



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

The heart opens

A man was murdered. His name was Aaron Danielson, but he also went by the name Jay Bishop. From what we know as I write this, he was from Vancouver, Washington, and belonged to the group Patriot Prayer. He had a bright, warm smile, a smile his loved ones will never see again.

I don't know much else about Aaron-Jay, except that he was shot and killed in Portland this weekend. I learned about the incident from a Twitter post with cell phone video, posted by a controversial, conservative-leaning magazine editor. He specified that the shooting didn't "appear to be related to the ongoing Antifa protest."

Conservative media has since exploded with accusations that this was an anti-Trump hit job. An unhinged Antifa protester has been named as a potential suspect. As the social media melée unfolds, as thousands of bot-generated echo sites disguised as news media amplify the language of

hate around this incident, I find it hard to draw myself away from the conflict and suspense.

It is hard to step away long enough to feel grief, to feel the true sorrow that comes with sympathy, to process the pain we can feel when contemplating a mystifying, pointless loss of human life. Sometimes our courage wobbles. Fear keeps us focused elsewhere.

If we feel something real and painful, it may threaten our sense of comfort and security. To feel truly and deeply, to allow ourselves to flow with sympathy, empathy, grief, and love — this kind of thing could wrench us out of our bubble.

If sufficiently strong, it could cause us to question our group's way of thinking. What then? If our inner life doesn't match up to that of our friends, family, church, news media, or political party — what then?

So we read and watch the news. We focus on details and factoids: How many pints of blood pooled around the victim's body after he was shot? What kind of skirt was she wearing when she was assaulted? Did the plane fly into the building from the south, or was it more of a south-southeasterly flight?

We focus on the idea of justice and perhaps fantasize about its second cousin, revenge. Assessing blame and condemnation, flinging self-righteous indignation at the presumed guilty: this is all far easier than sitting with the bleak, heartrending knowledge that a fellow human being was killed. That fellow Northwesterners have lost their friend, their son, their relative, and will never get him back in Earthly

form. That murder and war are spun into humanity's fibers, the warp and woof of our history and temperament. That we, too, will die in our time.

The ongoing narrative, the alleged story around the tragedy, provides a grand distraction from real pain and loss. Some narratives are specifically designed to manipulate what the public feels, what it buys, who it votes for. Others are home-grown affairs: speculations that fit a person's worldview, musings on the political ramifications of the tragedy at hand.

Conspiracy theories emerge. Some explore important avenues of truth: was Lee Harvey Oswald really a lone gunman? Could the CIA be dealing cocaine and shuttling illegal arms to Central America under the benevolent watch of Ronald Reagan and Oliver North? Some stories that sound impossible turn out to be true.

Given the history of infiltrators in American protest movements, from early union organizers to civil rights and anti-Vietnam War demonstrators, was the shooter incited by an Antifa infiltrator? Was the shooter himself an Antifa infiltrator?

Was it a cruel assassination ordered by power players in DC, to rile up the base at the expense of an actual, everyday Trump supporter? Or was the shooter just a lone lunatic who imagined his heinous act would be seen as heroic?

It was not heroic. It was stupid, evil, sad, and wrong — as human beings so often are.

Some conspiracy talk undermines our attempts to trust each other or reach consensus on any topic. If we can just focus on how Hillary and Q are trafficking children in the non-existent basement of a pizza parlor, maybe we can avoid our pain. If we can obsess on

Antifa and cell-phone footage, we can avoid delving into our own dark side, the shadow side every person carries with us — every society, too.

Sufficiently distracted, we avoid the opening of the heart that accompanies true grief. If we do not cry, we cannot share the profound human experience of crying together.

I am crying today. I mourn the loss of Aaron "Jay" Danielson. I cry over the lack of decency, civility, justice, and courage evident across party lines. I cry over my own wrongdoings and shortcomings. As I weep, my heart opens. And there, glimmering, I find hope.

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