

*Wednesday September 26, 2012*

## **Forgiving the unforgivable**

By Jim Taylor

It was a ghastly, horrible, disgusting, ruthless crime – there are hardly enough adjectives to describe what David Shearing did.

In 1982, Shearing shot and killed George and Edith Bentley, and their daughter and son-in-law Jackie and Bob Johnson, while they were camping at a B.C. park. And if that weren't enough, he kept the Johnson's two daughters, the Bentley's granddaughters, Janet 13 and Karen 11, alive for most of the next week while he sexually assaulted them. Then he killed them too.

Last week, Shearing failed to win a parole application.

In reporting the story, the Kelowna newspaper placed two contrasting quotations on its front page.

From Shearing: "My actions will always cause me to feel an overwhelming sense of shame."

From a friend of the victims: "Thirty years later he is the same sick, callous, remorseless monster he was in 1982."

Those two contrasting quotations reveal the clash between ideals and reality.

The reality is that each parole hearing feels – in the words of a niece – "like another scab has been ripped off and we bleed again." Thirty years has not softened the anger, the bitterness.

But the ideal, as I understand the Christian faith in which I was reared, is forgiveness.

Is what Shearing did forgivable?

### **Raw reality**

I can't presume to judge those who judge Shearing harshly. I've never been in their situation.

The Parole Board agreed with them. Shearing, they ruled, remains too great a risk to release into society.

Students of comparative religions look for a dominant theme in each of the great religions: Judaism, obedience; Islam, submission; Christianity, forgiveness.

Granted, the history of Christianity does not always support that characterisation. The Crusades were not particularly forgiving. Nor were the witch hunts, or the Inquisition. Although the Inquisition at least aimed at repentance, thus making its victims eligible for forgiveness.

Personally, I do not believe that anyone is ever beyond God's forgiveness. Not even David Shearing.

Theoretically, we should emulate God and forgive him too.

But theory doesn't cut it, when you've been cut to the heart.

### **Defining ideals**

Genesis claims that humans were made in God's image. Although I normally avoid taking the Bible literally, I think the wording is important. Humans were made in God's image; God was not made in human image.

The fact that humans may not be able to forgive a crime as hideous as Shearing's doesn't mean that God cannot forgive him.

God is the ideal towards which humans aspire.

We need such an ideal, whether or not we can attain it. Without ideals, we sink into a morass of individual desires. My welfare trumps your welfare; I can squash you like a bug, and not care. Universal selfishness shatters unity.

To counter that anarchy, every religion identifies its ideals. Sometimes they embody those ideals and give them a name. Like God, or Krishna. Sometimes they turn those ideals into a philosophy rather than a being.

However it's done, we need those ideals. Especially when we fall short of them. To remind us of what we could be.

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## YOUR TURN

After last week's column on the effect of placebos, Fran Ota took exception to my suggestion that someone in a car accident would want "the real thing" not some form of "alternate medicine."

"I found the comment about the 'real thing' offensive, as if homeopaths are not the 'real thing' but dispensers of placebos," Fran wrote. "I come from a family of a long line of homeopaths, and they are also the 'real thing'. If I were in a serious car crash, of course I would go to a hospital and an allopath would stitch me back together -- but I would also be consulting my homeopath for medications which would speed the healing and minimise the need for more dangerous painkillers and drugs."

Fran provided a couple of recent examples of homeopathic medicine providing relief that allopathic medicine could not.

She went on, "All the drugs you and I take for anything are based on a substance which occurs in nature. **\*All\*** of them. Every antibiotic is a variant of something which has occurred naturally, like penicillin for instance. Homeopathic medicine also utilises substances which occur in nature..."

"The difference is the theory of treatment. Homeopaths believe that the body, given the appropriate stimulus, has the means to speed its own healing. With homeopathic medicines, once the process of healing begins, you stop taking the medication..."

"Which would you rather use after a car crash? Something which will speed your recovery and minimise reliance on heavy drugs? Or stick with the heavy drugs which may have a harmful effect on your system?"

"Michigan State University has a medical school which teaches allopathic, homeopathic, naturopathic, and osteopathic medicine. Every student **MUST** obtain an MD before specialising in one of those four. Some are also surgeons. Homeopaths are as much the 'real thing', as allopathic physicians and surgeons."

Cliff Boldt suggested "Government subsidies and tax breaks may be a bit like placebos. Except they don't work, but we keep being told to accept them as necessary. Sigh."

Life friend Jane Downs Wallbrown wrote, "I read your Placebo article with interest. That's sort of my world. Human behavior!"

"My niece sent me Daniel Kahneman's book, *Thinking Fast; Thinking Slow*. He's a Nobel prize winner, easily readable. It has blown my mind! It occurred to me, after reading the Placebo thing, that it might blow your mind as well so I have had it sent to you... I now see the truth of his book everywhere, which causes me some dismay. The marketing/advertising world certainly has taken its content to heart, as well as the political world."

Clare Neufeld offered some wisdom: "I had a doctor, years ago, whose philosophical response to faith, placebos, and other inexplicable effects, might be good for many of us hard-liners in religious or scientific matters: 'You can't argue, reasonably, with what works!'"

This view, Cliff argued, “might also have a ‘placebo’ effect, otherwise known as ‘grace’, extended to those whose life, experiences, insights, focii, etc., are distinctly differentiated from our own. It brings to mind the adage, ‘Don’t depend only on your own understanding. Acknowledge God(s), and [God] will guide your life, (too)!’”

Laurna Tallman in England wrote an extended letter about her own research into an unconventional form of medicine. I won’t print it all, but if I may digest a field I’m not familiar with myself, she finds that much therapy can be accomplished through the ears, by the kinds and qualities of music listened to. The ear, she maintains, has a direct connection to the brain, and thus to the well-being of the whole body.

Because the right ear connects to the left brain, and the left ear to the right brain, it’s possible to use these connections to influence a variety of neurological and psychological malfunctions.

If I say any more I’ll be way over my depth, so I’m going to break my usual rules about the privacy of my correspondents, and give you an e-mail address where you can follow up directly with Laurna if you wish:  
[rtallman@reztel.net](mailto:rtallman@reztel.net)

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I think perhaps my political views are showing in this paraphrase of Psalm 124, for Sunday September 30.

- 1 The odds were stacked against us from the beginning.
- 2 The great corporations strung us a line  
about caring for us, about bringing prosperity.  
But they really meant prosperity for themselves.  
When the profits looked better somewhere else,  
they abandoned us. They always do.
- 3 The powerful nations promised us freedom;  
they loaned us millions for a fresh start.  
now we are enslaved by our debt.  
They will not free us.
- 4 The arms makers sold us weapons  
to protect ourselves against our neighbors.  
They sold weapons to our neighbors,  
to protect themselves against us.
- 5 Now our former friends are a threat.  
We need more, and more, and more.
- 6 The only one not exploiting us for private gain is God.
- 7 If we have retained any faith in human nature,  
in justice, in our own identity,
- 8 it is because of God.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775.

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YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](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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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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

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

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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