

Violence in American Schools: An Interview with Dr. Michael Hurd

by **Joseph Kellard** (June 13, 1999)

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[www.CapitalismMagazine.com] **Capitalism Magazine: Many people, sociologists and psychologists among them, blame the rash of shootings by kids in schools on the violence depicted in video games, movies, and TV and on the prevalence of guns in America. What do you think is the most fundamental cause that unites all of these incidents, and to what extent, if any, do these depictions of violence in various mediums of entertainment play in them?**

Dr. Hurd: Only a profound and all-encompassing hatred of existence could motivate such a crime. Other student killers in recent years demonstrated elements of these motives, but not with the ruthless consistency of the Littleton, Colorado, terrorists.

The hatred of life and existence that these young killers exhibited—and their determination to bring the rest of the world down with them—is unspeakable. Morally, it simply does not get any worse than this. Yet crimes motivated by such hatred are happening with increasing frequency in public schools.

In the case of the most recent disaster, the young men clearly hated anything remotely associated with life: achievement, happiness, and valuing of any kind. Notice the reports we're hearing that the killers hated competent athletes and competent students. The only thing they "valued" was the hatred of any and all earthly values. This is known as nihilism.

Look, too, at how one of the killers shot a female student when, having been asked by him if she believed in God, she insisted, "Yes." One need not be religious to experience horror and revulsion over this event.

What could motivate such an act? Only one thing: hatred of valuing as such. It was not religion or belief in God that the gunman wanted to snuff out. It was the fact that his classmate valued something—anything—which the killer felt he

had to destroy. It was her integrity—even at gunpoint -- which he felt had to be eliminated, ruthlessly and on the spot. It was the best within her—her independence of spirit, a sign of loving life—which he could not tolerate.

This nihilistic hatred of life and of values unites all tragic incidents like this one. Without it, no such tragedies would be possible. Not all the guns or violent movies in the world can convince somebody to terrorize a school if he does not possess this profound and all-encompassing hatred of existence; if he does possess it, not all the censorship or gun control laws on earth will change his mind.

CM: Last year you published a letter in the New York Times that noted how these shootings occur only in public schools, and that they have something fundamental to do with the violence that occurs in them. Why do you regard kids who attend public schools, as opposed to private schools, as prone to be (more) violent?

Dr. Hurd: Think about the ideas children learn in today's public schools. They are usually taught, at least implicitly, that there is no right or wrong. There is no good or bad. They learn that hatred—even when deserved, as in the case of violent criminals—is always a sin. That the superior students must be held back for the sake of the feelings of the inferior—as demonstrated by such public school policies as test norming. Or that selfless charity, rather than self-interested achievement and love of life, represents the essence of morality—as evidenced by community service requirements.

Increasingly, the intellectual and psychological atmosphere of most public schools is not so much geared towards love of life and training of the mind as it is towards duty, selfless service, and protecting the feelings of others at any price. How dreary and uninspiring, to say the least!

Under dictatorships, government schools are overtly used to train students to be good citizens—that is, slaves of the state. Our own public schools serve the same kind of purpose, only in a more subtle and hypocritical way. Students learn not so much how to achieve, reason and think for themselves, but rather how to be politically correct and serve others. The school agenda is set not so much by teachers and parents, but by officials in Washington, DC. As goes Washington, so go the schools. Principals and school officials are under pressure not so much to teach kids the basics, as to please the bureaucrats and politicians in Washington who finance and rule their schools.

Parents neglect or ignore their sacred responsibility to actively monitor their child's education; instead, they passively leave the job to the government, an entity to which they trust few other things. Socialized education, like socialized medicine or socialized anything is "free;" people tend to value things less when they are free, and take less responsibility for them. Parents (and teachers) who do try to take on the system are faced with an unaccountable bureaucracy, and have no way to effect change outside of writing a letter to their congressman.

Private schools are not immune from the effect of bad ideas. But they are relatively immune from the effect of political edicts. They are also much more compelled than public schools to be rational, effective, and get the job done. Kids attend private schools because parents carefully chose them—and feel good enough about the schools to write out tuition checks. If private schools fail, they go out of business; if public schools fail, they get more funding.

Fear of lawsuits and a pervasive, fawning attitude of "non-judgmentalism" make it difficult if not impossible to expel bad or lazy kids from public schools—at least, until they open fire or set off bombs. But by then it's too late.

CM: What do you tell the people who tell you: "But there are millions of kids who attend public schools and have been raised with the same teachings as the murderers in Colorado, but they live basically normal lives and commit no harm against others or themselves"? If public schools are perhaps incubators for the breeding of violent kids, why aren't more kids murdering their schoolmates and others?

