

## **I'm not OK, you're not OK, it's not OK**

On Tuesday, January 6, 2009, George Sodini, a 48-year-old systems analyst at a law firm, went to a fitness center in Collier Township, Pennsylvania where a women's aerobics class was in progress. He was carrying a duffel bag containing handguns and ammunition, intending to kill as many of the women there as possible and then kill himself. The night before, in an on-line blog begun two months earlier and devoted to what he called his "exit plan," Sodini had written, "I cannot wait for tomorrow!" He made three more entries during the day, ending the third with his farewell:

It is 6:40 p.m., about an hour and a half to go. God have mercy. I wish life could be better for all and the crazy world can somehow run smoother. I wish I had answers. Bye.

However, the blog (which I have lightly edited to correct spellings and clarify punctuation) continues:

It is 8:45PM: I chickened out! Shit! I brought the loaded guns, everything. Hell!

Just as we try to comprehend how Adolf Eichmann, in Hannah Arendt's words, got his conscience to function "the other way around," and instead of finding it unthinkable to

participate in murder, came to find it unthinkable to refuse to participate – to the question of how long this took him, Arendt answers mordantly "about four weeks" – we wonder at a man who charges himself with cowardice when he is unable to bring himself to kill random women in a mass slaughter.

Sodini's blog, which he maintained on a dedicated website that no one else ever saw, is not without interest that is independent of the morbidity of its main preoccupation. Sodini is self-aware, at least on a surface level. He understands his situation to be one of extreme isolation and loneliness. He bears a generalized grudge against all women because he has not had a relationship for 19 years; but most of the time he attributes this to his own failings, not theirs. He psychologizes his family of origin with incisive descriptions:

My dad never (not once) talked to me or asked about my life's details or told me what he knew. He was just a useless sperm donor. . . . Mum – The Central Boss. Don't piss her off or she will be mad and vindictive for years. She actually thinks she's normal. Very dominant. Her way and only her way with no flexibility toward everyone in the household. . . . Why are people vicious with their closest ones?

He paints a devastating portrait of his older brother as a bully and narcissist, speaks of his sister with some affection ("More of a victim than anything"), and says only positive things about her two children. He concludes his extended entry about his family with a portrait of a right-wing fundamentalist Christian neighbor:

A condescending, demeaning, passive-aggressive person. Frigid, rigid, linear and totally inflexible. Being a very serious person, he cannot hide his frown-lined face. He better not try to smile; lest his face might crack. I knew children of parents who grew up in strict religious homes. Religion has a certain stink to it of guilt, shame, fear, and that moral standard that

always contradicts the natural tendencies and desires of a person. Therein lies the conflict. Young persons cannot experiment with things to decide on their own and establish their own parameters. So they tend to cut loose and really rebel much worse than the average young person.

The entries I have quoted pretty much exhaust the range of topics he covers – his grievances about women (it seems to him that they bestow their sexual favors indiscriminately upon everyone except him), his disgust with his brother, and his exit plan. But exactly one week before the day appointed for the execution of his plan, he devotes an entry – the only one – to a social issue that is completely unrelated to his own life:

While driving I radio-surfed to a talk show. The caller was a 30-ish black man who was describing the despair in certain black communities. . . . It is the quality of life that is important, he said. . . . The host got sarcastic and ended the call instead of trying understanding his point. Agreement wasn't necessary. I put music back on. But it was an interesting and useful point for me to hear.

After he "chickened out," Sodini fell silent for three-and-a-half months, but resumed the blog on April 24, 2009, writing mostly about his work situation. His law firm had been laying people off, but he was philosophical: "If you have nothing, you have nothing to lose." Then:

I enjoy writing these entries, I have no plans to go back and edit or even read most stuff already written. If you get bored, just click that "x" at the top, right corner of your browser. Bye.

Did this indicate a faint hope that some reader would stumble across his blog and perhaps intervene in his exit plan?

Between May 4 and May 7, he posted these entries:

I was so eager to do this last year. The big problem on my mind now is that my job will end soon. . . . I do a good job. I survived two general layoffs and other little layoffs they are having but keeping quiet about. I hear things.

The problem is I feel too good now to do this but too bad to enjoy life. I know I will never enjoy life. This is an over-30-year trend. . . . I always had hope that maybe things will improve especially if I make big attempts to change my life. I made many big changes in the past two years but everything is still the same. Life is over. Even though I look good, dress well, well groomed – nails, teeth, hair, etc. Who knows.

