

Today is a memorable day. A local trafficker pled guilty to multiple sex trafficking charges, with a plea bargain of 30 years. In the last 1 ½ years, we have interacted to varying degrees with 7 of the 12 identified victims, some quite closely...these 12 women were prepared to testify in a possible 3 week trial to start next week. I have strong emotions that do not feel real. I can't imagine what the ladies are feeling. I have learned so much from them.

I've learned about **survival**. What a victory it is that they've survived, but how difficult it is when facing layers of trauma to move out of survival. I've learned about **trauma bonds**. I've seen multiple women speak highly of him, be loyal to him, feel guilty for leaving or testifying against him, believe that he loved them, cared for them and believing that she was different from others to him.

I've learned about **choice**. They all initially believe they chose the life and the rules of the game, and it takes time, repetition, patience and exploration to face the reality of lack of choice. I've learned to honor their choices in the healing process, though they often are distracting or destructive, because freedom in choice is more important to their humanity than me forcing or coercing them into help and healing. I've learned about layers of **trauma** that began long before him, and often created vulnerability that prepared them for future exploitation.

I've learned about **the life**, the rules and "code" of "the program," which both controlled them and gave them a sense of order, security and predictability. I've learned about **power** and the places we may find it in order to survive. In times of vulnerability or when shaped by trauma, abuse and the commercial sex industry, power is found in money and sex...but specifically being a sex object, or as one woman described, a **commodity**.

I've learned also from him. I've learned the **potential of the human heart and the capacity for evil or good**. I've seen power used for his own fame, wealth, power, pleasure in successful, sophisticated systematic "enterprise" that sold and exploited human beings...so much influence in 28 short years. A hardened heart, a deadened conscience...yet so admired and supported.

Hours upon hours of work, money, words, emotions over the last 1 ½ years...to bring justice, to stabilize, support and restore the victims, to expose truth...is it worth it? Has it made a difference? Is 30 years enough? What about these ladies who are still struggling? Some still in and out of the life, some feeling stuck and struggling to make it with entry-level jobs, some still struggling with substance abuse, some still bonded to him...all left with wounds, memories and loss. The work is necessary and worth it because the work honors their value and dignity. So, I can only pray with King David:

Psalm 10: "Arise O God, lift up your hand. Forget not the afflicted...but you do see...to you the helpless commits herself. Break the arm of the wicked and evil doer; call His wickedness to account till you find none...o Lord you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen your heart. You will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed."