What Veracity Looks Like

The first victim of the first school shooter

Some years ago, on a two-hour flight I found myself seated next to a woman who had been a student in a department at my university that was later dissolved into my own. As she told of being propositioned by a senior professor who wrote “See me” on her essay, I asked myself whether she was credible. Given that the professor was a known rake, checks on him were nonexistent, and her story had no false notes, I concluded that her account was in all probability true.

Only once have I heard a story that was astonishing and yet told with such compelling simplicity that the possibility of doubting it never arose.

*

For a while in 1969 I lived in the same cabin in Sunshine Canyon outside Boulder, Colorado, as a quiet young woman from Texas, Claire Wilson. Just as people remember where they stood when they learned of the Kennedy assassination, I remember even now which way I was facing when Claire told me that two and a half years before, while eight months pregnant, she had been shot at the University of Texas. She said this in a manner

remarkable only for being undramatic, and I believed her implicitly, without so much as a flicker of doubt.

In later years, as I came to realize the rarity of such moments, I also learned more about what happened to Claire. Around noon on Monday, August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman, a Marine sharpshooter, having already murdered his wife and mother, ascended the tower overlooking the mall of the University of Texas at Austin and from the observation deck took aim with a high-powered rifle at the passersby below. The first to be shot was Claire, as if he chose her precisely because she was visibly pregnant. Unlike those who could at least run when they heard gunfire, Claire had no chance. As she played dead under a scorching sun, bleeding all the while, three Good Samaritans came to her aid: Rita Starpattern, who lay down next to her to comfort her and keep her conscious, and James Love and John Fox, who at last—around 1:15—removed her bodily from the plaza. The baby had been killed instantly.

Armed to the teeth and using downspouts as ports, Whitman fired from all four sides of the tower for some 90 minutes, wounding dozens and killing fourteen, until he himself was killed by Austin policemen who stole up on him on the observation deck. Though Richard Speck had murdered eight student nurses in Chicago days before, never had the United States witnessed anything like the massacre of civilians one by one, staged as a kind of military operation.

Whitman's autopsy revealed that he had a tumor in his brain, and some surmised it may have been responsible for his outburst of violence, all the more incomprehensible in that it was calculated, methodical and sustained. For those who leaned to the

interpretation of behavior as a product of underlying social forces, an abnormality in Whitman's brain mattered less than his all-too-normal upbringing at the hands of an authoritarian father, reinforced by his service in the Marines. The press emphasized his father's rigidity and brutality, while "[t]he anti-military crowd, at the time growing as the Vietnam War escalated, offered Whitman's marine training as the culprit."[1] Anyone with a will to do so could have put two and two together and held up Whitman, the former Eagle Scout and all-American boy, as an image of the United States itself.

If, when she told me of being shot by Whitman, Claire had taken this line—if she had waxed rhetorical and likened Whitman to the United States, with its fury and firepower trained on Vietnam—would I have believed her quite so instinctively? Most likely not. Such a tirade would have sounded off, like propaganda introduced where it least belongs, and I would have struggled to make sense of it. Only a great cynic would invent a story for political purposes about her unborn child being killed by a sniper, and Claire did not seem like a cynic. Probably I would have concluded that her account was true and that she sought and found some sort of distraction from grief in a political narrative.

The option of politicizing what befell her was open to Claire—wide open. According to the definitive account, Claire and her lover Thomas Eckman, who was killed immediately after she was shot, were reportedly "members of the highly controversial Students for a Democratic Society."[2] The cabin in the mountains outside Boulder in which we met was

---

[1] Gary Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower: The Charles Whitman Murders* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), p. 258.

[2] Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower,* p. 141.

indeed a sort of SDS house, albeit not in the sense that those who passed through it held the same membership card or subscribed to theses posted on its door. There was not necessarily anything doctrinal about "belonging" to SDS. The SDS line was that the military-industrial complex deformed the United States from top to bottom, that the nation was a democracy in name only, and the path to renewal lay through the practice of political participation. At least with me, Claire did not engage in such high-altitude theorizing,

Much as Martin Luther King, Jr., writing from Birmingham jail in 1963, reproached "the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects and does not grapple with underlying causes," an SDS interpretation of the University of Texas massacre would reject outright any reading that failed to view it as a symptom of a deeper pathology: namely, the conditions that made an unthinkable outpouring of violence possible in the first place. Such an interpretation would both assume and conclude that murdering civilians in a military manner, as Whitman did, reflects the militarization of the United States, and that Whitman's subjection to a violent father illustrates the condition of the American polity. Were not the epithets applied to Whitman, such as "deranged" and "murderous," applied to American society at large by critics like SDS?

