

As American as Apple Pie

Yet another mass killing – well over 600 for this year. We grieve at the loss of innocent lives and swear we will “Never forget.” Then it happens again and again and again. and we respond with “Thoughts and prayers.” However, these mass killings pale against the background of 14,634 murders in the US in 2021. No other Western country comes close.

We all know the contributing factors – easy access to guns, gang violence, drugs and alcohol. But it goes deeper than that. Consider, in the 246 years since our country’s founding in 1776, we have been at war for 225 of those years - almost 90% of our existence.

Many, perhaps most, of our national heroes were military men or otherwise known for fighting. We even celebrated outlaws like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone, and Lucky Luciano. More recently, *The Godfather* and its sequels were some of the highest grossing movies of all time, and *the Sopranos* was one of the most popular series on television.

I grew up during the ‘50’s when westerns ruled the airways and movies. We never missed *Gunsmoke*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Wyatt Earp*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, or *Bonanza*. The movies included *High Noon*, *Shane*, *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, and *The Gunfighter*. My sister, cousins, and I played cowboys and Indians on Saturdays and Sundays. There is no counting the number of people I saw killed on the screen during those years. Of course, it didn’t warp most of us who grew up with these images, but they did make solving conflicts with violence seem normal.

America has a culture of violence. Violence may not be the first choice when it comes to settling a dispute, but it’s not far down the list. It moves closer to the top when it involves those in the majority dealing with people who don’t look like them or think like them. Blacks and Asians come readily to mind, but we forget our history includes discrimination and violence against the Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans, and others. Of course, Jews were and are targets. LGBTQIA’s have increasingly become victims over the past decades.

We are the most Christian nation in the West, but the Prince of Peace hasn’t made much of practical impact on our culture. He gave us the *Beatitudes* which told us how to live in peace with each other, but we seem to prefer to emphasize the Hebrew Scripture about punishment and revenge. Imagine the difference if the Beatitudes were placed in courtrooms rather than the Ten Commandments: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.”

I don’t know how to change a culture, but I know it must come from inside. It may be too late for my generation (I’m 80) to have much influence now. Our time was when we were raising our children and, to a lesser extent, our grandchildren. One would think that religion should take the lead, but the younger generations seem to have largely given up on religion, at least as they have seen it in the lives of their parents and society in general. Our poets and

writers (including those who write for TV, movies, and the stage) have always had a leading role in defining a culture. Our political leaders can unite us or drive us apart. Religious leaders have less power than in decades past, but still can still call us to head the examples of community and love that is at the heart of all religions.

What is our role? Few of us have regional or national influence, but we do have friends and usually a social media presence. We must be the ones who pay attention to and support those leaders and writers who are working to unite not divide, to heal not harm, to build not destroy. We can vote, attend plays and movies, volunteer in NGOs, choose books for ourselves and our book clubs and to read to our children and grandchildren all with an eye to those that promote non-violence, unity, and building up. Engage with relatives and friends who look too quickly to violence and division, by trying to see alternatives. Refuse to be part of the problem.

America has a culture of violence, but it doesn't have to remain that way. It starts with us!