

Collateral Damage

The Princess, the Nun, the Athlete, the Addict, the Sheep and the Sparrows

GEOFF RYAN, MARCH/APRIL 2002

*Sex jibe husband murders wife
Bomb blast victim fights for life
Girl thirteen attacked with knife*

Princess Di is wearing a new dress

*Jet airliner shot from sky
Famine horror, millions die
Earthquake terror figures rise*

Princess Di is wearing a new dress

*You can't change the world
But you can change the facts
And when you change the facts
You change points of view
If you change points of view
You may change a vote
And when you change a vote
You may change the world*

*In black townships fires blaze
Prospects better premier says
Within site are golden days*

Princess Di is wearing a new dress

("New Dress" by Depeche Mode, 1985)

I guess it all started with the death of Princess Di. I remember that morning, a friend called me with the news, quite upset. The subsequent media coverage and very public mourning, the eulogies, the creeping beautification... at first it all surprised me, then I became fascinated and eventually irked. Surely this was a case of (in the words of Ambrose Bierce) a saint being simply "a dead sinner revised and edited". I never was one of the Princess' fans and rarely

thought about her. When the popular press did bring her to my attention though and I paused to reflect, I couldn't say she was one of my favourite people. Her death struck me as sad but tawdry, somewhat like her life, of little significance in the greater scheme of things. Obviously I was in the minority.

What I really remember about that week was another death – that of Mother Teresa. It was bad timing on her part, though. The media, given the choice between an old Nun and a young Princess went for the Princess hands down and we, the public, predictably followed.

I mean how can you compare the two? On the one hand a wrinkled, old slum-dwelling Catholic nun from Albania with a sharp tongue and an inflexible moral code versus a young, vibrant, saucy Princess who danced her nights away in clubs and on yachts and stuck her tongue out at her stuffy in-laws. One loss more acutely felt than the other and hence the subdued references to Mother Teresa's quiet passing and the endless outpouring of grief, the songs, the fields of flowers for the Princess' spectacular exit.

On the surface Princess Di possessed all the qualities our society values and desires – youth, beauty, romance, glamour...I could go on. The reality was actually a rather shallow, self-centred woman who spend her nights clubbing with a succession of lovers, chalked up a broken marriage and proved an indifferent mother to her two sons. She didn't work, contributed little to society and even her much-vaunted charitable efforts constituted about one quarter of what the average society matron undertakes in any given year. But she had become in life an icon, the "People's Princess", and in death a "Candle in the Wind", the media-shaped perception transcending the reality of her life.

Mother Teresa was from a place no one had ever heard of, was old (one of the top five unforgiveable sins in our our youth-obsessed culture), was a Catholic who often gave the impression of a vague universalism (two

more sins in the largely Protestant West) and she spent her nights in the fetid slums of Calcutta nursing human refuse from the streets and alleyways. Age and wrinkles, faith, a foreign accent and a distinct lack of glamour conspired together to lessen the Mother's star value. The press needed more to work with and we the public needed more to hold our wandering attention.

It's not very hard to see why we valued Princess Di more than Mother Teresa and why their death's produced such disparate reactions.

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I thought about the Princess and the Nun again last summer. We went through a rough spring and summer in our neighbourhood with shootings almost monthly - all of them fatal and all of them young men in their late teens or early twenties. The assumption is that they are drug and gang related (although its anyone's guess as almost a year later, no one has been arrested and not one of the seven murders solved).

Two of the men were shot in the same night. One was a drug addict who occasionally made use into the café we run as part of our corps outreach. He was no one special, just another "crack-head" in a part of town that has hundreds of them. He was shot in the head. His body was found on a grassy triangle just up the street and across the road from our corps offices early one Sunday morning. Rumour has it that he owed money to the dealers.

The second boy was shot several blocks north of our neighbourhood. A few years younger than the first boy he was also shot in the head. This boy, however, had a brother playing in the NBA and he himself was a rising basketball star, slated for the big leagues and with a scholarship in pocket to an American University that autumn.

The death of the first boy got one paragraph in our city's largest newspaper the following day and no further mention that I could find. The second boy was front page news, the subject of editorials calling for justice and denouncing the "shameful waste" of such talent and such promise. His mother was interviewed ("he was always a good boy"), his brother came back from the States ("he fell in with the wrong crowd") and the usual community leaders weighed in ("How long, O Lord, how long?"). His funeral made the front page again a few days later with a second flurry of editorials and opinion pieces and political posturing regarding at-risk youth, cleaning up

the ghetto, the evils of drugs and the perniciousness of systemic racism.

Both deaths were shameful and tragic wastes, as have been all the other shootings in our area (two more just prior to Christmas). Boy one was no star talent and showed no particular talent or potential. But I also happen to know that the boy two was no angel either. He not so much *fell* in with the wrong crowd as much as he *was* the wrong crowd. Whether his mother or brother or the community leaders or editorialists knew it - he carried (a gun), he robbed people, he sported an attitude that on the streets brings trouble as surely as blood in water attracts sharks. I asked one one dealer from our neighbourhood about him. The laconic answer was "that boy messed with a lot of people". As much an explanation for what happened to him as one will get in these parts.

