

MAKING SENSE AND LEARNING LESSONS FROM THE PORT ARTHUR KILLINGS

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It is now a year since the Port Arthur massacre. But the lessons of the event have progressed little since the killer's answer to the question 'Why?' when he said, 'S'pose it happens, doesn't it?'

Yet we need to know what motivated the killer to give us hope to be able to prevent similar tragedies. If such knowledge can prevent future deaths, the deaths of the victims and the sufferings of the survivors may not have been totally in vain. Even if adding but little, it is in this spirit that this paper is written.

What follows is a brief overview of the event utilising records of police and psychiatric interviews, the media, and some encounters with the victims and their helpers.

THE TRAUMA

The massacre at Port Arthur was one of the most horrifying crimes possible. For innocent people enjoying an idyllic spot to be shot dead suddenly and willfully by a heavily armed human is like a nightmare come true. Particularly horrifying was the deliberateness, mercilessness, and indiscriminate killing of children. The image of the gunman seeking out and shooting the small girl who hid behind a tree, after he had shot her mother and sister, is especially abhorrent.

Unlike the regular menu of shootings, often of innocents on television, this shooting was akin to crossing a line in the sand, the breaking of a taboo, loss of innocence, 'things never being the same again'. The magnitude of the trauma reverberated throughout Tasmania, Australia and the world. If this could happen in such an unexpected place, who was safe?

Many tried to imagine the horror, terror and incredulity of the victims just before death. Survivors described the sense of unreality when the massacre first started, as if they were watching a film. Some survived by whatever means possible such as hiding, pretending to be dead. People did what they could to rescue others, often at risk and even sacrificing themselves.

Afterward survivors had to deal with their injuries, losses, reliving the event now permanently imprinted in their minds, trying to make some meaning. They were rent apart by emotions, and almost as bad, by putting the event out of their minds in order to get on with their own lives, people were horrified that they might be 'forgetting' their dead friends. But the pushed down memories remained like a rumbling volcano ready to erupt.

There was tremendous compassion for the

victims and their surviving relatives. In one way Australia was like a grieving family.

The trauma is not over. The losses continue, and may become fully appreciated only over time. In different ways people will try to absorb the Port Arthur tragedy and make some meaning of it for the rest of their lives.

THE MORAL OUTRAGE WITH REGARD TO THE CRIME

If there was any crime where the division between good and bad, guilty and innocent was clear, it was this one. The crime personified evil. The evildoer was seen as a monster, or a subhuman (for humans could not perpetrate such inhumanity). There was an instinctive response to be rid of the evildoer. Some regretted that he did not burn to death, others that the police did not shoot him. Somehow natural justice required him dead. It only seemed natural that death should beget death. He and his evil should be annihilated from human society, never to be able to threaten it again. For some, the revenge seemed the only relief they could obtain.

In this sense it seemed unnatural that the man who was perceived as the monster should receive treatment for his burns in the same hospital and in the same way as his victims. It also seemed too long for what appeared such an open and shut case to wait for months to come to trial. And yet to deny treatment and a fair trial might have dragged the values of a civilised society down to instinctive responses, perhaps engaging in similar non-civilised reactions as displayed by the perpetrator. Yet many thought that now at last he should be killed by the judicial system, and some called for retrospective reintroduction of the death penalty for him. As it was, it was inconceivable for most people that he should receive any lesser sentence than the one he got — imprisonment for the term of his natural life.

The other issue of justice was compensation for victims. Some were incensed at the offers which to them cheapened their experiences — was that what lost lives and their sufferings were worth?

In a sense one could stop one's enquiry at this stage, for an action and a reaction have been completed. To go beyond, in some ways is *unnatural, counter intuitive*. To find reasons for a heinous crime may seem to be looking for excuses, negating evil. This is not the intention at all. Yet we must ask further questions if we want to have further answers.

THE NATURE OF PERPETRATORS

Accumulated knowledge now exists about a variety of perpetrators, including multiple and

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serial killers, violent criminals, wife beaters, physical and sexual child abusers, soldiers who perpetrated atrocities and perpetrators of genocides [1,2].

