

Death by Therapy



*The New Age counselors who killed a little girl
and the "child welfare" regime that enabled them.*

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The death of 10-year-old Candace Newmaker --who was asphyxiated last year during a bizarre New Age therapy for a dubious disorder--had all the ingredients of an O.J. Simpson-esque *cause celebre*. It's not just that Candace was a particularly charming girl, although she appears to have been. It's also that her therapists-cum-captors, throughout the Denver trial that ended in their conviction on April 20, showed every outward sign of unrepentant evil. They even videotaped the entire hour over which Candace was gruesomely killed.

Yet the New York Times gave the case only a brief story in the waning days of the trial, the Washington Post honored the guilty verdict with just a wire-service snippet deep inside the paper, and the networks were

largely silent. Peggy Lowe's excellent reporting on the case in the Denver Rocky Mountain News never got the national attention it deserved. Candace Newmaker's story is a grisly one, but the media's inability to make sense of it may have another explanation--that it tells ordinary Americans something they don't want to hear about the plight of a lot of their own children.

Candace Newmaker (born Candace Elmore) was removed by social service authorities from her home in Lincoln County, North Carolina, in 1995. She was given up for adoption (at age 6) to an unmarried Durham heiress and aspiring single mother named Jeane Newmaker, who lives in a five-bedroom house and works as a nurse practitioner. Newmaker showered her daughter with gifts and affection, but was troubled to find the two weren't "bonding." Candace continued to miss her siblings Michael and Chelsea and (go figure!) her mother. She had a temper. She knocked clown a bookcase. Jeane Newmaker claims she killed her goldfish.

Jeane started surfing the Internet for information on Candace's "problem." She discovered ATTACH, the Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children. She attended one of their conventions in Alexandria, Virginia. There she discovered "reactive attachment disorder," or RAD, the clinical name for a child's inability to bond with new parents. It may not surprise the reader to hear that a therapist who'd never met Candace (then at home in North Carolina) diagnosed her with PAD in absentia.

Since by definition "attachment" involves two people, there's something odd about the way reactive attachment disorder is identified as an illness of only one of them--the one who's not paying the bills. But leave that aside. In Candace Newmaker's case, the oddest thing about her reactive attachment disorder is that it had no symptoms discernible to anyone except her adoptive mother.

"She wasn't a behavior problem at all," says Candace's first-grade teacher. Others note that she was fond of animals and particularly kind to special-ed students. The Los Angeles Times interviewed the father of her best friend, who says not only that he "never saw the two girls argue," but also that he "never saw any indications of a problem." The most hard-line view of Candace comes from an attention-deficit-disorder specialist who compared Candace's behavior to "having the average 18-year old adolescent in your house." Candace's biggest problem seemed to be missing her birth family. Kids at school taunted her for constantly drawing pictures of Michael and Chelsea, the brother and sister they assumed were figments of her imagination.

Defenders of the RAD concept (there are many of them, and they have grown in number since the wave of adoptions of troubled Eastern European children that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall) are quick to say that

that's exactly the problem. Charm and self-control are the symptoms of secret obstreperousness. Most defenses of RAD take the form of "Outwardly things appeared fine . . . but behind closed doors . . ."

ATTACH referred Jeane Newmaker to 54-year-old Connell Watkins, whose most advanced degree was a master's in social work from Denver University: Watkins's practice, like those of a half-dozen other radical attachment-disorder therapists, was based in Evergreen, Colorado. It was there, in the 1970s, that psychiatrist Foster Cline founded "rage reduction therapy"--one of those euphemisms, like "re-education," that bundle together several kinds of sadism that would get a person arrested were they inflicted on a non-consenting adult. Cline's methods crossed the line in any case. Cline stopped practicing in 1988 after a gutsy 11-year-old ran away following a session and described to authorities the abuse he had been made to undergo. Cline settled in court with the state of Colorado and moved to Idaho. Many of his proteges stopped using Cline's therapies at that point. Watkins was the most prominent of his disciples to press on with them.

Newmaker agreed to pay Watkins \$7,000 for a two-week course of treatment. A major part of it was the "holding therapy" invented by Cline. This involves touching the child in intimate ways in order to render him vulnerable and break his sense of mastery over his environment. As Watkins described it, "I establish that I am in control and that I am the boss at that time." And how. According to a wire report, during one 160-minute session in the last week of her life, Candace "had her face grabbed 90 times, was shaken or bounced 309 times . . . was shouted at 65 times, [and] was threatened 49 times with such consequences as being abandoned or institutionalized." Watkins threatened to shave Candace's head and tattoo it, and asked her if she had ever seen her (natural) mother have sex. Since Candace proved (to use Watkins's word) "resistive," Watkins and her assistant resorted to insults: "You act pretty stupid You're a liar and you lie all the time." All such therapies take not just planning but adult muscle. As Cline himself explained to a journalist, You have to use me sort of strength to get the kids to allow touch." One notices the line blurring between therapy and rape.

