

## Jokes let folks handle tragedy

Somewhere in the haze of the mid-1980s, a memory was made. I was sitting in one of my high school classes, drooling pools onto the Formica desktop and generally drifting into a lesser state of consciousness.

Then the principal came in. My drooling stopped as my classmates and I were told that the space shuttle Challenger had exploded. We watched the news replay of the explosion for what seemed like hours.

No one said a word. The silence soon changed to a weird sort of joviality, however. You probably know what I mean: "Hey, what's NASA stand for? (pause) Need Another Seven Astronauts, get it?" Of course we got it. We even laughed.

Laughing at the tragic deaths of seven U.S. astronauts didn't even strike me as that strange. Somebody cracked a joke, and we laughed. I guess I shouldn't be surprised; I mean, back then, our definition of classic humor was watching milk come out of someone's nose in the lunchroom. Come to think of it, it still is.

Anyway, a few years after the Challenger explosion, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms raided David Koresh's Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas. Scores were killed in the resulting fire. Again, I watched the news replays of the inferno for what seemed like hours.

Only hours after the event, the first David Koresh jokes began circulating. I got 'em, and I laughed.

Jeffrey Dahmer jokes ... O.J. Simpson jokes ... "How many Somalians can you fit in a shower?" For every horrible story,



**Doug Peters**

there were hundreds of equally horrible jokes. And people usually laughed.

Not laughs of joy and delight, though. Not real laughs, not wedgie-in-the-locker room laughs. Strange, subdued laughter that is almost always prefaced with a disclaimer — "Oh my God, that's awful!" — or something along those lines.

Last week, after terrorists bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, I watched the news show scenes of the destruction and chaos, and I watched the death toll climb. I watched people whose lives had just been devastated wandering the streets, waiting for word from friends and loved ones who had been inside. I was silent.

By evening, the jokes had started. This time, I didn't laugh. I couldn't have, even if I had wanted to. Maybe the images were too vivid. Or maybe the terror was just too near.

I couldn't laugh. But when I thought about it, I could understand how some people could, or maybe why some people had to.

We laugh in self-defense; we laugh just to get by.

We laugh at tragedy and giggle about serial killers. Quips about murder, mayhem, loss and despair get us rolling in the aisles. We

laugh, not because we want to, perhaps, but because the alternative is something we can't quite come to grips with.

Quite simply, we laugh to keep ourselves from really thinking about what it is we are laughing at. And it works.

We've all heard the cliché "laughter is the best medicine." It certainly is a good one. It works on all sorts of ailments. It works on fear, it works on anger and it works on shock and disbelief. But for the most part, it only relieves the symptoms.

When something as terrible as the Oklahoma City bombing happens, and when we can see it as clearly and completely as television allows us to, it affects us. That is unavoidable. Being human has a price. We pay that price by feeling pain, by experiencing sorrow and by wondering why. Then we keep paying by dealing with those feelings. Some people can swallow the pain and go on. Others need something to take the edge off. Others need to laugh about it.

When our everyday lives are suddenly dominated by the horrible, the sensational or the macabre, we need to deal with it and move on.

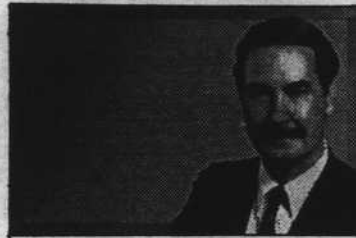
So talk about it, if you want. Think about it, if you can. Laugh about it, if you must.

Eventually, the jokes aren't funny anymore, and the laughter has to stop. For most of us, the end of the laughter signifies the end of just coping and the beginning of healing.

And when that is done, the real laughter, the milk-out-the-nose kind of laughter, can start again.

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## Standard evil label varies with tragedy



**Cal Thomas**

President Clinton accurately condemned those who killed innocent men, women and children in the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building as "evil cowards." In doing so, he invoked a word — evil — that has suffered in recent years from lack of use.

When Ronald Reagan applied the word to the Soviet Union — "evil empire," he called it — sophisticated commentators were shocked that a word they regarded as crude was employed by a national leader. But what other explanation satisfactorily describes such a despicable act or a soul-destroying government that causes men and women to sob in grief and others to declare their lives drained of meaning and joy?

Great writers have grappled with the concept of evil — Shakespeare's "the evil that men do lives after them; the good is often interred with their bones" — and popular culture explains it with such notions such as "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts and minds of men?" and such movie symbols as Darth Vader.

Acknowledging the existence of evil — not just evil people but the evil itself — is a prerequisite to understanding and controlling it. Denying that evil exists, and that it is a proper metaphor for the worst kind of behavior, ensures that evil will prosper.

The dictionary is of some help. It defines evil as "morally reprehensible; sinful, wicked; arising from actual or imputed bad character or conduct." This presumes a standard of good conduct against which evil may be measured. It also indicates that evil begins in a heart and works outward and is not created by one's circumstances or environment. Such a notion contradicts most modern teaching and philosophy.

