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Editor

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Articles

Peter B. Raabe

Not If But When

*First Philosophical Reflections on Perpetrators,
Victims, and Survivors of Mass Shootings*

Shanti Jones

*Complex Moral Narratives in Philosophical
Counseling: Insights from Henry James*

James Binnie

*Camus' Absurd and its Application
to Existential Psychotherapy*

Katerina Apostolides

*Philosophical Counseling:
Some Methodological Concerns*

Book Reviews

*Living With a Wild God: A Non-Believer's
Search for the Truth About Everything*

Reviewed by Kate Mehuron

*Wondrous Truths. The Improbable
Triumph of Modern Science*

Reviewed by Fernando Salvetti

*On Human Conflict: The Philosophical
Foundations of War and Peace*

Reviewed by Lydia Amir

Biographies of Contributors

**Not If But When
First Philosophical Reflections
on Perpetrators, Victims, and Survivors
of Mass Shootings**

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Abstract

If the word 'random' is used to imply 'meaningless' then there is no such thing as random violence. Violence against innocents, such as in wars and mass public shootings in peacetimes, always have a meaning or purpose for their perpetrators. But this may not always be obvious to their victims. The media tends to focus on the spectacle of violence, often saying little about its victims or survivors. Counselling survivors with philosophy can be a difficult task. It is often appropriate to have at least a cursory discussion about the meaning of life. One often unusual but very useful strategy is to place the blame squarely on the shooter.

The news programs presented a flood of grim and detailed reports of a horrific school shooting on the weekend prior to my regular Tuesday morning class. Six young school children had been brutally shot dead and many more were injured. After killing the teacher, the shooter, a young man of my students' age, had turned his military-style rapid-fire automatic assault weapon, that he had purchased at a local gun shop the previous day, on himself.

That morning the usual lively chaos of our university's hallways was subdued as students walked from class to class with a dim but constant expectation of the possibility of copycat gun violence on our campus. My third-year philosophy class had just settled after diffusing the energy that always accompanies their arrival for my early morning lesson.

Suddenly the heavy classroom door was flung open; a young man paused breathless in the door frame. He stood with his feet planted wide apart like a Western movie gun slinger.

His dark hair was wind-blown; his flushed face unshaven; and his rumpled black ski jacket looked like he had slept in it. He was carrying a worn grey canvas backpack crumpled under one arm. His eyes were wide, staring with a combination of alarm and confusion. He scanned around the room like he was searching for something or someone he had expected to find in the room behind me.

My thirty students stopped what they were doing as though they were struck by a sudden paralysis. Standing or sitting in stunned silence, each one seemed momentarily hypnotised by the intruder.

He was silently staring at me with the intensity of a cornered wild animal. I looked him straight in the eyes, not wanting to see what I might find if I glanced down at his hands.

Out of the corner of my eyes to my right I could see several of the young women students reflexively covering their mouths with both hands to stifle an urge to scream. To my left I became aware of two

athletic-looking male students whose postures suggested they were poised to jump over their desks to come to my defence.

After what seemed like several minutes but was probably just three or four heartbeats, the young man let go of the door handle, and fumbled behind him to pull something out of his pants back pocket. When he brought his shaking hand forward I could see he was holding a wrinkled and hastily folded sheet of paper. He held it toward me, and I saw that it was a schedule of his classes with information about their locations.

“Are you the instructor here?” he asked in a nervous and apologetic voice.

“Yes, this is my philosophy class.”

“Philosophy?”

“Yes, were you looking for us?”

“I’m ... No, I was ... Sorry ... Um, I think this is the wrong room.”

“What room are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for Mr. Sloan’s criminology class.”

At that point I literally sensed all the students in my class exhaling their breaths as one.

“Um, I’m Peter Raabe,” I said. “I’m not sure what room Mr. Sloan is in this semester.”

“Professor Raabe,” a tall student called out suddenly from the back row. “Mr. Sloan’s class is in ‘B’ building next door.”

The accidental intruder nodded and began backing out through the still-open door.

“OK, I’m sorry ... I’ll just ... sorry.” Looking sheepish and embarrassed he exited, letting the door swing into its frame and click shut behind him.

I took a deep breath, willing the revolving knot in my stomach to untangle. I sat on the edge of my desk and, facing my somewhat traumatised students, tried to remember a suitably profound philosophical aphorism, or at least a few reassuring words I could share with them. But the best my unsettled mind was able to deliver was, “Well, that could have gone a lot worse.”

