

Published written pieces by Wilfred Roach

Orlando

The Pulse Night Club Orlando Massacre in Orlando, Florida; a set of Personal Reflections.

From the time I was a small boy (the eldest of three brothers), and as I steadily grew into adolescence, my Dad, an immigrant from the beautiful twin islands of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, was often given to biblical utterances. These utterances were so powerful that they stayed with me for the rest of my life. I was afraid of him, but I knew his words were those of a wise and experienced man who in a quiet, firm manner, would tell me - as he leaned uneasily against the family kitchen table - about his life and the conclusions he had drawn about the 'nature of Man', a habit he continued until his death. He would preach these regular Sunday sermons (after lunch) in an animated way, describing events and his reactions to them as if they had only just occurred!

To me this seemed to go on for hours, with Dad pausing only to catch breath, and me feeling as if he had no care for whether I understood what he was saying or not. There was no scope for questions. He would announce with a flourish that the old people would say this and that about a given situation and how for him those sayings still had relevance even though they were long gone. What I realised much later in my life was that this was, for him, the most effective way of imparting wisdom to me, a young mind that could be shaped in values and life outcomes. In this he was successful, imparting knowledge, values and morals, and casting an interesting light on how a young man entered the world and related to it at a later stage of life.

My family and I lived in a cul-de-sac at the bottom of a long road in the London suburb of Kingsbury. At one of these Sunday speak-a-thons, Dad said - eyeing me with a look that spoke volumes - he told me that the old people used to say (and I paraphrase), 'if you see a man walking towards you, and see he wants to fight you, then your best course of action is to cross over to the other side of the road.'

And that was it. The significance and depth of what he said had eluded me at the time, but the despicable behaviour of Mateen at the Club in Orlando twenty years later brought it back to me with a powerful knock. The wisdom contained in that pithy observation of Man (as in Mankind), is: it's never too late to turn back from a disastrous course of action, to keep a hold of yourself, take responsibility for your urges, and avoid unnecessary conflict with your 'fellow man'.

Dad was a great humanitarian. He believed in the indissoluble links and responsibilities that flow from us as human beings and that we are responsible for our actions, to ourselves and to each other. On that principle he was unmovable. He hated violence of any description, whether verbal or otherwise, and would turn the other cheek, literally, in situations others would perceive as a basis for personal insult or inevitable involvement. This could be in the context of work, family or friends. I say 'perceived' because he exercised an unwavering politeness in his daily discourse and showed respect for other human beings, even if they were Americans! Towards the end of his life he became quite the philosopher concerning the 'universality of Man and Nature'. He loved being in nature and through agricultural cultivation contributed, in his view, to the betterment of mankind. What is the state of our connection with nature? He rightly bemoaned the obsession with modernity in its desire, he felt, to obliterate the source from which the human species emerged; that is Nature. He used to say 'your heaven and hell is right here on earth'.

I know from experience that he was right; I created my own heaven and hell without any assistance from anyone else, over and over again, until I learnt it well - that humility comes from all that flows in making the wrong choices, leading inevitably to interesting consequences, not only for me, but also for my 'fellow man'. The tragic events perpetrated by Mateen in Orlando all that time ago was no exception. Therefore, your mental state is of great significance in how you present yourself and how you behave.

This is what I wrote on my Facebook page after a heinous crime committed against innocent and loving Queers at the Pulse nightclub:

‘The last 72 hours plus since the truly horrible and evil events at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida and having just witnessed the gathering at the iconic landmark, Taylor Square in Sydney, and later online at Old Compton Street, London. Following those incidents I had these reflections: We as a human species who have raised ourselves by our thoughts and actions above another species on this beautiful planet called Earth, have in my opinion failed in our conceit to let hate die a natural death. We allow, through thought and deed, to perpetrate little deaths on each other. I think about how I have negatively labelled the behaviours of others, creating reservoirs of distrust, certainly with others and the wider community, but also within myself. So I ask myself what chance does love have in this never ending contest with hate and its awful consequences? It occurs to me that hate is love gone sour.

