

YOUNG MURDERERS

*Why do children kill? We are unlikely to get a satisfactory answer to this question, but it is one we have to ask. James Garbarino has studied violence and its impact on children for 25 years, and he has interviewed children all over the world who have been the victims—and perpetrators—of violence. In the 1990s, he began talking with children in prison who had committed acts of lethal violence. In this article, which is drawn from his book *Lost Boys*, he offers some reflections on the moral world of these children, and others like them, and how this world has been shaped.—Editor*

BY JAMES GARBARINO

MAKING MORAL sense of their behavior is probably the most difficult challenge in dealing with kids who kill. When I appeared on a radio talk show in the days after Kip Kinkel, a schoolboy from Springfield, Ore., shot twenty-four fellow students and killed his parents, one of the callers said, "Surely, by the time a child reaches the age of four years, he knows the difference between right and wrong!" How can we understand the acts of lethal violence committed by violent boys in a way that helps us not only help them but prevents other kids from doing the same in the years to come? Do these actions make any moral sense? Are these boys without moral sense? Are they simply immoral? We need answers to these questions if we are to complete our understanding of the chain of events that begins in the disrupted relationships and rejections experienced in infancy and early childhood, that includes the bad behavior and aggression we see in later childhood, and that culminates in lethal violence in adolescence.

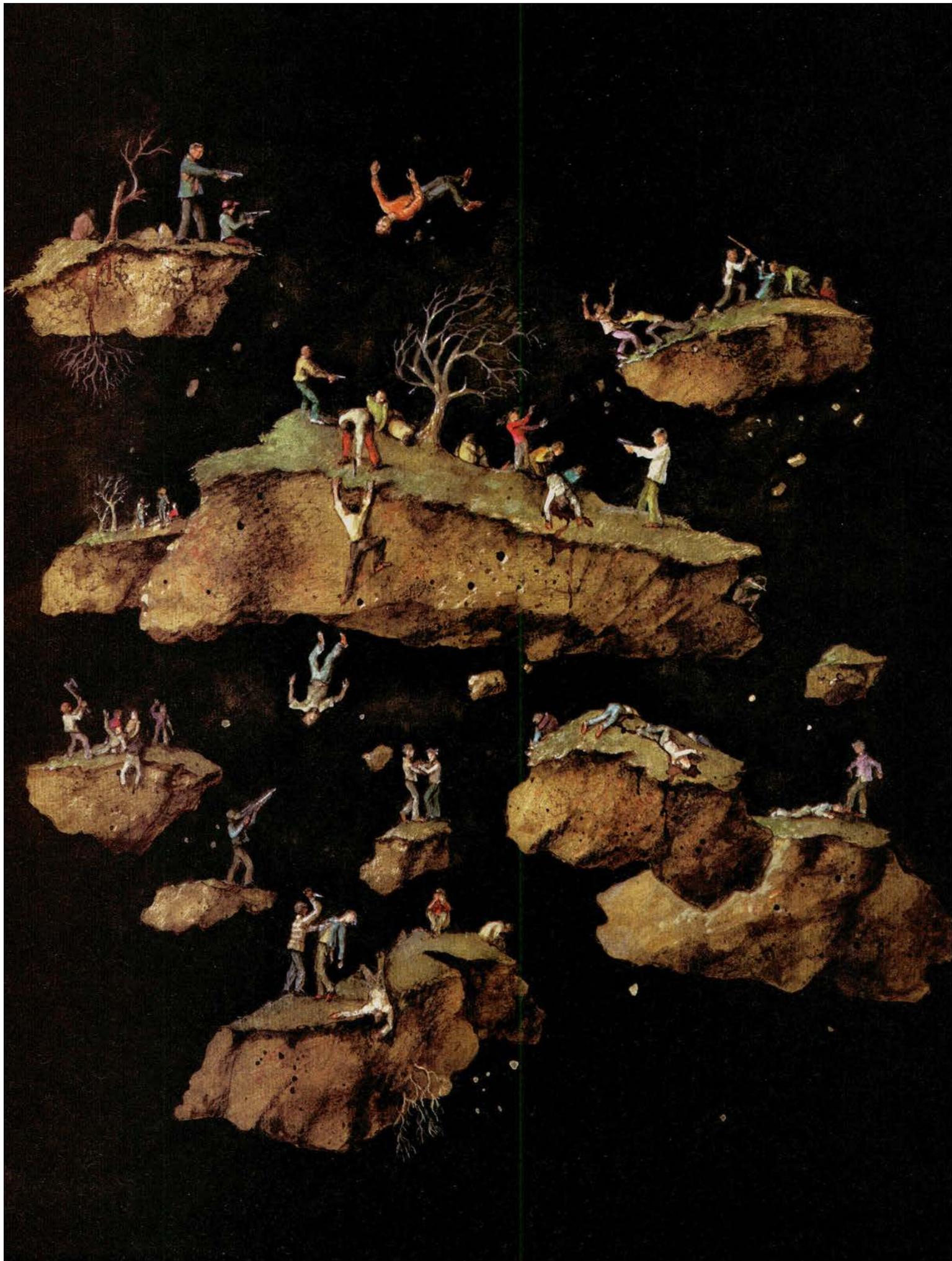
Sixteen-year-old Taylor is in prison for stabbing a priest. How did it happen, and why did he do it? Generally, Taylor doesn't like to talk about it. Now, looking back on it during an interview with me, he seems a bit ashamed. When he is finally willing to tell me the

