

**AN ART THERAPIST'S VIEW OF
MASS MURDERS, VIOLENCE,
AND MENTAL ILLNESS**

“Andrea Yates”



Figure 1. On June 20, 2001, wanting to send them to a better place—heaven—Andrea Yates drowned her five children in the bathtub. She had attempted suicide previously and suffered from post-partum depression and post-partum psychosis. Nevertheless, she was left alone in the house with the children. Yates was convicted of capital murder and sentenced to life in prison. The verdict was overturned on appeal and she was found innocent by reason of insanity. She is serving her sentence in a state mental institution in Texas.

**AN ART THERAPIST'S VIEW OF
MASS MURDERS, VIOLENCE,
AND MENTAL ILLNESS**

**Practical Suggestions for Helping Practitioners Find
Support and Guidance in a Dangerous Practice**

By

MAXINE BOROWSKY JUNGE



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This book is for those who stand up for what is right.

And for my children Benjamin and Alexa, who do.

ALSO BY MAXINE BOROWSKY JUNGE

A History of Art Therapy in the United States

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Voices from the Barrio
“Con Safos: Reflections of Life in the Barrio”

Dear Myra, Dear Max
A Conversation About Aging
(with Myra Levick)

I once read that the root of all anger is fear, particularly a fear of those things we cannot control.

—Brittany Cooper, *Eloquent Rage*

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road to the future: but we go around, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.

—D. H. Lawrence

When people conclude that all is futile, then the absurd becomes the norm.

—Stanley Crouch

PREFACE

There have been times when I thought I should title this book *Everything I've Ever Wanted to Say About Everything*. Writing it has given me the opportunity to revisit and reconsider my deepest source—my history as an art psychotherapist in a variety of clinical settings and in teaching. Exploring through writing, I have remembered again valiant struggles of students and colleagues to help the clients they serve as bureaucracy has burgeoned and encroached deliberately. I have watched them hold onto their humanity grimacing, unsung but bathed in light in what has always been a difficult and all-too-often inhuman mental health system. I admire their bravery. Sometimes simply continuing on is an act of courage.

Formally, I became a clinical art psychotherapist and teacher in the early 1970s just as the mental health system was dramatically changed. My history in the art therapy field coincides with the history of modern mental health. Originally thought to be a major advance over the old days, as in most things, unsettling problems have emerged. Unfortunately, the struggle is not ended. It has simply become more complicated. I believe it has gotten worse for clients and for clinicians who carry on together with hope despite inherent dangers and despite immeasurable obstacles. In this book you will find my thoughts on a variety of issues of creativity, violence and mental illness, framed around the phenomenon of mass murders. Most have been turned over, inside out and crafted in conversations over the years with students, colleagues and friends in my living room in front of the fireplace. They are the ideas of an art psychotherapist who has been active in the mental health system for almost fifty years.

In the 1970s, when I first began clinical practice, a colleague's house was burned down by a client she was seeing in an outpatient clinic. Her baby was saved—they threw him out the window—but her husband died in the fire. She was very badly scarred and terrifically shaken. It was a horrifying wake-up call for me about the dangers people who engage with mental illness may encounter. I never forgot it. It remained an unforgettable, ever-present memory and in a myriad of ways, this book, more than forty-five years later, is the result.

M.B.J.

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I have worked with my publisher Michael Thomas at Charles C Thomas Publishers for 18 years in a literary partnership and I want to thank him and his staff for their support and appreciation of my work and for being endlessly helpful. Most importantly to me, they have been non-intrusive, perfect for the way I work. I have never met Michael in person but have had a long email relationship with him where we discussed and argued about punctuation (he was generally right) and wrote about our families, as our children grew up and expanded into their own lives. As an artist, I am particularly picky about visual imagery and thus am exceedingly grateful to Trevor Ollech who created the spectacular cover designs for many of my books—often using my own artwork.

Diane Divelbess encouraged me to thank my familiar old desk chair, with me for 40 years, traveling from Los Angeles to Whidbey Island and supporting me (so to speak) through the writing of my dissertation, books, articles and a variety of other things. In the middle of writing this book, it finally had enough and went to the dump. I am just getting to know my new desk chair and hope it can be as effective as my old.

My wonderful house has sheltered me and my curiosity, helped me clean out the cobwebs, given me a sweet place for dreaming and nurtured my writing and art for 18 years. I will miss it.

