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Teachable Moment in Tucson: Guns, Mental Illness and Masculinity

A consensus seems to have developed that some in media precipitously and inaccurately blamed violent rhetoric from the right for the shooting in Tucson on January 8. But whether or not they were misled in this instance by what turns out to be false reports about the shooter's political motivations, something positive did emerge from the media in the wake of this tragedy. Key figures in media promised to "look in the mirror" and examine their responsibility for contributing to a toxic political environment that could lead to violence.

This is a promise to which we should hold the media, regardless of how the event that initially catalyzed it turns out. There is a lot more that journalists and opinion-makers in the media could do to advance a discussion in our society about violence - political and otherwise.

Much of what needs to happen is an honest conversation about issues related to masculinity and violence. Many people have circled around this subject, especially in terms of the intensifying debate about guns. The Tucson massacre has revived debate (for the moment) about our country's gun laws, and the astounding power of the NRA to block commonsense regulations. Some people go beyond the power of the gun lobby and ask larger questions about our culture, such as *MSNBC's* Chris Matthews, who asks repeatedly: what's the obsession with guns? But few if any voices in mainstream media have discussed the connection between guns, violence, and American ideals of manhood.

Amazingly, this connection has not been part of the mainstream coverage of Tucson or any of the rampage killings in recent years. The trouble is you can't change a social phenomenon until you can at least identify and name it. Each time one of these horrific acts of violence occurs, commentators and editorial writers hone in on every relevant factor they can identify - mental illness, the availability of handguns, the vitriolic tone of talk radio and cable TV - and leave out what is arguably the most important factor: gender.

Why is gender such a critical factor in an incident like Tucson? In the Tucson rampage, like the Virginia Tech killings to which it has been compared, "expert" opinion and media commentary has coalesced around "mental illness" as the cause of the mayhem. But mental illness itself has critical

gendered dynamics. As the psychiatrist James Gilligan has written, the vast majority of homicidal violence is perpetrated by men who have severe disorders of personality or character, but who are not technically "insane." Thus it should be no surprise, Gilligan writes, that less than one percent of murderers in the U.S. are found "not guilty by reason of insanity." (Arizona law, unlike federal law, includes a possible finding of "guilty but insane.")

Most men who murder do not do so because they are mentally ill. It is also important to note that only a small fraction of the mentally ill (men and women) are violent. But regardless of their mental health diagnosis, many men who engage in homicidal violence do so as part of a strategy to respond to deep and often intolerable feelings of shame and dishonor.

It is impossible to separate those men's feelings and their chosen response to them from their societal context, which includes how we define manhood, how we socialize boys, and yes, how young men learn - how we as a culture teach them - that blowing people away with guns represents the ultimate assertion of manly resolve, competence, and reclaimed honor.

Many of us who work on issues of gender and violence experience the same frustration repeatedly. After each rampage, we have intense conversations among our colleagues and friends in academia, feminist organizations, batterer intervention programs and elsewhere. We talk about the gendered nature of these acts - how they almost always involve men as the shooters, very often white men -- and what that says about the special pressures and tensions in the lives and identities of men in our society and around the world at this particular juncture in history. And then we turn on the TV or open up the pages of the major newspapers and we're transported to a parallel universe, where *almost no one even mentions gender as a category worthy of attention.*

But there is an impassioned and sophisticated conversation about violence, gender politics and social change taking place outside of the media, where men and women who are unafraid of losing rating shares - or being called "male-bashers" for telling the truth - are talking about Tucson, guns, mental illness and white masculinity, and yes, talk radio bullies and Sarah Palin.

What follows is a sampling of the kinds of things talked about in these ongoing conversations, offered as a series of suggestions to those in mainstream media who are newly introspective about violence and their role in covering and not contributing to it:

* The national conversation about violence in our society - political or otherwise -- needs to be gendered. For example, it is not useful to say - as many have in the case of the Tucson killings -- that disturbed "people" and "individuals" with fragile psyches and perhaps mental illness might be susceptible to the influence of purveyors of hate. In discussions about violence, it is more accurate to use gendered words like "men" and "boys" whenever possible, as they comprise the vast majority of perpetrators of violent crime. It is not helpful to pretend that violence is a gender-neutral phenomenon, and it does not advance violence prevention efforts.

