OF SOAPBOXES AND COFFINS

People hate *American Terrorist*. In response to negative public opinion, Wal-Mart will not stock this new literary release on Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombing. Blast survivors accuse the authors of providing McVeigh the proverbial soapbox to broadcast his views. There is hurt and hatred and delusion in McVeigh’s words. Is there danger in his words as well? The answer is yes, with the greatest threat being to deny those words an audience.

The documentation of mass murder is necessary and beneficial to our society. There is concern about erecting a soapbox for the perpetrator and creating a “how-to” for the next killer. The “how-to” factor is precisely the reason for airing mass murder information: to provide examples of how to head off the next mass murderer, mad bomber, or school marauder.

In January of 2001, two clerks at a San Jose-area drugstore, Kelly Bennett and Michelle Houde, processed photos of a young man posing with guns and what appeared to be homemade bombs. They could have explained away the pictures, rationalizing them as harmless. Instead, they called police who arrested the young man, Al DeGuzman, when he came back for his prints. A search of DeGuzman’s home revealed four firearms and approximately sixty pipe bombs, along with journals and a Web site paying tribute to Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan
Klebold. DeGuzman’s ultimate tribute to the murderous duo was a pending attack on DeAnza Community College, now thwarted.

Kelly and Michelle, the heroes from the drugstore, received verifiable, positive instruction from the news about mass murders. When they saw the DeGuzman photos, they recognized the menace and acted. Mass murderers telegraph their upcoming crimes, often in painstakingly recorded, self-glorifying fashion. Too often, the clues become obsolete, discovered after victims—and many times the killer—are already dead.

Did DeGuzman receive his “how-to” from stories about the Columbine tragedy? If not Harris and Klebold, he may have sanctified some other killer or sought a less likely “inspiration.” Disturbed minds have relied on obvious and obscure sources to justify their deadly actions. Millions have listened to The Beatles’ “White Album” without ill effect, but Charles Manson heard a call for a biblical race war in the songs. In the final analysis, DeGuzman could have selected any number of icons, but Kelly Bennett and Michelle Houde needed direct lessons in identifying a would-be mass murderer. These lessons were derived from unrestricted information about incidents like the Columbine massacre.

An absence of censorship and a weakness for self-glorification also brought down Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski. In exchange for a promised halt to his mail bombings, major newspapers printed Kaczynski’s “Industrial Society and its Future,” frequently called the Unabomber Manifesto. The dense work denouncing the mechanized world refers to the source of authorship as “we,” possibly representing Kaczynski’s royal pretensions or his warped assumption that he spoke for a society of homicidal technophobes.
Many were outraged at the Unabomber receiving such a platform; however, publishing the Unabomber Manifesto was a masterstroke by law enforcement. In his insane egotism, Kaczynski handed a dissertation of clues to the nation. The FBI knew somebody reading the manifesto might recognize the writings and the anger. David Kaczynski, Theodore’s brother and unwitting financier, did. As a result, the disheveled hermit known as the Unabomber was taken into custody, his Montana shack plucked away as one giant piece of evidence.

Know the warnings and patterns of mass murderers and trust your instincts. Do not dismiss disturbing signs or threats, as did students at Santana High in San Diego. Skinny, bullied, deranged Andy Williams said he was going to shoot people to get even. His friends didn’t take him seriously. They did after Williams killed two schoolmates on campus. Would one more analysis of Harris, Klebold, or Oregon high school killer Kip Kinkle have compelled just one of Andy Williams’ friends to punch 911?

Do not suppress information about mass murder; shout it out, again and again. For every “human timebomb” who might embrace a bloody sermon from a killer, there are a million rational souls who need the facts in order to stop that already ticking timebomb. When Timothy McVeigh speaks of dead children in the Murrah building’s daycare as “collateral damage,” loathe him but listen. Hope that others are listening, too. The next time an anti-government militant is stockpiling ammonium nitrate, the next time a troubled teen is stuffing guns into his backpack, hope that someone is standing by with the presence of mind to call the police. Pray that bystander has learned the consequences of inaction.