Keywords: *‘random,’ victim/survivor, justification, suicide, meaning, counselling, philosophy*

I. Introduction

The shocked feelings and racing thoughts my students and I experienced during the trivial ‘accidental intrusion’ into our philosophy classroom were embarrassingly insignificant compared to what some unfortunate people have had to go through (and many more are likely to go through in the future) in this time of unrest and violence in so many areas of the world.

In some countries so-called ‘random’ killings are discussed in terms of “not if it happens here, but when.” They include mass shootings with automatic weapons, numerous hackings with a machete, multiple stabbings with a knife, explosions with homemade bombs, driving into a crowd of pedestrians with a car, and so on. The inevitability of these sort of mindless bloodbaths is now generally taken for granted. It’s been suggested that the multiple killings of innocent people in many countries are now, unfortunately, considered ‘the new normal.’ This includes not only ‘random’ and mass shootings in usually friendly public areas but also the intentional genocides of tribal and religious wars, and the civilian killings in so-called ‘justified’ warfare. There is little distinction between kill-

ings and killings. As the retired military sniper told the reporter, “When I look through my rifle scope, find my target, and pull the trigger it’s the closest to murdering another human being that you can get.”

Frequent mass shootings are an early 21st century phenomenon, experienced predominantly, although not exclusively, in North America: the mass shootings of young women university students at Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989; the mass shootings of teens at Columbine high school in Colorado in 1999; the mass shootings of 19 children and two teachers at Uvalde school in Texas in 2022. In just five days following Uvalde there were 17 more mass shootings throughout the nation—not single murders but multiple gruesome murders on a massive scale. The media reports that there were some 320 mass shootings in the first six months of 2022 in the US alone.¹ Whether the number of deaths are calculated *per capita* or simply totalled, mass shootings are continuing worldwide on a daily basis. It’s an autogenic (self-produced) human pandemic.

This essay is not meant to be read as a critique of porous gun control legislation, nor as a criticism of sluggish police response to gun violence in their respective jurisdictions. It’s meant as an exploratory discussion for counsellors and therapists who find themselves asked to help the survivors of what seems like ‘random’ violence by men of various ages and situations in life. I use the pronouns ‘he,’ ‘him,’ and ‘his’ for the shooters because the mass slaughter I address in this essay is executed almost exclusively and shamefully by the males of our species.

A detailed discussion of the pathogenesis—the biological, psychological, psychiatric, or social/environmental factors—that might drive a man or boy to engage in a murderous rampage is beyond the scope of this essay. The consequences of a massacre are only ever two: death and injury, but the personal reasons perpetrators have for shooting innocent people are multifaceted.

II. Perpetrators

The 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes claimed that “every man is desirous of what is good for him and shuns what is evil” (Ayer p.185). But if this is really the case then why does the shooter believe committing mass murder is in fact what is good for him? The answer to this question might explain why so many of them attempt to ‘martyr’ themselves by committing suicide just seconds before the police are about to capture or kill them. Shooters understand that what they’re doing is clearly both illegal and immoral in a civilised society. And they don’t want some authority figure (the police) to have control over their final act of defiance. It might be the case that ‘the good’ that the shooter desires is an end to his own unhappiness. But then why defer his own death to only *after* he has first ended the brief lives of innocent children and killed as many adults as he possibly can?

It is an underestimation of the shooter’s consciousness to assume his actions were ‘random killings.’ To the objective observer, and after the fact, a mass shooting may seem to have been chaotic and random. But a so-called ‘random’ shooting is not random at all. Each shooter follows his own subjective but distorted logic in choosing the potential victims he aims to target. He always carefully selects his victims by clusters that meet various generalised criteria (“murder by proxy”): be they women, gays, trans, blacks, Asians, Jews, Muslims, Christians, children, classmates, a concert audience, grocery shoppers, hospital staff, and so on (Bartol p.311). And each targeted population

is skilfully justified by the killer's burning hatred and rage, which he would probably be unable to rationally articulate if he were asked to do so. A mass shooter is a societal disaster who disturbs the interconnected mindset inherent in human nature, and assaults the social cohesion which defines all societies. In retrospect his private actions could have been recognised as preparatory for the lethal event, but the precise moment of his actual attack is beyond exact prediction.