I like to write and talk. Ironic because I haven't met anybody recently (past 30 years) who I want to be close friends with *or* who wants to be close friends with me. I was always open to suggestions to what I am doing wrong . . . .

Went to the gym and did mostly cardio. My heart rate was 117 just from walking on the treadmill at 3.4. This should be done a few times a week for maybe 15 minutes or so to keep the heart active. I sprinted a few times to push the limits.

On July 20, he writes:

I got a promotion and a raise . . . . No more grunt programming. Go figure! New boss is great. He tactfully says when you did something wrong or compliments on good things. Never confused with him. But that is *not* what I want in life. I guess some of us were simply meant to walk a lonely path. I have slept alone for over 20 years. Last time I slept all night with a girlfriend it was 1982. Proof I am a total malfunction. Girls and women don't even give me a second look *anywhere*. There is something *blatantly* wrong with me that *no* goddam person will tell me what it is.

On August 2, he writes that "The biggest problem of all is not having relationships or friends, but not being able to achieve and acquire what I desire in those or many other areas. Everything stays the same regardless of the effort I put in." On August 3, he

writes "Tomorrow is the big day." The final sentence of the blog is "Death lives!"

The following evening he found his courage and fulfilled the exit plan just as he had hoped to do seven months earlier. He killed three women, wounded nine others, then shot himself in the head.

Sodini's apparent ability to examine his motives and reflect on his life puzzles us. The glimpses we have of his discernment and self-awareness encourage us to see him as someone who should be inoculated against the evil that he is tempted to do – surely his moral intelligence will kick in and veto his project. He must realize that his murderous project is logically disconnected from the particulars of his life of quiet desperation. Isn't this why he "chickened out"? Isn't his on-line publishing of his "exit plan" evidence that he hopes that somehow his blog will come to the attention of someone who will save him from himself? He appears to have the psychological mobility to interrogate his thoughts. In many of his entries, he takes satisfaction in his work, in some of his activities, and even in the act of writing itself.

But he is tethered to his plan; he is not free to change his mind. His destiny has been decided – or so he *feels* – by something bigger than himself, which, while ineffable and mysterious, is nevertheless definite and adamant – a vise in the grip of which he is powerless. *We* see (or think we see) that free will is a possibility for him; *he* experiences determinism as his very phenomenology. He is fated to do the thing he is going to do: it is already written down in the book of deeds, though it be still undone. He is *compelled* – which is the element that makes his decision incomprehensible to the normal mind. But that is the point, no matter how difficult it is for us to understand:

he is *not* free to rescind his decision. Free will exists, but those who do evil have the least amount of it.

To an overly logical mind, this question naturally occurs: Why didn't Sodini start with his brother, move on to his parents, and then track down as many of the women who had *actually* rejected him as he could?

One of his entries about his law firm speculates that the senior partners are invoking the recession of 2009 to rationalize heartless layoffs: "I know this firm is using this downturn as an excuse to take advantage of a bad situation and kill jobs *unnecessarily*." He writes, "Wasn't going to mention it" and then gives the name of the firm, previously withheld. I read this as evincing his scrupulosity: heretofore, he has not wanted the firm he works for to be identified, as it is innocent of any contribution to the slaughter he contemplates; but now that he suspects the firm of its own evil, he abandons his circumspection. The next sentence is pertinent to Sodini's "logic." Still on the subject of his workplace:

Most people there are OK and I would never have a shoot 'em up there.  
They paid me for 10 years, so far!

So he has a code of morality. It is clear to him that it would be wrong to murder his co-workers, or even the bosses who are terminating his co-workers; but the code will not be violated by his murdering women who are completely unknown to him. He has been bullied by his brother, vituperated by his mother, and ignored by his father; and several women – A, B, and C – have rejected him. As payback, he will kill several *other* women selected at random – X, Y, and Z.

Now the psychologically astute reader wants to remind me that the logic of a madman is not like Aristotle's logic, or Bertrand Russell's. I know that. But if we answer, "Well, Sodini was crazy," we have not really explained anything, because his 4500-word blog, like the manifesto of the "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski – or, for that matter, *Mein Kampf* – does not read like the unhinged production of someone who is losing his grip on reality and needs to be institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. If his blog had come to the attention of the authorities, the institution that they would have tried to refer him to would have been a prison. He would have been mentally evaluated, of course, and presumably would have scored high on some dysfunctional qualities tested for by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory; but he would not have been a candidate for an involuntary commitment to an insane asylum. Similarly, we aren't helped by labeling him a misogynist. His attitudes are similar to those of at least 20 or 30 million other men in this country alone; and while we should take seriously the social consequences of the psychological and moral malady that afflicts misogynists, still we are left with the problem of explaining why *this particular* misogynist was that one-in-a-million or ten million who takes his pathology to the next level.

