

By Robert B Adams 3/12/13

A. INTRO

Many things happening in the world in the last few years have led me to revisit the question of the existence of natural limits on the application of many of our fundamental beliefs. The particular fundamental belief I will discuss tonight, that seems to be held by most of our current civilization is the belief that human life has a very high if not the highest value in our belief system. Many seem to believe that human life is sacred.

I will try to explore some of what I see as the consequences of this belief and whether there are any as yet unrecognized natural limits on the application of this belief.

I will start by describing a recent article in a Feb. USAT paper. The author lost his 53 yr old brother to suicide with a gun in late 2011. After the recent incidents of mass killings and the discussions of the role of guns in these events, he was distressed because the high number of gun suicides (about 2 a day) was never mentioned in the discussions on gun control. Gun killings of strangers get all the news, but each suicide leaves family, friends, and others asking about how this could have been prevented if they had only been better in some way they cannot define. The author believes that everything possible should be done to save lives. The author is distressed because he thinks "society is looking the other way" with regard to suicides.

My reaction to this article is that the society looks the other way in these cases for 2 reasons. First, they cannot yet know the mind of another person, which presumably would allow them to intercede. And, second, they are distressed by the event but do not recognize that the source of the suffering is their belief that "all human life is sacred."

In the next part of this discussion I will introduce the phrase accepted-time for death. The concept of an accepted-time for death seems to require at least two aspects. The first is that the death occur at an old age common for the culture where it occurs, and second, that no one else can be blamed for the death. The possibility of an "early" death seems to cause much distress to many people who would be much less distressed if the death were to occur at whatever they thought was an accepted-time for the death. I suggest that the accepted-time of death is an acceptance of the existence of a natural limit on our desperate activities to keep people alive because human life is sacred.

I am presenting this paper, not to claim that life is not sacred, but to attempt to get people to consider the consequences of trying to extend this idea and its byproduct "compassion", beyond what seem to me, their natural limits. One of the consequences of the belief that "life is sacred" is the introduction of another, often unacknowledged, source of long term stress into our culture. Since long term stress is known to cause chronic health problems, and I believe it clouds our ability to evaluate our relationship with reality, I campaign to reduce this stress in order to improve our health & decision making.

Now I will review some other examples of the kinds of happenings that triggered this discussion of possible limits on the belief that human life is sacred.

There is the recent question before the Supreme Court about the mandate in the Health Care bill in which the Federal Government directs every adult person to purchase some sort of health care insurance. Their rationale was that since every person who needs care will be provided health care, whether they have health care insurance or not, then every person should help pay for the care. The unspoken part of this argument is that if the uninsured don't get the health care they need, some of them might die before their accepted death time which seems to cause much distress among many people.

A second situation involves the almost universal desire to intervene in various active conflicts taking place around the world when a leader is using his military power to slaughter large numbers of civilian populations who may or may not support the opposition. This unnecessary killing must be stopped. The unspoken part of this argument seems to be that while it is OK for either side to kill active combatants on the other side, it is very wrong to cause damage to non-combatants, especially the young, who by virtue of their slight age are presumed innocent and therefore too young to die. Failure to stop the killing causes much stress in many people who do not know the reason for their distress.

But why does damage to non-combatants cause such distress? It seems to me the distress is in response to the case of deaths occurring before the accepted-time for death and in this case someone is considered to be at blame and because we did not act to stop the activities, we also are to blame. This stress is significant for some.

A third situation involves the drive to feed large numbers of starving populations in various places around the world. The spoken part of this argument seems to be that it is wrong for those people to die while others with excess food could keep them alive for awhile. The unspoken part of this argument involves our inability to invent the magic distribution system that could get the excess food to the people in need without disrupting the system that created the excess. In the case where the problem is deemed to be short term, it may be worthwhile to cause a short term disruption to the system creating the excess. But if the problem is long term, there will be a limit to what the supplier is willing to or can do. This response to the external limits on the supply system causes distress because the experienced limit is seen as unacceptable and the distress source is unrecognized.

