

How Do You Spell Relief?

R-E-V-O-L-T

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

1983

Mass murder, random killings and the like are nothing new in this country; Bruce Springsteen, in his ballad about a killing spree in the late 1950s by Charlie Starkweather, sings, "It's just a meanness in this land, sir."

It seems someone blows their top, flips their lid almost daily. So, reports of a homophobic minister's son in New York City shooting into a crowd of gays, or a driver ramming her car into pedestrians packed onto a Las Vegas sidewalk, or a disgruntled client tossing gasoline bombs before him as he shoots his way through a crowded Detroit law office, or a bored Southern California school girl who calmly fires round after round into her school yard, become almost mundane, ordinary, such is their frequency. They are the small percentage of flip-outs, those whose rage has gotten out of control.

Initially, there's always shock—America's leading emotional commodity, eagerly milked by sensational media coverage—and then on to the next page or right back after the commercials for a report on the leading economic indicators. However, it's not as if passivity to this type of news is a completely inappropriate response—after all, how does one react to daily reports of random violence and mass murder?

The Tylenol Killings—Like the Dam Breaking

The Tylenol murders of early October (their very name denotes an eerie, modern clinicalness) represent a watershed in the growing syndrome of seemingly senseless violence. Only seemingly senseless because all things have their causes and here the causes are too close for comfort, too rooted in the mass psychology of this culture.

We live in a world so plagued with violence, there is such a "meanness in this land," that the Chicago Tylenol killings and the subsequent "copy-cat" product poisonings are like the dam breaking loose releasing a torrent of pent-up, murderous rage. The rage is now generalized—all are potential victims. It is produced by a lifetime, by generations of frustrations, repression, disappointment, anger, failure, confusion, ambivalence—all concealed beneath a calm exterior. The potential is there in all of us; it breaks loose in only a few.

Usually, these highly charged emotions are skillfully manipulated to shape reactionary social views—the urge to punish others, the desire for executions, support for the police and military, for wars, racism, denying abortions to women and the like. But in some individuals, the fantasies of violence, for revenge for all of the hurt, cannot be contained within society's domain—it escapes to its logical conclusion, murder.

It's never a monster who suddenly kills, but "the guy next door"—and "he always seemed so nice." Sometimes a whole society rushes into madness and all of the murderous impulses are given free rein, so all of the nice guys next door clamor to become concentration camp guards, torturers—their grisly fantasies no longer have to haunt them: they are officially approved.

The copy-cat adulterations of food and drugs which followed the Chicago poisonings certainly weren't socially approved, but they suddenly became socially available. And the fact that perhaps only a hundred or so took advan-

tage of the availability out of a population of millions does little to ease the creepy sensation that random violence lurks everywhere; a newsweekly referred to the poisonings as “a chilling reminder of everyone’s vulnerability.”

This new terror was added to a land already racked with fear of nuclear war, crime and now, potential attack from your neighbor in any form. It’s like your mother turning on you. Where we live should be a place of nurturing, a sanctuary, not a war zone. In wartime everything becomes unraveled, one’s life, one’s emotions; destruction is everywhere, attack is always imminent. When this becomes a permanent definition of the culture, life becomes intolerable. Without any mass demand for a new life, individuals retreat, public life disappears (even vestiges of ancient, public rituals like Halloween are over through the fear of sneak attack from one’s neighbors).

Television, official messages and controlled environments—guarded shopping centers and work places—represent the only safety. Public life shrinks that much more towards its final collapse.

America—An Epidemic of Daily Pain

The Tylenol murders exposed another public secret—Americans are suffering an epidemic of daily pain. Johnson & Johnson, makers of the poisoned pain reliever, were raking in \$3–400 million dollars a year and this only represented a little more than a third of the pain reliever “market.” It takes only a short trip to most of our own medicine cabinets or a quick look at TV commercials to know that we are plagued with chronic, daily aches and pains; an incredible array of headaches, digestive and elimination difficulties, tension and sleeplessness, to the point where all of this is taken for granted; aren’t such pains and problems “natural”? And similarly, isn’t murderousness, this “meanness in this land,” as well, the human condition?

In a word, no. Both malaises are powerful messages from our collective psyches and guts that something is dreadfully wrong in this land. The rage which permeates every fiber of this society stems from a culture eviscerated of its human qualities. One which had to destroy a virgin land to establish itself, slaughter its original inhabitants, enslave another population to build its economic foundation, fight war after war to expand and defend its empire, all to produce a nation of factories and offices.

This history is not lost on today’s inhabitants no matter how little they actually perceive of it. In a land of slaves to industry and business, at best you get headaches, at worst you murder. In between, lie alcoholism, mental illness, suicide, crime, drug addiction—a whole range of social disintegration which is the price for our history.

