

Heartbroken and Shattered

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I think child abuse is the most horrific crime there is.

Today, I woke up to news that has hit me quite personally.

One of my childhood rabbis has been arrested for attempting to seduce children online.

The article is short on details, but he was caught in a sting operation by police officers posing as underage kids.

I pray it's not true. Maybe his identity was stolen. I don't know.

This rabbi is the nicest guy in the world.

I know. They always say that.

But this time, I know the accused. He's not some random creep you see on the news.

He taught us in Wednesday night school at our temple. He was the youth group adviser.

He inspired us. He cared about us.

We all loved him.

I still see him at rabbinic conventions, and we always give each other a big hug.

It is mind-boggling and extremely painful to think he could do this. Our hearts are broken.

I know that child-abuse victims don't always report what happened to them. Often, they are too ashamed or frightened to say anything.

Tragically, I have encountered this before in my rabbinate.

In my previous congregation, we read one day that one of our former religious-school teachers was arrested for sexually abusing minors.

It had been many years since he taught at the temple. It was before my time there, and I did not know him. But many of my congregants did.

And they were devastated.

The first time I spoke to the congregation about the arrest, I said this teacher was "evil."

But one of my most trusted congregants came to me afterward and told me she didn't think that was appropriate.

His actions may have been evil, she said, but he is not an evil man.

He's sick. And he needs help.

I followed her advice and didn't use that term again, but I had a hard time sympathizing with her point of view.

Today, I get it.

She knew that religious-school teacher, as did so many others in the community. To them, he was not a monster.

He was kind to them. And they had genuine affection for him.

That's how I feel about my high-school rabbi.

I haven't yet wrapped my head around what he's accused of, but I have very warm memories of a man who, I know without a doubt, truly cared about my friends and me—and still does.

He might be found to have committed monstrous crimes against children.

But he is also a human being—one I, and so many others, love and admire to this day.

It will take me time to process this.

But in the meantime, I want to share what I said to my congregants the next time I spoke about the religious-school teacher's arrest. Thanks to my dear friend, I think I handled it with more sensitivity the second time around.

The details are different and my rabbi has not had the chance yet to defend himself. But these words I spoke back then capture what I am feeling now.

And I hope they might be of some comfort to my Houston friends who are in shock tonight:

"The reality we thought we knew lies broken and mangled in our hearts.

"Our faith and trust in humanity—even in our own ability of discernment—may feel shattered.

"How could this even be possible?

"We feel betrayed. Shocked. Horrified.

"There are no words. And it's hard to breathe.

"There is no way to reconcile the two realities that have been revealed to us: the charismatic, devoted teacher and the abuser of children.

"There is no way to reconcile our experiences of personal friendship and trust with the unspeakable acts that took place behind closed doors. No way to reconcile the light with the darkness.

"The truth is that both are real. Both light and darkness are real, and the one does not negate the other.

"They are both true.

"And as painful as it is, we will have to find a way to hold both of them at the same time.

"And I know we are capable of doing it. Hard as it seems, we do have the spiritual and emotional capacity for it.

"The horrors that have been revealed now make a demand upon us: What will we do in response to them? How will we do our part to help the victims of abuse, and try to end the cycle, and bring comfort and healing to the world?

"This is our sacred calling now.

"Be kind and compassionate with yourself. Let yourself feel your emotions, whatever they are, whenever they come. There is no such thing as a wrong emotion.

"May God bring healing and comfort to the victims and their families. And may God grant all of us strength."

And, having learned from my previous experience, this time I will add:

May God have mercy on his soul.

****IF YOU HAVE BEEN A VICTIM OF CHILD ABUSE, PLEASE REPORT IT TO THE POLICE OR TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE ASHAMED. YOU WERE AN INNOCENT CHILD.**