

Life Cheapened By Society Today

The snuffing out of human life has become so commonplace to the American people that the public conscience has developed a callousness to it. So says Dr. Ralph S. Banay, well-known criminologist. In the following article, the second in a series on the subject of why people commit murder.

By DR. RALPH S. BANAY

There is no doubt that society is partly responsible for the prominence of murder in the tableau of today's community.

The tenuous state of world affairs, the effects of wars and the threat of greater ones, the danger of mass extinction from horrendous weapons, constant preoccupation with the theme of killing in the popular forms of amusement, exploitation of the competitive spirit in the struggle for material advantage, the surfeiting of children with unearned ease and luxury—these and other factors would seem to be contributing to a prevailing social disruption that results in a cheapening of life.

Many of us have lived through two world wars; none of us can escape the lingering effects of both of them. We tend to forget that these wars took away what might have been the finest elements of today's citizenry.

A fatalistic but embittering acquiescence in loss and deprivation became a common attitude. Those who fought these wars and returned, and those who stayed at home, were exposed for a long time to the reversal of humanitarian principles in the glorification of killing and destruction.

In the wars and their aftermath ethical and moral standards were relaxed, homes were blighted, family life disorganized and much of the sweetness and salubrity of the old way of living was swept away. Those calamities and their long-lasting reverberations have profoundly affected people everywhere.

Between world wars I and II the social structure of law and order crumbled ominously. Prohibition made the flouting of the law a veritable parlor game and spawned an era of rackets, racketeering, hoodlum murders and vice corruption. Further, the law was weak, lawless and unenforced.

Archy came to be associated with easy affluence and even political power. In the same era a hysteria of hedonism, making the pursuit of shallow pleasure an end in itself, led to the possession of many young people. With the return of cafes, taverns and cocktail bars, alcohol further established itself as an open source of enjoyment and a solvent of cares and anxieties. The motor car put pleasure in streets and workaday duties became, for many, more dreary intervals in a carnival of indulgence.

After World War II the supposed rainbow of peace proved to be only a mirage of uneasy truce. The threat of another devastating, wasting conflict returned to glower with even greater menace.

In the redivulsion of the world into armed camps, the near-miracle of nuclear fission, so promising in its potentials, presents its frightening side of lurking doom. The "H-bomb" breathes an ominous, missile-cast specter in the feast.

Living in an era of general disturbance and insecurity, no community, no person can be sure of immunity from the devastating cross of his peaceful way of life. With the conception of sudden death all around us, with genocide a recollected fact and the destruction of the very world a possibility, the significance of one person's death shrinks to small proportions in the collective mind.

The growing acceptance of a morbid outlook on life cannot fail to reduce the power of those standards of integrity by which we have traditionally lived.

As all symbols of authority become less respected, can we wonder that reverence for the law should spread among those poorly endowed with the fibers of integrity?

We know that careers of crime often begin with minor peccadilloes that increase in seriousness and damage with each new offense. We know, too, that many murderers had been subject, before their crime, to little-known episodes of annoyance and rage that actually were cumulative precursors of the killing in a piecemeal way. And all of us have had to resist a general tendency to become cynical about the law and its enforcement—that is, about obedience to basic authority.

FOR EXAMPLE, the ever-growing importance of income tax in the national economy makes everyone subject to imprisonment just as severe as for a violent crime, for dishonesty in reporting income and paying the levy upon it. Yet persons in a position to know believe that a very high proportion of taxpayers cheat in their favor year after year.

And everyone has heard the self-justifying comment on this: If the big companies can hire lawyers to find tax loopholes for them, why can't the little fellow look for some of his own? Law observance tends to be something that one demands of the other fellow, not of oneself.

Similarly, an incalculable proportion of the people honor traffic laws more often in the breach than in the observance. For many it is a standing habit to jump stop lights and exceed speed limits when they think they can get away with it. Even minor parking violations make most of us unwitting criminals, many defiant scofflaws.

Thus the distinction between the so-called criminal class and the rest of us is steadily being diluted, and the collective burden of guilt—a subtle acceptance of the role of aggressor—is gradually wearing down the power of public conscience.

Incidentally, the man in the street casually accepts the fact that more than three times as many victims are killed by motor vehicles than by the more traditional instruments of death. Thus the commonness of accidental homicide, and a casual tolerance of the close approach to willful killing, helps to reduce further the opprobrium attached to outright murder. The snuffing out of life is a familiar incident in daily experience, regarded as inevitable.

When all these forces of violence, intimidation, defiance of authority, callousness toward

tragedy, egotism and competitive opportunism are combined in the legacy we prepare for our children and in greater volume for the yet unborn, need we wonder that there is never a shortage of crime news and that each crime seems more atrocious than the one before?

What clearer demonstration of the genetics of horror could there be than the execrable spectacle of a child under the age of 10 ruthlessly killing one or both of his parents?

THE SOCIAL FACTORS contributing to violent crime must include a long catalogue of sins of omission in our ostensible concern over juvenile delinquency. We should not forget that adult delinquency sets the prevailing pattern.

The mushroom growth of suburbs produces almost as many social problems as it solves. Urban blight multiplies slum areas where no one cares enough about what happens to the children growing up in them. Waves of migration carry families from place to place with little regard for repatriating and nourishing the roots torn from their natural soil.

Television, the movies and trash literature are invoked with the baby-sitter as convenient means of relieving parents of the burden of enlightening and guiding their children. This and other unpleasant duties and hard facts are pushed aside in a common mania for dodging ungenial effort or self-sacrifice.

If this review of the social horizon seems unduly dark and pessimistic, let it be taken as an objective picture of observable symptoms.

In the maintenance of personal physical health, the discovery of serious infections and disorders is not pleasant, but it is an essential step toward remedy and the restoration and maintenance of health. The social system that dominates and determines the quality of our individual lives needs to be diagnosed, too. And in that process of analysis it is possible to observe trends in the transformation of civilization and culture that inevitably activate destructive violence.

TOMORROW: The underlying forces that lead to murder.



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