‘Right now I am asking myself truthfully; what can I do to eliminate hate from my thoughts and actions?’

‘My thoughts and prayers are with those in Orlando who have lost loved ones. As well as for those around this beautiful planet who continue to be subject to unacceptable homophobic violence. Peace.

‘I ask myself, how can I eliminate hate from my thoughts and actions in order to contribute to a less hate-filled world. I am not suggesting for one moment that the actions of Manteen were caused by the very existence of queer people, but that existentially, we all swim in the water which is light and dark. I also know that I have my Dad’s example and wonder if over the years, I have shied away from creating and walking a path in its fullest because of what I perceived as the costs flowing from not reacting.

I admitted to myself, but never while Dad lived, that not to fight back was a weakness, when for me to ‘fight back’ in words and deed was very much the order of the day - usually as a response to how I imagined my sexual identity and characteristics were perceived by others. Yet without realising it I

was often tilting at shadows. I tacitly understood that any overt discussion, expression or championing of my sexual identity (which is inseparable from all my constituent identities, skin colour and so on) was a burden best kept from most of my extended family and some friends. It arose from a dread fear of rejection. To me that fear (which lurks in all of us) is the handmaiden of dark psychic thoughts which can only repress our true light-filled expression of ourselves and beyond, with the community and planet we all share.

In discussing the aftermath of Orlando with my partner Paul, he and I both noted that, given our personal histories of being shunned, bullied, and denigrated, with little of our true selves being lauded or accepted, that it wasn't remarkable neither of us ever sought to perpetrate violence on others, queer, or non queer.

It is an interesting point of reference that nearly all the atrocities perpetrated against innocents in Western democracies such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Australia have been by younger men as the lead perpetrators. I wonder if they had had fathers such as my own, what difference there might have been to the outcomes?

We permit the wilful breaking of spirits. It is like enduring watching a contest where the collective hole is dug, the hate is the rocks we use to pile on top of ourselves causing the most excruciating and lasting pain. When will we listen and learn? There is nothing of worth in those rocks except that they are best left alone.

When the initial reports emerged of the massacre, I was numbed, feeling nothing. I took a step away initially from the horror of seeing dead and injured innocents bathed in their own blood beaming at me through camera lenses and mobile phone footage. To me it was as if our human eye in the form of these reports was magnifying and distorting the horror of unfolding events. I could not, and would not, connect to this violence. The numbness endured. I wondered if it was the result, this numbness, of all the years of steadily unfiltered horror starting for me in childhood with reportage of the Biafran civil war. I remembered the ads of the late 1960s asking for donations to provide food for little children, looking just like me, but with pot bellies, a sign of starvation; then onto the Vietnam war, the

Northern Ireland conflict with bombs going off in London and Birmingham, shelling and genocide in Bosnia, and so it goes on and continues as I write. Had I become inured to global violence available twenty-four hours a day?

I have always known that people hated me for no good reason other than the colour of my skin pigment, sexual orientation, or whatever - that dark and ugly thoughts have never gone away from any era. Ever. But also that generations of my own and many other families have walked this road of life and done so with decency and care for other each and humanity, resulting in beautifully wrought outcomes.

Yet as I sit writing this opinion piece against the backdrop of modernity, noise from the chatter other cafe patrons and traffic, I wonder whether Orlando is a signature of the age we live in? That raw emotions stirred in the US presidential primaries of XXXX could give voice to that voiceless hatred, and then you would unleash furies that no politician or citizen of the world could control. We need to be very aware that the patrons of Pulse were Latinos and friends, and what had been a coarse political discourse in the US may have contributed to their deaths and injuries. Can I say with any certainty that Mateen was not unaware of this discourse and this consequently affected his course of action? We may never conclusively know. But for all our sakes we need to understand that we are all Orlando - Je suis Orlando. Like it or not.

Yes we must honour the innocents in whatever way seems appropriate to us so long as it champions love, and commitment to values that unite us rather than foster hate. For as Dad said, all we have in the end is Love.