

ASBESTOS – CANADA’S POLITICS OF DEATH

By Helke Ferrie

Vitality March 2009

“No man is an island ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

John Donne 1572 -1631

The lesson the current meltdown of the global economy teaches is that it is bad business and not career-enhancing to kill customers, deceive voters, maltreat employees and take our planet for granted. When human activities are focused on profits and power they inevitably careen off into a deadly abyss, taking millions along. British journalist Jeremy Seabrook wrote back in 1988, before morally-challenged governments brought the world economy to the brink of destruction: “If the creation of wealth itself destroys and wastes humanity, that wealth, however vast, will never suffice to repair the ravages it has wrought.”

What that looks like in real time and real life, I witnessed personally on a daily basis over the last three months. Jim Murray (1942 – 2009), one of my most cherished friends, died on February 16, having spent those last months in our house where my husband, a doctor, and I helped Jim’s wife with the arduous task of nursing him, a malignant mesothelioma patient. This cancer, possibly the fastest and most deadly known, is caused exclusively by exposure to asbestos.

Jim was a shaman disguised as an alternative energy engineer who installed solar and wind sourced systems. He lived off the electrical grid for more than thirty years, yet his house was full of all the latest gadgets imaginable. Every new one sent him into ecstasy. He had concert pianist-level musical training, worked for years with troubled teenagers, and helped bring organic farming to remote Manitoulin Island. In his twenties he had left Toronto, barely knowing how to handle a hammer and saw, to build in the wilderness of Manitoulin a symmetrical nine-sided house which incorporated ancient Greek mathematical mysticism known as the Golden Ratio (or phi) found in all their ancient temples. Known also as the Fibonacci series, popularized recently by Dan Brown’s thriller *The Davinci Code*, it is found in the structure of sea shells, astronomical phenomena, and evolving living things. The grand unity of nature and spirit deeply fascinated and sustained him. Jim was one of those rare people who always made one feel emotionally replenished. Underneath his wild and crazy enthusiasms (religion, genetics, cars, food, Sufism, Gurdjiff’s philosophy, movies, the criminality of politics, the environment – he was carefully informed on all, and he asked no end of questions when he wasn’t) was a meditative calm that was felt as warm and accepting energy. His wisdom, wit and humor brought people together and created ever-widening circles of friends. As a teenager and again in the 1980’s during temporary jobs, he was exposed to asbestos, mixing it with his bare hands, never knowing anything about its dangers. A quarter century later this killed him.

According to the World Health Organization, about 100,000 die every year from asbestos related cancer. Due to its characteristically long latency period (as much as 30 years after the initial exposure) its incidence is increasing exponentially, having more than doubled in Canada in 20 years, as people, exposed in the 70's and 80's before asbestos use decreased, are now diagnosed. Class action suits against asbestos mines and manufacturers in the US and Europe involve millions of victims or their families, also in increasing numbers.

Standard medicine has no treatment whatsoever – even the usual cut, burn, and poison therapies (surgery, radiation, chemo drugs) are no longer suggested. The best of the alternative therapies, mostly those protocols developed by the Gerson Institute and Dr. Nicolas Gonzales, which have proven successful even in ovarian and pancreatic cancers, rarely succeed with mesothelioma patients; they do occasionally, if diagnosis was early enough.

Everybody agrees that asbestos is a “perfect carcinogen”, meaning it promotes cancer and causes specifically mesothelioma, a cancer of the pleural sheath between the lungs and the rib cage which tends to spread into the abdomen and the heart. Who is “everybody”? Mesothelioma, and specifically asbestos, have made bedfellows of the World Health Organization, all the medical associations and medical schools of the world, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the labor unions of the world, all cancer societies, the European Union, Australia, various non-governmental organizations of all sizes, even Codex does not approve of it – and the World Trade Organization! And what's more, they also all agree that the only way to stop this cancer is to stop the mining of asbestos – totally - and to stop all activities that use asbestos.

All that consensus notwithstanding, our Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, begs to differ. Whatever his reasons may be, the fact is that he managed to scuttle the Rotterdam Convention on the world's most hazardous substances in October of last year in order to protect Canada's asbestos mines, specifically Thetford Mines, located in Asbestos, Quebec. My friend Jim was diagnosed with mesothelioma on the same day, October 27.

