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Night of Blood and Horror: Thoughts on the Trolley Square Shootings

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Soon after the collapse of the Teton Dam in 1976, President Spencer W. Kimball spoke at an extraordinary meeting in Rexburg, Idaho, close to the area of destruction and suffering. Beginning his message of compassion and consolation, the prophet proclaimed, “I know there are times when you would want to give up, or to weep, or to yield, but you have got to stand steady as an example to others.”¹ His words serve as a somber reminder of the stark truth that we live in a world of unpredictable death and violence, a world where tears and suffering are commonplace and where temporal safety cannot be assumed nor assured.

Early in the evening of February 12, 2007, a man walked into Trolley Square, a shopping mall in Salt Lake City, and began firing a shotgun at patrons, apparently at random. Within a few minutes, five innocent shoppers were killed and four others seriously wounded. Thanks to the quick and courageous efforts of law enforcement officers, including an off-duty policeman from Ogden, Utah, who was having an early Valentine’s Day dinner at the mall with his wife, the shooter was killed before harming other bystanders. He was identified as an eighteen-year-old Bosnian refugee who had lived in Salt Lake City for several years, having escaped the violence and bloodshed of his native country.

The whole affair, from first to last shot, lasted only six minutes, but the effects left the whole community shell-shocked and will reverberate throughout the years. Healing is a slow and uneven process at best. Still, we should not despair. From pain and sorrow can come patience, faith, humility, and enhanced understanding of the purposes of life and death.

The primary effect on survivors of a tragedy such as this is a sense of loss: the literal loss of a life on the part of family and friends of the victims, coupled with a perceived loss of safety, security, and control—for the victims and the community as a whole. What we have considered as the fundamental truths on which we all base our perceptions of reality are shaken, and we experience a decreased sense of peace, or as some have put it, a disruption in our internal homeostasis.

To help reclaim the sense of peace that we all desire in our daily lives, there are important lessons to be learned from this tragedy. These lessons apply to all of us, those directly affected and community members alike. Unless we learn to apply them wisely, the sheer horror of the event and others of similar ilk may crush us. But that need not be so. I believe the lessons to be learned include the following.

Our Perspective Changes the Meaning of the Experience

Even amid tears and sorrow, eternal principles prevail. It is so easy to forget when caught up in a maelstrom of pain and grief, of blood and suffering, that death is not the end of existence. Our lives are not bounded by the cradle on one end and the grave on the other. We are eternal beings for whom our “second estate” is but a way-stop on an eternal journey, schooling intended to bring us closer to God and help us become more like Him.

Were we mortals able to close the doors upon sorrow and distress—to banish forever suffering, disappointment, and injustice—we would, perhaps unwittingly, destroy the fundamental principle upon which a war was fought in heaven and upon which all human development rests. To force all to be righteous, to do away with wickedness, foolishness, or evil—by force if necessary—would destroy moral agency and annul the whole of the Father’s great plan of happiness. The truth is that, from an eternal perspective, the adversity which tries our souls and the times which call us to stumble alone through deep waters of sorrow, confused and uncomprehending, are essential to our eternal progression. As Elder Orson F. Whitney eloquently stated: “No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire.”²²

As we think of the innocent dead and wounded, their dreams and aspirations for tomorrow forever altered, how easy it would be to cry in our agony, “How could God do this to the innocent? Why didn’t He prevent it? Has He the power to do so?” Of course He has the power—He is omnipotent, possessing all power to save us from pain, to protect us, even to shield us from death if He will. But He will not. I believe that although He is not the cause, He permits tragedy to occur, knowing that suffering, even death itself, opens the doors to glorious opportunities while maintaining the vital principle of moral agency.

It is not that I—or anyone else either—know exactly why God does what He does. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). But with Nephi of old, I cling to one sure and certain truth: I do not know the meaning of all things, but “I know that he [God] loveth his children” (1 Nephi 11:17). Someday, when we are further along in our eternal journey, when we are wiser and better able to understand God and His ways, when we are blessed with an eternal perspective and not shackled by the myopia of mortality, I am confident we will know with perfect clarity that which we now see as “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). We can take comfort from that, even as we admit that we don’t always know why bad things happen to good people.

Provide Opportunities to Talk About What Happened

It is important for all of us to understand that venting intense emotions through tears or words is an important part of healing. No one who has witnessed the results of mass criminal violence is unaffected by it. Those who witness the violent death or serious injury of others or who suffer the murder of a loved one have a likelihood of intense and prolonged emotional, behavioral, and physical reactions causing high levels of distress. Though effects usually fade over time, periods of difficulty may occur intermittently for years to come. Though usually seen in less dramatic fashion, these effects extend outward like ripples in a dark pond, affecting the whole community of innocent and unsuspecting people.

Thus, if we are to heal as individuals and as a community, we must do all that we can to encourage people of all ages to talk frankly and honestly about their feelings and fears regarding what happened at Trolley Square. Parents especially must seize every opportunity, regardless of the time it takes, to listen carefully to their children. In doing so, they must listen not only to what is said about frightening and confusing events but also to the emotions behind what is said and to the worries and fears which, though perhaps unexpressed initially,

need to be verbalized and not repressed if healing is to occur. This is best done by talking, sharing, and comparing. It is a time for expressing love, affection, and gratitude for others. It is a time when families can draw closer together and when parents can admit that they too were frightened and confused and that there are no easy answers to events which seem so monstrously unfair and random.

