

Thoughts After the Fatal Beating of Ricky Whistnant

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Those who knew and loved 39-year-old Ricky Whistnant were thrilled by how his life kept getting better and better—that is, until Saturday afternoon, April 5, 2003, when he was beaten up in the foyer of his apartment building. A group of teenagers, thinking the pudgy, loquacious man a bit strange, followed him and poked fun at him after he left a neighborhood market in Hartford, Connecticut. Inside the foyer of the apartment, the three leaders of the gang—two 14-year-olds and a 13-year-old—began hurling full containers of soda at Whistnant. One struck him in the head and he collapsed. Then the group kicked him viciously while he lay motionless on the floor. Whistnant died a short time later in the hospital.

Interestingly, a security video camera in the foyer recorded everything the boys did. It showed that the more weakened their victim became the more viciously they attacked. It also showed that the leaders enjoyed what they were doing.

Also interesting and puzzling was that the medical examiner ignored the obvious precipitating cause and stated that Whistnant died of a failing heart. If the victim had been the president of the First National Bank of Hartford, one cannot help but wonder if the medical examiner would have issued the same cause of death. Would the doctor who performed the autopsy have issued the same cause of death?

A Valued Life

Over 100 people attended the funeral of this colorful, straight-talking spokesman for himself and for all of his “brothers and sisters” with disabilities. Because of his own disabilities, he was admitted to Southbury Training School in 1982, where he was heavily medicated and placed in restraints. Even so, he rose above it all. In 1989, he left the institution and moved into his own apartment. He joined the local self-advocacy organization for persons with intellectual disabilities and became one of the group’s heroes.

A spellbinding speaker, Whistnant once con-

fronted Governor John Rowland about the crucial need for community services for persons with disabilities. During the class action suit to close Southbury, he testified with candidness about what it was like to live there. Later, the Arc of Connecticut bestowed on him the prestigious Peter Kirsche Award for Self-Advocacy. They honored him for being such a good role model and defender of persons with disabilities.

Even so, Whistnant did have an eccentric side. Sometimes he liked to mimic Batman and claimed to be a dedicated crime fighter. This usually got chuckles from those who knew him. One friend said, “We all knew that Ricky, as big as he was and as vocal as he was, he wouldn’t hurt a flea.” Even so, it may have been the knowledge of this eccentricity that caught the attention of his attackers.

Now that Ricky is gone, thoughts about the attack can well up in one’s mind. Many of the thoughts have to do with how such terrible attacks might be avoided.

About Prejudice

Since 1989, University of Alberta researcher Richard Sobsey has collected hundreds of narratives of attacks on persons with intellectual disabilities from all over the world. From these narratives, he has estimated that the people we care about and work with are four times as likely to be viciously attacked than are those in the general population (personal communication, Richard Sobsey, April 14, 2003).

Most moms and dads will quickly describe the painful histories of abuse their children with disabilities have received. Calamities like Whistnant’s should make us want to listen as never before. These parents just might put their fingers on some of the evil seeds that need to be interrupted before they sprout into violence.

About “Rising Social Decency”

On June 20, 2002, the United States Supreme Court, in *Atkins v. Virginia*, voted 6 to 3 to ban the

execution of persons with mental retardation. The ruling is based partly on the perception that we the people are experiencing an “evolving standard of social decency” toward these persons. It is a long shot, but it would be wonderful if that standard-of-social-decency phrase could someday seep into the everyday language of the street, and we could honestly speak about it with pride.

About a Fading Interest in the Attackers

At first we may feel anger like others do. We may toy with the overlapping concepts of rage, revenge, punishment, justice, and rehabilitation and never come to a solid conclusion. We never even begin to get our hands on the switches and handles of the apparatus that made these boys do what they did to Whistnant.

Once attackers are arrested, we seldom follow them through the court system. We seem content to let the police do whatever they are trained to do. We do not care much about what the court orders. So, with little knowledge about the futures of attackers, our interest fades. This is wrong. After all, we work in the rehabilitation business. Are we not stakeholders in the struggle to get at whatever makes others see the people we serve as high-profile targets for violence?

