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From Different Shadows, Two Tragedies

By Scott Braddock

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There were two tragedies in America with high death tolls over the last week and I am taken aback by the difference in the reactions to them. One was a mass shooting in a Colorado movie theater that left 12 Americans dead. The other was a truck crash here in Texas that killed 14 undocumented immigrants.

Americans are moved, naturally, by things we can all relate to. The rampage in Colorado hits us where we live because going to a movie is normal. Enjoying a show with our friends or family is a necessary escape from the bustle of our everyday lives. After the shooting, it was rightly declared a “national tragedy.” Cable news shows almost immediately became a non-stop debate about whether to reform the nation’s gun control laws.

When I woke up last Friday morning and the news of the shooting had just begun to dominate the headlines, my 13-year-old asked “Are we still going to go to the movie or do you think we’ll get shot?” I wasn’t sure what to say. He’d been looking forward to the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* for about a year. The potential of an everyday fun activity turning deadly was now a part of our reality. I held him in my arms and assured him we’d be ok.

My son and I cannot relate to being stuffed into the back of a pickup along with about 20 other people, but it’s a routine occurrence in the life of an undocumented immigrant. As they try to escape impoverished lives in countries where it’s not uncommon for women to give birth in garbage dumps, they are often shoved into tight spaces with little air to breathe, let alone room to move. Earlier this year, 9 undocumented immigrants died when a minivan crashed near McAllen. Back in 2003, 19 immigrants died after they were abandoned in the trailer of an 18-wheeler near Victoria. As the temperature in that trailer soared well above 100 degrees, witnesses said a 5-year-old boy was crying out “Daddy, daddy, I’m dying.” His father held him in his arms, undoubtedly assuring him that everything would be ok. The little boy was among the first to die.

Texas is home to an estimated 1.7 million undocumented immigrants. For the most part, they’re here to do things like hang the drywall in our homes, mow the lawns in our neighborhoods, clean dishes at our favorite restaurants and care for our children.

Since the crash near Goliad on Sunday night, I have wondered why a wreck that left more people dead than the theater shooting isn’t also viewed as a national tragedy. When I’ve voiced this concern, the question has been met with either blank faces or the all-too-easy common comment that “They’re illegals. They shouldn’t be here in the first place.” It’s as if their illegal entry into the United States, a misdemeanor, somehow makes them inhuman.

I picked up the phone and called someone who would hopefully make some sense of this.

“The crash is emblematic of a broken system,” said Charles Foster, an immigration attorney in Houston and an adviser to Presidents Bush and Obama. “There will be endless analysis, as there should be, of what went wrong in this young man’s life in Colorado. People will ask ‘how can we prevent this?’ With this truck crash, we know exactly what’s wrong,” Foster said. “These people aren’t coming in here to do harm. Many are traveling to visit ill relatives or they just want to be reunited with their breadwinner,” Foster said. “Why don’t we have a functional legal system where they can come in with some dignity?”

Foster suggests an overhaul of the nation’s immigration laws, like the failed attempt at reform championed by President George W. Bush, that would identify and tax currently undocumented immigrants so that they’re not forced to live under such bizarre circumstances.

The reasons why 12 Americans were gunned down in the shadows of a movie theater may never be known. But, we know the reasons these immigrants continue to die in the shadows of our society. Will we ever turn on the lights?

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