

In Theory: Reflecting on the Seal Beach hair salon tragedy

October 21, 2011

Question:

Eight people were killed and another left in critical condition after a gunman opened fire in a Seal Beach hair salon Oct. 12. Police say the alleged gunman, Scott Evans Dekraai, is the estranged husband of one of the salon's employees, who was killed in the attack. In looking for a motive for the mass shooting, the media has pointed to Dekraai's disintegrating marriage and post-traumatic stress disorder caused by a 2007 work accident in which one of his colleagues died.

As Seal Beach reeled from the massacre, the popular salon has been turned into a makeshift memorial by friends and relatives of the victims, and scores of people have placed flowers, candles and cards outside the building. The shooting is the deadliest in Orange County's history.

The Rev. Peggy Price of the Center for Spiritual Living addressed mourners, saying, "Recognize that life is precious. Right in this place, just as yesterday right across the street was the presence of God ... and that presence of God is still here. It is in our sadness, it is in our sorrow and it is in our anger."

What response can spiritual leaders make in a case like this? Are you resigned to this kind of incident happening over and over in America?

Answer:

I am saddened that such a horrific tragedy has entered the community of Seal Beach and has shattered the lives of families and friends of the innocent victims who were killed there. It is hard to imagine a response any spiritual leader could make that would truly soothe the pain arising from such a senseless loss of life. To have one person killed would have been heartbreaking. But to have seven others who were not directly involved in the parents' custody dispute wantonly murdered is a catastrophe. Incidents like this one are something to which we should never become resigned.

So what do we say and do? As a person of faith, I believe we are all called to reach out to those in distress and offer what support we can. It will not bring back those who are gone or explain why such things happen. But our words and actions can help to ease some of the grief by letting others know that we care. There is a son whose mother is dead and whose father has been charged with

her murder. There is a ninth victim in critical condition in the hospital. There are those who are aghast that such a terrible thing could have happened. And there is a man who must now deal with the results of the destructive actions he allegedly committed. All of those people need our caring thoughts, actions, and prayers.

But there is more that we can do. We can establish preventive support and treatment for those who are in the kind of distress that makes them believe violence is the solution to their anguish. Religious institutions can offer pastoral care, counseling, and prayer. Social service agencies can be called into action to keep situations from escalating. Families and friends can support those in mental and spiritual distress and encourage them to get professional help. What we cannot do is sit idly by until another disaster such as the one in Seal Beach strikes.

May we find the courage to act out of our conviction that every person is precious and must be held in our loving care.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

This past Sunday during a prayer request time in our worship service, one parishioner requested prayers for the families who lost loved ones. So we prayed for them, as well as for Scott Dekraai, the alleged perpetrator of this awful crime.

As one congregant pointed out, she would never dream of such awful mayhem happening at the beauty parlor. None of us could, really —but such is the nature of random violence. Do I expect such violence to continue? Sadly, yes.

There is in the human psyche such terrible ability to commit evil if we feel we have been wronged; and if innocent bystanders get caught in the middle, so what? Add to that ability to commit evil a little rage, a little mental illness and a few guns — and suddenly you have a bloodbath in the making.

We'll never give up our right to bear arms (2nd Amendment, you know), and so we'll never rid ourselves of random violence such as what we saw in Seal Beach.

Guns aren't totally to blame in this case — but if the murderer had been forced to

use a knife or a machete or a spear or a saw or an ax or a hammer or something else that he had to wield without the benefit of simply pulling a trigger, fewer people would have died. And those who were in the shop would have had a better chance of running away or even fighting off the attacker.

Again, guns aren't totally to blame — but as long as they are so easy to get, we will have repeats of Seal Beach, Virginia Tech, Columbine, Tucson and the Texas tower massacre of 1966. You've heard the line that guns don't kill people; people kill people. That may be true. But it's also true that a crazy guy who's off his medications and who has a gun can create a hell of a lot of mayhem.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

The response spiritual leaders can make to a case like this is that we live in a fallen world, with broken people. And unfortunately, mental illness is not understood or taken seriously in many cases.

