



The Soapbox

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Engaging the culture, changing the world.

It has been quite some time since I sent reflections to my *Soapbox* friends. For those of you who have just joined this list, I designed the *Soapbox* to provide a little platform from time to time from which to reflect (well, maybe sound off is a better term) on various matters of the day. What I imagine is that this series might cause in you some kind of response. Let's consider this a conversation, to be sure.

My thoughts for this *Soapbox* began to form as news broke out from Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, on October 2, 2006. That was the day a mad milk truck driver barged into a small, one-room schoolhouse and brutally snuffed out the lives of five little Amish girls.

How can we ever make sense of such senseless actions? But just as puzzling for me was the extraordinary response of the Amish people over the days that followed.

I understand that about half of the mourners who attended the funeral of the killer, a man named Charles Roberts, who somehow thought his wrongs in the past justified his horrific actions, were *Amish*. These were the fathers and mothers, the uncles and aunts and cousins, the friends and playmates of the little girls who were inexplicably shot dead — all come to mourn the death of the killer of their children.

Apparently these people know how to forgive unconditionally. And I ponder what kind of culture might create such forgiving hearts, because the dominant culture in which we live is motivated mostly by revenge and anger and outrage.

The Amish have apparently shaped a profoundly different kind of human community. I'm not talking about the buggies and no-buttons and kerosene lanterns. Over centuries, these people have read the Scriptures with great care and attentiveness, and they have embraced the radical Christian story about what it means to flourish. As we look at those pictures of rural Pennsylvania, we feel the collision of cultures, and these people, who seem so quaint and backwards in their ways, come out looking good and right and beautiful.

I understand that the oldest girl in the schoolroom, her feet bound by wire and plastic along with the others, asked to be shot first so the other girls might be spared. These were kids, by the way, who had never seen a movie of our culture's easy indulgence in violence. Judging from the gear their killer brought into their little schoolhouse, it is clear that he knew the ways of a culture of anger and fear and vengeance and violence.

Sometimes it takes someone so totally outside the dominant culture to jolt us into seeing how destructive and damaging and degrading our assumptions can be. Mother Teresa comes to mind, she who reached across the gaps of repulsive disease to welcome the utterly rejected into human community. Rosa Parks was another, emphatically deciding that all of God's children deserved a place on the bus. John Paul II was yet another, announcing what he called the splendor of truth to a world fiercely suspicious of any notion of truth. We stand on trial by these voices of another way of living together.

It is as if they live in the 17th century, we were told over and over about the Amish, as if this somehow explains their strange ways. How quaint and dated. This was the handle that seemed to help our secular press get hold of something they could not comprehend.

But history is not the point here. To be sure the 17th century was as full of violence as our own. The point is that these people come, not from another time, but from a wholly different culture, a culture they have shaped over centuries, a culture with the biblical text right in the center of who they are, a culture formed by a radical story of forgiveness, non-violence, peace, simplicity, community, hard work, and humility.

Over time, and even in the last few days, I can imagine they read Romans 12, in high German of course, that familiar passage out of our holy text that says, “let hope keep you joyful; in trouble stand firm; persist in prayer; contribute to the needs of God’s people, and practice hospitality.”

We might imagine, for centuries, the high rhythms of Scripture coming out of their little farmhouses, saying “call down blessings on your persecutors — blessings, not curses. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in agreement with one another. Do not be proud. ... Do not keep thinking how wise you are. ... If possible, so far as it lies with you, live at peace with all.”

I remember that remarkable movie called *The Witness*, a story about these same Amish people. The main character of the movie, played by Harrison Ford, lands in Amish country, with wounds from bloody battles in the streets of Philadelphia. The Amish take him in, without questions, until he might heal from his wounds. In part because he falls in love with an Amish woman, in part because he is puzzled by their healing touch, the Ford character ponders the crossings between these radically different cultures. He watches their ways, intrigued, full of curiosity, admiring but skeptical. Could he ever leave his own culture and join the Amish? Could she ever leave her carefully formed community and join him in the urban swirl of contemporary America? That’s at least part of the drama of the film.

But the bigger drama is about this collision of cultures and out of that collision the dominant culture comes out wanting. In one amazing scene, a group of Amish head into the village for supplies. They find themselves as usual degraded by crass tourists who want to take their picture. They are demeaned and goaded by some village toughs who want to pick a fight. As one of the bullies smears an ice cream cone into the face of an Amish young man, Harrison Ford’s character can resist no longer. He smashes the guy in the nose. The theater, where I first saw the movie, erupted into applause. I chimed in heartily.

But “this is not our way,” one of the elders keeps saying to Harrison Ford. The elder almost seems to whisper, we must “call down blessings on our persecutors, not curses.”

In the moment of cultural collision we have witnessed over the past weeks, is it possible these simple people might teach us something about a radical way of human flourishing? I want not to be foolish or naïve, but what would our world look like if we followed just a hint of the human community we are witnessing? Perhaps we might begin to imagine a better way for the world we have designed.