I thank Catherine Robinson for everything.

David Wilder offered an appreciative listening ear and important documents. In the course of writing, he also put up some motion lights on my house. I am grateful to him for the many roles he plays in my life.

Betsy, my Havanese dog, slept quietly, snoring on her rug underneath my computer, while I wrote. Her furry and comforting presence contributed in many ways.

My son, Dr. Benjamin Junge is my computer/tech consultant. Technological ninny that I am, I call on him for help where ever he is in the world. (For the last six months, he has been in Brazil.) I am grateful for his good-hearted willingness to help, despite his own heavy research and teaching demands. Our weekly discussions provided me with an intellectual

scholarly colleague who is thoughtful, imaginative and knowledgeable. Ben took the pictures of my artwork for this volume.

My fabulous daughter Alexa's caring, understanding and interest in her mother's peculiar obsession has meant everything.

Much of the research and thinking for this book was done at the John Auburn's Whidbey Island Bagel Factory in Clinton. I walk in the door and am handed my cup of coffee and my bagel is automatically inserted into the toaster. When I came to Whidbey 18 years ago, I made the bagel shop my office. I want to thank John and his staff for making it more than an office and treating me like family.

My work on mass murders and keeping therapists safe, culminating in this book, has been a long process. But not everyone I talked to about the project was enthusiastic. Many felt the subject too horrifying and best avoided. However, there were some. For their support and ideas, I acknowledge the essential role played by those who have come in and out of my life over email and in person during that time—students, mentees and friends at Antioch University in Seattle, in Los Angeles and on Whidbey Island, Washington. Ellen Stewart, Danna Rooth and Katie Kapugi's enthusiasm for the urgency of safety for art therapists has provided incentive when my own might have lagged.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Writing is done in solitude but it is by no means made in isolation. In that solitude I find the quiet to think and respond to the world and the things people have said, and everything I write is in conversation with others.

—Rebecca Solnit, *Call Them by Their True Names*

My interest in the human personality's mysterious intersection of violence and mental illness has been present for decades—in all the years of my formal career as I practiced clinical art psychotherapy and directed a Master's-level graduate training program in Clinical Art Therapy and Marital and Family Therapy, first at Immaculate Heart College and then at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. In those over-busy days, I had little time to make my own art. When I retired from LMU and moved to Whidbey Island, 18 years ago, I stopped active involvement with clients and finally had time and energy to make my own artwork. I moved from a practicing art therapy clinician and took up again my persona as a visual artist who had been waiting in the wings all that time. Fascinated before now as a practicing art therapist, I remained intrigued with how the human personality could manifest a congruence of mental illness and violent aggressive behavior and decided to focus my artwork there. On Whidbey Island, I painted and drew about mass murders (which unfortunately kept coming in real life). My paintings and drawings are included in this book in Chapter 5.

This volume is not about terrorist killings or killers. As achingly horrifying and terrible as it is, a terrorist killing can be explained on political terms. A mass murder without terrorist intentions is, I think,

ultimately unexplainable. It is a complicated, yet pared away, articulation of the human personality, and all-too rampant these days.

Motives may actually differ but mental illness is often a suspected cause of mass murders and the broken mental health system readily accused. For the purposes of this book “mass murder” is defined as one in which more than one person is killed at one time. Both Andrea Yates who drowned her five children in the bathtub to give them a better life in Heaven and Dylann Roof who killed nine African Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2015 with white supremacist motivations are mass murderers. Mass murder is contrasted to “serial killing” where the killer kills one person and then another and another etc., at a later time.

There has always existed unsettling disruptive behavior by people with mental illness. Many rightly or wrongly diagnosed with mental dysfunction spent their lives institutionalized in asylums or, since the 1960s, in jails. During the Kennedy years (1960s,) despite indisputably good intentions a sea change occurred in the treatment of mental illness. It was the effort to end the psychiatric “warehousing” of people, many of whom spent decades in institutions (cf. Chapter 4, Martin Ramirez). The focus was to empty out the state mental institutions and treat the unwell in community mental health centers in their home neighborhoods. Nothing is simple, however and as always, there were unforeseen ramifications. Later, politicians, such as Ronald Reagan, Governor of California and then United States President slashed funding and all but closed existing psychiatric hospitals, leaving very few beds for the seriously ill. Known as “deinstitutionalization,” this major shift, broadly and visibly, moved people with mental dysfunctions into communities—particularly cities, expanding and multiplying where financing for enough community treatment facilities and services failed to materialize. Many believe that the ever-broadening phenomenon of urban homelessness is the direct result of deinstitutionalization and that jails have become vast holding cells for the mentally ill—especially black prisoners. Others with mental dysfunctions remain among us, where they have always been.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that *all* violent behavior is committed by people with mental illness. Nor am I saying that people with mental illness are necessarily violent. What I *am* saying is that mental illness is probably *one cause* of violence, along with a variety of

