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Right Decision, Wrong Reason

BY LEONARD PITTS JR.
Tribune Media Services

Let there be no cheers for Rob Portman. The Ohio senator is, pardon the tautology, a conservative Republican and last week, he did something conservative Republicans do not do. He came out for same-sex marriage. This is a man whose anti-gay bona fides were so pronounced that his 2011 selection as commencement speaker at the University of Michigan law school prompted an uproar among the graduates, many of whom signed a letter protesting his appearance as an insult to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

Yet, there he was, telling CNN he's had "a change of heart." And what prompted this? Well, as it turns out, the senator made his U-turn because of Will.

That would be Will Portman, 21, who came out to his parents two years ago. His son, the senator said, explained to them that his sexuality "was not a choice and that that's just part of who he is." As a result, said Portman, "I've come to the conclusion that for me, personally, I think this is something that we should allow people to do, to get married, and to have the joy and stability of marriage that I've had for over 26 years."

It was, make no mistake, an act of paternal love and empathy and deserves to be celebrated on that basis. He did the only thing a good father could have done. And yet, if Portman's change of mind warms the heart, it also, paradoxically, illustrates the moral cowardice so often found at the heart of social conservatism.

Look, the senator's son is doubtless a fine and admirable young man. But with all due respect to his son, to heck with his son. This is not about Will Portman. It's far bigger than that.

So one can't help but be frustrated and vexed by the senator's inability to "get it" until "it" included his son. Will explained to him that his sexuality "was not a choice"? Lovely. But was the senator not listening when all those other gay men and lesbians tried to tell him the exact same thing?

Apparently not. Like Dick Cheney, father of a les-



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bian daughter, Portman changed his view because the issue became personal. Which suggests a glaring lack of the courage and vision needed to put oneself into someone else's shoes, imagine one's way inside someone else's life. These are capabilities that often seem to elude social conservatives.

Small wonder: if you allow yourself to see the world from someone else's vantage point, there is a chance it will change your own. Can't have that.

So instead we have this. And by extension of the "logic": here, we must wait on Herman Cain to adopt a Mexican child before he sees how offensive it is to suggest electrocuting Mexicans at the border. And if Michele Bachmann would only have an affair with a Muslim, she might stop seeing terrorists on every street corner.

Tellingly, Portman's change of heart elicited mainly an embarrassed silence from his ideological soul mates who, 10 years ago, would have been on him like paparazzi on a Kardashians. But then, 10 years ago, gay rights was still an open question. Ten years later, that question is closing with startling speed, as in a new *Washington Post*-ABC News poll that finds support for same-sex marriage at a record high. Change is coming, gathering momentum like an avalanche.

And once again, conservatives will stand rebuked by history, be left on the platform by progress. Or else, split the difference, do the right thing for the wrong reasons like Rob Portman.

No, you cannot condemn a man for loving his child.

But true compassion and leadership require the ability to look beyond the narrow confines of one's own life, to project into someone else's situation and to want for them what you'd want for your own. Portman's inability to do that created hardship for an untold number of gay men and lesbians.

Each of them was also someone's child.

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Mental Illness, Guns And Suicide

BY STEVEN S. SHARFSTEIN
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Some years ago, I was called by one of my patients who had just suffered severe rejection in a love relationship. She told me that she was on her way to buy a gun but thought she might call me first. I suggested that she come see me before she purchased a gun so we could talk it over.

In the intense debate on gun violence and mental illness, with a focus on the extremely rare event of mass murders such as in Newtown, Conn., or Aurora, Colo., what is lost in the conversation and debate is the serious suicide epidemic we experience in the United States every year due to gun violence.

Of 30,000 gun deaths in the United States every year, nearly 20,000 are suicides. If you try to kill yourself with a gun, you will be successful 80 percent of the time, as compared to suicide attempts by overdose, in which the success rate is less than 2 percent.

The lethality of guns and easy access to them are major contributors to this public health problem. The state with the highest suicide rate in the United States is Wyoming, where the prevalence of guns in the home is the highest. There is a direct correlation between the availability of guns, their presence in the home, and suicide. Seventy-five percent of guns used in youth suicides are accessible in the home or the home of a friend.