What stands out among perpetrators is the almost universal lack of guilt and remorse, but rather views that they were justified in their actions. There was no decision to be evil, no conscious pact with the devil. And while to outsiders their views may seem preposterous, perpetrators often feel that they were forced through self-defence to do what they did (sometimes for their group, nation or the world); or they were provoked; or seduced; or they were exacting revenge, preventing further abuse of themselves.

Perpetrators' victims seem to them to be their persecutors, monsters. Even a screaming baby may be seen as a wilful, dangerous persecutor.

Background reasons are often multifactorial. They include parental and group modelling, emotional neglect and stunting, societal coercion, a way to belong and overcome alienation, and appeasing rage, fear and humiliation. Victims are scapegoats who lose their humanity. Perpetrators are no longer helpless.

This type of knowledge may be disturbing because it appears to blur moral divisions. After all, if the perpetrators were themselves abused, are we supposed to sympathise with them? This indeed was a dilemma for some of the Port Arthur victims, who, when they heard the perpetrator's story could not hate him and were even unwillingly sympathetic to him. For us, it may be difficult to keep in mind simultaneously the terrible trauma and its injustice, and possible reasons in the mind of the killer for doing what he did.

IN THE MIND OF THE KILLER

One may intuitively think that if not bad, a Port Arthur killer must surely be mad. So what does psychiatry say about him? Overlapping psychiatric approaches have been forensic, diagnostic and psychodynamic.

The *forensic* diagnosis held that the killer knew what he was doing and he knew that what he had done was wrong. Therefore he could plead and be tried as a normal person. Considering that the killer premeditated and planned his actions, and he hid his thoughts and the stockpiles of weaponry from others, this assessment seems quite correct.

The *psychiatric* diagnosis is more problematic. Five psychiatrists and psychologists agreed that Bryant suffered an intellectual disability with an IQ of 66, at the lowest 1-2% range of the population. They also agreed that he suffered a personality disorder. Though both diagnoses occur in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of psychiatric diagnoses, they are background, developmental diagnoses, stating more how the person is distorted, rather than what acute illness he suffers. In practice, personality disorder is often used to reflect the person's intractable problems, lack of cooperativeness, and let it be said, therapeutic despair.

It is thus that a person who has been referred multiple times to psychologists and psychiatrists in the past, who has been granted a disability pension by a psychiatrist, and to outsiders who heard his story would be anything but mentally normal, could be said technically to not suffer from a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or depression. Similarly, though he had been despondent and had suicidal preoccupations, his symptoms did not fulfil the diagnostic criteria for depression.

Perhaps the most productive path is the *developmental psychodynamic* one. This looks at the historical development of the person and explores why which mental patterns and responses developed.

Unfortunately, we have scant details of early family relationships. However, we do know that virtually from the time Bryant entered school he had learning and relating difficulties, to which he reacted by being disruptive and aggressive. Bryant's recall of those times was of awful years of being hazed, bullied,

knocked about, and of avoiding school in terror. This is consistent with the experience of many retarded children who are teased, ostracised and humiliated in schools. Because of his limited capabilities to deal with problems, it is possible that Bryant, like other intellectually disabled children in such situations reacted with frustration and aggression.

Bryant's disturbance was extreme and may have been contributed to by other unknown factors. He tormented animals, as well as his younger sister of whom he was jealous. He caused a fire and though he was burnt in it he said he would do it again. He had been seen by a number of mental health workers. There is no mention what treatment he or his family received.

However, at the age of thirteen he was placed in a special school with some initially good results. Two years later he tormented animals again. At the age of seventeen a psychiatrist granted him a disability pension. He had not been seen by a mental health professional thereafter.

In his teens Bryant was accepted by an eccentric lady in her forties. He moved in with her, and this time shared a positive interest in her numerous cats and dogs. He saw her as a friend, and was noted to have behaved with her like an obedient, affectionate, helpful child. When she was killed in 1992, Bryant was left the mansion and a million dollars. He was alone and rich. In 1993, his father, perhaps the only other person who had affection for Bryant and who had some disciplining influence on him to some degree, killed himself. He had been treated for depression.

Following the deaths things deteriorated for Bryant. He felt once more that people were against him. When he tried to talk to people they just walked away. Bryant tried to achieve relationships through travel. He hoped that in other countries people he approached would be friendlier. They were not. The best part of the trips were the long flights where people could not move away from him. The trips had to end as his trustees said he spent too much money on travel.

