

Questions on prison suicides in Kaohsiung hover like dark clouds

March 1, 2015 by Daniel J. Bauer

The attempted jail break in Kaohsiung Prison that led to the death of six inmates may have occurred nearly a month ago, but the story has not yet ended.

Publicly lauded in the days immediately following the prison crisis, when they were termed heroic in their efforts to bring calm and common sense to a highly combustible situation, the prison warden and his deputy have now been cited by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for “gross negligence,” and punished with demerits. The MOJ handed down similar penalties for some 20 other officials at the prison.

But there is so much more in all this that begs for analysis.

Although I am not a professional in the media, I am smart enough to know ethically-sensitive practitioners do not resort to drone cameras to grab juicy, profitable photos when peoples’ lives are in danger. And who will soon forget the pandering to hostage-takers we saw in the form of the live interview with the now disgraced warden, not to mention the room service on heavy-duty booze for prisoners already in an agitated, edgy state of mind?

Beyond this disturbing picture, or perhaps buried deeply under it, there lie still more shadowy realities. One of them is the question of suicide, which inevitably links to the value of human life, which links to a whole lot more.

Considering how credibility is such a sensitive issue in Taiwan life nowadays, it is not surprising that skepticism immediately arose about the suicides that capped off the scenario. Is it a quirk of cultural differences that at least two foreigners I know doubt the official version of the suicides? “It just seems so hard to believe,” one friend commented, “that all six of those guys wanted at the same moment to do that to themselves.” And yet, having lived in Taiwan over 30 years and witnessed a (for me) unhealthy and unnatural fascination with suicide, I can believe that, sadly, an end to life is what some of those men chose for themselves. Rumors are that not all six chose that end, that their associates brow-beat them into it.

When I showed dismay and even anger about the suicide “end” of the story, another friend of mine took a most peculiar stand. With a shrug and a half-chuckle, he looked at me almost in amusement, as if to say, “Who cares? Good riddance to good rubbish!” This left me to ponder how the public in general views the loss of life here.

The value of even a criminal’s life should weigh on the mind and heart of every thinking person in Taiwan. Questions about the value of a life cannot be left to a popular vote in certain narrow, confined venues. Caucasians in the American south in the 18th and early 19th century presumably found the lives of black people of little or no inherent value. The same was true for at least 200 years in American culture and politics as regards indigenous peoples there, what we once called “the American Indians.” Many Americans of European heritage, if asked at the time, probably would have said “Indian lives? Who cares?”

At the Oscars last week in Hollywood, Graham Moore, who was honored for his work in “The Imitation Game,” said hope was an option for everyone. He revealed a secret. At age 16, he said, he felt so unhappy that he almost ended his life. In the same ceremony, on the same stage, Dana Perry, producer for the best short documentary (“Crisis Hotline: Veterans Press 1”) dedicated her Oscar to her son. He committed suicide 10 years ago. “We should talk about suicide out loud,” she said. I say so, too.

I say that even the lives of people who do horrible things in society are, in the eyes of heaven, lives that are precious and valuable. By all reports, Taiwan’s prisons are not as flat-out terrible as prisons in the United States. Taiwan incarcerates only a miniscule number, compared to the USA. Still, according to Professor Shih I-huei, Taiwan currently has ordered 64,000 of its citizens into its prisons (TT 2-26-15 p. 8). Do we care that those prisons were meant to hold 53,000? We should.

Perhaps I am pessimistic about the question, but I feel life is too cheap in Taiwan for too many people. We do not value the gift of human life nearly enough.

The lower value we hold for some lives is why we denigrate the importance of girls and women in our society, and prefer baby boys to baby girls. We know that attitude is wrong, and that’s why we’re ashamed to talk about it. The cheap value we put on female life is also why we don’t even want to think of the truth that Taiwan mothers and fathers are more inclined to deny the life of a female fetus than that of a male.

So, the question of those suicides in Kaohsiung should bother us, and for many reasons. We may not know what to do with people who do evil, but prisoners are still human beings. Their suicides are important, partly because their lives are important.

Like it or not, the story of Kaohsiung prison 2015 is here to stay. (*Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest*

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Talking points

1. Sometimes we "associate" violent behavior with people in foreign countries, but not in Taiwan. The prison event in Kaohsiung last month involved the taking of hostages, the use of knife-like instruments, guns, and suicides. Is this an isolated event, or is the world, and Taiwan also, becoming a more violent place?
2. What is our attitude toward people in prison (prisoners)? Do we look at prisoners as "bad people," or "people who made serious mistakes," or "people who are socially sick" or "people who also need our care and concern"?
3. Although no one likes or wants to talk about suicide, people do suffer from the temptation to commit suicide (to end their lives). Perhaps talking out loud about the problem is healthy. Even for us who are friends together, however, this topic may be very difficult to touch. Do you have thoughts or feelings about suicide that you'd like to share with us today?

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