

Lessons from a Tragic Death

by Kenneth A. Kuhn
April 3, 2012

There are a number of lessons to learn concerning the tragic shooting death of teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, FL on Feb. 26, 2012 by Mr. George Zimmerman who was a neighborhood watchperson. The shooting should not have happened and unless critical lessons are learned there will be countless repeats of the tragedy. In the following I will refer to the youth by his first name and the adult by his last name as that is common practice. I present the following as the rational perspective – not conservative, not liberal. Such polarizations never help the situation. As a brief commentary before I begin, this whole incident has turned into a sick media circus that has served only to amplify divisive politics.

Lesson 1: Just because there is an incident involving people of different races, ethnicity, or by whatever distinction does not mean that the incident was a direct result of the differences – or racially motivated in this particular case. I have lived in the South my entire life and have witnessed incidents some of which were definitely racial and others where race had nothing to do with it. I remember two classmates in junior high school in the 1960s, one was white and the other was black. They taunted each other for days before the big fight that sent both to the hospital (fortunately with non-serious injuries). Knowing both of them I can tell you with absolute certainty that race had nothing to do with the fight. The number one culprit was testosterone – it was a competition to establish pecking order – a common situation among male teenagers. It could have easily been classified and played up in the news as a racial incident. But it wasn't. The two actually became friends (I don't think they were ever enemies) and hung out together after the fight which technically ended in a draw. Such is not an uncommon outcome regardless of whatever is different between two people. Yes, racial incidents do occur but not every cross race incident is racially motivated.

There was one time when a black class mate made a definite threat to knife me – in retaliation for reporting him cheating on a test. That threat might have been real as a few days later he was caught with a large knife and expelled from school. It bothers me that if he had attacked me that would not have been considered a racial incident. I wish someone could explain why. True, race had nothing to do with it. But when the situation is reversed all of the sudden it becomes racial.

Over the decades I have heard countless news stories of similar situations that ended just as tragically and those were not necessarily of different races. But it gets blown up into a racial incident of national significance if there is a difference and someone loses a contest to a white person (I find this asymmetry disturbing). Would this story have captured national attention if Trayvon had been white? Would the story have captured national attention if Trayvon had killed Mr. Zimmerman? Suppose Mr. Zimmerman had been black? Why does the one particular permutation make a difference?

Lesson 2: Fear supersedes rational thought. As a child I was bullied through much of my school life. There were a number of times I really felt that I was in danger of serious harm – however no real harm ever happened – those taunts were only well performed bluffs looking

Lessons from a Tragic Death

back now with 20:20 hindsight. If I had had a weapon at the time there is a chance I might have used it. Fortunately I had no weapon so no tragedies happened and I have lived a successful life.

At odd times over the years I have been taunted by young people – they were not good actors and I could see it was all a bluff and no harm was done. I can imagine becoming very afraid if they presented a convincing act. Being afraid while holding a gun is an equation for someone getting killed. That happened to a coworker some years ago in a road rage incident that made national news in 1999 where my coworker was ranting at another driver who became scared while holding a gun and somehow the gun ended up going off killing my coworker. My coworker was unarmed and I truly believe the other driver with the gun did not intend to shoot – but fear clouds judgment. The point here is that I relate to the fear that I believe Mr. Zimmerman really felt – however unfounded that turned out to be *after* the tragic deed.

Lesson 3: Teenagers in general tend to show lack of respect for authority figures even if it is just a show and not real. It is not unusual for a teenager to act tough, talk tough, and make intimidating actions (mostly bluffs with no actual malice intent). For teenage boys it is probably testosterone related and seems to be a part of growing up. Similar effects can be observed in young animals as they approach adulthood. Sometimes the animal gets in too deep and pays a serious or perhaps the ultimate price. We do not understand it but it seems to be Nature's way. Perhaps it relates to competition for the top position. I have raised cats for many years and have seen teenage cats, particularly male, taunting the top cat. In this particular situation I can easily believe that Trayvon was engrossed in acting tough as any teenager, white, black, or whatever will do. I believe that he intended no real harm but felt a need to appear that way to go along with the enjoyable psyche of feeling powerful – the feeling of leaving childhood behind and becoming a man.

I was different as a teenager and respected my elders because I recognized that they had a good thing going and I wanted a piece of that action – and I worked for and achieved it. Many of my classmates had the usual teenage brashness which they all outgrew and became fine adult citizens. So we should not be overly judgmental on teenagers. I think teenagers in general would have fewer problems if they respected the system like I did.

Lesson 4: Related to lesson 3, tragically it is practically impossible to distinguish a well performed bluff from a real attack until it is too late. I have no doubt that Trayvon when verbally approached by Mr. Zimmerman did the usual teenage boy thing of acting and talking tough and gave a performance credible enough for Mr. Zimmerman to truly believe his life was in danger. I have no doubt Trayvon had rehearsed and perfected the act as many teenage boys do. One thing that I concede that I will never understand is why many black youths (and even some white or Latino youths) like to mimic the gangsta motif as a way of life. Maybe it is fun to them but it is so counterproductive. One word of wisdom is that you become good at that which you practice. Being a good gangsta is of no value. Being a good member of society is of immense value. Why not practice that as others have done? The outcomes in life are a lot better.

