

An Ugly Secret
The Recidivism Prevention Group
Melvin L Morse MD and Khalil Peterkin MS
Contact us at 302-747-6001 or morsemelvin@gmail.com

A 12 year-old boy screams with glee. "I'm home!" The school bus has just dropped him off in front of the house. He runs inside, pounds the stairs to his grandfather's room, throws open the door: just as his grandfather blows his head off with a shotgun. Grey and red speckling the wall behind him. The boy is now a man, age 36.

A 44 year-old man speaks of his memories of his Mom, murdered when he was three. His father was murdered at age 4.

A 36 year-old man talks about one morning when he was six years old. Daddy made breakfast before school. This had never happened before. He ran upstairs to find his mother. He ran into her room. She was dead in the closet. She had killed herself by overdosing on pills the night before. She hid in the closet as she was ashamed. Her husband found her and in an unconscious daze mindlessly made breakfast for the children.

Sergeant Aaron Jefferson was a highly decorated sniper in the Marine Corps serving his country in Afghanistan. He killed twelve of our country's most wanted terrorists. He saw their heads explode through the sniper's scope. He came home a heroin addict. He is now doing three years at SCI for burglary.

A 54 year-old man cries for the first time over the death of his Mom when he was 17. She dwindled away from ovarian cancer. He says, "I haven't been able to release my grief. It eats me up like a cancer inside me. My drug use started right after that. I ignored right and wrong."

A 44 year-old man dreams of NBA glory. He played basketball at Michigan State until he had a career-ending injury. He was good enough that Tulane picked him up and gave him a full academic scholarship while he went to rehab. He never played a game for Tulane although he graduated. "Even now," he says, "25 years later, all I am is messed up in my head about my injury. It's only recently I realized that my addiction allowed me to feel great about myself, to stop thinking about it."

These are the men society is locking up. They have unresolved grief and post-traumatic stress disorder presenting as drug addiction. Just saying "No!" and just achieving sobriety is not solving their problems. Drug addiction leads them to prison by way of drug dealing and burglary.

This is an ugly secret that I learned after spending only two months in the Key, Delaware's Department of Corrections prison-based Drug and Alcohol Treatment program. Scratch the surface of many inmates, and heart-shattering grief is uncovered. Grief that is mostly untreated, unrecognized, and certainly considered completely unrelated to drug addiction. When we treat addiction as a disease, we overlook the fact that for many, addiction is a symptom.

Ryder is the 36 year-old gentleman who vividly remembers his grandfather blowing off his head with a shotgun. He is a short solid man, with the build of a fireplug. His skin is a honeyed light brown. I have never seen him smile. He doesn't really frown either, but has a serious intense expression on his face which otherwise shows little expression. He has the shaved bald head often seen in men who have premature male pattern baldness. He radiates a solid earnest vibration and is not at all intimidating.

I heard him tell his life history in Mr. Dean's Life Skills class.

Mr. Dean's class is from 8:30 to 10:30 am for five months. He teaches moral and ethical skills to students who often have the character development of three year olds. The class is so highly regarded by the Delaware Judicial System that thirteen good time days are awarded for successful completion of the course. Mr. Dean says with pride that his class has saved the State of Delaware hundreds of thousands of dollars as studies have shown that graduates have a markedly lower chance of returning to prison compared to the breathtakingly high 80% recidivism rate seen in the general prison population. It costs Delaware \$33,000 a year to house an inmate.

One reason I enjoy the class is that it is held in another building on the prison compound from the Key Building. It is a pleasant five minute walk outdoors from the Key to the Learning Annex where Mr. Dean's class is held.

On the walk over to the Learning Annex, I first pass by the prison chapel with its brick-lined raised flower beds. Then I pass the back of the kitchen building with its rich smells and idling trucks of the community merchants who supply the prison with groceries. Next up is the prison vo-tech masonry yard with its cement mailboxes and light houses.