And contrary to a true natural disaster, there are no natural causal factors driving the shooter's so-called 'random' attack. He is motivated by an internal hate-driven logic that defines others as the enemy, or as inconsequential barriers obstructing the path to his desired goal. His impetus might also include the stark mirror of reality that sometimes forces him to see the truth about himself and his miserable lot in life. The late 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche reminds his readers that "He who despises himself, nevertheless esteems himself thereby as a despiser." Sometimes the wicked are also happy (Nietzsche 2019, p.52, 36).

When viewed from the perspective of the careful planning and calculated organization of a massacre, and the writing of a lengthy manifesto in which he deflects blame away from himself and onto others, and when he arranges for the streaming of a live video of the killing for 'the whole world' to view, there is no doubt that perpetrators of mass shootings are in fact proud of what they do. They believe their actions are easily justified, not to mention worth watching. Nietzsche also said that moral judgment is an illusion since "there are no moral facts." But if morality is defined as the avoidance of intentional harm to others, then surely causing this much intentional harm to so many others must be counted as a moral fact, and may be judged accordingly as an indisputably immoral act.

Statistics show that angry men are more likely than upset women to strike out and hurt others; women are much more likely to internalize their distress and blame themselves (APA p. 52). This is why general gun violence and mass shootings are the exclusive *modus operandi* of the contemporary nihilistic male.

While some well-meaning politicians are trying to stiffen gun control legislation, or are demanding better school security, other politicians and pro-gun industry lobbyists are calling for teachers and the unarmed general public to arm themselves. This is driven by the argument that more guns make a safer society. But of course this is a fallacious circular argument which goes like this: it's important for everyone to own a gun in order to protect themselves from everyone else who owns a gun. This logic has also recently been empirically proven to be wrong: in fact more gun ownership leads to more killings (Cobb p.8-9).

One of the most insidious tactics used by the pro-gun faction is playing the 'mental illness' card. But crime data shows that the vulnerable people who are diagnosed as suffering from so-called 'mental illnesses' are much more often the victims than the perpetrators of violence (Stuart p.121-124). To date the psychiatric establishment has not produced any biomedical evidence that a diagnosed 'mental illness' could *cause* a person to become a mass shooter (Bartol p.231-234). Some may have suffered mental damage and injuries at an earlier age, but even so, this does not compel nor excuse the crime. There are millions of unfortunate individuals who may have suffered mental damage and injuries at an earlier age, often at the hands of brutal parents or peers, who have never gone on to commit mass murder.

One factor rarely discussed in the media in the aftermath of a public shooting is the possibility of the involvement of psychotropic agents, such as various stimulants, illegal drugs, and/or alcohol that may have been consumed by the shooter before his rampage. It may in fact not be a significant causal factor. But whether sober, drunk, or high the brutal gunman intentionally imposes his will onto his chosen victims, sadistically forcing his presence into their personal consciousness, and implanting his actions among their intimate memories. The trauma he inflicts “shatters the assumptions held by his victims about themselves and the nature of the world” (Bracken p.80). Eyewitness accounts mention a lack of affect: an inhuman, emotionless, far-away stare in the shooter’s eyes, utterly lacking any concern for the suffering and death of his victims. But, again, the involvement of a psychotropic agent is no excuse since there are millions of individuals who may have snorted, shot up, or swallowed various noxious potions who have never gone on to commit mass murder.

It may simply be true that there’s evil lurking in the hearts of some men.² But many of the perpetrators of mass killings are not yet men; they’re still only boys. What compels a boy to kill members of his own family, or his neighbours, or the strangers in a crowd? What does he see in it for himself? There’s no one answer to this question; the motives for these terrible acts are as varied and as difficult to relate to as are the individuals who bring themselves to commit them.

