

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH**Peter Schwartzman****Let's expand the definition of child abuse**

Well, not exactly, but close. I am an ardent defender of children's rights. It sickens me to hear of children being abused or neglected, yet, when one looks at current stats, one cannot but be convinced that our society is suffering in this regard. In addition to the standard sources of abuse/neglect, there are other abuses that occur below the radar. I'll expose a few of these here.

Smoking in proximity to children. Despite massive disinformation campaigns to the contrary, everyone now knows that smoking is harmful and secondhand smoke is dangerous as well. According to the American Lung Association (ALA), children who breathe in secondhand smoke are "more likely to suffer from pneumonia, bronchitis, other lung diseases," as well as "ear infections." By the numbers, "there are an estimated 790,000 visits to health care providers for ear infections and over 202,000 asthma attacks in children ... caused by secondhand smoke exposure," in the United States, alone (ALA). According to the Environmental Protection Agency and the World Health Organization, secondhand smoke is classified as a known human carcinogen. Given all of this, why in the world would one choose to smoke in the presence of a child?

Using lawn chemicals. Children love to get outside and play on grassy fields and lawns, yet so many people still spray their lawns with known toxins. This is extremely dangerous to children. Let's look at the scientific literature. A study published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* (Lowengart et al, 1987) concludes that pesticide use (both in and outside of the house) increases the risk of leukemia in children as much as sevenfold (9). Another study (Salam et al., 2004, in *Environmental Health Perspectives*) finds that toddlers exposed to herbicides within their first year of life are nearly five times more likely to get asthma by age five. These aren't isolated findings but ones consistent with many other analyses. And these facts aren't surprising when one considers that two very commonly used lawn pesticides are associated with many health problems; 2,4-D is connected with cancer, hormone dysfunction, reproductive problems, nerve and brain disorders & glyphosate (aka, Roundup) is associated with cancer, reproductive problems, and kidney/liver damage (Beyond Pesticides). So how important is it to have an immaculate, weed-free lawn? Isn't a smile on a healthy child worth a heck of a lot more?

Not teaching teenagers about sex and sexual relations. Since our schools have dropped the ball in this mission, it is imperative to give children age-appropriate information about sex. What is the alternative? Should you be letting some older child pressure your uninformed daughter or son to partake in some sexual activity? This is how I've heard it often happens in our community. Television shows sexualized relationships more and



more in its content. Any kid with Internet access has the ability to find graphic pornography in about two clicks. Yes, parents can get software to block this. Yes, parents can try to monitor a child's whereabouts on a 24-7 basis. Experience tells me that these things are virtually impossible to control. So, that leaves to us the task of teaching our kids how to deal with their changing bodies and how to handle difficult situations.

Keeping quiet puts them in the "driver's seat" with no practice or insights from adults they trust. This can often lead to unwanted pregnancies and the spread of STDs. Come on people, don't be so prudish. Recognize the seriousness of the situation and give your kids the knowledge and tools they need so that they can make responsible decisions with useful input from you.

Feeding children diets high in sugar and high fructose corn syrup. Unfortunately the shelves of grocers are full of processed foods. Pick up practically any box or bag and see for yourself. When did food become so complicated? The shift from natural to processed foods is driven by larger profits. These foods are not nearly as nutritious as basic foods—such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and unprocessed meats. Too many foods have unnecessary sugars (in a variety of forms) added to them. These make the foods "sweet" to the taste and therefore enticing to the palate. However, their inclusion makes the processed foods have a high glycemic index, which means that they digest quickly and cause blood sugars to spike. This is especially bad for diabetics but it isn't good for anyone. Keep diets diverse with kids, and provide them as much unprocessed food as possible. If you do, they will ultimately thank you when they are old enough to realize how important good nutrition is for a growing body and mind.

Putting a TV in a child's room. According to a recent study, perhaps as many as 70% of 3rd graders have a television in their bedroom. This may not seem like a problem until one looks at the research that points to an association between such children and lower test scores, sleep disorders, being overweight, and beginning smoking. Besides all these horrible connections, simply having a TV in bedroom apparently increases their viewing by 9 hours a week, for 4 to 7 year olds. So time that they could otherwise be using to socialize in productive ways, tackle a book or puzzle, or go outside is lost. Additionally, the advertisers on TV love to attract "naggers"—to get parents to buy them products—as recent exposés have shown. So, in short, save yourself the aggravation and the money and keep the television out of children's bedrooms.

This list is abbreviated, but it should get the discussion going. In case you are wondering, I am not advocating that that these offenses be criminalized (such as things that the police or DCFS get involved with). Rather, my hope is that they will become commonly understood "No-No's" when dealing with children. While some of these suggestions may strike folk as "over the top," I do not offer them for comic relief. I firmly believe that these activities are detrimental to our young people and I think it is time for an open discussion of these matters to occur. What do you think?