Finally I arrive at a red brick building with a wooden "Leaning Annex" sign pointing up a flight of stairs. I slowly climb the metal stairs and open the steel reinforced door into what appears to be a junior high school classroom, complete with a wooden desk for the teacher and combination metal desk chairs for the students. There is a large old-fashioned blackboard behind the teacher's desk.

I make a point to observe something that makes me grateful, that connects me with the divine, when I walk back and forth to Mr. Dean's class. A songbird perches on top of a security fence. A wooly caterpillar inches its way across the tarmac. The vibrant flowers in the Chapel's garden boxes. A touch of whimsy, someone took a spring daffodil and threaded it into the security lock of the door to the Learning Annex. Something remarkable.

Yet, am I looking deeply enough to find the mark of the divine? In my daily walk to Life Skills class, I find something beautiful, something humorous, something pleasant that perhaps makes me laugh. I thrill with wonder at the squawking V formation of the migrating geese overhead. I laugh at an unusual cloud shape that stimulates my imagination.

The Persian poet Hafiz wrote, "Everyone is God speaking. Why not be polite and listen to Him?" He also wrote, "Now is the time to realize that all that you do is sacred."

His poetry challenged me to find God in everything both within and around me. This means that the drudgery of daily prison life is just as much an awe inspiring part of Creator-God as are the antics of a wooly caterpillar. I had heard this same message from children who had near death experiences, that all of reality is sacred. One girl told me that she no longer minded waiting in long lines at the checkout stand at the supermarket, as "pieces of the light are there too, no different than in church."

I determined to listen carefully to my fellow inmates' experiences, as if God were speaking through them. I will be polite and listen.

Mr. Dean's course ran from early September through the end of January. There are only ten inmates in a class. This gives plenty of time for each student to describe his life to the class and explore specific incidents over times when the inmate betrayed and/or was dishonest to

others. With the help of Mr. Dean and the class, the student would place himself somewhere on a ten-rung moral ladder, ranging from dishonesty and betrayal to normal. Normal is the highest rung on the ladder. It is the state of non-criminal thinking and behavior that most people exist in. Some of the other rungs, for example, include oppositional behavior, being hurt by others, codependency and being in a constant state of emotional emergency.

Over the five months of the class we carefully analyze our behaviors and motivations and progress up the ladder.

As I sat in class one day, I wondered if God was to be found in the basest of human behaviors. As Mr. Ryder rose to tell his life story, I was to learn that not only does God have a dark side, but also a side-splitting sense of humor. Although Mr. Ryder's story starts with the grim image of his grandfather blowing his head off with a shotgun right before Mr. Ryder's eyes, it ended with an incident so hilarious and absurd that Big Easy fell out of his student desk chair as he was laughing so hard.

Mr. Dean asked Ryder to stand in front of the battered wooden teacher's desk and face the class. In a soft halting voice, while staring at the cracked linoleum floor, he first told us of his early childhood in a church-going middle class family. He was an only child but had many aunts and uncles and cousins. Sunday afternoon typically was a time that the family congregated to have Sunday dinner.

"I was an only child, but was part of a large extended family. I always felt loved. Then everything changed. My parents were killed in a car accident when I was six. I went to live with my aunt. My grandfather also lived there. My aunt became my Mom and I think of her as my Mom. I can hardly remember my parents."

“Life for me was very simple and sweet. My cousins became my brothers and sisters. I went to school, I came home and did my homework, I did my chores, we went to church. I had a good life.”

“I didn’t start missing my parents until my Grandpa killed himself. Then I couldn’t stop thinking about them. I started staying out late, running around with older kids. I started drinking, finishing beer cans and bottles at family parties, doing whatever I needed to do to get high.”

Ryder graduated from high school. He took culinary classes at Del Tech. Soon he was able to get a job as a short order cook without difficulty; he was a good cook and a reliable worker. He could not make enough money however to keep up with his by now firmly established cocaine and heroin addictions.

“I resented my family. I felt different from them. I used my anger as an excuse to get high.”

As Mr. Ryder said those words, I wondered if his anger was really unresolved grief. I knew from my work as a pediatrician that as orphans grow up, they often don’t start to grieve over the loss of their parents until they are old enough developmentally to understand death. This is often not until their teen years.

