



We close our eyes to kids' blindness

I USED TO THINK you could tell a lot from the eyes of a child. I used to think it made a difference if they cried. I know better now. Children whose lives have been ignited by gunfire become blind. Their eyes dry up and their voices are silenced. Their pain is deeply buried in private graveyards scattered throughout Milwaukee's central city. As we drive to the video store, we miss the grave sites because they have no markers. Perhaps if we renamed the streets they would be easier to spot: "I'll meet you at the intersection of Adams and Morgan."

Children are not the only sightless ones in our community. Responsible adults have become blind, too. But it is a different kind of blindness. It is a loss of vision based on bigotry and anger and fear. "Life plus 50" was a recent incantation pronounced on a 17-year-old child convicted of murder. Over and over again, the myth is repeated: "These children have no respect for human life." I don't buy that. Human life has no respect for them. As Felicia Morgan so simply stated, "In your world, old people die first. In my world, that is a lie. There is no order. Anybody can leave you any time."

In a city reeling from its bloodiest year in history, the haunted truths of children echo from graves and prisons. No one is listening. Day after day, the mothers and sisters and brothers of these children arrive at my office, looking for someone to listen, to understand, to act. "My child's not a monster, I love him. The devil took my child."

There is no textbook or class that teaches one to navigate through the mis-



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erable world of these children. All a lawyer or social worker or judge has is an intuitive grasp of the anguish locked away in a child's heart. Recently, I asked a young client charged with murder, "How many funerals have you gone to?" "Twenty," he answered. As we listed the uncles, cousins and friends who had been killed, he said, "I have lost so many people, and some of them are me."

Why do kids whose lives have been devastated by violence turn to violence? Shouldn't they know better? The answer depends on how one defines the word "know." Knowledge encompasses more than the intellectual truth that if you shoot someone you could kill them. Knowledge carries with it, by definition, the concepts of seeing and appreciating. These children have become blind. Not because they want to be, but because to really see the carnage is to personalize and integrate pain that is of extraordinary proportions.

In order to survive, I have made the pain political. My defense of children charged with serious violent crimes is a form of confrontation. I did not accidentally come across their pain. I am not there by chance. I want to stick it in the face of those who think the answers lie in steel cages. I want them to be humiliated and sickened and horrified by what I see and hear.

This is what I hear: "I have lost three

uncles and two cousins. . . ." "I was set on fire." "My father made me kneel on broken glass when I was bad." "My mother's boyfriend kept the Uzi under my mattress." "I remember eating squirrels and cherry pie filling for dinner five nights a week." "Have you ever held a severed head?"

The voices of children reflect the memories they have. The public is screaming for these children to remember. And then what? Owning these terrifying memories is difficult enough for well-adjusted adults, but for children it is excruciating and therefore unbearable. So they forget. Whether the process of forgetting that which is too unbearable to recall is volitional is a matter for debate. But we live in a city that has short-term memory deficits. What would Milwaukee be like if none of the children forgot? Teachers wouldn't be able to teach; writers couldn't write; and we'd never be able to go to the movies, always fearing the nightmares of the children left at home. I am glad kids forgot. They are remarkably resilient, open to change and capable of great love.

Our current response is to lock these children as far away from us as possible, so that we are not reminded of our own blindness. In forgetting, we don't make the streets any safer. In fact, they are more dangerous. In a few short years, there will be no more children to bear witness, but perhaps the graves will be marked. Is that what we want? We continue to pay the price for our comfortable but temporary ignorance.

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