

Sunday November 18, 2012

Distorted notions of justice

By Jim Taylor

We haven't seen video this disturbing since four RCMP officers killed distraught Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski with their Tasers five years ago at Vancouver International Airport.

Recently, TV networks showed four or more security guards – it's hard to keep track of burly bodies moving in front of the camera – forcibly subduing teenager Ashley Smith.

In one sequence, guards duct-taped Smith's hands to the armrests of her airline seat, while others jammed a second "spit hood" over her head. In another sequence, several guards held Smith down while one more guard injected her with anti-psychotic sedatives.

On October 19, 2007 – by some irony, just five days after Dziekanski's death -- Ashley Smith ended her life in her cell at the Grand Valley Institute for Women in Kitchener, Ontario.

Institutional complicity

I submit that the correctional system killed her, as surely as those RCMP officers killed Robert Dziekanski. Not physically, of course. Security services did not zap Ashley Smith with 300,000 volts. Nor did they tighten the cords around her neck that strangled her.

But they did not act to prevent her from killing herself.

They could have. But one of Grand Valley's managers, Michelle Bridgen, had ordered guards not to enter Smith's cell "as long as she was breathing."

So the guards had to watch, as syndicated columnist Christie Blatchford wrote, "as blood vessels broke in her face or eyes. They were reduced to counting the number of breaths she took. They saw her nose bleed and her face turn purple."

Blatchford continues, "When guards...tried to rush into Ashley Smith's segregation cell to cut off the makeshift ligatures around her neck... they were stopped by superiors and told to pull back...and if they went in anyway, they were warned, verbally and in writing, that they would face disciplinary hearings..."

They had, in fact, intervened on previous suicide attempts. Six guards, five female and one male, had stopped Smith from asphyxiating. The acting warden criticized those guards for saving her life. Their actions had constituted "use of force."

Even worse, they had actually interacted with their prisoner. They had talked with her. Even pleaded with her. The warden, Cindy Berry, blamed the guards for "not removing warmth" from their relationship with Smith. I'm appalled.

Maintaining control

There is something seriously wrong with a system that deliberately prevents human beings from showing compassion to other humans.

The video that somehow got released and televised suggests that the sole concern of the guards was to control Smith's behavior. With duct tape, spit hoods, and sedatives.

The primary motivation of the correctional system, it would seem, is to maintain control. Not to correct. And certainly not to rehabilitate.

There's no question that Smith was out of control. Her early crimes consisted of throwing apples at people and pulling fire alarms. Her behavioural problems escalated. By the time she turned 18, she had to be transferred from New Brunswick jails to federal penitentiaries. She was shunted from one prison to 17 times in less than a year. She spent all but a few days in solitary confinement.

But she got little help. A prison psychiatrist, according to one report, made some cards with her. Apparently she enjoyed writing and drawing. But her hands were kept cuffed behind her back the whole time.

Reward and punishment

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews came under fire from opposition critics for refusing to see Ashley Smith as a victim of his "correctional" system. But perhaps he couldn't.

If I understand his religious convictions correctly, Toews believes in a literal heaven and hell. That sets up a reward-and-punishment mindset. Good people go to eternal bliss; bad ones deserve eternal suffering.

Heaven and hell have been used for some 19 centuries in the Christian world to maintain control. Like a carrot dangled before a recalcitrant donkey, the prospect of heaven encourages oppressed people to submit to their present misery in the expectation of something better – eventually....

At the same time, the threat of hell deters them from rebelling.

Given that mindset, Toews would see no inconsistency in withdrawing human "warmth" from Ashley Smith. She's just getting a foretaste of what awaits her if she doesn't repent and change her ways.

In a heaven/hell mindset, Smith would not be a victim, but a sinner offered a chance of salvation.

The church, to its eternal shame, has been complicit in making heaven and hell a way for the privileged few to exert control over the miserable many.

That theology did not improve the lives of slaves and peasants, serfs and foot soldiers. But it worked well for those who could work the system for their own benefit.

Notions of heaven and hell will continue to create a reward-and-punishment framework for justice, until our nominally Christian society dares to re-think its theology. Hell in the hereafter, whether it exists or not, does not justify creating a hell on earth.

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YOUR TURN

I apologized for re-using (even with adaptations) a piece I had written six years before. John Hatchard from New Zealand replied, "I wasn't subscribed to your site six years ago so this piece is quite new for me. It is as beautiful and moving a piece of writing as any of yours that I have read. Thank you."

There were a few other compliments. Isabel Gibson wrote, "This piece caught you at your lyrical best - and that's saying something!"

And Isabel's mother (no, probably her mother-in-law, but I don't really know) Marjorie Gibson also wrote: "We share so much with our ancient ancestors, and this is a perfect example. How nice to have this example of love and grief instead of others where the death has obviously been a sacrificial act. Sheldon and I were lucky enough to visit Ireland several times. One is left with the feeling that no matter how many thousands of years separate us, we all wrestle with the same questions, the same fears, the same hopes."

Laurina Tallman wrote a long letter exploring the boundaries that separate – and unite – life and death, from which I will take only these excerpts:

“For years a husband and wife shared their weekends off work constructing a lovely garden. The spring after Paul died, Leona cried out one night for some sign of his new life and woke to find a columbine growing near the house beside the walk, far uphill from where they together had planted that plant....

“As my sister and I were driving towards Toronto to our father's funeral, the clouds swiftly shifted into a sky full of brilliant rose, pink, purple, and gold sculpted to the shapes of a romantic, gabled house with a walled garden full of flowers.... Together she and I exclaimed, ‘Dad must have created the clouds.’ The mind of a scientist and the sensibilities of a romantic circa 1930s were perfectly united for a few minutes. I have never before or since seen cloud formations of that complexity; that they should be lit by the setting sun for the moments when we might see them adds a breathtaking element of miracle.

“Many of the stories of life after death I have heard or read about I can now explain as hallucination... [But] Other accounts could not be hallucinatory. People who have died come back to life with knowledge impossible to the sensory systems of a dead corpse. People who are alive come into contact with the dead, as Jesus met his spiritual ancestors on a hilltop in the presence of his disciples who also perceived them. The cyber-cloud we have invented pales beside that cloud of witnesses who sometimes find an attentive soul open to their communication.

“I am so very glad those Celtic angels met you among the dolmens.”

At least two readers had also visited the Burren with its dolmens.

Barb Francis write, “We visited Ireland and the Burren a few months ago, and I learned more [about them] from reading your column today. We also lost a son, 22 years ago now, so we can understand your feelings about the child buried there.”

And Jean Hamilton sent me some pictures of the dolmen, and added a comment on a comment made in these letters: “Nothing wrong with a good diatribe. Nobody ever said Rick Mercer's rants were evenhanded, but they sure hit the nail on the head.”

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> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

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 to see if this service scratches where you itch. 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.

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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" -- reynoldsraps@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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.