Like so many inmates in Delaware, Mr. Ryder received a fairly short initial sentence for burglary, followed by many years of probation. Even though he did not re-offend, he still was incarcerated throughout most of his twenties because he violated probation by continuing to use drugs. By the time I met him, he had not committed any burglaries or other such crimes in over a decade.

So why was Mr. Ryder incarcerated this time?

As Ryder explains it, it was all due to his sincere desire to be a good family man.

Mr. Ryder has two beautiful children, by two beautiful baby Moms. Mr. Ryder loves his children, one a handsome young man, age eight, and one a beautiful young lady, age six. Mr. Ryder grew up in a blended one big happy family, where cousins and uncles and aunts were all considered immediate family.

One beautiful summer day, he decided to buy his children new summer clothes, swim suits and swimming pool toys. His aunt, whom he was currently living with, had a small swimming pool in the back yard of her apartment complex.

Mr. Ryder loves both of his baby Moms. He loves his children so he spent a lot of time at each of his girlfriends' houses. To hear Mr. Ryder tell the story, he is absolutely convinced that he, his two baby Moms and his two children are just one big happy family.

So imagine Mr. Ryder's total shock and surprise at the following sequence of events as they unfolded.

He decided to drop his son off at Keisha's house, baby Mom number one. Mr. Ryder doesn't own a car, so he was picked up by Ki'ki, baby Mom number two. They parked in front of Keisha's house.

Mr. Ryder got out of the passenger seat. He carefully walked back to the rear door of the four-door sedan and opened the door. He reached in and unbuckled his son's seatbelt. He lifted him out of the car and gently placed him on the sidewalk.

Father and son then held hands and walked to the front door of Keisha's house. He admired her well-kept lawn and the nicely painted one-story rambler. Keisha opened the door and out ran his daughter to greet him. Ryder gazed at his children fondly as they embraced.

He told Keisha that he would shop for the children's summer clothes, swim suits and some fun pool toys. He and Ki'ki would be back in several hours to pick up his son. He thanked her warmly for the opportunity for his children to play together.

Keisha smiled back at him and hissed, 'Don't you ever bring that whore over to my house again.' Ki'ki heard her and jumped out of the driver's seat of the car. "Who are you calling a whore, bitch?" The car was situated with the passenger's side closest to the curb. Ki'ki leaned over the hood of the late model Chevy Malibu and screamed, "You want some of this?"

Ryder hurriedly took his children inside the house. He situated them in front of the living room TV set, and found a snack for them to munch on.

When he returned outside, he found the two women locked in mortal combat on the hood of the Malibu. He jumped in the passenger's seat and honked the car horn. Finally Ki'ki rolled off the hood and got in next to him. She backed up the car rolling Keisha forward and ultimately dumping her on the road. As Ki'ki and Ryder drove off, the two women continued to scream invectives at each other.

The next day, Ryder decided to host both children at his aunt's house, to avoid any problems. He borrowed his aunt's car and picked up his son. He brought him back to his aunt's home, and while she looked after the boy, he drove to Keisha's and picked up his daughter. The two children had a wonderful afternoon trying on their new clothes and playing in the pool.

Since Ryder didn't have a driver's license, he asked the women if they could pick up their respective children. He carefully schedule one child to be picked up at 5:00 pm and one at 6:00.

Unfortunately, one woman arrived late and the other woman came early. They met in Ryder's kitchen and started up where they left off the day before. Just as tempers were boiling over and blows about to be exchanged, Ryder's aunt came into the kitchen. He heard the ratcheting sound as she pumped a shell into the chamber of a shotgun. "Take it outside girls," she said, "not around the kids," pointing the shotgun at them.

Both women jumped up and tumbled out the third floor apartment's door. They then fell down the stairs, punching, brawling, and shouting, rolling down the steps out the front door, down the cement steps of the front door stoop and on to the lawn where they both passed out.

