

**“Life Is Precious, or It’s Not”**  
**Barbara Kingsolver**

“Columbine used to be one of my favorite flowers,” my friend told me, and we both fell silent. We’d been talking about what she might plant on the steep bank at the foot of the woods above her house, but a single word cut us suddenly adrift from our focus on the uncomplicated life in which flowers could matter. I understood why she no longer had the heart to plant columbines. I feel that way, too, and at the same time I feel we ought to plant them everywhere, to make sure we remember. In our backyards, on the graves of the children lost, even on the graves of the children who murdered, whose parents must surely live with the deepest emotional pain it is possible to bear.

In the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado, the whole country experienced grief and shock and- very noticeably- the spectacle of a nation acting bewildered. Even the op-ed commentators who usually tell us just what to think were asking, instead, what we should think. How could this happen in an ordinary school, and ordinary neighborhood? Why would any student, however frustrated with mean spirited tormentors, believe that guns and bombs were the answer?

I’m inclined to think all of us who are really interested in these questions might have started asking them a long while ago. Why does any person or nation, including ours, persist in celebrating violence as an honorable expression of disapproval? In, let’s say Iraq, the Sudan, Waco- anywhere we get fed up with mean spirited tormentors- why are we so quick to assume that guns and bombs are the answer?

Some accidents and tragedies and bizarre twists of fate are truly senseless, as random as lightning bolts out of the blue. But this one at Columbine High was not, and to say it was is irresponsible. “Senseless” sounds like “without cause,” and it requires no action, so that after an appropriate interval of dismayed hand wringing, we can go back to business as usual. What takes guts is to own up: this event made sense. Children model the behavior of adults, on whatever scale is available to them. Ours are growing up in a nations whose most important, influential men- from presidents to the coolest film characters- solve problems by killing people. Killing is quick and sure and altogether manly.

It is utterly predictable that some boys who are desperate for admiration and influence will reach for guns and bombs. And it’s not surprising that this happened in a middle-class neighborhood; institutional violence is right at home in the suburbs. Don’t let’s point too hard at the gangsta rap in our brother’s house until we’ve examined the video games, movies, and political choices we support in our own. The tragedy in Littleton grew out of a culture that is loudly and proudly rooting for the global shootout. That culture is us.

Conventional wisdom tells us that Nazis, the U.S. Marines, the Terminator, and the NYPD all kill for different reasons. But as every parent knows, children are good at ignoring or seeing straight through the subtleties we spin. Here’s what they must surely see: Killing is an exalted tool for punishment and control. Americans who won’t support it are ridiculed, shamed, or even threatened. The Vietnam war was a morally equivocal conflict by any historical measure, and yet to this day, candidates for public office who avoided being drafted into that war are widely held to be unfit for leadership.

Most Americans believe bloodshed is necessary for preserving our way of life, even though it means risking the occasional misfire- the civilians strafed because they happened to live too close to the terrorist, maybe, or the factory that actually made medicines but *might* have been making weapons. We’re willing to sacrifice the innocent man condemned to death row because every crime must be paid for, and no jury is perfect. The majority position in our country seems to be that violence is an appropriate means to power, and that the loss of certain innocents along the way is the sad but inevitable cost.

I’d like to ask those who favor this position if they would be willing to go to Littleton and explain to some mothers what constitutes an acceptable risk. Really. Because in a society that embraces violence, this is what “our way of life” has come to mean. The questions can’t be why but only “Why yours and not mine?” We have taught our

children in a thousand ways, sometimes with flag-waving and sometimes with a laugh track, that the bad guy deserves to die. But we easily forget a crucial component of this formula: "Bad" is defined by the aggressor. Any of our children may someday be, in someone's mind, the bad guy.

For all of us who are clamoring for meaning, aching for the loss of these precious young lives in Littleton to mean something, my strongest instinct is to use the event to nail a permanent benchmark into our hearts: Life is that precious, period. It is possible to establish zero tolerance for murder as a solution to anything. Those of us who agree to this contract can start by removing from our households and lives every television program, video game, film, book, toy, and CD that presents the killing of humans (however symbolic) as an entertainment option, rather than the appalling loss it really is. Then we can move on to harder choices, such as discussing the moral lessons of capital punishment. Demanding from our elected officials the subtleties and intelligence of diplomacy instead of an endless war budget. Looking into what we did (and are still doing) to the living souls of Iraq, if we can bear it. And- this is important- telling our kids we aren't necessarily proud of the parts of our history that involved bombing people in countries whose policies we didn't agree with.

Sounds extreme? Let's be honest. *Death* is extreme, and the children are paying attention.