



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

A day for remembering victims

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Yesterday afternoon, the Iannella Council Chambers on the fifth floor of City Hall featured a rather unique event -- a three hour session devoted to testimony from a long line of Boston residents who have suffered the loss of a family member to murder.

The good news is that the room was packed. The crowd of people interested in what survivors of homicide had to say spilled over into the lobby where the television broadcast of the hearing was available.

The bad news was also that the room was packed. There was, unfortunately, a seemingly endless pool of ordinary folks -- overwhelmingly people of color from the poorest sections of the city -- whose lives took an extraordinary turn for the worse when their son or daughter, cousin or other kin became a part the city's murder statistics.

The most important aspect of the day was the chance to associate names and stories with the otherwise impersonal homicide figures -- to humanize those who have died from senseless episodes of violence in homes, schools or on the street. The speakers, many of whom struggled to hold back their tears, were eminently successful in reminding City Counselor Ayanna Pressley who convened the hearing, several of her colleagues, and countless others in the room or watching on TV of the pain endured by families of murder victims. Much too often, their plight gets lost in the inordinate attention typically given to questions about who committed the crime and for what reason. Even worse, our society has an obsessive fascination with murderers whose undeserved celebrity only exists because someone else -- usually someone quite obscure -- was killed.

Speaker after speaker gave heartfelt statements reflecting a blend of sorrow and frustration, sadness and anger. Not only did they describe the emptiness they felt after losing a loved one without even the chance to say goodbye, but they took advantage of the occasion to criticize certain officials who kept them in the dark about what had happened and about the state of the investigation.

The hearing was unusual in that no public official, no politician, police chief, or public safety executive-- was allowed to speak. Rather representatives of the Boston Police Department, the Office of the Attorney General, the Massachusetts Department of Correction, and other city and state agencies were invited to be there just to listen, but not to give opinions.

With so many wanting to tell their story, the hearing lasted well beyond the allotted time period. I left before the end of the session, having another stop to make on my day of reflection concerning the victims of homicide. A little more than a stone throw from City Hall, halfway up Somerset Street, is a modest yet magnificent plaza displaying hundreds of stones, each dedicated in memory of a homicide victim with ties to Massachusetts.

The [Garden of Peace](#) is, unfortunately, not especially well-known to the most residents of the Commonwealth, except for those who may have been family or friend to one of the names engraved on the face of a rock. It is, however, a place that everyone should visit and experience at least once, if not more often.

Among the hundreds of names are assassination victims, John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy; their respective rocks are no different in size or position than some other Kennedys who, in life, had not been particularly distinctive. Additional victims of note include Carol DiMaiti as well as Imette St. Guillen who had been a recipient of The Carol DiMaiti Scholarship. Adjacent rocks bear the names of Robert and Walter Earley who were both killed on June 14, 1990. The rocks dedicated to the memory of kidnapped girls Molly Bish and Holly Piirainen also lay side-by-side.



The vast majority of the rocks, however, are engraved with names that few people would recognize. Most are in memory of someone loved yet not famous in life or in death. At least in the Garden of Peace, everyone is considered equal.

Scattered among the hundreds of spent rocks are dozens that remain blank. They await some future tragedy; they are to commemorate some person who is not yet dead.

It would surely be wonderful if the remaining rocks were never to be needed. Sadly, this is nothing more than wishful thinking.