Both women were taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital where they were kept overnight. Ryder ended up being arrested for living in a home with a shotgun and for the drugs that spilled out of both women's purses. They children spent the night with Ryder's Mom.

Mr. Ryder tested negative on a urinalysis which lent credence to his claim that the drugs were not his. He told us that he had no idea that his aunt owned a shotgun. Still he pled guilty and was sentenced to one year in the Key Drug and Alcohol Treatment program for possession of a firearm by a person prohibited.

Mr. Ryder looked around the small classroom and sighed. "All I wanted was a nice normal family life, yet look where it got me."

Then he burst into tears.

Mr. Dean went over and embraced him. He told him, "You are a man of courage. In twenty years of teaching this class, I have never heard a more tragic story nor met a student as capable of handling that trauma as you." As hilarious as the finale to Ryder's story was, none of us could get the haunting image of the young boy witnessing his grandfather's suicide out of our minds.

Nor could I escape the ironic symbolism of his aunt's shotgun putting him back in prison. Perhaps it was the same shotgun that his grandfather used, responsible as a trigger for his PTSD leading to lifelong struggles with heroin and crack cocaine addiction. How ironic that his addictions were conquered prior to his being sentenced to a drug and alcohol treatment program. Mr. Ryder of course accepted that plea bargain as otherwise he could have received as much as eight years for the gun charge alone.

Mr. Dean felt confident that Ryder would not be returning to prison. He based this on Mr. Ryder's score of "normal" on the moral inventory of Ryder's life, gleaned from his life history.

Mr. Dean should know. He has seen hundreds of convicts pass through his Life Skills class in his 20-year tenure at SCI.

After the students present their life story and their moral inventory, the next step is to confront those same moral issues and make amends if possible.

Mr. Dean shared with the class two examples of the transformative power of this process.

He told us the story of Robert, a young man who served three years for assault.

Robert was a troubled young man with a gift for playing football. His high school's Assistant Principal made the young man his personal project, loaning him money for clothes, making sure that he could play sports even when academically ineligible and opening his home to the young man when he was homeless. College scouts attended games to see Robert play. The football team went to the State Championships, but Robert didn't, because of out-of-control drug use. He ended up punching the Assistant Principal at the school's sports award ceremony in front of 300 people. Instead of a college scholarship, Robert spiraled downward to a life of drugs, alcohol and, ultimately, prison.

He always remembered the man who tried to help him. He was always ashamed of punching the man in his anger and frustration about his own behavior. His awards ceremony brawl was his effort to handle the grief of losing a football scholarship to a Division One college school.

As Robert climbed the moral ladder in the Life Skills class, Mr. Dean encouraged him to write to the Assistant Principal. By then the man was the Superintendent of Massachusetts Public Schools.

That letter changed both men's lives. The Assistant Principal became cynical after being assaulted by the young man he reached out to help. Robert assumed that he would not be forgiven. For him, the incident proved that he was not a worthwhile human being, "lower than snake shit," as he put it.

That letter led to further correspondence. After Robert was released, he was offered a job working with troubled teenagers in the Massachusetts Public School system. He initially

lived with his former mentor until he found a place of his own. He has not returned to either Delaware or prison.

In retrospect, both men realized that Robert punching the Assistant Principal was a response to his grief at the loss of his football dreams. Anger and violence are common masculine responses to grief and trauma.

One of my classmates asked, "Are you saying, Mr. Dean, that simply writing a letter could wipe Mr. Ryder's mind clear of his grandfather's suicide?" Mr. Dean replied, "No, I am not saying that. I am saying that this class is a safe place for making the association, the linking up of the trauma, the horrible things that you men have endured, and your drug addictions, your alcoholism, and your anti-social criminal behavior. Then you have a place to start to heal yourself, to finally walk away from these walls."

Mr. Dean told us another story to illustrate this point.

He said he had another student who was in and out of jail for ten years for crack addiction and burglary. His Mom was a single mother who raised two sons. Both boys became crack addicts. Mr. Dean's student stole his mother's diamond engagement ring and sold it for drugs. This was all she had from the boys' father, who had died when they were very young. Mr. Dean's student blamed the theft on his brother.