- He might kill out of revenge for a perceived wrong or an insult against himself or a family member.
- Or to defend the honour of some radical right-wing extremist political party, or a fanatical religious brotherhood.
- He could be looking for fame or notoriety, or for a mention in the history books, or in social media, regardless of what that mention might amount to; any attention is good attention as long as he gets a mention, and perhaps a ton of ‘likes.’
- The shooter could be suffering from loneliness and isolation; he could be trying to violently acquire what he doesn’t already have such as respect, admiration, acceptance, companionship, even friendship and love.
- He could be wanting to not just annihilate those in front of his weapon, but also to crush the hearts of those left behind: various distraught loved ones, and the grieving parents of slaughtered children.
- Perhaps he believes in the Nietzschean existence of a master–slave race dichotomy, and he has an overwhelming but frustrated desire to be among the ‘masters’ who rule over their slaves (Nietzsche 2019, p.120).
- The shooter could imagine his actions as a demonstration of his superiority, a legacy of his illusory power and absolute paranormal control over the life and death of others.
- He could imagine himself as a weapon of mass destruction like the evil genius in some computer game.
- Or he could simply be copying the scripted violence of some fictional patriotic action-hero or movie super-villain.
- Then again maybe he has dreams of a film being shot or a book being published about his ‘accomplishments.’
- Of course he could have had a disagreement at work or at church or at home, in which case his attack could be his frustrated attempt to gain a semblance of control over what he sees as his chaotic life in a world in constant flux.
- Or the shooter could have been driven by an attitude that originated in him during an

unfortunate encounter with a single individual, which he then fallaciously generalised to an entire group—in the form of racism, sexism, chauvinism, classism, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia, and so on—in effect scapegoating innocents.

- He may also have bought into the propaganda of exclusive nationalism, anarchy, and other abstract ideologies rooted in the veiled immoral values of his family or society.
- He might be giving in to xenophobic propaganda, defending his homeland from the so-called ‘great replacement’ scheme: a conspiracy theory which warns that his government is allowing immigrants and foreign nationals to take over his country.
- Or he could be acting out a punishment against the citizens inhabiting his imperfect reality who have failed to live up to his Disney fantasy.
- His motivation may also be as benign as a lack of opportunity for him to ‘vent’ or ‘unload’ his feelings, to show some male emotions to a non-judgemental buddy who would let him safely defuse his smouldering grievances. That would make his murderous rampage a cry for help.
- Or ... ?

This non-exhaustive list illustrates the varied and complex topography of impulses that might drive a shooter to act out his illusions and frustrations. Many of these motivations may simply be considered evil; others are based on the shooter’s misguided self-serving logic; and still others are his belief that his deadly scheme is somehow ‘worth it.’ There are as many triggers as there are guns in the hands of shooters.

Prior to their rampage a shooter will often separate himself off from his social environment in order to enhance his feelings of detachment, uniqueness, elitism, and the holder of ‘special knowledge.’ This aloofness helps him to justify his attack on members of the ‘inferior’ community. Occasionally a shooter will choose a particular victim, such as a teacher, a doctor, his employer, or his grandmother who he feels has particularly wronged him in some way. But many mass shooters hold few if any personal grudges against individual victims. His target is often simply ‘society at large’ and its institutions in general, which he’s been impotent to manipulate into accommodating his personal plans, desires, and fantasies (Bartol p.310).

Mass shooters are, to borrow Nietzsche’s words,

men of *ressentiment*,³ physiologically unfortunate and worm-eaten, a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts against the fortunate and happy (Nietzsche p.560).

Each shooter sees the purpose and meaning in his crimes as important and meaningful, even if that purpose and meaning are completely illegal, immoral and/or irrational. It’s difficult, if not impossible for others to rationally articulate his irrationality. Yet it’s fair to say that killing innocent people is indeed irrational because murder or injury does not change the mindset of the targeted victims, nor does murdering innocents improve the sympathy of the surviving loved ones toward the shooter. Mass shootings only accomplish one thing: they appease the shooter’s lust for the bloody violence of illusory vengeance. He sees his terrified victims as nothing more than a means to his own degenerate end.

The French Nobel Prize winner for literature, Albert Camus wrote about murder committed in a 'hot flash' of uncontrollable passion. But the murders of mass shootings don't occur in a hot flash; they're typically well-planned, meticulously organised, and purposefully carried out up to, and including, the shooter's own death. The shooter always has an intention, even if the official police report lists it as 'a random act of mass violence.' An innocent bystander may have been randomly in the line of fire, but the intention of the shooter is never random or meaningless. It's always, and unquestionably to inflict as much suffering and death on as many fellow human beings as possible. People rarely act randomly, and never when it comes to a highly emotionally charged event such as a multiple shooting. Classical Greek philosopher Aristotle claimed that,

the origin of action—its efficient cause (what sets it in motion) ... is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end [purpose] ... It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating (Ayer p.9, 16, 20, 35).

