

If you were watching, as I was, the unfolding events at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia, you were perhaps reminded, as I was, of the events that took place just south of here at Columbine High School some years ago now. The shock and horror of a gunman or gunmen mowing down students is still a prevalent image in my mind, as it may be in yours. Emotionally troubled people, in a fit of rage and anger, and in the case of Virginia Tech, a single individual who acted out his rage by shooting innocent people who happened to be in the vicinity at the time, play out their troubled lives into eventual suicide. So this massacre at Virginia Tech, although the largest in U.S. history, has been the kind of story we've heard and seen before. So I thought I would reflect with you on violence in our society, but more than that, our own responses to violence as it is presented to us in the media and in a variety of other ways.

I am reminded of the story of the nine-year old boy, who came bursting excitedly into the family room yelling, "Mom, we found a big ugly lizard behind the garage, and we hit him with a board. Then we stomped on him, stabbed him, drowned him in a puddle, crushed him with a rock until...And at that point the boy finally noticed that sitting there in the room with his mother, staring at him with a raised eyebrow, was their parish priest. Quickly switching to a very somber voice he finished the account by saying, until the Lord called him home."

I call your attention to the ambivalence in the boy, as it interrupted his relish of the violence. Though it came a little late for the lizard, suddenly he realized that there was another way of looking at the violence done to this poor reptile.

Though in more subtle forms, I know something about that inner confusion regarding the violence that goes on in our life and world. On the one hand, I certainly disapprove of raw violence. I consider it to be one of the awful scourges afflicting modern civilization, our own culture included.

Nevertheless, if I get hooked on some adventure film on television, one that is just now reaching its climax, replete with a chase scene in which careening vehicles sideswipe each other, become airborne and turn intersections into eight-car pile-ups; and maybe now following a foot chase, the cruel, ruthless, unrepentant villain is cornered by the hero on the catwalk above a tank of bubbling sulfuric acid, don't try to pry me away before he tumbles into it (or, if you prefer, "The Lord calls him home.") It is somewhat embarrassing to admit that I let myself be entertained by that, but I suspect that I am not the only one here who sometimes finds violence inappropriately entertaining.

The fact is, the market in this country for violence-as-entertainment is huge and continues to grow. The CEO of one mid-size American film company said in a magazine interview, "For some time now, ordinary rape and murder just won't do it for our audiences. "Ultra-violence" is now required, with chain-saw massacres, unimaginably salacious monsters, whole continents and their populations sinking into the sea, intimate, slow-motions shots of bullets, blood and bone fragments exiting a human body."

It isn't only fictional violence either. It's abundantly clear that the television news media as well as the print media believe that their success in attracting viewers and readers, hinges on carrying stories more gory, reporting atrocities in the most lurid way possible, and detailing tragedies and brutalities in the ways that are most jangling to human sensibilities. The fact that violence sells is hardly new information to any of us.

Then too, while most are loathe to admit it, violence is part of the appeal of certain of our most popular sports. Hockey fans relish the fighting that is part of that sport. You are aware of the popular definition of football as merely violence punctuated by committee meetings.

One could hear echoes of it in the comment by one professional football player speaking admiringly about a fellow team member. He said, "He has a God-given killer instinct." Uh huh! How's that for turning violence into a godly virtue?

In fairness to him, though, the Old Testament does describe instances of rape, lynching, genocide, mutilation, and an ugly line in one of the Psalms (137) that recommends smashing the heads of Babylonian children against rocks. So if one is bent on justifying his violent proclivities, there is an assortment of Biblical atrocity, barbarity, and savagery he can cite.

But as I hope we know, none of that is information on what God is like. It is information on what human beings are sometimes like. In addition to being capable of incredible compassion, concern, generosity, selflessness and thoughtfulness, back then and still today hangs on a belief in, a capacity for, and a fascination with violence.

It raises the question of “Why?” and “How can this be?” and “Where does it come from?”

Part of the answer is tied up with our having been given a self-preservation instinct. This isn’t the same as “a god-given” appetite for violence. Nonetheless, whether it was a Neanderthal confronted by a lioness with cubs, or you or me suddenly face to face with a berserk killer running amok, in such extremities, our survival instinct is capable of eclipsing all other considerations and suspending our humane qualities.

Undoubtedly the disciple Peter would have explained his response that way when the soldiers came, the night before the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane. The scripture says that Peter drew a sword to cut off the ear of one of the arresting officers. Even there, though, Jesus told him to put his weapon away, saying that “those who take the sword die by the sword.” Notwithstanding some of the violent stories in the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, one cannot find even the most minimal justification or approval of violence in the Christian Gospel.

Far more important, though, is understanding what it is that makes violence seem normal, inevitable, and even useful to those who are ostensibly good, reasonable, sensitive, compassionate, civilized people. How can that be so with people who are perceptive enough and have lived long enough to know that ultimately it doesn’t work –doesn’t solve anything.

The reasons are subtle as well as complex.

