

# Moving from Institutional Betrayal to Institutional Courage

BY DIANE CITRINO

**B**etrayal is one of the ugliest and most painful things we experience in our lives. Institutional betrayal — betrayal by an institution we respect — our school, church, employer, military, U.S.A. Gymnastics, to name just a few — can cause even more damage than personal betrayal. The term institutional betrayal was coined by Dr. Jennifer Freyd and her students in 2009 and refers to wrongdoing perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution.<sup>1</sup> The concept that institutions can betray those who love them has come increasingly into the news with the tsunami of sexual assault cases at colleges and universities. Not only are individuals harmed, but the fabric of community is frayed when a revered institution betrays those who depend on it.

A clear expression of institutional betrayal was voiced by Aly Raisman, a two-time Olympic athlete, during the sentencing hearing of Dr. Larry Nassar. She specifically called out the institutions — U.S.A. Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee — that allowed Dr. Nassar's predatory behavior toward young athletes to go unchecked and to not have done more after his abuses were uncovered:

False assurances from organizations are dangerous, especially when people want so badly to believe them. They make it easier to look away from the problem and enable bad things to continue to happen. And even now, after all that has happened, U.S.A. Gymnastics has the nerve to say the very same things it has said all along. Can't you see how disrespectful that is? Can't you see how much that hurts?... Why has the U.S. Olympic Committee been silent?...**It is like being abused all over again.**<sup>2</sup>

Raisman's comment about the pain caused by institutional betrayal has been verified by social scientists. It is hard for individuals and institutions to confront betrayal. The trauma symptoms exhibited by victims of sexual assault

have been found to be much worse when the institutions where they are reported ignore or fail to protect victims.<sup>3</sup>

Why is it so hard for people and institutions to take action to see the betrayer for what he or she is and protect the victim? Dr. Freyd and psychologists have studied "betrayal blindness," where someone can be unaware of betrayal that is right in front of his or her eyes.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, betrayal may simply be too dangerous for a person to consciously acknowledge if someone is dependent on the betrayer. This can explain a battered woman refusing to acknowledge her spouse's betrayal when she doesn't have any resources to leave him. Institutions may be dependent on a coach or doctor to win an important championship, or a company on the magic of its founder. Psychologists see betrayal blindness in institutions who renege on the trust of those who rely on them similar to the blindness of individuals in personal relationships.

Institutional betrayal can take the form of missing opportunities to fix problems: the failure to investigate complaints, a failure to properly supervise people in authority, a cover up when a problem is found, or structural rules that encourage bad behavior rather than doing the right thing. For example, the State of California missed numerous opportunities to discover Jaycee Dugard, an 11-year-old kidnapped by Phillip Garrido, a known sex offender on parole. Dugard was held captive by Garrido for 18 years before she was finally rescued. But the inspector general of California made those errors public after an investigation and admitted the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation "missed potential opportunities to discover the existence of Garrido's three victims, by failing to investigate clearly visible utility wires running from Garrido's house toward the concealed compound at the rear of his property; talk to neighbors and local public safety agencies; and act on GPS and other information clearly

showing Garrido had violated his parole terms."<sup>5</sup> This type of admission is a good first step to fighting institutional betrayal.

Institutional courage is the opposite of institutional betrayal.<sup>6</sup> Seeing and acknowledging the betrayal is part of fixing the system. Listening to people who have been harmed and taking their concerns seriously is critical. Part of what colleges and universities do as a routine part of their Title IX obligations is to observe patterns in order to prevent future problems. This can require institutional courage as alumni reaction to a fraternity shutting down or coach being terminated can be harsh.

Sometimes institutional courage means issuing an apology and vowing to do better. An exemplar of institutional courage is Ed Ray, President of Oregon State University. A former Oregon State student, Brenda Tracy, called to his attention a sexual assault perpetrated by the University's athletes 16 years earlier that had only resulted in a one-game suspension and community service. The University exhaustively reviewed the record, President Ray issued a heartfelt and moving apology, and the University hired Ms. Tracy, the person who had experienced the assault, to help get better policies and procedures in place.

Lawyers have a role to play in ending institutional betrayal and turning their clients toward institutional courage. Everyone benefits when a problem is brought to light and better processes protect the people who depend on that employer/university/governmental entity/institution. Institutional courage looks like training people how to report problems, getting a complete and thorough investigation of any problems, hearing the people involved, and working to change the tone if appropriate. Choosing courage makes sense for our clients.

<sup>1</sup>Platt, M., Barton, J., & Freyd, J.J. "A Betrayal Trauma Perspective on Domestic Violence." *Violence Against Women in Families and Relationships*, edited by Buzawa, Eve S., & Stark, Evan, Praeger, 2009, Vol. 1, pp.185-207.

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<sup>2</sup>Gaianan, Mahita. "Read Aly Raisman's Full Testimony Confronting Larry Nassar." Time, 19 Jan. 2018, 4:52, time.com/5110455/aly-raisman-larry-nassar-testimony-trial/. Emphasis supplied.

<sup>3</sup>C.P. Smith and J.J. Freyd, "Nowhere to Turn: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Traumatic Aftermath of Sexual Assault," poster presented at the 27th Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS), Baltimore, Maryland, November 3-5, 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Freyd, Jennifer, and Pamela Birrell. *Blind to Betrayal: Why We Fool Ourselves We Aren't Being Fooled*. Wiley, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Shaw, David R. *The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Supervision of Parolee Phillip Garrido*. Office of the Inspector General, State of California, 2009, , retrieved February 3, 2018.

<https://www.oig.ca.gov/media/reports/ARCHIVE/BOI/Special%20Report%20on%20CDCRs%20Supervision%20of%20Parolee%20Phillip%20Garrido.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Jennifer Freyd discussed this concept during a presentation titled, "*Institutional Betrayal and Workplace Investigations: Risks, Warning Signs, and Mitigation Strategies for Investigators*" on October 7, 2017 in Marina Del Rey, California. The example about Ed Ray in this article is taken from Dr. Freyd's presentation (with her permission); the example about Philip Garrido is from her book, *Blind to Betrayal*, cited above.



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