In the year before the shooting Bryant realised that his life would not change. He saw himself as a friendly bloke who just wanted to make contact with others, but his fellow humans rejected him. He became very distressed, lived day by day, with memories of past rejections, indignities and bullying intruding into his mind. This is not unlike symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. He came to have had a 'gutful'. 'All I wanted was for people to like me,' he reminisced of this time, and he thought that he would be 'better off dead'. He drank alcohol to appease his loneliness.

With memories of his earlier slights, returned also vengefulness and desire to inflict on others what he suffered. He started to think of getting even through strangling the next person who would be unfriendly to him. He turned his attention to guns, '... the more power the better'.

He particularly turned his vengefulness on the Martins whom he in fact killed first. He rationalised that they caused his father's suicide by preventing him buying the Seascape property. Some weeks before the event he elaborated the fantasy of extending his killings. These fantasies increased at the time he broke up with his girlfriend.

It is not clear whether he watched the videos at this time but *The Protector* and *Under Siege* were his favourites. Both contain gratuitous violence and killing at close range with automatic weapons. In the latter film the antihero's group kills innocent people with automatic guns, then commandeers a nuclear warship and finally fires nuclear missiles at Hawaii. His motive is revenge for having been ostracised and badly treated in the past.

The future killer now bought the guns and ammunition without a gun, or even a driver's licence. Though a new girlfriend diminished his suicidal preoccupation, his homicidal ones persisted. Nevertheless, he believed that he would himself be shot during the shooting, possibly as happened to the antiheroes in the videos.

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

The appearance of the killer gave away nothing. To his neighbours he was a pleasant smiling young man, even if with the mental capacity of a young boy. While eating lunch outside the Broad Arrow Cafe he engaged in some talk, attracting no particular attention. Mostly he talked to himself about WASPs. Perhaps he felt rejected again. During the shooting he did not talk though he was reported to have laughed in an aggressive way. To another victim whom he chased he said, 'No one gets away from me.'

During the police interview he was nervous, timid and inarticulate. His only concerns were his immediate comfort suited to a very small child. He liked being interviewed, because of the contact it gave him. In court he sat close to his guards, trying to talk to them. Though again looking normal, '... he could be any one of our boyfriends ...', he also appeared like a lonely little boy craving attention and contact, wanting to be part of it all. Involuntarily he aroused sympathy. His defence lawyer said he and his client got on remarkably well and he would continue to visit him. The sentencing judge's eventual verdict was that of a pathetic social misfit.

How did the killer view his killings? In the interviews he apparently denied knowledge of them. At one time he invented an elaborate story of how he went surfing that day. At other times he asked what had happened, as if he knew nothing about the event. But he was not a coherent liar. Thus he variably admitted owning and liking guns, and having been in Port Arthur where he kidnapped a man. He expressed the wish for a gun currently so he could escape. He just wished all this had not happened, he could enjoy his mother's stew, or be dead.

Comments like this shocked people with their self-centredness and lack of empathy. Yet there may be two types of psychological explanations apart from Asperger's syndrome which was suggested by one psychiatrist (though negated by another). Firstly, that the killer's mind was not coherent, but was rather in a dissociated, fragmented state. Such states occur to avoid awareness of something too dreadful (traumatic). There may have been two levels of dread — that the killer's life had always been pathetic and hopeless and would not change, and this state may have been dissociated prior to and during the killing. The second dread may have been that now he would be irretrievably and eternally most pathetically and totally rejected and isolated forever if he allowed awareness of his *deeds*.

Secondly, the killer's mind functioned like that of a young child, where contact with an attachment figure was imperative above all. Such a child knows no morality except whether he is accepted or rejected, and this is quite egocentric. So are his judgements of those who accept or reject him. It was more important to him whether his interrogators liked him and would give him cans of Pepsi, than the contents of their inquiries.

So on the one hand, to avoid rejection and feeling pathetic, the killer, like a child caught doing something wrong, denied, and made up a story sprinkled with self-deception, wishes, and a measure of truth. And yet when interviewed by a psychiatrist whom he came to trust and presumably he felt less threatened, he recalled and related much more self-condemnatory information.

