



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Mortimer: Inspired by love?

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You may find the words of Thomas J. Mortimer, written in the hours after he had allegedly slaughtered his wife, mother-in-law and two young children, incredibly bizarre. Whereas a quarrel over a bounced check to the IRS may have precipitated a bloodbath, the distraught husband/father apparently believed that his son and daughter would be better off dead--as he put in, "in a much better place than they could ever be living with Laura and living with me.

It is difficult for most people to fathom that someone could murder their own children, not in rage, but for love--albeit a twisted expression of affection and devotion. Although family mass murderers typically act out of anger and the desire for revenge, some are inspired to kill to spare their loved ones from misery and hardship. Overwhelmed with depression and despair, they see life as just too unbearable an existence.

In what has been termed suicide by proxy□ a husband/father who is despondent over the fate of the family unit, takes not only his own life but also those of his children and sometimes his wife, in order to protect them all from the pain and suffering. He sees his family--especially the children--as an extension of himself; killing them becomes part of his own suicidal act. And sometimes they reason that by killing them all, the family will be reunited spiritually in a better life after death.

It is a theme that we've seen before--too often before. In 1992, for example, Kenneth Seguin of Holliston, just prior to butchering his wife with an ax, took his two children for a ride, sedated them with sleeping pills, and then slit their throats. According to their attorney, J.W. Carney, Seguin had hoped to reunite his family in heaven.

Some cases of family mass murder appear to involve at least some degree of ambivalence between revenge and loyalty. Such mixed feelings can be seen, for example, in the 1991 case of a 39-year-old suicidal father, James Colbert of Concord, New Hampshire, who strangled his wife out of jealousy and then killed his three daughters to protect them from becoming orphans.

In the end, Mortimer did not take his own life, although he had designs to do so. Regardless of how despicable we feel about what he allegedly did to his family, his motives could still have had an element of love.