Socrates said before him, "To prefer evil to good is not in human nature." (Ayer p.7, 235). But this is contradicted by those who choose evil because they find some personal benefit in it, especially if there is little cost to themselves. The commission of a so-called 'random' shooting is never meaningless to the shooter. He is always driven to act by internal compulsions, even though he may claim in his defense that he acted because of some sort of external pressure. Mass shootings are always absurd because, after not having changed the world or the trajectory of his own life, and after not having provided himself with what he desperately needed to escape his despair, his futile execution of anonymous individuals more often than not results in the absurdity of his own suicidal death (Camus p.495-500). And it is entirely likely that 'suicide by police' may have been what he ultimately wanted, leaving survivors to marvel at the meaninglessness of it all.

III. Meaning and Purpose

The Enlightenment French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, "There is no original perversity in the human heart. There is not a single vice to be found in it of which it cannot be said how and whence it came" (Ayer p.382). The response to the question "why?" of a so-called 'random' or mass shooting is very much dependent on the context. If there is religious faith then the answer to the question "Why did this happen?" will be distinctly different from one not based on any transcendent beliefs, when the shooting is perceived as merely human-generated. It may be impossible to articulate a metaphysical purpose and meaning for any event in life, good or bad, in the absence of a guiding Principal who is said to have established a purpose and meaning for all human events. Regrettably this level of divine involvement would abolish human autonomy. It might well be that, without a higher Being's imminent participation, life's purpose on earth may simply be to reproduce. While this may hold true for the living beings lacking a conscious awareness of life and death, finding meaning and purpose in life beyond mere procreation seems to be a biological, psychological, and philosophical imperative in human beings. Still, human diseases, accidents, sudden death, and so on can only be explained in terms of meaning and purpose if they are based on the belief in a divine Stage Manager, at the expense of our own improvised actions.

Purpose can be seen fairly easily in the functioning of nature, from the sun to clouds to rain to trees, but it has no inherent meaning for any of those events or objects. There is abundant purpose to the

events in nature as determined by the cause-and-effect 'law' of interlacing evolutionary processes. But meaning requires a consciousness which evolution has not and cannot supply to objects. For humans, the meaning of an event or object can vary greatly from one person to the next, unless there is prior agreement. While the purpose of an event or object is established by its creator, the meaning of an event or object is typically defined by its owner. But both the purpose and meaning of violence against innocents can only be defined by the shooter. The explanatory responsibility rests on the shooter whose purpose and meaning for the violence may not make any sense to the survivors whatsoever, despite his delusional justificatory explanations.

If 'random' is defined as 'meaningless' or 'without purpose,' and 'lacking in intention' then the mass shootings that are so prevalent today can't be called 'random.' Even if a massacre is believed to be random there remains the question no one except the shooter can answer regarding the motive or intention for his attack: what was it that finally prompted him to set his murderous thoughts into action? These considerations have absolutely nothing to do with the ages of the victims, who the victims happen to be, or what they happen to be doing at the time of the attack. This is a crucial perspective that survivors must be helped to understand and accept.

Life is a composite of many different positive, negative, and neutral events. In the attempt to find a holistic meaning to it all we are doomed to live, as Camus wrote, with "the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle." The reasons human beings have for acting as they do are many and varied. Camus added, "According to a magistrate, the vast majority of murderers he had known did not know when shaving in the morning that they were going to kill later in the day." (Camus p.534, 618). But a single murder is not the same as a dozen victims butchered with vicious automatic weapons fire.

Rather than search for the comprehensive purpose or profound meaning of a distressing mass shooting, it may be enough to assume the shooter had a ridiculous but personally meaningful compulsion behind his actions, and move on. It's a fruitless endeavour to attempt to determine a motive because, while every shooter's actions will parallel those of every other, his justification will correspond only to his particular life circumstances, his inextinguishable desire to carry out his plan, and the illogical promptings in his solitary mind. In other words, having determined one shooter's motive doesn't guarantee that the next shooter will be guided by the same values, principles, or desires. Similarities may exist, but there is no possibility of establishing a universal motivating core to mass shootings. The actual reason for the violence will most likely remain a mystery, perhaps even to the shooter himself.