In summary, there is a lifelong history of a mentally deficient child who felt rejected, ostracised, bullied and humiliated. He craved contact with people, but when he could not achieve it, he extracted recognition, contact and self-esteem through force. As a child he did this through disruption and torment of those weaker than himself. As an adult he attempted to do this through guns.

After the only two people who cared for him and disciplined him died, plus when he broke up with his girlfriend, and later when he was deprived of travelling which allowed him some minimal contact, his loneliness escalated. As well, the realisation came that this was it — this was to be his life. It

appears that his loneliness took his mind back to his early childhood isolation, bullying and humiliation. These memories intruded into his mind and were projected into newly failed relationships. The old aggressive impulses through which he extracted revenge and recognition also came to his mind. But instead of animals, his mind turned more directly to people, and to guns which had most power. Films and videos and gun magazines appeared to make his fantasies possible, as did easy access to actual guns. In the end he was a small disturbed boy with maximum adult power.

We may speculate that the climax was to have been a final solution for him. He would be free of his loneliness and helplessness and die powerful and recognised.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNT

Why him and not others?

It was discouraging to not be able to find a specific reason why this, and not another pathetic and aggressive person committed this particular act. This implied that one could not predict and prevent such future happenings.

It may be that this despair reflects wrong expectations. The question assumes a type of billiards ball 1:1 logic, where one cause leads to one effect. This was not the case with the Port Arthur massacre, nor can it be with solutions. Thus any number of factors could have deflected from the event — had the benefactor not died, had overseas trips not been curtailed, had the gun dealer not sold the guns, and so on. The person's mind was a major, but not sole determinant of the action.

While retrospectively we may understand quite a lot about the killer's actions, prospectively each factor adds but a fraction to predictability of violence. The extraordinary coincidences leading to mass murders are too great to predict. But this need not be cause for despair.

A comparison may be made with car crash perpetrators. Though it is again difficult to predict any particular crash, we know factors which contribute to them generally, such as bad roads, speed, youth, alcohol, personality, and so on. Knowing about these factors can help institute measures which diminish not the one-off spectacular crashes, but the number of run-of-the-mill, in perspective more numerous everyday crashes.

How cost effective is it to note and act on factors contributing to the Port Arthur killings? Possibly very cost-effective, for this massacre bears the same signposts which contribute to much more common and numerous tragedies through violence. So let us look at the signposts in chronological order.

Early signposts and early help

Major early signposts were learning and behavioural difficulties, tormenting others and fire setting. These would have required much personal and family therapy (note the father's depression) at the time. Aggression in the intellectually disabled is often a cover for depression [3]. It may be that Bryant was both traumatised and depressed at the time.

The lesson here is that there must be extensive services available for obviously disturbed and aggressive children and their families. It is insufficient to treat only 'major psychiatric illnesses' (the current perpetrator would not have been included). There must be sophisticated training and treatment also of the deep terror and suffering inherent in feelings of abandonment, ostracism, and being bullied as a child, which often underlie behaviour disorders. Many such children finish up as future victims or criminals. Proper and sufficient interventions with such children in particular may be most humane, and actually also cost effective.

The need for long-term follow up

After being granted a disability pension, there was no more mental health contact with the future perpetrator. It seems that acceptance by his benefactor and being allowed to act as the

child he felt himself to be contained previous feelings of rejection and aggression. However, this latent period still contained latent dangers. After the deaths of the benefactor and his father, the 'child' was left alone again. In retrospect one could have expected trouble to brew again.

Who could have been aware of the increasingly distressed and aggressive state of mind? Perhaps a severely disturbed child like he had been, whose patterns of behaviour were known to often lead to future sociopathy should be followed up, even if minimally, for a long period. Perhaps a constant interested professional figure could have satisfied some of the craving which the perpetrator had to make some human contact with someone, anyone. In practice, it may require only one constant understanding professional to contain the rising desperation, and prevent suicide or violence. If someone had kept the person in mind, the death of his benefactor and the suicide of his father may have alerted them to closer follow up. Such follow up requires a professional service with high morale, a rarity these days.

Other points of entry may have been subsequent traumas which compounded the previous ones. A liaison psychiatry service might have alerted enquiry into the wellbeing of a survivor who suffered prolonged unconsciousness in a fatal car crash. Or a disabled child might have been followed up after a parental suicide. However, such services are being cut back.