other things including poverty, substance abuse and the ready accessibility of guns that for many make the world fearful and unsafe. For many the world appears to have slipped off its axis.

Some blame this feeling of unease on an increase in world population. Some blame it on the NRA¹ and the proliferation of guns and loose regulations in the United States. Some blame it on the ramifications of the technology blitz. Some blame it on video games and gamers. Some blame it on terrorists, homegrown and from abroad.² Whatever the realities, a generalized fear³ along with a profound sense of anxiety, exhaustion, instability and unpredictability predominate human consciousness and are ubiquitous today in American life.

Another point: Although this book concerns mass murders, at times committed by people with mental illness, some of whom, like Andrea Yates, had long documented problematic histories, I am not saying, by definition, that mass murderers *are* mentally dysfunctional or diagnosable. Many people do believe exactly that. It *is* true that most mass murderers if not all, probably have some aberrant behavioral issues that could be classified as early warning signs of mental illness. Although serious mental illness, in a second, can change a calm, relatively reasonable person into a violent monster, mass murders are typically carefully planned over a period of time and are not due to what is called “snapping.”

The search for a motivation for a mass murder usually begins immediately after the event and produces speculations, typically about the shooter’s “mental illness,” proclaimed as “facts” before any real facts are known. That there must be a discoverable motivation for such a terrible act is a virtual truism. Formulation and understanding of a motivating cause is the narrative story about the “prequel,” the “why” to the heinous act. It seems important to find out and know, even though the relevant discovery of motivation may be partially true

1. The NRA, as most know, is the National Rifle Association, the major lobbyist for gun rights, based on the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution.

2. In 2017 *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings* edited by Laura C. Wilson was published. It contains research articles on the subject (including politically-motivated terrorist shootings) by researchers, sociologists, criminalists and academics. Most of the research is on the aftermath and trauma of mass shootings, not on how to avoid or predict them. From what I can tell, this is the first book about psychology and mass killings to be published.

3. Journalist Bob Woodward’s book has recently been published. With a portrait of U.S. President Trump on its red cover, it is named *Fear*. Woodward writes that when Trump was asked to define power, he said “fear”!

or altogether false because discovery of motivation is the well-intentioned attempt to make the unexplainable, explainable. If we can understand the motivation, then we can feel normal again and safe in our own skins.⁴ If we know why (or even think we do), then we can feel comforted that we are *different* from the murderer and the world can tilt back on its axis and anxiety subside. Common wisdom concludes: “who would do such a horrible thing unless they are crazy; therefore, logically, the person who did it must have a mental illness.” This immediately leapt-to assumption is a psychological coping mechanism, a way of understanding evil acts which inherently are not understandable, making those who carry them out distant and different from “normal” people. Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

I believe in historical progress, but after almost 50 years of clinical psychotherapy and art therapy teaching and practice, despite our best efforts, I am convinced that human personality—its motivations and actions—remain complex and thus far, largely mysterious and unknowable. The old iceberg story applies: We see a bit of it at the surface of the ocean, but there is a large and unknowable area beneath the surface that we cannot see and we cannot know which can sink even our most safe and enduring ships. We do our best with the information we can see, can learn and can know. As art therapists, we search for patterns, speculate, predict and treat, but our abilities to tolerate and work within the ambiguity and existential unknowability of the human condition is an important skill that an art therapist cannot do without. This is the pragmatic reality we live and work in. Like medicine, an art psychotherapy practice is an art, not a science. This has always been true and is true today. We wish it were science and predictable, but it's not!

Is a mass murder a crime or an act of a mentally ill person? To go to trial, a mass murderer must be declared sane. But even legal definitions of mental disease or insanity change and generally the only relevant question is “does the person know right from wrong,” at best, a changing definition. One would hope advancement in thinking might result in a more accurate and improved definition. Unfortunately, not. Roth (2018) writes:

4. Recently, when a baggage handler stole a plane from SeaTac Airport, within two hours of the event and before any of the background information was known, I heard an “expert” speaking on TV giving a detailed story about the surrounding causation, including that the pilot was clearly suicidal and had been for a long time. Assumptions and hogwash!