There is an argument that is sometimes used by people of faith to salve the sting of evil: just like darkness is required in order to appreciate the light, evil is necessary for the enjoyment of the good. The early Greek Stoic philosopher Chrysippus said that "the evil which occurs in terrible disasters has a rationale (*logos*) peculiar to itself ... Without it there could be no good" (Ayer p.88, 2). But this seems to imply the opposite is true as well, that the good "has a rationale (*logos*) peculiar to itself," and that without the good there could be no evil. This makes the good the catalyst for evil. Unfortunately this binary perspective doesn't help to relieve the sense of hopelessness about the evil lurking in the hearts of good men. It also raises the question, does this mean that it's not possible to enjoy light or the good without first experiencing evil; must darkness and evil exist as counter-balances to the good?

Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud wrote that “the moment one inquires about the sense or value of life, one is sick” (Frankl p.87). Freud’s pessimistic hypothesis implies that there is no healthy way to discuss the inherent meaning to all of life. But this doesn’t at all mean that there can’t be meaning *in* life, meaning that is ascribed to life by those who live it. Clearly turning to Doctor Freud for help with questions about the meaning of life would have been a mistake. Philosophers have much more to offer. For example, Aristotle stated clearly that “the ultimate end or object of human life” is happiness (Aristotle p.73). This sentiment was later adopted by the unknown writer of the Bible book of Ecclesiastes who wrote, “I know that there is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.” And again, “I know that there is nothing better for them (workers) than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover it is God’s gift that all should eat, and drink and take pleasure in all their toil” ... etc. (Metzger 2:24; 3:12,13; 8:14,15; 9:7). What could be more explicit than this?

The 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued logically, “Since that which is morally good contains its meaning and value within itself, it follows that it (a morally good life) is intrinsically worth while” (Edwards p. 474). And contemporary US Professor of Philosophy and Neurobiology Owen Flanagan writes,

If meaning and worth come with relations of certain sorts, to other selves, to nature, to work, to oneself, then perhaps we are wisest to look for grounds of meaning and worth in this life—in the relations we can have during this life (Flanagan p.204).

Perhaps the meaning of life manifests itself precisely by virtue of escaping our attention. In other words, by living life consciously and fully in the pleasurable distractions of the present moment, the questions “what is the purpose of life” or “what does it all mean” do not arise, and therefore demand no response. Camus wrote, life is worth living because “it is all that we have” (Camus p. xxii). After all, if life is not lived, what is the alternative? Meaning does not have to reside in all of life, so long as there is one’s own meaning in one’s own life. But for those who’ve had the misfortune of being caught up in a mass shooting attack, continuing to live a normal, meaningful, happy life thereafter can be a very difficult challenge indeed.

IV. Helping Victims and Survivors

Rudi Juliani, one of the many legal advisors to former US President Donald Trump, accused a black woman and her mother—who had both worked for State and Federal election agencies for many years—of bringing in boxes full of thousands of illegal ballots in order to ensure Trump’s loss in the national election, and Biden’s victory. In his accusatory rant Trump used several racist slurs in disparaging these women to his loyal followers. The former President and his legal adviser were targeting these patriotic women as their scapegoats in their efforts to promote their own fake conspiracy theory, that the election had been rigged against the Republicans. At the Select Committee public hearings, in which the January 6, 2021 ‘attack on American democracy,’ and the ‘stolen election’ lie were being legally and constitutionally dissected, the woman was asked whether she and her mother were in fact guilty of what the past president and his advisor had accused them of doing. The woman said they absolutely were not. Then she broke down in tears and said she felt terrible about having “caused so much trouble.” She explained to the committee that the past President’s lies about the two of them had led to them being harassed with hate messages and menacing phone calls from

strangers, and even anonymous death threats. She said she felt responsible for it all, believing she was somehow to blame for the terrible situation she, her mother, and her family now had to deal with at home. But at the conclusion of her testimony at the hearing the compassionate chair of the Select Committee told her in a very calm voice, “You’re on no way to blame.” This was a troubling case of not only the perpetrator blaming the victim but also of the victim blaming herself—like so many women do—for finding herself in a bad situation for which she was not at all responsible. The accusation against her and her mother, and her reaction to it are only too familiar to women, given how often they’re blamed for their own victimization.

