

*Wednesday August 1, 2012*

## **No “closure” for a hole in your heart**

By Jim Taylor

I consider myself fairly fluent with languages. That is, I can manage hello, goodbye, where’s the bathroom, and two-beers-please in half a dozen languages.

But I don’t speak or understand any Chinese. So I have no way of knowing if Jun Lin’s parents actually spoke of “closure” during their son’s funeral in Montreal. Or if that term came from the translator. Or, indeed, from the media commentator needing a neat way to sum up her report.

Jun Lin was the Chinese student murdered and carved into pieces about two months ago, allegedly by Luka Magnotta.

Because I didn’t keep notes at the time, I don’t have any accurate record of how many other times I’ve heard “closure” invoked. But almost every time there’s a murder, a rape, a beating, the victims or their families seem to express a hope that the perpetrator will be found, tried, and convicted. So that they can have “closure.”

### **Many motives**

If “closure” means “justice,” I can sympathize.

I have less sympathy if “closure” means “revenge.” Revenge can be a powerful motivation. It may even feel good – for a while – but it solves nothing. And it drags us down towards the moral level of the person we despise.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, raises our moral level.

When Charles Roberts invaded the one-room schoolhouse at West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, killing five schoolgirls and wounding five more in before shooting himself, the Amish community offered forgiveness. They comforted Roberts’ wife and parents. They established a fund to help his family. They attended Roberts’ funeral.

It didn’t make their own loss any less. As Donald Kraybill and other scholars have noted, the Amish willingness to forgo vengeance does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong. But by refusing to harbour grudges, they took a step towards healing. They prevented their grief from festering into bitterness or hatred.

They knew that “closure” cannot come by increasing someone else’s pain.

### **Closure never comes**

Some reports say that Jun Lin’s mother converted to Catholicism during her two-month stay in Montreal. She can now, the reports say, feel some sympathy for her son’s murderer.

It won’t bring her son back. But it will reduce the anger that might otherwise eat away at her from inside.

The word “closure” implies that one can close a door on the past and forget it. It assumes that pain and loss will go away; life will return to normal.

It won’t. It never will. Heartbreak can’t be bottled up and sealed.

Whenever I hear a TV talking head babble about “closure,” I immediately suspect that person has not had much experience of life. Because no one ever gets over a traumatic loss. If you love someone, there will always be a hole in your heart.

Eventually, you will find someone else to love. Eventually, you will learn to carry on without breaking down unpredictably. Eventually, your mood swings will even out, the broken bones of your life will knit together again.

And life will settle down to normal.

But it will always be a new normal, not the old normal.

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## YOUR TURN

Fran Darling wrote from Vancouver Island that she too had attended a reunion: “We are old enough now (1969 grad year) that we are no longer trying to impress each other, but we are genuinely interested in how each other's lives have unfolded. We had remarkable years with an amazing teacher (Rudy Engbrecht at Kelvin High in Winnipeg), at a time when world events were literally exploding all around us. So we compared notes on how our high school career formed us for the rest of our personal and professional lives -- all in different ways.... One of the most useful tools was the five-paragraph essay we learned in English class — every assignment week in and week out. Some even wrote their doctoral theses as multi-chambered five-paragraph essays.

“The whole reunion, at school and through the months before and since via e-mail exchange, underlined the importance of good teachers and the abiding value of keeping in touch.”

Bob Lewis wrote from the LeHigh Valley in Pennsylvania, “The Parent, Teacher, Leader Effectiveness books/courses deal with Active Listening -- the ability to put into our own words what a speaker has said in such a way that the speaker can agree that we have grasped the gist of his/her message. That, of course, calls for a certain attitude and certain listening skills...

“I like the old proverb that God has given us one mouth and two ears, therefore we should do twice as much listening as talking.

“There's the idea that God gave us two ears -- one to hear what people are saying, and one to hear what they really mean.”

Charles Hill and his wife are “currently teaching a group in a program called Stephens' Ministry how to listen. We can truly be alone in a crowd. Many will perhaps listen as we talk about happenings; few are interested in hearing our feelings. Men, in particular, are focused on solving problems, giving advice. Not having someone who can hear our problems without giving advice, or telling us we shouldn't feel that way, sure helps the psychotropic drug industry!”

Isabel Gibson mused, “In our “go, Go, GO!” culture, it's hard to wait and give someone the space they need to speak fully. A pause sounds like an invitation, and we're off and talking.

“I was in my 40s before I learned this – the opposite of talking is not listening; it's waiting. Waiting just a bit more gracefully -- maybe it's one of the gifts of increasing age.”

Dale Perkins offered some words of wisdom: “A friend of mine says there are four signs of a wise elder: He or she shows up; listens and pays attention; speaks the truth; and (this one usually gets me) doesn't become attached to outcomes.”

Ivan Gamble also had some good advice: “My son Ken told me ‘There are two kinds of listening; (1) listening to understand, and (2) 'listening to reply'. I must confess that I mostly 'listened to reply'. I used my early family life as an excuse. I was born 9th in a family of 12, with 3 younger brothers... My siblings and I usually played the game 'can you top this'. When they told a joke or a story I was trying to think of a better one. We competed for attention. Now I am seeking to focus on [listening for] understanding. This is in reality a moving from a focus on myself to a focus on others. It is a challenge, but I am working on it.”

Paul Mitchell (one of the classmates who was at the reunion I wrote about) described his own practice for teaching listening: “When I work with couples, I teach them this ‘listening exercise’. They must repeat back to their partner what they heard her/him saying, and before responding, must ask, ‘Is that what you said?’ If the partner says ‘no’ or ‘partly’, then the other tries again. A response can be given once the first partner agrees, ‘Yes, that is what I was saying’.”

Robert Smith offered a cultural explanation for the uncertainty about our grandson’s age: “Several years ago, a friend's son was in sub-Saharan Africa studying malarial effects. In the villages that he visited he discovered that the lives of children weren't celebrated until they reached their sixth year. As I understand it, mortality rate is so high among the very young children that they aren't given names until their 6th year -- supposedly so there is less attachment to the child when the inevitable happens. And then it is a community celebration that occurs for all children surviving until that 6th year.”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I don’t buy the notion implied in Psalm 51:1-12 that we are born sinful (sorry, St. Augustine), but I think it is beyond question that every one of us has fallen short of our ideals. Just as one absence ruins a perfect attendance record, even one mistake can ruin our self-esteem.

- 1        Take pity on me, God.  
As a god of love and of mercy, show mercy to me.
- 2        For I have disgraced myself, and you.  
The stink of my sinning clings to my skin like the spray of a skunk;  
I cannot wash it off.
- 3        For I know too well what I have done;  
My past hangs over my future like a dark cloud.
- 4        I took my chances, and cut my corners.  
I cared only of what other people thought of me.  
Now I see that each time I hurt another person, I hurt you.  
You have every right to condemn me.
- 5        But what else can you expect from me?  
I was conceived in a human womb, born to a human mother, brought up in a human society.
- 6        You expect me to be holy like you, through and through.  
Well then, teach me!  
Flush away my faults!
- 7        Scrape the crusted barnacles from my brain,  
and fill it with fresh ideas;  
Drain the pus from my spirit,  
and mend my soul with your touch.
- 9        If you must turn away from me, turn away from my bad side.  
Close your eyes to my many weaknesses.
- 10       Give me a second chance, Lord;  
Start me over again, with a transplant of your holiness.
- 11       But do not abandon me.  
Do not leave me without your company.
- 12       Take me back into your circle of friends, where I won't have to battle temptation alone.

For this and other paraphrases from *Everyday Psalms*,  
order the book 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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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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