A fourth expression of this experienced distress with people dying before the rest of us have a justifiable cause is the cultural & occasionally legal probation against suicide. The recent reported worldwide distress caused by the suicide of the nurse who passed the hoax phone calls thru in the English hospital is another example. Since she took her valued life before the rest of us thought she had any reason to, and there were others who many said were to blame, the distressed crowd wanted revenge for their own suffering. Those with blame must be punished.

And yet another cause of great distress is the increasing occurrence of what are called mass murders in this and many other countries. I don't know how many murders make a mass murder, but one article I read implied 4 or more at the same time would constitute a mass murder. Especially if small children are killed. In these cases there is one or more persons with blame who must be punished for inflicting great distress on those still living. There is also a great deal of activity devoted to, what to me seems like an unrealistic expectation, of finding some way of preventing this act from happening again. As I said before, we cannot yet know the mind of another.

I believe that the distress experienced in all these cases is caused by the fact that almost all of us have been conditioned, our whole lives, by the actions and statements of those we trusted, to believe we must show and exercise compassion for others in various forms of what we would consider distressful circumstances, because human life is to be very highly valued and should not be cut short without just cause. Today, there is a worldwide campaign to increase the degree of compassion being exercised. The sacredness of Human life seems to me to be a fundamental but mostly unspoken belief of those promoting this expansion of compassion.

In cases where people & some other life forms may and/or do die, and we cannot discover an acceptable just cause for the deaths, people with the attribute of compassion may become distressed in a variety of ways. Many people so distressed try to admonish those of us who appear less distressed that we should have exerted ourselves in ways thought to have prevented the unjustified deaths.

I contend that the belief driving the expressions of distress in each of these cases is the belief that "all human life is Sacred" and it is the long term consequences of this belief that I wish to explore.

What are the consequences of this belief that my life form is sacred - that it has a higher value than any other.

In the past:

This belief had great survival value to a small or medium sized groups for at least two reasons. The first was that almost every new adult added to the group was useful in the constant battle for survival. The second reason was because it implied permission to utilize all the rest of the environmental resources including all other life forms.

The consequences of acting on this belief were so useful that the core of this belief, "our life form is sacred" got incorporated into almost all the world religions. It appears as specific prohibition phrased as "thou shall not kill your own kind without just cause." Then and now some religions extend this prohibition to members of other religions and some do not.

Group governance bodies, whether influenced primarily by the religious or other leaders, found this idea very useful in maintaining order within their group, so the idea was incorporated into the rules of interaction for the group. The idea appears in the form of making "killing one of your own kind without just cause" a crime. Crimes require penalties, frequently determined by the "eye for an eye" concept. The list of "just causes" was compiled by those with executive power and frequently included the concept of "opposition to established authority."

During the long time over which this core idea "thou shall not kill your own kind" was being established deeper and deeper into the rules under which the group functioned, there was always the option to oppose the actions of "others" whose acts might inhibit our group actions or desires. Both religions and secular governance bodies permitted and often encouraged killing "others" of our own life form for what they defined as "just Cause." Compassion, when it was acknowledged, seldom extended beyond the local group.

Another type of problem surfaced during this long time period when the successful groups were growing larger. Group growth occurred mainly from being born into the group. The first component of this problem had to do with children born defective. In earlier smaller groups on the edge of survival, these children were recognized as an unacceptable burden on the group so the group did not support tending to them. The extension of Compassion was limited by the realities of survival.

In later years, the larger & successful groups modified this policy to permit tending to defective children because the burden on the rest was small and acceptable. But this change, which was an extension of compassion, started to dilute the age old membership requirement of "being useful to the group."

A second component of this problem had to do with those apparently normal people who did not fit with the rest of the group. The consequences to the poor fits usually depended on the degree of poor fit. They ranged from acceptance, to rejection, to death, for just cause. Again, this change, another extension of compassion, further diluted the age old membership requirement of "being useful to the group."

