

To pray or not to pray



Nigel Alston

Motivational Moments

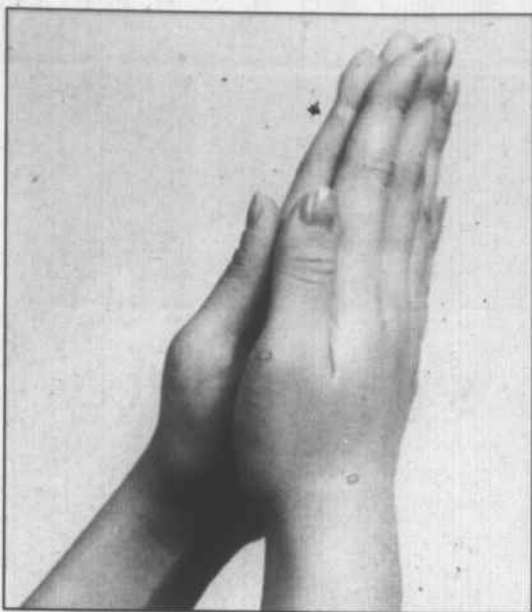
The naked truth is always better than the best dressed lie.

— Ann Landers

Have you ever hoped that something you didn't want to deal with would just go away? That something could be sectarian prayer, an issue before county commissioners and other elected officials in our community and surrounding communities. It is a complex issue for some and at the same time a very simple one that others believe they should take a stand for or against.

Being a Christian and an elected official is a tough situation to be in. You believe in prayer and have taken an oath on the bible to uphold the law and vote against prayer in a public meeting. In this case the law as it is interpreted states that prayer in those meetings is inappropriate and unconstitutional. In some communities it has ceased and non-sectarian prayer or a moment of silence are offered instead. In others it continues and is being challenged.

So, is there a right or wrong side to the issue, or is no one willing to meet in the middle and walk the rest of the way together? Maybe both sides are right. One side welcomes anyone of any faith to give an invocation, even though in our community the majority of people providing an invocation at a meeting are



Christian. For some, that isn't inclusive enough.

As one commissioner has recently stated, the issue is not whether or not sectarian prayer is legal; the Federal courts have interpreted it as unconstitutional. Does that mean an elected official making a decision to deny prayer in a public meeting is not reflecting their personal Christian beliefs?

What will happen if we don't have sectarian prayer at public meetings? Does that mean we have lost our moral compass and given in to the world, another sign that people are chipping away at what this country was founded on?

I know of a situation where "good Christians" (I am baffled by that description. Can you be a good or bad Christian?) are leaving hate messages because of the actions of some public

officials against sectarian prayer. Is that the Christian way? Are people really listening or rushing to judgment, their minds already made up?

This is an emotionally charged issue for some who have to cast a vote one way or the other and as one person shared with me, others sit on the sideline and simply stand up and accuse them of being unwilling to "stand up for God." Is that true? The real argument another person told me should be what is actually meant by the first amendment. According to this person, this issue forces us to hold up a mirror to see images we don't want to see or deal with.

An executive I talked with recently finds the conversation interesting. As he says, people recognize their creator in different ways and mandated prayer may not be

inclusive. A person talks to his or her creator in many different ways not mandated by time, place or form. "Your creator is without question without politics," he went on to tell me. I agree with that assessment.

So, what if we continue to proceed with prayer in the manner we have, primarily in the name of Jesus. Maybe years from now, as Journal columnist John Railey wrote recently (If commissioners win fight, they might not have a prayer), taking a look into the future, that another majority will be elected officials and the prayer of the day will reference Allah or another deity and Christians will not like the prayer and feel excluded.

Other than the formality of prayer to start a meeting, does it govern what happens after a meeting begins? Judging by some meetings, how they are conducted, and the outcomes, prayer has no impact on the participants. Is it political posturing by some to support the issue for future political gain? A non-profit executive raised that point in another conversation recently, as he considers the issue to be more than meets the eye.

So, which side is right? Will we lose something by being inclusive or should we take a stand on what we believe whether the courts rule it unconstitutional or not? I wonder what side God is on as I take a moment of silence to pray.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. He is a member of the Winston-Salem State University Board of Trustees. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.



