

Inquiring Minds topic for March 30, 2012

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When the Good Do Bad, by DAVID BROOKS NYT Published: March 19, 2012

It's always interesting to read the quotations of people who knew a mass murderer before he killed. They usually express complete bafflement that a person who seemed so kind and normal could do something so horrific.

Friends of Robert Bales, who is accused of massacring 16 Afghan civilians, have expressed similar thoughts. Friends and teachers describe him as caring, gregarious and self-confident before he — in the vague metaphor of common usage — apparently “snapped.” As one childhood friend [told The Times](#): “That’s not our Bobby. Something horrible, horrible had to happen to him.”

Any of us would be shocked if someone we knew and admired killed children. But these days it's especially hard to think through these situations because of the worldview that prevails in our culture.

According to this view, most people are naturally good, because nature is good. The monstrosities of the world are caused by the few people (like Hitler or Idi Amin) who are fundamentally warped and evil.

This worldview gives us an easy conscience, because we don't have to contemplate the evil in ourselves. But when somebody who seems mostly good does something completely awful, we're rendered mute or confused.

But of course it happens all the time. That's because even people who contain reservoirs of compassion and neighborliness also possess a latent potential to commit murder.

David Buss of the University of Texas asked his students if they had ever thought seriously about killing someone, and if so, to write out their homicidal fantasies in an essay. He was astonished to find that 91 percent of the men and 84 percent of the women had detailed, vivid homicidal fantasies. He was even more astonished to learn how many steps some of his students had taken toward carrying them out.

One woman invited an abusive ex-boyfriend to dinner with thoughts of stabbing him in the chest. A young man in a fit of road rage pulled a baseball bat out of his trunk and would have pummeled his opponent if he hadn't run

away. Another young man planned the progression of his murder — crushing a former friend’s fingers, puncturing his lungs, then killing him.

These thoughts do not arise from playing violent video games, Buss argues. They occur because we are descended from creatures who killed to thrive and survive. We’re natural-born killers and the real question is not what makes people kill but what prevents them from doing so.

People who murder often live in situations that weaken sympathy and restraint. People who commit massacres, for example, often live with what the researchers call “forward panic.” After having endured a long period of fear, they find their enemies in a moment of vulnerability. Their fear turns to rage, and, as Steven Pinker writes in “The Better Angels of Our Nature,” they “explode in a savage frenzy.”

Serial killers are often charming, but have a high opinion of themselves that is not shared by the wider world. They are often extremely conscious of class and status and they develop venomous feelings toward people who do not pay them sufficient respect.

In centuries past most people would have been less shocked by the homicidal eruptions of formerly good men. That’s because people in those centuries grew up with a worldview that put sinfulness at the center of the human personality.

John Calvin believed that babies come out depraved (he was sort of right; the most violent stage of life is age 2). G. K. Chesterton wrote that the doctrine of original sin is the only part of Christian theology that can be proved.

This worldview held that people are a problem to themselves. The inner world is a battlefield between light and dark, and life is a struggle against the destructive forces inside. The worst thing you can do is, in a fit of pride, to imagine your insecurity comes from outside and to try to resolve it yourself. If you try to “fix” the other people who you think are responsible for your inner turmoil, you’ll end up trying to kill them, or maybe whole races of them.

This earlier worldview was both darker and brighter than the one prevailing today. It held, as C. S. Lewis put it, that there is no such thing as an ordinary person. Each person you sit next to on the bus is capable of extraordinary horrors and extraordinary heroism.

According to this older worldview, Robert Bales, like all of us, is a mixture of virtue and depravity. His job is to struggle daily to strengthen the good and resist the evil, policing small transgressions to prevent larger ones. If he didn’t do that, and if he was swept up in a whirlwind, then even a formerly good man is capable of monstrous acts that shock the soul and sear the brain.