

Rediscovering Life in the Aftermath of Violence by *Brian Griffin*

One Sunday morning during a worship service, a man walked into my church with a sawed-off shotgun and opened fire on the congregation during a youth-led worship service.

It happened during the opening scene of the play *Annie, Jr.* The gunman was tackled by a man dressed as Daddy Warbucks.

It was a bloody scene.

A hate crime.

An atrocity.

You can come up with lots of ways to describe this. You can name various levels on which this atrocity exists. You can make a list of adjectives that describe and illuminate it. That might be a good way to let everyone know how bad it was.

But I suspect not. My hunch, after having lived through this atrocity, is that any list of words I create would only go so far. We could expand the power of the words with analogies and metaphors. That might help. But it dawns on me that this atrocity was, in addition to much else, a literary atrocity, too. It was a failure of language, a failure of simple human communication – that much seems obvious. But for those of us who witnessed this massacre unfold on the pews of our church, spattering with blood the hymnals and texts we hold dear and cutting from beneath our feet for one brief moment the very notion of sanctuary, it was an atrocity that seemed to threaten a shared heritage, a heritage bound up in words, the literary legacy of spiritual search. At the end of that day I sat finally in my office in the Religious Education wing of the church, and gestured at a

wall of books and curricula. “All this,” I said to a friend, “is meaningless now.” For this reason, among others, I knew almost instantly I would write about it. Call it a sickness of my generation, the compulsion to write about everything that happens to us. Call it a need. It just is.

But in my case it came from a place of despair. Because I really meant it. All those curricula, all those books – it really did seem meaningless to me then, in that moment. I can’t explain it, but in my nest of books I felt not solace but despair, and a strange sense of need.

Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* wrote of a similar need. He witnessed the fire-bombing of the city of Dresden in the Second World War and spent years struggling with a compulsion to write about it. He wrote “thousands” of pages that he threw away, he tells us. Or more accurately, that’s what we are told by the narrator of the novel, who, it turns out, is a novelist, too, much like Kurt Vonnegut himself. One day the narrator presented a manuscript to his publisher, Sam and said...

It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre. Things like “*Poo-tee-weet?*”

I thought of those words late that Sunday night after finally leaving the scene of the murders at my church. I had a volume of Emily Dickinson’s poetry in my car, so I brought it into a bar and drank a beer and felt the first wave of numbness come over me, the first instance of feeling that I could never communicate what had happened – after all, the facts were too simple to match the horror, the surrealism too disrespectful to the dead,

the need to write too self-involved to be worthy of the memories that everyone shared. The whole thing felt like a wall. It felt like a wad of horror wrapped in a blanket of numbness behind an impenetrable wall.

But in spite of that, three or four days after the shooting I wrote an essay for a magazine. Here is a part of that essay.

“When the first shot came the children had just begun their play and I was in the main hallway, maybe about thirty feet away, walking away from the sanctuary on my way to do a routine check of the nursery and toddler room. The shot was impossibly loud, and I turned back toward the sanctuary. Right then I saw a sight that I have decided not to describe for you. I remember thinking of the photograph from Time Magazine, the one of the little girl fleeing her burning village in Vietnam, her clothes burned from her body. There were more gunshots and children running, and suddenly I found myself sending children to the Presbyterian church up the hill. I ran to the nursery and sent them up the hill, too, to find sanctuary in that place. I thought of the Battle of Fort Sanders during the Civil War, fought on the very ground the children were on as they ran up the hill. I thought of soldiers on horseback, cannon fire, sweaty yelling men, and again I entered the sanctuary, where I saw things that I wish I had not seen. But I know now that what I “saw” was not seen in the normal sense of seeing, but was instead sucked in, swallowed, absorbed like a gas. I simply pulled everything inside myself the way cameras gather light. I gathered images of the murderer and his work, and I stored those images away in my mind, in my hippocampus, they tell me. I gathered Daddy Warbucks. Little Orphan Annie. Men struggling on the floor. Shotgun shells scattered across pews. And much more. To this day those images are vivid but jumbled, disjointed

