

Sunday February 24, 2013

Abuse, murder, and assenting victims

By Jim Taylor

Friday February 22, two days ago, marked the third anniversary of Allan Dwayne Schoenborn's conviction for murdering his three children. He stabbed the oldest, ten-year-old Kaitlynn; he smothered her two younger brothers: Max, eight, and Cordon, five.

Justice Robert Powers of B.C. Supreme Court found Schoenborn guilty of premeditated murder, but declared him not criminally responsible on account of mental disorder."

Basically, Justice Powers concluded that Schoenborn must have been delusional, because "any reasonable or rational person would know that [what he did] was wrong." If he killed his children, therefore, Schoenborn could not be "reasonable or rational."

Schoenborn claimed that he wanted to protect his children from sexual abuse. But no evidence was offered that they had ever suffered from sexual abuse, or were likely to.

A more likely scenario -- he was distraught that his partner, Darcie Clarke, had decided to leave him after 15 years together.

A relative term

As I read reports from the trial, I was surprised she would stay with him that long. Schoenborn had a long history of abusive relationships. During the week preceding the murders, he was arrested three times for violence and threats of violence.

But as I'm starting to realize, abuse is a relative term.

Our daughter is mother to a rapidly maturing eight-year-old girl. She's trying to teach her daughter that no one needs to tolerate abusive behavior.

But she lives with the tragically immature six-year-old boy I wrote about two weeks ago. Who hits his mother. Screams at her. Throws things....

Somehow, what she tries to teach her daughter doesn't match her own example.

Is this a case of "Do as I say, not as I do?"

Why does she do it? "Because he's a child," she says. "I feel responsible for him. I love him. I believe there is hope that he will straighten out..."

Darcie Clarke might well have used the same words to justify staying with an abusive husband, before she finally decided that enough was enough.

A near-universal experience

So might thousands of others, living in less-than-perfect relationships. Because abuse is not just physical. Or sexual. Emotional abuse is less evident.

The chronically depressed spouse who salvages her own self-esteem by cutting her husband down to size.

The boss who flexes his power by berating his employees in public.

The control-freak who micro-manages every aspect of a couple's financial affairs, who won't let his wife have her own credit card?

The alcoholic who's skilled, competent, holds a job and earns an income, but drinks herself into a stupor every evening.

The husband who refuses to give up his hobbies, his sports, his career, while his partner struggles with disabled children, unreliable appliances, and aching loneliness?

Feel free to reverse the gender pronouns in the examples above.

Basically, I suspect, all of us live with some elements of abuse. As Pogo said, “We have seen the enemy, and he is us.”

Making distinctions

So why do we hang in, year after year, letting ourselves be victims? Janie, the dear friend of a dear friend, hung in too long. Her husband beat her to death.

There are no simple answers.

Relationships that I might consider merely awkward, someone else might consider intolerable. And vice versa.

I remember an article about computer glitches. The author suggested that programs had two kinds of problems. He called them Fatal Flaws and Workarounds.

Fatal Flaws meant that the program simply could not do what it should do. Like a spreadsheet that won't process formulas accurately, or a grammar checker that can't – oh, wait, Microsoft Word already has one of those.

Workarounds were lesser flaws – irritating inconveniences that one could learn to work around. An awkwardly placed Delete key, for instance. A command requiring three keystrokes instead of two.

One person's Workaround might be another's Fatal Flaw. My friend Ralph Milton returned a new laptop because the keyboard didn't feel right for his fingers; I persevered with a keyboard whose numbers and letters wore off within a year. Maybe I have a higher masochism index...

Making wise choices

The same terms might apply to human relationships. But we don't all draw the distinction in the same place. The personality flaw that sends one person in search of a divorce lawyer may be, for another person, merely a workaround.

Perhaps Darcie Clarke should have recognized sooner that Allan Schoenborn had a Fatal Flaw – in his case, the morbid pun seems appropriate. Perhaps she thought she could work around it.

I'm not blaming her – but if she had made that distinction, sooner, she might have saved three children's lives.

