

Murder in a One-Room School House

Nothing captures America's sense of longing for a simpler time quite like the idea of a one-room school house. That is at least part of the reason why the horror that took place this past week at an Amish school in Pennsylvania was so devastating. The murder of children is reason enough for grief and anger. But for the assault to take place in a setting seen by many as the embodiment of a time of innocence now past, creates in us an acute sense of loss.

It is not without tragic irony that the assault would take place among the Amish. These faithful folk live out a deeply held commitment to nonviolence. Following the teachings of Jesus, and Anabaptist creeds from the 17th century, the Amish would rather "suffer the spoiling of our goods, rather than give occasion of offense to anyone; and if we are struck on our right cheek, rather to turn the other also, than revenge ourselves, or return the blow."

The depth of that commitment was evident almost immediately as the community joined together to create a fund both for the families of the slain and wounded children, but also for the family of Charles Carl Roberts-the man who brought the terror to them.

The Amish are often viewed with a sort of bemused respect. On the one hand they are admired for their dedication to a way of life that is grounded in hard work. Many Amish communities refuse to make use of modern technology. This makes work on the farm much harder and much more labor intensive than it is for other farm communities in America.

And even though we might question the validity of choosing a 19th century lifestyle as the only authentic way to live, we must respect their dedication and discipline. The austerity of their lives stands in stark contrast to the mad rush for creature comforts and labor saving gadgets that drive much of our consumer culture.

Sadly, the attack on the school house could very well serve as a parable for our time. We are drowning in a sea of senseless violence. We use violence to entertain ourselves. Violence is used as a first step rather than a last resort in solving

problems, both personal and political.

And since the Sept. 11 attacks, there has emerged an eager willingness to use violence in unrestrained ways—on combatants and non-combatants alike. All is fair in the new world order in which homeland security is the highest good.

In this regard the Amish might be held up as an example of how nonviolence fails. They left themselves vulnerable to the evil that stalks us in this world. No one can afford the luxury of seeking to live without resort to force.

Maybe. But I wonder how many of us out here in the armed world really feel safe? Are safe?

Beyond that, I wonder how long it will take the Amish community, calling upon their traditions of prayer and simplicity, to work their way through their grief and pain. Blessed are they who mourn, Jesus said, for they will be comforted.

We are five years out from Sept. 11 and our world is noticeably different, and we still are not healed. Five years from now, it will be interesting to see if Amish children are still meeting in a one room school house.

[James L. Evans](#), a syndicated columnist, also serves as pastor of Auburn First Baptist Church in Auburn, Ala.