



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Why mothers kill

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The grim discovery of 6-year-old Camden Pierce Hughes lying dead on the side of a road in southern Maine and the subsequent arrest of his mother, Julianne McCrery, under suspicion of murder have attracted widespread attention and outrage. In fact, Wednesday's news of the 42-year-old woman's capture at a rest stop in Chelmsford, Massachusetts may have eclipsed President Obama's visit to Boston as the lead story of the day and evening.

If only such cases were as rare as they should be. Regrettably, nearly 100 children ages 5-7 are murdered annually in the United States, and about 20% of these young victims are murdered by their mothers. And this is just the top end of a much larger cluster: There are, on average, about 180 children ages 7 and younger who are murdered each year at the hands of the women who brought them into the world. That's about one mother-perpetrated infanticide every other day.

It is difficult for most of us to fathom how someone could kill their own flesh and blood, especially a victim so young and innocent. Motherhood is supposed to be about nurturing, not murdering. The motives for such crimes vary from the pathological to the pathetic.

Some murdering moms act out of depression and despair, believing that their child will be better off living in heaven than suffering on earth. In March 2002, Andrea Yates of Houston, Texas, drowned her five children, ranging in age from 6 months to 7 years old, in a frenzied religious hallucination. The jury was convinced of her impaired mental state and returned a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity.

Of course, not all murdering moms garner as much compassion as Yates, particularly those who act out of pure selfishness. In 1994, Susan Smith of South Carolina drowned her two sons in a lake, and then told the police and the press that the young boys had been taken by a stranger during a carjacking. Apparently, she did it for love -- not love for her children, but to hold onto a boyfriend who would have nothing to do with her so long as her children were around. Plus, for Smith, playing the role of a grieving mother would make her more sympathetic and appealing.

Sympathy-getting can indeed be a powerful driving force, an irresistible motivator for some people. At the extreme, Marybeth Tinning of Schenectady, New York killed her nine children, one-by-one over a period of fourteen years, to feed her craving for emotional support. With each new birth and each subsequent death of a child, Marybeth remained at the center of attention. Baby showers and funerals sustained her.

Based on preliminary reports related to McCrery's depressed mental state and early speculation concerning motive, this case would appear to involve what has been called "suicide by proxy." A recurring theme identified in cases of infanticide is for a suicidal parent to kill his or her child out of a warped sense that they both will be better off together in the afterlife. In some situations, however, the parent succeeds in ending the child's life, but ultimately fails to complete the final phase of the suicide plan when their own survival instinct prevails.

In the weeks and months ahead, as the legal process plays itself out, we will learn much more about Julianne McCrery and what may have compelled her to kill, as it is alleged, the son to whom she seemed so devoted. Whatever her role in the child's death and whatever forces were upon her, most people will continue to be perplexed about how a mother's love can transform into the will to kill.