THE OLD SCOUT**Garrison Keillor****The poet gets the girl**

April is Poetry Month, whatever that may mean to you, perhaps not much. Perhaps what with your nomination to be Assistant Secretary for Human Rights running into rough waters because of that silly song you sang at the company Christmas party in 1997 which has been used to make you look like an insensitive jerk, your interest in poetry is practically nil, and if so — hey, you're not alone.

The reading aloud of poetry has been shown, time and time again, to be effective at breaking up gatherings of people. Rather than tear gas or pepper spray, many police departments now use Wordsworth. Or T.S. Eliot, that small dark cloud of a poet.

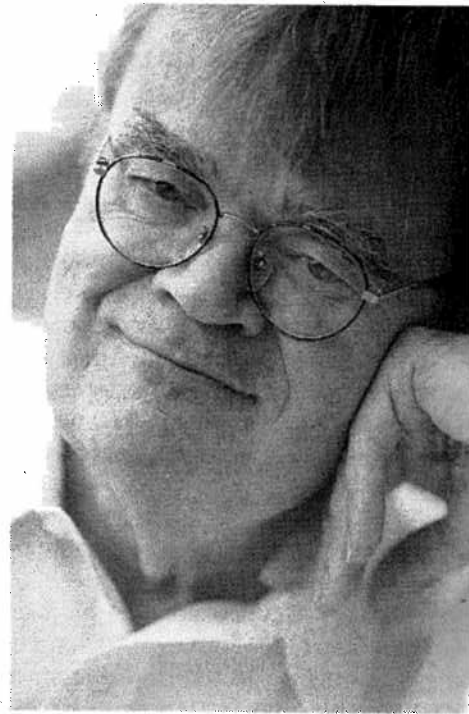
I don't care for poetry much either except for my own, of course. (Have you seen mine? Did I forget to send you a copy of "God's Hand Shadows On My Bedroom Wall"?) And that's the real message of Poetry Month, not that you should go back and reread the one about the cherry tree wearing white for Eastertide or the plums in the icebox so sweet and so cold — no, no, no — it's the month when you should write a poem and see how powerful this can be in winning the favor of women.

Back when our hairy-legged ancestors were living in mud huts and sleeping on piles of animal hides, and smelling of rancid grease and woodsmoke, men were not attractive to women at all. Fighting with rocks and clubs made unsightly marks on men and left putrefying sores. They squatted around the smoking fires, put ashes on their wounds, exchanged myths, and felt a terrible ache for love and affection.

They longed to see women exhibit an avid interest in them for their own merits and not have to go marauding against enemy tribes and stand toe to toe with their warriors and hack at them and bash their brains out and eviscerate and decapitate them and drag their women away screaming and sobbing. A lousy way of dating, especially as you, the winner, have plenty of hack marks on you and are not so interested in sex now, due to loss of blood.

They longed to make themselves appealing to women and at first, they thought they could do this with tomatoes — then known as the "love fruit" — and the lady would fling herself into your arms and your pleasure would be greater than if she were screaming and sobbing.

This worked for a time, but eventually tomatoes became so common that their aphrodisiac powers were diluted. This led to civilization as we know it: music, sport, learning, poetry — it all began as an attempt by men to impress women who would come home with you and eat a tomato and come to your bed. But the best strategy of all



was to compose a long ode to her beauty
O wondrous O shining Thou, I lift my per
up now to pay Thee Thy due praise, the
wonderment of these my happiest days, and
so forth and so forth, her lips, her brow, her
raven or flaxen hair, her neck, her breasts,
her pale thighs, and so on.

Then the Christians came along and tried to put aside carnal pleasure as a hindrance to the spiritual life, and Christian men hung out in gangs of disciples, devoting themselves to Bible study and prayer. (One thing they prayed for in secret was for women to love them, despite their thorny theology.) They taught their children to endure this earthly sojourn in the faith of reward in the life to come.

But poetry whispers, "Life is a gift and very brief. Seize the day. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." And this is the gist of the poem you are about to write to the wondrous and shining woman. You adore her and you long to clasp her in your arms and smell her hair and kiss the back of her neck. Forget about the cherry tree and the plums in the icebox. Write your own. Don't send it by e-mail. Write it on a sheet of clean paper and hand it to her and as she reads it, put your hand on her shoulder so that you're right there when she turns to embrace you. This works almost all the time. You'll see. Cummings wrote, "springtime is my time is your time is our time for springtime is love time and viva sweet love," and Cummings got the girl.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of a new Lake Wobegon novel, "Liberty" (Viking).)

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