

MY OWN PRIVATE DIASPORA

A Sermon Delivered to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie

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It broke my heart. You can be forgiven for not paying attention to this story. This has been a week of families and preparations, feasts and drinking, sentiment and nostalgia, and there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, there's a solid argument to be made that that's what this time of season is all about, from a pagan as well as a Christian perspective.

Be that as it may. Such stories break my heart. I'm talking about the party in Corvina, California, where Bruce Jeffrey Pardo killed at least nine people while dressed as Santa Claus. Here is the rough outline of the event: Pardo entered the front door, shooting as he went, and spreading fire accelerant from a home-made device. He had divorced the daughter of the family whose house it was only the week before and, according to sources, was targeting family members, shooting some of them execution style, which is a media term usually for "to the back of the head." He had, in addition to his Santa costume, \$17000 strapped to his legs and an airline ticket to Canada in his pocket.

He made his way through the house, shooting people as he went. Several people were injured in trying to escape by leaping through windows, one of them seriously. Pardo lit the accelerant and escaped. However, he was himself caught by the speed at which the fire spread, and suffered third degree burns. Part of the Santa costume melted to his skin. He changed into street clothes back outside and made his way to his brother's home in neighboring Sylmar, where he eventually killed himself. Apparently, his injuries were more severe than he had expected them to be.

Police are still searching for the people they assume were Pardo's original target: his former father- and mother-in-law and his ex-wife. Pardo's neighbors are quoted saying the usual things people say in such instances: "he seemed okay," "I just saw him a few hours ago," "he'd just told me 'Merry Christmas' this afternoon." By all accounts, the divorce was a contentious one. I haven't read anything suggesting that Pardo and his ex had children.

But all of that, well, that's terrible and a horrifying story. But that isn't what breaks my heart. What breaks it is this: For years, this party was attended by a neighbor of the victims who dressed as Santa and arrived at the party a little later, giving out gifts to the attending children. One of these kids, an 8-year old girl, heard Pardo's knock at the door, ran to greet him, and was shot point blank in the face as she opened the door.

She'll live, although a police spokesman, in that understated tone police spokesmen seem to study in order to get just right, said of her that "she'll have a long tough road ahead of her."

This is what shatters what I may call my soul: In a world in which angry men dress as Santa Claus and shoot 8 year olds in the face, how can I continue in a faith affirming the inherent

dignity of all people? Where a man dressed as Santa Claus walks through a house, shooting people in the backs of their heads and spreading gasoline, where can I find compassion? In a society where a man starts a fire in a house of partygoers, what can I continue to say about truth and conscience? I accept I am part of an interdependent web: is Bruce Pardo also a part?

The easiest answer, and the one that needs the least defense, is “no.” No, Bruce Pardo is beyond the pale, not a part of that web. No, it is impossible to believe fully in god, in the seven principles, in the transcendence of humankind—however you might want to put it—impossible to believe in something larger than myself and still live in a world where someone can behave in such a small manner. Who could blame me for taking the attitude that, as there are Bruce Jeffrey Pardoes in the world, there can’t be also beloved communities, or sanghas, or a personal Diaspora of some wider thing for me to believe I belong to? Who could blame me if I took the attitude that 8 year old girls who believe in the goodness of men in Santa costumes are suckers who may not deserve to be shot in the face but at the very least should not be surprised by it?

Is it more practical, more realistic, less deceptive, to see clearly that the world, or at least the humanly social part of it, is a place of malice and hate, a place where evil, in the form of men whose decks are less than fully stacked, hold not only the most important cards but also a gun and a home-made gas sprayer?

There’s a theological term called “theodicy” that asks the question: If god is a loving, all-powerful, all-knowing being, why do little babies die in horrible ways? The term, as used by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, came from the Greek words theo- meaning “god” and dike “justice,” and was intended as an answer to Pierre Bayle who, in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, posited from mankind’s experience of universal suffering that god was neither good

nor omnipotent. Leibniz countered that evil, a direct, palpable evil in the way we experience it—that is, the evil of dying slowly and painfully as well as the evil we do to one another—does not contradict god’s goodness, and that this is in fact, in his infamous phrase, “the best of all possible worlds.” God, Leibniz said, is a kind of “optimizer” of all possibilities, and it is in his power to balance all the evil with all the good. Without one there can’t be another one; without treachery there can be no loyalty. Without cruelty there can be no compassion. You’re likely to recognize this as the idea Voltaire mocked in *Candide* in the character of Dr. Pangloss who, as he goes from situation to situation, argues that each situation is exactly as it must be. God had given him syphilis, for instance, as a way of balancing his gift of chocolate. You’re also likely to recognize it as the balance so many of us have come to at some point in our lives, maybe as freshmen in a philosophy survey course.

