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Sociopathy as a Public Health Issue

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“We struggle for the words to explain to our children how such evil can exist, how there can be such cruelty and such suffering....” Donald Trump, POTUS. Las Vegas, NV, 10/4/2017

In the movie “Hero” Sam Elliot plays Lee Hayden, a Western icon whose career has peaked long ago, and who is struggling in silence with a new diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. In a pivotal scene he is given a Lifetime Achievement Award. In his ‘acceptance speech’ he actually declines the recognition, saying that achievement is “the result of hard work.” He goes on to say that although he has worked hard, he’s not sure he deserves the award. At that point someone in the audience yells, “We love you Lee!” And Elliot/Lee expresses his love for them, saying that he is nothing without the audience who love him, but “I’m just a grain of sand. We’re all just grains of sand ... we’re just people ... workin’ hard and tryin’ to do our best ... I’m no better’n you, and you’re no better’n me ... everyone in this room is as deserving as I am of this award ...like you, miss.” That is when he chooses, evidently at random, one of the women in the audience to whom he gives the award. (By the way, Lee Hayden was wrong when he said that he didn’t deserve that award any more than anyone else in the room. It is obvious that he did, but it may not be obvious why.)

On the night of October 1, 2017 in Las Vegas, Nevada, as the result of some very hard work, SP (I refuse to use his name) killed 58 people and then himself. But because of the choices he made his hard work resulted not in achievement, but in death, suffering and incalculable loss. So then, to come back to the President’s words, what do we tell our children? How is it that cruel thoughts become cruel plans, and cruel plans become cold preparations which then lead to horrific actions resulting in inconceivable suffering? We could begin by pointing out that we all have choices; the choices we make always affect what it is that we actually do, and what people think of us. For example, from time to time even the best of us have cruel thoughts (if you doubt it, see what St. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:12!), but we can choose to nurse the cruel thought or choose replace it with another thought, or simply busy oneself with some task. Beyond that, however, we need to teach everyone that there are important things beyond choices and hard work, and even beyond all that we can see or touch or put into words. Whether or not we use words such as “spiritual” we each have evidence of these more important things by way of the

feelings generated as we relate to and connect with the world and the people around us. It is this betweenness that gives meaning to our lives. When those feelings are missing life is only a matter of our own sensations, and the lives of other people have no value beyond whatever part they may play in providing those sensations. In the general population about 96% of people have these feelings of betweenness, but the other 4% do not. They go mostly undetected, but when they are discovered they are labeled “sociopath” or “psychopath” (the two terms are equivalent). Although they have a psychiatric diagnosis, these people are not insane. Insanity refers to a failure of reality testing and applies in any case where an individual cannot distinguish the true state of affairs in the world from a false perception or thought. Actually, the 4% usually think that they are the only sane ones. To them it seems that everyone who acts out of compassion or loyalty or love is doing something crazy, based on a false understanding of the way the world really works! You may think that there is a difference between the psychopathic murderer and the sociopathic 4% of people that statistically are part of every large crowd or population of people. You would be wrong. The only thing that prevents any sociopath from committing murder is their perception that the difficulties and consequences are likely to exceed the benefits of taking a particular human life. While much could be said about the public health effects of crime, drug abuse, etc. attributable to individual sociopaths on a daily basis, the largest public health issue arises when horrific acts are discussed non-stop on cable news and reverberate through social media. This corrodes the quality of life for everyone and contributes to what are known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Children all over the country were terrified after September 11, 2001, and no doubt there are thousands or millions of children now who are asking just the kinds of questions to which President Trump referred. If these children cannot be re-assured in a way that is meaningful, this ACE may contribute to the future burden of chronic disease in ways we will explore in a future column.

To return to Lee Hayden, the reason he deserved the Lifetime Achievement Award is because he evidently delivered his part(s) in ways that allowed his audience to feel real feelings – betweenness. Like the man said, “We love you Lee!”