The next time his mother visited the prison, the student confessed to her that he had stolen the ring and that he had felt guilt about the theft for many years. His mother hugged him and cried. She said that she had always known that he took the ring, but was happy that he told her. This led to a new closeness between mother and son. This time when he left prison, he did not return. Mr. Dean said that he has been out for more than five years.

Mr. Dean was not trying to say that severe trauma such as being a sniper for the military, or suffering the death of family members and friends can be easily resolved. His examples were meant to be illustrations of what is possible once we make the connection between guilt, shame and trauma and alcoholism, drug addiction and criminal behavior.

Daryl is the 44 year-old former college basketball star who had his career cut short by injury. He had never made the association between his grief at losing a promising athletic career and his subsequent drug addiction until he and I talked one day. He didn't even realize that anger is often the first stage of grieving and one that men commonly get stuck in.

Daryl asked his counselor for information on post-traumatic stress disorder and grief. He started to play basketball with the other men when we went out to gym. He was surprised to realize that he had not played basketball, even at the pick-up level, in twenty years.

Daryl found that he had many symptoms in common with descriptions of men suffering from PTSD. He asked me if a basketball injury could be considered as traumatic as the death of a loved one, or a war injury. I honestly didn't know the answer to this. However, he clearly felt healed just by considering the issues. His craving for drugs, ever present even after a year in prison, has subsided.

He and I gave our fellow inmates a class on the link between trauma and drug addiction. At the beginning of the class, we asked for a show of hands of all those who felt trauma was a core issue in their lives. Only three men raised their hands.

Daryl spoke first and told the men his story. He spoke movingly for about ten minutes. There was total silence after he spoke. There still was over an hour left of the therapy session.

The men were totally engaged. No one was reading a book, writing a letter, or quietly talking as is common in most treatment sessions.

Over fifty men were totally silent, waiting for what was to come next. They all looked at me expectantly.

I heard myself quietly say that my own struggles with anger were in part fueled by my unresolved grief over the many dozens of patients, babies and children, who died under my care.

As a young man, I worked for Air Lift North West, an Air Transport Medivac service out of Seattle Children's Hospital. We transported critically ill infants and children from Alaska, Montana, Idaho and throughout the state of Washington to Seattle.

Many of these patients died. The children who survived became the source material for my books on children's near death experiences.

At the time, I felt unaffected by the rigors of attempting to resuscitate so many children who came close to death, often from nearly drowning, automobile accidents or severe overwhelming infections. I felt like a hero, working with beautiful nurses, flying around the Northwest United States in either airplanes or helicopters.

As a team we never spoke of the sadness and grief we must have individually felt. There were no lectures or conferences on the grief and trauma caretakers endure when caring for dying children. We often had Quality of Care conferences dedicated to understanding how we could have provided better care for our patients. Unfortunately, these conferences led me to feel defensive and intensely guilty about my failures. I often obsessed over trivial mistakes which did not affect the overall care of the patients.

I was often designated to speak to the parents. I was always acutely aware that it was not my child or infant who had died or was critically ill. I formed a tough shell around my own feelings. I found that I was better able to answer their question the more detached emotionally I was from the situation.

After I married, and adopted children, I developed odd quirks that should have alerted me to serious unaddressed problems. I had a severe phobia of balloons at birthday parties. I remember taking Cody to one of his friend's birthday parties. To my horror, there were dozens of balloons in the living room of his friend's home, as decorations. I could only remember a patient of mine who had inhaled a piece of a rubber balloon and died.

I could hardly think. My heart was beating out of my chest. Cody started misbehaving, as he often did. I was relieved. I had an excuse to take him home, which I did. Cody asked me why we went home early and I angrily told him it was because he was a "bad boy." I couldn't believe I said this to him; I just blurted it out from my fear and anger at seeing the balloons. All of my training as a pediatrician, all my efforts to be a good father. I flushed them all down the toilet by angrily telling Cody he was a "bad boy".

