

The Bell Tolls in Wilkinsburg

Personal Essay

To the MMM Coordinators:

Published in a Pgh. E. End neighborhood magazine in May, several weeks after yet another Western PA shooting. I knew one of the prev. victims. Please feel free to circulate copies; contact me about reprinting. Thank you.

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BY CHUCK LANIGAN

The sirens have stopped. The police cars have returned to their stations. The ambulances have carted away the injured, the dying, and the dead. Priests and ministers have spoken their masses and sermons. Congregations have said prayers and sung hymns. Friends, family, loved ones, and strangers have uttered words of sympathy, comfort, and reassurance; or maybe just sympathy — their tongues paralyzed by any attempt at explanation. The news trucks, like so many alien UFOs with their antennae booms sticking into the air, have moved on to other stories of the day or hour.

Analysts have come and gone in the newspapers and on television making an honest living discussing how such violence can occur in our society and what we should do about it. Politicians have wrung their hands and moved on to the next issue. It's all history by now. The funeral meats have been cleared away for the wedding feast.

Unless, of course, it's happened again. Unless someone's shot more people somewhere, as Ronald Taylor did in Wilkinsburg on March 1st of this year. Odds are it has.

As tragic and horrific as the events are, as often as they occur, people shrug their shoulders and life goes back the routine. The tragedy becomes part of the background noise. Maybe we feel powerless to make a difference. Perhaps we are simply shell-shocked. Perhaps we have become blasé about murder and mayhem...

I attended Joe Healy's funeral in Wilkinsburg on March 6th. Joe was one of three people Ronald Taylor killed on March 1st. I knew Joe's wife, Frankie, from where we both worked before she retired two years ago. I heard Joe tell stories several times at Tellebrations in Pittsburgh.

We were not close friends. Over the years Frankie and I fell out of touch, as workplace acquaintances do. But as unpleasant, brutal, tragic reality intruded suddenly into her life, it intruded, albeit in a tangential way, into mine.

"The death of any man diminishes me, because I am involved in all mankind," John Donne wrote for a sermon over three hundred years ago.

We try to isolate ourselves in a comfortable fiction of safety by thinking we live in the right house, grew up in the right family, are the right color, or live in the right neighborhood. It's all relative, we know. But we think we're safe enough.

But it can happen to you. It could be at the McDonalds or the Burger King down the street or in Wilkinsburg; or at a gas station or in your

car. It could be in Point Breeze or Squirrel Hill or Shadyside, as well as Homewood.

If you take comfort that this sort of thing only happens in communities on the economic or social fringe, remember the murder of a rabbinical student a few years ago in Squirrel Hill by an anonymous assailant. Remember Atlanta and Columbine and Edinboro, and six-year-olds shooting other six-year-olds in Mount Morris Township, Michigan.

Was it in Ronald Taylor's case, a matter of mental imbalance or economic misfortune? Is it truly a racial issue; a case of anger exploding instead of remaining a raisin in the sun? Does the ghost of Nat Turner rise up to haunt us all — African-American and white, alike?

What people seem reluctant to point out is that you or I or anyone in Ronald Taylor's state of mind, or with his intent, should not have had a gun. It was a human act of will that killed three people in Wilkinsburg and wounded two. It is human volition and fear that prompts people to buy guns. It's simple market economics that continues to produce them.

The frightening truth is that the events which occurred near Pittsburgh's East End on March 1st have less to do with mental illness or economic disparity or even racism than with confronting the heart of darkness in ourselves. Ronald Taylor holds up a mirror to the everyday potential for violence in each of us and in our society.

The most well-adjusted and sane person among us is subject to fits of irrationality; can react under certain circumstances (in a car stuck in traffic, say, or a sporting event) in ways that range from verbal to physical violence.

Everyone has a limit. People do things they shouldn't do all the time; even upstanding, rational, moral people. That's why we have laws. You may think we have too many laws. You may think we don't have enough. But the agreement you make when you live among your fellow citizens is generally to abide by them.

When laws don't work or don't address the problems we face, then the issue becomes what to do. The state places restrictions on the use of cars. Driving is treated as a privilege. You can't just buy a car and drive it legally. You must pass a driving test and get a license. You must get the car inspected, keep it in good repair, and register it with the state. Why don't people scream about infringement of their right to travel?

After the murders on March 1st many preached forgiveness. There was little said about the long-and short-term cost to individuals and

the community - to the day-care center where Joe told stories, to his friends and family, to the others who were killed and injured. We seemed in a hurry to move on. What about the loss to Frankie and her family, and the loss to the community caused by Joe's death? What about the loss to the families of the others who were killed, and the long- and short-term injuries to the two men who survived and, as of this writing, are still in the hospital trying to recover?

Many, including Frankie herself, have said we must learn to end the hate. This is a laudable goal. In the meantime, should we shrug our shoulders and say events such as those which occurred March 1st happen solely through fate or an act of God? Or, worse, should we say we don't care as long they don't happen to us or someone we care about?

Each morning my bus passes along the East Busway on its way into Pittsburgh. As we travel over Penn Avenue, I look down at the McDonalds and the Burger King where Joe lived his final moments, and think of Frankie Healy. Two years ago she retired looking forward to spending more time with him. Now what does she have left to spend time with but his memory?

I really wish that we could trust ourselves and each other to behave responsibly — whether with guns or with automobiles. Maybe a lot of the time we can.

You may keep your weapons under lock and key and teach your children gun safety. You may not want more laws restricting your rights. But you can't control the willingness and ability of your neighbor (or your neighbor's children) to do the same. In this election year it's time to find a way, through moral opprobrium, existing law, or new legislation, to hold individuals accountable for their ownership of weapons, and restrict them from those who use them improperly. To do otherwise is social, and perhaps individual, suicide.

It's either that or become the land of the free and the home of the deranged, with guns for everyone. If we must arm ourselves to walk down the street, is this a civil society? Should we have to look over our shoulders as we celebrate the virtues of our East End communities?

We find ourselves in the position of someone in an abusive relationship, always hoping things will get better. The question is, how bad do things have to get before we make a change?

The bell tolls in Wilkinsburg. It tolls in Columbine and Atlanta and Edinboro and Mount Morris Township and Memphis. Do we hear it? SA