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Healing a society afflicted with violence



Students pray across the street from Santana High School Monday in Santee, Calif., after a student went on a shooting rampage at the school.

Compassionate action will make a difference in our communities

By Ari Cowan
Special to the Journal

A 15 year-old boy opens fire at his high school outside of San Diego, kills two students and wounds 13 others. An 18-year-old Shoreline man who friends describe as "a real good kid" is arrested and charged with felony rioting and assault during Seattle's Mardi Gras riots. Twenty-year-old Kristopher Kime is stomped and beaten to death as he attempts to come to the aid of a woman being attacked, also during the Mardi Gras riots. Another 18-year-old man is arrested in the shooting death of Des Moines police officer Steven Underwood.

When we speak of violence we cannot do so without including men as central characters. The rap sheet on men and violence is a litany of savagery. Incidents of girls massacring classmates, women gang-raping men, and mothers shooting their



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husbands, their children, then themselves, is extraordinarily rare.

Men doing the same? That's daily news.

To grow up in America is to be touched in some way by violence. This is especially true for our young people. During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, 148 Americans were killed in action. In 1997, 6,146 teenagers - nearly 42 times the number killed in the Gulf War - died in action within the borders of the United States. That translates into the equivalent of one Gulf War every nine days.

Of the children under 18 who were murdered in 1997, 78% were boys. When it comes to harm against us, especially our children, Saddam Hussein is not our problem. We are.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ari Cowan is a writer and educator living on the Eastside. He is the author of the forthcoming book, *Acts of Courage, Acts of Cowardice: America and the Culture of Violence*. He is the recipient of the Physicians for Social Responsibility's 1998 national public health *Broad Street Pump Award*.

Cowan served as a member of the Workplace Violence Task Force of the University of Washington Graduate School of Public Affairs, Institute for Public Policy and Management. He was cited for his assistance in bringing the first edition of *The International Bill of Human Rights* to publication.

He is working with other Eastside residents to create educational "tools" to help parents, teachers and young people end violence.

Cowan was born and raised in the Seattle area. He is a graduate of Evergreen High School. He is the single parent of two grown sons (both graduates of Juanita High School) and lives near Lake Sammamish.

There are several things we need to note about these numbers. First, men are less likely to report an attack upon them by others, especially women. Second, because of the widespread belief that men are not the principal victims of violence, there are serious inhibitors at work to prevent men from seeking help and getting treatment. Domestic violence shelters rarely give sanctuary to men battered by their intimate partners.

In spite of these limitations, the data is substantial enough to show that men are the principal purveyors of serious personal injury. Third, numbers can deceive us. They offer a perverse sanctuary; one that numbs us and - through the lens of "data" - offers us the comfort of distance from the sorrow and suffering. Do not let the numbers fool you. Each statistic is a living being, a face, a voice crying out.

Violence is cultivated

These boys and men that have been shaped by violence haunt me, especially when I think of their beginnings. Walk through any hospital nursery. Look into the faces of the baby boys. Where are the serial killers, murderers, abusers? Where are the bigots, liars, creeps, scoundrels, deviants, perpetrators? Where are the swaggering, power-hungry, macho, obnoxious, and

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exploitive brutes. They are not there because they have not yet been created.

They are grown from the physical, emotional, mental, environmental, and spiritual soil of fields which are tended by their caretakers and society at large; fields for which we are responsible. Why are we surprised that, when we neglect or poison these fields, we reap a harvest of sorrow?

What can be done to ensure that children coming into the world will never know the horror of violence brought upon them by those charged with their safety and well-being? What can be done to inoculate them against the inevitable exposure to this terrifying disease of the heart and soul? What can be done to help set free those - so terribly many - already ravaged?

The questions eat at me. How can I bear my own sorrow in seeing their struggle - the price for having opened my eyes and my heart to their suffering? What will I say to those who believed in me and patiently led me away from the bloody fields of my own childhood in Seattle's south end? What will be the excuse that exempts me - that I was too blind, too busy, too uninformed, too removed, too confused, too preoccupied with creating a fortress of comfort and denial for myself in the relative security of the suburbs? How will I justify my own being in the world? What am I to tell my children? What will you tell yours?

A nasty epidemic

But, of course, this is nasty business. The magnitude of this epidemic stuns us. Is it really that bad? How can that be? This is not something about which we want to know. This is a dark cloud that can rain down upon our otherwise sunny lives. It is a downer, a bummer, an annoyance. Epidemics always are. And this one is particularly unpleasant.

This illness of the soul will tempt you to turn away. It bares its fangs, hisses forth a foul and repellent breath, and relies upon you to recoil - to back away so that it can live on; so that it can replicate itself in those without the physical, emotional, mental, environmental, and/or spiritual immune system strong enough to withstand its onslaught. It depends upon your blindness, aversion, and cowardice to give it life.

Do not turn your eyes away from this sorrow. There is hope in this, even exhilaration and, ultimately, perhaps some keys to meaning in your own life. Clearly, there is a crucial part you can play in ending this great suffering.

Violence is often seen from a legal, political, or moral high ground. Acknowledge the presence and power of those views and focus instead on a different vantage point: one in which we employ a medical model and use a public health approach. The public health approach employs four basic steps: definition of the problem, identification of risk factors, intervention, and evaluation of the results. Violence renders itself well to this orientation.

Diagnosing the wounds

Using the medical model, we can identify the scope and severity of the wounds violence creates. When we examine this disease, we see that this illness, its toxicity, and its injury can be found physically, emotionally, mentally, environmentally, and spiritually. Its pathology becomes clear and methods of treatment begin to reveal themselves. When we adopt this view, we leave behind issues of right or wrong, revenge, indignation, political power, and gender rage.

Using this approach and model, we learn that harsher laws and punishments, metal detectors in schools, public condemnation, gun safety regulations, threat reporting, drug sweeps, and controlled access to school facilities are not enough. Indeed, some of these strategies may actually contribute to violence - especially those that are punitive or that have their roots in rage.

What quickly becomes evident is that you carry within you the power to both help immunize our young people against violence and to contribute to the healing of those infected. This power lies in your understanding, love, and compassion. It lies in your willingness to take concrete action. It begins with seeing what your role is in creating and cultivating the fields in which our children grow. It means making changes so that you become healthy - an instrument of peace, an example, and an oasis for our young people lost in the deserts of meaninglessness, isolation, and despair. It lies in understanding what is toxic in our society and taking action now to bring about changes.

For me, that translates in to caring about every kid I see as I fetch my lunch at the Crossroads food court. It means treating everyone not only with respect, but with reverence. It means not being seduced into a rage on I-405 when someone arrogantly cuts me off during the rush-hour crunch. It means supporting organizations like Youth Eastside Services. It means spending time as a "spare dad" for kids who need love, understanding, patience, safety, and help in becoming complete human beings.

For me that means making the singular irrational decision to make all children my children. Every child's

well-being is my concern - no exceptions.

Embracing others

It means giving up my hatreds, prejudices, and superstitions about others and embracing them as a part of my family - even when their behavior is despicable and horrifying.

And it means making these commitments with an unwillingness to back down; to move forward even though I may be unqualified, unprepared, and inadequate for the job; to make my stand even if no one else does; to unleash with a will the caring hidden in the deepest recesses of my heart; and to wage a relentless compassion until all those lost to the malignancy of violence return to us, whole.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Information on Ari Cowan and his book may be found on the internet at:

www.aricowan.net