In calling attention to the illogicality of Sodini's act, I know that I may seem to be stating the obvious – but I wish, if possible, to home in on what, exactly, separates the mass murderer from the rest of us. His evil originates in his feeling, familiar at one time or another to all of us, that "This should not be happening." In other words, the perpetrator of what the world is going to call evil has first been, at least in his own mind, a victim of evil. While we too have our impulses of revenge, our fantasies tend to have

two salient qualities: they are directed toward those persons who have actually mistreated us; and they are scaled to the degree of the offense. If you have carelessly made me late for an appointment, I do not fantasize about killing you and your family, or about murdering several people selected at random from the community.

What confronts us, then, in trying to wrap our minds around evil, is precisely this disjunction between grievance and what the perpetrator considers to be righteous retribution. And we have to turn the question around. We are spinning our wheels if we keep pointing out that the response is incommensurate with the offense and then throw up our hands, as if somehow our gesture of incomprehension is the answer. No: we have pinpointed the enormity, but so far we have only described it; we are as far as ever from understanding it. We have to enter into the phenomenology of the perpetrator and say forthrightly, "The response was not incommensurate *to him*." Instead of calling this fact of psychology "inexplicable" or even "insane," we have to take it as the point of departure, rather than the terminus, of our investigation, calmly accepting it as an indisputable datum and treating it as no more intellectually elusive than any other fact of science.

To the evildoer, the retributive act is exemplary, the victims are deserving of death, and the scale is appropriate. His act will be the needful corrective to the injustice he has suffered. But how does he arrive at his notion of location and scale? I can hypothesize only one possible answer to that question: The amount of devastation he plans to inflict is the objective correlative, he thinks, of the amount of suffering that he has endured. Or believes he has endured, which is the same thing – for it is "all in the mind."

To complete this phenomenological analysis, I will begin by quoting Rudyard Kipling's autobiographical reminiscence about the terrible treatment to which he was subjected as a child at the hands of a foster family and the reluctance that he had shown to speak of it to even his most sympathetic relatives:

Often and often afterwards, the beloved Aunt would ask me why I had never told anyone how I was being treated. Children tell little more than animals, for what comes to them they accept as eternally established.

Thomas Harris, in his best-selling book about Transactional Analysis titled *I'm OK – You're OK*, proposed a grid of four orientations toward others:

- I'm Not OK, You're OK
- I'm OK, You're OK
- I'm OK, You're Not OK
- I'm Not OK, You're Not OK

Harris posited that the first orientation is natural to childhood, but good parenting inducts the child into the second orientation. The third and fourth orientations are fortunately rare because they can have dire outcomes – criminality and homicide in the case of "I'm OK, You're Not OK"; major depression and suicide in the case of "I'm Not OK, You're Not OK."

However, the effect of childhood abuse is even more damaging than Harris's grid suggests. Consider this schema proposed by Morton Schatzman, the author of *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family*:

- You are not a victim, and you know that you are not
- You are not a victim, but you think that you are
- You are a victim, and you know that you are

- You are a victim, but you do *not* think that you are

The second condition is paranoia; the third condition is political or personal oppression.

The first condition has no name, inasmuch as it implies a happy life and a healthy orientation. *The last condition also has no name*, although its effects are devastating.

It encompasses large numbers of individuals who swell the ranks of both the evildoers and the depressed. It also suggests that Harris's grid can be profitably reformulated as follows:

- I'm Not OK, Life's OK
- I'm OK, Life's OK
- I'm OK, Life's Not OK
- I'm Not OK, Life's Not OK

Even more illuminating is the substitution of the indefinite pronoun "It" for "Life." The vagueness better matches the phenomenology. Something is wrong – "It's not OK" – but who can put his or her finger on what "it" is?

