

Every county resident should be saddened by Tuesday's events

“What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned to our sorrow. ...”

“The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. ...”

— Judge Learned Hand, “The Spirit of Liberty,” 1944



West Words
by Tom West

I don't pretend to know what went on in the troubled mind of Gordon Wheeler last Tuesday in the minutes before his life ended in a fusillade of bullets in the County Commissioners Room at the Government Center. I can only speculate.

All I know for certain is that the tragedy is profound and should sadden every voter in this county. It is the voters, after all, who choose the people we want to represent us in the difficult and time-consuming tasks of balancing our individual interests against the overall good. To take issue with the authority of these representatives is to take issue with the voting public.

Courthouses are not particularly happy places. They are where we go to pay our taxes, to judge those who break our collective rules, to transfer property after death, divorce or dispute. Nevertheless, they are indispensable to our free society. More than any other in history, our society has bent over backward to make sure that all receive a fair hearing. It's hardly perfect, but the effort to make it so remains ongoing.

Wheeler's differences with the county have been well documented. He lost his liquor license after his conviction on prostitution charges. He tried to get the business back by going through family members to renew the liquor license. The County Board refused.

Wheeler had a reputation for pushing societal limits on human sexuality. He owned “adults only” businesses that the county essentially regulated out of existence. The Board knew that the majority of voters supported it in that regard, that the majority believed that this county should have standards of decency and behavior concerning sexuality.

Wheeler never seemed to understand that message. The county essentially tried to tell him, “You need to find a different line of work.”

But what Wheeler heard was, “You've singled me out and are doing me wrong by destroying my livelihood.”

What's more, he saw it not as a fight with the government, but as a personal dispute with a few individuals, the county commissioners, the county administrator, the county attorney, the sheriff, the judge, etc. He didn't seem to get that they were standing on a solid foundation of laws and rules. So he sued them.

When his case was summarily dismissed, he undoubtedly thought that he didn't get a fair hearing. The county officials undoubtedly thought, we've been through all of this before, you had a fair hearing and you lost, so stop bothering us.

Thus were the seeds of desperation sown.

Our hope as a society always is that with a fair hearing, even the losing party will gain an understanding and respect for the law. It didn't happen with Wheeler. In fact, it is not happening with a lot of people these days. Increasingly the blogger, the political partisan, the divorcee are coming from the position not only that they are right and somebody else is wrong, but that their particular somebody else is not to be respected, not to be given the benefit of the doubt, not to be accorded the dignity every human being deserves.

In that environment, we shouldn't be totally surprised when someone holds a gun to someone else's head. But neither should anyone, including the gunman, be surprised when the possible outcomes then dwindle rapidly to just a few — all of them bad.

I am particularly sad for Gordy's family and friends, for the county officials and employees who were terrorized, and for the CIRT team that had to stop him from harming others. The world will go on, but it will take a while for any of them to realize it.

As Judge Hand suggests above, no law can solve the challenges posed by the Gordon Wheelers of this world. Our liberties, indeed our lives, depend on the self-restraint of everybody, on making an honest attempt to understand the other person's point of view, and demanding better not from somebody else but from ourselves.

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