

Barbara Kay: The agony of an attack without explanation, and the pain of chaos

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The method is only too familiar. The motive of the man who rammed a van into dozens of pedestrians in Toronto on Monday is so far unclear, although it is for the moment tentatively linked to sexual grievances. In 1993, when North Americans were still cocooned in their bubble of geopolitical security, a 1,200-pound bomb in a Ryder van parked underground at New York's World Trade Center exploded, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000 people. It was meant to cause greater damage. Since then, the weaponized "van" has become a meme for Islamist terrorism. If the motive turns out to be different this time, nobody deserves to be chastised for having instinctively assumed, when the news broke, that the Toronto massacre was related to religion. Given the long litany of ISIL-inspired van attacks (listed on a full page in Tuesday's National Post, with one of them, committed outside a London mosque, the work of a non-Muslim man claiming he was avenging an Islamist attack), such a leap is not a sign of "Islamophobia." Patterns lead to prediction. That is the history of human survival. (--image--)

A tarp covers a body on Yonge Street at Finch Avenue after a van plowed into pedestrians on April 23, 2018, in Toronto.

Cole Burston/Getty Images

In this context, I was struck by a tweet put out by the Toronto Sun's Lorrie Goldstein on Tuesday: "In today's world, I think we all know what we're thinking it could be. Let's hope it isn't." That puzzled me. I tweeted back: "What should we hope it is?" Should we hope it is "merely" a deranged individual, whose addled perceptions and inchoate self-pity have merged to produce the insane idea that mowing down a crowd of peaceful strangers will somehow serve to close the loop on his personal anguish? That to me is a far more unsettling thought. Islamist terror is at least something we have come to understand. Jihadists are not insane, even if their amateur acolytes are often mentally unstable. Their attacks are premeditated along fairly predictable lines. It begins with radicalization. We generally know what they believe. We know how these beliefs are spread. We know who is financing the propaganda mill into which lone-wolf jihadists get sucked. So when we learn that an attack is based in ideology — whether it's jihadism or even the terrorism perpetrated by the Baader-Meinhof gang in the 1970s and '80s — we at least have something positive to do with our grief. We can transmute it into white-hot anger. Our thoughts turn to probable suspects, analysis of the event, of our security policies, of ways to prevent another attack. And we do prevent many. (--image--)

Toronto Police continue their investigation along Yonge Street a day after a van struck and killed 10 pedestrians and injured 16 others on April 23, 2018.

Dave Abel / Toronto Sun / Postmedia Network

Knowing that an evil action is part of a pattern, rather than a random act over which we hadn't a scintilla of preventative control, is the difference between feeling helpless and feeling purposeful, between feeling utterly vulnerable, with no possibility of counter-action and feeling empowered, galvanized to counter-action. On a more metaphysical level, it is the difference between mental order and mental chaos. Nothing is more frightening in these situations than mental chaos. University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson titled his book — recently the best-selling non-fiction book in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. — "Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos." I have this passage highlighted in my copy: "Chaos is the domain of ignorance itself. It's unexplored territory. It's ... the despair and horror you feel when you have been profoundly betrayed ... Chaos is where we are when we don't know where we are, and what we are doing when we don't know what we are doing. It is, in short, all those things and situations we neither know nor understand." Nothing is more frightening in these situations than mental chaos (--image--)

(--image--)

And order? “Order is explored territory ... It’s the flag of the nation. It’s the value of the currency. Order is the floor beneath your feet, and your plan for the day ... order is the place where the behaviour of the world matches our expectations and desires.” And above all, this: “Where everything is certain, we’re in order ... We like to be there. In order, we’re able to think about things in the long term.” I admit I wasn’t really puzzled by Lorrie’s tweet: I knew where he was coming from when he said, “Let’s hope it isn’t.” He was steeling himself, if it were an act of jihadism, for the wave of anger that was sure to include a substratum of #YesAllMuslim types, and countering them, another substratum of “nothing-to-do-with-Islam” types. He was imagining Justin Trudeau lecturing the country on diversity being our strength. He was steeling himself for news of a hijab attack that, this time, wouldn’t be a hoax, that really was directly linked to spillover rage at the attack. Kelly McParland: Toronto wasn’t as immune as it thought — but it still held up well Christie Blatchford: Deadly van attack can’t divide Toronto’s most diverse neighbourhood An attack of this magnitude can be much more difficult when it is ideological. It can produce social tension. The debates can be exhausting. A “merely” deranged massacrificer can produce social unity — a single, grieving circle of citizens, who will privately experience dread of the chaos the massacre represents. But I will cop to extreme selfishness in saying I would have preferred it this had been an act of jihadism or something else linked to a clear ideology or cause. Because I like to be able to think about things in the long term. I prefer mental order to mental chaos. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](https://twitter.com/BarbaraRKay)