About Gaining a Deeper Understanding of Spoiled Childhood and Youth

*I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.*—W. H. Auden

Auden is correct, and our English language is filled with such truisms. However, they do not go deep enough, and they certainly do not stand up as a defense in a court of law.

About One Who Went Much Deeper

Seton Hall University’s “maverick criminologist” Lonnie Athens had to go deeper. He did it to save his own life. Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Rhodes was so moved by Athen’s life and work that he wrote *Why They Kill: The Discoveries of a Maverick Criminologist* (1999). This book may turn out to be one of the most important books on violence that has ever been produced. Even though Rhodes

does not specifically focus on attacks against persons with disabilities, much of it can be applied to cases like Whistnant’s.

About brutal childhood. Athens grew up in a war zone of violence. His father beat his wife and children into total subjugation. Once, Athen’s head was shoved into the toilet and held there. Another time his father grabbed him and his brother by the hair and smashed them together until their faces were bloody. Athens watched in horror when his mother and brother were beaten so badly they ended up in the hospital.

Lonnie Athens experienced additional “horri-fication” (his own term) from living on one of the meanest streets in Richmond, Virginia. He watched gunfights. He even watched a man grab a woman, push her into a doorway, and stab her to death. All the boys in the Athens family were coached into becoming vicious, too. If they were beaten on the street, they would get another beating at home. His father ridiculed Athens relentlessly for being small, calling him “runt.” At other times, his father sensed that Lonnie was much smarter than he himself was and called him “Einstein.”

When Athens reached the eighth grade, he began to turn the tables. When his father grabbed him by the throat, Athens broke free, grabbed a chair, and threatened to use it on his father. On another occasion he took a bow and arrow and aimed it at his father. Then he said, “Don’t ever mess with me. Don’t ever put your hands on me. I’ll kill you if you touch me” (Rhodes, 1999, p. 19). Interestingly, when Athens no longer showed fear and threatened to retaliate, his father backed off. Even so, the father continued to terrorize his wife and the other children.

At school Athens made good grades, but he was still seen by teachers and students as a tough-talking little thug with hair down to his shoulders. Like many school toughs, he became a legend and was proud of his toughness. A turning point came at the close of his high school years. He wanted to go to college. So he made an appointment with a guidance counselor. Rhodes described what happened with the counselor:

When she called him in, she said, “Well, Lonnie, you’re a person who likes lots of action. We know just what you need. Here’s a pass. Tomorrow at sixth period the Green Berets are going to be here, and we’ve selected you.” . . . The next day he found himself facing the Green Beret recruiter with twelve classmates from the slum. The recruiter played a tape of the Green Beret song and invited them to sign up. (p. 25)

Athens raised a fuss that continued until he was helped to qualify for financial aid at Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

About Studying Violence

Athens never wavered, like most undergraduates do, over what he wanted to do in life. He immediately committed himself to studying “violence.” He continues to this day with that single, unifying, energizing commitment. Consequently, he has, through the years, created many ingenious “handles” that we who knew Whistnant just might grab, ponder, and promote.

Early in his work, Athens developed a plan for getting himself alone with some of the most vicious inmates in the nation. He sat with them face to face for as long as 6 hours—gaining their trust, promising confidentiality, and listening carefully. Then, very respectfully, he asked questions about what went on in their minds when they were beating, raping, or killing people.

It was dangerous work. At first, some men tried to assault him. Sometimes unsavory guards aided the inmates in their attempts to hurt Athens. Even so, he was tough and always ready to fight for his life. Later, he became a welcome sight by guards and prisoners alike. One inmate reflected this change of attitude by saying, “Don’t worry, little Lonnie. Everything’s gonna be okay. Stay cool. Don’t say nothing to nobody. You coming tomorrow?”