Currently, groups of all sizes, from confederations of countries down to local gangs, have prohibitions against killing individuals within the group. A usually unexamined rule which they still find essential for group survival. But they all will kill their own group members and others outside their group for what they consider "just cause."

In our country, we currently have a population that is living under the assumption that the government has an obligation to take care of them in every way. One of the latest expressions of this attitude appeared in the USAT newspaper of 1/8/13. The title was THE OTHER LESSON OF NEWTOWN and the sub-title THE MENTAL-HEALTH SYSTEM IS FAILING US, WITH MILLIONS SUFFERING IN SILENCE UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE. The article starts with a story about the novel fact that a very concerned mother of a mentally ill 9 year old boy has put her story about her son and the difficulties she has had in getting some kind of treatment for her son, in public view. She has the typical mother's love for her son, and she currently has her son in a program of care & control which cost the public \$13,000/month. She worries that this control over the violent tendencies of her son may not continue because he will be released from the publicly supported program in the spring. She believes, because of his past history, that he could and would engage in killing someone if released.

The rest of the article discusses the facts about the current lack of and expected reduction in funding for mental health issues. The result will be that the many problems of dealing with a mentally ill child or adult will be imposed on the family, who are constrained by belief, love, law and finances from taking any effective action on this problem. The impact of the article is a lament that the Government is lacking in compassion by failing to deliver what these families need, that is some way to take this burden from them.

I see the people's distress at this situation as their recognition of the limits society has put on how far the society is willing to extend itself for this kind of problem. I believe that this distress is aggravated by the fact that most do not see why these limits apply to their problem. They exist in a society where many refuse to acknowledge the existence of limits of any kind.

Another expression of this attitude of refusing to recognize limits is the current response to the higher than usual list of natural disasters, many of which seem to be associated with the climate change that some claim is already underway. Whatever the cause of the events, the desired compassionate response is to try to return the damaged property and people to their former state. Even when there are sound reasons, based on history and reasonable expectations about the future, for not rebuilding in a particular geographic area, the people's affiliation with the land makes them want to return to the familiar. This is especially true in regions where the population is large and there is no other available land.

My Argument

I believe that any self aware life form that struggled against competing life forms and found cooperation with similar life forms had great survival value, would likely create the idea that all life of my particular form should be considered to have very high value because in the early stages each individual has a very high probability of being useful to the group survival. This compassion for others was initially limited to the useful of the local group, but was later expanded by removing the requirement of usefulness, and is currently being promoted to include all other humans and some additional life forms.

I further believe that these ideas were essential to the evolution of human kind to its present state.

But I also believe that the usefulness of these ideas is a function of the relationship between the group holding the idea and the environment within which they exist.

When the group is small and the environment is large, these ideas work fine when the dominant life form does not need more substance than local environment can provide. In the past, the standard procedure when the local environment could not provide had three components.

The first component is the long established biological response of many lower life forms to stress, which is to over produce offspring. This overproduction is often at the expense of the already stressed parent life form but is understood as having species survival value because the more offspring, the higher chance that a few will have mutations which improve survival in the changed environment. In the very early centuries of the progressive development of life forms, this involuntary mechanism was responsible for the rapid progression through higher & higher life forms. But this involuntary mechanism, which depletes the parent, does not work well for life forms where the offspring required parental care for some time before they can function on their own.

In early humans, with their short life span and high value on continued life, especially their own, parents, in times of plenty, had many children, the better to provide for them in their old age. The result of this was to increase the population which put more stress on the local environment. Eventually, this will lead to a natural limit in the form of inadequate resources in the local environment.

The next component was to look for a new usable environment to spread into. When the group was small and the environment large, this was the easy and very popular component which is still in use in various forms. Over the course of many thousands of years, the human group has spread over the surface of the world and found many environmental niches it could occupy with various degrees of comfort. During most of this time the various groups were small and maintained the idea that the life of every member had very high value, but as the successful groups grew it became obvious that the value of the life of some individuals who could no longer make significant contributions toward the group survival, should and could be less. Thus in times of group stress, these individuals of lower value could be excluded for just cause.