The vicissitudes of personal history determine whether this pathologizing of life itself is channeled into depression or evil – it turns on whether the agent blames himself alone, or blames others, or the universe. All evil, including the existential affliction of despair, starts from "This shouldn't be happening." Whose fault is that? The melancholy person says "Mine." The angry person says "Theirs." Who are "they"? The answer to *that* question will be instructive.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, Sodini felt "I'm Not OK." Clearly he felt also that "It's Not OK." Sometimes in his blog he conducts a self-assessment and finds himself lacking. But sometimes he lists his personal assets and expresses irritation and

bafflement that generalized others find him "Not OK":

I actually look good. I dress good, am clean-shaven, bathe, touch of cologne – yet 30 million women rejected me – over an 18- or 25-year period. That is how I see it. Thirty million is my rough guesstimate of how many desirable single women there are.

In spite of occasional eruptions of anger, the blog's consistent motif is demoralization. It is conspicuous, however, for the absence of an element that we might expect to find: a philosophical case for misogyny. From time to time, Sodini reflects on the women who freely dispense their sexual favors, and they are all described as "ho's" – black slang for "whores" – but the connotation of that term, as Sodini uses it, is worldly *sang-froid*. He isn't condemning women for being too easy – he is condemning them for being easy with everyone but him. He does not pursue an argument that women are sluttish and morally bereft, carrying the curse of Eve; rather, he is open about his desire for a bedmate and ready to assume that he is somehow the damaged party. His misogyny is mostly a matter of frustrated sexual longing.

Misogyny is rife throughout our society and is a structural element in many other cultures. Hatred of women has figured in several mass murders. The dubious honor of putting misogyny on the mass murder map probably belongs to Marc Lépine, who burst into a college classroom in Montreal in 1989, cleared the room of the men, and shot 14 women to death. The case is memorable for the public reaction, which was to downplay or even ignore the role of misogyny – partly because the gunman's suicide note, in which he wrote that feminists "have always ruined my life" and "I have decided to put an end to those viragos," was long withheld by authorities who claimed that their

motive was to discourage copy-cat killings. Even so, it would seem that his targeting of women was so overt that no one could have plausibly denied the role of misogyny in his crime – but many did. Feminists were, not for the first time, at a loss to start a conversation about a societal pathology that was invisible to everyone except them.

Since then, matters have "progressed." No one could miss the misogyny of Sodini's act, but it came a full two decades after Lépine's, and passed for a one-off. The game-changer was Elliot Rodger's 2014 killing spree near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Rodger, much younger, handsomer, and seemingly in possession of more social assets than Sodini, was articulate about his animus and its origin in sexual frustration. He left behind a "manifesto" and numerous toxic diatribes against the girls who rejected him. As a disconcerting and troubling consequence, he has attained posthumous sainthood among a group of men who call themselves "incels" – involuntary celibates. Just as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are revered as martyrs by subsequent mass murderers who have targeted schools, Rodger's name is now invoked as the presiding spirit of a movement of men who blame women for not sleeping with them. Nikolas Cruz, the perpetrator of the rampage at a Parkland, Florida high school on Valentine's Day 2018, vowed in a comment on a YouTube video that "Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten." Alek Minassian posted this message on Facebook: "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" (Chads and Stacys are the attractive and affluent white people who pair off, leaving the incel community with only the women who are too ugly to date.) A few minutes later, Minassian drove his van onto a sidewalk and killed ten people in Toronto.

Yet Cruz and Minassian, unlike Lépine and Sodini, targeted crowds of people and killed indiscriminately without regard to sex. In October of 2006, however, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, another mass murder had occurred that was explicitly directed at young girls – children, in fact. Charlie Roberts sent all the boys out of an Amish elementary school classroom and then shot to death five girls and wounded five others. Roberts was regarded in his own church as a good husband and father. He left his wife a long handwritten letter that resembled the last messages of most such killers:

I am sorry to put you and the kids in this position but I feel that this is the best and only way. I love all of you and this is why I am doing this.

Roberts told his wife that he was angry with God because their first-born child had died; and he confessed to her that he had molested two young family members years before and had been fantasizing about doing it again. Once again, the "logic" of killing randomly selected children as a way to ward off thoughts of sexually abusing them, or as a way to punish God, escapes us. But such a deed is always felt by the killer to be necessary and inevitable; it is the only possible solution to the problem that is tormenting him.

In Sodini's blog, however, this sort of grotesque apology and statement of necessity is nowhere to be found. Perhaps because he is one of the oldest men ever to commit mass murder, his blog is also free of adolescent boasting about the sensational journalistic coverage his act will engender; and nowhere does he evince the gun fetishism that is so often a feature of such killers. His writing is marked by a blandness that is markedly at variance with the violence of his act. We search in vain

for any eruption of strong passions or uncontrollable urges. His compulsion seems frivolous by comparison to that of Rodger, Lépine, and Roberts. This is why we are so challenged in attempting to ascertain the exact nature of his motivation. His blog defeats any easy or convincing access to his negative feelings; he seems too phlegmatic to have felt much. This invites us to apportion a larger role to his negative *thinking*.