In Keith Maitland's semi-animated documentary "Tower," released close to the fiftieth anniversary of the first of what became a long succession of school shootings, a figure of Claire Wilson is shown with the Port Huron Statement in her hand just before she is shot. Written by Tom Hayden in 1962, this de facto charter of SDS surveys the non-participatory democracy of the United States in something of the manner of the Frankfurt School. In the course of his diatribe Hayden cites the "human potentiality for violence,

unreason, and submission to authority," with the implication that the United States draws strength from that malignant source. For someone invested in this way of thinking, the University of Texas massacre, carried out by a dominated son and trained Marine, exemplifies all too well the darkness at the heart of American life—"the general militarization of American society," as Hayden puts it.[3] Claire later said that as she lay defenseless on the plaza during Whitman's siege, "I thought Vietnam had broken out in the United States."[4]

Were Americans actually told that the massacre in Austin represented the dark murderous soul of America itself? They were told just that by none other than Walter Cronkite, the sonorous voice of CBS News, whose sermon on the event brings "Tower" to a close. "It seems likely that Charles Joseph Whitman's crime is society's crime," intones Cronkite following an oration on the American addiction to the imagery and practice of violence.[5] "Tower" implies that this judgment is indeed the last word, and not only by placing it at the end. Additionally, the filmmaker accompanies Cronkite's sermon with images of massacres to come, including Columbine and Virginia Tech, quite as if Cronkite

---

[3] See https://archive.org/details/PortHuronStatement/Phs00-211Copy/.

[4] Austin Statesman-American, Sept. 3, 2016.

[5] "The horror of these, the sick among us, must be found in the horror of our hyper-civilization. A strange pandering to violence, a disrespect for life, fostered in part by governments which, in pursuit of the doctrine of self-defense, teach their youth to kill and to maim. A society in which the most popular newspaper cartoon strips, television programs, and movies are those that can invent new means of perpetrating bodily harm. A people who somehow can remain silent while their own civilization seems to crumble under the force of the caveman's philosophy that might makes right. It seems likely that Charles Joseph Whitman's crime was society's crime."

saw so deeply into American society that he read the future.[6] The filmmaker doesn't say that he agrees with Cronkite; he merely shows it.

What if Claire had interpreted the murder of her child, her lover, and very nearly herself as "society's crime"? She could have filled college auditoriums across the land, holding listeners rapt as she told of the violence unleashed on her and her loved ones by a man who was the product and image of the same crazed system that was even then waging war in Southeast Asia. She could have become the living symbol of anti-militarism. In reality, she did nothing of the kind. In "Tower" itself she does not declaim, arraign society, or theorize about the root causes of violence. Indeed, she forgives Whitman, speaking with the same simplicity, the same lack of theater, with which she spoke in 1969, as I recall.

When I knew her while her wounds were still fresh, Claire's speech was quiet and measured. She could not have been more unlike a social critic theorizing from on high or a rhetorician projecting artificial emotions, and she was certainly not about to exploit the death of the child within her to score imaginary victories in front of cheering audiences. Shortly before the release of "Tower," she was quoted in the Austin Statesman-American as follows:

> I was in the hospital so long I didn't get to talk to anyone or hear about it [that is, the shooting] or anything. . . . The hardest part of it is nobody talking about it. I guess everyone was too shy to ask about it. I would have been happy to talk about it. Even

[6] "Tower" shows a photo of Whitman with a rifle at the age of three. At the age of three the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech massacre, Seung-Hui Cho, lived in Korea. Not until he was eight did Cho move to the United States.

> my family never talked about it. And I asked them once, and somebody said, "We figured if you wanted to talk about it, you would have brought it up." All I can say is, to be perfectly honest**,** since nobody else talked about it, I always felt kind of embarrassed to talk about that.

Claire may have been reluctant to speak because others seemed not to know what to say, but how well this reluctance compares with the fluency of polemicists and pontificators. After all, there remains something unspeakable about an event to which she refers—so appropriately—as "it."

Many years after the fact I realized that Claire disclosed to me less of her tragedy than she might have—for example, that she was the first victim on the mall and that she knew after being shot that her child (Baby Boy Wilson, as he now appears on the roll of the dead) was no longer alive. Evidently she hesitated to claim priority, to place herself in a category of one, to dramatize herself in any way. In all, she spoke of the shooting with a certain reticence not to be confused with concealment, and it was because she was indeed "perfectly honest" that I believed her completely. The viewer of "Tower" has something of the same experience of implicit belief when Claire remarks in passing that she dreams of her son. After all, no one can know what another does or doesn't dream of, and yet what viewer doubts her for a moment?

A thousand miles from Texas in 1969, I could not know, strictly speaking, whether the person who reported being shot by a sniper was telling the truth. Nevertheless I did know, just as the viewer of "Tower" knows. This is what veracity looks like.

Stewart Justman
2025