Harper insists on protecting some 700 jobs of an already increasingly failing industry which still brings revenues of \$ 112 million a year (while also killing plenty of Canadian miners) from exports to 80 third world countries – whom Harper wishes to remain clueless as to the dangers involved. Simultaneously, Canadian taxpayers are footing the bill, to the tune of millions, to have all the asbestos removed from the parliament buildings. But it's OK to export death; it's OK to have some Canadians eventually get mesothelioma; it's OK to stop the process of banning toxic substances world wide; but it is not OK to expose our MPs to asbestos – of course not, but why anybody else?

There is yet another twist: Public Works Minister Christian Paradis, came originally from those Thetford asbestos mines and was the president of Canada's Asbestos Chamber of Commerce; and Indian Affairs Minister, Chuck Strahl, is currently dying from mesothelioma (Macleans.ca, October 27, 08).

To be fair, Harper is just continuing, albeit with fierce vigor, the asbestos policies of the previous Liberal and Conservative governments. In 1997 the increasing international consensus began to upset Canada when France banned asbestos. Canada went to the WTO court in 1999, which to everyone's surprise agreed with France. The EU followed France's example and banned asbestos; so, Canada went back to the WTO

and appealed again. Again, the WTO confirmed that the use and trading of asbestos was legally indefensible, even by the murky WTO standards. Undeterred, in 2001 Canada tried to appeal again, and lost again. When South Africa banned asbestos shortly thereafter, Canada threatened to go to the WTO court once again, but South Africa told Canada (in essence) to jump into one of our great lakes. Canada, meanwhile succeeded in stopping Thailand and some other countries from putting the internationally recognized skull-and-crossbones sign on the bags carrying Canadian asbestos, to ensure workers handling them would not be “unduly alarmed”.

In 2008 Health Canada, under the chairmanship of Trevor Ogden, the editor-in-chief of the *Annals of Industrial Hygiene*, produced a report on asbestos for the Prime Minister which he didn't like, so he kept it under wraps, and continued to pour several more million dollars of taxpayers' money into the national asbestos cheerleader, the Chrysotile Institute, whose leading “scientists” have on several occasions been exposed internationally as frauds, and whose business it is to literally sell asbestos to the Third World. Those propaganda efforts cost about \$ 50 million by now (see CMAJ articles.).

The Canadian Medical Association, in an editorial published in the CMAJ, October 21, 2008, expressed outrage over the fact that “Canada has led a ferocious diplomatic opposition” to the Rotterdam Convention which would have made a mere courtesy warning mandatory. Canada's opposition to this “regime of politeness” was supported only by Iran, Russia and Zimbabwe, countries whose governments give one the creeps - as our own government now does for me.

“For Canada to export asbestos to poor countries that lack the capacity to use it safely is inexplicable”, the CMAJ thundered, “but to descend several steps further to suppress the results of an expert [Health Canada] committee, pour millions of dollars into an institute that shills for the industry, and oppose the Rotterdam Convention's simple rule of politeness is inexcusable. Canada's government seems to have calculated that it is better for the country's asbestos industry to do business under the radar like arms traders, regardless of the deadly consequences. What clearer indication could there be that the government knows what it is doing is shameful and wrong? Canada's government must put an end to this death-dealing charade.”

The medical profession is still fighting to protect Canadians and the rest of the world from our asbestos. On January 23 of this year, the faculty of medicine of Laval University wrote to Harper, giving him a piece of their joined scientific minds that can scare anybody – because these guys really know what they are talking about. (See the BAC website.)

When the World Trade Organization comes to the cancer patient's defense, the world is turning into a new direction. Joel Bakan in his now classic book and documentary film, *The Corporation*, explored the psychopathology of the corporate pursuit of profit and power, showing how profit-focused conscience-neutral behavior displays all the classic signs and symptoms of a psychopath. However, anybody, our MPs included, sitting at the bedside of a mesothelioma patient would find it a wrenching experience. But then, how many ever have to do just that?

In contemplating Canada's asbestos policy I was reminded of the experiments by Stanley Milgram of Harvard University in the 1960's. They proved that most people will do terribly harmful things when given orders to do so. He also showed that when a person cannot see, hear, or touch the person they are harming knowingly, he or she will

even killing the victim. However, when in direct contact with their designated victims, most could not harm them. “Morality is inextricably tied to human proximity”, a researcher studying these experiments observed, pointing out that “personal images” will override obedience to “abstract categories”.

