

US shooting shatters Christmas peace

December 23, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

With twenty minutes before the dismissal bell in a class last Monday, a senior in the back row raised his hand and wondered if he could ask a question unrelated to our course. I gave him the green light, and he said he wanted to know if I had anything to say about the shooting incident a few days earlier at Sandy Hill Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

"I'm in a service course activity now where I teach little kids a few hours a week and I found I really like it," he remarked. "I didn't expect it to happen, but you start to get attached to the children, and now, well, this killing of these kids, it's got me to thinking - -." I had to wave him down. At the moment, I didn't need to hear more of his sentiments.

I did the best I could, but after I spoke, I felt very dissatisfied with my words.

At breakfast two days later, a Taiwanese priest ("shen-fu") asked me how to make sense of various random acts of violence we've recently witnessed in the United States, shootings at shopping malls, a movie theater, schools here and there, and so on. He also less than gently peppered another American shen-fu at the table with questions about what seems to be the American love affair with guns. As the topic shifted to the national reluctance to tackle gun control, between the lines I detected what singer Paul Simon termed so well the "hints and allegations" that are bound to arise in conversations such as this.

For the most part, I let the other American at the table do the talking. But I studied the facial expressions of the Taiwanese, the Chinese, the Polish, and the Indian faces around me. It surely is true that we often become more sensitive to our own culture when we live outside of it.

A day after that uncomfortable conversation, a student in a campus discussion group on current events asked me point blank if I planned to write about the massacre at Sandy Hill. I told him I did not know.

Considering his curiosity, and wanting to make up for my weak words earlier in class, a tiny voice in my conscience is pushing me now to unlock a door inside

my chest. Indeed, how do we respond to this tragic and totally unnecessary loss of 27 lives?

My wording here makes it obvious that I am taking the Sandy Hill event personally. I do not want to take it personally, but I must. I am angry, and angry first at myself. I am angry at myself for my passivity. I have been so complacent, so lazy on two issues about which I actually care very greatly. The one is guns and violence. The other is concern for our mentally troubled.

I haven't lifted a finger and written a representative in congress or a senator to express my views on these topics. Not even once. How long would it take to write the letter? A half hour, I suppose, maybe an hour at most. That's all it would have required to send a few words to a political leader, urging a ban on assault weapons (the sooner the better) and a call (also the sooner the better) for more robust education about violence in society and more care for the mentally troubled.

Taking Sandy Hill personally is not only a matter of anger for me. It is also a matter of shame. I know, I know: the person who did this was sick beyond all imagination and the rest of us had nothing to do with making him that way. So, the shame here doesn't belong to us. But I challenge that view.

All Americans, including we who live abroad, should be ashamed of our country's lackadaisical attitude about assault weapons in specific and hand guns in general. We should be ashamed of our excuses for not facing this problem. It is truth time now, time for some brutally honest self-criticism about our cultural obsession with violence.

We need to take a whole new look at violence and the role it plays in our lives. This is not just about Hollywood movies and video games that distance us from emotions. It's about bullying, too, and about the power not only of bullets and guns, but of words as well, to hurt or even kill others.

This Christmas, a time that should sparkle with the joy of children, we find ourselves with so many questions to ask, and so much to ponder. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. The shooting in Connecticut seems far away from Taiwan, and yet violence in various ways is present in all countries and all cultures. Offer some examples of violence in Taiwan.
2. The writer is ashamed of himself for never having written a letter to American political leaders to urge a ban on assault guns and for more national care for mentally troubled persons. Are you willing to write a letter to your legislative representative about a public issue you care about?
3. Sometimes a large public event pushes us personally to think more about a problem in life or even to try to do something about it. Is there any social problem that you hope to do something about either as a college or student or after you graduate?

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