. . . In biblical times and still today in some cultures, seeing visions or hearing voices is an indication of holiness, not madness. . . . Throughout our history we have struggled to figure out what transgressions should be considered crimes: for a brief period within my grandparents' life-times, it was against the law to drink a glass of wine; within my parents' life-time interracial marriage was illegal. In my adult life, I have watched marijuana become legal in state after state. (p. 4)

Diagnosing and treating mental illness is complicated with no definitive testing such as there is for physical disease. Mental illness cannot be diagnosed from a blood test! When I began clinical practice there was no *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*⁵ the therapist's diagnostic "Bible" today, developed to standardize, guide and define the thinking of clinicians and health insurance companies. Many mental health workers and others today consider the DSM "Truth." It is not. Over the years, definitions of diagnoses shift and move. Probably the most remembered story about the DSM is that in 1973 homosexuality was classified as a sexual deviance disorder—a pathology. Although it took 42 years, homosexuality as a pathological diagnosis was removed December 15, 2015. Sometimes a change is because of the advance of scientific information; more often, like this one, it is the result of sociopolitics.

Like every human creation, the DSM is only partially "true" at best. Dylann Roof, who killed nine black people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal in Charleston in 2015, had no documented mental health history at all, had never seen a therapist, nor been diagnosed for anything and, as far as we know, had never behaved in any way vastly different from the norm. Assessed competent to stand trial, can it be said that white supremacist ideology is "crazy" and drives someone to kill? It is what motivated Roof, but

5. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* I was first published in 1952 (and it was later than that that it was broadly used.) Before, there were a number of other mental health classification systems, but they were not widely used. The *DSM* was published by the American Psychiatric Association, the professional organization for M.D. psychiatrists. It has had five editions. The *DSM 5* is the first major revision in 20 years with significant changes to the categorization of schizophrenia. There are work groups of psychiatrists for each disorder, tasked with evolving definition and symptoms. In other words, the *DSM* intends to capture the best thinking it can about mental health and illness and has decided that a *committee* is the best way to do this. There are many who would question this central premise.

obviously it is not a mental illness diagnosis. White supremacy and racism are not psychiatric diagnoses in the DSM.

My curiosity about the life and personality of human beings is more compelling to me than fiction could ever be. My fascination with mysteries, patterns, puzzles and the complexities of the human condition was the main driver in my career as an art psychotherapist. Over decades I remained acutely attuned to and aware of the confluence of mental disturbance, violence and human personality. I continue to be fascinated to this day. Something in me? Perhaps. Unraveling and unsnarling the chaos so that, hopefully, it works better is the job—even the calling—of therapists. At its core, for many, it has something to do with trying to make a better world. As Jewish lore says it is a Jew's obligation to heal the world's wounds. In some small way, that has been central in my life.

Eighteen years ago, I moved to Whidbey Island, north of Seattle. As a visual artist since childhood with professional-level training, I reclaimed my artist Self. I discovered that my interests remained the same, as they had been when I was a practicing art psychotherapist—anger, violence, aggression wrapped within the human personality. But instead of working with therapy clients, I began making visual art about those same inner issues that continued to intrigue and mystify.

I noticed that some mass murderers had long and documented mental illness histories, even what we would call “red flags.” I was curious about why these warning signs seemed to have been ignored, resulting in the final tragedy of murder. In my art, I created renditions of mass murders and mass murderers. I believe with painter Ben Shahn that form is the shape of content. My main interest was to make art that tried to pierce the depths of mental illness in the human condition and explored how, at times, it could result in mass murder. Edges of personality interested me, as they always had. As a westerner who lived her whole life by the ocean, I knew I liked living “on the edge” and believed with Hannah Arendt, that evil exists and is banal. I was intrigued by that stark metaphorical landscape where outliers live, the arid psychic land where people breach the boundaries of civility and cultural acceptance and can commit acts so heinous that they instantly become monsters. I was also interested in the nature of contemporary American culture which increasingly seemed a crucible to enhance, allow, provoke and protect violence so that anger of all kinds could flourish and transform into hot flames. It was an