

...reprinted from the *Vancouver Sun*

## Modern ritual replaces “wrong” with “illness”

With a breaking voice and tears dropping, MP Svend Robinson admitted on Thursday that he had stolen a \$50,000 ring.

People were stunned by what he had done, but the idea of Svend as a thief was a fleeting one. Instantly, it was replaced by the now prevailing image of him as a victim of stress.

Friends, and even foes, were quick to express sympathy, concern, even respect for this man whose political career had come to such a sad, abrupt and dramatic halt.

Federal NDP leader Jack Layton talked of the “very personal inner challenge” Robinson now faces. Prime Minister Paul Martin spoke of him as a dedicated parliamentarian who is “obviously under a lot of stress.” NDP MP Lorne Nystrom, who himself faced charges in 1990 of shoplifting a package of contact lens cleaners and was acquitted after explaining how he had been distracted and inadvertently left the store without paying, cast Svend’s “real health problems” as the priority.

But from the scant details available, it seems that, while Nystrom’s offence was minor, Robinson’s wasn’t. Terms like “shoplifting” and “pocketing” seem euphemistic. A criminal charge, if laid, would be serious.

But what I find intriguing about this story is neither this dangling legal issue nor what it reveals about Svend Robinson as a person, but rather what it says about our society’s proclivity to redefine illegal acts as signs of mental illness in need of therapy.

In earlier days, we might have described what Robinson did as “out of character.” But in our current culture, this term, which I think describes it well, is deemed insufficient. We want to know “why” he did it and we turn to medicine for answers that we believe to be definitive. Perhaps that’s why, before describing his actions as “inexplicable and unthinkable,” Robinson had already laid the psychological foundation for understanding: “For some time now, I have been suffering from severe stress and emotional pain.”

When he claimed that “accumulated stress culminated” in the theft, we grabbed on to his explanation. And, when psychologists started appearing in the media using labels like post-traumatic stress, depression and brain damage, we thought we had the answer.

I don’t think we do. I think that, instead of an answer, what we have is a modern ritual in which we obviate crime and guilt by recreating them as aspects of mental illness. We’re caught up in a myth. And there would be nothing wrong with that except it puts us in the bind of having to see someone like Robinson either as a criminal to be punished or a damaged person to be healed.

Psychological notions have become our new moral reference points. Having substituted “health and illness” for “right and wrong,” we have developed a common therapeutic language that provides the sole route to caring and forgiveness.

Offenders confess their psychological problems and we rationalize their actions in terms of personal woes. Former U.S. president Bill Clinton, knowing full well how emotive language resonates with the public, demonstrated his mastery of this art in his tearful confession of the Monica Lewinski affair. It saved his political career.

Now Robinson is following suit, doing what repentant wrongdoers must do –speaking about his emotional pain, beginning “a course of therapy to deal with these problems,” and hoping that after “healing and recovery,” his constituents will once again trust him.

He’s not a common thief. Like everyone, I’m curious to know the real reason he stole the ring. But I am no more satisfied with theories of “severe stress and emotional pain” than I am with the archaic terms of foolishness and imprudence. Neither do I believe, as one of his staunch supporter said, that his experience just goes to show that mental illness can hit anyone.

What is taking place here is a ritual that has become commonplace in our therapeutic culture, one in which the offender can rationalize the irrational and we, in turn, can feel legitimized in offering sympathy and forgiveness.

For Svend Robinson, this may offer his best shot at recovery - his own political recovery.

**BYLINE:** Tana Dineen, author of *Manufacturing Victims: What the Psychology Industry is Doing to People*.

**SOURCE:** *Vancouver Sun*, April 17, 2004 Pg. C8

For more columns visits: <http://tanadineen.com>