

Dateline: January 15, 2011

UNHINGED

For many years I was privileged to lead a modest-sized faith community of good-hearted folks. Being handy resourceful types, we were constantly repairing and enhancing the buildings and property.

On the long list for on-going maintenance were the wooden sanctuary doors. They were large and heavy, and with frequent use the hinges would loosen, the doors would jam, and people couldn't get in or out. That was a problem.

Replacing the hinge screws with longer and longer ones worked for a while, until the threads stripped the wooden jamb once again. Eventually, it was clear the problem wasn't the door, the hinges or the screws, but the building itself. Until we fixed the framework, our most important passageway wouldn't work, and we weren't going anywhere. In a word, we'd become unhinged.

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A week has past since the unfolding events of yet one more violent moment in this nation and its aftermath, this time in Tucson. Amidst all the searching for the inexplicable 'whys,' the inadequate 'what' of what might have been done to prevent it from happening (or ever happening again), and the squabbling over who might be blamed, one thing was clearly felt. Whatever else has happened, we have once again collectively found ourselves *unhinged*.

On Wednesday, the President remarked, "... when a tragedy like this strikes, it is part of our nature to demand explanations - to try to impose some order on the chaos, and make sense out of that which seems senseless. Already we've seen a national conversation commence, not only about the motivations behind these killings, but about everything from the merits of gun safety laws to the adequacy of our mental health systems. Much of this process, of debating what might be done to prevent such tragedies in the future, is an essential ingredient in our exercise of self-government."

But he also simply and astutely observed, "We're shaken from our routines, and forced to look inward."

My hunch is that, while the ensuing "thorough investigations" and careful examination of lots of evidence and data might provide a lot of potentially useful information, deeper, broader and more far-reaching introspection could prove more illuminating and helpful in the end.

Consequently, my further hunch is legislation merely limiting the number of rounds in a Glock's magazine clip, or reviewing and revising school policies to better address student mental health may always prove to be too little, too late, in a social order that is itself in crisis and hanging off its hinges. There's something more at stake here. And more than a little introspection would help serve the common good.

Whereas I would normally have had an immediate comment or two (or more) to make, in response to the perpetual 24-hour news cycle, I've surprised myself this last week; feeling more compelled to listen to others, ponder and reflect.

Quite some time ago I realized there's always a *back-story* to every story; where something more profound may often be found. That's probably why I've spent so many years foraging around the language of myth and the plotlines of parables; moving from storyline, to interpretation, to meaningful application of arcane tales that still have the capacity to move us and tell our story too. And, in this high-profile story of tragedy and violence for perpetrator and victims alike, I believe there's a back-story; which may lead us to the very framework by which we collectively try to set our house aright again.

We have been both stirred and shaken. There is something more deeply seated, more culturally endemic that has unfolded to create this American story; and it has something to do not only with the manner in which we think and act, but the words we use to tell our stories, about the ways we order our lives.

Looking at the back-story, we should not underestimate the power of language. And public forums filled with talking heads that challenge each other to reevaluate the rules by which we engage in civil discourse and political rhetoric, with a general reminder that we all ought to just behave ourselves and treat others as we would like to be treated, is only a starting point.

Call it coincidence or not, it doesn't matter: Gabby was absolutely right. Words have consequences. And her words should haunt us. When one employs the language of *lock and load*, and *crosshairs* over targets that have a name and face behind them, it builds upon the *framework* in which one deliberately chooses to tell their story. It becomes a part of the common language, the cultural parlance and folklore with which a society tells its story.

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When we tell our stories using metaphorical imagery, it's never, ever *just* a metaphor. Unless one is completely ignorant of the words that come out of one's mouth, stories are told with certain imagery *precisely* for the *power* invoked in such an image. The words chosen may be inspirational, insightful, or incite-full. Once let loose, it should not utterly surprise us when the words used to tell our stories become part of real live human events.

It has been objectively argued the sole action of one more deranged gunman, who easily passed an instant background check and exercised his second amendment right to purchase a weapon capable of such inordinate violence, was not a political act; despite the fact this high-profile mayhem seems to have struck a deeper nerve in our national psyche precisely because a member of Congress was not only one of the hapless victims, but the target.

Regardless of the confused logic to such an argument – which is altogether useless anyway -- it leaves me asking a far bigger question.

Why is it that political assassinations and the routine acts of armed violence amongst the citizenry are typically the stuff of across-the-border drug cartels, war-torn nations in which we're engaged halfway around the world, and impoverished third-world countries in total social chaos; with the *only seeming exception* being our own magnificent country, the last so-called superpower and leader of the free world?

What is it in our collective make-up, our constitution and character? What is it in the way we create the stories we tell that makes a Tucson supermarket on a Saturday morning the latest crime scene; but not, I fear, the last such story to be told?

Misfortunate events happen all the time, and are typically labeled as being tragedies. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time is a terrible misfortune when tragedy strikes. What is truly tragic, however, is when terrible misfortune happens when one has

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What is truly tragic, however, is when terrible misfortune happens when one has the wisdom and capacity to do otherwise. We can do better.

In the aftermath of such stories, it is often asked why bullets need to fly and we become *unhinged* once again, before we are starkly reminded of both the capacity for good, often heroic acts of human kindness and sacrifice, in the face of utter human cruelty on the other. Like it or not, they are both a part of our common story.

In the face of this still greater tragedy that continues to unfold – of which this event is only the latest chapter – I am persuaded it yet remains within our capacity to deliberately choose to tell another story; if only we have the wisdom, courage and compassion to do so.

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