A third component was to reduce any competition for resources in either the original or the new environment. This frequently led to conflict with other groups of your kind and in some so called primitive and evenly matched groups, this conflict was maintained over long periods of time, because the justified & low loss of life on either side kept each group population relatively stable. In other cases, where sheer numbers, or improved ideas or technologies gave an advantage to one side, the losers were killed and or taken as slaves. Slaves had lower life values which could sometimes be improved by becoming extraordinarily useful to the winning group.

Over many hundreds of years the successful groups grew in population and controlled larger areas of usable environment. Improvements in utilization of the available environment led to the group ability to support people who had time to think about how the society was structured. The new ideas generated were often very useful, so the life value of those who did the thinking remained high. All this better social organization & improved utilization of the environment led to an even faster population growth rate.

Where do we stand today. What are some of the major sources of stress in our society?

Today, groups of like-minded people from around the world can organize to bully or terrorize, by any means, some "other" group. The group being bullied always try to stop the bullying. The eventually identified location of the bully is likely to be the home of the group leader or one of his co-conspirators. When these locations are attacked by those being bullied, and nearby so-called civilians are damaged, there is always an outcry by the locals and some of the people in other parts of the world, against the unfair actions of the attacking group who are being bullied. This distress is usually expressed as anger against the organization causing the damage even though most of the civilians damaged are part of the support group (family & friends) who know of and support the activities of the targeted persons.

This was not always the popular view. Much of this kind of distress was avoided during the bombing of German civilian populations near the end of WW 2, because it was widely recognized that these civilian populations were creating the supplies that were supporting the activities of the German armies. In our own civil war, Sherman's bombardment of Atlanta filled with civilians and his march to the sea destroying everything in his path were seen as necessary, because, while Atlanta was untouched, the South had a rallying point. The whole purpose in both these cases was to break the spirit of the civilians supporting the fighting men.

In my view, this outcry occurs because the people making the outcry are counting on the rest of the world being distressed by the presumed unjustified deaths of the claimed innocent victims. The fact that most of the innocent victims are part of the support group of the aggressor is no longer considered of importance in public discussions. In the past it was easier to lump all people in the group as the enemy, even though this was never entirely true. Battles, when they occurred, did so on "battle fields" presumed to be clear of non-combatants, even though this also was never entirely true.

I attribute this difference in view point to have 3 major components.

The first component is the idea the Western world has, that if you are not involved directly in an action, you cannot be held responsible for the action. Currently the word "directly" does not include planning the action because we are assured freedom of thought. You cannot be obstructed while you plan. You can be obstructed if you try to carry it out. If you succeed in committing the action, you can be pursued forever by the police for the offence against society. I view the label of terrorist as a way of extending this police type activity to the military, because this label carries the idea that the person so labeled has carried out some bad deed and is always in the process of trying to carry out some new bad deed, so they may be attacked whenever and wherever they can be located.

But those family & friends who feed & house you while you plan and act are considered innocent of your intent & action. So if they get damaged in the military police action, there is a great wail of distress and calls for retaliation, usually against the police actor. I believe the calls for retaliation are misdirected, because the person with highest blame is the terrorist. I think the expressed distress is due to the reasons discussed above, having to do with the idea that life is sacred and early deaths are unacceptable.

The second component of this different viewpoint is the treatment by the press of this new type of isolated spotty combat by our Military. They tend to treat it as a war and the US Administration wants it treated as a war because this gives the President certain powers to act. We invade countries believed to host the bullies, but even within the invaded country, the battles are isolated & spotty and do not take place on a field cleared of civilians. The description of this activity, which is more like a police action, as a war, leads to confusion in the world population about the nature of the conflict.

And the third component is, if what is going on is a police action, then the general pervasive belief that all surrounding people must be protected at all cost, because they are innocent, comes into play. But the adults are in fact part of the support of the bullies and are involved.