Leibniz’s use of theodicy as an answer to Bayle fell out of favor following the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 that killed an estimated 100,000 people, at least as it answers Bayle, but the question remains: In a world where things are run according to some sort of plan, as it’s assumed by the simple statement “everything happens for a reason,” how do we account for little girls being shot in the face by men dressed as Santa?

It is rude to ask the question. But it is certainly ruder, both to 8 year old girls and to reality, to ignore it. The simplest response might be to shuck the question off. “We don’t,” we say; we can’t account for such things happening. The world is too big, god is too big, reality is too big and too complex to even try to account for it. It’s simply one of those things that happens. Nothing new: 8 year old girls have had the equivalent of being shot in the face for millennia, and sometimes worse. At least this girl’s victimhood was sudden and fast and she

lived through it; any millions of 8 year olds in history and outside it have been raped and tortured and murdered cruelly and we can't spend our days thinking about every one of them. We would never stop crying.

This is true. In contrast with what might have happened, with what has happened over and over and over again in the past, this little girl got off easy. But it shirks the question because the question really isn't why does god allow such things to happen, but why does someone purposely do them? What could possess a man to take advantage of a situation—he'd been to those parties in the past, he had seen children run to the door to open it for Santa, he knew that some child if not that specific 8 year old girl, would answer the door—and he shot anyway. He had the gun pointed at the door and the moment it was opened he pulled the trigger.

An 8 year old girl is waist-high to an adult. If the door had been opened by someone older than she was the person would have been shot in the belly, a wound that anyone who's watched a lot of TV cop shows could tell you is one of the most painful, slowest ways to bleed to death. Bruce Pardo knew exactly what he was doing, no matter who answered that door. What is it in a man's life that causes him to kill other people like that?

I'm pretty certain I'm not the only preacher addressing this question this morning and I'm pretty certain a lot of Christian preachers in particular are answering it with some variation on the phrase "it was Satan, not Santa, who had entered into him." This isn't nearly as much a scoffable answer as we might think, especially if we substitute the words "loneliness," "depression," "anger," maybe even "alcohol" or "drugs" for Satan which, as any good theologian will tell you, comes to about the same thing. But I don't accept that and I don't think you will either. We've all been lonely, profoundly lonely, we've all been profoundly depressed, angry

enough to split open someone's head, drunk enough and stoned enough to plough into a St. Patrick's Day parade, as I saw someone do in New Paltz in 1988. But we haven't done it. We haven't shot any 8 year olds or anyone else in the face. Why Bruce Pardo and why not us?

Are we, am I, better than Bruce Pardo? I like to think so. I like to think that no matter the level of mental illness or depression or hopelessness I wouldn't shoot anyone, much less a child, in the face. I like to think there are a number of us, a Diaspora like the Jews or Africans, for whom such things are anathema. We are believers that good shows up more often than bad in people, not that most people are good rather than bad but that the good in them gets displayed more often than that which is not so good. In Leibnezian terms, compassion trumps cruelty.

On what do I base this? Well, how about on the fact that the shooting in the face of an 8 year old girl still has the power to horrify and shock us. If it's true that a society is judged by how it treats its poorest members, it's also true that at base we are no worse than the things which shock us most. Back in June of this year we were shocked by the fate of Angel Torres, the 78 year old man who was struck by two cars in Hartford, Connecticut, and who lay unconscious in the street and stared at by pedestrians for a minute and a half before a police cruiser happened by. How, we ask, can anyone on seeing that simply stand there and not offer him a hand? On the day after Thanksgiving, Jdimytai Damour, a 34 year old Wal-Mart temp, was crushed in the melee of 2000 shoppers each trying to be the first to get bargains at a Valley Stream store. CNN's story describes Damour being stepped on "by hundreds of people" while co-workers fought against the flow, and minutes later as police tried to revive him, they found themselves "jostled and pushed."