As James Gilligan points out in his book *Preventing Violence* (2001), "the highest rates of violent behavior occur among young males, from when they first attain adult size and strength during adolescence until they begin to accumulate some of the signs of status....around the beginning of middle age. That age group alone - fourteen to thirty-nine - commits more than 90 per cent of the murders, assaults and rapes in the world, and almost all of the military and political violence as well."

* According to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, and as reported in Bob Herbert's *New York Times* column on January 11, more than one million people in the U.S. have been killed with guns since 1968, when Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were killed. According to various researchers and law enforcement agencies, 85-90 per cent of those killed by guns are killed by men and boys. This is not a peripheral part of the story; it is the heart of the matter. What is going on with men in our society?

Most media conversations about gun violence only talk about gender in the relatively few cases where women are the perpetrators. The failure even to discuss the relationship between cultural ideas about manhood and the pandemic of gun violence in our society runs across the board

politically. Consider Michael Moore's Oscar-winning 2002 documentary, *Bowling For Columbine*. *Bowling* was a two-hour film about gun violence in America that did not once mention the single most important factor in gun violence: the gender of the perpetrators.

* In the hours and days after the January 8 shooting, when it became increasingly apparent that Jared Lee Loughner suffered from some form of serious mental illness, the national conversation turned to questions about the access of mentally ill "people" to guns, the reliability of background check for gun purchases, etc. This is understandable, but it also fits into a broader pattern in the wake of rampage killings. When the shooter is identified as mentally ill, much of the serious sociological or political dialogue shuts down. In this case the right has an obvious self-interest in depoliticizing the killings, attributing them to the crazed acts of a deranged lunatic, and accusing progressives of opportunistically using the tragedy as a stick with which to beat conservatives.

But the impulse to pathologize the shooter and dismiss efforts to understand his actions is widespread. These dismissals take many forms, such as when public officials decry the "senseless" killing, or in the cruder precincts of tabloid headlines, such as one in the *New York Daily News* on January 11 that read "Not a Trace of Humanity in Face of Smirking Psycho."

In *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (1996), James Gilligan cautions against this rush to dismiss deeper explanations for violence: "I am convinced that violent behavior, even at its most apparently senseless, incomprehensible, and psychotic," he writes, "is an understandable response to an identifiable, specifiable set of conditions; and that even when it seems motivated by 'rational' self-interest, it is the end product of a series of irrational, self-destructive, and unconscious motives that can be studied, identified, and understood." Gilligan's work - drawing on his twenty-five years of work with violent men in a state hospital for the criminally insane -- focuses on shame and humiliation in the lives of violent men, and how their personal experiences interact with cultural norms of masculinity.

A January 12 story in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Loughner had recently experienced a lot of rejection - in his search for a job, but also from women. His meandering postings on an online video game he played included his thoughts on rape. Among his statements: "Being alone for a very long time will ultimately lead you to rape." Was his murderous assault on Giffords linked to his feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and failure? Was his violent outburst merely the latest tragic manifestation of a deep cultural pattern, where confused and angry young men are socialized to lash out externally when their true problems reside within?

While it is obviously necessary to resist drawing premature conclusions based on a still-incomplete picture, Loughner's own statements -- like the aforementioned one about rape -- provide fertile leads for journalists who seem to be scrambling after any and every other kind of lead and theory about his motives.

* One of the most interesting Tucson personalities to have emerged in the days following the shooting is Pima County Arizona Sheriff Clarence Dupnik. "The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous, and unfortunately Arizona has become sort of the capital," he said just after the shooting. "We have become the mecca for prejudice and bigotry," Dupnik added. "The fiery rhetoric that has taken hold in politics may be free speech, but it's not without consequences." In a series of interviews, Dupnik stressed that public figures in (right-wing) politics and media bear some responsibility for fostering a climate of vitriol: "To try to inflame the public on a daily basis, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, has impact on people, especially who are unbalanced personalities to begin with," he said.

