

Sunday June 10, 2012

Real murderers do stupid things

By Jim Taylor

I gave up reading murder mysteries a few years ago. But I didn't realize why I found them unsatisfying until I browsed through last week's news.

I grew up devouring the novels of Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, and Marjorie Allingham. As time passed, I moved on to Dick Francis, Ellis Peters, and P.D. James.

But they all have a common flaw – they give far too much credit to the murderer's intelligence.

Without exception, the fictional killers know that murder is socially unacceptable. So they concoct iron-clad alibis. Carefully conceal motives. Avoid leaving clues. Deflect suspicion. Frame innocent persons....

Then this week I read about three real-life murderers.

Anders Breivik is the Norwegian who admits blowing up eight people with a bomb in downtown Oslo, and then shooting 69 young people at a political retreat.

But he denies any criminality. He obtained his guns and his explosives through legal channels. His victims, he insists, betrayed their country by supporting immigration.

Since he was caught on site, and made no secret of his actions, there was never any question about what Breivik did. The only question is why. Was he mentally deranged?

One set of forensic psychiatrists said yes; a second group said no.

As part of his trial testimony, Breivik read a long list of perceived slights and slurs.

According to the Associated Press, a Turkish father drove over Breivik's bicycle when he was seven. When he was 15, a Pakistani subway driver slapped him for hanging onto the outside of a subway car. One of his friends was threatened by a Kosovo/Albanian youth.

Any right-minded person – the old formula used for selecting jurors – would recognize that these as petty incidents, unworthy of mass retaliation. But Breivik could not let them go. He brooded over them, hatched them, nursed them into a racial and religious conspiracy directed against people like him.

Hey! Look at me!

Luka Magnotta is accused of killing and dismembering Lin Jun, a 33-year-old Chinese student, in Montreal. The murder might have passed with little media attention as just another episode of urban violence, except that the killer mailed parts of the dismembered body to the national offices of both the Conservative and Liberal parties.

If there was a political reason for not sending body parts to Thomas Mulcair's NDP offices, no one has explained it yet.

Magnotta may have posted video of the actual murder on YouTube. He may also have previously posted video of someone – possibly himself -- suffocating kittens inside a plastic bag with a vacuum cleaner, and feeding a live kitten to a python. He certainly posted dozens of videos of himself in various states of undress, in various disguises, under various aliases.

But not, it would seem, with any intent of muddying the trail of evidence. Rather, to deliberately draw attention to himself.

Magnotta comes across as a preening peacock, a narcissist obsessed with his own image. When he was arrested at an Internet Café in Berlin, he was watching video reports about himself.

Obsessed with themselves

The primary characteristic of both Breivik and Magnotta seems to be egotism. They are incapable of valuing any viewpoint but their own. No one else matters.

Is that insanity? If it is, most international corporations would qualify.

Breivik himself rejects insanity. His lawyers told the London *Telegraph* that he “wanted to be declared sane so as not to damage the political message in his manifesto.”

And then there’s former security guard Angus David Mitchell. When he died in a police shoot-out at the end of May, in B.C.’s Fraser Valley, he already killed the owner and an employee of a sushi restaurant and shot a former landlord. He carried with him a hit list of 10 more people and businesses he planned to target.

Like the other two, Mitchell had previously drawn attention to himself, in a rant on Facebook.

Insp. Kevin Hackett, head of the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team, told a press conference Mitchell had “no clear motive beyond his fragile mental state.”

Not attractive role models

I know it’s dangerous to generalize from a few examples. But it’s hard to ignore some similarities here. All three killers were men. All three were white. Two chose immigrants as victims; the third cited immigration as his cause. Breivik and Magnotta both had links to right-wing white-supremacist groups; both Breivik and Mitchell nursed old grievances.

All three showed signs of mental instability.

But none of them fit the model of Agatha Christie’s clever, calculating killers.

If such persons get away with murder, it’s because of good luck or police incompetence – as the Willie Picton inquiry suggests – and not because of intelligence or planning.

Increasingly, I’m convinced that most killers simply do not think.

Their motives are not rational. The killing is its own justification. They kill. Period. They do not think past that act.

Sorry, Dame Agatha. I no longer find murders exciting or stimulating.

Copyright © 2012 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns.

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

YOUR TURN

Last week’s column about declining attention spans seems to have held your attention, at least.

Bob Stoddard wrote: “I agree that the mass media’s encouragement of a short attention span is part of a larger picture. Another part results from our concept of time. We are bombarded with the declarations that ‘time costs money’ and that ‘efficiency’ is achieved by reducing the time required to complete a job. Thus, many seek to have instantaneous ‘news’ rather than a thorough evaluation of events; farmers hire planes to spray chemicals across broad swaths of land rather than utilize alternative methods of dealing with perceived pests through less harmful and more appropriate methods. With such ready acceptance of a goal to do things faster, it is not surprising that short attention spans result.”

Robert Caughill admitted to being “a BIG fan of Douglas Adam and his Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy novels...”

He thought my description of Fox News as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury" could also describe some of Sun News Networks TV commentators. For a one sided view of things, watch Fox News or SNN - fair and balanced reporting they are not. In-depth reporting and discussion of issues seem to have become a thing of the past."

Lyle Phillips had this to say: "I thought about multi-tasking this morning in church when the person beside me made a comment unrelated to the reflection being voiced from the pulpit. As a result I missed part of the reflection and I didn't hear the comment either. I realized once more that I cannot multi-task.

"BTW when you rightly stated that only in a sentence can you know whether "bow" refers to a ship or a shoelace, I thought of a person bending at the waist."

It could also apply to a bow and arrow. "Fast," in case you didn't check definitions, can me speedy. Also solid or fixed, as in tied fast to a dock, or glued fast. And paradoxically, it can mean morally loose, as in "a fast woman" – a term rarely applied to men, it seems.

On sentence lengths, Isobel Gibson sent me a 153-word sentence from her son. She also noted, "As a blogger, I know the challenge of trying to keep 'on point' and within something that resembles a newspaper column for length. The length we allow ourselves affects what topics we tackle, and how. "Postman's analysis is devastatingly correct -- all the more amazing for having been written in 1985 as a rant against TV, not against internet-styled communications."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

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 unsubscribe 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.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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.
