

This e-mail is sent only to a voluntary subscriber list. If you no longer wish to receive these weekly columns, send a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca. Or write to me personally, jimt@quixotic.ca

Sunday December 21, 2014

The cost of ignoring mental disabilities

By Jim Taylor

It wasn't the kind of news one looks for in the days before Christmas. Three people died in Sydney, Australia, when a lone gunman burst into the Lindt Chocolat Café and held 17 people hostage.

The killer, 50-year-old Man Haran Monis, was described in the media as "no stranger to police or to Australia's justice system."

He had allegedly sent "grossly offensive" letters to families of Australian troops killed in Afghanistan. He had been charged as an accessory to the murder of his ex-wife, and with sexual assault of another woman.

So why was a man known as a loose cannon free on bail?

The same kind of question could be asked of a number of recent killings.

The RCMP had monitored Martin Couture-Rouleau, the 25-year-old Quebec man who deliberately ran down two Canadian soldiers with his vehicle, killing one of them. The RCMP had seized his passport, suspecting him of planning to join militants fighting in the Middle East.

Justin Bourque, the 24-year-old from Moncton, New Brunswick, who shot and killed three RCMP officers, was well known for his anti-authority rants and paranoid conspiracy theories. He had bought a second gun. He had threatened to kill people.

Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, who stormed Parliament Hill in October, had a string of arrests, and convictions, for fraud, theft, armed robbery, assault, and possession of a dangerous weapon.

The common factor

And consider this list of mass murders in the U.S.:

- The Boston Marathon bombings by Chechen brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev.
- Sandy Hook Elementary School, where 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed 20 children and 6 adult staff.
- Virginia Tech, where Seung-Hui Cho, a senior, shot and killed 32 people.
- Marysville Pilchuck High School, in Washington State -- 15-year-old freshman Jaylen Fryberg fatally shot four other students.
- Columbine High School in Colorado, where senior students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 students and one teacher.
- Fort Hood, where Nidal Malik Hasan, an Army major and psychiatrist, shot 13 people.

Do you notice any similarities in that lamentable list -- aside from all the killers being males?

No, it's not that some of the men -- Couture-Rouleau, Zehaf-Bibeau, Hasan, and the Tsarnaev brothers -- had Islamic connections. As an aside, the words "terrorist" and "Islamic" seem conjoined these days. The terrorist tag is never applied to Christians who commit violent acts.

Many of the killers may indeed have had political or religious motivations. Marc Lépine certainly had an anti-feminist agenda when he selectively murdered 14 women in the École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal.

But that's not the common factor either.

It's that every one of these killers was described, after the fact, as deranged, upset, or mentally disturbed.

“Damaged goods”

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, lawyer Manny Conditis said of Sydney gunman Monis: “This is a one-off random individual. It’s not a concerted terrorism event or act. It’s a damaged-goods individual who’s done something outrageous.”

Why can’t we recognize “damaged goods” before they go on killing sprees?

Michael Zehaf-Bibeau turned himself in to police twice in the months before he shot and killed Cpl. Nathan Cirillo at the National War Memorial. They didn’t detain him. Nor did a detox centre. Eventually, he robbed a Vancouver McDonald’s restaurant with nothing but a sharp stick. After the clerk called police, Zihaf-Bibeau sat on his backpack outside, waiting for police to come. He told his judge he was trying to get caught so he could sober up behind bars.

“I’m a crack addict and a religious person,” he told Madam Justice Donna Sinnew, according to court transcripts. “I want to sacrifice freedom and good things for a year maybe, so when I come out I’ll appreciate things in life more and be clean.”

As a mental health therapist told me, a few days later, “If that wasn’t a cry for help, I don’t know what is.” But he didn’t get help.

Objective measurement

We have no difficulty identifying physical disabilities. We can measure blindness or hearing loss. We can see the effect of a club foot, a cleft palate, an amputated limb.

We minimize physical disabilities by providing surgery, prosthetics, and devices like hearing aids. So that the affected people can function normally in society.

But we can’t measure mental disabilities. We have to rely on anecdotal evidence. This man loses his temper easily. Or thinks everyone is against him. Or enjoys hurting other people.

Because we can’t measure it, we think it’s not real. It’s all in his mind. If the rest of us can control our impulses, he should be able to do the same.

We don’t concede the reality of mental disabilities until the person does something physical that we can measure. But by that time, it’s too late to protect innocent victims.

We need to acknowledge that mental disabilities are just as real as physical disabilities. And when left unrecognized, untreated, they may prove far more costly.