C. S. Lewis's wise advice to parents of children struggling to understand a world that is often frightening and confusing bears repetition:

Those who say that children must not be frightened may mean two things. They may mean (1) that we must not do anything likely to give the child those haunting, disabling, pathological fears against which ordinary courage is helpless: in fact, phobias. His mind must, if possible, be kept clear of things he can't bear to think of. Or they may mean (2) that we must try to keep out of his mind the knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil. If they mean the first I agree with them: but not if they mean the second. The second would indeed be to give children a false impression and feed them on escapism in the bad sense. There is something ludicrous in the idea of so educating a generation which is born to the . . . atomic bomb. Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker.³

Though it is not only wise but necessary to talk about the frightening events which have left us confused and apprehensive, it is also unwise to suggest either that such terrible things could never happen to your family members or that what happened to others is of no real consequence because they were strangers to us. One of the greatest truths in all scripture is the reminder that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). What happened to strangers of course matters to all of us! They are our brothers and sisters, bound to us by the indissoluble ties of shared humanity and filial responsibility. We must—if we are ever to overcome the fears which separate us from others—weep and mourn together, share each other's burdens and sorrows, pray for each other, give and receive comfort as needed, and, in the process, realize more fully than ever before that we are all the children of God (see Mosiah 18:8–10).

It is important to note that there is a difference between calm discussion and candid admission of fears and anxieties on the one hand, and morbid, pathological pandering to fear and horror on the other. We must, if we are to help heal each other, cling to the first and resolutely reject the second. As C. S. Lewis wisely said, "Since it is so likely that [children] will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of

brave knights and heroic courage.” So parents and other adults should take care to make certain that the children for whom they are responsible learn of the multitude of heroes, both honored and unsung, in the tragic events of February 12, 2007. There are, of course, many: police officers, nurses, shoppers, shopkeepers—the list is too long to recount. They are the “brave knights” of whom Lewis spoke, who deserve to be honored by all of us.

Reestablish Family Patterns

Though there certainly “is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1), we must do all we can—after taking the time needed to mourn, weep, pray, listen deeply, and admit our fears—to then reestablish family patterns. After the collapse of the Teton Dam, President Kimball asked parents to “gather their children around them in family home evenings in which they can share their fears, their joys, and their experiences . . . and to plan together for the future.” Said he, “We cannot overstress the importance of reestablishing family patterns.”⁴ Part of the reestablishment of family routines is the need for wholesome recreation that restores and soothes troubled hearts and souls.

None of this should be considered an attempt to cut short the time needed to mourn, grieve, and counsel together. Far from it: we must not cut short the questioning and the grieving. We must not do an injustice to everyone involved by being too ready to run ahead with life as usual. But that being said, we help to instill hope and restore trust as we build upon the spiritual bedrock of prayer, blessings, family councils, and so on. I reiterate: even in tragedy, eternal principles prevail!

Avoid Blaming the Perpetrator or Anyone Else

Feelings of anger after an episode of violence, which by its very nature is frightening and confusing, are natural responses to the stress involved. But only in refusing to play the “blame game” can we ever find peace. It is not the responsibility or even the right of any of us to attempt to ascribe motives to the young man who was the Trolley Square gunman. I believe we will never really know in this life why he did what he did. He is dead and cannot tell us. He left no papers or journals. As Christians, we must pray for his soul and for his grieving, confused family, who will never in this world, I think, fully understand his motives.

It does no good to play pseudo-psychological games as to his motives. The horrors of blood and violence he had witnessed as a

youngster in Bosnia may or may not have been significantly instrumental in conditioning him to commit similar violence just before his death. We simply don't know, and it does little good to speculate.

Our task is both simple and profoundly difficult. Its essence is found in these words of the Almighty: "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (D&C 64:10). Only as we do so—as individuals and as a community—can we heal and make sense of a world which, without forgiveness, would be a grim and grisly place, a veritable jungle indeed.

An integral part of not assigning blame must be a resolute intention not to stereotype or caricature the perpetrator of this violence. He did not kill because he was a Muslim or because he was a Bosnian. To assume so is to embrace the natural man, who is an enemy of God (see Mosiah 3:19) and who demands blood for blood and an eye for an eye. Furthermore, insulting a great religion and a great people is calumny of the worse sort.

Join in Symbolic Acts of Love and Concern That Help Heal the Community

How gratifying and reassuring it is to note that the people of Utah, as well as many from far away, have come forward with widespread expressions of love and offerings of help. These have been offered both to the families of victims and that of the perpetrator. Community events, including widely publicized and well-attended funerals, have helped to define the love and concern felt by all. Friends and family have celebrated the lives of the deceased, and various funds have been set up by local banks in aid of victims and their families. All of these efforts are of great importance not only for what they do but also for what they symbolize—a caring community that lays aside its differences and pulls together in a crisis for the common good.

In summary, we are still reeling in shock and disbelief in the aftermath of the terrible violence in Trolley Square. As we struggle to heal from the grievous harm done, let us all remember that even in the midst of tears and sorrow, eternal principles prevail. Only by accepting an eternal perspective on life can we overcome grief, horror, and disbelief and finally find peace. Essential parts of the healing process include providing opportunities to talk frankly and honestly about what happened, listening carefully to others, acknowledging their fears and our own, reestablishing family routines of prayer and councils, and learning to forgive unconditionally and without exception. **RE**

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Notes

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1. Spencer W. Kimball, as quoted in David Mitchell, “Thousands of Saints Left Homeless by Idaho Flood,” *Ensign*, August 1976, 70.

2. Orson F. Whitney, as cited in Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 98.

3. C. S. Lewis, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” in C. S. Lewis, *On Stories, and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, 1983), 39.

4. Kimball, as quoted in Mitchell, “Thousands of Saints,” 70.