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“The Write of Crime”

-Stephen Reid

The headline of a recent Watchtower, the Jehovah Witness magazine, asks the question, "Can Government Stop Crime"? The Ontario government, in 1994, did not stop crime but they did take steps towards stopping criminals from writing about it, or, more to the point, stopping them from profiting from their writings. Victims' groups had lobbied hard for years to bring in something like Bill 210 and just as it appeared stalled, it was suddenly introduced on December 8, 1994, given all party support, all three readings, and kicked upstairs for Royal Assent, all on the same day. The government's sudden turn around, the concerted effort, and successful passage of this bill was described by one MPP at the time as, "being like the ending of a Frank Capra movie". The government's action came on the heels of a phone call to the Premier's office from the mothers of two of Paul Bernardo's victims. Bernardo had boasted, if ever caught he would "write a book and make a million". The Premier summoned his Attorney General and within 24 hours Bill 210 was cobbled together and presented to the legislature.

But the Frank Capra characterization has proved all too apt. This bill, like his movies, bears little relation to real life. In the years since, Paul Bernardo has not written a book, or, if he has, no one is interested. Nor has he tried to strike a deal a la Clifford Olson -cash for information. Neither has Clifford Olson written anything in the fifteen years since his imprisonment. In fact, in the past fifteen years the published books written in English by prisoners in Canada can be counted on eight of your fingers - three books of non-fiction, three books of poetry, and two novels. The advances, in total, come to less than eleven thousand dollars. None of these stories "celebrate" the criminal, rather they illuminate the issues of racism, misogyny, child abuse, substance addictions, poor choices, bad experiences and harsh confinement.

Prison writers do not profit from their crimes, they profit from their willingness to re-enter the wounds of their life with the unflinching conscience of a writer. If they do that with extraordinary ability, they might be published, and receive payment. To have them forfeit their earnings is to discourage most from even trying, and further diminish those in our society who are most diminished already. We threaten what is for many the single most important rehabilitative tool there is. To write is to establish a moral relationship with the world.

So why are we studying the Ontario bill for a national application? One reason is that too many of us ask our legislators a question quite different than the one posed by Watchtower magazine. We ask, Why Can't Government Stop Crime? They can, some of the crime, some of the time, but if there is to be a genuine movement to heal victims and reduce crime it will not come from more and more laws, nor from lobbyists, or even mass media. This movement will rise out of our communities.

At a recent White House conference, U.S. President Clinton emerged from a breakfast meeting with eighteen moderate church leaders. Their joint announcement was, essentially, that the Christian Right did not represent all Christians. In the Canadian political scene, although we have nothing as formidable as the Christian Right, our politicians need reminding that victims' rights groups, the organization of anger, do not represent the views of all victims' rights advocates.

There is another groundswell in the community - people who are committed to the process of restorative justice, healing circles, victim-offender reconciliation, recovery programmes, community policing, transition houses, et al. The welfare of victim and offender need not be at cross purposes, and in fact are not. Only when we place a Paul Bernardo or a Clifford Olson in the crosshairs does all the retributive legislation make emotional logic.

I will be directly affected if this bill is adopted nationally. I wrote my first novel while in prison. Now, ten years later, I continue to rise every morning at six to write, and I continue to write from experience. I make a marginal living from writing and teaching creative writing both inside and outside prison. To commit the act of

writing every day is for me an expression of my willingness to participate in an orderly society.

In writing, I found a way out of hate. Legislation like Bill 210 takes us all deeper into it.