

I Wish I Had Done More



*waves of fear / attack in the night
waves of revulsion / a sickening sight
my heart's nearly bursting / my chest's choking tight
(Lou Reed, 1982)*

It was 2:30 am, or so, and I was standing in the kitchen of my youth. Moonlight entering from the window above the sink allowed me to navigate around the table and chairs without stubbing a toe.

I made my way over to the screen door leading outside to the patio, where moments earlier I had left my Great Dane, Brutus, to do his business. The door opened with a springy croak. "Come on inside," I beckoned. It was thickly humid and dark outside, and I had trouble seeing anything, especially black and grey Brutus.

"Come on, come on inside and go to bed," I whispered impatiently. "I'm tired." Not hearing any movement, I was about to step outside until I noticed, somewhat startled, Brutus's dark figure at the base of the stairs. His face was covered in shadow, and the only reason I noticed him at all was for a passing car's headlights catching his chain collar. Still, I could tell he was looking directly at me.

"Brutus, come on. Get in this house! It's time to go to bed."

The dog sat motionless, silent.

“GET INSIDE THIS GODDAMN HOUSE,” I yelled with all the might my throat could project. I was about to shout again when, from behind, I heard a distant voice call out, like a bell.

“Michael . . . you shouldn’t have woken me up.”

The sound of the voice pricked at my skin like icy needles. I stood frozen and poised with my arm stretched outward, holding open the screen door. But Brutus just sat there, motionless and silent.

I slowly turned my head to look behind me. Closing the screen door, I lightly stepped across the kitchen floor. Some of the vinyl tiles squeaked under my weight. Rounding a corner, I began to make my way down the hall toward my mother’s bedroom. The only light came from the small crack under her door.

She never watches TV this late.

Upon reaching her bedroom door, I could hear the low muffled voices from some TV program. “Mom, are you awake?” I waited a minute, but heard no reply. “Mom, it’s Mike. I’m coming in . . .”

Turning the doorknob, I pushed open her bedroom door until I could see fully inside. My mother was lying on the bed, her back elevated with pillows. The room was completely dark, except for the random sequence of light emanating from the TV. “Mom, I’m sorry for waking you up, but you shouldn’t be watching TV this late.”

“Mom?”

Not getting any response, I stepped tentatively inside the room. My eyes began to adjust to the vicissitudes of the TV, making it possible for me to make out my old high school graduation picture on the wall. As I approached the bed, my mother’s face gradually became visible . . . only something wasn’t right.

“Mom . . . what’s wrong with your face?” I asked softly, squinting my eyes to see. Drawing closer, I noticed that she was peering straight at me, but her face -- normally round porcelain -- drooped severely, as if someone placed a hot candle under wax. Her skin was further degraded by a web-like pattern of deep wrinkles and a yellowish complexion, visible even through the room’s murkiness.

“Mom! What happened to your face?!” I began to shout nervously, retreating backwards through the door. As I stepped into the hallway, my mother made a sudden movement: within a second, she was standing upright at the edge of her bed, her dark hair falling over her face. She started walking toward me.

“GET AWAY FROM ME! GET AWAY,” I yelled, running back up the hallway and into the kitchen. Pushing open the screen door, I rushed outside and nearly tripped over Brutus, who still stood immobile at the base of the steps. Regaining my balance, I looked back into the kitchen and saw my mother standing in the entrance. Her nightgown flowed slightly in the early morning breeze.

At that moment, Brutus stood up on all fours. He leapt into the kitchen in two bounds, and turned to sit next to my mother. I stood there, breathing heavily, staring wide-eyed and gasping. Slowly, my mother raised her left arm and flipped a switch to turn on the kitchen lights. She pointed at Brutus. His face was sunken and corrupt.



In the wake of the sex abuse scandal at Penn State, and hours before his firing by the PSU Board of Trustees, Joe Paterno remarked: “This is a tragedy. It is one of the great sorrows of my life. With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more.”

He’s been excoriated ever since by politicians, journalists and sports pundits from ESPN to the Washington Post to CNN. In the 24/7 news cycle, headlines and clicks come at a premium. When an hour ago “Paterno’s moral failure” may have compelled a read, somebody else ups the ante with a piece about how “Penn State’s Conspiracy of Cowards” enabled Jerry Sandusky to molest his victims.

I don’t want to recount and rehash everything that’s already been written about Penn State. I’d just like to explain why I know exactly how Joe Paterno feels, and why I forgive him. A cynic may react that I’m blinded by my love and loyalty to my university. It’s certainly true that I do have strong affinities for Penn State, but I also think the reality is much more complex, and one that we all stand to benefit from understanding.

