

*Sunday February 3, 2013*

## **Mental health hits close to home**

By Jim Taylor

Apparently February 12 is Mental Health Day in Canada. Mental Health is certainly worth thinking about. The U.S. still reels after Adam Lanza's shooting spree in December. In Canada, a coroner's inquest struggles to understand how deeply disturbed teen Ashley Smith could be allowed to commit suicide in prison while guards watched.

The young man with whom I've had closest contact is my grandson.

He's adopted, from Ethiopia. His mother died when he was three months old. He had a father, and four older siblings – two brothers, two sisters. But after his mother died, his family gave him up for adoption.

We suspect he was abused. For his first three years here, whenever he felt threatened, he withdrew into another world where he heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing.

Over about six months, while he should have been learning to talk, he was shuttled through four different homes and three different languages. Not surprisingly, he has been reluctant to learn ever since. He absorbs mechanical processes exceptionally well – but he resists learning letters and numbers.

He can be helpful, polite, and charming.

But he has an explosive temper. He slammed his bedroom door so hard he ripped it off its hinges. His school says that he punched a girl in line beside him, tried to strangle one schoolmate, and tried to drown another boy in a toilet.

Worse -- these were not just emotional eruptions. These students had ridiculed him, or damaged something of his. He nursed a grudge against them. He waited for an opportunity to retaliate.

Did I hear you mutter the word "psychopath"?

## **Limits to assistance**

Now consider this – he's still in kindergarten. According to his birth certificate, he's six years old. He might be seven -- the Ethiopian village where he was born didn't bother much with paperwork.

There's still time to help him redirect his impulses. Various B.C. health services have offered help. But each professional area has focused only on a single facet of his behavior. No one seems willing, or able, to look at the whole child.

His elementary school has tried. Indeed, there are times when it seems the whole school is run around his needs. All the teachers know him; all shepherd him. The Grade Six class has been organized to provide activities to keep him busy at recess and lunch.

But there are limits to what they can do. He's restricted to half days at school, because he's considered dangerous to other students. In his classroom, scissors are kept locked up.

The psychiatrist assigned to him, from what I saw, made no attempt to engage our grandson in any way. His sole concern was a smorgasbord of medications.

The boy has been on so many different drugs for hyperactivity, anger, violence, rebelliousness, and impulsivity that I doubt if anyone knows his real personality any more. Least of all, himself.

## **Don't blame mom**

It's commonly assumed that children are a blank page, waiting to be imprinted with their parents' behavior patterns. I deny that assumption. I'm biased, I admit. But I believe our daughter has been an exceptional parent –

more caring, more compassionate, more patient than we were. She ran a successful consulting business for 15 years until her son's psychological needs took priority.

Her other adopted child, a girl three years older, is growing into a delightful young woman – well adjusted, literate, socially skilled. Her home also includes a large dog and three cats, none suffering any signs of neglect or abuse.

I defy anyone to prove that our grandson's disturbed behavior derives from her parenting.

For five years, she has struggled to find people in social services who would take her concerns seriously. With a few exceptions, they are too busy. They have reports to write. They already have full case loads. They're not taking any new patients...

Meanwhile, our grandson gets worse.

His sister is already afraid of his rages. His mother isn't – yet – but in few years he will be stronger than she is. Other children his age are starting to avoid him.

### Prevention, not punishment

Unless he learns to control his energy, to channel it into useful outlets, he will be a serious problem as he grows to physical maturity. He will get into trouble with the law – I hate to imagine how – and will be placed in contact with people who will teach him even less acceptable forms of violence.

Last year, each inmate in a federal prison cost Canadian taxpayers \$113,974. Why must we wait to spend some of this money until a mentally disturbed young man harms his own or some other family? Wouldn't it make more sense to spend money now, to prevent him from ending up behind bars?

Prevention is always preferable to punishment.

His mental health is not just one family's problem. It's everyone's.

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## YOUR TURN

John Willems connected the business of slavishly following rules with the death of Ashley Smith in her prison cell: "I cried for a confused girl in our jail whose guards refused to disobey a sinful order. I join the saints under the altar asking 'how long'."

Charles Hill wasn't surprised by the revelations of the Brazilian story: "I see the 'bouncer' mentality every day in the college students who come from the 'street' and in my criminal counselees. I also see it in corporate offices.

"Part of the key in some catastrophies lies in the phrase you used, 'you gotta know when...' On an individual level, most of us never question our culture or the authority that we have chosen to follow. Many of my college students are on automatic pilot. Nobody is in the cockpit. They don't question the behaviors they have seen on the streets or at home that cause their failures. I also believe in the bell shaped curve of intelligence. It takes a certain level of mental functioning to quickly evaluate situations or question instructions. I'm not sure where club bouncers would land on the curve, in terms of speed of evaluation of a situation.

"I'm not surprised by the media 'ho hum' attitude. Most of the population in developed countries have watched endless hours of crime shows, news portrayals of catastrophic natural and man-made events, massive loss of life. Many of us are [now] hardened, fatalistic, and devoid of feelings"

Isabel Gibson picked up the next line from Kenny Rogers' song: "You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table..."

She went on, "I'd like to see a set of criteria for differentiating between situations demanding that we stand firm on our principles, and ones demanding that we rethink them. In the Kenny metaphor -- we do have to know both when to hold'em and when to fold'em. Maybe what we need most is the willingness to even admit to ourselves that we might have to fold'em. If we're honestly open to that possibility, maybe then we can be more confident in our decision to hold."

Bill Peterson connected rule-following with the practice of many Christians to quote the Bible as authority for their actions: "How does adult usage of scripture to defend/approve/validate a decision/belief/action differ from the child's statement: 'They do it!' Or 'All my friends get to do it.' Or as my older brother and sister would exclaim, 'You wouldn't let us do what you let him do!'"

"In other words, what is the most convenient or (hopefully) potent authority that'll support you?"

James Russell wrote, "I like your idea that sin is a virtue taken to an extreme. I've always felt that tragedy in the theatre sense is most moving when the protagonist is overcome by his main strength, not by a flaw."

Mervyn Flecknoe thanked me "for this reflection on obeying rules, Jim. I have used it in my lectionary reflection (<http://www.baildonmethodists.org/category/worship>)..."

Mervyn expanded my thought into the "rules" that made being gay in the UK a death sentence for some 600 years. He concluded, "It is time we spring-cleaned the beliefs in our minds and hearts. The Nuremberg trials pronounced that following instructions blindly without challenging them can be a crime against humanity. How many such crimes have we committed over the years before we saw the world by the light of Jesus?"

John Hatchard quoted my closing line back at me, "Whatever your ideologies, if you hold'em in spite of new evidence, if you can't fold'em when the game changes, even the best of intentions will go awry." To which John added, "Twas ever thus methinks. Galileo found this out too! In his case it took over 300 years for justice to be done."

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## **HYMNSIGHT**

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,  
Ralph Milton

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TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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