NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The secret reason for the death of the innocents in Newtown

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 4, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side

Sorrow is not like archeological finds in which the carbon-14 content possesses a "half-life": the pulse, so to speak, of the content's decline whose diminishing throbs allow scientists to date them with great accuracy.

Sorrow has no such half-life; it dwells in the unending *now* of the unconscious, where time never passes and the wounds inflicted in what we experience as passing time are always fresh as a cut in the instant before it bleeds. Time passes and we age and change, and so may speak, as people who have suffered great loss often do, of its "changing" while it remains essentially the same.

That is why sadness rises like chimney smoke that never drifts away over places of great loss, such as the now-cleared space of 9/11 in lower Manhattan that even on a sunny morning is filled with a lingering invisible sadness. Sorrow hallows battlefields deserted by the sated gods of war. You can feel the sadness that clings to everything as autumn's first fog does every hollow and water hole.

The abiding strength of this haunting sorrow is in exact proportion to the love people experienced for each other, sometimes in places that are famous, but more often, places that are unknown except to the lovers whose first meeting there made them forever sacred.

Invisible sorrow is a function of the inexhaustible love that is the energy of the spirit and that is found everywhere, revealing the transcendent glint in the eddying waters of the ordinary that we enter, as biblical pilgrims once did healing pools, every day of our lives. This full-strength love has no half-life, and neither does the sorrow of separation and loss that is time's penalty for our tasting the eternal within its temporary casing.

That is why, as at the school in Newton, Conn., people do not know what to do with the structure that gives off the powerful, invisible sadness of the terror that laid open the mystery of everyday love celebrated there.

When tragedies take place in some settings, such as fast-food restaurants, the company policy is to knock them down; not to rebuild, but to eliminate any association of the brand with the loss that occurred in that place. Do they think these grassy plots do not bloom invisibly with the sadness of the loss that took place there? What is it that so powerfully moves us and always will at any site -- knocked down, paved over, its address taken off the rolls in the understandable attempt to erase the memory and the mystery of human loss that has no half-life and remains at full strength for all touched by it?

James Joyce, through his character Stephen Dedalus, explores a profound and related theme. "Pity," Dedalus tells us, "is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer."

We are indeed united with the human sufferers at Newtown as we remain with those of 9/11, whether in New York a dozen years ago or in Benghazi last year. But Joyce pursues another question about what haunts these occasions and, indeed, our whole age.

"Terror," he writes, "is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites us with its secret cause."

What is the secret cause we do not recognize and that, as in Newtown and other recent shooting tragedies, seems beyond the reach of those who propose that the cause was the availability of guns and that new gun control laws will deal with the underlying reason for this terror?

The secret cause is something deeper than that and, even with the enforcement of more sensible gun controls, will still be present in everyday life -- indeed, in everyone's life -- and is guaranteed in the lives of those who love and are loved.

We know, in the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., the public cause of his death, of the hollow man out of T.S. Eliot, James Earl Ray, firing his rifle at the great religious and civil rights leader as he stood on the balcony of his Memphis motel. The secret cause of King's death, however, was his life, his taking on danger every day in fulfilling his calling to bring long-denied justice to his people. The secret cause of his death was his courageous pursuit of his destiny.

And what does terror reveal to us as it considers all that is grave and constant in human suffering and unites us with the secret cause of the death of the children and teachers in Newtown? This is the secret cause of heartbreak and suffering for all lovers; it is the secret cause of the death of the Holy Innocents in the Christmas story and the Connecticut story as well.

The secret cause of the loss of the children and their teachers, the secret cause that unites us to them and to its mystery and to the reason that sadness will always hover over the space where the terror struck, is also their pursuit of their lives; their being separated every morning from trusting parents and given over to trustworthy teachers is one of the greatest if little-celebrated transactions of love in ordinary time.

The secret cause of this suffering is the vulnerability that lovers suffer themselves and with which they endow, blessing and danger in one, those they love. Love makes everyone who loves truly vulnerable to its loss or to the uncounted threats of loss that parents, for example, must allow their children to encounter if they are going to grow up and pass that love on to someone else.

This vulnerability is the chief characteristic of all the children under 2 years of age who were so easily available in cribs that were thought safe, powerless to protect themselves or be protected when terror was loosed in the countryside that season. This is exactly the same vulnerability of the schoolchildren, easily available in a place thought safe, powerless to protect themselves or be protected from the terror loosed in the countryside that day.

The secret cause is found in the ordinary mystery of the vulnerability to losses great and small that is the terror taken on by all lovers every day. It is the secret condition of pursuing the destiny that defines us, the shared calling of all of us who do not bear the mark of Cain as much as the scar tissue of the real if misnamed original sin, that of our being human and therefore called to be vulnerable to the danger and transforming wonder of the love that only comes whole and is beyond measure because it has no half-life at all.

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