Milgram designed these experiments following the Nuremberg war crimes trials when learning that the plan to exterminate the Jews in Germany had begun with orders given to Nazi SS officers to round up and kill entire families in a systematic way, which very quickly failed. They wouldn't do it when confronted with those families. Hitler changed the plan such that those who gave the extermination orders were totally removed from the reality of their actions; often even those who herded their victims into the gas chambers were themselves deceived at first and did not know that they were actually killing these people.

I suggest that governments which allow themselves to become the tools of the corporate tendency to psychopathy, which itself is the result of their own vast structural impersonality described by Joel Bakan, are falling into the pattern of behavior Milgram showed is latent in almost everybody.

World consensus on the carcinogenicity of asbestos seems not to deter policies that continue to ruin the lives of millions – who are all conveniently out of sight. “There is a secret medicine given only to those who hurt so hard, they can't hope” wrote the great Arabic poet Rumi (1207 – 1273). I believe that secret medicine is individual moral determination, which in the long run works – unlike mere hope. Governments can be compelled to act morally only through wide awake moral citizens and voters. We must relentlessly go after our MPs and tell them what we want and what they must absolutely stop doing. Harper's policies have the support of less than one third of Canadians, most of whom probably don't even know about this asbestos crime. None of us would personally hand a bag of asbestos to a construction worker in India and tell him it's quite OK to work with it day after day.

US president Barak Obama said in Ottawa on February 19, that since NAFTA has various “labor provisions and environmental provisions as side agreements, it strikes me that if those side agreements mean anything, they might as well be incorporated into the main body of the agreement, so that they can be effectively enforced ... I think it is important, whether we're talking about our relationships with Canada or our relationships with Mexico, that all countries concerned are thinking about how workers are being treated and all countries concerned are thinking about environmental issues...”

Good heavens! Maybe the Golden Rule is going to resurface in some of those power-crazed brains in Ottawa and they will recall “...the truth that was forgotten during the years of free market excess [that] economics and markets exist not for their own sake, but in order to promote the fullest possible development of the human person.” (Elliott & Atkinson, 2008).

Sources and Resources:

Go to **Ban Asbestos Canada** (BAC) www.bacanada.org, sign their petition, inform yourselves, click on the link that sends a letter to the Prime Minister – and get all your family members and friends to do the same. Read the “World Call of Conscience to Prime Minister Harper” signed by hundreds of scientists from all over the world. Check

out the **Canadian Environmental Law Association's** work against asbestos:
www.cela.ca.

Google links to many law firms specializing in asbestos. Miskin's work started in 1979 and also represents victims of the anti-inflammatory drug Vioxx that caused Wyeth to be bought up by Pfizer this year. Free information on eligibility: miskinlaw@aol.com, 416-492-0989 or 1-877-428-8000 www.adrworks.com

L. Armstrong et al. *Cancer – 101 Solutions To A Preventable Epidemic*, New Society Publishers, 2007

J. Bakan. *The Corporation – The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, Viking 2004
Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ): free on-line. See October 21, 2008, vol. 179 (9)

L. Elliott & D. Atkinson. *The Gods That Failed – How Blind Faith in Markets Has Cost Us Our Future*, Nation Books, 2009

C. Gerson. *Healing The Gerson Way*, Totality, 2007

P. Kraus. *Surviving Mesothelioma and Other Cancers – A Patient's Guide*, 2005, via
www.cancermonthly.com

D. Michaels. *Doubt Is Their Product – How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*, Oxford, 2008

J.R. O'Connor. *They said months. I chose years! A Mesothelioma Survivor's Story*, 2008,
via www.cancermonthly.com

K. Ruff. *Exporting Harm – How Canada Markets Asbestos to the Developing World*,
October 2008. Free download www.rideauinstitute.ca

D. J. Savoie. *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom*, UTP, 2008

J. Stanford. *Economics for Everyone – A Short Guide to the Economics of Capitalism*,
Fernwood, 2008

G. Tweedale & J. McColloch. *Defending the Indefensible – The Global Asbestos Industry and its Fight for Survival*, Oxford, 2008