and cut off from time. I felt as though I were in the sky, above it all, looking down on everything. Then somehow I was outside and everyone was outside and mothers were outside and they were calling for their children, running for their children, running the wrong way, and I suddenly felt the entire thing descend on me. Each mother calling was calling for me. Each person crying was crying to me. My mouth turned to sand. I couldn't speak, so I ran to the Presbyterian Church, where I had sent the children, and there I saw men in suits standing in a cordon. "Who are you?" one of them said. He was a big man. They all gathered around me and stared, and I knew instantly they were protecting the children. They were saints. I stepped to the big man and said, "I don't know, but I think I'm in charge." It came out as a whisper. "The children," I said. "Where are the children?" "We have them," he said. "Don't worry, they're safe." I was trembling, nauseated. "Okay, then," I said. "I'm gonna send their parents." So I ran back to my church and saw everyone on the lawn. The air was very hot. I tried to call out but my mouth wouldn't work. I thought of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus speaking to all those people. He must have yelled the Beatitudes. He had to, no way around it: Jesus on a hillside yelling about peacemakers. Yelling about the blessed. *Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you.* Suddenly I remembered my Sunday School teacher at Middle Valley Baptist Church in 1966, Nelka Chandler. She thought Communists would attack us, steal our Bibles, but they never did. I can remember the Beatitudes because Nelka Chandler made us memorize them. If children memorized the Beatitudes, she said, the Communists couldn't take them from us. They would live in every child. And then came a miracle. Standing in oppressive heat on the lawn of TVUUC I felt my mouth suddenly fill with water. I held my arms in the air and yelled for everyone to stop, to look

at me. I told them where the children were, and while parents ran up the hill I had everyone form a huge circle. We had a moment of silence, and then I yelled out a prayer. I have no idea what I said. Inside the paramedics were working and the police were searching the building and I was not even remotely Jesus. I was not even remotely blessed. There were cicadas in the trees. Did I say another prayer? Something about Buddha? Everyone held hands, everyone pulled out of their fear and pulled together, and suddenly in that moment those sweet, innocent people became Jesus and Buddha and Mohammed and every other healer that ever lived. They were divine, blessed, loving, whether they knew it or not. The light of all that we call God was in their hands, human hands, hands that held the hands of others, right then, right there. It was a holy moment, in spite of it all.

Well, that was an essay. I know now that while I sat on that barstool feeling numb and drained and wasted and tired, inside me that essay was taking hold. I know now that *this* essay and much else, including the book of poetry I'm about to publish, was present in that moment in ways I could not articulate. But as I sat on that barstool I felt a sinking feeling, something akin to the feeling you get as a child when your mother picks you up at school to take you to the dentist. Butterflies. I felt butterflies. A feeling of dread. A feeling that something unpleasant is about to happen.

But it was all behind me now, right?

It was over. Right?

Well, right. If time is nothing but chronology, it was over. But the feeling in my gut told me something else. As I sat on that barstool at the end of the worst day of my life I felt a strange *apprehension*, a feeling that what had just happened is still about to happen, is still poised teetering on the edge of a cliff. That feeling was accompanied, inexplicably, paradoxically, by a feeling of profound numbness. There's much I can say about this, and much that I will say, but I'll skip ahead to something that took me a long time to understand. It's simple -- in trauma, time stops. Time and chronology split from one another. As trauma unfolds, time as we know it goes away and is replaced by a new kind of time. There are neurological reasons for this, I'm told. It's natural. The problem comes when, for some of us, time doesn't click back into place again well enough to hold. We flash back. It's called PTSD.

That's the dilemma of Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut's character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* – as Vonnegut puts it, Billy Pilgrim is *unstuck in time*.

One minute he's in an optometrist's office in Ilium, New York, in the 1960's, and the next minute he's back in a P.O.W. camp in Europe in 1944. Unstuck in time.

You know, I get that.

There are plenty of guys like Billy Pilgrim living on the streets of my city, war veterans mostly, still traveling back to a moment of long ago. I met my share of them in my childhood, too, Vietnam veterans mostly, living in the special spaces they had carved for themselves with the help of family or friends who gave them space, places they can be unstuck in time with a minimum of dire consequences.

William Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust* is a paean to time, death and guilt. Guilt, especially. Everything centers around a midnight lynching of a black man and a

boy's efforts to help him. The boy assumes this lynching will happen at midnight not because he has evidence that a mob has gathered – it hasn't – but because that's what the burden of the past tells him will happen. His gut tells him so. He just feels it, but he feels it with certainty. The horror that hasn't happened yet exists already because the horror has happened before. Over and over again.

In a way, he has butterflies.

Existential butterflies.

Time out of time. A culture unstuck in time.

“Outside the quiet lamplit room,” Faulkner wrote, “the vast millrace of time roared not toward midnight but dragging midnight with it, not to hurl midnight into wreckage but to hurl the wreckage of midnight down upon them in one poised skyblotting yawn.”