Over time, Athens developed narratives on over 150 violent, never-to-be-named inmates. What they told him was graphic and vicious. Three short excerpts from many longer narratives in Rhodes’ book follow.

An attacker described a verbal altercation between him and three men going into a liquor store. The attacker described what happened after two of them came out:

I said to myself, “Fuck it I’ll shoot all of them.” I fired two quick wild shots, but missed them both, and they got away. I decided then that I better put the barrel to the chest of the motherfucker who I really wanted—the driver—and make sure I didn’t miss him. I had stone hatred for him, and I righteously couldn’t wait to see the look on his face when I blew him away. As soon as he popped out of the liquor store, I charged right up to him, rammed the barrel in his chest, and pulled the trigger. (p. 69)

An attacker described how he followed an elderly woman into her apartment:

I didn’t want to panic her too soon, so I threw her off base and said, “Do you have any money.” She said, “All I have is the ten dollars in my church envelope.” [He took it and told her to take

off her coat.] I grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her to the floor. She started yelling, “What are you doing? What are you doing?” I figured that I better let her know that I meant business, so I jumped right on her ass and started smashing her in the face and saying, “Shut up, shut up.” Then I pulled her dress up above her face. (p. 71–72). [The rest is too offensive to print here.]

An elderly woman is attacked and her camper is high jacked:

James said, “Would you look at her ugly old face.” After I looked at it, I got so mad. I smacked and backhanded her about twenty times. Then I threw her against the camper and she slumped down on the ground. [During the beating she asked to be let go.] “I said I’m not going to let you go, you stinking old bitch. I’m going to kill you.” I grabbed her by the hair again and slammed her head back and forth against the side of the truck until blood started running out from her hair and over her ears. Then I dropped her to the ground, kicked her over into the mud puddle and left her for dead. We got into her camper and drove off. (p. 110)

About an Etiology of Violence

Athens found four stages that persons usually reach before becoming completely violent. He based these milestones on the 150 narratives stemming from his visits in prisons. One may sense that they were also influenced by his own childhood experiences

1. *Brutalization in Childhood*: This early milestone includes *terrible beatings*. It involves *subjugation* (Remember how Athens was dominated totally by his father?). *Violent coaching* becomes part of the brutalization. (Remember how Athens was told to win fights with others or be beaten at home?) It also contains *horriification* (Remember the awful things he watched—even a woman stabbed to death?).
2. *Belligerence*: Persons reaching this stage develop the rebellious strength to stand up to those who try to beat them into submission. They become defiant. They fight back.
3. *Violent Performance*: Those reaching this stage become cocky and proud in their reactive victories. They glory in becoming so volatile. From this time on they seem ready to fight at the drop of a hat. Others tend to fear them and see them as legends. They move from fearful low self-esteem to arrogant high self-esteem.
4. *Virulent “Violentization”* [Athen’s term]: Persons reaching this final stage become totally addicted to violence. In their moves from being hapless victims of brutalization to utterly ruthless ag-

gressors, they become the most dangerous attackers in our society. Athens believes that those who reach this ultraviolet stage long to commit violent acts. They truly enjoy carrying them out. (Most important to those who knew Whistnant, persons in this phase derive great joy from attacking persons perceived to be more vulnerable than they are.)

Douglas Dennis, a prisoner who became a veteran criminal justice philosopher and staff writer for *The Angolite*, a prison news magazine, provided a powerful amplification of the works of Athens and Rhodes in one of his book reviews (Dennis, 2002). He stated emphatically, “*Why They Kill* is an absolute must read for anyone concerned about violence.” According to Dennis, “Lonnie Athens’s rugged genius has been to strip away superficialities, and expose the gears and levers of the very apparatus of evil itself” (p. 47).

About a Rapidly Growing Multitude of Interruption Programs

Although Athens tends to believe that when persons reach the fourth stage, the process is irreversible, Dennis does not. In his correspondence (personal communications, July 6 and 20, 2003), he repeatedly amplified a single, basic theme: “interruption, interruption, interruption.”

