Book Review

Gibson G. *Gone Boy: A Walkabout.* New York: Random House, Inc., 1999.
Reviewed by Mildred Z. Solomon, EdD

Gone Boy: A Walkabout is a great book. An honest, heart-wrenching, profound book. It is also a book that I did not want to read.

A true account by a father of the murder of his 18-year-old son and of the father's struggle to understand that murder and come to terms with it—well, I just didn't want to go there. I'll bet a lot of people feel that way, which may account for why *Gone Boy*, which has received fantastic reviews from such places as the *New York Times,*[1] is not as widely read as it deserves.

Gregory Gibson's son Galen was one of six victims of the infamous shooting spree by a student on the Simon's Rock College campus in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in December 1992. Galen and a professor were killed, and four others were seriously injured, when Wayne Lo, a sophomore at the school, let loose with a semi-automatic rifle.

In *Gone Boy*, Greg Gibson sets out to uncover the circumstances leading to the moment when Wayne Lo shot Galen at point blank range on a quiet college campus. As the subtitle says, this father's journey is a walkabout—a search to make meaning out of pain, loss, and random horror. Importantly, the father's spirit cannot rest until he has amassed the facts through expert investigative reporting. For me, that is telling: the *spirit* needed the *facts*. Health care professionals should never underestimate the importance to families of knowing the details. Ultimately, at least for some, there can be redeeming value in knowing the truth, as best as it can be reconstructed, as well as value in being supported by the people around them, in their need to weave facts into a meaningful whole. Narratives, built on the facts, can capture—if not explain—the horror.

One of the important facts Greg Gibson uncovers is the ease with which Wayne Lo attained that rifle. Wayne, a deeply disturbed student who had shown signs of increasing agitation and hostility, easily got hold of the weapon at a nearby gun store and even had the ammunition sent to him at the college post office by an American mail-order firm. Gibson learned how most-favored-nation status granted to China in the 1980s led to exponential growth in the rate of light, cheap firearms that China shipped to the United States: from seven rifles in 1983 to 1.42 million in 1992. Congress ultimately recognized what was happening, in part because of the Simon's Rock incident and others like it, and in 1994 reduced these exports to a trickle. Although China is no longer a major source of cheap assault weapons, easy access to such weapons from other sources is still a major national calamity. Gibson decries the lack of political and legislative leadership for gun control—while emphasizing that there is a public health model that could be employed and could be successful in reducing the scourge of senseless violence, if only we had the will to implement it.

Yet, there is no proselytizing on Gibson's part—no grandstanding. There is not one misstep into self-pity, grandiosity, or political correctness, just the graceful accumulation of accurate details. His is

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a sparse story-telling style that has, aptly, been compared to Norman Mailer, combining a poet's lyricism with the keen eye and mastery of rhythm found in the best detective stories.

In reading this book, one cannot miss the vital role that fact-finding, writing, and coherent story-making play in the process of coming to master one's demons. Of course, not everyone has Gibson's prodigious talents. Nevertheless, I suspect that more people could use writing as a method of healing, particularly if they understood its powers and were encouraged by family, friends, and health care professionals.

Beyond the importance of narrative for an author, Gibson's book and reactions to it also illustrate the importance of narrative for others who have been affected by loss and grief. We are told in the afterword, that numerous Simon's Rock students contacted Gibson after reading his book to tell him that his account "helped them understand and accept what they had had to endure since that horrific night" (p. 272). Parents of children murdered in other places, under other circumstance, sent similar letters. Yet perhaps the most telling example of the power of narrative comes from Wayne Lo himself, who has been sentenced to life in prison. Lo was a seriously mentally ill young man with powerful delusions who believed—even many years after the incident—that he was on a "mission from God." Even Lo's parents, whom Gibson approached and with whom he developed a relationship, despaired of Wayne ever breaking through his denial and illness to acknowledge what he had done.

Oddly, almost unbelievably, after reading Gibson's book, Wayne Lo at last found a route to insight. He contacted Gibson to express his profound sorrow and seems to no longer suffer from delusions. Indeed, the *New York Times* has reported that Gibson and Lo are joining forces to lead an effort to better regulate access to handguns and automatic weapons.[2] Can narrative be *that* therapeutic? It seems, in this case, that it was.

Read this book even if you don't want to. The middle section focuses on fact-finding and investigative reporting, stripped apparently of emotional valence. In the final third of the book, emotions enter more consciously, with less terror, for having gotten the factual details right.

If you or a family member has lost a child, perhaps Gibson's walkabout can be of some service to you. If you are a health care professional, ask yourself what Gibson's story implies about the kind of help you can be to bereaved parents. There is often so much lip service paid to the principles of family-centered care, which include a commitment to providing parents with all the information they desire. Gibson's persistent need to know should remind us all to involve families as fully as possible in all the facts and all the decisions. Perhaps Gibson's story—and our realization of his need to create a comprehensible story—can bolster health care professionals' patience on those days when anguished parents' requests for information may seem intrusive and unrelenting.

Gibson also urges the reader to think beyond the personal to the societal issues at stake. Is each of us doing enough to promote gun control? He advocates for legislation that would treat guns as dangerous consumer products that must be regulated, just like cigarettes, alcohol, or cocaine. I agree: a public health framework and concerted effort on the part of legislators, public health specialists, physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals holds the greatest promise for restraining the scourge of gun violence in our land.

References:

1. Jason Zengerle, "Something Happened," *New York Times* Book Review Desk, 24 October 1999, sec. 7, p. 42. Available at www.nytimes.com

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2. William Glaberson. "Man and His Son's Slayer Unite to Ask Why," *New York Times*, 12 April 2000, sec. A, p. 1.

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