This is not saying that I think he deserved what happened to him. Few people deserve a bullet in the head. Lives can be redeemed and transformed and if the chance had been given and...I digress. What struck me again was the value we assign life and the loss of life based on whether or not that life or those lives embody qualities or abilities or sustain fantasies that we value and affirm. In the case of the second boy it was his athletic potential and in this sports-crazy culture that is indeed a valuable commodity (our area tends not to breed either Mother Teresas or Princess Di's)

So the city mourned the Athlete and paid little attention to the death of the Addict.

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Fast forward a few months to the tragedy of September 11. I guess I'd better say up front that I was as shocked and saddened as anyone by the death of those 3000+ people and the bewildering pain carried by their families and friends. By and large, I support the subsequent course of action taken by the U.S. and I am most definitely not a member of that angry and unimaginative chorus of finger-waggers who blame US foreign policy for the attacks and feel that this somehow creates a balance of justifiable blame between America and the terrorists. Having qualified myself, let me proceed...

I thought hard of the thousands of Americans who died at Ground Zero and watched with a deep interest how, in the subsequent days of rage, the condemnation poured in and support gathered from the international community for retaliation to ensure that justice was

served, A historically unprecedented coalition of nations (of varied and competing political systems, philosophical and religious convictions) joined forces to ensure that the outrage of so many murders did not go unanswered.

And yet, and yet... I also couldn't stop thinking about the Princess and the Nun and the Athlete and the Addict. That still small voice niggled at me, more than the knee-jerk reaction of a contrarian.

What if the dead had not been Americans? What if the attack had not been levelled against the most powerful nation on earth? What if it had taken place elsewhere, in, Dakar or Lima or Brazzaville for example? Would it have mattered as much? Would anything even remotely like what has taken place in the world since September 11, taken place? Would anyone have cared enough?

My mind wandered back a few years to Bhopal, India. Remember Bhopal? In the middle of the night on December 3, 1984, over 40 tons of Methyl Isocyanate and other lethal gasses leaked from the (American corporation) Union Carbide's pesticide factory in the city of Bhopal, India. 8,000 people died immediately and over 500,000 suffered from injuries. 10 to 15 people continue to die every month from exposure related complications. The current death toll is well over 16,000. The evidence points to corporate negligence - a drive toward profits at the cost of worker and community safety.

Did the world change on December 3, 1984? Not really. There was no international coalition formed, no retribution paid, no justice served and no official blame laid. But just as many grieving spouses, parentless children, childless parents as at Ground Zero - more even.

No, September 11, 2001 was the day the world changed as we are reminded constantly. I pondered on...

The Gulf War. In response to aggression against another country, America went to war and in a dazzling display of technological superiority wiped out, in a few weeks, over 100,000 Iraqi soldiers. American losses were just over 40 (and not all of those combat related). The 100,000 doesn't include civilian casualties from the bombing campaign. *100,000 versus 44! 100,000 versus 3,000?* I couldn't help myself, I thought on...

There are 13 million AIDS orphans presently living in sub-Saharan Africa whose numbers will balloon to 40 million by mid-century? Presumably this represents 26

million dead parents, soon to be 80 million. Give or take a few hundred thousand. Will the world change then?

There are approximately 40,000 children who *every day* die of starvation and hunger-related conditions (diarrhea, dehydration etc) and whose individual lives could be saved by a postage stamp's worth of food?

There are tens of thousands who die daily from diseases that could be cured by immunizations that would cost developed countries approximately 0.24 of their GNP?

I heard the other day that a conservative estimate of 4,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan due to the carpet-bombing carried out in retaliation for September 11. Al-Qaeda and Taliban members aside, this surely makes things about even, right?

I could go on but we've heard it all before, read the statistics, watched the emotionally-charged infomercials on TV. Nothing new here, nothing we don't know. But still the question for me: why are some lives valued more than others and how is this determination made? Is it a geographical thing, a matter of where one lives? Or maybe something racial - dependent on skin colour? Or cultural, linguistic, economic...what? How does the math get done?

The reality is we do assign differing value when people die and if we do this in death, do we do it in life. In viewing people and their worth through the eyes of the dominant culture and through the lense of its value system we are forced to conclude that some people are simply worth more than other people. All made in the image of God?

How does the Creator look at all this? Among his children, does he have favourites? How does he assign specific value and to whom? How does he want us, as his followers, to view and value life? Whom she would mourn?

I challenge you to take half an hour after reading this and do the following reading exercise. As seamlessly as possible, as if they are one text, read the following passages of Scripture. Hosea 6:6-8; Isaiah 58:6-10; James 2:1-9; Luke 12:6,7 and 15:3-7.

“Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind;”

John Donne