Cody worshipped me. Now the Dad he worshipped called him "a bad boy." I was so ashamed. When we got home, Allison asked me how the party went. I angrily told her that Cody acted up again and that we had to go home.

Many of the men reacted with quiet whispering to this part of my story. One man raised his hand and said that he had often been called a "bad boy" as a child. Another man thanked me for my words. He said that he now understood that his own father had his own fears and traumas, but that what was important was that he treat his children with respect.

I then briefly shared with the men the circumstances of my own descent into hell, my hepatitis C, treatment with Interferon and the blossoming of my previously unrecognized bipolar disease. I explained how I didn't want to admit that I was challenged with mental health issues. My sense of confidence that once was the source of my skills as a critical care physician now betrayed me by becoming grandiosity and false pride.

I became obsessed with losing my children. It seemed so wrong that I cared for so many ill children and counseled so many grieving parents, just to lose my own children. Sadly, my obsession and unresolved anger and grief drove my adult children away and led to the loss of my own biological child.

"How do you know that the source of all this anger was because you were a doctor taking care of dying kids?" one man asked me.

"I don't know," I answered. "I have been so angry about so many things. But this anger just feels right. Not right, but all wrong. My shovel is hitting bare hard rock when I talk about these issues. I've never talked about them before. I feel alive again; a weight is off my soul."

"When I think about the triggers for my anger, they usually involve something to do with losing my children. An image of one particular child flashes before my eyes. Again and again, whenever I have experienced that redline zero to one hundred anger that can last for days."

I suddenly realized that my divorce from Allison in turn triggered a custody battle over the children that lasted for years. This custody battle in turn triggered all my unresolved anger, guilt and grief issues from being a critical care physician. For the first time that I could remember, my anguish led to a healing place, not an angry place.

I told the group about this insight of an anger that seemed to twist into something healing. Many men nodded their heads.

“What happened with that child you kept having flashbacks about?” one man asked.

I told the men about an eight year-old boy who fell in an open septic tank in Alaska. He was under the sewage for over an hour, yet medics on the scene got his heart beating and his lungs breathing on their own. When we received the call in Seattle, we knew this was a terrible case that at the least involved severe brain damage.

The septic tank was a concrete structure in the back of the family home. The cover had been left off overnight as the tank was in the process of being pumped dry.

The boy was walking along the concrete lip of the tank, just fooling around. His parents had already caught him doing it once and brought him inside the house. He snuck back out and did it again, walking a cinderblock-wide tightrope just to see if he could do it. He lost his balance and fell in.

When our Air Lift team arrived in Ketchikan to pick him up at the local hospital, I was nauseated to see that his skin was stained light brown from floating in the feces for so long.

He died in the Intensive Care Unit of Seattle Children’s Hospital not long after we arrived back home.

My custody battle with Allison was over our adopted children. When I married her, I knew that she had had her fallopian tubes tied and could not have children. I think that this case was one reason I was willing to marry a woman who would not be able to have our biological children.

I abruptly sat down. I had nothing more to say.

In the final minutes of the session, one man after another got up to briefly tell their stories: stories of abuse, neglect, homicides, suicides and the agonizing natural deaths of loved ones. I felt like I was floating in that septic tank of human waste for a moment.

Finally we were done. We stood to recite our Key Crest creed as we did to finish every session.

Then Daryl stopped us. He said, "Before we close, I have one more question for the group. How many of you now believe that you have unresolved grief and trauma that contributes to your addiction?"

This time over half the class raised their hands.

We are now in an era of mass incarceration as a public response to crime. After being locked up for nearly a year, I see no easy or simple solutions to the complex issues that have led to the current policy. In too many cases, however, it is hurt grieving men who are being incarcerated. Many of them are heroes, successful business men, family men who have been taxpayers and otherwise contributed to society. These are the men society is reflexively locking up in this era of mass incarceration. I hear God whispering to me as they tell me their stories. They are God speaking to us. Let's be polite and listen.