It blurred further the day before Candace died, when Watkins moved on to "compression therapy." Jeane Newmaker lay on top of Candace and, on Watkins's instructions, licked her face. That Candace submitted to this was thought a breakthrough. Watkins decided to "build on" her supposed receptivity, and attempt a "rebirthing" session the next day. By simulating for Candace a trip through the birth canal, therapists would symbolically "deliver" her to Jeane Newmaker, and erase the inconvenient natural birth Candace had gone through ten years before. Watkins had been taught the method by the California-licensed New Age marriage therapist Douglas Gosney during a barnstorming tour he made through Evergreen in 1999. Prosecutors alleged that Gosney had been fired from a hospital for "inappropriate contact with a patient," and that he claims to be able to remember his own birth. Gosney would become one of Watkins's most vocal public defenders during her trial.

This rebirthing took even more planning and muscle than the usual Watkins therapies. Watkins not only needed her 40-year-old assistant Julie Ponder (who stood trial alongside her this spring). She also enlist-ed for the occasion two other helpers--one male, one female. Candace's "rebirthing" involved wrapping her tightly in a navy flannel blanket, covering her with eight cushions, and having the four adults--who weighed a total of 673 pounds--sit on the 70-pound girl, bounce on her, and squeeze her to "simulate contractions," while taunting Candace about not "wanting" to be born enough. Her adoptive mother witnessed the whole thing.

So proud was Watkins of her novel treatment that she videotaped it from start to finish. This is not the place to describe fully the gruesome contents of the tape. It was shown to the jury in its entirety. (A transcript is available at the Rocky Mountain News website under "Candace's Final Hour.") Whereas none of Gosney's "rebirthings" had last-ed more than six minutes, Candace's went on for seven~'. Things started going wrong almost immediately. Ten minutes into the procedure, Candace was begging to be let out, warning that she was dying, that she couldn't breathe. But that was just a symptom of her sickness, part of her "denial." As one Evergreen attachment guru approvingly explained to the Los Angeles Times, "You need to use 'paradoxical intention.' When they say, 'I'm going to die' you say, 'Go ahead and die.' That way, you defuse the oppositional element. If you respond to it, you buy into it."

That's exactly the way Watkins and Ponder saw things. Sixteen minutes in, after her sobs and her pleas to be released have been ignored, Candace says, "You mean, like you want me to die for real?"

Ponder says: "Uh huh."

"Die right now and go to heaven?"

"Go ahead and die right now,'" Ponder replies. "For real. For real." At one point Ponder was even bracing her feet against a fireplace in order to heave more force into her.

Among the most poignant elements in the video are the deference and exquisite good manners that this supposedly rude and cantankerous child shows throughout. She always says please, and frequently says sorry. At twelve minutes in: "Please quit pushing on me." At fourteen minutes: "OK, I'm dying. I'm sorry." At nineteen minutes: "Please, you said you would give me some oxygen." By contrast, the intimidation of her therapists is blunt and scatological. At twenty-three minutes, Watkins says, "Stay there with the poop and vomit." At forty minutes Ponder says, "She's stuck there in her own puke and poop."

That was when Candace spoke her last word ("No"), at which point Ponder went into a nyah-nyah taunt-- "*Quitter, quitter, quitter, quitter! Quit, quit, quit, quit. She's a quitter!*" A half-hour later they unwrapped the blankets. Candace was dead.

On April 20, a jury deliberated five hours before pronouncing Watkins and Ponder guilty on all counts. The main charge, on which the two will be sentenced in June, was "reckless child abuse resulting in death," which carries a penalty of 16 to 48 years imprisonment. Lesser charges against Watkins include criminal impersonation, obtaining a signature by deception, and unlawful practice of psychotherapy.

Both defendants were wholly emotionless throughout the trial. As one juror put it, "I was waiting for at least any glimpse of remorse or sorrow or regret that they had ignored Candace, and I was quite shocked that that just never happened." Watkins and Ponder were not only remorseless but defiant. Said Watkins, "It could look to the superficial observer of the tape that she couldn't breathe. I knew she could." This was part of a strategy, to confuse jurors about what asphyxia is. The defense wanted to focus on the question of whether the blanket had been porous enough to breathe through, and leave to one side the question whether a 70-pound girl's lungs could open under the 673-pound weight of four bouncing adults.