He gives the appearance of intending his act to be exemplary: by his calculated selection of women as his only victims, in conjunction with the casual misogyny of his blog, he seems to be encouraging us to see it as symbolically directed toward the entire tribe of sexually active women and expressing an implicit critique of their mores. But he does not lash out at feminists or blame any particular women for ruining his life. He never writes with any consciousness of vengeance as an impulse. His blog remains stubbornly mired in the quotidian: he stews in his own juices, and never explicitly gives a reason for his undertaking.

One trait that stands out in retrospect is a complete absence of imaginative identification with any other person's phenomenology. He pontificates about the malign effect of religion, and ponders the cogency of the black man's explanation for the anomie of the underclass, but he never enters into anyone else's experience. He analyzes his brother from the outside, without psychological curiosity. His nephew is a "good young guy"; his niece is "attractive, smart, emotional – all good qualities." But he does not contemplate their lives from their point of view. He thinks about his own life, including its pleasures. For a while, he is enjoying it too much to want to end it – and he is uneasy about death:

What is it like to be dead? I always think I am forgetting something, that's one reason I postponed. Similar to when you leave to get in your car to go somewhere – you hesitate with a thought: "What am I forgetting?" In this case, I cannot make a return trip!

But he never gives a thought to how his victims will have all had similar reflections.

This is of course characteristic of anyone who could do such a deed – lack of empathy is always mentioned as a salient trait, perhaps *the* salient trait, of people who do evil.

We take it for granted that this incapacity for feeling the lives of others must be a necessary cause for such an act. But it is not a sufficient cause. Millions of people are empathy-impaired. There must be another contributor to so violent an act.

Because he is so voluble and articulate, Sodini gives us an unusual amount of access to the solipsism of self-pity. He does not literally believe that he alone exists; but his mental life is so entirely self-focused that the reader of the contents of his blog, as they are spread out over nine months, can find very little indication that other people actually exist *for him*. Even his hateful brother is just a convenient piñata for verbal darts. It is plain to see why Sodini is not going to go to the trouble of hunting down the people against whom he has real grudges – his feelings against them are not vivid enough. He is all about thoughts rather than emotions. He is an intellectualizer. His blog is a litany of complaints but the tone never rises to any level of passion. His one mention of strong negative emotion is retrospective: "My anger and rage is largely gone since I began lifting weights." But this just magnifies the mystery of how or why he eventually mobilized himself and attained the get-up-and-go to massacre strangers. Half the answer almost seems to be that they were close at hand: he was too lazy to

expend a lot of effort on this.

After damning religion eight months previously on New Year's Eve, he unexpectedly produced out of nowhere, on the day before he finally fulfilled his exit plan, this reflection:

Maybe soon, I will see God and Jesus. At least that is what I was told. Eternal life does *not* depend on works. If it did, we will all be in hell. Christ paid for *every* sin, so how can I or you be judged *by God* for a sin when the penalty was *already* paid. People judge but that does not matter. I was reading the Bible and The Integrity of God beginning yesterday, because soon I will see them.

I don't sense a lot of commitment to these ideas here; but his bothering to express them does indicate that, throughout the year or so that he honed his plans, he continued to be ruminative and interested in recording his thoughts. Wrapping up his blog, he writes:

Maybe all this will shed insight on why some people just cannot make things happen in their life, which can potentially benefit others.

This sudden interest in contributing to humanity's greater understanding strikes an oddly discordant note – perhaps something can be done in the future, he is saying, not necessarily to prevent senseless mass murders, but to benefit his fellow incapables. Nothing hints at an apology to the victims or their loved ones. Many mass murderers who leave a note behind do betray some awareness that they are about to do wrong; and occasionally they apologize at least to their own families. Sodini expresses no regret at all for what he is about to do. In light of his blog's utter insensibility about the consequences of the act he intends, its opening lines seem almost mocking:

Why do this?? To young girls? Just read below. I kept a running log that includes my thoughts and actions, after I saw this project was going to drag on.

November 5, 2008:

Planned to do this in the summer but figure to stick around to see the election outcome. This particular one got so much attention and I was just curious.