It’s important for a counsellor to understand that there is a significant difference between using the word ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ when helping those unfortunate enough to have experienced violence. Simply put, to be a victim is to be the aim of someone else’s unwelcome, and often violent attentions. (1) Some victims are fatalities; they’re those who were targeted and did not survive. (2) But victims can also become survivors if they were targeted and left for dead by the shooter, and ultimately survived. And finally (3) survivors are those who were targeted, have thereby experienced victimization, and yet were fortunate and skilful enough to have kept themselves out of harm’s way throughout the fatal attack.

Violence is often the last resort, the ultimate strategy of a person who can’t cogently persuade others to do as he says, or give him what he wants. Violence is sometimes employed by those who insist on ‘winning’ and being ‘right’ no matter what the cost. But of course violence is never the answer because it can’t reconcile the problematic premises underlying a difference of opinion. Being reminded of this simple fact can be very helpful to survivors of many different types of violence, from mass shooting rampages, to domestic violence, racial and sexual violence, unnecessary police brutality, and so on. Violence is meant to satisfy the self-serving desire to triumph over the victim(s); it rarely, if ever serves to equitably settle a dispute.

Many individuals trapped in a violent situation try in vain to reach some sort of understanding as to how they might have been personally responsible, how they were partly to blame for their victimization. In their efforts they (and their counsellors) risk internalizing the victimization, in a sense blaming the victim in a vain attempt to prevent similar situations in the future (Bracken p.42-43). This is especially evident in battered women, abused and bullied children, and children of divorced parents.

On the other hand it’s important for a counsellor or therapist not to dismissively assume that the survivor couldn’t possibly believe she’s somehow at fault for what the attacker did to her. While beliefs and feelings aren’t always rational, they serve a purpose. Self-blaming is a natural survival strategy; it acts as a flight response when flight is impossible. If in counselling the survivor explains that she feels she is somehow to blame then the question needs to be asked, “Why do you feel you might be to blame?” The answer to that question lies in the power differential and relational context between the victim and the perpetrator, and must be dealt with.

Beyond the victim’s thoughts and beliefs there are strong emotions and feelings that must also be dealt with. The phenomenology—the lived experiences—of victimhood are many and varied: fear, horror, disbelief, numbness, despair, panic, helplessness, anger, outrage, resentment, violation, shame, guilt, regret, shock, trauma, and so on. A philosophical counsellor doesn’t automatically

diagnose or define ordinary people as sick, damaged, traumatised, or disordered after having endured an extraordinarily distressing experience (Dineen p.65). A very useful question the counselor can ask is, "What can I do to help you feel better?"

A number of years ago an interesting theory was made public after a Montreal newspaper editor was shot six times in the back by mobsters. Apparently they resented his investigative journalism into their gang's illegal activities. Doctors said that in recovery the editor exhibited no post-traumatic stress symptoms. They thought that perhaps this was because he didn't blame himself in any way for being violently attacked. He saw himself not just as a victim or survivor, but as one of the 'good guys.' This led other doctors to speculate that perhaps the incidence of post-traumatic stress might be predicated on the survivor's experiences of personal guilt, shame, and responsibility for what has happened to him. This led to the hypothesis that armed services personnel coming home from a combat mission, who felt that their government had not provided reasonable grounds for the death and mayhem they had been ordered to carry out, tended to experience more symptoms diagnosable as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those who returned from missions which they and their governments considered moral, honorable, and justified. In other words, post-traumatic stress symptoms tended to occur most frequently and severely in individuals who feel they were guilty of having participated in immoral and unjustified military combat operations. Similarly post traumatic stress is more likely to occur in the event of a civilian survivor's self-blame for the violence aimed at her.

In order to avoid post-traumatic stress and other kinds of suffering, survivors need to be helped to understand how they themselves had nothing to do with the violence they experienced. They need to be persuaded to accept the fact that they were unable to do anything different than what they ended up doing to protect themselves. Again, the focus should be on helping them to avoid self-blame for their victimization. This seems like an obvious point, but it's often overlooked. Clearly every effort should be made by legislators at all levels of government to keep handguns, and especially the military-style assault weapons favoured by mass shooters out of civilian hands. Few traumatised victims would disagree with such a policy. But, if the emphasis is on helping victims and survivors directly, what needs to happen is a refocusing, a paradigm shift away from half-hearted policy discussions about gun control or how to deal with shooters, to helping the survivors hold the perpetrator responsible for their actions *in no uncertain terms*.

Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and philosopher, Victor Frankl spent three years as a prisoner in Auschwitz concentration camp. He is the author of a book in which he describes the survival of a traumatic situation as being dependent on the establishment of meaning for oneself. He argues that, in a world lacking the intervening presence of a higher Being, humans have the moral responsibility to deal with evil by themselves. But this seems to imply that it's the responsibility of the survivor to establish a meaning for what the shooter did to her. Frankl insists that in counselling, "... meaning must be found but cannot be given, least of all by the doctor" (Frankl p.67). While meaning for one's own suffering might be fabricated internally, if there is no belief in a higher Being then the meaning of the suffering inflicted by a shooter can only be rationalized by the perpetrator. How ironic it would be if the survivors of the Nazi death camps were somehow expected to find meaning for what was done to them. Establishing the purpose and meaning of a mass shooting is never a survivor's responsibility! The demand for an explanation must be aimed bravely at the man with the gun.

Defense attorneys and other analysts who try to place the blame for a shooter's antisocial behaviour on his parents will find themselves forced into an infinite regress of blaming the bad parenting styles and/or bad genes on grandparents, great grandparents, great-great grandparents, and so on back into infinity. Contrary to the belief in deterministic genes, English sociologist Anthony Giddens writes, "We are not what we are but what we make of ourselves" (Giddens p.75). And we don't have to accept the role of the victim others sometimes attempt to make us become.

In countries where gun laws are lax, counsellors can make survivors aware of the fact that part of the responsibility for their victimization lies with their government's inaction on issues such as inadequate social welfare, rampant crime and unemployment, inferior education, and permissive gun control. This might then encourage victims and survivors to re-empower themselves through an involvement in letter-writing campaigns, citizen protests, and legal actions that pressure their governments to enact the necessary safety-enhancing legislations. For survivors of mass shootings these activities can regenerate a feeling of personal control over the uncertainty of life in a turbulent world.

In her book *Pathological Anxiety* Professor of psychiatry Barbara Rothbaum reminds her readers that emotional processing requires "the presence of information that disconfirms the erroneous elements" that are causing the despair (Rothbaum p.7,13). This means it would help a counselling client to be made aware of the information in the above sections of this essay which deal with a shooter's character, his self-serving justifications, and his ultimate responsibility for his horrific crimes.

Research into avoiding, or at least reducing, casualties during a mass shooting in schools found that well-intentioned 'active shooter drills' (like the atomic war drills of the 1950's) were causing unnecessary stress, anxiety, and depression in children. These drills not only engendered an unrealistic expectation of inevitable violence, they gave children a chilling sense that the adults were moving away from preventing these kind of attacks, and seemed to be holding kids responsible for their own survival.

Survivors, both young and old, need to be helped to understand that only a coward would shoot an automatic weapon into a group of frightened children and their teacher, whom he has trapped in their classroom. It takes no courage to fire a deadly military style weapon into a group of innocent, unarmed shoppers in a shopping mall on a summer afternoon. The cowardice of the mass murderer is further revealed when he manipulates and tricks apprehensive police officers into publicly shooting him because he doesn't have the courage to end his own life with his own gun.

The actions of a mass shooter shatters the safe and comfortable existential reality most of us take for granted. For the majority of us life is a stable, predictable social existence in which we respect each other's autonomy and the right to live a safe life as we please. The counsellor must make it clear that the shooter is or was an anti-social statistical 'outlier,' an anomaly whose actions are fundamentally abnormal. The reason for a shooter's actions need not be understood in order to see that his attack was not driven by anything his victims said or did, but by his inner delusions and torments. By viewing them from behind his gun sight the mass shooter attempts to diminish the value of their existence to the vacuous level of his own. This is where a counsellor can act as the contrary, explaining to the individual survivor that she is not alone, that like the other victims she is not to blame for

anything, and that she is welcome to feel safely at home in her supportive community. In fact she is valued, she is loved, she is cared for, and she is cared about.

Notes

1. See <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>
2. Adapted from an early 20th century fictional radio series titled “The Shadow.”
3. Nietzsche uses the term “men of *ressentiment*” to mean individuals who blame the pain of their own sense of inferiority or failure on an external scapegoat. They create the illusion of an enemy—sometimes their community, or the world—which they hold responsible for their own shortcomings.

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