



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

FAMILY VIOLENCE , YOUTH VIOLENCE

A tale of two funerals

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It is all too easy, while spending decades writing about violence and those who perpetrate horrible crimes, to lose touch with the pain and suffering of victims. And when researching and analyzing murder for a living, the victims and their stories often seem like footnotes to the larger questions of who did it and why? □ Just as surgeons must separate themselves emotionally from their work in the operating room, career true-crime writers and journalists must maintain a certain emotional distance in order to stay focused on the most inhumane acts imaginable.

At the same time, there is the danger of becoming overly dispassionate. A certain level of sensitivity is necessary to appreciate the mix of horror and tragedy that underlies the crimes we examine. For that reason, it is a good idea occasionally to attend the funerals of murder victims, those whose demise serves as the basis for our craft.

Two primary areas of my work over many years have been urban youth violence and family mass murder. And so I attended today's funeral in Winchester for the four

members of the Stone/Mortimer family murdered last week allegedly by their husband/father/son-in-law, just as I did last month for 14-year-old Jaewon Martin who was gunned down in Dorchester while playing basketball.

The two experiences could not have been any more dissimilar. It isn't that the crowd at Jaewon's funeral was a large sea of black faces with a few whites here and there, whereas today's congregation was nearly all white, if not entirely. And the conspicuous difference is not that today's ceremony took place in an affluent community that bears no resemblance to the Dorchester neighborhood where Jaewon was eulogized. Rather, the most striking contrast is in the overall atmosphere and mood at the two funerals.

The Martin ceremony bordered on being a political event -- and not just because a bunch of politicians showed up. It was both an occasion to remember a promising youngster whose life was senselessly extinguished and an opportunity for several speakers to voice loud demands for immediate action against the scourge of gang and gun violence. On that day, a fever pitch of anger permeated the jam-packed chapel. The pastor even went before the TV cameras to rail against the gun culture.

By contrast, the pastor at the Stone/Mortimer funeral today in Winchester didn't seek the spotlight, and even instructed members of the media, who were represented in full force with microphones and cameras, to stay outside of the church and away from the mourners. There were no politicians in sight, only an array of friends and neighbors wishing to pay their respects and lend support to the surviving relatives. Today's gathering was all about sorrow, not anger and grief so profound in a situation that combines murder, multiple victims, and young children.

In the weeks since Jaewon Martins funeral, there has been much discussion and debate about solutions, everything from expanding summer jobs for urban youth to expanding regulations aimed at curtailing the illegal gun market. Today, in Winchester, there was only talk about bringing closure.

It would be unfortunate, however, if we did not at least consider what solutions there might be for preventing family massacres, even though these measures are not particularly tangible. They may just involve a greater effort on all of our part to be a supportive friend and neighbor to those around us -- the same kind of effort that hundreds showed today in coming out to support a family in mourning.

Note: Out of respect for the memory of Laura Stone Mortimer, her children Finn and Charlotte, and her mother Ellen Stone, I have disabled the commenting feature of this site. You may contact me directly by e-mail at j.fox@neu.edu.