

Sunday November 24, 2013

Those who deny they're in denial

By Jim Taylor

A group of friends were sitting around a table, chattering about nothing in particular when, out of nowhere, one of the group asked two others who both had long careers in psychological counselling, “So, how would you counsel Rob Ford?”

[For non-Canadian readers: Rob Ford is the mayor of Canada’s largest city, a man who has been almost constantly in the news headlines for several months because of allegations, later confirmed, of cocaine use, drunkenness, temper outbursts, etc.]

I found the two counsellors’ responses informative. Because all of us find ourselves, occasionally, acting as amateur counsellors to our friends.

“I wouldn’t take him as an individual client,” one of the counsellors replied. “Not unless his family came with him. He’s a product of a family system, and that whole system needs to change before anyone in it can change.”

All of us are products of family systems, or work systems, that shape and sometimes warp our personalities and our reactions. I don’t say that to absolve individuals of responsibility. Comedian Flip Wilson’s trademark line, “The Devil made me do it,” got laughs because it was so obviously an evasion of personal responsibility.

In all the media frenzy surrounding the mayor of Toronto in recent weeks, I’ve seen little examination of the kind of family he grew up in. His wife has appeared with him only once. But his brother sticks as close as his five-o-clock shadow.

All for one, and one for all

Treating the family as a unit is not a means of blaming them – just acknowledging facts. Only alcoholics themselves can quit drinking. But their spouses or partners, their children or siblings, have learned – sometimes too well – how to survive in a toxic relationship. They have organized their lives around their relative’s addictions.

It’s a reciprocal relationship. The addict makes their lives a kind of hell; they enable him to keep doing it. Because they don’t know how to relate to an ex-alcoholic or ex-addict.

In effect, they have a stake in keeping him addicted.

In family therapy, the alternatives are clear – either the whole system has to change, or the individual has to break out of the system. That’s why divorces often follow a cure, although superficially the couple’s lives may have seemed worse before it.

The second counsellor talked about tactics, about “externalizing” the problem. The addict needs to see the problem as an enemy who is not identical to himself – whatever he is.

Instead of being used as an adjective – alcoholic, depressed, suicidal – the affliction is treated as a noun, something separate and distinct from the person addicted to it.

Guilt doesn’t work

In some senses, that’s counter-intuitive. Religion has traditionally taken the opposite approach. It works on guilt. The traditional ritual of confession begins, “Forgive me, father, for I have sinned...”

I have sometimes joked that churches should run a travel agency called “Guilt Trips.”

Church teaching implies that failure results from personal weakness, from an internal flaw. Only by repenting of your sins, renouncing them, excising them, even amputating them, can you be saved.

And why not? The Bible quotes Jesus as saying, “If your right hand offends you, cut it off.”

Some forms of Islamic law apply that concept literally to thieves.

Contemporary counselling, however, encourages the “sinner” to consider the “sin” as a separate force or influence – in a sense, like the demons that were once presumed to take over a person’s behaviour. By rejecting that demon, clients do not become less than they were; rather, they excise a foreign presence, like a tumour or a parasite, that prevents them from being what they could be.

Willingness to change

But what if the counsellee wants to blame others for his problems? A good counsellor does not offer sympathy. Or support. I found that an important lesson.

“This is not about them,” the counsellor would say. “This is about you.”

Counselling, in other words, is not about who’s right. Or about whose fault it is. Or about self-justification.

It’s about willingness to change.

“I used to blame my father for some things I didn’t like about myself,” a wise friend once commented. “Then I realized that I’ve lived with myself a lot longer than I lived with him.”

Strangely enough, it would seem, the biggest obstacle for Toronto Mayor Rob Ford may not be his associates, his drunken stupors, or even his use of illegal drugs.

It’s his addiction to denial.

As the Alcoholics Anonymous program knows, alcoholics cannot start recovery until they hit bottom. For some, “hitting bottom” means financial ruin, social exclusion, or mental/physical breakdown. A few manage to see the abyss before they fall over the edge.

Hitting bottom cannot be imposed on anyone. You cannot rationalize, you cannot browbeat, you cannot shame addicted persons into acknowledging (to use the Twelve-Step program's words) "that our lives had become unmanageable."

As long as Rob Ford or anyone else continues to insist that he's OK, that he can carry on, that he can do his job, he's not, and he can't.

Until he can get over the hurdle of denying that he's in denial, he can't be helped.

Nor can any of us.

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YOUR TURN

Most of us have never been in the kind of ethical situation that confronts the people of the Philippines. But we have seen dramatizations of it. Ralph Milton made a connection to Les Miserables: "Jean Valjean steals because a sister's child is starving and then steals from the priest because he is desperate. The priest does not condemn him and gives him two candlesticks which become a symbol of goodness in the rest of the opera. The policeman wants to arrest him because it is his duty, and eventually kills himself because he can't deal with the dilemma of doing this to a good man who turns out to be a saint. On the other hand, the heavy in the play steals from the dead because he can, and delights in it.

"I wish I knew myself well enough to know how I would respond in any such situations. I've never had to make those kinds of choices, and I hope I never have to."

Hanny Kooyman had similar thoughts: "I have often wondered how I would react. When all of 'my' world has gone to pieces -- no shelter, no water, no food -- am I to sit and wait till help comes in a week or two while food is stored close to where I am? I will take some of that food and I will never consider this theft but self preservation -- provided it is taken with consideration to many others suffering the same. We'll consider the "mine" question later, when all is back to normal again. I'm talking about abnormal situations. When a friend of mine told me that he had 'stolen' half a loaf of bread (the other half he had left for the person who had baked that bread), while the country was starving during Stalin's man-made famine.... I cannot call this stealing.

:Besides, I don't think I will recognize myself when truly overcome by hunger and thirst."

Bob Warrick wrote from Australia, "On today's morning TV news their reporter on the ground in the worst hit area of the Philippines observed that all nations were pulling together to bring aid .. If only, he said, the nations could cooperate for good always and forget about shooting each other. It was a powerful plea from a reporter, and they usually are so neutral and refrain from

making such comments... My comment is, if only the nations could hear his plea and see what a great thing it is work together.”

John Willems connected to the biblical story: “Everything is for sale, only the price needs to be negotiated. Look what was sold for an apple. What would our world be like if the price had been different or no sale at all?”

Steve Roney didn’t go for Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development: “Ethics is a branch of philosophy. No psychologist can be a guru on ethics. It’s out of his field.”

He clarified one story, that I had only partially: “As I understand it, those bags of rice were looted by thousands of individuals who stormed the warehouse [and thus caused the wall to fall, killing eight]. Nor is there any reason to see anything sinister in the rice sitting in the warehouse. Distribution is a major problem at the scene; the infrastructure is so badly damaged that most of the people who would have been emergency responders are themselves dead.

“It’s worth noting that the answer to [looting] is clear in the Catholic ethical tradition, the Philippines being an overwhelmingly Catholic country. If you or your family are starving, you have the moral right to steal the food you need to survive. The same would go for stealing medicine, if you are otherwise going to die.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- 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.
