alone in believing this. Chief Constable Simon Bailey who is the National Police Chiefs' Council lead on child protection says "We have to change the dialogue. What we are doing isn't working." He is keen to point out that this is not about liberalisation or watering down of child protection laws, but says "If we are to stem this tide and protect our children we must make prevention and rehabilitation a priority." This is a sentiment echoed by so many specialists in the field who long for a

change in approach.

Juliet Grayson, felt so strongly about prevention, that in 2012 she co-founded the Charity StopSO: The Specialist Treatment Organisation for Perpetrators and Survivors of Sexual Offences. StopSO has a UK wide network of psychotherapists and counsellors who have been trained to work with survivors of sexual abuse, as well as people who feel at risk of committing (or who have committed) a sexual offence. StopSO has over 150 therapists across the UK, who will work with potential perpetrators at any stage. They'll see clients who have troubling thoughts but have never committed an offence, through to those who have been arrested, and those who come out of prison. However, Grayson says, "Our main focus is preventing the *first* crime. If we can stop that first offence, we protect the vulnerable and save huge amounts of distress." She goes on to point out that it is much cheaper to offer therapy at £4,000 per year than to imprison someone, which costs about for a year £60,000 including police time and court costs. So far over 4,000 perpetrators have asked StopSO for help *not* to commit a crime.

There is more than enough scientific evidence to show that attraction to young children or adolescents is something that nobody chooses. Pedophilia (attraction to prepubescent children) and hebephilia (attraction to early adolescents) have always been part of the human race. We cannot obliterate this with prison sentences. It can be a useful exercise to ask yourself 'When did you choose to be attracted to adults?' The answer is, of course, never; but for many paedophiles, it just happened.

For some these attractions may only surface in later life, under certain circumstances or illness. Certain traumas in childhood maybe being re-enacted or worked out. James Cantor, the neuroscientist, has researched the brains of paedophiles, and discovered that some people are *born* with a sexual attraction to children. Many begin to realise this when they are still very young themselves, often only 12 or 13 years old. It is hard to imagine what this must feel like as you begin to realise there is something terribly wrong and that you can't tell anyone - not ever. You can't tell your mother, your teacher, your best friend... There can never be that 'special person' out there for you; with this problem, you are as alone as it is possible to be. Imagine a world in which admitting your attraction to that good looking woman in the office or that tall handsome man you see in the pub led to alienation or prison - or even your murder. Older gay men can probably remember such an era. This is a very real problem and it is happening to young people all over the world. What would you feel if it was your son who needed help with a sexual attraction to young children? We might not like it, but shaking our fist at it is not going to change anything. When judgement and hatred and knee-jerk reactions stop sucking all the oxygen out of the room, it clears the way for solutions to be found. And Germany seems to be leading the way.

Project Dunkelfeld started in Berlin and has spread to many other German cities. It specifically aims to help men and adolescent boys - both those who have acted on their impulses and ones who haven't. From 2011 it developed into a nationwide network called 'Don't Offend'. Unlike other countries, there is strict patient-doctor confidentiality. It is the only facility in the world offering truly anonymous, fully funded treatment. It is financed by the state and the government says that the best protection for children 'would be for pedophiles not to become offenders in the first place.' The German government believes that anyone who is serious about protecting children should be serious about the requirements of those who, through no fault of their own, are attracted to minors. Their needs for safe avenues to seek therapy, feel understood and thrive as

non offenders should be catered for. The problem behaviour must remain stigmatised but the act of asking for help should be met with encouragement.

Project Dunkelfeld has many calls from desperate people in this country. One British man even moved to Germany to be able to access help that was denied him here. The project is supported by victims' groups both in Germany and abroad. I would hate to think that the only thing that is holding us back in this country is a desire to demonise. I am hoping we are better than that.

There are now charities in this country, such as StopSO UK and the Lucy Faithful Foundation. They offer confidential support to those who are afraid they may offend but many cannot afford the therapy that is offered. Funding is desperately needed and people are being turned away. StopSO also offer an online support group for the families of those who have committed a sexual offence. This has been invaluable to so many family members, who are the unacknowledged victims in all of this.

It has taken more pain than I thought I could bear to open my eyes and to question many previous beliefs. I have found that astonishing things can come out of indescribable pain. Maybe this is what a crisis can do. The Greek root of the word 'crisis' is 'to sift' - to shake out the excess. Crises shake things up until we are forced to hang on to what really matters. The crisis in my life has opened my eyes and this is what I have learned:

There is a love that cannot be broken, a love that survives extremes of sorrow and surpasses depths of loneliness and pain. And I am floored by it. You will find this love in prisons and visiting halls. It is in both sex offender prisons and mixed prisons. You will be amazed - as I was - if you have eyes to see it. My previous rigid way of thinking has been broken open. Maybe our views of reality are a bit like this. And maybe the truth is so very different to our egoistic ways of thinking. Maybe the truth is not as it is presented to us in the press. If our hearts can be broken open and we can find the courage to put aside our beliefs and our hating, if we can listen to people's stories and reach out with a desire to support and to help we just may get a different result. Isn't a different result what we want? The alternative is to continue as we are. I choose not to have that on my conscience.

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Written by a family member of an offender