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story, it comes out like this: "I needed money. I used to go to the church—lot of good it did me—so I knew there was money in the church. So I went there to take it. You know, from the collection box. Anyway, I needed the money, and I was working on the box with a screwdriver, you know, opening it, when this priest comes in and yells at me to stop. I started to run and he came after me, so I stabbed him, you know, with the screwdriver. Then I ran."

It seems hard to fathom any moral framework in which stabbing a priest makes sense. But is it really any more or less sensible than killing your classmates? Or shooting a convenience store clerk because he stuttered and was slow to get the money out of the cash register? Or killing a stranger on the street who insulted you? Or shooting a cop to death because he stopped you on the street? The violent boys I know have done all these things and more. Do any of these acts make moral sense? What strikes us about many of the kids who kill is that their actions don't seem to make any moral sense. And so we readily conclude that these boys have no moral sense. But things are not always as obvious upon reflection as they seem to be at first—both for the kids who kill and for all of us who judge them. To these boys and their peers, their acts often do make moral sense. Or perhaps they don't see their acts as either moral or immoral at all but, rather, as necessary for survival, or as simple entitlements.

Regardless of its origins, the action of many violent boys conveys a kind of arrogance, or what journalist Edward Helmore, writing in the *Guardian* in 1997, calls "deadly petulance."¹ "I needed money," says Taylor, as if that is justification enough. "He insulted me," says Conneel, a boy who is in prison for murder, as if that is sufficient to warrant a death sentence. In this these two are not alone: Many of the shooters in the small-town and suburban school attacks offer what appear to be similarly self-centered explanations. Luke Woodham, who killed three schoolmates in Pearl, Miss., after murdering his mother, feels like an outcast and reported, "I just couldn't take it anymore."² Michael Carneal, who shot three fellow students attending a prayer meeting before school in West Paducah, Ky., says he felt mad about the way other kids treated him.³ Mitchell Johnson, a thirteen-year-old from Jonesboro, Ark., who, with his eleven-year-old cousin,



opened fire on students and teachers in a playground, killing four students and a teacher, says, "Everyone that hates me, everyone I don't like is going to die."⁴ Andrew Wurst, a fourteen-year-old from Edinboro, Pa., who killed a teacher at a school dance, says he hated his parents and his teachers and was mad about not being successful with girls.⁵

Just hearing these few words from boys who kill does seem to cast their actions as grandiose, egotistical, and arrogant. Who the hell are they to take a human life because they feel insulted, frustrated, or teased or just because they need money? At this level, they do sound like simply rotten kids. But there is much more to the story. The sense of their actions and the scope of their moral framework emerge from the details, rather than the headlines, of the story when we place these details in the larger context of their lives. It comes from their being lost in the world.

The Moral Circle

All of us have a moral circle when it comes to violence; some acts are inside the circle of moral justification while other acts are outside that circle. Would you kill an intruder in your home? Would you kill a terminally ill relative? Would you abort a third-trimester pregnancy? Would you agree to the assassination of Saddam Hussein? Would you kill a relative if he were sexually abusing your child? Where does one draw the line, and how does one determine which killings make moral sense and which do not?

