Making Murder Respectable

By Theodore Dalrymple

When the news of the terrible killing of eight children in Shreveport, Louisiana, first broke, I was forcibly struck by the language used by the police spokesman to describe what had happened (or, rather, what had been done) there.

Of course, this was a minor consideration by comparison with the horror of the events themselves, but nevertheless it was of some interest, at least to me. After all, the way in which we use language is not an insignificant indicator of the way in which we think.

The police spokesman (or, as some would have it, spokesperson, though he was clearly and unequivocally a man) said, “This is a very large scene with four specific locations that we are currently addressing.”

The spokesman went on to describe the police’s efforts to arrest the suspected perpetrator, who had hijacked a car:

“Shreveport Police patrol officers got behind that vehicle and they chased it. The vehicle was chased into Bossier Parish, and at which point in time, Shreveport police officers did discharge their firearm, and that individual is deceased.”

The spokesman finished by saying, “This is a very large scene of multiple deceased children present, so we’re going to ask for patience and us getting information out, and we’ll release the name of the suspect that is deceased when we have made the proper notifications.”

Does anyone have thoughts expressed in this type of language running through his head, or had the police spokesman had special training, perhaps by lawyers, in the public usage of inelegant and pompous inexactitude? Who led him to believe that “at which point in time” is better, more exact perhaps, then “when”? Or does he go home in the evening after work and ask his wife, “At which point in time will we enter a dinner situation?”

“Shreveport police officers did discharge their firearm, and the individual is deceased”: In other words, “Shreveport officers shot the man dead.” There will be few, I suppose, to mourn this very deeply, even among those firmly opposed to the death penalty, so the question is why the police spokesman felt it necessary (assuming that he did not use such language in his every-day, non-official life) to employ such circumlocution? Did the police spokesman, or his superiors, believe that the public had to be protected from the raw truth, as it was once said, probably apocryphally, that Victorians covered the legs of pianos as prophylaxis against lewd thoughts in drawing rooms?

As I read the police spokesman’s words, I thought of Mrs. Gamp, the drunken, blowsy nurse in Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* who, among other memorable pronouncements, said of one of her patients, “He’d make a lovely corpse.”

Despite her utter slovenliness, Mrs Gamp has pretensions to gentility. When asked whether she would like to have a drink, she says, “Leave the bottle on the chimley-piece, and don’t ask me to take none, but let me put my lips to it when I am so dispoged, and then I will do what I’m engaged to do, according to the best of my ability ”

Had she been living today, she could have been a police spokeswoman.

To have called the whole episode “a domestic disturbance” would, in other mouths, have been an admirable example of ironic understatement, such as the reaction of the critic to the melodramatic portrayal of Cleopatra on the late Victorian state: “How different, how very different, from the home life of our own dear Queen!” But not all euphemism is ironical, and “a domestic disturbance” is, unfortunately, another example of the bureaucratization of thought of which the spokesman’s utterances were so symptomatic.

A later statement by the police said that the suspect had been “neutralized.” This is appalling: it speaks of a human life as if it were an acid to which a base had been added to result in a pH of 7. It is the adoption by the police of the language of dictators. The subject was killed, not neutralized. We should remember what Orwell wrote in *Politics and the English Language*: Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.

Too little is known, or has been revealed as I write this, of the perpetrator’s past and recent life to comment on his motives, though the fact that he was a father of seven by the age of 31 and had a conviction for a firearms offence is likely to raise many suspicions in people’s minds as to his way of life. Drugs and drug dealing, custody battles, insensate jealousy and the reverse of its medal, promiscuity, spring to my mind, but no case can be prejudged in the absence of real information. The devil is always in the details.

I recall a case in which a respectable man without any history of violence or other bad behaviour killed his three children in his care by gassing them. He tried to gas himself also but failed and was rescued.

It was clear that he was mad, in the grip of delusions caused by deep melancholia. He thought he was saving his children from a far worse fate by gassing them. After his rescue, he continued to be suicidal, but he was sent to hospital and prevented by constant watch from killing himself. His melancholia was treated, and he lost the delusions that had led him to kill his children. But he was then left with a clear-minded awareness that he had killed his own children in a fit of madness: a terrible, torturing burden of guilt and remorse that he would have to bear for the rest of his life and that would never leave him. One could not help wondering whether it would not have been kinder let him kill himself, though it is forbidden us to do so.

The death penalty, even if it had not by then been abolished in Great Britain, would not have been a solution, for it would never have been applied in him since he had not been *compos mentis* at the time. It was cases such as this (there were others), in which there was no happy solution possible or even conceivable, that caused me as a young doctor to acknowledge the real existence of the tragic dimension of life. And oddly enough, though it remained essential to distinguish the remediable from the irremediable, this was consolatory rather than depressing.

First published at the American Conservative