

*Sunday August 25, 2013*

## **How not to find a missing person**

By Jim Taylor

Franz Kafka would have delighted in describing Canada's National DNA Data Bank.

I'm surprised how many people have never read Kafka. Although he wrote almost a century ago, he seems to me to be the prophet of the convoluted bureaucratic labyrinths that plague much of our century.

Granted, Kafka is not easy to read. His novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, use deceptively simple language and realistic detail to lead readers into a surreal world where nothing is simple, where everything reasonable and dependable isn't, where seemingly straightforward systems turn into nightmarish delays and detours.

Judy Peterson has been living a Kafka novel ever since her 14-year-old daughter Lindsey disappeared from Comox, on Vancouver Island, in 1993.

Lindsey had run away once before. But she had left a note to her mother. And she had taken her favourite teddy bear, Snowflake, with her.

This time, she didn't leave a note. And she didn't take Snowflake. That led her mother to believe that Lindsey didn't disappear by choice. The police agreed. Their 20-year-old file is classified as "Foul Play Suspected." Suspected. But not proven.

And so the National DNA Data Bank is out of bounds. It can't be used to find Lindsey – or, more likely, Lindsey's remains – because federal legislation limits its use to solving crimes. No crime; therefore, no access.

## **Useful tool**

A bit of background -- the Canadian government passed the DNA Identification Act in 1998. The National DNA Data Bank opened June 30, 2000, using software obtained from the United States. The software is, I understand, the world standard for DNA matching.

At present, the Data Bank contains 275,000 records in its Convicted Offender Index, and over 87,000 in its Crime Scene Index. So far, it has cross-referenced around 14,000 offenders with crime scenes.

The saga of serial killer Robert Picton offered convincing proof of the value of DNA searches. Vancouver police and the RCMP were able to identify DNA from over 80 people on Picton's farm east of Vancouver. Picton went on trial for killing 26 of those victims, and was convicted for murdering six of them.

After Lindsey's disappearance, Judy desperately tried to find out what had happened to her daughter. She offered to donate a DNA sample to the Data Bank, to see if it could be matched with DNA crime scenes already in the Bank.

Oops. The Data Bank can't accept Judy's DNA sample. Because she hasn't committed a crime, and her DNA didn't come from a crime scene.

## **Twists and turns**

Is this sufficiently labyrinthine yet?

Under the existing legislation, the only way Judy Peterson can find out if her daughter's DNA has been found, somewhere, is to get convicted of a violent crime – attacking a particularly obdurate bureaucrat might seem appropriate – so that her DNA can get entered into the Offenders Index in the National Data Bank and possibly matched with Lindsey's, assuming Lindsey's DNA is in the Crime Scene Index.

Of course, if it isn't, Judy would go to jail for nothing.

I can see Franz Kafka licking his lips in delight.

Some 50,000 families across Canada share Judy's dilemma – they too have missing children. Another 20,000 or so have missing adult relatives. And coroner's offices all across Canada have bodies they can't identify.

## Unused capabilities

The solution is actually fairly simple -- a pair of supplementary DNA indexes, for Found Human Remains and for Missing Persons.

Here's where Kafka would really cackle. The software for both indexes already exists. It was included in the National Data Bank's package when they got it. But the two programs have never been enabled.

Both were dropped from the legislation that created the Data Bank because of fears that they might infringe someone's right to privacy. It was argued that including these two additional indexes might "find" some people who wanted to stay missing.

"Not possible," Judy Peterson counters. "The only search would be against unidentified remains or unidentified DNA from crime scenes. Living people who want to be missing wouldn't show up in those databases."

Gary Lunn tried twice to introduce legislation that would reinstate the Missing Persons Index and the Found Human Remains Index, when he was the member of Parliament for Judy Peterson's riding. In 2003, he introduced a private member's bill he nicknamed "Lindsey's Law."

Parliament's Public Safety Committee considered Lindsey's Law and endorsed its recommendations. So did a Senate committee. So did Steve Sullivan, while he was federal Ombudsman for the Victims of Crime. Judy's current MP, Green Party leader Elizabeth May, has also supported its intent.

But it has never come to a vote, Judy explains, because implementing the bill would have cost about \$7 million. In a final Kafkaesque twist, only the government itself can introduce bills that have monetary implications.

It hasn't. And apparently won't. It has bigger things to deal with. Like Senate audits.

Twenty years later, Lindsey is still missing. And Judy is still searching.

\*\*\*\*\*

Copyright © 2013 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; links from other blogs welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns too.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca)

\*\*\*\*\*

## YOUR TURN

When my wife Joan read last Sunday's column about guns in church, she said, "Oh oh! You're in for it again!" Any time I write anything about guns, the NRA seems to circulate the column to a worldwide mailing list, many of whom write me in great umbrage. For some reason, that didn't happen this time. So there wasn't much mail to pass along.

Diane Robinson reacted with, "There is too much in the world that shocks and horrifies me. Your column regarding guns in churches has added one more horror to my list. Three words come immediately to mind: 'And Jesus Wept'."

Rob Brown mused, "I was particularly caused to reflect by Charles Burton's observation that, 'If people don't feel safe because of the lack of community, guns won't fix that.' That's the key. I think a lot of people don't live in particularly healthy community, which seems to raise their insecurity. Then the National Rifle Association comes along as says, 'The solution for insecurity is a gun.' Vicious circle. I'm glad that we have a different approach to

firearms here in Canada. Although, I admit, we are seeing more gun crime, and we are significantly influenced by American values.”

Jean Hamilton in Nova Scotia challenged me: “I wonder why you so often choose examples from south of the border, when we have so many things worthy of critique going on closer to home. I am more concerned about the weakening of environmental laws in Canada, the muzzling of scientists and (of all things) librarians, the evasion of responsibility for the many scandals, and so on and on...including, on the subject of guns (and Tasers), the readiness of our police to shoot first and ask questions later.

“Could we not have a discussion among your readers of the political and theological implications of the actions of our own government?”

I hadn’t intended to prolong the discussion about computers (started with the “I am Joe’s computer” column several weeks ago) but a further e-mail from Jean was too good to ignore. She wrote, “My grandson Adam, whose dad is an ‘IT guy’ and who cut his teeth on computers, came into my kitchen one day when he was about 10 and saw my electronic portable typewriter on the table.

“He asked, ‘What’s that, Nanny?’

“I said, ‘That’s a new kind of computer. You don’t need a printer; you just put the paper in there and type on the keyboard, and the words come up on the paper.’

“Adam said, ‘Cool!’

“His dad, who was standing beside him, said, ‘Yes, and first thing you know, you won’t even have to plug them in!’”

\*\*\*\*\*

#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca). Similarly, you can un-subscribe at [sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca).

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)

\*\*\*\*\*

#### 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

- Ralph Milton’s HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating’s “SeemslikeGod” page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.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.

\*\*\*\*\*