Cultures and societies set different standards for the morality of killing. Watching the film *Seven Years in Tibet* about the youthful Dalai Lama, many of us were amused to see the lengths to which Tibetan Buddhists went to avoid killing worms while digging the foundation for a new building. Their reverence for life extends their moral circle very widely. Most of us would put worms *outside* our moral circle when it comes to killing. Does that make us immoral, or does it make much of the killing we do amoral (in the sense that few Americans can relate to the killing of worms as a moral issue at all)?

Most of us can morally justify some form of killing when it seems necessary. Most of us legitimize violence when we see no moral alternatives and denounce it when we believe that alternatives are available. In this sense, necessity is the moral mother of murder. And that is the key to understanding boys who kill and their legitimization of violence. At the moment of crisis, they don't see positive alternatives, because of who they are and their emotional history, and where they come from and how they see the world. They do what they have to do—as they see it. Understanding this horrible reality is very difficult; it requires a kind of openheartedness and openmindedness that is hard for anyone to achieve, particularly in today's political and emotional climate. But achieve it we must if we are to understand the motivations and experiences that drive boys to commit acts of lethal violence and then marshal our resources to prevent this from happening with other troubled boys.

I face my own personal struggle to understand when the incarcerated boys I interview talk about

killing. It is my third interview with Conneel, and although the official topic of discussion is "his neighborhood," we end up talking about violence, specifically, his "first homicide." We are talking about girls, and Conneel says in passing, "They really started coming around after my first homicide." He says it so casually that I think it would be a good time to hear the whole story, particularly since other boys (such as Kip Kinkel) echo this theme; namely, that some girls find violent boys attractive.

Conneel tells his tale rather matter-of-factly, a narrative style common to the boys I have interviewed in prison. The discourse leading up to the description of the killing itself sounds rather chilling despite—or perhaps because of—the nature of the story. In this account, fifteen-year-old Conneel rounds a corner in his Brooklyn neighborhood and sees a nineteen-year-old standing on the street in front of his building; he is surrounded by other kids, most of whom Conneel knows from dealing drugs. Recognizing the gold chain around his neck as the one this youth had stolen from him at gunpoint two weeks earlier, Conneel approaches, gun drawn, and demands the chain back. The nineteen-year-old at first yells out that he doesn't know what Conneel is talking about, but then gives up the chain after seeing Conneel's gun. With the chain now in his left hand, Conneel puts the gun to the nineteen-year-old's head and pulls the trigger. The boy dies instantly.

Why on earth did he kill him when the chain was recovered? For Conneel it was simply, "I did what I had to do." What does that mean in moral terms? It means that this was a matter of retributive justice and an act of preemptive violence that made moral sense to Conneel because by robbing him in the first place the boy he killed had placed himself outside Conneel's moral circle. Conneel calculated that if he didn't kill the other boy at that moment, he would be exposing himself to danger in the future, so he "did what he had to do." In Conneel's eyes, the boy deserved the death penalty for threatening him, and executing him was a morally justified act of punishment, deterrence, and self-preservation. The fact that in Conneel's eyes the shooting was morally justified doesn't mean it was right. I must say that I feel the same way about those who favor the execution of kids who kill. They offer a moral justification, but they are not right.

Violent boys operate in a particular moral universe. They often have moral circles much more circumscribed than those of other kids their age. Sometimes these moral circles shrink so as to virtually disappear, which produces what seems from the outside to be unlimited legitimization of aggression. However, all but those with the most profound psychological damage do have a moral circle.

The Lure of the Dark Side

There are individuals who are so profoundly damaged that they are literally amoral, that is, without any morality whatsoever when it comes to interpersonal aggression and violence. As Yale University psychiatrist Dorothy Otnow-Lewis reports in her book *Guilty by Reason of Insanity*, some of the most notorious serial killers are so psychologically damaged that they ap-

proximate this state of pure amorality.⁶ But such individuals are very, very few in number, and even most of them do have some small area of morality in which they suspend their lethal behavior—for a dog, a cat, a bird, a rat, a lizard, or even a child.

Complete amorality is extremely rare. We have encountered a couple of boys in our work who are so profoundly damaged that they seem to have no moral circle at all. The psychiatric term for these individuals is *psychopath*.

Few boys ever get to this point, where they are beyond morality. But some boys do come close to achieving this final state, particularly when they are operating in the war-zone mentality of a conventional youth prison, where honor and the preservation of some modicum of dignity are a constant battle. Some get there when they are immersed in some sort of negative ideology, such as Satanism, in which they adopt a profound nihilism, believing only in the darkest of the dark side.