Writing amid the violence and uncertainty of what we now can call the “watershed year” of the Civil Rights movement in 1963, Faulkner saw that the knot of atrocity and guilt in the Southerner had become a blinding drowsy numbness, quite possibly the worst outcome of all. The Southerner's true sin lay in his ability to acknowledge the existence, even the pervasiveness, of injustice and still be comfortable with it – faced with horror, Faulkner's Southerner yawns.

Compare that with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's book about the atrocities of Dresden. The book about Dresden “begins like this:”

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has become unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet?

And in between that beginning and that end, Pilgrim and Vonnegut embark on the kind of examination Faulkner would urge on his fellow Southerners, an examination I urge, now, upon myself and upon our entire country – the look back, at all costs.

The reckoning.

The coming to terms with the jumbled, inchoate pastiche of time we call “the past.” It’s an examination I conduct while still “unstuck in time” myself, reeling to this day from the unending sound of those gunshots in that sanctuary, that nauseating smell of gunpowder, my dying friend, that blood on the pews and on my Sunday shoes.

The TVUUC gunman thought of himself as a latter-day Confederate soldier. That’s what his neighbors told the reporters.

So this is a Southern story, yet again.

The South has been declared dead many times, but damn, there it is. In Charleston. In Charlottesville. On and on and on. And yes, a bit of the South was set loose in New Zealand, too. An angry, self-righteous guy with a gun is now a major American export. The mainstreaming of hate has become ordinary in both the media and politics. And increasingly, it knows no borders.

“You do not have to be good,” wrote the poet Mary Oliver. “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

The TVUUC gunman turned away from what his body might have loved and let his mind be corrupted by hate.

Clearly he felt that he would be admired for his actions, but like the Southerners Faulkner wrote about in *Intruder in the Dust*, he also hoped everyone would yawn at the

deaths he caused. He was a Confederate soldier from a mythical past, striking out on a valiant mission, hoping for glory – and, simultaneously, a giant yawn.

He opened fire because he hates liberals. They are vermin. They are pests, like termites. Those are his words. He hates Unitarians for accepting gays and lesbians. He hates Unitarians for supporting blacks during the Civil Rights movement. His chief sources of inspiration? Bill O'Reilly, Michael Savage, Sean Hannity. That's what he told police. He imagined he was making a political statement.

But here's what I've discovered about political violence. No matter how strident the politics, no matter how spiteful the rhetoric, no matter how vehemently hatred is directed at broad groups of people – people of color, people of faith, people of different sexual orientations -- in the end, in spite of the rhetoric and the tweets and the manifestos, mass shootings are *not* directed at those groups. Not really.

Why?

Because people are not ideas. People are not constructs. People are not abstractions.

Mass shootings are directed at human beings. Innocent, individual human beings.

I experienced this first hand. So have many others. We live in a world in which men revel in anger and political hatred, then lash out blindly with guns. But the reality of these shootings is not ideology or rhetoric. The reality of political violence is not even political.

The TVUUC gunman thought he was sending a message -- but there no message.

There was only death.

A bullet does not strike an ethnicity or an ideology or a faith or an identity. A bullet strikes the soft animal of who we are.

The body. The bone. The flesh.

Later we analyze it; we pick it apart and talk endlessly about it; but *in the moment*, in the *here and now* of gun violence, it has no explanation, no rationale. It is senseless. It has no meaning other than what it is – an attack by gun on the very idea of human dignity.

So when the gunman entered our sanctuary and opened fire, he failed completely. The bullets he fired did not hit “godless liberals who deserved to die,” did not hit subhuman vermin, did not hit people who should be exterminated like termites, because such things did not exist in that building or anywhere else.

No, the bullets hit innocent individuals, human beings full of hopes and dreams and love.

It was an act that was simultaneously personal and impersonal, human and inhuman. The gunman erased from his sight, during those few seconds, the humanity that was right in front of his eyes.

It was an act of pure, unadulterated evil.

And here’s the thing. Those bullets made it evil.

Those bullets, those shotgun shells.

They erased any hope of shared humanity in that moment, any hope of dialogue, any hope of reconciliation, reducing not the *victims* to something less than human, as he liked to imagine, but reducing the *gunman himself* to something less than human,

something that lacks what makes a person a person – the shared humanity that defines us all.

