

A Letter – In the Spirit of Dr. King and in Reaction to a Tragedy

Friends,

I spent a bit of last evening watching a poorly plotted and violent western movie, a movie about which I can only say that it was not Burt Lancaster's finest hour-and-a-half. Afterwards, I found myself contemplating the apocalyptic elements of the film: the suggestion that, within its confines, law and civility do not exist. Only power exists, the power that resides in a gun. Within the context of the film, we find ourselves vigorously rooting for the demise of the various "bad guys," a vicious, power-mad rancher and his homicidal hirelings. In the process we cheer on the archetypal American hero as he picks off close to a dozen members of an army of twenty or thirty.

That lone gunman, avenging evil, stands as an American archetype. He shows up in a range of such films, with equally lethal consequences. Unfortunately, he is easily mistaken for the protagonists of those great films in which the hero prevails, not because he is a more successful mad murderer than his opponents, but because he can inspire with words, self-sacrifice, and bravery. These latter heroes are often far from pacifists ("Casablanca" ends with a shooting; Tom Joad strides off into the sunrise as a man wanted for murder), but victory is the result of moral tenacity, not violent rage. There is a tremendous difference between the theme that "there are things worth dying for" and the theme "there are things worth killing for."

It is not just in movies that we confuse the two. As we, in the real world, engage in rhetoric that is out-of-hand, we are exchanging words that inspire hatred rather than strength. When we speak of 'targeting' someone, we speak of metaphoric slaying – the opposite of 'standing like a rock' ourselves, the moral opposite of demonstrating integrity. Compounding our error, we speak to those who do not understand metaphor, those who would use real guns to create real deaths because they imagine themselves righteous and just and are ready to dehumanize all with whom they differ.

Let me be blunt – it seems, however unintentionally, to be our social policy to give guns to crazy people; to desensitize them by exposing them to violent entertainment; and to tell them to go forth and destroy their enemies. Culturally, we reinforce values that can only be deemed insane. It is little wonder that disturbed individuals seize on these values and use them as self-justification for unspeakable acts. Supposedly sane individuals excuse all manner of rudeness and incivility in themselves by the same process. Since those latter individuals manage not to fire guns into crowds we tolerate them. Perhaps we tolerate their – and our own, for they are we – antisocial behavior too easily.

It is time for soul-searching, not just in the name of using more civil words but in terms of thinking more civil thoughts and behaving with consideration and respect. We are responsible for the world we create – we can, metaphorically, send our enemies to hell; in the process we join

them on the hellish earth we have conspired to create. Or we can choose not to, and create a better world rather than an uglier one. It is time to sit down together with better purpose than plotting each other's destruction.

Blessed Be,
Marty Price

1-15-2011; feel free to disseminate if you find these words worth repeating.