

PAYMENT IN BLOOD

By Michael Ventura

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In one afternoon at a suburban high school in Colorado, more Americans were killed than during one month of war in Yugoslavia. The same was true of the Gulf War: Many more American children died of gunfire during those weeks than did our soldiers in combat. These days it is safer to be an American soldier in a war zone than an American child in a high school. What fact could shame us more? Yet every voice of government and the media joins in a shrill chorus constantly repeating that we are the greatest nation in history. Would we need to boast so often, every day, so many times a day, if we really believed it?

The bodies of the children in Colorado were still warm -- literally -- when various gun advocates went before the cameras to say such an event need not and should not mean that our gun laws must be changed. Several suggested that the massacre wouldn't have happened if teachers and guards had been armed. Their solution is *more* guns! But we have failed utterly as a civilization if for the first time in history schoolteachers need to pack weapons. And if we demonstrate such fear of our children, then our children have no choice but to fear themselves and to fear us, to fear and fear and fear, until fear eats away every value that education is supposed to stand for.

In fact, there was at least one armed guard at that suburban high school; he exchanged a couple of shots and then retreated to wait for reinforcements; the SWAT teams arrived while the massacre was still going on, reports now say, and they conferred for over an hour before going in. At least one person who might have been saved bled to death during their conference. So much for men with guns.

Our American infatuation with guns is our admission of cowardice; because if you need a gun to feel secure you are really saying that you feel no inner strength with which to confront a stranger. One set of numbers says it all, as reported in *The New York Times*: "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." There is no conceivable argument against those numbers. The other countries have strict laws about handguns; we don't. Let's see, we lost roughly 50,000 soldiers during 10 years of war in Vietnam; so in 1996 Americans at "peace" suffered, from handguns alone, roughly 18% of the casualties of 10 years of war. What conclusion can be drawn but that we are at war with ourselves? That we have driven ourselves so crazy that no enemy is as dangerous as our neighbor -- and our neighbor's children?

How does one stop this domestic war? With whom does one negotiate? What are the terms of a cease-fire, much less of peace? As for disarmament: The so-called "gun lobby" is financed by arms manufacturers and by men too frightened to feel strong without a weapon nearby, and we endure a political system in which legislators can be bought with "donations"; guns are in massive supply on our streets and in our homes because greed and fear are built into our system of governance. The result: The only countries with yearly casualty rates that approach or exceed ours are Third World countries in states of civil war. How can we justify ourselves? How can we call ourselves "great"? How can we see American civilization as anything but demented and out of

control when compared to any place but a Third World country ravaged by poverty and internecine strife?

The President spouts platitudes, the high school principals sputter helplessly, the parents walk in dazed horror, the gun lobby is stern and shrill -- and commentators indulge in hours of blab, saying nothing because that is precisely what they're paid for, so that viewers will be numbed by a constant spew of televised ineffectuality. After all, if the highly paid thinkers on the tube are ineffectual, how can we blame ourselves for our own helplessness? And all of this is done to mask the truth that we, as a culture, cannot face, a truth articulated by James Baldwin years ago:

"We, the elders, are the only models children have. What we see in the children is what they have seen in us."

What the children see is not hard to figure out. By and large, they see this:

People who say one thing, but do another. People who profess beliefs that they do not, in any way, live by. People living a lie. For instance: in a country that overwhelmingly and stridently calls itself "Christian," what could be more contradictory, more self-defeating, more of a lie, than a Christian with a gun? The thing children hate more than anything is being lied to, being faked. And our children are lied to every day, everywhere they look, by almost every television show and advertisement -- and they know it. They're lied to by adults who demand that their kids live by ideals while preparing these same kids, in countless ways, to live only by money. And what our kids hate and fear most is that their "education" consists largely of lessons in how to buy into the biggest lie of all: the lie that if only you have enough money you'll be alright. Some kids can't bear being lied to on such a massive scale. And some, a very few, do awful things. At which the rest of us pretend to be shocked. But we're not really shocked. We're revealed. We sell these children the means to insulate and corrupt themselves, and we market the means by which they can kill themselves and each other, and then we blame the kids for our terror when a few are driven mad by this virulent mixture of our lies and of what we've enticed our children to buy.

Several weeks ago I quoted a 15-year-old student, Morgan Whirlledge in another context, but his writing is well worth quoting again, because I've found no more cogent commentary or explanation for what those murderous boys did in Colorado, and why they did it:

"What's in? Why? The image, the look, the personality, the surface. It's in you, whether subconsciously or consciously, it's there. I think everyone knows and deals with this every day, minute, second of their lives." Morgan goes on to speak of children assaulted by television, media, technology, abuse, ignorance, disrespect, and lies, and then he writes: "And so the kid sits, silent, in a mess of artificially inseminated thought. A shattered life around him, as easy to break as a mirror. He grows and eventually sees himself. A reflection. He is holding a sledgehammer, given him by his world. It is for mending the shattered pieces of fragile glass."

In Colorado, the "sledgehammer" those boys picked up was a gun -- many guns and bombs. They were not going to be able to mend anything. They had been given no hope of escape but to join a world they saw no possibility of joining. So, laughing as they killed, they murdered those whom they could neither emulate nor befriend. Were they responsible? Of course. Were they what we made them? Of course. It is too simplistic to say it is either one way or the other; it is, most awfully, both. Their parents, their teachers, and their society, were not strong enough to give those boys the strength to stand either with or against the collective lie that is America. Their morality dissolved. They chose to

join the ranks of the unspeakable. They made us feel their horror by enacting their horror. By becoming their horror. What could be a more terrible fate for a child? The others at least died innocently. That is horrible too, but not as horrible as dying stained with the greatest and most heartless sin there is.

What can we do? That's what everybody is asking, but nobody wants to face the answer -- especially because the answer is fragile and uncertain and difficult. Still it is the only answer there is:

Stop living your lie.

Live in your truth, that your children may live in theirs. Your children can't respect your truth all the way unless you're willing to live it.

The people you have to lie to, own you. The things you have to lie about, own you. When your children see you owned, they can't help but feel owned by what owns you. When your children see you owned then they are not your children anymore, they are the children of what owns you. If money owns you, they are the children of money. If your need for pretense and illusion owns you, they are the children of pretense and illusion. If your fear of loneliness owns you, they are children of the fear of loneliness. If your fear of the truth owns you, they are children of the fear of truth.

I say this in grief, as a sinner and a liar and a failure -- my truth, like yours, is always more than I can bear. But there are two kinds of failures: the failure of honest effort, and the failure of avoidance and denial. In the failure that always accompanies honest effort, there are lessons and courage and dignity. In the failures of avoidance and denial, there is only more failure. When we choose, we are also choosing for our children. It is they who must pay for every one of our evasions. And now, in America, the payment is often in blood.

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