
Remember: August 6

Throughout the world August 6 is rightfully remembered as the day that humanity entered into a never-before-seen form of homicidal violence—the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, August 6, 1945. Unlike the Fourth of July in the United States, Independence Day, or the Fourteenth of July in France, Bastille Day, August 6 is a planetary day of remembrance. What is done on that day in 1945 is utterly new in human history—death finds a new doorway into life. So we remember.

But, we forget. We forget that on August 6, 1890, another never-before-seen form of homicidal violence entered human history—death by the electric chair. On that day William Kemmler, age 30, an illiterate alcoholic from the slums of Buffalo, NY and a convicted murderer is executed by electricity at Auburn State Prison. Something utterly new enters human history—death finds a new doorway into life. But, we do not remember. Why?

The Killing Chair

Certainly the first use of the “killing chair,” as it was then called, is as much a story of horrifying violence and deceit, of giant intellects operating through moral dwarfs, of money and the callousness of big-time government officials, as is the first use of the atomic bomb. In 1890 Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse are in the middle of an economic-political fight that became known as the *War of the Currents*. Edison wants the country to adopt his system for electricity distribution, which is termed direct current (DC). Westinghouse sees that his interests require that the country adopt alternating current (AC). As the benefits of AC become apparent, e.g., easier and cheaper to transmit over long distances, Edison decides to discredit AC on the basis that it is extremely dangerous to use. To showcase this danger he electrocutes dogs, horses and calves in public with AC. Then he tells his audience how effective AC would be for a killing chair. He lobbies politicians and prison officials of the State of New York to use AC in order to produce “instantaneous death” in an electrified chair.

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Westinghouse sees exactly what Edison is up to and refuses to sell his AC generators to New York State. Edison helps the State of New York procure a used Westinghouse

AC generator from Brazil. Westinghouse counters by hiring a high-priced lawyer, W. Bourke Cockran, to appeal William Kemmler's case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The ground for this appeal is that the electric chair violates the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which prohibits the infliction of "cruel and unusual punishments." However the learned members of the Court decide that there is nothing cruel about this type of execution. They also decide it is not unusual—although it has never been done before. William Kemmler is sent off to be killed.

The Electrocution—The Smell of Burning Flesh

On the morning of August 6, 1890, a lamp panel lights up on the Westinghouse generator at Auburn State Prison indicating that it has reached two thousand volts—which has been scientifically determined to be the optimal voltage for executing a human being. The switch is pulled by a man named Edwin Davis and electricity courses through William Kemmler for 17 seconds. When it is over Albert Southwick, a leader in the killing-chair movement, exclaims, "There is the culmination of ten years work and study." The electric chair is a mini-Manhattan Project brought to successful completion!

However, a problem exists. William Kemmler is not dead. Government officials in a panic try to turn the Westinghouse generator back on, but cannot. It requires time to recharge itself to 2000 volts. Meanwhile, William Kemmler, who has turned bright red during his "electrocution," is in agony, groaning and frantically gasping for breath. He has of course urinated and defecated all over himself, since it is not known at this time that those to be executed in this manner must wear diapers. The *New York Herald* describing this scene reports that "strong men fainted and fell on the floor." When turned back on, the current is kept rushing through Kemmler's body for over a minute. The next day newspaper stories tell how smoke rose from Kemmler's head, the smell of burning flesh permeated the room, a curious crackling sound was heard by all witnesses and flames shot from his mouth. Although there is considerable public outcry, it does not move the legislature to repeal the electrocution law nor does it move the United States Supreme Court to see anything cruel and unusual in it.

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The War of the Currents

Edison now has a ghoulish public relations field day warning people of the clear and scientifically proven dangers of Westinghouse's alternating current, which has proved itself only good for "electricide." He cleverly embellishes his negative PR campaign against AC by suggesting that criminals condemned to death by electrocution should be said to be "westinghoused" or "condemned to the westinghouse."

In the War of the Currents Edison wins the battle of August 6, 1890, but Westinghouse wins the war. AC becomes the household standard. However, this is morally irrelevant. What is morally relevant is that Edison, like his counterparts 55 years later, on August 6, 1945, chooses to place a great gift of intellect at the service of homicidal violence. He has, in the self-excoriating words of Robert Oppenheimer, The Father of the Atomic Bomb, “become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

Remembering All the Victims and Executioners

Perhaps on each August 6 it would be appropriate, along with remembering the victims and executioners of August 6, 1945, to remember the victim and executioners of August 6, 1890. Perhaps it would be good to remember on each August 6 that the executioners of that day are not just the crew of the Enola Gay or the switch-puller Edwin Davis, but all—including some of the brightest people the world has ever produced—who intentionally participated in the long chain of choices without which August 6, 1945, and August 6, 1890, could not have entered history as they did. Finally, it may be spiritually sound and humanly helpful to specifically remember on that day, when two utterly new forms of high-intelligence, high-tech homicidal violence tear into the human community, the individual human being, William Kemmler.