Dr. Hurd: Schools—public schools or otherwise—cannot totally mold kids. Some kids are more intellectually honest than others. Some exercise their free will better than others. Some have better family influences which help them rise above the worst elements of the public schools. Some will squeeze the best education they can out of the public schools or, failing that, motivate themselves to learn elsewhere.

The problem is not that public schools are turning all kids into murderers. But more public school kids are turning to murder than ever before. Why? In part, because public schools increasingly tolerate and even actively spread the idea that there is no such thing as right or wrong, except what you feel inside.

Children, like adults, will always have free will. You can teach them right from wrong, and they are still free to do wrong if they choose. But it's much easier for kids to rationalize the doing of wrong—especially on the grotesque scale we saw in Littleton, Colorado—when they are taught that there really is no such thing as right or wrong in the first place.

CM: In America, fame and celebrity, coveted by many at any cost and often short-lived, falls on seemingly anyone today, from an intern who writes a best-selling book simply because she had sex with our nation's president to the depraved people on Jerry Springer's show who are willing to verbally and physically abuse one another to be "somebody" on TV, if only for a moment. To what extent do you see the mainstream media's focus on these violent acts in schools as inspiring kids to copy them at their own schools for instant fame? And what does this say about fame in America?

Dr. Hurd: The mainstream media are not so much the creators of today's culture as they are the manifestation of it. Keep in mind that television

networks find it hugely profitable to air The Jerry Springer Show (and similar horrors, such as the interview of Monica Lewinsky). Why is it profitable to air such garbage? That's the real question.

The popularity of such shows does not prove that most Americans have degenerated into Jerry Springer's guests, or to a Ms. Lewinsky. If they had, our country would be in a state of complete civil collapse unlike anything human history has ever seen. Economically and culturally, there is still much tremendously and awesomely good about our culture, so we can't be that far gone.

What we are witnessing today, and for some decades now, is the virtual death of hero-worship. Great majorities of people don't seem to want to look up to heroes anymore. Instead, they want to look down to their inferiors. The average person does not watch The Jerry Springer Show and feel, "Gee, those people are just like me." The average person watches The Jerry Springer Show and feels, "Gee, it could be worse. At least I'm not like those clowns."

Tragically, people no longer want to admire; they would rather sneer. Consequently, the morale and mental health of both the individual and society-as-a-whole has suffered gravely.

This cynical, negative psychology is the dominant mindset into which most of today's kids, like the rest of us, are inducted. Only the unusually savvy and independent-minded will fight it. This nihilistic mindset is enough to drive the most troubled elements to open fire on an entire school. Most kids don't go this far, of course; but many kids are closer to the psychological cliff than their parents want to believe. One reason for this is the dominant hatred of beauty, heroism, and success which permeates our culture right now.

"Copycatting" of violent crimes may be a real risk. But I don't know what can be done about it. The real problem is not the copycatting. Nor is the real problem a quest for fame. The fundamental problem is that there are a growing number of children who feel so hopeless and cynical about life that they want to end it all—their life and your life!

CM: Speaking now of violent crime in general, why is that a significantly disproportionate number of violent criminals are males? And do you reject such theories as it is because of his so-called "aggressor" hormone: testosterone; or, as certain feminists believe, that it is something deterministic in the male being; or, contrary to feminists' cant, that it is a displacement for the pressures he feels for his traditional responsibilities as a male?

Dr. Hurd: Ultimately, why a person becomes violent is more a consequence of the individual's values, beliefs and philosophy of life than of the individual's gender. There is nothing in either a man's or a woman's gender which makes violent, criminal behavior inevitable; nor is there anything about a person's gender which makes violence impossible.

Generally speaking, men are taught from childhood to be aggressive, while women are encouraged to downplay or disregard anger and aggression. As a consequence, when a man becomes angry, it is more likely that he will overtly show his anger than a woman would.

Men are also less likely to engage in introspection about their feelings. Women are more likely to talk things out with family and friends, or even keep a diary to help them manage emotions such as anger. Since men often reject these outlets, they might turn to violence as a first and only means of expressing their anger.

Gender may be a factor in criminal behavior, but it is by no means a determining one. Furthermore, men can learn to express their anger in more rational, less aggressive ways while women can learn to express their anger in more overt, rational ways. Nothing in the nature of either males or females makes such change impossible.

CM: What is the most important thing that Americans must do to dramatically reduce the violence in this nation, particularly violence committed by young people?

Dr. Hurd: Short-term? Close down the U.S. Department of Education as soon as possible. Completely get the federal government out of education. Most of the irrational ideas in the public school system trickle down from the top, from those wrong-headed intellectuals and hapless policy wonks in Washington, DC.

