

The Canaries Are Dying

Two centuries ago, miners would carry a canary in a cage with them. If poisonous gases built up underground, the bird would go into convulsions and die long before the miners. If the canary died, the miners were at risk, and it was time to go back to the surface. The canaries are dying today, but no one is leaving the mine.

When I was growing up, there were kids who didn't fit in, who were mistreated by their classmates because they were "different." I was one of those kids; I lost track of the number of times I was beat up in elementary school and junior high. But I never even considered killing anyone. It wasn't impossible; I knew how to make poison gas out of common household chemicals, and the crowd of computer nerds that I hung with in high school built all sorts of explosive devices. I suppose that if I had really wanted to, I could probably have found a gun, somewhere. At no point, however, did it ever occur to me that the solution to being mistreated was murder.

Don't just read the headlines about this kid accused of murder in Santee, California. Read the rest of the news stories, and ask yourself if there isn't something a bit more wrong here than just a kid with a gun. Handguns weren't invented recently; they have been in American homes, in large numbers, for more than a century. The *Washington Post's* March 6th story reports that the alleged killer in middle-class Santee hung out at the skatepark, "Drugs were readily available to those who wanted them: marijuana, mushrooms, acid, speed." Santee is no different from where I live, except that those sort of drugs are available in middle school here. Something is *very* wrong.

The *Los Angeles Times* distributed a news story the same day that contained allegations that would have been shocking twenty years ago: "a break-up last week with his 12-year old girlfriend. There were allegations that Williams tried to entice the girl into having sex while she was intoxicated." Raising kids in Sonoma County, I don't even find such allegations surprising; that's actually pretty common behavior around here for kids that age. Something is *very* wrong.

A culture based on bullying, mocking, violence, degradation, and intoxication has taken over America. The entertainment business—the purveyors of "poison gas"—keep insisting that the problem isn't violent movies, violent video games, degrading television shows, divorced parents, parents too busy to supervise their kids, or songs (and presidents) that encourage teenaged boys to see girls only as objects of sexual gratification. No, they insist that the problem is guns; ignore the dead canaries filling up the bottom of the cage. But the guns have been around for a very long time in America—and yet these random mass murders by schoolkids have not. Something is *very* wrong.

There is another part of the problem that doesn't get very much attention, and that is the way in which news coverage of these events encourages copycats. In the days that followed the murders in Santee, there were dozens of threats, and arrests, and some of

them were clearly motivated by all the attention that this crime received.¹ This isn't particularly surprising; copycat crimes encouraged by news coverage were a problem when America was young. An early observer of our culture, Fisher Ames, who sat in Congress from 1789 to 1800, expressed his concerns about this very subject in the October, 1801 issue of *The Palladium*:

Some of the shocking articles in the papers raise simple, and very simple, wonder; some terror; and some horror and disgust. Now what instruction is there in these endless wonders? Who is the wiser or happier for reading the accounts of them? On the contrary, do they not shock tender minds, and addle shallow brains? They make a thousand old maids, and eight or ten thousand booby boys, afraid to go to bed alone. Worse than this happens; for some eccentric minds are turned to mischief by such accounts as they receive of troops of incendiaries burning our cities; the spirit of imitation is contagious; and boys are found unaccountably bent to do as men do...

Every horrid story in a newspaper produces a shock; but, after some time, this shock lessens. At length, such stories are so far from giving pain, that they rather raise curiosity, and we desire nothing so much as the particulars of terrible tragedies.²

Some years back, I wrote a paper on the role that news coverage of mass murder plays in encouraging copycat crime. *Time* and *Newsweek* gave grossly disproportionate coverage to mass murders committed with guns in the period 1984-1991, unquestionably causing at least one of the mass murders of the period, and perhaps encouraging some of the others. The *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* published my paper.³ I have been hoping for some time that journalists would start to put the public good above their economic interests.

Finally, in the last few incidents like this, a few reporters and columnists in the mainstream news media have begun to seriously discuss the copycat problem. Jay Mathews, a *Washington Post* columnist, wrote on March 13th about the Santee killings, "We gave the news unusual prominence, and that, I think, is part of the problem." Mathews described the courageous decision of Nigel Wade, the editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Three years ago when the school shootings took place in Springfield, Oregon, Wade decided to put the coverage inside the newspaper—not on the front page. The *Chicago Sun-Times* is apparently continuing this policy of keeping these shootings—horrible as they are, but actually relatively rare—inside the newspaper.⁴

Rob Morse's column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* also startled me. After quoting from a description of the average "classroom avenger" as psychologists now call such cases, Morse points out that he fit that profile when he was a kid. "As in all towns, there were dozens of us loners and kids who didn't fit into the suburban dream life of

¹ Matthew B. Stannard and Elizabeth Bell, "Student Threats Escalate Worries, Killings revive police concerns," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 10, 2001, A13, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/03/10/MNS189801.DTL>.

² Fisher Ames, W. B. Allen, ed., *The Works of Fisher Ames* (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1983), 14-15.

³ Clayton E. Cramer, "Ethical Problems of Mass Murder Coverage In The Mass Media," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 9:1 [Winter 1993-94], <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/JMME2.htm>.

⁴ Jay Mathews, "Does Notoriety Inspire Imitation?", *Washington Post*, March 13, 2001, <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A62929-2001Mar13.html>.

Barrington, R.I. Back in the early '60s we were armed loners, too. We all had .22-caliber rifles, but for some reason it never occurred to us to shoot someone with them. It just wasn't done then. So when I read about the plague of guns in young hands, I get a little skeptical about whether guns are the cause of school violence.”

Instead, Morse points to the way in which “Adults are the ones in love with the pornography of violence. Adults make money from violent movies, violent hip-hop music, violent video games and CNN.” Morse, when asked to go to Columbine High School, refused the assignment.⁵ That took courage; I wish more journalists had that much.

It would be nice to say, “Parents are just too busy to supervise their kids.” For some parents, that’s true. (Get less busy.) But quite a few parents simply don’t think about the consequences of soaking themselves—and their kids—in violent trash. I read a very depressing interview recently with Jamie Rouse. Rouse is serving a life sentence for murdering a teacher and a student at his high school in Lynnville, Tennessee in 1995. In that interview, Rouse describes the sort of “death metal” music he listened to during that time, and how he watched *Natural Born Killers* a month before the rampage with his father. “I found it very entertaining. It made killing seem cool. That’s the way I took it.... I used to think, ‘This ain’t affecting me, you’d have to be weak minded to let this stuff affect you,’ and the whole time it affected me—it helped shape the way I thought....”⁶

We have received our warning; dead canaries are littering the bottom of the cage. The entertainment industry is poisoning our kids, and far too many parents are either passive or active participants in that process.

Clayton E. Cramer is a software engineer in Northern California.

⁵ Rob Morse, “After the Violence, There is Only Us,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 9, 2001, A2, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/03/09/MN223766.DTL>.

⁶ Bob Waliszewski, “Confessions of a School Shooter,” *Plugged In*, March, 2001, 12.