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Sunday December 28, 2014

NO COLUMN TODAY

By Jim Taylor

Nope, no column today. Sorry. As of Wednesday, I still had no idea what to write about – the Luka Magnotta trial for murder and dismemberment, the anti-police demonstrations in the U.S., recurring killings of unarmed black youth (mainly male) by those same police, the tenth anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami, to say nothing of endless year-end reviews of significant events – and then Christmas Day from opening stockings in the morning to turkey dinner in the evening....

So I took this week. To recover. From over-eating. And over-thinking.

YOUR TURN

But there was mail. The column about treating people who commit crimes, especially mass murders, as mentally disturbed drew a number of responses. Several writers wondered if I was painting too many with too broad a brush.

Chris Duxbury, from Australia where the chocolate shop killings occurred, cautioned, “I think we have to be careful not to label everyone who does these terrible crimes as mentally ill and then excuse their behaviour. We may automatically think how else could someone do this atrocity if they were not mentally ill? Perhaps some people just give in to their dark side. We all have a dark side, but we try not to let it rule us.”

To illustrate, Chris added a story:

“One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, 'My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.'

“The grand son thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: 'Which wolf wins?'

“The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one you feed.'”

Steve Roney wrote, “As for the problem of the mentally ill becoming violent, it will not do to lock people up on speculation that they might commit a crime. And I would feel better if you had noted that, statistically, the mentally ill are apparently less likely to commit violent crimes than the general population. They have enough stigma against them without this one being added, of being violent mass murderers.”

In my defence, I'd like it noted that I didn't suggest incarcerating the mentally disturbed. Nor did I suggest that all people with mental problems will become violent. Indeed, many will retreat in the opposite direction. All I asked for was a recognition that mental disabilities need to be recognized and treated, just as much as physical disabilities are.

Susanna Suchak picked up on that point: “That the seriously mentally ill are invisible and uncared for may be an error in your thinking. We who work with them know them very well. They often have sweet souls fighting to be.

The resources we have at our fingertips are inadequate and quite frankly we are burned out trying. I do think you have nailed it (note the crucifixion pun and my apologies) when you say that there is a lack of will.

"If it doesn't bleed, maim, or kill, we can just walk on by. Most of the good people I know complain that the mentally ill in our small city are undesirables and barriers to our downtown economy. But where else should they go? There's a serious lack of affordable housing and a maze of bureaucratic red tape to wade through, even to get them on a wait list. They must have a physician to make an original diagnosis so that they can receive any kind of care and/or support...

"Counselling allows for SIX visits. Yes, just SIX. I'm screaming because it is ludicrous to expect someone with so many serious and often concurrent disorders to be 'fixed' in six one-hour visits to a busy counsellor.

"These people aren't invisible -- if we as 'Christians' and good people would only use our ears to hear and open our eyes to see. I think Jesus said something along these lines.

"I often preach (sometimes even from the pulpit) about the Gerasene 'demoniac' who was healed when Jesus looked into his eyes and really saw him as a human being with inherent dignity and worth. I try to remember that story when someone comes into my office. It's not always easy. Well, frankly, it's never easy. But I think that is what we are commanded to do...since we are all Relations."

Bob Walker asked, "Are we to suppose that every such act of killings is the result of a mentally ill individual or released criminal? Might not such cruelties be the result of anger leading to revenge, or be guided by a religious conviction based on supposedly sacred writings...

"Some months ago, after another horrifying killing [at a school], the National Rifle Association (NRA) said the best solution is to lock up permanently every single criminal and mentally ill individual

"It is essential that we find the means for controlling criminals and helping the mentally ill persons who are guided by their thieveries, angers, or paranoia; however, even more so we need a tight control over the gun industries so that no individual can freely walk into a store and leave with one or more guns plus a huge supply of bullets intended for murdering people.

"Further, leaders of our various religious bodies need to set aside the sacred writings that call for murderous punishments of individuals or groups because of their sinfulness in disobedience to their supposedly angry deity. As a Wesleyan follower of the Jesus way of life, I plead with people to set aside all suppositions that we worship an angry God, ignoring the conviction that the God portrayed by Jesus is a giver of love to one and all, deserved or not.

"It's time to worship the God of love, not the idolized guns. Instead of having to bury people killed by guns, let us bury the guns."

"There are no simple answers," wrote Charles Hill. "There are multiple mental health reasons for acts of deadly violence. Let's look at paranoia. I think the police are out to get me. Can I be detained and hospitalized if I vocalize that belief? No, not if I don't want to go. Can my wife or children hospitalize me if I don't want to go? No! (If that were possible, I think a number of people would find some way to get rid of me.) Most mental health illnesses are treated with medications, some of which have horrid side effects. Can you make me take a pill?

"Do you know someone who is unsuccessful in life because they do not have the mental ability to master a complicated task? There is a bell-shaped curve in ability to think, even if Karl Marx didn't believe in it. How would their ability to think through their actions be affected by poor reasoning ability? Karl Marx sent theists to mental hospitals along with capitalists. Some of us have better judgment in most situations. Is poor judgement mental illness? Is 'dumb' against the law?

"I have a friend whose wife has mental health issues that could motivate her to hurt someone. He can't do anything unless she is willing to go into treatment voluntarily (people with severe mental health issues rarely recognize or admit it) or commits a very serious crime. He is divorcing her to protect himself."

In a second letter, Charles added, "Here in Texas funding for hospitalization of the mentally ill was cut in half a decade or so ago. No governmental agency could afford, financially, to hospitalize every potentially dangerous person. Not all mentally ill individuals are dangerous to others. Not all mentally ill people, even paranoid

schizophrenics, are dangerous to others. Hate for another religion, racial group, etc. is not a mental illness. Low intelligence, something we now deny in schools, enables horrid decisions based on irrational reasons. There is no treatment for lack of intelligence. At this point, if anyone other than an Anglo Saxon (e.g., White) were forced into treatment, the news media would yell 'racial profiling.' It is a scary world. It always has been."

Cliff Boldt might have been anticipating some of these letters when he wrote, "Yep, you have over turned a rock that society would rather not have you do. We live in a society that fears mental illness; witness how we treat people suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's. You have this habit of holding up a mirror to your readers. Hold your hand steady."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- 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 "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.