After reading the blog from beginning to end, we are no more enlightened than when we started as to why he did this to young girls (actually, the dead all turned out to middle-aged); his famished sex life, by his own account, seems to be owing more to his own torpor and self-immurement than to female disdain. We rightly conclude that he does not really know why he is doing this. And we can only scratch our heads over the incongruity of his determination to end his own life, but in conjunction with his willingness to delay his exit plan out of curiosity to see how an election turns out. However, just such perplexities are commonplace in the literature – the suicide who tidies up his closet and brushes his teeth in the last minutes of his life.

I must seem to have taken a lengthy detour immediately upon enouncing my principle – the reader is likely to have forgotten it. I submitted the thesis that the only possible explanation for the exaggerated scale of the retributive act is that "the amount of devastation he plans to inflict is the objective correlative of the amount of suffering that he has endured." Sodini's grudge against life goes back 20 years. With typically male sarcasm and fatalism, he covers over his *dukka* – the Buddhist word for the suffering mentioned in the Second Noble Truth, which encompasses not only terrible loss and pain but also the frustration and gnawing dissatisfaction when desires go

unfulfilled. His sometimes cheerful egoism, the acuity and justice of some of his reflections, and his comfortable job and salary, lull us into seeing him as having enough inner resources to prefer life to death. But we have to take seriously the impoverishment of his daily round, his awareness of this impoverishment, and his tendency to ultimately blame everything and everybody but himself – especially "life," "things," and "this crazy world." Even his boredom and low-key disgruntlement are red flags. A physically healthy human being, materially well off, who chooses to end his life is acting in a way that no member of any other species on earth ever acts. He is utterly alienated from the capacity to take pleasure from or even interest in the things that have sufficed for nearly four billion years to motivate all other organisms to cling to life and breath until continued clinging is no longer possible. His condition is exacerbated by his perception that others are at the banquet of life and he is not. Finally, his revenge is "ontological" – like a child who kicks a brick wall after running into it, he will punish the universe itself for having hurt him.

What can we do? How are we to identify the killer next door? Sodini – like those fictional dastards Iago, Claggart, and Satan – had no criminal record to alert any onlookers to his potential for evil. He had some social assets – according to his blog, he got along with everyone at work. On May 18 – midway between his initial failure and his eventual "success" in carrying out his project – he wrote, "I actually had a date today." But in the same entry, we go to the core of what his life feels like to him:

I need to expect nothing from me or other people. All through the years I thought we had the ability to change ourselves – I guess that is incorrect.

Looking at The List [of items that will provide motivation to execute the exit plan] makes me realize how *totally alone*, a deeper word is *isolated*, I am from all else.

I no longer have any expectations of myself. I have no options because I cannot work toward and achieve even the smallest goals. That is, *above all*, what bothers me the most. Not to be able to work towards what I want in my life. I believe I deserve that. I read recently it is called "self-efficacy," but who knows. Is that more psychobabble?

Whatever it is called, the lack of it is experienced by Sodini as a deep unfairness at the very core of things. It seems to be the birthright of all sentient beings, but it is denied him, through no fault of his own that he can identify. He cannot achieve any purposeful agency in his life; and to worsen this state of affairs immeasurably, he sees that others can. In other words, the universe, in distributing its gifts, is arbitrary, capricious, and unjust. If that is so, then someone's accidental possession of its goods is no more meritorious than his own equally accidental deprivation is discreditable. In a world without meaning, the women at the spa no more deserve to live in their abundance than Sodini deserves to die in his emotional destitution. In a world of chance, some lack "self-efficacy"; others, in the prime of life, go down in a hail of bullets. No one has a legitimate complaint – it's all just rock 'n' roll.

Nihilism is the name for the "philosophy" that I have just expounded. (Sodini was not academically inclined and did not feel the need to offer a coherent world-view.) In the rare instance where nihilism is seriously maintained as an intellectual orientation, it is almost always by an adolescent bidding for attention. It is a pose of heroic nonchalance, of brave indifference, in the face of the meaninglessness of existence. Beneath the vanity of this pose is the nihilist's plaint – "Everyone else has all the luck;

nothing good ever happens for me."

Does my description of his phenomenology do justice to Sodini's horrific act? No – evil almost always eludes a totally satisfying explanation. The last piece of the puzzle is what I call the X-factor – the tipping point that is unique to the individual actor and therefore useless as the warning sign of a future rampage even if it could be identified. Here a German proverb is apropos: *Einmal ist keinmal* – "Once is (or may as well be) never." Whatever sent Sodini over the edge is never to be repeated exactly in another mass murderer.