In the end, Watkins's lawyers tried to claim Candace's death had had nothing to do with the "treatment" whatsoever. After all, no vomit was found in Candace's lungs. So she could have had a congenital heart condition! She could have died from one of the three medications she had been placed on for her RAD. She could have died from having stopped those medications. Or something. As Watkins put it, "Somehow the 10-year-old inexplicably stopped breathing." Watkins sent this observation to an Internet site set up by her defenders in the attachment-therapy profession. During the trial, Watkins contributed postings in which she warned that a wave of Columbine High School incidents and similar depredations awaited society if she and her colleagues were hindered from bringing future sociopaths like Candace to heel.

Deciding whom to blame for Candace Newmaker's death is harder than it looks. The quack Watkins is easily enough taken care of. She, personally, will be put away for a long time, and her therapies will be, too, at least in Colorado. In the aftermath of the trial, the state's governor Bill Owens signed "Candace's Law," to ban rebirthing therapy. No one will regret this bit of political posturing. But the next time such a thing happens, the therapy involved will be slightly different. Those who claim it's impossible to police the fringes of medicine are correct,

It's impossible, because this is really not a medical case at all. Watkins's treatments have less in common with medicine and therapy than they do with cult rituals. In this respect, Candace Newmaker was like the children carried off to Jonestown. But cults aren't the only parallel. There is sadism involved. One has the sense that both Watkins and Ponder were actually getting a perverted thrill out of their treatment of Candace Newmaker, and to procure that thrill they had first to dehumanize their "patient." Anyone who has read the literature of twentieth-century totalitarianism will find political parallels.

Candace Newmaker was killed by something that goes much deeper than medical malpractice or rough trade or ideology--by a mentality. Anyone can see the monstrous metaphysical arrogance in Watkins's treatment. If Watkins took seriously the idea that she was going to give "birth" to Candace--and there is every indication that she did--she had no sense that what she was squashing beneath those pillows was *already* a human being.

The person who understood best what had been done to Candace was her own birth mother, Angela Elmore, who raged at Jeane Newmaker for putting the child in that position. "You only have one birth," said Elmore. "I'm her mama. What I did was God's will. What [Jeane] did was cuckoo. She played God with my child."

Certainly Newmaker's role is a haunting aspect of the case. She acted not like a mother but an outraged consumer. She seems to have thought that when she adopted Candace she had a right to a "normal" parent-child relationship. When Candace's natural bond with the mother she'd known for her first six years persisted, Newmaker took Candace to Evergreen to be "cured" of it. Newmaker will stand trial on charges of criminally negligent child abuse in September (and Brita St. Clair and Jack McDaniel, the two assistants who helped squash Candace, will face the same charges as Watkins and Ponder).

Jeane Newmaker's terrible parental judgment should make us ask whether placing children in single-parent households is generally wise. Two heads being better than one, a simple but big problem with single parenthood is that it doesn't provide for built-in second (parenting) opinions. One parent's mistaking his child's temper for a "problem" requiring treatment may happen from time to time, but it's much less likely that two parents will be thus deluded.

We can also blame the it-takes-a-village zeal with which North Carolina's authorities, acting in the name of the public, examine family dynamics, declare parents unsuitable, and separate children from their parents forever. North Carolina's practice in this regard is chilling in a way that goes beyond merely raiding poor families for upper-middle-class adoption prospects. It is Orwellian, and wholly unaccountable. Candace's early home life may have been dysfunctional enough to imperil her. But we can't know, because the never-look-back Lincoln County child welfare authorities who ordered her removed will neither speak to the press about the criteria they used to do so, nor unseal any of their records.

No one outside of North Carolina's family-welfare bureaucracy knows where Candace's siblings Michael and Chelsea are now. Certainly not their mother, Angela Elmore, for under the state's laws, once a child is removed from a home, all parental rights cease. And the state will go to any lengths to make sure they're never reasserted. Candace's very birth was rendered a nullity, through a bit of Zhdanovite airbrushing of the records: Upon Jeane Newmaker's adoption of Candace, the state of North Carolina issued a new--and fraudulent--birth certificate, listing the girl's birthplace as Durham and her name as Newmaker. Her original certificate, which records her birth in Lincolnton on November 19, 1989, and her name as Elmore, has been removed from the records. North Carolina's social workers rebirthed Candace before Connell Watkins did.

In keeping with this official obliteration of Candace Elmore, the state of North Carolina never told Angela Elmore of her own daughter's fate. She found out from two journalists who showed up one morning at the door to her trailer home. At that point, Candace had been dead for five months.