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Some of the fascination with violence, for example, is no doubt curiosity –morbid curiosity, but curiosity nonetheless. There's sometimes a part of me that wants to know and/or see whatever I can of violent things that go on in hopes that then I will know how to avoid its befalling me. That curiosity is also sometimes a search for reassuring evidence that I am so essentially different from the victim, that I am safe, that it couldn't possibly happen to me. (I am too smart or too strong or too careful or too deserving a person, while, as is easy to see, he was stupid or careless or was "asking for it.")

Then too, violence is tantalizing and entertaining for some because it is the quickest and most emotionally intoxicating way to create the illusion of drama and action in what is actually his drab, monotonous, and arid life. For one who has made his existence pale, predictable, well buffered, dull and lifeless, the vicarious emotional intensity he feels when exposed to the disasters, scandals, hurts and gossip that is there in the agonies, terrors, and rages of others makes him feel more alive than usual. It is, one might say, a kind of voyeurism.

Another reason civilized people become cozy with violence, and teach themselves to see it as a regrettable, but necessary part of our shared life, comes from a lingering primitive wish and belief that yes, raw force and violence (if one does it just right), actually can be made into a quick and simple, answer to just about an dilemma or problem. If the weapon is formidable enough, that is, if the terror evoked is sufficiently pervasive, if enough of the right people are killed, if terrible enough revenge is taken, how can it help but bring about a good result. (Take a look at Iraq for example). As we know in our more rational moments, that has never really worked for the "long haul" of human history. But when we are most enraged or frightened or power-hungry it just sees as if, unlike all of the other times, this time violence is going to solve whatever it is, once and for all.

Yet another dangerous, pathetic, troublesome source of violence though, smolders in those who believe that their option of violence is an important source of their personal dignity and empowerment. "I may not be much or may not have much or may not know very much, but if I

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get humiliated, hurt, or enraged enough, I do have the physical strength to break a few skulls; I have this handgun, or am holding yet some other means to terrify, to hurt, to devastate and make all of “them” take me seriously. At least the preliminary assessments of the Virginia Tech shooter seem to verify this account.

That’s only a few. There are probably other, subtle or unconscious or carefully-rationalized nourishings of violence that keep it alive and vigorous as part of our life together.

What then, does all this come down to. Are we hopelessly stuck with this? Is there no difference that can be made in this matter? Is violence so much a part of human nature that the best we can do is accept it as a grim fact of life, protect ourselves as best we can and assume, for example, that “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” is here to stay since that is the way we are?

That bronze-age concept, by the way (eye for an eye-tooth for a tooth) even back in that primitive era, wasn’t intended as permission for violent retribution. Those who study those most ancient writings and teachings tell us it was meant to CURB violence, not incite it. “Tooth for tooth,” for example, meant that if someone broke a tooth of yours, you weren’t allowed to smash his teeth. You could break one and only one of his. The same was true of his blinding you in one eye. You could only blind him in one eye, not both. Even that sounds violent, but it was a primitive recognition that violence was a problem, not an answer.

That right there then, is one basic truth, much in need of being reclaimed even now in the 21st century. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (when accepted the way it is by the most primitive among us) means that everyone ends up blind and toothless. Violence begets violence. Wars don’t bring peace. They plant the seeds for new and additional wars.

Second, (and difficult to come to terms with) the violence that entertains us, the violence that we tacitly permit, the violence that we secretly believe in, is NOT either unavoidable, natural or intrinsic to human nature. For a “quick study” one has only to look at the unbelievable violent crime rate in our society as compared to other developed countries. So

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no. Violence is an acquired appetite and in huge numbers we seem to have acquired it – accepted it. The indications scream from our media and our taste in entertainment. It's written all over our love affair with guns. It undoubtedly has something to do with our being the only developed country that has a powerful appetite for capital punishment. The market in major cities, for attack dogs as household pets is also probably symptomatic. There are hints of it in the way political leaders are able to get us to accept draconian solutions to our social problems.

The third understanding in this flows directly from that. It is that while there are some external forces that nourish the appetite for violence, they cannot do it without yours and my tacit cooperation. Suspicions, xenophobia, mercilessness, prejudice, elitism, callousness and all similar, direct underpinnings of violence go on in individual human beings, not just in the society at large.

This isn't at all to suggest that we aren't good, rational, idealistic people –ones capable of compassion, ones interested in reconciliation, and ones who deplore cruelty and malice. We are that we aspire to it.

But complacency about the extent to which our thinking simultaneously often accommodates the violent as inevitable and thus acceptable, should worry us....A LOT. Bad as are the symptoms: the deplorable incidents like gang wars, drug killings, the school shootings like Columbine and Virginia Tech, hate crimes and the like, it really does have something to do with me and you: right down to the personal rages I permit and nourish in myself, with the stories I allow myself to relish and believe, with the vengeance I like to imagine, with inflammatory articles that I go ahead and read knowing full well that their authors generate only heat,. Not light, with my choices for entertainment, with the voyeuristic curiosity about others' problems and tragedies that the newspaper has discovered I want to read about and yet more like that.

Very few if any of us, in our most thoughtful moments, think violence is a good thing or a worthwhile solution to anything. So the good news is that even in a time and world like this one, you and I do get to make spiritually healthy choices. We actually can choose, several times a day, not to cooperate with this virulent form of evil that is the violence allowed to be a part of our shared life. And choosing against that is about as healthy as choices get.