You cannot make meaning of chaotic, dangerous behavior and murder. I do believe we will always see tragedies like this. However, as a mental health provider, I see this in a completely different way. The phrase from a newspaper article about this incident that stands out to me and shows the unawareness of the general population is the quote from a neighbor: “He is one of the friendliest guys on the block, a man who invited them over for pool parties and played catch with his son in his yard.” Why do people think those with mental illness are not nice, do not have moments of sanity, or do not practice good deeds? But when it flares, it is often only seen by those closest to them, whose reports often are questioned: Is that person really dangerous, or is the ex-wife just exaggerating?

Treating Bipolar Disorder is one of my professional specialties, and I can attest that if this man was Bipolar, the wife was not exaggerating. Overall, many do not understand mental illness; they think it is not real. But it can be very dangerous, even more so if someone is not medication-compliant. Often women are afraid to stand up and give the evidence they need and take the action they should. In this case, it led to a grave tragedy. The wisest action America can take to stop these incidents is to stop stigmatizing mental illness and educate the general population.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian
Kimberlie Zakarian Therapy
Montrose

We should never let ourselves become resigned to acts of violence, or grow so numb that we simply accept murders as a routine aspect of daily life.

In the book of Genesis, God states that he has created man in his image. Once we recognize the fact that every human being has a divine spark within, it places immense value upon each one of our lives.

Whenever a person is killed, it is as if a part of God is lost from among us. Tolerating bloodshed in any form is sacrilegious, for it is essentially tantamount to accepting the destruction of the divine spirit.

While the uniquely American phenomenon of mass shootings has many causes, I feel that one important factor is the lack of spiritual direction in our public schools. To try to stem the carnage that has become too much a part of American life, we need to re-introduce religious and moral values into our schools. It is crucial that our children are raised with an acute understanding of both the sanctity of life and the terrible ramifications of murder. Although the primary responsibility for instilling ethical principles in children should rest with their parents, our educators can play a vital role when parents fail to meet their obligations.

In keeping with this idea, I am a strong advocate of the Moment of Silence in our schools, a time which would provide children with a daily period of silent contemplation, prayer, reflection, or meditation. These few moments give students an important opportunity to focus on their responsibility to each other and to the world at large. If they would like to think about God, that is also their prerogative. Most important of all is that our youth spend some time every day thinking about the bigger picture, how they fit into it, and how they can be productive members of society. As adults, all of us — whether we are parents, teachers, clergy, or just concerned members of the community — must strive to raise a generation that will abhor violence and killing.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center

Utoya Island, Norway, 69; Sang-Namdo, South Korea, 57; Port Arthur, Australia, 35; Blacksburg, Virginia, 32; and Bogota, Colombia, 30.

That is only the top five massacres worldwide by lone gunmen (and yes, they are all men), with the number slain in each.

I believe that all of us need to stop mopping the floor long enough to turn off the faucet.

To me, the necessary response, the only real solution, is to take all guns out of private hands. OK, in the few areas where actual hunting still happens, we can figure out a system to keep appropriate firearms safely stored and issued to licensed hunters. But please, not assault weapons for city-slickers to gun down animals raised for slaughter.

The U.S. Constitution's 2nd Amendment, with its reference to a well-regulated militia, has inexplicably and, to me, foolishly, come to be seen as conferring the right to own a personal arsenal. England's 1689 Bill of Rights is the inspiration for our 2nd Amendment. But the U.K. now has imposed serious gun control, banning semi-automatics after the 1987 Hungerford massacre (16 dead), and going even further to outlaw most handguns, plus imitations and air rifles, after the Dunblame shooting (another 16 dead), in 1996.

I resign myself only to the self-defeatists assuring us that an end to gun violence can never happen.

Goals that may seem unobtainable are essential in order to make progress toward social change. Improvement comes in incremental steps along the way, with the vanguard out ahead working on the next challenge.

“If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.”

“Shoot for the moon and if you miss, you will still be among the stars.”

“With God, all things are possible.”

Perhaps there's something here to inspire you to head for the faucet.

Roberta Medford

Atheist
Montrose

Clearly, the role of the religious community is not to normalize the victories of brokenness and darkness, but to take on the sources and forces that change people like Scott Dekraai into someone who allegedly is capable of committing desperate, irrational and cruel murderers.

