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Local Opinion: Hatred of the 'other' is bigotry

Someone was abducted, taken to a remote location, robbed, beaten, tied to a fence, set on fire and left to die. Who is it?

The ultimate answer to this question is important and it sets us on a course toward solving a problem that has existed within our single human population since before we could call ourselves “human.”

If this crime happened in the Deep South of the U.S. in the 1950s, who would the victim be? If it happened in 1940s Eastern Europe who would it be? How about Cambodia in the late 1970s?

Would we call it a lynching or part of the Great Murder? Would we see it as part of a genocide? How about in Bosnia, Rwanda, South Africa or North America after 1492?

Understanding the victims and the perpetrators is certainly important in solving the specific crime, but these specifics can also fade our view to the ultimate problem and the solution. As we run out of space, water and farmable land, we need to solve it soon lest we all fall.

Ultimately, it matters more why the crime was committed. As the true crime is timeless, the specifics of one night fades, though these specifics are important to draw attention to the problem.

People deemed as the “other” are the consistent victims of these crimes. In this country, throughout our history if you are of African or Hispanic decent you are probably aware that powerful groups see you as this “other.” If you are female, throughout all human history and in most civilizations, you are that “other.” If you are of an aboriginal or original native culture standing in the path of mass migration, the people of your history became the “other” within their native land.

No matter your history, you’ve descended from those who were the other at some time.

Matthew Shepard, the victim in the crime described above, was the other because he was gay in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. On the night of Oct.6 that year, Matthew was added to a long historic list of people deemed as the Other who have come to a violent end.

As extreme as this example is, it also speaks for diminished lives of those that become victims of a slow crawl violence that shortens lives and robs individuals of their authentic selves.

We tend to deflate this important issue with overly specific language. It is true that racism, sexism, nativism, homophobia and a whole list of other philosophical crimes can be described as different based upon the victims. A solution comes, though, when we look at the problem as a whole. Bigotry is the better word, as it speaks to the similarities of these philosophical crimes that create these physical crimes.

Having left Matthew Shepard to die, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson went back to town and robbed two Hispanic men. That is a clear indication that they didn't just hate gays, but many other "others." If the crimes had been reversed, the crimes would have been just as heinous.

It is not a new idea that what happens to one, happens to us all. Most religious texts agree and we feel it when we observe sporting events and moon landings. We are our brother's keepers and we share a single planetary existence.

Unlike many other countries, we have an ability to change things. This age-old and universal idea unites us and if we simply assume that an affront to one of us is an affront to us all, we will become an elective majority and we can change our society.