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After Tucson, we must bring conversations 'into the light'

Joan Chittister | Feb. 1, 2011 From Where I Stand

The country is in a new kind of national simmer these days, the boiling point of which may well determine the social climate of this country for years to come. All the signs are clear.

For the first time in history, the President of the United States has raised the nature of civil discourse to the level of a State of the Union address. Assembled for that speech, many members of the Congress of the United States sat together, intermingled, as if they really were all cooperating citizens of the same country.

And after having been shot through the brain in a face-to-face assassination attempt, Representative Gabrielle Giffords' medical condition, though now upgraded to "Good," will nevertheless, her doctors say, take "months of physical therapy" for her to reach a state of 'new normal.'

We have, it appears, a country that has abandoned civility while it extols democracy, is mired in polarization at its highest levels and calls that politics, and is provocative and dangerous to both public figures and citizens alike and says we can't imagine how those things happen.

I suppose it's possible to conclude that things could be worse and to simply go on business as usual. In fact, many people do, apparently. But around the edges and in the shadow of it all, in personal conversation and in public gatherings, the unsaid is being said. Old topics, once considered closed, are surfacing again.

Why? Because some events are, by nature, "illuminating." And we have just had one of those events.

Giffords, the target of an assassination attempt, and the numbers of people who were killed in her stead and the even larger number of people who were wounded and lived but who will never again be quite the same persons as they were before the event may never be able to forget those topics. Nor will we. One way or another: either because we face the issue or because we don't.

An "illuminating event" is one that has more meaning to it than is at first apparent. It brings multiple issues into focus at one time and shines the light of the soul on issues too often kept in darkness. Because of an illuminating event, the relationship between a number of apparently unrelated issues are unmasked in one fell swoop. The attempted assassination of a public official in the United States of America has done that. Clearly, this event has much to teach us all.

First, language matters: I have written in this column before now about my concern for the level of discourse -- if you can call it that -- pervading cyberspace, poisoning the minds of children, and demeaning whole segments of society. Name calling and baseless accusations have become commonplace in recent years. The global anonymity of the internet, unlike any other media, has, it seems, released all the demons of the heart into the atmosphere -- without accountability, without substantiation, without boundaries.

Assassinations of the spirit are now the coin of the realm. They are a kind of media lynching: People, so much easier to destroy than good arguments, are being hung out to dry in front of all our faces in the dark of the night

by ghosts without bodies and speakers without faces. It's one thing to pollute the air, the water, and the soil of the planet but it is far more dangerous to pollute the human soul with attacks of random violence against bullied school children, against public figures who think differently than we do and against social groups of whom we do not approve. .

In the name of "free speech" the freedom to assassinate is being worn as a badge of democracy. And it happens on the best sites on the internet, including this one.

As a result, the United States is toxic. There was a time when slander and libel were legal offenses. Now there is too much of it to even begin to tame. We have come to the point where we pay television and radio hosts to do it bigger and better than their competition, in fact. Masking as 'journalists' they talk over answers to the very questions they themselves have just asked.

Why? Because it brings more of the same kind of people to the site, that's why. Because people listen to it, that's why.t

If we really wanted such an atmosphere to change, we would deny it oxygen. But, according to the polls, these programs prosper and with them the polarization temperature of the nation rises. What can we possibly expect in a social climate like this but violence in a tinder box?

So, while we're sitting around blaming left, right and center for the attack on Giffords, maybe we better start with ourselves.

Second, the mentally ill are human beings who find themselves in an environment with too few laws to protect them from themselves. In two cases of which I have personal knowledge, two young people attempted to admit themselves to their local mental health center for help and were sent home and told to call someone "if they felt the same way tomorrow." By tomorrow, one of those young men had killed himself, the other had killed his girlfriend and two of their three small children as well as himself.

No law required short-term admission and observation so long-term help never arrived.

While a panel of citizens and officials discussed the effect of hate radio and attack language on public violence, one of the official speakers himself called Gifford's shooter, a man with mental problems, "a monster."

But the mentally ill are no more "monsters" than any people with communicable illnesses -- they are simply mentally ill. Ask the families who love and try to care for these people day after day.

Third, yes, the tiresome old alibi "guns don't kill people, people do" is at least true on one level. But it fails pitiably on others: What people kill people? Should all people be allowed to have guns? Shouldn't licenses be renewed regularly in the way we do driver's licenses? Should professional references be expected?

What was needed at Gifford's assassination, a national representative said, was "just one more gun." Really? And then what will we do when every argument or difference of opinion becomes a shoot out?

From where I stand, the interesting thing is that most of us outside Giffords' district in Arizona may never have heard her name before this. But after this, her name will mean a number of different things to us all.

Unless we insist that these conversations continue -- out of the darkness and into the light that has illuminated them -- we may all be hurt by any one of them at any time: the verbal attacks, the mental illness or, it is clear, even the guns.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web column, *From Where I Stand*, is

found on the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand [1].]

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