Creating barriers to the availability of lethal means has been shown to have a strong impact on the suicide rate. When physical barriers were erected at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, suicide from

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that readily accessible structure decreased drastically, and those individuals did not go to another bridge and try the same thing. Many people who commit suicide by gun are momentarily desperate and panicked rather than classically depressed. Approximately 40 percent who kill themselves with a gun are not in therapy at the time of death, and many families report that the first time they were aware of such extreme distress was after the event of a gun suicide. But depression is the most important risk factor for suicide, and restricting access to guns would be lifesaving.

In contrast, less than 4 percent of homicide gun deaths are attributable to individuals with mental illness. People suffering from mental illness are more likely to be victims of homicide than perpetrators. So, as the legislature and the governor consider restricting access to guns, we need to keep in mind this contrast between risk for suicide and homicide. Barriers to purchasing a gun for those with a history of treatment for mental illness will likely have a positive impact on the suicide rate but not much effect on the homicide rate.

My patient did come to see me before going to a gun shop, and her suicidal impulse subsided after her psychotherapeutic session. Creating time between a suicidal impulse and getting a loaded gun is clearly lifesaving.

Dr. Steven S. Sharfstein is president and chief executive officer of Sheppard Pratt Health System in Baltimore. His email is ssharfstein@sheppardpratt.org. He wrote this for the *Baltimore Sun*.

Although most of the newspapers cite the president's commendation of our new Catholic leader "as a champion of the poor," I had to go to the Internet to find the exact words he said after offering "warm wishes" to "His Holiness." The president stated that "he carries forth the message of love and compassion that has inspired the world for more than 2,000 years — that in each other we see the face of God." That was worth quoting and I appreciate the fact that you included that statement and regretted that so many others did not.

THE PRESS & DAKOTAN

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OPINION | OTHER THOUGHTS

U.S. Still Needs A Missile Defense

THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE (March 19): Decades ago, in the scariest days of the nuclear arms race with Russia, American schoolchildren learned to "duck and cover" under their desks in case an atomic bomb was dropped nearby. Since the end of the Cold War, kids have grown up free of the fear of nuclear attack. But those days may be coming to an end.

New threats have emerged. The first is North Korea, which is believed to have as many as 10 nuclear warheads and recently carried out its third nuclear test. The Pyongyang regime, according to House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Mich., has missiles "that can reach U.S. shores." ...

Missile defense is an attempt to buttress the power to retaliate with the ability to fend off incoming warheads before they arrive. Last week the Defense Department said it would spend \$1 billion to deploy more missile interceptors along the West Coast to shoot down a North Korean missile, increasing the total number from 30 to 44 in the next four years.

It's a reasonable and useful step, at a cost that would seem trivial if the system were ever called on to deflect an attack. ...

With regard to Iran, the administration took a different step, scrapping the last phase of a missile defense system that has elicited vigorous objections from the government of Russia — which regarded the program as a threat to neutralize its nuclear weapons. The Pentagon insisted the U.S. decision was based on technical problems, which may be true. But it may also serve to pave the way to better relations and even arms reductions with Moscow.

The danger still exists, of course, but President Barack Obama has made it clear he will take military action if necessary to keep Iran from getting the bomb. If he succeeds in deterring Tehran from that course — or in forcibly preventing it — the European missile shield will not be needed quite so soon.

American missile defense still has a lot of hurdles to surmount before it can offer a reliable safeguard against attack. But even an imperfect system is better than nothing. And no one can doubt the need to keep pursuing it.

The Rise Of The Americas

SACRAMENTO BEE (March 14): By selecting Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the next pope of the Roman Catholic Church, cardinals have sent an important signal to the Americas — and particularly to Latin America, where 39 percent of all Catholics worldwide live.

Bergoglio, who will be called Pope Francis, was previously the archbishop of Buenos Aires. He is the first pope to be selected from anywhere in the Americas, and the first Jesuit tapped to be papal leader. While he may be more conservative than many American Catholics and Jesuits would prefer, it is significant that the Vatican has recognized the rise of Latin America, which for too long been overlooked by this and many other international institutions.

According to 2011 data from the Pew Forum, more than 425 million Catholics live in Latin America, with the largest populations in Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. ...

