

# Individual Crime, Collective Responsibility

*Violence knows its own sense*

*by Shekhar Deshpande*

**A**s this column takes shape, a news story is breaking in Australia of a gunman who has killed several people in a tourist town and is holding some hostages to negotiate his escape.

A few weeks earlier, we heard of another lone gunman in Scotland, who killed many young children and then killed himself, leaving a whole town, a nation and the world to grieve for his deeds. We learned not long ago that the greatest illusive suspect called Unabomber, that misguided philosopher who killed three individuals and injured several, has been caught by the FBI and that district attorneys from many states are sharpening their cases against him.

These are crimes of a particular order. Luckily, the postal workers are quiet, but this crime seems to be spreading around. There have been many other crimes of the worse kind committed around the world at the same time, but these ghastly deeds deserve our special attention.

These are crimes of individuals without purpose, without any direction and without any connection to other human beings.

True, we also witness the acts of terrorism. The members of the Hamas group, extremist Jewish settlers, Right wing Militia members in the United States, and others around the world have resorted to crimes where individuals have taken fanatical actions and caused deaths of civilians or those they consider to be accomplices. We attribute these crimes to people on the fringe of organized yet unfavored political groups.

Yet, the unpredictability of individuals going berserk in the midst of a boring



everyday life of common citizens drives our fears. Unlike the acts of terrorists, these are unfathomable crimes. We don't understand the reasons behind such acts and our state of uncertainty exposes our perilous weaknesses. These weaknesses are fundamental.

Somehow, wars are forgivable. Wars are accompanied by organized and aggressive attempts to forge sanity into the acts of mass killings. Systematic bombings of Northern Israel and Lebanon are overlooked as some kind of rational efforts that justify killings.

Why are the crimes of the individuals different?

We like to think in the most casual way that these are aberrations. The very idea that someone in Scotland does not wake up each week trying to kill children shows that it is a rare crime and that it is a rude intrusion in an otherwise peaceful life of the people. Usually, such crimes are followed by an extreme outpouring of religious feelings as if to gloss over the gravity of human complicity in these acts.

All of a sudden, we hear that a community comes together in such moments of compelling grief. It is important to pause here and see why this drumbeat for a community and why in its religious garb?

**The mindless violence of armies and "law enforcement" institutions, the entertaining bloodbaths of TV and film industries and the cosmetic approach to social problems, contribute to the silent fuses that suffer from the short circuits of individual's existence.**

People in the West tend to treat heinous individual acts as mistakes of those who had forgotten the good ways. Underneath all that rush to skip over the deeper diagnosis, the pain must be so severe that it serves to numb the sensible nerves.

**H**ow could an individual commit socially irresponsible acts if in fact he/she lived in a community to begin with? The community as such is a sleepy and sleeping notion in the West, especially in its decentered, diffused and deranged environment which so nourishes individualism, both the philosophical and the free market kind.

How is it that a community that seems so capable to express itself after the crime seems too far removed from claiming any responsibility in the circumstances that lead to the act? Why would individual loners commit purposeless mayhem if the circumstances in that community are not nurturing such crimes in the first place?

It would be possible to own up to such responsibility if the so-called community did not see everything in isola-

tion. The mindless violence of its armies and "law enforcement" institutions, the entertaining bloodbaths of its television and film industries and the reckless cosmetic approach to its own street violence, not to speak of unemployment and other social network problems, contribute to these silent fuses that sometime suffer from the short circuits of individual's existence. Beneath the serene consumerism and free market orgies of greed, the West is nurturing some criminals who are truly expressing the limitations of their community.

Religion and the rhetoric of community aided by the smooth and pathetic rituals of televised memorials gloss over the real problems.

There is no such thing as senseless violence. Violence knows its own sense. It isn't desirable in any way. But the terrorists kill for a purpose and they know it. Violence on a collective scale is equally abominable, but at least it knows its limitations and its causes.

The violence of some silent individuals points to a deep pathology that neither befits the concepts of religion nor community.

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