I make this last observation because in the end homicidal violence cuts into life one unique, fragile, pain-absorbing person at a time—even when hundreds of thousands are killed on a battlefield. “One death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic,” says Stalin. True enough. But this is so because of the mechanisms that society and its institutions—including religious institutions—employ to nurture psychic numbing and indifference to the mass killing of human beings by governments and successful violent revolutions. But, whether on the blood drenched fields of Gettysburg, or in the vermin infested trenches on the Somme, or inside a burning tank in Baghdad, each person dies his or her own private death—every bit as much as did William Kemmler. It should be an imperative of truth and morality to always and everywhere acknowledge and emphasize this fact, and thereby foster the growth of a deep intellectual and emotional certainty regarding the intrinsic perniciousness of homicidal violence.

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If the spirit of homicidal violence had but one victim in human history, it would be no less monstrous, grotesque and perverted. The satanic is not fundamentally discerned by statistics. Indeed, statistics can dull empathic sensibilities that expose critical truths. Exclusive focus on quantity can be a decoy of the demonic, whereby the actual concrete reality of an irreplaceable person being mutilated or burned to

death is rendered all but invisible by fixating on the numerical abstractions of competing body counts. And of course, once a reality can no longer be apprehended cognitively and affectively, it is no longer subject to accurate moral evaluation. Once the screams of the individual person are silenced beneath the clatter and chatter of statistics and justifying philosophies or theologies, then homicide ceases to be experienced as the phenomena it in fact is. Homicidal violence without a unique and irreplaceable face as its victim does not exist in reality—and hence we see, part of the importance of William Kemmler to August 6.

Exorcising the Spirit of Cain from Our Presence

Each who dies on August 6, 1945, in Hiroshima dies as William Kemmler dies on August 6, 1890, in Auburn, New York. Each dies his or her own, very painful and very personal death at the hands of other human beings. The common denominator between the two August 6 events is that both are the enfleshment of exactly the same wicked spirit. The spirit that kills William Kemmler on August 6, 1890, and the spirit that kills tens of thousands of human beings on August 6, 1945, is precisely the same spirit that possesses Cain, kills Jesus and is acting through every person who has ever intentionally participated in the destruction of the life of another or played at destroying the life of another. August 6 should be the day when the world community examines its conscience and consciousness, and unequivocally commits or re-commits to exorcising this spirit from its presence.

To this end a practical step might be to employ the reality and the symbol of August 6 to honestly view what the putrid spirit of that day subjects humanity to, once a human being allows his or her body to be its instrument on earth. “Knowledge is in the detail,” as the saying goes. Certainly there is a knowledge of the repulsiveness of the spirit of homicidal violence in awareness of the quantitative extent of its destructive power. But, there is an equally important knowledge to be acquired by seeing this spirit at the very instant of its actual entrance into human life. This is the knowledge which governments, militaries, violent revolutionaries and their propagandists systematically keep from the public. This is the knowledge that mass media and scholarship refuse to access, study and communicate, as only they can. William Kemmler offers an opening onto this avenue of perception, not only in terms of himself but also on behalf of every person broken and destroyed when this unholy spirit has been given flesh by human choice.

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Yearly, August 6 holds out the opportunity to view homicidal violence fully—in all its macro and micro viperous ugliness. August 6 presents to planetary humanity a universally recognizable symbol—rooted indelibly in that day’s history—by which

to examine not only its conscience regarding homicidal violence, but also its consciousness of homicidal violence. There are powerful and well-financed people throughout the world who have a vested interest in systematically hiding from humanity the realities of homicidal violence, of promoting a consciousness of faceless homicide. They forever want to have at their disposal the humanly created situation of which the 19th Century robber baron, Jay Gould, spoke when he bragged, “I can hire half the poor to kill the other half.” Such hiring would be made as socially and as personally noxious as incest if the poor—and the middle class—really knew what the spirit of homicidal violence looks like—and unleashes—at the moment it actually enters human existence.

Transfiguring Consciousness

August 6 is a day for planetary enlightenment. It is a day for transfiguring consciousness by stripping away all the theologies, all the philosophies, all the rituals and all the medals that camouflage the truth about what the spirit of homicidal violence does to both victim and executioner at the hour of its incarnational eruption—and for untold time thereafter. August 6, like Good Friday, is a day pregnant with remembrance, with sorrow, with truths and with lessons for the whole world. Remembered accurately, it can be an essential ingredient of the glue that remembers a humanity that has torn itself to pieces by giving legitimacy—even Christic legitimacy—to the spirit that spawned the accursed events of that day in 1890 and 1945.

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