The son of Italian immigrants, Bergoglio is said to lead an austere life. In Argentina, he worked to restore the church's reputation after a murderous military junta in the 1970s was allowed to "disappear" tens of thousands of leftists and people suspected of being opponents.

Yet it remains to be seen if the 76-year-old pope, the 266th pontiff, will be any more committed or effective than his predecessor in slimming down the Curia and moving the church into a modern age. ...

Yet both of the hemispheres are rapidly changing and, on many issues, the church is decades behind. Will Francis work to change that? The answer, at this point, will await moments of clarity that have been absent during the closed-door conclave.

SPEAK OUT!

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TODAY IN HISTORY

By The Associated Press
Today is Thursday, March 21, the 80th day of 2013. There are 285 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On March 21, 1963, the Alcatraz federal prison island in San Francisco Bay was emptied of its last inmates and closed at the order of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

On this date: In 1556, Thomas Cranmer, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, was burned at the stake for heresy.

In 1685, composer Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany.

In 1804, the French civil code, or the "Code Napoleon" as it was later called, was adopted.

In 1871, journalist Henry M. Stanley began his famous expedition in Africa to locate the missing Scottish missionary David Livingstone.

In 1907, U.S. Marines arrived in Honduras to protect American lives and interests in the wake of political violence.

In 1940, a new government was formed in France by Paul Reynaud, who became prime minister, succeeding Edouard Daladier.

In 1944, Charles Chaplin went on trial in Los Angeles, accused of transporting former protegee Joan Barry across state lines for immoral purposes. (Chaplin was acquitted, but later lost a paternity suit despite tests showing he wasn't the father of Barry's child.)

In 1960, about 70 people were killed in Sharpeville, South Africa, when police fired on black protesters.

In 1965, civil rights demonstrators led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. began their third, successful march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala.

In 1972, the Supreme Court, in *Dunn v. Blumstein*, ruled that states may not require at least a year's residency for voting eligibility.

In 1985, police in Langa, South Africa, opened fire on blacks marching to mark the 25th anniversary of Sharpeville; the reported death toll varied between 29 and 43.

In 1990, Namibia became an independent nation as the former colony marked the end of 75 years of South African rule.

Ten years ago: The United States

launched a ferocious, around-the-clock aerial assault on military targets in Baghdad and other cities. The House approved a \$2.2 trillion budget embracing President George W. Bush's tax-cutting plan.

Five years ago: Officials admitted that at least four State Department workers had pried into the supposedly secure passport files of Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain, prompting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to personally apologize to the presidential contenders.

One year ago: A previously divided U.N. Security Council sent a strong and united message to the Syrian government and opposition to immediately implement proposals by international envoy Kofi Annan to end Syria's yearlong bloodshed. Meting out unprecedented punishment for a bounty system that targeted key opposing players, the NFL suspended New Orleans Saints head coach Sean Payton without pay for the coming season and indefinitely banned the team's former defensive coordinator; in addition to other sanctions, Commissioner Roger Goodell fined the Saints \$500,000 and took away their second-round draft picks for the current year and the next.

Today's Birthdays: Violinist-conductor Joseph Silverstein is 81. Actress Kathleen Widdoes is 74. Actress Marie-Christine Barrault is 69. Singer-musician Rose Stone (Sly and the Family Stone) is 68. Actor Timothy Dalton is 67. Singer Eddie Money is 64. Rock singer-musician Roger Hodgson (Supertramp) is 63. Rock musician Conrad Lozano (Los Lobos) is 62. Rhythm-and-blues singer Russell Thompkins Jr. (The Stylistics) is 62. Comedy writer-performer Brad Hall is 55. Actress Sabrina LeBeauf is 55. Actor Gary Oldman is 55. Actor Matthew Broderick is 51. Comedian-talk show host Rosie O'Donnell is 51. Rock musician Jonas "Joker" Berggren (Ace of Base) is 46. Rock MC Maxim (Prodigy) is 46. Rock musician Andrew Copeland (Sister Hazel) is 45. Hip-hop DJ Premier (Gang Starr) is 44. Actress Laura Allen is 39. Rapper-TV personality Kevin Federline is 35.

Thought for Today: "History is principally the inaccurate narration of events which ought not to have happened." — Ernest Albert Hooten, American anthropologist (1887-1954).

FROM THE BIBLE

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word. John 17:20. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis

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