In each instance we find ourselves astonished that people can do such things to one another. We are astonished, we are horrified, we are rendered speechless, as well we ought to be. I count it a point in our favor that we don't simply shrug and go on, that we take at least a moment to reflect and ask ourselves and one another, "What is happening here? How can we allow this to happen? What can we do to prevent it from happening again?"

The sad, honest answer to that last question? Nothing. We can't even stop something as eminently preventable as genocide from happening. We watch it happen in Germany and again in Rwanda and again in Darfur and each time we weep and wring our hands and wear sackcloth and ashes and swear "never again," until it happens again, and then we swear "never again," until the time after that. If we can't prevent an 8 year old girl from being shot in the face at point blank range, how can we hope to prevent a nation of people from being massacred?

Again, are we better than Bruce Pardo, than the unknown hit and run drivers who took the use of Angel Torres' legs and torso, than the unnamed hundreds of New York men and women—I am a man from New York and I am speechless at the inhumanity of this action—who trampled Jdimytai Damour, than the people who at the very least stood by while hundreds and thousands of otherwise sane and responsible Germans, Hutus and Arabs torture and slaughter people? If so, where are we while prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are tortured and humiliated? We can't claim later we didn't know it was happening; that didn't work for Adolf Eichmann or the makers of cuckoo clocks and sausage who willfully blinded themselves to the cold reality happening just down the road. I like to think so but I also think I am wrong.

To add greater complexity to an already complex equation, this morning we read that Bruce Pardo was living with the guilt that he'd contributed to an incident in which his son from a

previous relationship, now 9 years old, has had to spend his life confined to a wheelchair from brain damage suffered when Pardo was watching him. Turns out the 13 month old had crawled through an open screen door and into the pool at the apartment where Pardo's then-girlfriend was living. Can it get any more complicated?

Of course it can. We can find that Pardo was himself the victim of child abuse, that someone in a Santa costume had forced himself on him while he was himself an 8 year old. We could find his missing father, his lapsed Catholic mother, the girlfriend with a daddy complex. None of that, however, will matter. The fact remains that Bruce Pardo killed nine people and shot an 8 year old girl in the face. We can't reason away evil.

A couple weeks ago I preached a sermon up here that asked the question "how much religion do we need," and my answer was something to the effect was it was something like food, just enough to live. I'd like to amend that answer somewhat. We need enough religion, enough faith, enough belief that people like Bruce Pardo—or the hit and run drivers of Angel Torres or the hundreds of killers of Djimytai Damour—are, despite all evidence to the contrary, that they are nonetheless members of our family.

Because the sad fact is that what they do does not put them beyond the pale. True, we will never shoot people, hit people with our cars, walk over prone bodies on our way to save \$5 on a cordless drill. But those are possibilities each of us possesses. What Pardo and the others have done does not make them less human, but more. Many of you know that I often teach in prisons and I've met a number of men and women there who have done evil things, sometimes evil things to children, and who I've nonetheless come to like. I prefer not to know what they've done or what they're accused of doing or in some instances what they were finally caught for—I

could know that, their records are public knowledge and available on the internet through the Department of Corrections—and some of them want to tell me, as if expunging their guilt through confession. When they've approached and said, "I want to tell you what I've done," I invariably say no. I say, "Right now you're my student and I'm your teacher and if I find out that thing about you I might not like you anymore." That rarely stops them. And they tell me and my experience of what it means to be a human being has another layer of complexity added to it.

In the story of the original Diaspora, Moses led his tribe out of slavery in Egypt and into the desert on their way to becoming the people of god. In this newer Diaspora, in which we're no longer a tribe but the whole press of humanity, Bruce Jeffrey Pardo and the others lead us out of the false sense that we are somehow above that sort of behavior and into a moral desert where we become a people who must accept that the worst some of us do is a part of the best of us. That doesn't mean we're capable, given the circumstances, of dressing up in a Santa costume and killing people, or of staring impotently and afraid to approach an old man who's been hit on the street, or of trampling underfoot a temp who's made the poor choice of getting between us and a bargain. Deliver us from such capabilities. It does mean if we are to be people of god, people of spirit, people of faith—people—we must never let ourselves get so caught up in ourselves we forget that what it means to be human is to choose not to do such things.