

An Essay Terror, Driven by the Forces of Randomness?

Terror strikes at the heart of people when they are confronted by seemingly random loss of life and / or property. Terror “pulls the rug” out of what is normally the experience of a day-to-day ordering of life. This is especially so, when any loss is the result of a direct intentional act by another human being – i.e.; a person intentionally chooses to randomly take another’s life. For example, the sniper-killings that terrorized the region of Washington, DC were random and intentionally committed and not the result of accident. Most everyone went about their day looking over their shoulder.

A family in New Jersey departs on vacation. Filled with hope, they pack the car and head down the interstate highway. Their lives end less than one hour later, killed when an overturning semi-tractor trailer loses its load that falls on the passing cars below. How can such loss be justified or explained? To be sure, the insurance companies can investigate and determine what led to the overturning of the semi-truck, but there is no explanation as to why this particular family seemed to have been singled out to die. Such arbitrary loss of life begs the age old question of “why this family or why, at all?”

What makes the question seemingly impossible to answer is the arbitrariness of what is truly a tragedy. There is a bumper-sticker wisdom that says, “Practice random acts of kindness.” It is this randomness that creates confusion – even random acts of kindness. It is the randomness in the loss of life that strikes terror in the heart of people, and it is the random loss of life – life intentionally taken at random with intentional and reckless abandonment that defies the ordinary daily routines of life, setting in motion confusion that awakens the personal and public consciousness. It is this confusion that evokes the cry, “Why?”

People search to understand, intellectually, this deeply visceral pain. We need a vocabulary to explain it! Any unexpected loss will evoke the question, “Why” but it is the experience of senseless loss, done intentionally and at random, that defies human understanding. Some will call it the work of evil while others might call it bad karma, and others will apply the science of psychology that says, “Hurt people hurt people.” Ultimately, these fail to address the very real sense of violation and abandonment that survivors of tragedy experience, and a justice that might result in real healing is easily miss-applied. Why? Because, at fault is our over-investment of trust in the very society that guarantees an ordered world of safety.

Newtonian physics defined a well-ordered universe of natural law, including gravity. If gravity did not exist then the semi-tractor trailer load would not have fallen on the car below. At the same time, without gravity, nothing on earth would “stick!” The advent of these natural laws was supposed to end the rule of anarchy and hold at arms-length this randomness “run amuck.” Natural law provides order and sets the stage for the freedom of others to choose. You can choose to fly all the while being aware that what goes up must come down.

Even so, the terror brought on by randomness is such that it cannot be rationalized. For protection, we create elaborate institutional bodies to govern – demanding them to provide order and set boundaries acting as containers of predictability. We become disillusioned (confused) when the unpredictable happens. This is our human condition.

Some say *function precedes form*. It is one of my favorites since my character is one shaped by action. I shared this with a friend and she replied saying, “Yes, this is true, but people are attracted to form, are they not?” In all humility, I had to agree. Indeed we are attracted to a form that fits the criteria of our own identity – a form that preserves our sanity, even if this form is nothing more than an ideology. This is especially true when an ideology provides the metrics that allows one to regain some control over their lives. The form “of terrorism” attracting terrorists may likely be one that gives the terrorist the mechanism to “stiff-arm” the forces of randomness in their own lives allowing him or her the ability to choose when to die, and to do so with a purpose. In a sick way, randomness is defeated for the one or two but continues to rule over the lives of the living.

Humanity must symbolize cause and effect in order to face the forces of randomness. Our human psyche is not able to rationally cope with base randomness and unpredictability. It cannot be explained. We can only begin to hope to understand something like terror when we are able to turn it into an object – name it. Once named, we are able to differentiate ourselves from our fears. Such differentiation provides us a modicum of control – *I am because I am not that*. We then believe that we know what to do.

The question remains, however, “Have we properly named it?” Are we able to fully grasp the power of terror by naming it as “Evil?” In so doing, do we create greater layers of abstractions diluting our ability to face the issues? What is evil? To wade into this is to find oneself engulfed in an ocean tempest. Therefore, this essay chooses to name terrorism as “the forces of randomness,” in this way, hoping that the our human intellect will be liberated to creatively devise systems that once again provide a modicum of order that is willing to be engaged in sustained conversation with the forces of randomness.

Why be in conversation with these forces? Because, they have something important to say to those who would choose to enslave others by constructing too much rigidity into our order. So, the question to be discussed is: What and where are the forces of randomness that impact our ordered lives and what are they trying to say to us about who we have become and where we are going as a society?

This essay is not written to provide answers to the questions written above, but hopefully to provide a framework and vocabulary so that the search can begin. Nor is this essay written to prescribe the landscape of terror, but to describe a way of looking at it. In this way, might we begin to disarm terror of its power to dominate our lives? For example, how we collectively choose to respond to terror will set in motion possibilities for long-term transformational forces that can embrace and bring together this terrible dialectic of randomness and order.

