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Violence Against Women Undergirds Amish Massacre

By David Weaver-Zercher

A year has passed since the horrific shooting of 10 Amish girls in their Lancaster County, Pa., school. In the weeks that followed, people around the world expressed great sympathy for the Amish community in Nickel Mines, and many lauded their quick extension of forgiveness to the shooter, Charles Carl Roberts IV.

The forgiveness story is astounding and deserving of our attention. But there's another story that must precede it if we are to remember the Nickel Mines shooting in a way that truly honors the victims, their families and the act of forgiveness: the violence story.

The violence perpetrated by Roberts was horrible in its scope and unique in its details. Unfortunately, it was not as unique as we might wish. I'm not alluding here to school shootings which, granted, are all too common in the United States. I'm referring to the violence perpetrated against American women by American men.

It's tempting to think that the United States has come a long way in its treatment of women. We're not like the Afghanistan described by novelist Khaled Hosseini, where women are locked in rooms for days on end. Nor are we 19th-century America, where women's rights were systematically limited and legally ignored. Come to think of it, most of us aren't even like the Amish, where strict gender roles govern all sorts of behavior.

But violence in America is disproportionately a male thing, and in many instances, the victims are vulnerable women. The statistics on the National Organization for Women Web site are staggering. Four women are killed each day by husbands or boyfriends; over a half million women each year report assaults by intimates; and as many as 1.2 million women are raped annually.

The Amish girls were not shot by their husbands or boyfriends, but they nonetheless joined the long list of women who have been assaulted by men.

Unfortunately, there weren't many news reports last October that reminded us of that. What we heard instead were reports about the violation of Lancaster County's "bucolic

countryside” and the murder of “Amish innocents” (notice the gender-neutral language). Then the narrative changed, and the forgiveness story took over.

I don't wish to belittle the act of Amish forgiveness. Like many Americans I was moved by their ability to extend words of grace to the killer's family, and by their commitment to overcome resentment toward the man who robbed them of their daughters and traumatized their sons.

Still, the evil that occurred in Nickel Mines falls within a more prominent American tradition than the forgiveness that followed. In fact, the radical nature of forgiveness is brought into even starker relief when we acknowledge the evil that made it necessary.

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