

THE NAMES OF THE DEAD

*In New Orleans, a Pastor Fights Against the Widespread Violence and the Cult of the Gun in America -
With a Memorial for the Victims*

Treme; the name has a certain ring. In the Treme, the oldest black neighborhood in America, right behind the famous French Quarter, lies the deepest roots of jazz. When David Simon, one of the best storytellers of American television, was looking for a showplace in which to document the difficult rebirth of the storm-deserted New Orleans, his choice fell on Treme. Trendy, but remaining fundamentally the same as it began, so do the Tourism-marketers advertise it as the cradle of Jazz. Only the tables, which Bill Terry has hung on the cast-iron fence before his church, don't quite fit into this folkloric picture. One could say that they are a fly in the ointment.

They are memorials for the victims of gun violence, everyone around two meters tall, closely inscribed with the names of the murdered. Terry, who is the pastor of St. Anna's Episcopal Church is continually adding new names, names from all over New Orleans. In the beginning, he had the names engraved, but the list became longer and longer too quickly. In the meantime, he writes the names with a thick, waterproof marker on the tables. On the left, the name, then next the age, and on the right, how each lost his life: *Sam Syson, 17, shot.*

For a long time, it has seemed like the city had gotten its violence under control, said the sixty-six year old, and through the ponytail in which his long hair is bound together. New Orleans recovered from the aftermath of Katrina, of a hurricane in which the levees broke and left whole neighborhoods under water. "The Big Easy," as the city is called, attracted (and continues to attract) young Americans who wanted to experience a milieu which on one side felt relaxingly Caribbean and on the other changed to a breakneck rhythm.

It is a success story, but one which doesn't change the fact that there are certain corners of the city in which nothing has changed, in any case nothing for the better. The number of murder victims is on the rise. In the previous year, it was 175, the highest count since 2012. This year, the curve will be even higher, fears Terry. It's exactly the same in other cities: in Chicago on the Independence Day holiday last Tuesday, there were more than a hundred people wounded with guns, 14 fatally.

Terry adds as an afterthought that he has little time for statistics. I know that numbers are helpful, but they make the victims faceless. I want to rescue the names from the anonymity of statistics." If he reads the name of Corey Harris on the board, he gives a story as well. Corey Harris, 36, shot: he was a drug dealer and he was overtaken on the way to the bank with three thousand dollars in his pocket.

Now he is trying to persuade her that she should not get involved with a drug dealer for a second time. "It's going to come down to whether we can break this devil's circle of violence, at least in one family." He carries a photo of Harris' daughter Darrielle in his wallet. Like a talisman.

Every Sunday Mass at St. Anna's, they read the names of the dead aloud, not only those murdered in New Orleans, but also the American police officers, who have lost their lives that week, regardless of where. "I want to leave nothing in doubt. I want the people to hear this word: shot," says Terry. "Tyrone Mathews, 23, shot." Once a month they march to the police headquarters with roses, one rose for every dead person.

This began in July 2005, in the month before Katrina. On the television, the evening news told the story of a shooting. Father Terry's wife wanted to know exactly what happened. 'Don't worry, it's not in our neighborhood,' he answered, remembers the churchman. "And on that same night, shots were fired in our street." He ran outside into the parking lot as if he had lost his reason, a young man was lying lifeless and near him, completely hysterical, his screaming girlfriend. The next morning, Terry began to write the names of the victims of violence in a notebook. Nearby, he glued newspaper cutouts, most of them were only short notices, which were forgotten after a few days, unless one collected them. Two years later, he hung the first tablet on his church's fence. It should have become a sober memorial, as sober as the war memorial in Washington, where only names stand on a wall of black marble. In the the passage of time, it became a sort of shrine, so that people might know that the city of New Orleans had little interest in its murdered sons, brothers, fathers. "Because the shootings became routine," says Terry, "and because most people became accustomed to them."

Once, told the pastor, he was accosted by the mother of a murdered young man, who didn't believe that anyone mourned her son apart from her. The words really tore him up. Essentially, the woman had said that her son had become disposable in the eyes of society. "But please," says Terry, "don't paint me now as this pacifistic preacher, who damns weapons without exception."