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NC House of Representatives

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Cho-like killers shaped by American values



Rev. Barbara Reynolds

Guest Columnist

The violent outbursts of Cho Seung Hui, the student madman who killed more than 30 of his classmates and wounded more than 30 others at Virginia Tech, may well be the result of the boomerang effect, which returns to the source whatever is sent outwards.

In other words I think Frankenstein-like psychopaths like Hui emerge from the values and symbols that shape America.

When you look at the more than 3,000 U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq, the killing spree in Virginia, preceded by the hate speech of Don Imus aimed at killing the spirit of young black female students at Rutgers University, it is time to hold a mirror up to ourselves.

Is our normal course of hypocritical acts coming back to haunt us? We say we want peace and a civil society, but we pay our peace providers, such as day-care workers and teachers peanuts compared to millions paid to the hate-carriers in the media and entertainment world. We are obsessed with war, power, gun ownership and the constant display of soft pornography and gratuitous vio-

lence in the media, all of which are accepted as normal behavior.

First of all, people — whether politicians, rappers, preachers who engage in vitriolic character assassinations, gansta rap songs targeting women for abuse, or shock jocks that comb society to hold the powerless and helpless up for public ridicule are stoking the flames of violence. Witness the new sport of stomping and beating the homeless in some U.S. cities.

Moreover, hate wrapped up in violence is part of the capitalistic system that begins a selling spree to our children at an early age. Once I happened to watch some of the cartoons my five-year old niece was watching. Some of the life-like characters were bloodied and battered before being utterly destroyed. Moreover any parents who have monitored kid-level video games understand that death and destruction is a billion dollar kiddy enterprise.

Equally devastating is the fact that the United States has lowered the bar on when killing is justifiable and acceptable.

Right now we are engaged in a war that is killing both U.S. soldiers, Iraqi troops and civilians by the thousands for no justifiable reason except Iraq has oil. We need it. We take it because we have the billions to finance a war, the firepower to execute it and the

lies to defend it. We make our points, even the freedom to choose a democratic form of government, with tanks, bombs and bullets.

So following this national prescription, certain twisted individuals arm themselves to carry out their own twisted mandates of taking what they want and enforcing their will on others even to the point of mass killings. Their craziness is empowered by a gun lobby that makes their weapons of mass destruction readily available to any nutcase with a buck. In the District of Columbia, the Republicans and the gun lobbies are working to knock down the ban on hand guns, in a city where black-on-black homicide is already an outrageous scandal. Before the month is out, the total of violent deaths in many cities in the United States will surpass the tragedy in Virginia.

Another ingredient in this volatile stew is there are few systems in place that help people deal with their pain and anguish, according to Dr. Michelle Balamani, a psychotherapist in Largo, MD. "As a culture we have trouble acknowledging the pain and anguish people are trying to deal with. We expect them to stuff it, put it out of the way and move on."

"In schools we focus on the mind, not feelings," Balamani says. We must teach young and old how to do an emotional inventory, how to respond to hateful

incidents without violence, or the use of alcohol and drugs. There are acceptable ways to deal with pain without hateful thoughts that trigger a violent response. But we must invest in solutions."

Unfortunately as the Virginia Tech shootings show, even when there is undeniable proof that a person is a "mental case," the individuals fall between the cracks of broken or non-existent mental health systems. On campuses there are few counselors or mental health services available and in urban areas both are rare indeed.

The Virginia Tech shootings are a terrible tragedy; the likes of which we must all do our part to prevent.

Now is the time to look within. We must examine our own actions in our homes, what programs baby-sit our children, the hateful-name-calling on our public airwaves, the shoddy rationales for war and invasion and the excusing of hateful gangsta rap lyrics.

If what we truly want is a peaceful and civil society, then we must stop aiding and abetting so much violence and hate.

If we choose not to change then we will continue to experience the Boomerang Effect.

Dr. Barbara A. Reynolds, an author and ordained minister, is a radio talk show host on XM satellite radio.

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