Not surprisingly, Sheriff Dupnik, who is a Democrat, became the target of a right-wing counter-attack that continues to this day. Rush Limbaugh called Dupnik (among other things) "predictable, childish and immature" and said he was making a fool of himself. For his part, Dupnik says, without apology, that regardless of whether Jared Lee Loughner's violent outburst could be tied directly to right-wing incitements like Sarah Palin's exhortation to conservatives to "retreat and reload," the climate of anger and anti-government rage that the right has been fomenting has consequences. What does all this have to do with gender?

Sheriff Dupnik, 74, is a white man with more than fifty years of experience as a law enforcement officer. He has been sheriff since 1980. In other words, not only does he occupy the same demographic category as millions of listeners of conservative talk radio; his law enforcement background gives him added credibility with this group. Rush Limbaugh, whom Dupnik has deemed "irresponsible," routinely ridicules liberal men as "linguini-spined" eunuchs as a way to discredit their politics. Limbaugh is a master of ad hominem attacks on Democratic men's manhood, such as when he said "I don't think Barack Obama is half the man Sarah Palin is."

But Limbaugh can't successfully attack Dupnik's manhood, especially when you consider the details of Limbaugh's own life story, which, as reported by the author Glenn Greenwald, includes an episode where as a young man the "Big Talker" avoided military service during the Vietnam War because he claimed an anal boil rendered him "unfit for service."

For his part, Dupnik says he speaks for millions of Americans who have had enough of the poisoned and violent political rhetoric of the right. One only hopes that among the many Americans Dupnik has inspired by his fearless calling out of right-wing bullies will be many more middle-aged and older white men, who are sick and tired of the implication that the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck speak for them.

* While there is much we do not yet know about the motives of the murderer, we do know that his primary intended victim was a woman - and not just any woman. She was a strong woman in a position of political leadership. According to a January 16 article in the *New York Times*, Loughner had a problem with strong women. Tellers at a local Tucson branch of a major bank were unnerved by him, but not simply because of his menacing appearance. As the Times reported, it was also "the aggressive, often sexist things that he said, including asserting that women should not be allowed to hold positions of power or authority."

Is it possible that if the congressperson in his district had been a man, Loughner would still have shot him? From what we know today, it's impossible to say. But it's worth asking the question: did the fact that Representative Giffords is a woman contribute to Loughner's murderous rage against her? Millions of men in our society - and across the world - use violence against women as a way to control them or punish them for not fulfilling some role the man wants or feels entitled to from her - or from women in general. Was Loughner angry at Giffords in part because she is a strong woman? Was he enraged by her stances on issues? In his fragile psychological state, did he feel slighted in his brief interaction with her a few years before? Did he feel rejected by her? Was this in some sense an attempt at a revenge killing, where the bystanders were collateral damage?

Preliminary reports show that Loughner made misogynous statements in his college classes and in his online postings. This is consistent with the pattern of many other rampage killers. As Anna North wrote in a posting on *Jezebel.com*, "Though Loughner's obsessions appear to range far beyond women, his postings on women are more evidence that virulent misogyny isn't just an objectionable ideological pose -- it can be a red flag for impending violence."

In the coming weeks and months countless analyses and impassioned orations will be offered about the Tucson tragedy and what it says about everything from the state of mental health treatment to the continuing power of the gun lobby. Because of the irreducibly political nature of Loughner's act - he shot a member of Congress at point blank at a political event -- the conversation will necessarily include the polarized state of our politics, and the media forces that too often fan the flames of enmity and conflict.

One can only hope that in the context of this ongoing dialogue and debate, more people in mainstream media will realize that it is not possible to move forward without seeing and seeking to understand the gendered processes that in this case - and in most incidents of violence -- play out right in front of our eyes.