

July 11, 2013, WTE Editor's Headline: "Unlearning Learned Behavior"

If you think it doesn't happen in Wyoming, think again.

In a Jackson motel, a brawl broke out among men waiting in line to be serviced by a prostitute. When the cops arrived, they found the "prostitute" to be a twelve-year-old child. She had been trafficked thousands of miles.

Since then, Wyoming has passed a law addressing human trafficking. Rep. Cathy Connolly, D-Laramie, sponsored the bill in the 2013 legislative session. "Victims actually constituted criminals who could be prosecuted in Wyoming for breaking anti-prostitution and anti-drug laws," she said. The new law includes a proviso that traffickers' assets be confiscated for a victims' fund to cover rehab and counseling services.

Rep. Elaine Harvey, R-Lovell, said deputies drew her attention to local girls who owe money and pay off the debt through prostitution. "If you think it doesn't happen in Wyoming, think again," she said.

Also during the debate, Rep. Keith Gingery, R-Jackson, rendered an emotional description of the Jackson case, which he prosecuted. Over a period of three weeks, adult men raped nonstop a homeless twelve-year-old. The girl, who had been trafficked from Mexico, turned thirteen by the time the case came to trial; hence, she's referred to as a thirteen-year-old in the media.

Prostitution is often mistaken as "sex work," writes Melissa Farley, who collected extensive research on the matter in "Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress." Instead of recognizing prostitution for what it is—a horrible form of abuse—the public is served film-industry ideas of the "hooker with a heart of gold" and the glamorous Western "ladies of the night," while the Church upholds a penitent Mary Magdalene, advised by a benighted if charismatic Jesus to "sin no more."

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) haunts victims pressed into the sex slavery that's termed prostitution, in tandem with a damaged sense of self that begets low self-esteem, depression, poor impulse control, and suicidal ideation. In turn, these give rise to health problems, particularly autoimmune and inflammatory diseases.

Prostitution has its roots in family violence, which can lead to the sexual abuse of children. "Futures Without Violence" estimates that a quarter of all adult women in the U.S. experienced sexual abuse in childhood. Needless to say, such women find it difficult to function successfully as parents, for they cannot fall back on memories of positive role models to guide them. When they were small, the home was "the least safe place." Among shelter populations, PTSD is estimated to run as high as 84 percent.

Violence is imitated behavior, learned from parents who themselves lacked parenting skills. When family members don't recognize that angry outbursts are rooted in stress, they'll explain

them as “He has a temper,” “She throws hissy fits.” Hence, for children who experience mostly violent and angry exchanges at home, domestic strife becomes the norm; it becomes normalized.

Stress is generated by threats to one’s values and goals, and these include family and parenting values. Threats to one’s sense of self—a demeaning work environment, the loss of a job—will generate additional stress. The threats trigger inappropriate reactions that manifest as “diseases of adaptation.”

A father who makes passes at his daughter, a mother who acts seductively toward her son: such individuals are intensely stressed and conflicted. Typically, they are harsh disciplinarians who don’t communicate well and are confused about parenting. In their own childhoods, scarce opportunities existed to observe (for emulation later in life) appropriate communication and parenting.

Many of us hold that violence must be answered with violence. How “natural” it was, in the wake of 9/11, to consent to the war in Iraq! Aggression abroad would solve our problems at home. But the war veterans who displaced and rendered homeless millions of Iraqi women and children, having come home, find themselves displaced in turn. The throng of homeless and unemployed veterans is a disgrace, and a contributing factor to domestic violence nationally.

Once it’s recognized as disadvantageous, a learned behavior can be unlearned. That’s not as simple as it sounds, for our culture has created a fantasy world of good guys versus bad. How many movie villains or Western gunslingers examine their anxieties? And the good guys who chase them—would they admit to a stressful lifestyle? Economic hardships invariably worsen family stress and strife, but you wouldn’t know it from television and the movies.

Domestic violence: Is it the inevitable aftermath of war? The strife cuts across all cultures and social strata.

In Wyoming, the Coalition Against Domestic Violence in Laramie coordinates Safe House programs for all its counties and reservations. In Cheyenne, Victims Services respond to calls and conduct forensic interviews with children who allege domestic violence or sexual abuse. COMEA and Safe House provide shelter while Recover Wyoming helps people who seek to free themselves of addictive behavior. Generous and caring individuals stand by displaced and jobless arrivals, lending a helping hand with support and guidance.

In less extreme cases, parents may learn to manage their stressful lives through insightful reading. Steven Aldana’s “The Culprit and the Cure” pinpoints lifestyle as “the culprit behind America’s poor health” and advocates transforming that lifestyle to effect the cure. Simplistic as it may sound, switching to a healthful diet and adding regular exercise go a long way in reducing stress. At the least, getting ourselves up to exercise shifts us away from mind-numbing television fare. Best of all, family members may participate.