

Making Sense of the Senseless

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – December 23, 2012

It's the same each time. After yet another tragic loss of life at the hands of an armed madman, we mourn, ache, cry, and seek someone or something to blame.

This time, we're fixated on a small town in Connecticut, and the innocent lives lost are children – 20 of them -- and six adults who died trying to save them. After all we've witnessed in Columbine, Blacksburg, Aurora, Milwaukee, College Station, Minneapolis, and too many other places, you'd think nothing could shock us. But, this was unthinkable.

We're talking about guns and gun laws, and that's good. There are no easy answers, but we must acknowledge the implications of easy access to weapons of mass destruction like assault rifles.

We're talking about mental illness, and that's good. Those who are ill and parents of troubled children should have better places to turn for care and support.

We're discussing spirituality, faith, and families, and these are good. Such events remind us evil exists in our world, and strength of character and moral fiber are our only real defense.

But we won't find solutions by placing blame. We choose sides and argue. We quote statistics, digging in and calling each other names. Even if one side wins the argument, everyone loses and nothing changes.

Instead, we can empower ourselves by asking: "What can I do?" I've been encouraged seeing friends ponder how they could have made a difference. One asked, how might Adam Lanza's actions have changed course if he'd been touched by someone's random act of kindness in the hours, days, or weeks preceding that sad day?

The night before Newtown, I watched a documentary titled "I Am" by Tom Shadyac -- Hollywood writer, director, and creator of films such as Liar Liar, The Nutty Professor, and Bruce Almighty. Shadyac's humor is still evident, but his latest work is a serious film on a serious subject.

At the pinnacle of success, inside his mansion, Shadyac felt only deep loneliness and great unhappiness. Seeing the trappings of wealth as a trap themselves, he adjusted his life and began giving up those possessions. Then, a near-fatal bicycle crash left him in severe pain, facing mortality, wondering what final message he had for the world. When he recovered, the filmmaker set out with a small crew seeking answers to two questions: "What's wrong with the world? And, what can we do about it?"

His journey led to philosophers, scientists, religious leaders, healers, and thinkers around the globe. It also brought him unexpected conclusions. As the film's promo says: "Ironically, in the process of trying to figure out what's wrong with the world, Shadyac discovered there's more right than he ever imagined."

The film's core message is that "contrary to conventional thinking, cooperation and not competition may be nature's most fundamental operating principle." Through interviews and demonstrations, Shadyac explains we have been misled into thinking human existence is about getting a leg up on everyone else.

He notes Charles Darwin uses the phrase "survival of the fittest" only twice in "The Descent of Man," while writing the word "love" 95 times. In one scene, Shadyac places probes in a bowl of yogurt to demonstrate that his emotional response to words generates an electromagnetic pulse "felt" by the yogurt. We also hear how global sensors detected massive-scale electromagnetic pulses world-wide at the moment of the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. On that sad day, all humanity was not just emotionally linked; we were physically linked.

As for the violent killings plaguing our society, I believe acts of kindness make a difference. But, it takes more. Actions speak louder than words, but there is something stronger than action, which is love. Acts that matter are the manifestation of a genuine kindness which springs naturally from a heart-felt caring for our fellow man.

This may sound as naïve as the Beatles singing "All You Need is Love," but science is finding we actually are wired that way. And regaining that awareness is key.

To kill without remorse requires the ability to dehumanize the victims and deny any human connection to them. Mass murderers are the extreme. But, to what extent do we all see others – especially strangers – as objects either in our way or competing for what we see as rightfully ours?

Shadyac's title comes from English writer G. K. Chesterton who was asked by a newspaper "what's wrong with the world today?" "I am," he replied. To that, I say "ditto."

Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me.