Then there is the large worldwide distress over deaths & damages caused by events in nature.

Here I refer to the trauma of earthquakes, tsunamis, and super-storms. After these events, there is frequently a large cry for and response from many so-called first world countries to supply aid in the form of rescue workers to save all possible lives and supplies to feed & house the displaced survivors. In many cases there is the unexamined drive to try to return most of the damaged areas to at least their former state. These expressions of compassion for the victims attempt to extend the concept of compassion to include the world.

I suspect that that each of the few individuals rescued greatly appreciates all the time & money spent in the rescue effort, but the effort to feed, & house the displaced survivors almost always fails to be enough, as judged by the survivors. I judge that the great compassion raised by the "unexpected" event is short lived, so the initial food & housing aid slows and finally stops well before the effort to return most of the damaged areas to their former state is accomplished. Such compassion activities are almost always in addition to the normal life activities of the supplier so the burden on the supplier soon grows untenable and stops as recognition sets in "that nature is to blame".

I believe that the "unexpected" aspect of these events is a large contributor to the high initial distress and resulting compassionate activities because people tend to believe that the world is or should be stable. Of course this is an unwarranted expectation but most of the world chooses to believe it anyway. They choose to believe that their sacred life should not be disturbed and since they cannot manage it alone, it is the duty of whom ever is in charge to make this so.

Then there is the large national distress over killings in schools, businesses & malls in US.

In the last 50 years just in this country we have had well over 100 cases of multiple killings at various places like schools, businesses and other places where large numbers of people congregate. In a few cases, small groups of people working together have been found to be responsible, but in many cases a single individual is thought to be responsible. The most recent case, as I write this, is the multiple killings at the grade school in Connecticut. In all cases, there is a great public outcry about the event. First, about how horrible the event is, second, how surprised everyone is that the event could have happened where it did, third, who is really to blame, and forth, how do we make sure this never happens again.

As to how surprised everyone is - surprise is a function of expectation. Most people expect their life to be stable and to improve. Any event that does not fit into this personal view is by definition unexpected and therefore a surprise. Their rose tinted view of reality is largely unjustified in my view.

As to who is to blame - The blame game is popular because we live in a culture where everything is expected to run smoothly. So if anything other than a natural disaster goes wrong, somebody must have done something wrong. Thus, whoever did the wrong thing must be to blame for the disruption. Unfortunately, the culture has become so complex that placing the blame is not always easy. In this case, even though the actual person doing the deed is known, his sanity is being doubted. If he is judged to be mentally ill, then he is considered not responsible for his actions. But if the actual culprit cannot be held responsible, then the demand to assign blame must be carried further.

In this case, the culture's rules about gun availability, who can buy guns, and the culture's attitude about the mentally ill (as defined by the rest of us who are not mentally ill), are all being considered as cultural objects to blame for this event.

Every time something like this happens, the same two proposed solutions are debated by the various local and sometimes national gov. agencies and the various groups opposing the proposed solutions.

The first proposed solution is always more gun control because the people who don't have and don't want guns think this will be easy to do. And this is always opposed by the group who want and like to have & use guns who say the US Constitution permits them to have guns, and they use them responsibly. So the result of these debates is usually some ineffective action restricting gun or gun equipment in future sales. Gun owners do represent a very large group of people who like to use guns for a variety of permissible activities and who cannot understand why the gun is blamed when it is obvious to them that the unstable person using the gun is at fault.

The second solution is always to somehow gain control over the unstable person using the gun to commit this horrific event. But today we live in a society where each person has many rights and freedoms which cannot be removed without due cause, which usually means 'an act considered detrimental to our society' must be initiated or committed before any corrective action can be started. But restriction for intent is very difficult these days when every individual who manages to be conceived is considered a potentially perfect sacred being. I believe this idea to be another expression of the current unjustified expectations about reality. I could contend that this kind of killing event is just another kind of natural disaster given the societal rules and exceptions we have set up.

