

## Staying cool after MRT knife attack

May 25, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I haven't been to Tunghai University in Taichung for years, but happened to be there for a talk this past Wednesday. Just off the high speed train late that afternoon, I flagged a cab outside the station rather than wait for a bus in the wind and rain. Darkness had just fallen over the city.

This taxi driver was a talkative sort who drove with one eye glued to the storm-spattered windshield, and the other to a television screen planted like a flowerbed in his dashboard. Every couple minutes, he glanced at my face in the rearview mirror.

He was watching a news conference with a police official on the heels of the gruesome knife attack that had occurred a couple hours earlier on an the MRT train.

The driver suddenly boomed at me, "You said you just got off the train from Tunghai?" Instantly I felt guilty of an unknown wrong. I confirmed the accuracy of his words. I had indeed mentioned Tunghai a moment earlier. Then, making it sound like it was my fault: "Sounds like this knife guy is a student there."

"Knife guy?" I leaned over and peered at the flowerbed-TV screen.

It didn't take long to picture the scenario that was sure to follow. The media would be all over the alleged assailant's family. They'd poke noses into his personal life, and want all the grease and dirt on his school history. Within hours, his university campus would be under virtual siege.

The hungry tiger of public curiosity would fuel a huge rush to judgment. What went wrong, and who was at fault? Had the guy shown signs of a violent personality, mental instability, or aberrant behavior? Did he come from a broken family? What did his classmates, friends and professors say of him? Had he ever gotten counseling at his university or a mental health clinic? These were the question marks the media would pursue, and pursue with a vengeance. I told myself this as I paid the driver and climbed out of the cab at home.

Now we know that warning signs had appeared, and that classmates and authorities had expressed concern about a young man who seemed fixated on grandiose ideas linked with terrorist acts. In fact,

people did worry about him and his potential for mayhem, and said so.

What to say about an event that took the lives of 3, and left 23 others gravely injured? As a writer long ago put it, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" No one can measure here the psychological damage and accrued aftereffect on society. In some corners, anxiety hangs so thickly in the air that we can hold it in our hands.

We should remind ourselves the MRT system began serving the public in 1996. For the first time in some 18 years we've hit upon a horrible attack sustained in an MRT car. Violence like this a single time in 18 years (and once is assuredly too much already) reminds us to be reasonable.

Nor is there any reason to engage in cheap debate that relies on a lust for blood. From whence come these knee jerk cries for mandatory death sentences in cases like this? The accused criminal was quoted as saying he did all this because he wants to be executed. His words ironically support the notion (to which many of us subscribe) that capital punishment does not deter violent crime.

To aim a laser beam at the family and school of the alleged killer is both inhumane and grossly unfair. We too have parents, brothers, sisters and children. Who among us can control any of them? Hold back blame, I say. Let us examine ourselves. Violence is a shadow in the lives of each of us. Our words and petty behavior are nothing to compare with what happened last Wednesday. Still, what we say and do can be flashes of steel and wounding, too.

Even large and influential universities like Tunghai are only human institutions. I am told Tunghai has nearly 20,000 students. The fact that a friend there did alert authorities about worrisome Facebook usage, and that Tunghai called the troubled student in for counseling shows people did care and did act.

What happened in that MRT car has changed us, and not for the better. But life goes on, as we must go on, as well. Let us work not toward more anger and violence, but toward greater compassion, care, and healing for those who suffer around us. (*Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.*)

## Talking points :

1. The media has focused on several aspects of the sad story of the MRT incident last Wednesday, including the Q of blame on the alleged assailant's family and university. When someone commits a violent crime, is it fair to say this person's family and former teachers are responsible for the act? However you may feel, why is it you feel this way?
2. MRT riders have been far fewer over the past several days. Do you know people who are now afraid to ride the MRT? What can you say to them about their fears? Are you afraid, too?
3. A few voices in society connect the act of the knife-wielding college student w. t. Sunflower Movement. How do you feel about those who feel the student protests a month ago played a role in the MRT incident?

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