Evil is as old (older, really) than the second chapter of Genesis where God instructs Adam, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." If evil existed at the time of Creation, this suggests that evil and its author came before. Is this what New York Times columnist Bob Herbert is

getting at when he wrote of the Oklahoma City tragedy: "From what universe beyond the one that most of us inhabit does this kind of evil arise?"

Will this horror teach us anything, or will we allow the shock to subside and eventually be able to look back on it with detached and emotionless hindsight?

Those who would do such evil things show the capacity of humanity uncontrolled by the restraining influences of an inner power and a culture that believes evil must not only be resisted but opposed. While we have always had with us those who would kill the innocent, rarely have we thrown a party and celebrated the killers and the profit potential of their acts. Even now there must be lawyers jockeying for the position of defense counsel and thinking about exclusive rights to books and movies. The O.J. Simpson trial has shown us how easily we can forget about the innocent dead and focus instead on the side issues and non-issues as we pay homage to the cult of celebrity.

Once God defined the norms of our society, but we decided we could do a better job. To speak of evil requires a knowledge of its opposite, good, and good's Author. Otherwise, evil is simply a label we apply to actions a majority likes the least at a given moment. This floating "standard" is not permanent, but for the moment only, and it can be changed or shaded when public opinion requires something new.

A nation that rejects a universal standard eventually experiences an Oklahoma City tragedy. If hate groups are proliferating, if evil seems ever more the norm and not the exception, perhaps it is time to re-examine the old values and seek the One who defines good.

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## McVeigh a thorn in our side

Unless you've been on a different planet for the past week, you have probably heard that the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was given a face-lift and makeover. Along with these new airy renovations, the lives of more than 70 confirmed individuals, 13 of them children, went with it. Many are still unaccounted for.

Now the most important question, the one that the whole civilization wants to know, is WHY?

Assuming that he was responsible for this crime, as authorities believe, what was going through Timothy James McVeigh's mind when he helped plot this horrible incident? Did he think he could simply blow up a federal building and get away with it? Did he not think that all of the FBI, CIA, ATF, IRS, American police, United States marshals and the Boy Scouts would be out looking for him?

This man, under all aspects of the law and psychoanalysis and under every perception of common sense, must be the biggest stupid-idiot-moron-jerkhead known to man. He should have the word "DUH" tattooed across his forehead. He should be smacked across the noggin. Really hard. Repeatedly. With a big rock.

With this track record of utter stupidity already behind him, he should be a logical candidate for any number of college administration jobs around the nation, but by the luck of us all, a fate far worse will await him.

Since McVeigh has been charged with a federal offense and will be tried for crimes against the federal government if convicted, he will get the utter joy of making



**Robb Goff**

little rocks out of the big rocks at "Club" Leavenworth.

To make life even more comfortable for him there, I suggest they take an Epilady to his pointy little head, and instead of the usual prison fatigues, make him dress like Michael Jackson and force him to watch taped reruns of Tony Robbins infomercials. That's enough to kill any mortal. But if that wild and crazy Janet Reno gets her way, McVeigh will be executed by the U.S. government. If memory still serves, the capital-punishment methods of the feds are by hanging or firing squad. Either way, this man would deserve a sentence far worse.

I'm all for the grass-roots idea of tying a whole string of fireworks to certain parts of his male anatomy and then watching him dance. Not enough, mind you, to blow things away, but just to make him bleed real slow. Then, not to arouse the furor of human-rights groups, we'll give him a Barney Band-Aid to cover his wounds.

If this sounds too extreme, we must remember this crime was not only a crime against the people of Oklahoma City and the federal government, but against the country as a whole. These were not the Middle East terrorists who

command the headlines in Europe for their activities. These people were not fighting for religious reasons, as some do in Ireland and Japan. These individuals were American-made, in every aspect of the word, and that's the scary part.

The current theory for the bombing is that these so-called "patriots" were upset at the government for supposedly limiting their freedoms, with their gun privileges being the leading reason.

But what individuals like these haven't figured out is that they are the reason why gun privileges are denied. Many of them are convicted felons and it is for that reason they cannot purchase firearms.

Home-grown militia will be a thorn in society's side as long as it believes that the federal government is waging war on them. It seems that some people believe they can take the law into their own hands and become judge, jury and executioner all in one swift swoop. That is not one of the principles our founding fathers wanted when they created this country.

Our country's laws are to protect the people, and the police forces, both local and federal, have proven their worth this past week in carrying out that task. We should let them do their job and not become the vigilantes that these "freedom fighters" like McVeigh have become. For we have seen what they believe in.

If the murder of innocent people is his act of vindication, then he deserves every kind of punishment the law allows, and possibly more.

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**Mike Luckovich**