A study done by psychologists Kelly Damphousse and Ben Crouch revealed that nearly 10 percent of juvenile offenders in the Texas system reported some level of involvement in Satanism.⁷ These boys were characterized by a low level of attachment to conventional society, as represented by parents and schools; a high level of attachment to peers; higher than average intelligence; and a sense of life being out of their control. The fourteen-year-old shooter in Edinboro, Pa., Andrew Wurst, was nicknamed Satan by his schoolmates.⁸ Kip Kinkel in Springfield, Ore., was involved in the dark, violent imagery of “heavy metal” music.⁹ Luke Woodham, the sixteen-year-old shooter in Pearl, Miss., was part of an avowed Satanist group of boys in his community.¹⁰

The culture of the dark side has a special draw for troubled boys, alienated boys, and boys who are outside the orbit of the positive features of American life. When this attraction combines with the power of negative peer groups, the result can be very dangerous. Social worker Ronald Feldman has studied the impact of peer-group composition on adolescent behavior for decades. He finds that the tipping point in an adolescent peer group, from positive to negative, can come with only a minority of the individuals being predisposed to negative behavior. Once these negative peers take over the group, the positive boys either leave or are driven out or go along with the negative agenda. Today boys can become members of negative peer groups without even leaving home (e.g., through Internet chat groups).

Much more common than truly amoral boys are boys within whom a stunted or otherwise troubled emotional life combines with a narrow and intense personal need for justice. These impulses come to dominate a boy’s moral thinking to the exclusion of other considerations, such as social conventions about right and wrong, consequences, empathy, and even personal survival.

I learned this lesson about the links between perceived injustice and the moral code of violence first from the work of psychiatrist James Gilligan. For many years Gilligan worked in the mental health system of the state prisons of Massachusetts, dealing with violent

boys grown into full, psychologically impoverished manhood.¹¹ Gilligan achieved the incredible openness of heart and mind required to understand men who commit lethal violence. As he did so, he came to understand that almost all acts of violence are related to perceived injustice, the subjective experience of frustrated justice, and an attempt to redress injustice. Deadly petulance usually hides some deep emotional wounds, a way of compensating through an exaggerated sense of grandeur for an inner sense of violation, victimization, and injustice.

Perceived Injustice

When boys kill, they are seeking justice—as *they see it, through their eyes*. What makes these acts appear senseless to us is often the fact that we either don’t see the connection between the original injustice and the eventual lethal act or don’t understand why the boy perceived injustice in the first place. This latter point is sometimes easily dispelled if it results from our lack of understanding of the boy’s experience.

Consider Stephen, for example, an eighteen-year-old who killed a police officer. Stephen is a polite young man with an engaging smile and a shy manner. Words don’t come easily for him, but when they do come they often tell volumes about his desperate efforts to escape his physically and psychologically abusive mother in the years after his father died, when Stephen was eight years old.

I see little evidence in the reports of his social workers and psychologists that they recognized the injustice he experienced at home at the hands of a mother who rejected him while she accepted his brother, a mother who whipped his back raw while she rewarded his compliant brother and who told him that he was like his “no-good father” and that his brother “favored” her side of the family. Interestingly, what comes across in Stephen’s records is just a boy who after losing his father grew into an ungrateful teenager who caused his mother embarrassment and inconvenience.

But I have had a chance to see and hear the real story, from the inside out. What did Stephen want more than anything in the world? He wanted to be loved and accepted by his mother. He wanted to be free of the imprisonment he felt at home, where, he told me, his greatest fear was that he would strike out at his abusive mother. And when I asked him if he thought God would forgive her for what she did to him, he responded, “I hope so.”

Of course, not all the lost boys are so forgiving. Boys do commit parricide. In fact, kids kill their parents with alarming frequency, almost always in response to feeling they have been rejected and abused. In his book on the topic, *When a Child Kills*, lawyer Paul Mones presents numerous examples.¹² Even when the initial story paints the child as an ungrateful or crazed monster, further investigation often (but, admittedly, not always) reveals that the killing took place as the culmination of years of deteriorating family relationships and, most often, abuse.