Happily, Athens, Dennis, and others have begun to search for every interrupter of violence they can find:

- *Mentoring*. Although many professionals talk long and loud about such relationships, Dennis feels that regular, intensive mentoring can bear rich fruit.
- *Taking Responsibility for Expelled Students*. It is not enough to cut them loose and ignore them. We cannot leave them with street gangs or in detention centers that reinforce journeys toward complete violentization.
- *Expand Basic Education to “The Three Rs and a V.”* Athens believes that the best place to prevent or interrupt “violentization” is in the school. “Although the community cannot guarantee a good family to every child,” he writes, “it can guarantee them a good school” (Rhodes, 1999, p. 313). He obviously feels that a good school can go a long way in making up for a bad family. That is, if the school is determined to provide a basic education for all students.

- *Alternatives to Violence Courses*. Members of the Quaker religion conduct Alternatives to Violence classes in prisons across the land. They meet in small groups with inmates and together they seriously search for everything they can think of to replace violent solutions with gentle ones. Prison officials gladly support these efforts. In some cases, correction officers copy the program and carry it out themselves.
- *Refusal to Try Teenagers as Adults*. According to news reports, the two 14-year-olds who attacked Whistnant will be dealt with as grownups. The 13-year-old will be adjudicated in juvenile court. All are still in their developing years. Those impressionable youngsters when being thrown in with adults have a chance for an accelerated movement toward total violentization.
- *Make Violence a Top Priority Public Health Problem*. Athens believes such a radical move should happen soon, and it should be supported with government and foundation funding.

Control of human violence is essentially a public health problem, directly comparable to the problem of controlling epidemic disease. . . . Fully half the population of the United States, who would otherwise have died before producing or would never have been born, is alive today because of twentieth century improvements in public health. Man-made violence continues to fester, its treatment stalled in part by inadequate knowledge of its etiology (Rhodes, 1999, p. 320).

Public interest in this epidemic must be heightened radically, and the money needed to fight it must be raised to fight it as never before and to fight it adequately. Like it or not, violence is just as frightening and as crucial an epidemic as AIDS, cancer, and smallpox!

- *Aging*. Dennis has observed that many prisoners give up all tendencies towards violence as they grow older.
- *Rehabilitation in Prison*. Although most experts outside the prison believe that there is no such thing, many inmates can point to numerous prisoners in their cellblocks who have done it beautifully—sometimes with professional help, sometimes without.

Now, in this rapidly evolving world, more new interrupters are appearing every day. They will continue to increase rapidly. Can we as a society, however, begin to grab them as they appear and put them to work?

Conclusion

The thoughts expressed here were organized after receiving the disorganizing knowledge that Ricky Whistnant was mindlessly beaten down in the foyer of his apartment. Attempts to make sense out of the tragedy moved me to look for everything, long- and short-term, that I could find that might—just *might*—have interrupted the violence that precipitated his death.

Some readers may take issue with the fact that these thoughts move from specifics about Whistnant into the general areas of violence and back again. We have to do more. There are no “special” remedies for violence toward the persons we care about.

Helping me to organize these thoughts was Douglas “Swede” Dennis, an astute observer of criminal justice systems and a topnotch journalist—even though he is a life-terminer in the Louisiana State Prison. This now perceptive, highly principled straight arrow man has served as a mentor of mine for better than 13 years.

Recently I told him about a seemingly innocuous incident of road rage in which I was involved. Hearing about it, he grabbed me by the collar and shook me with his words in ways that persons in the free world would never do. Once more, he re-

mind me that *all of us have beasts within us* that must be watched and interrupted—just like the boys had them who beat Whistnant. He introduced me to the work of Rhodes and Athens, and, like them, he longs to see comprehensive systems of violence interrupters in every aspect of our lives.

That is a great dream. Why not work for it wherever we can? We can become a gentler, kinder, and more *nonviolent* society than we are. If some of these dream interrupters had been in place before April 5, 2003, there is a chance that Ricky Whistnant would still be with us.

References

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