Perhaps, for an eight-year-old girl growing up, it's not as crucial to condemn every possible form of abuse as to learn to make wise choices, to know which human flaws she can safely work around, and which flaws could be fatal. Literally.

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

YOUR TURN

As the world waits to see who will be the next Vicar of Rome, you expressed your views.

Steve Roney said I had missed the point in last week's column. "Even if they [the 118 male cardinals] all wanted a female pope, it would still be in violation of canon law. It cannot happen, until or unless a Pope or a Council changes Church teaching, which in principle cannot happen."

Steve also advised me that "Benedict was actually the eighth German-born pope."

Ruth Shaver wrote, "I note with sadness that although the person elected to be Pope does not have to come from the current Curia, he does have to be a man because the Pope is the Bishop of Rome, a position which requires ordination."

Ruth favoured the election of a pope from the south, but, she added, "If we are to have another Pope from the European traditions, I would approve of Sean Cardinal O'Malley of Boston, who has been at the forefront of recognizing the hurt of and restoring dignity to victims of abuse and who, in my personal experience, values the ministry of women more than any other ranking member of the episcopate in the Roman Catholic Church."

By some coincidence, Tim Scorer was leading a seminar at Sorrento, along with Mary Jo Leddy and Chris Lind, the same week as my column suggesting that I'd love to see Mary Jo setting the Vatican's agenda. Tim wrote, "At breakfast some folks -- mostly an Anglican community -- got into proposing Mary Jo for pope. Then, lo and behold, I get your blog in which you are sending up the same balloon!"

John McTavish shared my sense that a Pope from a southern nation is likely to be as conservative as the last two incumbents. "I'm not sure what the Cardinals can do that would be significantly daring short of setting in motion a total overhaul of their church," he wrote. "All their big issues, as I see it, lead to other issues. For example, if they ever elected a Pope who allowed priests to marry, there goes the hard line on abortion and divorce and homosexuality. Imagine a married priest sounding off in the pulpit on abortion and going home for lunch to have his wife confront him: "You stood there in the pulpit this morning and said... Who gives you the right to talk about what goes on in my womb and the wombs of my sisters!" Okay, not every wife of every priest is going to talk this way. But some of them will, and they're not going to stop talking until there has been a complete overhaul of the system."

"And so, as I say, I don't know what the poor aging Cardinals can do short of waving a white flag or continuing on as before with only superficial change (such as electing a black-skinned but still conservative Pope)."

Isabel Gibson indulged in some philosophy: "This aligns with my political theory that leaders find it easier to introduce change that plays against type: so Conservatives ought to be able to introduce programs that favour/support groups they aren't normally seen as representing (women, aboriginals, criminals), whereas Liberals will be able to introduce programs that cut spending with less hassle..."

There's some validity to that argument. After all, it was paranoid Richard Nixon who opened relations with "Red" China, and hawkish Ronald Reagan who presided over the collapse of the Cold War. In Canada, liberal finance minister Paul Martin introduced stringent austerity measures.

Isabel continued, "In this case, a 'standard-issue' Pope candidate (Italian, old-ish) would have an easier time shaking up dogma than an outlier. It will be interesting to watch."

Bob Walker was less optimistic: "Like you, my first reaction on learning of Benedict's resignation was that the Cardinals should elect one of the fine "sisters" (aka "nuns") to the Vatican leader's office. If that were to be, we'd be freed (so I aver) from the U.S. Catholic bishops' unending attack on women, and their effort to make Catholicism the official U.S. religious body ruling the nation despite the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that outlaws the "establishment" of any religious body."

"During one of his trips to the U.S., a nun urged Pope John Paul II to elevate the Catholic sisterhood to the ranks of priesthood, thereby being available for parish ministries in the wake of declining numbers of male priests. He replied that he could not allow women to be priests since God chose a man to be the vessel for the coming of a Christ."

"Her snappy reply was that God chose a woman to be the vessel for that man."

I love that retort. Perhaps I'll borrow it some time.

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

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.

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. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at 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

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. 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;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, 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 to get onto her mailing list.
