Protection of offspring: one of the strongest of all human instincts, often even surpassing that of personal well-being, or even one’s own survival. We saw that the other day in the reports of the Uvalde school shooting in which a teacher died while instinctively shielding a child from the killer—a protective instinct seen often with such tragedies. But sadly, rarely does a day go by in which there we don’t see a story about child abuse of some sort—physical, sexual, or otherwise; few things stir us to fury so quickly and so inventently. And those are only those we see in the news; we fear that those are only the visible tip of a much larger iceberg.

One can’t but wonder how people who attack or abuse children go off this “instinct rail” so utterly, becoming the very thing that humanity otherwise desperate. Psychologists have concluded innumerable studies of this subject, but how to combat this societally and effectively this scourge seems to elude us. They tell us that those who abuse are often abuse survivors themselves—a self-perpetuating perversion seemingly impersonious to reason or human feeling.

Because perpetrators of such crimes are very often male, some impulsively use a blanket condemnation of “toxic” masculinity. But what is “masculinity”? We could go with a dictionary definition: “…qualities traditionally ascribed to men, as strength and boldness.” Such traits are hardly limited to men alone, especially clear in our day in which women, too, are front-line police officers, firefighters, soldiers, etc. In instances like Uvalde and other situations, women first responders risk equal dangers alongside their male colleagues. And even if not in such an occupation, anyone who has experienced a mother with her child seriously threatened has seen strength, boldness, and courage even to the point of self-sacrificing recklessness—the “mama bear” effect, legendary protective found even in scriptural analogy: “…they are fighters, as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs…” (2 Samuel 17:8).

Now, neither virtue nor vice belongs solely to a certain sex or gender, but vice emerges whenever traits/virtues meant for good are perverted toward evil, or even to excess. For instance, boldness (or courage) is an admirable trait when used to advance good, in protecting/saving the helpless or endangered being a prime example. However, like other virtues, boldness is perverted when its goal is perverted, such in criminal enterprises or in pointless recklessness heedless of consequences to oneself and others. Likewise, strength and power: good if for good, evil if for evil. True strength lay not in overpowering others for self-gain or merely paraphrasing one’s prowess, but rather in working for a greater good—measured in the effects to all whom that strength touches. Posturing for mere display’s sake, however, is much more often than true strength.

Knowing this, we see that any who prey on the helpless are not strong, but really quite weak. Rather than advance themselves through legitimate and praiseworthy means, they resort to oppression of the vulnerable. For instance, in their warped mentality mass shooters often claim to want to “go out in a blaze of glory” arising from any notion, even the infamous—perhaps from conscience deadened by long abuse—either by self or from without. Would that they could recognize that seeking notoriety via evil is weakness itself—an admission of impotence in advancing one’s place by good and legitimate means. After all, how courageous is it to use weapons of any type on nine and ten-year-olds cowering in fear in a classroom, much less with a firearm?

This brings us to muse: Why are these occurring in our present-day? What has changed so markedly in our society? Many of us were reared in rural areas in which laden gun racks in vehicles’ rear windows were common even in high school student parking lots with nary a concern. Many believe the situation is at least partially attributable to the decline of religious practice, and the subsequent loss of moral anchors and belief in the afterlife; after all, is there any more virtuous principle than Jesus’ (and Judaism’s, and Islam’s, and Taoism’s, and Buddhism’s, and Hindu’s various expressions) of the universal principle of “love thy neighbor”? Others think that these crimes may be attributable to the narrowing of the concept of the value of human life—individual subjective decision of when another’s human life begins and when it should end, or even who should be allowed to live at all. One noted university professor has even written: “…the life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.” (Link)

Will the bar of achieving “worthy” or “worthwhile” human life be raised in the future? Will that bar be measured simply by the level of convenience of caretakers? Will Alzheimer’s and dementia and the like—not to mention mere physical disabilities—take on automatic death sentences as lives not worthy of life, a Nazism and genocide? Are the sci-fi movies like “The Island”, “Soylent Green” and “GATTACA” our future? There are now those who even excuse crimes against persons due to perpetrators claiming to have been “offended” beyond reasonable restraint; what would be the threshold to justify such crimes, and how would that be measured? Are those who carry out murder crimes and indiscriminate killing simply taking that “logic” to even more absurd extremes?

Thinking about these things, it makes us even more thankful this Memorial Day for those who, rather than preying on the vulnerable, have given their lives for the vulnerable … in our—and others’—defense. Would that all learn from their examples of self-giving and sacrifice, remembering Jesus’ own words, example, and sacrifice for the world: “[I] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give (my) life as a ransom for many,” (Matthew 20:28), and that “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Such is the boldness, the courage, and selfless virtue of true strength.