

And Thy Right Hand Shall Teach Thee

By Michael Ventura

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Littleton won't go away, not because politicians and commentators are still yapping about it but because no one can forget it; and because Littleton has taught some deeply disturbed young people (all affluent, all white) how to make an impact on an America that wants nothing from them but their capacity to consume. In Michigan, California, and Texas, Littleton copycat plots have been foiled; in a suburban Atlanta high school that *U.S. News & World Report* rated as one of the top 13 in the state, a regular church-goer and Boy Scout wounded six and then broke down in tears, saying, "Oh my God, I'm so scared, I'm so scared." So are we all. Many are saying that guns aren't the problem; they blame MTV, Hollywood, and the lack of prayer and Bible study in our schools. Well, maybe some Bible study is in order. Turn to the Book of Deuteronomy, 21:18-21:

"If any of you has a disobedient and rebellious son, who does not respond to the instructions of his father or mother, you are first to discipline him. If he still does not heed you, you are to bring him to the elders at the gate of the city. You are to say to the elders of the city, 'This son of ours is disobedient and rebellious. He won't obey us. He is a glutton and a drunk.' The men of the city are then to stone him to death. In this way you will rid yourselves of this evil, and everybody else will hear about it and be afraid."

That passage is thought to be between 2,500 and 3,000 years old. So "disobedient and rebellious" sons were a serious problem centuries before Hollywood and hip-hop -- even in homogenous cities (none much bigger than Littleton) where every activity was structured around religion and where children were constantly with their families. The problem was consistent and important enough not only to be written into sacred law but to merit public execution. Which tells us something else: that no one knew what to do. A sentence of death, *requested and demanded by the parents themselves*, is a clear and strident signal that no one in that society could come up with a constructive solution for extreme disobedience and rebellion in the young. The problem was both too strong to overcome and too threatening to tolerate. In a time when children were crucial to the economic survival of the family, both the parents and the community were reduced to the epitome of defeat: killing their kids. And the stated purpose of this public execution was to scare other kids into behaving. No society sets such an example unless they feel it's needed, i.e., unless the children are restless ... very restless.

Which is to say: Twentieth Century America didn't invent teen angst or parental powerlessness. Nor did we invent substance abuse: Gluttony and drunkenness were the charges against Deuteronomy's children. In fact, the Bible, the book that many conservatives want taught in school as the word of God, is rife with children running amok and killing each other, sons warring against their fathers, brothers raping sisters, boys squandering inheritances, siblings throwing each other down wells, and scantily clad girls dancing wildly and then calling for the severed heads of prophets (at Mommy's instigation -- talk about family dysfunction!). The Bible also has its share of violently irrational parents: Noah's son entered his father's tent and saw him naked; the young man had no way of knowing his father would be naked, but Noah had him executed

nevertheless. (Fathers often don't like to be seen for who they really are.) Children are fair game in the Bible, especially if they're your enemy's. As Psalm 137 has it, "O daughter of Babylon ... happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (I continue to be amazed that Christians, Moslems, and Jews still regard this praise of atrocity as "holy writ.") The ultimate Biblical act of faith is supposed to be Abraham's willingness to murder his child Isaac -- although today "God told me to do it" is not accepted as a legal defense, even by most fundamentalists. My somewhat obvious point is that nowhere in the Bible does it say these people watched too much television.

During the siege of Jerusalem (66-70 A.D.), Jews who sneaked from the city to forage for food were captured and crucified by the Romans (i.e., Italians) at the rate of 500 a day. The Roman soldiers quickly became bored with crucifying them in the usual way, so they nailed their victims in all sorts of pretzel-like postures and then watched the crows peck out their living eyes. These soldiers hadn't OD'd on violent video games.

The Catholic torturers of the Inquisition ... the Europeans and Americans who, for hundreds of years, burned and hanged uppity women whom they called "witches" ... the upright Christians who let hundreds of thousands of Africans die in the stinking holds of slave ships, and defended slavery as an institution until their Confederate armies were beaten beyond hope ... the Anglo cavalrymen who massacred Native American women and children and often cut the genitals from the dead women and wore them as skull-caps as they rode off in victory ... the Nazis who ran the death-camps ... the young airmen who incinerated the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ... the rural boys who slaughtered nearly half the population of Cambodia ... the rural boys who, this year, cut off the hands and arms of hundreds of enemy tribespeople in Africa ... none of these people watched too many explosion-punctuated Hollywood movies, sang hip-hop, glommed shoot-'em-ups on TV, or played *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom*.

I am the last one to let the blood-drenched shallowness and venality of contemporary media off the hook; "Hollywood," to use that word as a catch-all for the whole sick stew, seduces the young into pissing away their precious time on insular fantasies instead of learning how to face life with courage, behave with integrity, and contribute what only their unique souls can give to us, to each other, and to the history we are making. Hollywood has become our abdication: the abdication of the elders, the abdication of our sacred duty that we share our souls with the young. For it as the Greek poet George Seferis has written: "the soul/If it is to know itself/It is into a soul/That it must look."

That is the fundamental demand of parenting, of education, and of culture; as a nation and as individuals most of us have failed it utterly. The young don't accept our excuses, and I thank God that they don't. I believe their only chance is in their rejection of our evasions.

Nevertheless, to blame Hollywood, with all its ramifications, for the violence in our young and throughout our society, is to ignore the record of human history. Which is the record of the human psyche. Which is who and what we are. We have not needed the media to instruct us in atrocity. We seem to have been born with that gruesome capacity. As it says in Psalm 45: "And thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things."

Not your movies, not your *Doom*, not your hip-hop, not your porn, but your right hand.

We are violent creatures subject to spasms of intense irrationality -- and we always have been. How do we solve the problem? It's the wrong question. The human

psyche is not a problem to be solved but a paradox to be lived. The paradox is how much love and gentleness and compassion we violent creatures are capable of; and how much violence we loving creatures are capable of. For we are both, at the same time, every day and every hour of the day. The human task is to choose between those elements in oneself every day. The failure both of Hollywood and of the moralistic stance that "this is right and this is wrong," is that they make the choice look easy, and it is never is.

The New York Times' statistics quoted here several weeks ago are worth repeating: "In 1996, handguns were used to murder 2 people in New Zealand, 15 in Japan, 30 in Great Britain, 106 in Canada, 213 in Germany, and 9,390 in the United States." As Hollywood director Rob Reiner said to *Times* columnist Maureen Dowd: "Every country gets our movies, but they don't kill anybody afterward." This fact cannot be overemphasized. The difference between those other countries and the United States is not the movies, nor is it consumerism -- they watch what we watch, they are as venal as we, and their histories prove they are equally prone to atrocity; the difference is that, to quote the commonly accepted stats, our population of 260 million owns roughly 300 million guns. We are an armed camp. It is difficult to obtain a handgun in any other civilized nation on earth, but our children seem able to procure them for the asking.

When an American right hand seeks to teach a terrible thing, it can reach for a gun.

That's the difference, and that's the only difference.

It is cowardly not to admit it. More cowardly still not to do something about it.

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