Lesson 5: The calls for Mr. Zimmerman to be immediately arrested in spite of a present (as I write this) lack of legal basis is a call for justice by mob – the lowest form of justice (if that is what it can be called) there is. The presumption of innocence concerning Trayvon and

Lessons from a Tragic Death

guilt concerning Mr. Zimmerman is completely preposterous until the results of the investigation are known. The normal process is that evidence will be presented to a grand jury who will determine if there is basis for this to go to trial. That process takes time and there is no evidence that the process is being subverted in favor of Mr. Zimmerman. If Mr. Zimmerman has committed a crime then I am confident that he will be arrested at the appropriate time. The calls for mob justice by demagogues such as Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and cohorts is shameful and a disgrace. It shows a pathetic lack of leadership that the black community should find offensive and throw out. The only point of those calls is to incite racial divisions to the political benefit of Sharpton, Jackson, and their corrupt cohorts. I also sense an undertone of divisive politics of trying to blame conservatives for what happened. That is bullshit. While there are always exceptions, my observation is that all people regardless of political persuasion are united in condemning what happened. The presumption of guilt because Mr. Zimmerman is white is an act of racism itself. Racism will never defeat racism. Perhaps such tragedies would occur less frequently if we worked together rather than in dividing ourselves along racial lines. Driving a polarization wedge when we should be working together is highly counterproductive. It insures that the tragedy will be repeated – for the political benefit of the demagogues. Shame.

The irony is that every week here in Birmingham, at least one black youth is shot to death – think about how many that is per year – any of them might be just like Trayvon. In 99.9 % of the cases the shooter is black. There is rarely any public outcry. If the shooter is caught and tried the only outcry is that the shooter is being prosecuted for being black.

Lesson 6: Distorting reality is counterproductive to ever achieving a day when such tragedies never occur. To paint Trayvon as a purely innocent youth minding his own business and painting Mr. Zimmerman as a vile racist is not credible. Teenagers in general are not so innocent and if Mr. Zimmerman was so determined to shoot a black person then he would have done so a long time ago. Based on my experiences I see this as a case of a collision between youthful brashness and an amateur gun operator. Someone is bound to get killed. Neither side is innocent. It is easy to condemn Mr. Zimmerman *after* we learn that Trayvon was unarmed.

Lesson 7: People whose job it is to be eyes for the police should not do policing themselves. It is questionable whether any amateur in the position that Mr. Zimmerman had as a civilian neighborhood watchperson should be armed. Such a person has no authority and generally should not be confronting anyone as that is the job of the police. Perhaps the more important issue is whether an armed person has had the training and mental conditioning (the ability to maintain rational thought under a fear stimulus) necessary to properly handle a weapon. At present I do not know the situation for Mr. Zimmerman but in every other case I know of including the death of my coworker described above the shooter had either no or minimal training nor mental conditioning in the proper use of a gun. The vast majority of gun tragedies are the result of amateurs. I might later be proved wrong but my suspicion is that Mr. Zimmerman is an amateur concerning guns. I know a number of people who have guns and who well understand the proper ways of using a gun. Those people will never make the news in any negative way. Guns are not the problem. Amateurs with guns are.

Lessons from a Tragic Death

What is the truth?

The stories I have heard to date range from Mr. Zimmerman shooting Trayvon in the back as he was attempting to flee to Trayvon having Mr. Zimmerman pinned to the ground and preparing to inflict serious injury just prior to being shot. Which version of the stories should I believe? In conclusion it is doubtful that we will ever know the truth about what happened but I can imagine the following. Trayvon was going through the neighborhood wearing a hooded jacket and acting out a common fantasy of being a real tough dude. Odds are he had no ill intent other than being a typical mischievous teenager. When approached by Mr. Zimmerman (who had every right to talk to him), Trayvon reacted with tough language and threats probably inferring that he was armed and had no problem wasting a white guy. I can easily believe that Mr. Zimmerman also played a tough guy role which probably inspired Trayvon to act even tougher. The act was convincing perhaps with some degree of physical interaction and Mr. Zimmerman became very afraid and pulled his gun out and being ill prepared shot and killed Trayvon who was found to be unarmed after the fact. It was a senseless tragedy.

In conclusion

If Trayvon had understood the above lessons there would have been no story. If Mr. Zimmerman had understood the above lessons there would have been no story. I do not believe Mr. Zimmerman shot Trayvon because he was black. I do believe that Mr. Zimmerman was scared enough so that it made no difference as to the race or ethnicity of Trayvon. Did the fact that Trayvon was black increase the probability of being shot? We are conditioned to assume the answer is yes (that troubles me) and no doubt in some cases it really is. Would many people critical of Mr. Zimmerman also have shot Trayvon under the same circumstance? Probably yes because without mental training the fear reflex supersedes rational thought. It is too easy to be judgmental when you are not involved.

Perhaps the ultimate lesson from this tragedy is that acting tough whether as part of youthful brashness or an amateur in a pseudo position of authority serves no good purpose. It is counter to the concept of living in peace. All the condemnations and prosecutions after the fact will never prevent the next incident. The whole point of civilized society is so we don't have a need to be tough like our forefathers of thousands of years ago. Let's be rational instead of divisive.

Will these lessons be learned this time? History tells us no – they were not learned in the past so why should they be learned now. There will be more Trayvons in the future who will die like those before him for the benefit of demagogues. History tells us that the masses are always gullible to demagoguery. That lesson is the ultimate tragedy of it all.