Op-Ed/Editorials – Loving the child, hating the disease.

July 29, 2011

Last night I saw pictures of Amy Winehouse's parents as they visited the shrine erected by Amy's fans in front of her apartment. They looked lost, and shocked – bereft. As the parent of a child who is both an addict and has a (currently untreated) mental illness, my heart aches for them. It is difficult to understand the unique and exquisite pain that accompanies parenting an addict. This message is meant as an attempt – feeble I'm sure – to elucidate that pain and to remind people that, for every addict lost, there are parents who are left behind with guilt and sorrow and a sense that there was something, something, something they should have done.

The parental instinct is a strong one. The majority of parents will tell you that the love they experience for their children surpasses in intensity any other emotion in human experience. When parents claim that they will gladly lay down their lives for their children, it is not simply rhetoric. Instead, it stems from a primal instinct that runs deep throughout most species in existence. When children are ill, parents go to extreme measures to seek the very best of care. No expense is spared. No sacrifice too great. Such is our drive to protect our children.

Addiction is an illness; make no mistake. Unlike other illnesses, however, addiction fools the brain and body into acting against its own best interests. Addiction changes the brain in a very fundamental way, literally rewiring it in such a way that the drug of choice, and ONLY the drug of choice, matters to the brain and its survival. Addiction tells the brain and body that only the drug of choice can make it well. Addiction fights against every attempt to cure it, and its weapons are powerful. Addiction takes a child and turns that child into a relentless machine that exists for one purpose and one purpose only . . . to feed the addiction.

Our parenting instinct tells us to fight the addiction, to free our children from its grips. We seek treatment, and counsel, and therapy, and prayers. We cycle through anger, and hope, and despair, and anger again. We rage against the addiction; we rage against our own children. We want to shake them until their

teeth rattle. We want to understand - WHY WHY WHY do you keep going back to the drug? WHY do you let it control you?

We seek advice from those who claim to know. We turn our backs on all our instincts and we let our children fall, and then ooze pain from our pores as we watch them suffer – dirty, hungry, helpless, homeless, hopeless – and when finally we can bear their suffering no longer, we reach out a hand to them only to be told that helping them is wrong and serves to escalate the problem. We let them sit in jail; we bail them out of jail. We turn them from our doorsteps; we let them in and wipe their tears. We slip them twenty dollars and we hope, we hope, we hope that they will use it for a decent meal, while knowing in our souls that there is only one hunger that will be fed this night.

Then one day, someday, on a day that comes sooner or later but always comes, we realize that they will die. It will happen. We don't know where, we don't know when, but they will die. It is the only end in sight. So we prepare. At night we lie awake and wait to hear the phone/the knock/the doorbell. We write obituaries in our heads. We plan a service and we plan what we will say. Will we admit that it was drugs? Or will we blame it on something else? We think about the things they own; the few, the meager things. Will we give it all away? Is there something we should keep? Is there something in there somewhere to remind us of the children we once knew?

And when it finally happens we are lost and shocked, bereft. We wonder wonder wonder what we could have done and should have done. We listen to the whispers and we know that we have failed . . . that we have failed to do the one and only thing that a parent is meant to do. We have failed to protect our children. There is nothing we could ever do to make up for this epic failure. Nothing. You can be sure that we're aware of just how deep our failure runs. You don't need to remind us. We remind ourselves each day.

I hope that you can find it in yourselves to remember all the parents of the addicts in this world. I hope that you can see that ANY parent can have an addict as a child. ANY parent can lose a child to this enemy that seems to have an arsenal against which we're nearly defenseless. Have compassion in your soul tonight for the parents of Amy Winehouse. They did not want to lose her, and tonight they are in pain.

– Lesa Ellis

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