Copyright © 2014 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; links from other blogs welcomed; all other rights reserved.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

First, some letters about last week’s column on creating hope for those who have no hope.

Mary Collins called it “a keeper: Thank you for this very powerful message -- especially the story of the two men willing to be buried alive each day... and your ending paragraph with sentence ‘We have to offer hope to them. And then do something to make that hope possible.’”

“I’ve saved it in my ‘inspiration’ file.”

Laurina Tallman had a different ‘inspiration’ file: “Thank you for this astonishing message of hope: ‘We needed to be hope for them.’ This one will be posted on the refrigerator.”

Diane Robinson recalled the prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi which includes the line, "Where there's despair, let me bring hope."

"Like the women who kept hope alive for the men who could not hope (a phenomenal story), our call (in part) is to bring hope to those who despair. In whatever way we can."

Mary-Margaret Boone thought it would be a good message to be reminded of, "in January when we are over the cushy comforting loving seasons of Christmas in our insular and comfortable Canadian world. It's a reminder of what we can still do and must do, and not drop the message and demands of hope, peace, joy and love."

Then there were some responses to my musing, "Am I tackling too uncomfortable topics? Should I stick to schmaltz?"

David Gilchrist responded, "Whoa Jim, don't even THINK it! No! Just because not many take time to write in this extra-busy season doesn't mean you don't get us thinking!"

Ted Spencer had similar thoughts: "Don't interpret it as indifference. It might be indolence. It might be that you have a remarkable knack of hitting nails squarely on their heads, with reasoned arguments that aren't begging for a rebuttal. In my case, both apply, to one degree or another.

"We, in Canada, are often told by the federal spin doctors about all the Syrian refugees that have been, or will be, 'granted' a new life in Canada. As we know, vanishingly few have been, or will be, allowed into this country and freed from their appalling plight. Christians are to be moved upward on the list. Try as I might, I can't slide a hair between a Christian fundamentalist and a Muslim fundamentalist.

"If we've hope to spare, there are many deserving. The heartbreak of it is that the current Canadian régime has no intention of offering hope to anyone who can't buy his way into this country."

And then there was a third group of comments, picking up on themes from the child labour column the week before.

On that subject, David Gilchrist continued, "I need to respond to 'child labour'. If we are preparing children for life, bring it on! Slave service? NO! Harsh and cruel treatment? Certainly not! But since when has learning to 'pull our weight' been damaging to anyone? Why should all the housework be left up Mum or Dad?

"Childhood is where children should learn the skills of becoming 'householders': starting with helping with the dishes (for most of us), to cooking and cleaning. And farms? Yes, there is more danger in that work than most of the things we did as kids (like newspaper routes, snow removal, lawn and garden care, delivering for local merchants after school, etc.); and of course the tasks to which we set our young should be very carefully monitored, and safety taught. But I'm glad I learned to milk a cow!

"I believe that expecting kids to earn at least part of their 'allowance', and maybe even contribute to the family pot when times are tough, does a great deal more good than it does harm.

"Maybe this is all understood and assumed; but the 'anti-child-labour' voices sometimes sound as if any kind of expectation from our children is abuse. There is a great difference between abuse and giving opportunity to learn valuable lessons."

Fran Ota wrote from her own experience: "One of the difficult things about living in South Viet Nam during the war was the number of children who worked. They were expected to go to school, so most were up around 6:00 in the morning, and off to class from 7:00 till noon. But then they worked -- young boys selling newspapers on the streets, children of either gender in factories, whatever jobs they could find. We had an experienced cook who had worked her way up from the bottom, and her 'apprentice', a young girl of 14, was mature enough to make our 14 year olds look infantile. She cleaned the house and looked after the kids -- lived with us during the week.

"In Viet Nam, in every family everyone worked -- to make enough money to support the whole family -- and often they hired 'pairs' to come in and look after **their** children while they worked. Average salary -- \$20US per month.

"Yes, child labour is horrific in many ways, but -- depending on the country and the work they are doing -- they ***must*** work for families to survive. Until we can right the wrongs perpetrated on many countries (like Viet

Nam) we cannot be too judgmental about how they manage to live; that's very much a first-world attitude. Child labour is a symptom of greater issues. If we address the source of the wrongs, there will be no need for it.

“P.S. Last week I heard that one of our Conservatives thought the restrictions on child labour in Canada should be relaxed. I suggest we have to be vigilant right here...”

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