In truth, he is a person full of contradictions, as contradictory in his attitude as America itself on the subject of weapons. His parents came from New York, he grew up in New Orleans, but for people in the South, they always counted as Yankees. He likes Warren Buffett, the billionaire investor, first because Buffett is successful, second because he has promised to give away 99 percent of his wealth. Terry also likes Bernie Sanders, however, the left-wing election rival of Hillary Clinton, who made the growing social inequality a gap which Terry calls perverse. He was once more conservative, a fan of the old Georg Bush. He insured ships for Lloyd's of London, before a family tragedy called him to change professions. His daughter took her own life as a teenager, and the prior theology student returned again to the church.

It's not that he hates weapons, says Terry, and counts off all the pieces that stand in his gun cabinet. Six shotguns, for instance, most of which he has cared for as an inheritance. Or the Smith and Wesson with which his grandfather fought in the First World War. He served four years - "I am very proud of that" - in the US Navy. On every Thanksgiving in November, he goes clay pigeon shooting, as an old family tradition.

So that the concept of not-pacifistic pastor should be absolutely clear, Terry walks to a glass case in his parlor and picks up an old Navy saber, playing the grinning pirate. "I like weapons. What I don't like is the symbolism with which they are laden." To transfigure weapons as a symbol of freedom as the lobbyists of the NRA do - that gets the goat of the pastor. "We act as if we were all still cowboys. As if every one of us is a second John Wayne."

Free citizens, who if they must, take up arms against a tyrant, and in the end Lady Liberty is victorious - so preaches the NRA. So rules the Second Amendment of the Constitutions, as Terry sees it, as a license for absurd excesses.

The matter of free citizens can be a double-edged sword. Certainly, Individualism is a strength of America, without which the great leaps would not be imagined. All the inventions and institutions which have allowed this country to become an economic power. And New Orleans in particular has raised Individualism to a peak. Through a culture that celebrates creative chaos, without cramping its style with rules. With Jazz, the rules of classical music are broken without exception, in cuisine, one mixes sausage and seafood in a single dish called jambalaya - "and by funeral processions, the people walk dancing behind a brass band without asking anyone's permission." Terry asks if one could imagine such a thing taking place in Heidelberg, and grins.

But to transfigure the gun as a symbol of this great American freedom, that demands his objection. It happens in a land whose drivers keep to the speed limit without objection, even if on some stretches of highway it is not permitted to drive faster than 55 miles per hour. 55 miles per hour and extensive unrestricted weapon possession, how do those two things go together? "You want to know if I can see sense in that? It doesn't make sense," answers Terry.

However, he has given up hope that something will change soon in the trends of the weapons debate. That a loud, well-organized minority in the name of John Wayne and cowboy-freedom keeps politics in check. It was already difficult under the Democrats. Under Republicans, with Donald Trump in the White House, it will become that much harder.

Only a powerful citizens' movement, Terry believes, could bring about change. A movement with perseverance and patience, similar to that of the civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King. Perhaps his tables on Esplanade Avenue could be a small beginning, but he is under no illusions. "It is not enough that we've been protesting after a particularly shocking running-amok for three months. We have to hold out for longer than that.

To begin with, Bill Terry is seeking donors for a school, a private, faith-based school, with a maximum of 60 students. In order to be able to pay good teachers, he must clearly come up with more donations than is currently the case. "If Mercedes-Benz gives me a million dollars, I'll name my school Mercedes-Benz School, that's fine by me," sums it up, the complete pragmatist, smiling in amusement.

He would take money from anyone, from a casino, from prostitutes, from Trump. The main thing is to keep sixty children from the devil's circle, says Terry. "The main thing is that their names don't land on my boards too."

INFO

Gun possession in the US

Although the inhabitants of the USA make up only four percent of the world's population, they hold 42 percent of all the guns. How it is that in the United States although only around 50 million people - fewer than a sixth of the population, possess rifles or revolvers - however

they have on average eight guns per household. “The fable, according to which the good people need guns in order to be able to defend themselves against wicked youths, is false,” says Sandro Galea, doctor at Boston University, who has made a name for himself as an expert in Epidemiology in his focus on the epidemic of guns. The simple truth, says Galea, is this: in neighborhoods with high concentrations of guns, the probability also increases that someone is going to get killed with one of them.

Translation courtesy of Lori Ranner, Vestry member