

Jonesboro! Who Forgot To Pay The Piper?

By Prof. McKinley Burt

The recent schoolyard massacre of children (by children) in the small Arkansas town of Jonesboro has produced an emotional and anguished response. No commentary strikes more to the heart of the matter than the plaintive query, "are we now paying the price for having ignored or put out of our minds, the growing alienation of our youth?"

If our title has a ring of familiarity, it is because the origin is in a very popular fairy tale that described a series of tragic events which overtook the children and towns people of the medieval German town of Hameln. The result was that the term, "to pay the piper", has become a metaphor for those who ignore their obligations and eventually must pay a very high price. The problem is that too often, as at Westside Middle School, it is the innocent who must pay.

It would seem that Hameln was besieged by tens of thousands of rats and the towns people could find no solution. Finally someone told of a mysterious "Pied Piper" who could play a magic tune on his flute and lead all the rats to the river, where they would drown. His services were engaged and the Piper successfully rid the town of its rats.

However, when our spellbinder appeared at City Hall to collect his fee, the City Fathers refused to pay him, a very foolish move indeed. "Too costly, too much money", they said. "We could have gotten it done cheaper - the rats would probably have gone away by themselves."

The very next day while all the townsfolk, men and women, were out in the fields harvesting, the angry Pied Piper slipped into town and

began playing an enchanting tune that no child could resist. He led them all away - not to the river - but through a crevice in a distant mountain. The gap closed behind the merry band and none were ever seen again. And for years the towns folk waited, "if only we had 'Paid the Piper' - we've lost our children."

So, how long has it been that America has been wringing its hands and covering its eyes as each bloody episode unfolds in a never-ending phenomenon of teenage violence. Better described as mass murders, it would seem that as the number increases, the ages fall as children unleash a primal rage upon anyone who may have thwarted their intentions in any manner. Have 'we' done this?

The criminal justice system, the

schools, congress, legislators and parents would all seem to be at loss to either explain or address this tragic situation in any meaningful or consistent manner. You hear it over and over again as more and more statistics are generated: "More correctional institutions - flexible sentencing - censor the television media - more counselors (and more guards) in the schools - obsoletely control the NET.

Then, of course, there has always been the educational directive that we must have more schools, better schools, lower classloads and more teacher. And at the same time, we are told that many more counselors are needed in the schools to deal with the emotional and social problems of disaffected youth. Present ratios are said to range from a ratio to pupils of one in eight hundred, to one counselor for every fifteen-hundred students.

For social workers the ratio is one in twelve-hundred.

A very expensive situation to rectify and at this point, not all who are involved are certain that we have currently identified the problem. Without doubt, money is the principal reason we have not moved as quickly as possible to remedy a tragic situation. But aren't we "paying the Piper" each day of our lives as we lose our children - not only to the "big ones", Arkansas, Kentucky, Washington, Mississippi, California and Alaska, but to a daily attrition of children's hope, motivation and personality?

Is it the case that what we need in this country is large-scale Social and Spiritual Renewal, while we put a hold on Urban Renewal with more highways, byways and multi-billion dollar rail lines. Shouldn't we first

pay to reduce the traumatic chaos in our nations school houses - to improve the learning process enough to make American students competitive internationally? Those who talk of a 'year-2000' level of student achievement should be aware that industry and the State Department are seeking more visas for the importation of foreigners who can operate at the level. "Year 2000 has been here, already."

Parents and many of my friends call me with such advice as "we've got a lot more to worry about than these sporadic episodes of youth violence like satanic cult murders and that baseball bat-armed lynch mob that attacked the Christmas Tree lot vendor. There is a daily, organized assault on our children's minds coming into our houses right over that wire to the computers." One parent

said, "There are 'spiders' in the WEB, man!"

What this parent went on to describe was not just the "occasional" (?) Sexual deviate preying on children, but the great surge in the sophistication of video games. "Sony, Nintendo and Sega are taking over the lives of a lot of kids. There are some new interactive computer games where a youth or child, even, can create his own story line, obviously within the context of his relative maturity and morality."

"If the kid regretfully kills one of the actors, he can always be 'brought back to life', after all, this was 'Cyber-Space'.

What I am worried about is at what age - if any - will fantasy and reality blur; possibly into a gory mess."

Continued next week

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Alcohol Awareness Month a time to increase understanding

How big a problem is alcohol? nearly 14 million Americans are alcoholics or problem drinkers, and every year in the U.S. alcohol kills 100,000 people, making it the third-highest cause of preventable death. In the U.S. and in Oregon, alcohol and other drugs are factors in more than 45% of all fatal automobile crashes.

Barbara Cimaglio, director of the Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs in the Oregon Department of Human Resources, says April, national Alcohol Awareness Month, is a good time for Oregonians to increase their understanding of alcohol-related problems.

"The cost of alcohol abuse in Oregon and the country is staggering," Cimaglio says. "Alcohol ruins the lives of those who abuse it, and can hurt their friends and family members."

She encourages Oregonians to take advantage of information available from local alcohol prevention and treatment programs. She says it's especially important for parents to talk to their children about the dangers of alcohol use. "Alcohol abusers and alcoholics can be surprisingly young," Cimaglio says.

"Young people are especially vulnerable to peer pressure and pro-alcohol messages in advertising," she adds. "They lack the maturity to understand the consequences of even casual use of alcohol and other substances."

She says education and awareness are the most effective weapons in the war against alcohol abuse.

"When people know more about the effects of alcohol abuse, the risk is lower that they will abuse it or become addicted."

Information about alcohol and drug treatment is available by calling Gail Kellum in OADAP at 503-945-6811, or by calling Oregon Partnership, 1-800-621-1646.



Photo by the Oregon Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation