

Clark County Commission

COMMISSIONERS REPLACED BY ROBOT CLONES

How else to explain approval of dubious Family Services director?... Not a single question asked!

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

A few weeks ago, we got a little bit pregnant and found ourselves a little bit married to a guy we don't even know, Thomas Morton. It was an arranged marriage, set up by our benevolent uncle Thom Reilly—who always knows best—and approved by our county commissioners—who always do what Reilly tells them.

When Morton was approved as Family Services director at the July 5 commission meeting, there was not one word of debate, not a single question asked, and no comments permitted from the public until

after the nomination was approved. The information the commissioners received was minimal, little more than the press release given to the public. Their decision was ostensibly based on a single sheet of paper in their briefing book.

Morton himself appeared before the board and stiffly read a bland and forgettable statement. This key speech, with TV cameras present, could have been a chance to rally the troops and unite the community, but that would have required leadership.

The commissioners moved their eyes nodded their heads and pushed their "Yes" buttons when instructed. Apparently this was accomplished through a system of pulleys, servos and compressed air. You've seen the technology at Disneyland, powering Abe Lincoln and the Pirates of the Caribbean. It's called *Audio-Animatronics*™.

The ceremony was over in a flash, and the illusion of process was complete.

After a 12-day paid vacation, Morton started work on July 17. We've been living with him now for a little over two weeks, and he hasn't really done anything wrong, so



we must be happy, right? Things must be going well.

We're now living together in a shoe. A really big shoe. With our children. A few thousand of them. The children are stacked up like cordwood in the basement, in the attic, and in the shed out back. They're running around in the yard, pulling each other's hair, snot dripping from their noses, crying for attention that we can't give them.

What's an old woman to do?

Thomas Morton is supposed to help us with our children. He's supposed to fix our shoe. Uncle Reilly tells us that he is the best person for the job but that we shouldn't expect instant results.

Crying all night doesn't help. There is no use in dwelling on the past—like how this marriage came about.

Okay, so we can't help dwelling on it. We can't stop crying. Maybe we should get our feelings out in the open right now so we can move on with our duties.

This marriage sucks.

In our view of his past, Thomas Morton has dubious credentials, no administrative experience, incoherent child protection theories, no demonstrated leadership ability, and a proven aptitude at suppressing dissent and creating bad feelings among those who happen to disagree with him. He has burned most of his bridges in the child welfare community and run his own organization into the ground—and we have rewarded him with a \$130k job! He was offered it without any other candidates being considered, without a significant background review, and without any consultation with DFS staff, the judiciary, the D.A., the provider community or anyone else with a stake in the outcome. Given all of the red flags in his background and personality, Morton certainly would never have survived a competitive process.

On the plus side, Reilly chose him.

Reilly, of course, is God. That's the way things work in the County of Clark. The unelected county manager rules his kingdom with absolute authority. The county commissioners appoint the county manager then are replaced by clones. Their role, thereafter, is strictly ceremonial and animatronic. At their meetings, they give out awards and proclamations and approve whatever the county manager requests.

Reilly has been God for so long that his May 3 press release announcing Morton's appointment didn't even bother to mention that approval of the Board was needed. It was assumed.

Gods don't need background checks or second opinions. Gods know the solution to every problem right away and don't need to consult with anybody. Gods are never wrong. If a decision, once made, turns out to conflict with reality, then reality needs to be revised. (A carefully worded press release will take care of that.)

What was the basis for Morton's selection? This has never been publicly revealed, because gods don't have to defend their decisions. We suspect, however, that the deal was clinched by a couple of lunches at the end of last year. Reilly was probably

swayed by Morton's glorious child welfare rhetoric and thought he had found the miracle solution to the problems at DFS.

Everybody loves miracle solutions. You wave your magic wand and with one bold, symbolic act—like choosing an “out of the box thinker” with no agency experience—everything is supposed to get better. Miracle solutions don't require that you actually understand the problem. All you need is faith.

The problems of DFS are huge and complex and can only be solved by attention, resources and intimate understanding. Miracle solutions feel nice at first, but sooner or later the fantasy breaks down, usually with an explosion of animosity.

You learn a lot about these things by hanging out in divorce court, as we often do. Many marriages, we observe, are “latent divorces” from the start. The explosives were set in place at the time of the union and it is only a matter of time before they go off. Sometimes it takes six months and sometimes six years, but with certain marriages, you just know they're gonna blow.

Here at Family Court Chronicles, we think we know where the Morton marriage is headed. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to add things up.

The deeper philosophical question now is what should we do? Should we hasten Morton's demise—which is oh so easy—or should we “give him a fair chance”?

Keep in mind we're married now. Getting unmarried is never easy. Since there is no obvious replacement at present, a search for a new director is going to take 3 months at minimum, probably longer. This will mean more chaos and disruption.

Which is more costly: a defective marriage or a disruptive divorce? It is not always clear.

Remember that there are vulnerable children involved. Thousands of them. They are our top priority. Sometimes, you have to make sacrifices for your children, including staying in a relationship that you would otherwise leave.

We are familiar with this dilemma from a previous life. Our own needs are not the most important thing. There is a big calculation involved: How are our actions now going to affect the outcomes for our children over the course of years?

Instead of dwelling on the injustice of how it happened, let's concentrate on what is in front of us right now and what we can do with it.

Morton isn't all bad. He has his supporters. He is a complex human being. He is vulnerable and needy like the rest of us.

What can we find that is positive in him that we can maybe work with?

1) He understands the language of child welfare.

This is like wandering in a foreign country and coming across an English speaker. You may not agree with what he is saying in English, but just having a language in common is something.

2) He wants to succeed.

He didn't come to Clark County thinking, “I'm going to con these people.” He wants to be seen as an effective administrator who “turns around” our troubled system. The stakes for him are as high as they are for us. At this stage of his checkered career, he can't afford to fail.

Because of the circumstances of his hiring, this is not a director who can make sweeping autocratic changes. He doesn't have the mandate or goodwill to do anything on his own.

The only way he will get anything done is by consensus. As alien as it is to his personality, he will only be able to act with the support of his staff. He will be closely watched (by us if no one else), and his actions will have to be transparent. He will not be “getting away” with anything.

Sometimes good things can evolve from bad. Has anyone read Machiavelli? **MAYBE WE NEED TOM MORTON!**

We need Tom Morton because the next time heads must roll, his will be available. Sooner or later there will be another horrific child welfare scandal that will require a scapegoat, and Morton will be it. In the process, DFS will get an increase in funding and more attention from the county.

It happened with the last director, who was seen to take the fall for the child death report. As soon as she resigned, God gave DFS thirty new staff positions.

God is leaving, however—in a matter of days. Reilly doesn't have the balls to stick around himself, but he has left his protégé, Virginia Valentine, in his stead.

Like Morton, Valentine was selected without competition. The audio-animatronic commissioners pressed the buttons they were supposed to, and Reilly's chosen replacement was approved.

Valentine is less wily and decisive than God was, but things are going to get done. We're all going to work with her, right?

Machiavelli can work with anyone.

—GC

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