I met one boy from such a situation, a fifteen-year-old who had killed his abusive stepfather. Abandoned

emotionally by his mother, Terry was left behind in the supposed care of her former husband. His humiliation of Terry was unceasing, but the boy had nowhere else to go. After nearly two years of escalating anger and sadness, Terry reached his limit when his stepfather casually slapped Terry's nephew across the face so hard that the two-year-old went sprawling across the floor. "I just wasn't going to take it anymore," Terry told me. "I knew I would have to pay the price for what I did, but I didn't care. The man had to be stopped. So I went into the bedroom and got his shotgun. Both barrels. Then I called the cops."

Terry was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Killings such as Terry's are easier to make sense of than what Stephen did. Even if we think Terry's response was extreme and impulsive, most of us can at least imagine his moral framework: retributive justice, vengeance, and a desperate attempt to escape from an emotionally intolerable situation. But what about Stephen?

Stephen killed when he was stopped on the street by the police. Why was he out on the street? He needed to escape from home. Why did he kill that night on the street? He was carrying a gun, and he was out on bail awaiting sentencing on a weapons charge; he was hoping for a brief sentence on that charge, but he knew that if he was picked up carrying a gun, the sentence would be lengthened substantially. At the moment he was stopped by police, he was caught by the injustice of his situation. Stephen needed freedom more than anything else (except love), and here was a threat to that freedom in the form of two cops who were stopping him on the street "for no good reason." As a result of this unfair action, he knew he would lose his freedom. He felt he had no choice but to prevent this injustice from going any further. He shot at the cops—he says to scare them so that he could run away. But after he shot twice, they started shooting at him. More injustice. Stephen returned the fire, and the result was a dead cop and his wounded partner—and one boy facing the death penalty.

Shame and Violence

Many of the acts of lethal violence committed by boys are deliberate and sometimes even meticulously planned, rather than spur-of-the-moment explosions of rage. I think this is significant, because it highlights the importance of understanding that boys think about violence as a solution to their problems. More than just the result of an uncontrollable urge, these violent acts are related to Gilligan's idea of frustrated justice. This is particularly true of the boys who committed the school shootings in the 1997-98 school year.

In Kentucky, Michael Carneal timed his assault so that it would occur during the regular morning prayer meeting at his high school. In Arkansas, thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson and eleven-year-old Andrew Golden developed an elaborate plan involving a false fire alarm to draw students out into the line of fire they had set up, like soldiers preparing an ambush; they succeeded in killing students and a teacher. In Oregon, Kip Kinkel carried his arsenal into the school cafeteria at just the right time in the morning and was

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able to shoot twenty-four classmates, two fatally.

What produces this intolerable state of being in which violent boys live? James Gilligan believes that injustice produces shame, and it is shame that generates the intolerability of existence. Shame imposes the fear that one will cease to exist, the prospect of psychic annihilation. Nothing seems to threaten the human spirit more than rejection, brutalization, and lack of love. Nothing—not physical deformity, not debilitating illness, not financial ruin, not academic failure—can equal insults to the soul. Nothing compares with the trauma of this profound assault on the psyche.

Those who are shamed are vulnerable to committing violence and aggression because they know that acts of violence against self or others are a reliable method for reasserting existence when life experience has denied it. And, paradoxically, acts of violence against the self may serve the same purpose, particularly for children; as they contemplate suicide or actually engage in a suicide attempt, many youth seem to think, "That will show them. They'll be sorry when I'm gone."

Remember that adolescents are theatrical, viewing the world as a stage, with themselves playing the leading roles. And their plays are often melodramas and, on occasion, even tragedies. Many of us can recall thinking suicidal thoughts, but most of us had the inner resources and outer supports to leave it at that. Of course, tens of thousands of kids each year can't leave it at that and do attempt suicide.

The greatest danger comes when the crisis of perceived impending psychic annihilation is melodramatically merged with the idea of addressing intolerable injustice with violence. The two go together, because in our society the idea of retribution through violence is a basic article of faith. Vengeance is not confined to some small group of psychologically devastated indi-

viduals. It is normal for us, a fact of value in our culture. The actions of violent boys show us what comes of our society's poisonous belief that "revenge is sweet." We would all do better to heed the ancient proverb, "When you begin a journey of revenge, start by digging two graves, one for your enemy and one for yourself."