The positioning of wage labor at the center of human activity completes the destruction begun by the emergence of the nation state of the tableau of previous ages which immersed the individual in a mythic, joyous and communal integration with nature and the people about him. In place of a mutually recognized human identity people are now known by their job categories (“Hi, what do you do?,” soon THX-1138); the wilderness recedes from our sight and from our visions; we do the bidding of economics.

Work itself becomes the task master. Its routinized and universal presence creates the illusion of an eternal quality as if humans always labored day in and day out at the same tasks for a lifetime. The human body and spirit is eroded by this deadening process producing a disheartened and weakened people willing to submit to work’s daily humiliation and subjugation.

The major physical difficulties produced by work are well known: wretches not favored by the class system are forced to take dangerous and unhealthy jobs which constitute the backbone of this economy. (At Three Mile Island, a member of the crew sent in to clean up the radioactive spill was asked by a reporter, “Aren’t you afraid to go in there?” “I’m more afraid not to have a job,” was the reply.)

Now comes the news that almost every job has hidden lethal potentials within it; from working with computer terminals, paint, printer’s ink, office machines, photography, endlessly providing a list of health-threatening diseases. Also, the human form is twisted out of its normal shape by the requirements of jobs whose activity is modeled on the motion of machines: sitting at typewriters, lying under cars, standing in front of machines, on ladders, at assembly lines, passing, holding, lifting objects repeatedly for an enforced period each day are all beyond the limit of the body’s capacity.

What is created is a chronically sick population suffering from job-related injuries and illnesses characterized on the lowest scale by an epidemic of smaller ills from which we seek relief by gobbling down billions of Excederins,

Tums, and Sominex. These are drugs for the modern wage slave. Labeling them “medicine,” the advertisements try to disguise their real function—masking the pain, drugging

Each Individual is a Potential Sale

The mind reacts as well with emotions as mild as feelings of generalized dissatisfaction and disaffection and as severe as psychosis, defining a population in various stages of immiseration so widespread are their occurrence. Prior to this current Depression psychologists clucked about “on-the-job stress”; now their concerns are with the stress of un-employment. Where is the joy, the reward? Even the material affluence reaped by one section of the population barely seems worth what must be sacrificed.

We are allowed by this affluence (even the poor) to now consume on a daily basis items which were previously only enjoyed on special occasions. Unhealthy to consume in quantity but now heralded by advertising as compensation for our long hours of work, meat, coffee, refined sugars, flours and grains, alcohol and tobacco are no longer for use at festivals or celebrations but have been advanced to the category of “necessities.” What is produced by this daily, massive ingestion of “celebration” items which are now, for the first time in history available everywhere as commodities, is a further debilitation of the body and an addiction, not only to the wares of the seller, but also to his remedies.

All of this physical and emotional suffering is placed within the context of a society in which the dominant mode of association is that of the business place—each individual is to be seen as a potential sale or as a competitor. Again, this is more than the human psyche can withstand and withdrawal becomes the norm furthering the process of social atomization; the periodic human explosions are just its indicators.

To be sure, this is the picture at its worst, but a characterization which can come to shape even those who resist dehumanization and try to retain a sense of humanity in their dealings with others. The social and cultural configurations of this society all exist as affirmation for the “war of all against all,” whereas the resistance exists in spite of them.

Right now we can only hope to make that rebellion, that negation, stronger by consciously opposing this scourge by maintaining our commitment to our projects, by resisting the increasing privatization, by creating public expressions of our desire to live a human life. For some of us, perhaps even in personal matters such as deciding to live a healthy life will be important. Understanding the notion that instead of sustaining you, here, too, the culture attacks you. We should see that the effect of the excessive consumption of “celebration” commodities mentioned above is no different than politicians—they are both out to destroy you.

Beyond the personal things get more difficult. Our groups are small and our projects fragile. For instance, the Grinning Duck Club, an attempt in Detroit to have a place where people could gather unmediated by commodity consumption, to just talk or perform our music, plays or art is presently out of commission. Our lives are that much more reduced because of it and that much more like the other victims.

Perhaps talk of healthy diet and social clubs may sound a bit pallid to those desiring clarion calls for revolution, general strikes, and “direct action,” but this is not what this essay is about. (Besides, the calls are just so much rattling of chains; maybe we should do it or be silent.) Rather, I meant to write about the maintenance and extension of human values among ourselves, this small group of us who feel acutely aware of being awash in this sea of modernity; how can we be kinder to each other and to ourselves?

While waiting for the assault on the bastions of authority and domination, we would do well to have as a priority the development of social forms which will at once nurture us, sustain us in our commitment to libertarian values, act as a model for the society we desire and, finally, be the instrument of this society’s destruction.

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