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Shattered Glass

Written by Matias Travieso-Diaz | 👁 Hits: 7



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When a man carries an instrument of violence, he'll always find the justification to use it.

If we really want to escape this war, we have to stop bringing it with us.

Brian K. Vaughan, Saga, Volume 1

The last two generations have grown amidst frequent exposure to acts of violence. Widespread brutality and mayhem abounded in the movies they have seen, the television shows they have watched, the comic books they have read, the news reported on their cell phones, the songs performed by popular artists. Most of the violence that was pictured or described was carried out by means of guns and other weapons, although – according to the many depictions available to the public – there seemed to be almost infinite ways in which a human being could commit violence upon another.

Of late, private acts of mass violence against groups of individuals have become common in our society. No place is safe today from such attacks. Whether the shopping mall, the school, the church, the stadium, or the street: any place people gather can become the scene of mass violence resulting in the deaths and injuries of many innocents.

One would have expected that the horror and revulsion elicited by such mass violence acts would have resulted in strong responses by the government. Alas, for various reasons, politicians have failed to implement effective measures to control the availability and licensing of firearms and, after every mass shooting, officials just express condolences to the effect that their “thoughts and prayers” are with the victims of the violence, but nothing of consequence is ever done to curb the epidemic.

There also seems to be increasing apathy among many members of the general population, who apparently have become desensitized to the repeated tragedies and now treat mass violence as an expected occurrence in modern life, thus practically legitimizing it.

Let us consider, for example, one recent shooting.

Maechi was a bhikkuni, an ordained Buddhist nun, who had among her duties the teaching of *Dharma* to young children of the members of her California temple. Every Sunday morning, elementary-school age children would gather in the temple and she would instruct them on basic Buddhist tenets (the Three Jewels, Four Noble Truths, compassion, mindfulness) and would narrate moral stories from the Jataka tales or sutras.

The school year had just started and she was becoming acquainted with her students. She was at the temple with her pupils, some of them just waking up (a process not helped by her unexciting recitations). Suddenly, there were loud pops, and the sounds of breaking glass resonated all around them. At once, everyone became fully alert.

Maechi had been trained on how to react to school and temple shootings, since there had been several attacks on religious venues in recent years, including one against a Mormon temple and the school it housed. She ordered the kids to calm down and led them out of the temple's main room and downstairs to a windowless basement storage room, the designated shelter in case of an attack on the temple. After Maechi and her pupils went in, she barricaded the room by placing furniture against the closed door.

They waited a long time. Most of the kids were shaking, sobbing, and wailing. An eternity later, someone knocked loudly on the door and asked to be let in. There were some anxious moments while Maechi considered whether to open the door. Finally, those outside identified themselves as the police and she decided to take a chance. Without removing the barricade, she partly opened the door and began lifting children out, one by one, over the barricade. Seeing that nothing threatening happened, she removed the barricade and came out into the basement main room.

Outside there was chaos. Children were running back and forth in all directions, not daring to go back upstairs. Finally, several desperate parents rushed downstairs asking if anyone knew where their children were. Some of the children in the basement were theirs, and their reunion was fraught with cries of relief and released anxiety.

Maechi had lost control over her charges, and noticed that three of her kids were missing. She broke into tears, blaming herself for any harm that might have befallen them. Later, she would learn that one of the children had gone out to a house adjacent to the temple and was fine. The other two children, however, had been hit by bullets and had perished.

The gunman had fired his weapons through the temple's windows, leaving glass shards and bullet marks on the images and walls of the *naijin* (altar area). In the *gejin* (outer hall), where Maechi and her students had sat, tatami mats and benches, offerings, a table holding prayer books, and musical instruments were strewn all over the place; there were holes on the walls and trails of blood leading to the temple door.

The gunman was a young man in his twenties. He lived in the community and bore grudges against numerous individuals, classes of people, and institutions, and had repeatedly expressed his hatred for foreigners and people of color. He was armed with an assault rifle, a shotgun, and a pistol, and had discharged all the weapons through the temple's window, clearly intending to desecrate the place of worship; later, he had turned the pistol on himself and committed suicide.

Investigations revealed that the attacker was known to suffer from personality disorders and had been felt by some who knew him to pose a violence risk. He had been allowed to purchase all the weapons legally and had announced his murdering intentions over YouTube and in social media. In retrospect, his rampage should have been anticipated.

Maechi, her charges and their families, and the entire Buddhist community, plus many others close to the tragedy, became traumatized by the events, particularly since violence is totally against the beliefs of Buddhism. Therein lies another regrettable result of this and other mass shootings: it is not only the dead and wounded who suffer, but uncounted survivors sustain psychological wounds that linger for long periods of time. Also, with each such shooting that elicits no adequate response, society becomes a bit more debased. Will the killings ever stop?

END

Bio:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and thirty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. A novel entitled "When Cubans Went to War", an autobiography entitled "Cuban Transplant," and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.



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