Of course even with salient signposts institutions may be reluctant or powerless to move, as happened with the Dunblane killer. Yet in this case the potential killer was keen to talk to people. But somehow no one asked him sufficiently what was going on in his mind.

Lessons for society

The context in which the killer's mind was deteriorating was a society in which guns and portrayal of violence were an accepted part of life. It was in this context that his mind moved almost naturally from strangling to firearms. He had watched on television and videos the use of guns as means of asserting power, masculinity and ways of resolving problems. He read freely available gun magazines. With remarkable ease he was able to obtain the most lethal guns.

The community at large and the government were outraged by this and took steps to introduce laws to restrict availability of these weapons. While it may be argued that it is not guns, but the mind of the gun owner which is crucial, this case may indicate that the easy availability of guns to twisted minds can be a lethal combination. Removal of such weapons may symbolise the community's unequivocal statement of abhorrence of guns and violence, and may act as some guiding influence for impressionable, disturbed and otherwise unguided minds.

Society has also had to reconsider the free availability of what is sometimes called the pornography of violence. In this case it appears that it was a factor which moulded the options of the killer.

Learnt lessons from past traumas

The responses of the Emergency Services and the hospital were exemplary. The police were aware of the importance of not shooting the perpetrator and thus giving him hero status which others might copy. The media were handled well, and sensationalism was prevented. The mention of the killer's name in this article is also restricted in order to avoid giving him undue importance or fame. It is mentioned only in reference to his pathetic nature.

Counselling of survivors was available. This time too, long term effects are so far not being ignored. Sensitive memorialisation of victims, and recognition of survivors' sufferings and their brave struggles must continue.

Recognition of violence signposts and acting on them more widely

Perhaps the very factors which caused the most helplessness are

the most useful to recognise. For instance, the government has encouraged research into violence and practical steps have started to emerge already. For instance, violence in pubs can be reduced by mixing with irritable hard drinking clients, taming bouncers and acting in cooperation with police.

Perhaps other means of handling violence can be researched. The community may be educated about signposts of violence, to take them seriously and to inform others who can institute help. Compulsory notifications as for child abuse, hotlines and ring-ins may be useful.

Some perpetrators may need to be handled by the police, but many others may be like the Port Arthur killer, feeling deprived, terrifyingly lonely, unjustly rejected, persecuted, humiliated and vengeful, scapegoating others for their plights. Though the violent may initially variably dissimulate their abusing behaviour, with trust that they are being offered better alternatives for their inner distress, many may come to share their distress and accept help.

Many of these people may not be considered to suffer a major psychiatric illness, or they may be labelled personality disorders. However, this may reflect unwarranted fear of their violence, and therapeutic despair. Readiness to understand their development and inner distress may be more hopeful. This does not make treatment easy by any means, but it at least may ameliorate some need to express physical violence.

Wider recognition of perpetrator psychology

It is important to recognise, understand and expose the roots of violence in a deep cultural sense. In other words, to not give it undue respect, notoriety, equation with power and masculinity. Rather it should be exposed as the last resort of those who cannot resolve their problems otherwise, of the cowardly, the weak, unintelligent, and unmasculine.

However, rejection of violence and obnoxious characteristics must be tempered with understanding and willingness to help when possible people who may feel unjustifiably victimised, blame others in callous unempathic and aggressive manners, who distort truth, find scapegoats for their internal problems, have no sense of their own psychological patterns and cannot look at themselves with humour. Understanding, exposure and help of such people and of groups whom they sometimes muster is essential for society.

IN CONCLUSION

It is important to not give in to the Port Arthur killer by fulfilling his will and giving him power. We may acknowledge the terror of damage and grief of bullets, but we need not be overawed by its sources, the pathetic lonely frightened vengeful child.

Though not all violence and hurting of people by other humans is fuelled by the fears of psychologically small lonely and vulnerable people trying to assert control, power and revenge, the dynamic is common enough to be very closely noted.

There are no simple panaceas for stopping Port Arthur type massacres. But understanding and dealing with each factor which contributed to it may help prevent its resultant abuses and atrocities which exist on a wider scale. Such prevention will make the deaths of the Port Arthur victims and the sufferings of the survivors not in vain. They will have also led us more broadly to the answer of the Port Arthur massacre through its antitheses — courage, compassion, humanity, understanding, wisdom and life.

References

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