

A glimpse of grace

The swift blur of tragedy that struck the Amish community last week should provide a moment of clarity for the rest of us. For a change, what we saw was religion in its best light.

By Bruce Kluger

In the hours and days following last week's heartbreaking school-house massacre of five Amish children in Nickel Mines, Pa., the story cut across the media landscape like a runaway brushfire.

Almost overnight, we learned the grotesque details of the vicious crime itself, heard the pitiful back story of its deranged perpetrator and were subjected to a flurry of the usual analyses — endless eddies of chatter that swirled about the tragedy without shame or abatement.

Rosie O'Donnell targeted the National Rifle Association in her blistering remarks about the killings; *Hannity & Colmes* used air time to bring on, then ridicule, a religious zealot who called the murders God's will; and columnists lumped the shocking slaughter into reports of other recent school shootings, as if to imply that this reprehensible act of madness was merely part of a bigger news story. A larger picture. A trend.

The Amish citizens of Nickel Mines were oblivious to it all, their religion having long ago instructed them to forgo TVs, radios and other devices of modern-day mass communication.

Instead, they quietly buried their little girls.

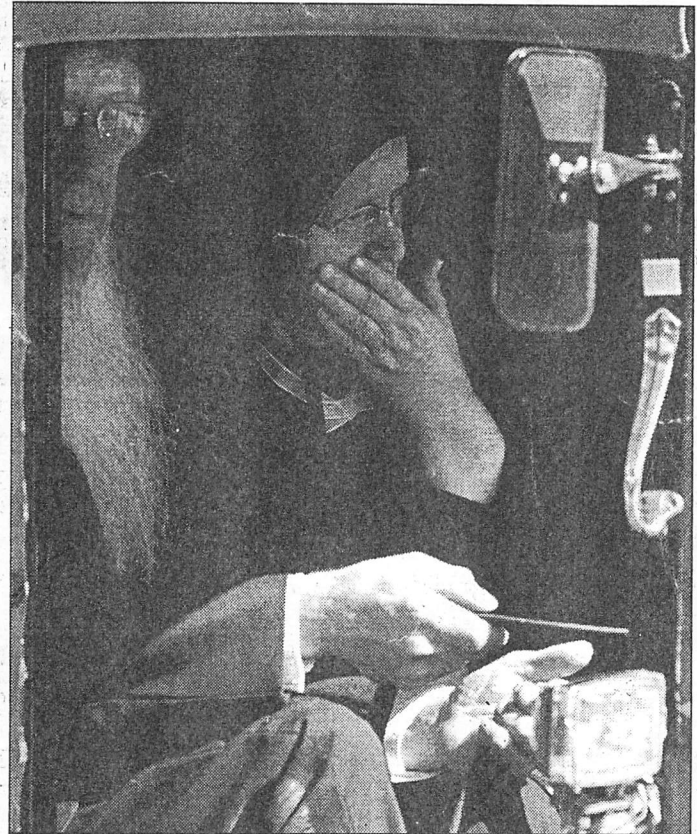
They collected money for the families of the deceased, including the horrified, grieving wife and children of the murderer. They also invited the family to the funerals.

"Grace," my wife said softly when I told her about this astonishing gesture of humanity by the bereaved people of Nickel Mines. "Pure grace. Maybe we all have something to learn from the Amish."

What faith has become

Religion is by no means an easy topic of conversation in this country — nor in the world. For many of us, it has lost its power to instantly transform or inspire. Indeed, this year alone, we've stood witness, repeatedly, to the dark and disjointed side of religion, and to its ugliest consequences.

We've seen mounting evidence that Islamic fundamentalists have no intention of retreating from their despicable interpretation of the Quran, bent as they are on de-



By Eileen Blass, USA TODAY

Burying a child: An Amish couple rides in a community funeral procession Thursday for a 7-year-old girl killed days earlier in Nickel Mines, Pa.

rying from its ancient verses little more than a global death warrant. We've watched in failed hope as peaceful Muslims around the globe largely stand mute in the face of this violence, their leaders unable or unwilling to coalesce into a single voice that might once and for all denounce the perversion of their faith by their misguided brothers.

Over the summer, Lebanese Shites and Israeli Jews similarly turned a deaf ear to the sacred tracts of their holy books — parables about decency and forgiveness and love — as they went about the business of murdering one another over prisoner exchanges and border intrusions and tiny parcels of arid land.

Catholics worldwide listened in confusion as their new pope, Benedict XVI, reached back to the words of a 14th-century emperor to draw a heavy curtain between the righteousness of Christianity and the "evil and inhuman" teachings of the prophet Mohammed.

And here at home, that small but rabid band of evangelicals con-

tinued a single-minded crusade, flocking not to churches, but to talk shows and congressional offices and town meetings, in an unyielding effort to write its own brand of divisive scripture into our laws.

Another kind of death

Where religion is concerned, we have reached a moment of critical mass in this nation — and the world — entering into a kind of apocalypse unimagined in the Bible. And our punishment is not the stuff of plagues and hellfire, issued by a wrathful and dissatisfied God. Instead, it is simply the souring of our inner spirit and the crushing loss of our soul. Our undoing is our own.

Meanwhile, the reclusive and serene citizens of Nickel Mines about their business. They lay the beautiful children to rest, and gently pray for our redemption.

Grace.

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