

When the Media Becomes the Bystander:

Psychologist Barbara Coloroso writes about the pivotal role bystanders play in her book *The Bullied, the Bully and the Bystander*. Coloroso argues the bystander determines the relationship between the bully and the bullied. A silent bystander, as anyone who has been there knows, is not neutral or objective. Silence is the signal to the bully of compliance. After this the bully works to win the bystander to his team. He almost always succeeds.

Coloroso's thesis has been crucial for educators and those in the workplace who are trying to eliminate bullying. The necessity of the bystander's agency--of taking action—must occur quickly because once roles are assigned in volatile situations it is difficult for a re-assignment.

Coloroso's work is what influenced me when I wrote the paper "Truth, Lies and History: John Furlong and Canadian Sport's Moral Vacuum" for the 7th World Conference on Sport and Communication hosted Play the Game. This Danish organization asks the hard questions in sport: Those related to corruption, drugs, match fixing, human-rights and freedom of expression. They are "a home for the homeless questions in sport."

We need a home for homeless questions because sport has immense power to move us emotionally, socially and in very personal and profound ways, but that power can also be manipulated to serve particular agendas. It is as if our emotions blind us to reason and rationality. The blind spot given to sport awards even greater power to the powerful within its culture. Those with power have access to massive amounts of money—public and private-- and cultural currency. And yet, despite this imbalance of power, sport is not investigated the way in which the politicians are or in the manner in which Toronto mayor Rob Ford has rightly been subjected. That's a tragedy because, as the 150 presentations at Play the Game clearly showed, sport is opaque and bullying and corruption thrive in a culture that eschews transparency and amasses power.

In "Truth, Lies and History" I wanted to understand the decision-making process on the boards on which Furlong is a member (Own The Podium, Whitecaps FC, Rocky Mountaineer, Canadian Tire, Whistler-Blackcomb Holdings). I asked the other board members if they had gone up to Burns Lake, met with the students who had made allegations of abuse against Furlong and realized they were not telling the truth. Had they phoned the students and concluded from their conversations there was no way they were being honest? Did they realize, in these years of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Indian Residential Schools, that they were playing a role in the re-traumatization of abuse victims?

Not one member of the boards answered these reasonable questions that are necessary in order for due diligence to take place in journalism. They were the consummate bystander. I asked the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport why they didn't create an independent inquiry into the hiring of Furlong as CEO of VANOC which would investigate the level of due diligence used in

examining his background. They said he had vehemently denied the allegations and it wasn't their mandate.

The day before I was to read my paper Play the Game received a letter from Furlong's lawyer threatening a lawsuit if they let me read it. They declared Denmark had not seen censorship for 150 years; they were not about to bring it back. The Furlong fatwa against me commenced.

I know that the dozens of people who either signed affidavits or statements about Furlong's alleged abuse did so with a true heart and mind. They wrote with tears in their eyes. I saw those tears many more times in the fall of 2012 after he went on TV and categorically denied the abuse and the power brokers of sport and the corporate world to whom he is connected kept him on their boards and either stayed silent or spoke up in his defense. How were *they* so sure of their convictions? Not one First Nations person who alleged abuse has ever been contacted by these organizations to give their side of the story. I wish those board members had seen the tears and the pain I saw. I wish they could see the daily courageous struggle that defines the lives of so many who survived Immaculata in Burns Lake and Prince George College. It is a national tragedy and a chilling commentary on the state of journalism in Canada that the tears and pain returned last week for First Nations people in Northern B.C. as Furlong's version of events went to air and print virtually unchecked and unquestioned.

Who in the media is investigating? That story about arriving at the Edmonton airport customs office in 1974 and then welcomed to Canada and told to "make us better" that Furlong has so oft repeated is an interesting one considering there wasn't a customs office there until 1982. And is he sure he came in 1974? The Irish newspapers have him playing basketball and Gaelic football throughout 1974 and into '75. He is also noticeably absent from the Prince George College 1974 yearbook.

This time it was not the various boards he belongs to that played the role of bystander, but the media.