“This cannot happen again” is our common cry — faith leaders, Seal Beach neighbors and compassionate people everywhere. This cannot happen again. But we have different ways of going about preventing a repeat occurrence. We can lean on law enforcement solutions — surveillance, security checks, arrest, and pulling unstable people out of society through imprisonment or institutionalization. Good policing will always be part of the mix. A response of spiritual leaders is to warn against an overreliance on such measures.

Computer security guru Bruce Schneier notes that we “estimate the probability of something by how easy it is to bring instances of it to mind.” Terrible things that we hear about in the news are very memorable, and we start to think that they happen all the time, but “by definition, news is something that almost never happens. When something is so common, it’s no longer news — car crashes, domestic violence — those are the risks you worry about.”

So we wouldn’t want to start adding security checks to beauty salons or imprisoning every person with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, as though repeats of this horrible incident are happening everywhere.

The role of faith communities is to advocate for policies and programs that promote healing and wholeness. For example, as society reincorporates thousands of returning soldiers, it is in everyone’s best interest to advocate for appropriate Veterans Administration funding and care for PTSD-affected veterans. It is in everyone’s best interest to promote adequate and accessible mental health care for all people.

Also in the interest of community health, faith leaders should advocate against gun proliferation, so that it is not easy to carry out a deranged revenge fantasy.

Finally, the faith community should continue to do as Rev. Price did — affirm the preciousness of life, lift up the presence of God even in the midst of tragedy, and

pray and act for victory over brokenness and darkness.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

“When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the villagers who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep. So the crowd said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (John 11:32-36, adapted).

Many Christians remember ‘Jesus wept’ from our childhood Sunday school days as the easiest-to-memorize Bible verse. As adults, we should remember that verse in times of tragedy as the best and only response to the grief-stricken question, where is God in all this?

I believe that the risen Christ is standing in the crowd of mourners gathered at that Seal Beach salon — weeping. And loving. Loving with all his heart the ones who have died. I believe that he is laying flowers gently down beside their photos. And lighting candles. And holding on to the people around him, and weeping.

Later, we speak of Easter, and resurrection, and eternal life, and hope. But now, in the raw moments of dumbstruck grief and anger, all we have to know is that God weeps with us.

One of our hymns says, “There is no place where earth’s sorrows are more felt than up in heaven” (‘There’s a wideness in God’s mercy’). There’s no way to make sense of such horrible events as this; but we can find some small comfort in knowing that when we cry out in our fear and rage and pain, and shake our fists at the sky, the sorrows of earth break the heart of heaven.

Later, we’ll tell each other, “This isn’t the end of the story.” And we’ll talk about the God of life and light and timeless hope. Today, we remind each other, “Jesus wept, and wept for love. We are not alone in our sorrows; the Holy One stands with us.”

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada

Yes, I am resigned to that fact, but America actually has less to fear, I think, than so many other places on the planet where violence and mass murder can happen at any moment without the public being so surprised. When tragedy occurs here, we suffer, but we're grateful that it isn't an everyday event. This latest massacre is said to be one of the worst ever. So it is unusual.

Another worst-ever event occurred this week, when the director of a wild animal preserve in Ohio opened the cages and set loose a record number of lions, tigers and bears. Then he committed suicide. That could have been a worse tragedy than Seal Beach, but the authorities hunted and put down all the animals. Imagine if nearby school children had been eaten by giant jungle cats. Both of these incidents occurred because of the perpetrator's emotional issues, and they both acted out with devastating consequences.

This doesn't surprise Christians. We read in the Bible how the very first son of the very first man committed the very first murder (Genesis 4). Adam's son Cain killed his younger sibling out of jealousy and it has been that way ever since. Something people need to get their minds around is the fact that mankind is flawed. We are not born nice and good, we are born selfish and sinful, estranged from God; and given free rein, we are capable of terrible atrocities. The news wouldn't even exist if there were only polite stories of how wonderful we all were to one another.

This being the truth of the matter, God sent Jesus into the world to right our relationship to him and to open heaven's doors to us. Apart from Christ, we have only death to expect, followed by the eternal consequence of our life's choice. Where would that have left you, had you been sitting in the barber chair that fateful day? "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1Colossians 15:22 NIV). Are you, "in Christ?" Better yet, is he in you?

The Rev. Bryan Griem
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