Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal

Volume 1 | Number 2 Article 11

1-1-2012

Men in Black

Martin Munoz
Professor, School of Education and Counseling, Regis University, mmunoz@regis.edu

Men in Black

Martin K. Munoz
Professor, School of Education and Counseling
Regis University
(mmunoz@regis.edu)

At almost every Catholic university you will undoubtedly find old photographs of a sepia colored world, grainy artifacts steeped in tradition with narratives all but forgotten, like clouds passing in a blue sky. These photographs are but a moment in time, only the instruments that captured these moments may exist, a reminder of how science has permanence in a world ruled by the machine while stories pass on like ghostly figures in an indifferent province. The stories within these photos that once were filled with hope, promise and faith are now silent; only the reverberations of their memory remain.

In every epoch there are images representative of the "Times of our life", illustrations of our reality. Cave paintings and petroglyphs gave way to the Internet and social media that now transfixes a new generation of storytellers. We are all witnesses to a changing psychological landscape that limits our imagination and limits our ability to reflect on how these stories impact our hearts and minds. The indelible images that burn into our consciousness like a branding iron: the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, or the daily grind of war and the suffering of the innocent on demand. Tending to our own suffering has now become an indulgence, as we become increasingly entwined in a world that only values the vacuous temperament of being contented by medication, psychotherapy or the resignation towards hopelessness.

I began writing this reflection shortly after the shootings at a movie theater in Aurora Colorado during the summer of 2012. James Holmes a killed 12 people and injured 59 others at a cinema showing the film "The Dark Knight". The actions of the shooter leave no room for interpretation or imagination; we are trapped in a world of information without context.

James Holmes was medicated and under the care of a psychiatrist, but his suffering was not amiable to clinically driven interventions; he embraced the very human notion that "I want you to hurt like I do". Like many in this fractured and isolated world, there is no way out. Pain and suffering can only be ameliorated by the distance between oneself and one's collateral damage.

The story of James Holmes is a story of living in a fractured world of increasing isolation, : the disease of detachment. Henry Corbin, a noted author and Islamic scholar, stated, "we must make a real effort to overcome what one might call Western man's "agnostic reflex", since it is responsible for the divorce between thinking and being".[1]

The notion of an agnostic reflex can be understood as an involuntary reaction to the world that necessitates a scientific rational reason for our suffering. We turn away from the inherent issue that drives religion and faith. The notion that suffering must be ameliorated through diagnosis, treatment: and vigilant monitoring to prevent another instance of our most particular and intimate painful experiences.

After leaving a Ph.D. program in neuroscience at the University of Colorado, James Holmes was caught in the "agnostic reflex" where he fashioned himself in the image of the Joker, a character in the Batman series: another mad scientist with a score to settle, a diagnosis, and a loaded gun.

Ironically, the notion of an "agnostic reflex" manifests in rational desire to understand this tragedy in the terms of early onset of schizophrenia as the rationalization for the shootings. Perhaps Holmes would have explored

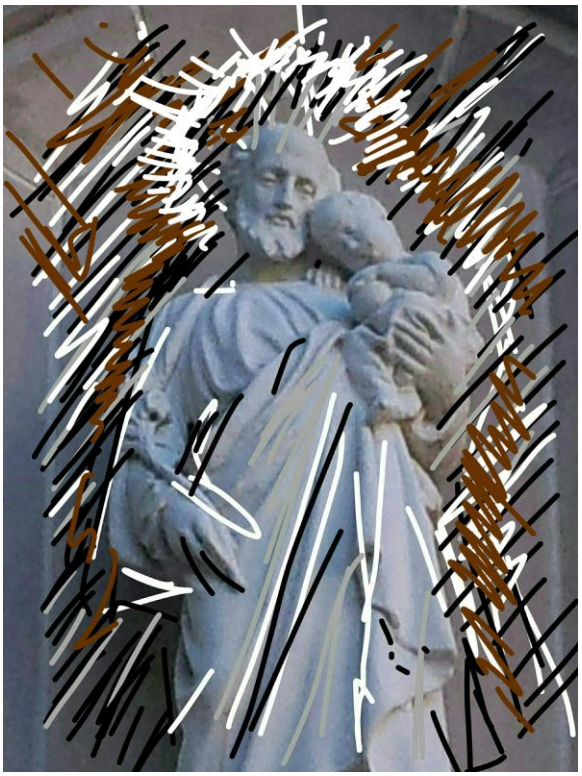

Image by the author

the phenomenon of psychosis in his studies of neuroscience.

