



**CONTEMPLATING CONNECTICUT:
MOVING BEYOND NARROW NOTIONS OF WHAT IS NEEDED**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 12-27-12, p.A-6

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The savage and senseless massacre of 26 people, 20 children and 6 adults, at an elementary school in Connecticut has once again forced the country to face a random rage and murderous rampage which allows no exemption for innocence of age, non-involvement or accidental presence. Indeed, it extends no respect to person or place, striking with cold-blooded calculation at movies, malls, religious sanctuaries and schools, and in big cities, small towns, so-called nice neighborhoods and mean streets, offering security and peace of mind to no one. But no matter how often it happens, it is a shocking and shattering experience, and a reminder of the continuing and problematic presence of violence as both an inadequately discussed legacy and continuing life-experience in this country and in its conception of overwhelming armed power as a personal and national existential need.

Perhaps, the tragedy is still too recent and the grief still too great for us, in our search for answers, to focus on anything except controlling access to the instruments of death and evil used in this and prior massacres of similar savagery and senselessness. But eventually, it would be good to go beyond the exclusive focus on gun control and reflect on the complex context in which there is a worshipful attitude toward guns and weapons of various kinds by a majority of Americans and an associated psychology of dominance. We can blame this deep attachment on the NRA, its lobbyists and weak-willed and wobbly-kneed legislators, but polls consistently show Americans unwilling to give up key ground on the possession and use of guns. Thus, in the end, after appropriate mourning and memori-

als—wild west, gun fighter, stand your ground and vigilante conversations and conduct reemerge.

Moreover, the tendency is to isolate the issue and see it as another case of a deranged killer, and search for signs of personal psychosis rather than social disorder. For we cannot easily come to terms with socially-rooted conditions in which the gun is not simply the instrument of choice for mass murderers in solving problems and expressing lethal rage, but is also seen as vital to the American way of life, and prized as the ultimate protection against the ever-present adversary and enemy.

But if we are honest with ourselves and each other, we know that the problem is not just the gun or a lone killer gone wild, but also the social context in which these boys and men, overwhelmingly White, emerge to kill their mothers, fathers and other family members, as well as children, neighbors and unknown persons. These are sons and brothers who come into being in a culture of dominance in which things and lives are taken as a matter of course for the White powerful at home and abroad. Those vulnerable by race, class, sex and other disadvantages and disabilities, are subject to violence of various kinds on a regular basis, but it is not considered similarly noteworthy, even though they are often children, also innocent and accidentally present.

So, no matter what madness we attribute to these troubled killers, there is also something to say about the lessons they learn from society itself about dominance and killing without conscience or concern for others and how these lessons and values are embraced, even by some members of the oppressed.

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Surely, there are lessons learned from the news, movies, TV, casual conversations and even video games about dominance-killing, war, official assassinations, justified torture, drone kills and collateral human damage, indiscriminate bombing, a law unto ourselves, might as right, kill counts, and blood rituals of celebration after kills of various kinds and by various self-justifying names like justice done, pre-emptive defense, anti-terrorism, and victory over a long-list of racial, religious and political enemies.

If we compare the prevalence of this war, killing and dominance talk and practice to conversations and practice concerning peace, conflict resolution, mutual respect and human solidarity, it is clear where the center of gravity and commitment is. And that is why even after tragedies, great and small; we cannot really give up the worshipful relationship with weapons, not just guns, but all the other technological weapons of war that give the country a false and inflated sense of its invincibility, and an imagined right to dominate and impose its will on the world. Yes, we need gun control, but there are still the issues of how we relate to the gun and to each other, how we define friends and enemies, and view and treat the vulnerable here and abroad. And ultimately, it's about creating a culture that respects the sacredness of human life, the rights and dignity of the human person, and demonstrates an ethic of care and responsibility for each and all of our children and us.

Indeed, as President Obama stated, our concern for our children and by extension for

ourselves, must be inclusive. For “Whether it’s an elementary school in Newton, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin or a movie theatre in Aurora or a street corner in Chicago—these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods and these children are our children.” And if we are not to practice a selective morality, we must also mourn the deaths and work to protect the lives of children and people everywhere. And I think especially of the children and people of Congo and elsewhere in Africa, Haiti, Palestine, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, plagued by brutal and gruesome wars fostered from within and without and the victims of human trafficking and oppression everywhere.

In this end-of-the-year season when we talk, pray and sing of peace, let us wish for them as we do for each other, peace, security and lives of dignity, decency and well-being. Let us also try to move beyond narrow notions of what is needed to heal, repair and remake the good society and world we all want and deserve to live in. And let us put at its center, the work and practice of peace, a peace, as Dr. Martin Luther King says, that “it’s not simply the absence of tension, but also the presence of justice.” It is a giving of persons and peoples their due, their respect as possessors of dignity and divinity, with a right to the shared good and goods of the world. And it is this justice-grounded, dignity-affirming and world-encompassing peace that our ancestors defined and embraced in the *Husia*, saying “exceedingly good is the practice of peace and there is no blame in peace for those who practice it.”

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