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Extremism is the New Normal

The Age of Grief and Shock

by BARBARA NIMRI AZIZ

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It seems not a day that passes without an act of violent extremism occurring inside the US. It happens in our neighborhoods, our quiet suburban streets, our bucolic townships. I'm speaking about murders of a particularly shocking sort: like one last month when three children aged 1, 5 and 12 were stabbed to death in their home; that followed five wounded and one killed in a Phoenix suburb; around the same time we learned a man murdered seven people, mostly members of his family, before turning the gun on himself. We were still coming to grips with news of a neighbor blasting away the lives of three North Carolina college students, and how a father, a retired NY policeman, shot dead his two daughters then himself. It's not just the numbers of dead; yesterday I read of the equally extreme case—a three-year old shot and killed his baby brother. So many dead children. I could go on, but why preoccupy ourselves such awful stories. Better to reserve thoughts of extreme violence to something far away... like in hostile Muslim places.

Meanwhile, thanks to citizen videos, our media is finally questioning routine police brutality across this country, especially the murder by police of unarmed Black citizens. (Although this violence is nothing new: our shameful history of this kind of extreme behavior is well documented by, among others, by John Whitehead).

Police killings and family murders are habitual here. But does that mean they don't constitute extreme violence? Because 'extreme' is the new 'normal' in America.

Consider this invitation to our favorite family pleasure, the circus. Ringling and Barnum and Bailey Circus, a show every child deserves to experience, is now promoted as "Circus Xtreme". (As if those massive elephants and roaring cats can't thrill us without this added moniker.) Extreme circus joins our daily indulgence in extreme sports—from group skydiving to alligator wrestling to skateboard-triple-turn somersaults.

Education is also promoted for its extreme potential: National Geographic, our most edifying institution, has launched the TV series "Extreme Planet". "Extreme Planet" invites us to "Take an electrifying journey into some of our *planet's* most *extreme* environments ...". NG publishes Extreme Explorer, a children's magazine "Specifically designed for striving readers in grades 6-12... (it) engages and motivates reluctant readers."

Our children's video games are populated by bizarre monsters—they make King Kong look like a fuzzy Teddy Bear—capable of ever more extremes of violence against the "forces of good". It seems we need to employ extremes to engage and motivate our children.

What about those TV commercials that show us what fantastic things our family automobile can do? Then there's something known as extreme sex; add to that those bizarre indulgences by normal college students on their spring break. I dare not imagine what extreme pornography is, since normal pornography shocks and unsettles me. And are the abuse of children and torture of captives of war no less extreme?

Which brings us to what we are taught to think of as violent extremism. We reserve this phrase for the behavior of foreign rebels:—currently they're Islamic extremists, let's not pretend otherwise. If not, why isn't the co-pilot who rammed a plane into a mountainside and murdered its 149 passengers not a violent extremist or a terrorist? Or those Canadian plotters of an attack on a Halifax mall?

To return those foreign atrocities and our daily extremism, I know it's a huge leap, and it sidesteps the issue of how rebels like IS and Boko Haram can indulge in extremes on the scale we witness today and why our terrorizing others doesn't seem to match theirs, here's a thought—if it's true that those foreign rebels are media savvy, perhaps in a macabre way, IS and its counterparts are competing with the extremes they observe in our society? They're competing with us to inflict grief and to shock.