



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

Crime: No laughing matter?

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The themes of crime and punishment, particularly true crimes and real punishments, are very much a part of our popular culture, and have been for generations. We are forever fascinated with tales of destruction and evil -- in movies, books, music and various other media.

Although the horror of murder and mayhem is no laughing matter, the fact is that the lighter side of our fixation on crime extends to humor, puns and jokes. Who hasn't heard and even repeated their share of cracks about O.J. Simpson's wild car chase with the cops or Jeffrey Dahmer's unusual appetite? So-called "gallows humor" is a well-established mechanism for helping us deal with harsh realities that affront our senses and sensibilities.

There are, of course, limits to what is acceptable -- a fine but important line that divides a good joke from poor taste. And, as with many proscriptions of social etiquette, this line has everything to do with time and place.

This summer has been especially shocking and painful for the spate of high-profile mass shootings -- at a Seattle cafe, in a Colorado movie theater, in a Wisconsin house of worship and, more recently and much closer to home, on the streets of Dorchester. The carnage would seem to be off limits for comics, be they pros or amateurs.

Last month, stand-up comedian Dane Cook got a lesson in the importance of filtering mirth from mouth when he stunned and silenced his audience by telling a joke about the movie theater shooting in which 12 were killed and dozens more were wounded. Cook's mistake wasn't so much in content, but in telling his ill-timed joke within a week of the tragedy.

Moving from the comedy club to the lecture hall, a professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N.Y. faces termination for his classless attempt at classroom humor. In case you missed the details, Professor Gregory Sullivan, a popular instructor in the humanities department, reportedly remarked to his students as he momentarily slipped out the door during a film, "If someone with orange hair appears in the corner of the classroom, run for the exit."

Apparently, few, if any, of the students found the reference to the accused Colorado gunman to be at all funny, especially one member of the class whose father was killed in the massacre. This was certainly not

the place for such an ill-advised attempt at humor. When the you-know-what hit the fan, Professor Sullivan apologized -- publicly to his class and privately to the grieving student. Yet the dean still wanted the offending professor banished for good.

At the risk of seeming like an apologist for others in my line of work, termination would clearly be an excessive sanction. Importantly, the professor's comment was about the accused gunman, not about any of the innocent victims.

In the weeks and months to come, we will likely hear many more jokes and pokes at the wild-eyed man with blazing orange hair whose initial court appearance was center-stage in the national media. It will be one way we deal with such an unspeakable horror.

So here's hoping that Professor Sullivan is given a reprieve rather than his walking papers. His classroom remark wasn't funny, but neither was it sufficient reason for dismissal.