Despite whatever diagnosis is derived, the suffering that Holmes and his victims have experienced cannot be ameliorated by treatment of a physical or psychological nature. We find little consolation in the laws of physics or mathematical proofs but rather comfort in faith, hope, and love.

As Holmes moved towards "the Joker" he became caught in a world spiraling down into the chaos brought about by his movement from the brilliant young scientist to evil genius, not unlike the protagonist Dr. Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's "A Modern Prometheus".[2] The monster created by Dr. Frankenstein was consumed by vengeance against its creator, in the same way that the science failed James Holmes; he would also exact his vengeance. Holmes chose the "Joker" as an alter-ego, a psychopathic genius with a mastery of chemistry and engineering. Holmes, like the Joker, experienced the agnostic reflex with all its malevolent power. Without the benefit of a soul that can gaze into suffering and accept quiet desperation, the outcome is frequently tragic. Like pebbles thrown into a pond, the concentric waves of love or hate are not discernible; they do however have a tendency of reaching the shore unencumbered. Holmes' pebble was indeed heavy, hewn from the larger narrative of rational causality, unmoved by an interior world of intuition and faith.

While many of us are troubled by the actions of John Holmes, we find comfort in a world that gives us definitive answers that are well reasoned and uphold the scientific values of precision and objectivity. This precision allows us to have a sense of control, despite the monsters of our imagination, those under our bed, in our closets, and those that live in the gritty streets of Gotham City.

So what of it? We struggle to understand acts of criminal behavior and assign a special psychological language that creates a clinical distance between the sane and insane.

The term "mentally ill" renders a sketch of an individual without assigning the intimate qualities of the illness. Mentally ill becomes a contrivance that can be easily be discerned by brain imaging or a complete psychological/psychiatric assessment.

As Holmes moved deeper into this fantasy of the mad scientist seeking vengeance against the innocent, it seems in character for the Joker whose only motivation is to use his persona as a psychopathic killer that sees all humanity as a backdrop to his very personal drama. To the psychopath, human beings no longer exist as a manifestation of god's creation but rather systems of neurotransmitters, synapses, and biological structures of an advanced organism. Essentially, the Agnostic Reflex has transformed Holmes into an extension of a skeptical world where the heart is a myogenic muscular organ rather than an organ of unmitigated love, compassion, and long-suffering of the heart of Christ towards humanity. Or as Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, inventor and Christian philosopher whose work influenced modern computer programming once stated, "The heart has reasons, which the reason cannot understand".[3]

As we search for solace it occurred to me that we are in the presence of "Men in Black" who can move us towards a vision of our own soul by

representing how "we ought to live". These men walk through the experience of giving the last rites in the middle of the night and witness the grief in all its command, then awake the following morning and celebrate a the sacrament of baptism. They become a witness to the fullness of life, and through their presence we are given direction. These men dressed in black value the experience of poverty and grief and offer guidance on this odyssey of the "Thinking and Being "of our experience.

They remind us to be passionate about our vocations and endeavor to do Gods work with elegance, passion, and genuine affection for others. Although we do live in a world in which the John Holmes's face their isolation and torment us within the shadows of our own fear, our men in black offer us a paragon of how we ought to live by finding god in all things, even in our incomprehensible suffering.

Notes

[1] Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis* (Paris: Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme, 1964), 6.

[2] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus* (London: Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1831).

[3] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Flammarion, 1670), sect. 4, no. 277.

Bibliography

Corbin, Henry. *Mundus Imaginalis*. Paris: Cahiers Internationaux de Symbolisme, 1964.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Paris: Flammarion, 1670.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*: London: Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1831.