Making Moral Mistakes

Illuminating the role of shame and perceived injustice in the lives of violent boys provides a good beginning to making some moral sense of their violent actions. But there is more to tell. One of the most difficult things to understand about the lost boys is their use of the word *mistake* to refer to deliberate, intentional acts of violence that achieve their conscious goal. Is there any way to understand how they can regard these immoral acts as mistakes without resorting to explanations that hinge upon the assumption that they are simply lying or engaging in self-protective denial?

Studies of moral reasoning generally focus on the development of sophisticated thinking as the hallmark of moral development, yet sophisticated thinking is but one side of a triangle. The other two are sophisticated feelings and behavior. Thus, the moral person is one who does more than reason about dilemmas. Such a person has moral character. As character education expert Thomas Lickona puts it, being a moral person involves "knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good."¹³

The standard for efforts to assess the thinking part of morality or reasoning grew out of the work of Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg.¹⁴ Kohlberg's approach has been adopted and adapted by many investigators as a strategy for identifying how well kids are doing in applying their intellect to the task of figuring out moral dilemmas. At Kohlberg's "preconventional level," the emphasis is on fear of punishment, desire for rewards, and the trade-offs between the two that alternative courses of action will produce. At the "conventional level," the focus is on doing what "good people" do and respecting family and society's rules. At the "postconventional level," the key is an attempt to live by more universal principles, that is, principles that go beyond specific times and places and people.

Most violent boys stand at the first level in Kohlberg's classification system, preconventional, moral reasoning. Systematic studies of juvenile delinquents responding to moral dilemmas of the type used by Kohlberg also identify such kids as primitive thinkers. A boy at this level responds to the rightness and wrongness of alternative courses of action on the basis of what and how each possibility will cost and benefit him. Few violent youths are at the second level, where right and wrong are couched in terms of what helps people meet their legitimate needs. For these boys, "wrong" equals "mistake." Thus, when they say they made a mistake in committing their crimes, often this is an indication of unsophisticated moral reasoning, not amorality per se.

In the wake of the Jonesboro shootings, in the spring of 1998, I ask Conneel about the two boys who committed the murders. Conneel has already admitted

to me that he himself was responsible for several deaths and has amassed a substantial arsenal that is hidden in the basement of his apartment building. When I ask him to tell me what he thinks about an appropriate punishment for Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, he starts out with the thought that they might deserve the death penalty. But then he quickly pulls back from that position, reminding me that he is concerned that the death penalty may be imposed upon *him* for *his* lethal acts. He thinks for a while, and then continues. "They're responsible for what they did," he says. "They shot innocent victims—girls," he reasons, "and they should go to prison for that. I'd say at least fifteen years in jail so they can change." When it comes to judging *others*, Conneel is about normal for an American. Of course, like many of us, he has trouble applying those standards to himself. His killings were not of innocent people, he is quick to point out. But isn't that always the point? Do any violent offenders see the target of their lethal violence as innocent?

To an outsider, the violence that lost boys commit often seems to make no sense or to evidence a total breakdown in morality. But this is not the case when we see the world through their eyes. These boys often commit acts of violence on the basis of a "moral" idea in their heads, usually something to do with revenge or injustice or wounded pride or glory. Pressures build as they ruminate on the injustice done to them, usually some specific insult or disappointment set within a bigger picture of resentment. In this way, there is no such thing as a "senseless act of violence." This does not mean that we simply accept their analysis as legitimate, of course, but it does force us to look beyond our shock, horror, and indignation to see the roots of the problem.

Conscience Under Construction

Eleven- to fifteen-year-olds are as much children as they are adolescents, and their ability to engage in reality-based moral thinking is still very much "under construction." Some children have erected a solid internal monitor, a prosocial conscience, by the time they enter adolescence. But, as psychologist Barbara Stowell's research shows, most teens actually have to deal with a "confused conscience."¹⁵ Some are still mainly responding to external messages about what is right and what is wrong. And some have a great emotional emptiness inside that drives them to seek extreme solutions to their problems. Some of this emptiness is personal, as we see from the individual life histories, but some of it is social and cultural in its origins.

But whether they exhibit conscience or not, boys are not yet adults, and their ability to appreciate the consequences of their behavior is often quite limited. This has a bearing on what we should do with juvenile killers. The fact that they are capable of committing lethal, adult-like crimes does not mean that they are adults. The two things are quite separate and distinct. The common belief that "if you can do the crime, you can do the time" is offered to justify the prosecution and incarceration of kids as if they were adults, but

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