I grew up living in a solid blue-collar household with Nancy, my alcoholic mother, and Bob, my alcoholic stepfather. Over time, the force of my Mom’s addition to liquor eroded her health to the point where she could barely get out of bed in the morning without a shot to steady her hands. And still, Bob would continue to serve her drinks, night after night, day after day, only interrupting the flow when he opened the freezer, drank the Jameson he’d prepared for himself the night before, then headed to his afternoon shift at Weyerhaeuser. Mom would spend the next 12 hours alone at home, drinking herself into oblivion.

This pattern continued despite several hospitalizations and interventions I made while enrolled in the Ph.D. Geography program at the University of Colorado, and later while teaching at Texas State. All of this came to an inevitable end in April of 2001, when I made a sudden trip home from Austin after receiving a call from my mother’s physician that her body was fading. My final memory was sitting with her in a hospital room watching the Oscars. Jennifer Lopez was giving an award, and my mother perked up.

“Jennifer Lopez, she’s so pretty”. I could understand what she said even with the oxygen tube stuck down her throat, her swollen jowls consuming her mouth.

A day after saying my goodbyes and returning to Austin, I instructed my mother’s physician to take her off life support. I got a phone call the next morning. The Caller ID showed my Mom and Bob’s home phone number. Sobbing hard, Bob kept repeating for minutes over the phone, “Mike, I should have seen the writing on the wall. I should have done something.”

In the years that followed, I carried a lot of anger and resentment over how so many seemingly preventable events conspired to end my Mom’s life at 63. How could Bob have let this happen? How could he not have done more? Where has my fucking sister been in this situation? The neighbors who were my Mom’s best friends? Soon enough, I began to ask myself the same questions. Ten years later, I still dream about her.



I have no idea what Joe Paterno and his staff knew about Jerry Sandusky. We probably never will. We do know that Paterno’s grad assistant, Mike McQueary, witnessed Sandusky and a 10-year old boy in the Lasch football room shower facility. Paterno, in turn, reported this information to Tim Curly, Penn State’s athletic director. After that, it appears neither Paterno nor McQueary took further action by notifying the police.

Despite fulfilling their legal obligation, Paterno and McQueary have been ostracized for not doing more. But I forgive them, just like I forgive Bob, and hopefully someday will forgive myself.

What Paterno and McQueary did, and did not do, is no different than what’s occurred in sex abuse cases nationwide, over and over and over again, from the tiniest swim clubs to the largest youth and religious organizations. Some people are just too close to suspected sex criminals that they simply can’t believe -- can’t see -- that their trusted associate is a monster. Or that a wife or mother is an alcoholic.

I can’t help but wonder, in their rush to condemn and criticize, that the vitriol and raw meat hurled by the politicians, journalists, and media pundits is really a reflexive lashing out, a fearful response seeking to avoid difficult and inconvenient questions about human nature. Questions that, if asked, would quickly break the moral postures of those who pass judgment.

Instead, fingers are pointed, mouths foam, and we never arrive closer to a rationale point of understanding the nature of what’s occurred, and what needs to be done to prevent terrible things from happening again. Instead, Mike McQueary, who along with Joe Paterno will serve as a witness for the prosecution, is now sequestered in an undisclosed location because of threats on his life. Instead, Fred Phelps will join the

ESPN circus at Beaver Stadium today for a game that heretofore was all about 20 year old kids from the pastures of Pennsylvania and the wheat farms of Nebraska, playing football and living a dream. Instead, we forget about the literally hundreds of kids from dead-end neighborhoods whose lives and futures were salvaged by a Great Experiment and a world-class university.



The Joe Paternos of the world could be fired a thousand times, but the satisfaction from that bloodletting will not prevent similar tragedies that are probably taking place right now in a neighborhood, youth organization, or church near you. Prevention will only happen when we come to grips that some people just cannot believe, cannot see, and cannot respond as we would hope they would and should, whether for reasons of denial, kinship, or a shared affliction. In this regard, there is hope for Penn State. Policies can be reformed, safeguards can be implemented, a system can be changed to promote a climate of transparency, accountability, and objectivity for ensuring the safety of innocent kids.

I hope I never again hear the words “I wish I had done more”. Words that felled a legendary football coach, words that ushered a blue-collar widower to his grave; words that continue to wake me in a cold sweat. But I know I will. And when I do, I know I’ll struggle with the same turmoil of guilt, frustration, anger, and misery that I’m feeling these days as a Penn Stater. But I’ll also move forward with resolve to become a better man, carried by the enduring wisdom of Marcus Aurelius:

If you are pained by external things, it is not they that disturb you, but your own judgment of them. And it is in your power to wipe out that judgment now.