So in the act of tackling him and disarming him, those Unitarian peaceniks did something remarkable. They saved the congregation from further bloodshed, true. And beyond that, in the act of disarming gunman, they restored his humanity.

Was it broken? Yes it was. Was it hateful? Yes it was.

But once he was disarmed, he became once again a person. Once he was disarmed, evil left the building. Once he was disarmed, the sanctuary was again a sanctuary.

But bullets can strike the spirit, too. It can strike even the hope that sustains us. When I walked dazed through the chaos of the shooting, I took into my mind images, sounds, smells that will not leave. And I lost my ability to know myself, to root myself. The body remembers. The *body* remembers. It's called PTSD, and many walk wounded even now.

For me, part of that wound was, for some time, a struggle with *despair*, the emptiness I felt when I realized the books in my office suddenly seemed “meaningless” in the aftermath of the shooting.

And as I worked for two more years in my position as RE director, working with the broken parts and the beautiful resilience of who we were as a congregation, I was also hoping something would fill that void inside myself, as though it would just magically happen.

But now I know it doesn't work that way.

The work of helping the broken "other" starts with helping the broken self.

Realizing that truth was my first step toward recovery.

The second step was understanding the concept of despair.

The poet David Whyte says it well. "Despair," he wrote, "takes us in when we have nowhere else to go, when we feel the heart cannot break anymore, when our world or our loved ones disappear, when our God disappoints...Despair is a haven with its own temporary form of beauty; of self-compassion; it is the invitation we accept when we want to remove ourselves from hurt." It is "a necessary and seasonal state of repair, a temporary healing absence, an internal physiological and psychological winter when our previous forms of participation in the world take a rest...Despair is, strangely, the last bastion of hope."

Finally, the biggest thing that helped me endure my season of despair was witnessing a child who was traumatized by the shooting *stepping beyond it*. She broke out of her own despair by standing up against gun violence, loudly and publicly and effectively, in the aftermath of the Parkland High School shootings. She led demonstrations and marches in Knoxville against gun violence that made local and national news. She organized with her friends and brought hundreds into the streets, hundreds of young people, and hundreds of old folks like me who needed to be kicked in the behind by a younger generation.

A little child shall lead them, says scripture. And this young woman, no longer a child, opened my eyes to the child I have hidden inside myself, begging to be free to hope again.

So here I am this morning. Speaking out, for the first time. Calling out to all of you for hope, thanks to her.

A young woman in Sweden named Greta Thurnberg, age 16, has recently been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for leading an international demonstration of high school students against global warming. When asked why she thinks the efforts of teens could successfully solve such a complex problem, a problem that may be hopeless, she said, “The one thing we need more than hope is action. Because once we start to act, hope is everywhere.”

Listen to those words.

Once we start to act, hope is everywhere.

I know a person who took action. The first shot at TVUUC went square into the chest of my friend, Greg McKendry. He stepped deliberately and directly into the line of fire in an effort to shield young children. And yes, he was successful. Not a single child was physically wounded, even though there were more than 100 children in the room.

And get this -- one of the children Greg shielded with his body became the young woman who led demonstrations against gun violence in the aftermath of Parkland, the young woman who brought me hope.

So yeah. Greta Thurnberg is right. “Once we start to act, hope is everywhere.” In fact, hope is unstuck in time.

That morning, Greg McKendry acted. And hope is everywhere.

With me, with us, here and now.

[read the poem about Greg as closing words]

At Greg's House, After

"...one can live without having survived" – Carolyn Forché

1.

There would have been an unmade bed, yesterday's shirt,
lingering odor of morning's rush:
coffee cup on counter's edge, crumbs of bacon, orange peel

and on the lawn a scattering of tools,
empty chairs, spears of grass,
squirrels crazed on scurry, busy

busy with acorns and pecans
mute in their brown skulls:

everything poised between knowing
and the speech that will never come.

There would have been wine in the cellar,
and on the table near the window
garlic, perhaps, and olive oil,
a bowl of tomatoes too red,
skin too tight
in this last slash
of summer's light,

his garden
loosed now,
lost.

2.

Left behind always:
some kind of garden
some kind of evidence

some fleeting
something saying

*someone was here
something now undone
was once done here*

To this he might say,
Look, you tie your shoe.

It comes untied.
You tie your shoe.

He'd say,
At the edge of oblivion

or grace
or God

(no matter)
we're busy.

There are things undone.
There are needs unmet.
There is work to do.

The world around us
is busy.

Stay busy.