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Opinion

LETTERS

Probing the Psyches of Mass Murderers

Readers discuss whether the killers are mentally ill, hate women or are inspired by right-wing rhetoric.

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To the Editor:

Richard A. Friedman's evidence-based refutation of the eagerly embraced narrative of mental illness as the cause of most mass murders should be required reading for our political leaders.

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Though my professional work is devoted largely to trauma healing for survivors of such mass murders — and of wars, state-sponsored torture and climate-related disasters — I have known and treated a number of violent extremists, including mass murderers. What characterizes most, as Dr. Friedman understands, is not mental illness but immersion in ideologies — and often communities — that promote a rigid separation between their own enlightened, entitled state and others toward whom their rage will be directed. This fearful, rigid objectification allows violent extremists of many political and religious persuasions to cavalierly murder those whom they do not consider to be fully human.

We need to counter this way of thinking and acting by offering convincing and emotionally stirring narratives and examples of inclusion, by promoting mutual understanding and building community.

Pointing the finger at “mentally ill monsters,” as President Trump has done, shirks our responsibility to address our differences and perpetuates, under the false flag of psychiatric diagnosis, the fearful, separatist worldview that feeds the violence.

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The writer, a psychiatrist, is the author of the forthcoming “The Transformation: Discovering Wholeness and Healing After Trauma.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/letters/mass-killers-shootings.html>