A third and less often mentioned possible contributor to the apparent trauma of all the above events is the state of the culture we live within. Specifically, the rapid rate of change of our culture partially brought on by the rapid influx of new ideas & technologies. I like new ideas & technologies but those addicted to stability find them upsetting.

The first cultural change I will mention is the one that has resulted in the loss of family cohesiveness caused by the existence of teen peer groups. The knowledge of the existence of these groups of whatever kind is seen as a way to escape problems at home. Whatever the problem, the knowledge and attractiveness of these groups tends to erode the young person's connections to their family. For those who are seen as "different", the failure to find acceptance in a local peer group further contributes to their feelings of isolation from all others including home. Feelings of inadequacy and isolation often lead to escape activities like drugs & suicide. One way to commit suicide is to do something so bad that others kill you in retaliation or you kill yourself to escape the retaliation.

The second cultural change is the change in the expectations for working people. For the hassled parents, who discover that their child is "different" in some identifiable way, the first reaction is often denial and later blame. The denial leads to elaborate ways to maintain the illusion of normality. The blame game often ends with the breakup of the family. I used the phrase "hassled parents" because the work place in our current society demands much of its workers. This work load, even if self-imposed, may leave the worker little time, even if they are so inclined, to usefully attend to the needs of their children.

A third world cultural feature that seems to have had a great influence on the degree of bullying of all kinds, from school yard to international terrorist, is the degree of stability and cohesiveness of the neighborhood. Bullying is generally reduced when neighborhood cooperation is high because the cooperating groups will not tolerate the bullying and they cooperate to suppress it. In this country, various factors have increased the mobility of people, so we now have neighborhoods where we do not know each other. These have replaced the old ethnic neighborhoods which did a better job of suppressing bullying activities. We are currently engaged in an international group cooperating to try to eliminate international terrorism.

Then there are the personal & cultural effects of new technologies.

The personal computer, the internet and the various social media have vastly increased the ability of people to communicate and find communities of other people they fit into, even if these communities are distributed over the world. For the most part this is a good result. But like everything else in the world, the activities of these communities have a very wide distribution with a very few groups devoted to bullying other groups in one way or another.

Conclusions.

So what are we to do? In the past we put maintaining human life on a sacred pedestal and we are now reaping the results of this unexamined ingrained belief. This unexamined belief fosters the unbounded increase in the population in a finite world and the current drive to encourage unlimited activities in the name of compassion. This unexamined belief worked very well for the first several million years of our existence so it is very entrenched. But this belief was never an absolute. A life could be taken for sufficient cause. But these days some have come to believe that there is no sufficient cause for taking a life. And we go to great ends to prolong the life of all who are alive. This has very bad long term consequences.

It seems obvious to me that: 1) We live on a small finite planet in a reality that does not know we exist. 2) Our life form requires materials known to be in limited supply. 3) A limited range of environmental conditions on this planet permit us to exist. 4) The expanding population on this planet is approaching several natural limits on our requirements for life which we are ignoring because most believe that life is sacred and some super being will make adjustments which will enable our life form to continue.

I believe the world's people will soon reach the point where they will be forced to recognize that they are hard against some natural limits, and that neither they, nor any super being, nor any government, can prevent these events that cause them so much distress, and cannot help all those in need after these events. When this occurs, they will start to ignore these events, or as we say, they will "tune out."

But "tuning out" will not really help them escape the distress they will continue to feel as long as they believe that "all" human life is sacred. To escape this, we might have to give up the illusion that the world is a safe stable place created just for us. We will eventually come to recognize that the world is an unstable planet in an unstable universe.

We are all at liberty to treasure our own life and the lives of close associates and to do what we can to stabilize the world around us, but we will have to give up the belief that something out there will do this for us because human life is scared.

I am an optimist who believes there is a good chance that life will again survive our coming encounter with natural limits here on earth, as it apparently did at the peak of the last ice age. If things don't happen too fast, some human life may survive. In any case, our only choice is to keep trying. Thank you for your attention.

The End