At the community and local levels, public school teachers and administrators should be left relatively free to be more rational and common sense-oriented in running the schools. They need to be left as free as possible to operate schools the way private schools are—teaching kids how to read and think, and expelling those who refuse to learn.

Longer-term? Completely privatize the schools. Pass laws like some of those currently under discussion with Social Security. Allow parents to obtain tax-credits for schools of their choice, and to set up tax-free education savings accounts when their children are born (or even sooner). Allow parents to home-school, as record numbers are doing today. Phase public schools out of existence—or at least let them compete with private schools in a fair race. It won't be hard to predict the winner.

Stop making schools the responsibility of everyone-in-general (meaning: politicians). Instead, make them the responsibility of the people who run them and the parents who pay money to send their kids there—as with any other commodity in the marketplace. As a family therapist, I constantly encounter parents with the "somebody should take care of it attitude" about their kids' education. Parents who would never in a million years drop their kid off at the doctor's and ask little or no questions about what the doctor is doing, take this very approach with their children's education. They treat his medical condition seriously, while almost ignoring his intellectual condition altogether.

More fundamentally, people need to make their priorities clear and face reality. It's not possible to have something for nothing. The "free" public school system—the system of socialized education—has failed, as it had to fail. When responsibility and freedom are taken away from people—especially for something so profoundly important as the training of the young mind—negative and even catastrophic results will follow. If the state of today's public schools is not sufficient proof for this assertion, then what will it take? How many more young minds must be quietly crushed—and young bodies overtly killed—before we accept the reality that socialized education has failed and it's time to change?

Most of all, parents need to think honestly about the wrong ideas which schools—and even parents themselves—are sanctioning. Think about who does and does not benefit from the politically correct ideas that: there is no such thing as right and wrong; there is no objective reality; feelings are just as powerful or even more important than rationality and facts in comprehending the external world.

Certainly the rational, and the good, do not benefit from this moral relativism. Certainly the superior athletes and the superior students do not benefit; they have the most to lose when the idea of moral relativism takes over. They only stand to lose when the intellectual atmosphere is stifled so that the inferior won't have their feelings hurt. They only stand to lose if the bullies, the druggies, and the lazies who refuse to think and work are kept in school (by law) because "everyone has a right to an education."

The bullies and the life-haters and the little Nazis, on the other hand, only stand to gain from the spread of moral relativism. If they join irrational groups or act in bizarre ways, who are adults to stand in the way? If they want to build bombs in the school basement or their parents' garages, they can count on most parents and teachers to look the other way, saying to themselves: "Who am I to judge? Who am I to assert myself? Maybe he's just doing what's right for him." Goodness knows, the schools can't expel the druggies and the bullies and the little Nazis; their parents would sue!

How can these irrational trends and tendencies not lead to resentment and psychological conflict in many kids? How can they not lead to outright violence among the worst elements, sooner or later? To stop the violence, we need to end the public school system—and all the ideas which make it

CM: Finally, of all the cultural commentators that I have heard talk about this tragedy in Colorado, I don't believe I have heard one of them say that a fundamental cause to violence in America's youth comes from our public schools. The only such criticism comes invariably from religionists, who believe that so long as God and prayer are kept out of public schools, violence in them will continue. To most Americans, however, the connections between violence and public schools that you have made are totally alien to them. Why is this so?

Dr. Hurd: For all its flaws and contradictions, American culture is still essentially reason-oriented. Being reason-oriented means having a high regard -- indeed, even a reverence—for the pursuit of knowledge. Most Americans see education as a basic requirement of life, which in an advanced society it certainly is. Consequently, they view education as a moral and political right which should be accessible to everybody. It seems inconceivable to them that the government stop providing a guaranteed education to everyone—even if it's increasingly apparent that the "education" may be doing more harm than good.

If you argue for privatized schooling, what most people hear you saying, in effect, is: "Education is not that important. You don't have to have it; it's a luxury." Americans need help understanding that it's precisely because education is so important that the government needs to get out of it.

Government, by its nature, is an agent of force; this is why it is valuable and necessary for keeping the peace, prosecuting violent criminals, upholding legal contracts, and defeating foreign invaders. It does not belong in the classroom, however, because the mind does not think under force or compulsion or political correctness; schools cannot teach young minds effectively under such conditions.

Today's public school system has, to a very great extent, become a vehicle for flaky, irrational ideas which would perish if forced to survive on their own in the marketplace. Its one-size-fits-all structure is appropriate for the military or the police force, perhaps, but not for the complex and deeply personal process of learning.

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