

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
"Parents in Pain"
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As a parent, I shouldn't be surprised. As a pastor, I constantly am. It's overwhelming how many parents are in pain.

Appendicitis was easy by comparison. Or they crash the car, and there's nary a parent who wouldn't wish they could switch places with them and bear their hurt. Or when the baby you eagerly anticipated is born with a birth defect, Down Syndrome, or mental illness. These require a huge emotional adjustment. Not to the loving, but to the coping, adjusting your dreams and expectations for your dear child, whom you pray will become skilled enough to be safe, happy, independent.

But it only gets harder. The world intrudes. They grow up. Playgrounds get replaced by proms. Lollipops get replaced by them smoking incense to get high.

Bad things happen.

I think of parents whose children are murdering themselves with drugs or alcohol. We've lost children to heroin. Our kids struggle to find themselves the hard way. I remember two former church members bludgeoned to death by their own son. Some of our sons sit in prison. Some are in rehab. Clever mischief gets replaced by meanness, even malicious violence. We've seen our daughters with an unplanned pregnancy. Or they marry, but those wedding day smiles quickly fade, replaced by reality, and a year later it's the hurtful divorce.

Look to history. Forefather John Adams had one son who became, as did he, a President of the United States; another son died in the gutter from alcoholism.

Senator and former Presidential candidate George McGovern buried his alcoholic daughter after she passed out one night and froze to death in a snow drift.

Donald Rumsfeld, President Bush's Secretary of Defense, wrote about how his son suffered from drug addiction.

Imagine what devout Roman Catholic Martin Sheen is going through.

Sorrows due to circumstances. Sorrows due to dumb, lousy choices. All sorts of pain.

Pain from the anger and frustration because you want to scream and break something.

Pain from the guilt because even if your friends tell you and your own brain reminds you that it's not your fault, you still feel that it is.

Pain because sometimes you feel you just want to give up trying, and then you feel even worse for daring to think that.

Our sanitizing smothering can create an environment that enfeebles our children. Pediatricians are beginning to see little skulls reshaped, flattened, by always reclining. Some babies, carted about, are never touched at all during the day. At Head Start one teacher found some kids couldn't sit up on the floor, they lacked developed diaphragm muscles. Enfeebling them physically, but just as readily our culture enfeebles them morally, spiritually, making them weak prey for the nasty vultures that circle overhead ready to pounce on them.

Which hints why I'm not a big fan of awards. Too many today expect you should be applauded for simply doing what you should be doing anyway. Should you be congratulated for doing your job? Should you get a trophy for simply showing up? You find a wallet with money and you return it to the owner; should you expect a reward? Of course not. Excellence should be our norm, never our goal.

Our children face tough choices. It won't happen when all we offer is entertainment, amusements, or convenience. If they are bored, it could be because they are boring. They require the principles and values necessary to decide what is good. It won't happen by dropping them off at church school and telling them you'll pick them up later. That's like training them to ride a bicycle by giving them an unassembled bike and telling them good luck, you'll check on them after you go shopping.

It can only happen by them honoring something more important than themselves.

But let's avoid blaming the parents for the failures of the children. They do become adults. They do make choices. Yet often I hear those in trouble blaming others, looking for rescue, when they need to admit that they're in trouble because it is their own fault.

Your parents didn't make you pop the pills, get her pregnant, or slam back the Jagermeister.

Parents in pain: you can only give choices rather than solutions. You cannot and must not live their life for them. You really cannot rescue them. All you can really do is hope. It is the toughest job there is. We honor you and your children. Parents in pain: choosing to love necessitates choosing to suffer.