

On Sheep to Slaughter
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

On July 22, 2011, 32-year-old Norwegian Anders Breivik set off a bomb outside the offices of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Justice in central Oslo killing eight people. He then traveled to the nearby island of Utoya and shot dead 69 participants of a Workers' Youth League summer camp. In August of 2012, he was convicted of mass murder, causing a fatal explosion, and terrorism. Journalist Asne Seirstad's book on those events has just been published in an English translation — *One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). I found it compelling reading.

Prior to his act, Breivik had authored a 1,500-page manifesto conveying his opposition to the policies of leftist politicians responsible, as he saw it, for the “cultural genocide against the indigenous peoples of Europe.” He particularly objected to the ever-increasing Muslim presence in Norway. “The country is being invaded by foreigners.”

However, this writing isn’t about Breivik and his motivations, personal or political—was he a madman or a revolutionary?—or the larger ideological and ethnic issues that provided the context for his actions. Rather, it is about my response to how ten teenagers died on Utoya Island that July day.

In her book, Seirstad sets the stage:

He advanced steadily through the heather. His boots stamped deeply into the ground as he walked over harebells, clover and trefoil. Some decaying branches snapped underfoot. His skin was pale and damp, and his thin hair was swept back. His eyes were light blue. Caffeine, ephedrine and aspirin ran in his bloodstream. By this point he had killed twenty-two people on the island.

The girl who lived recounted later that

she had seen him fire and a boy fall. More shots rang out. Rapid reports, a pause. Then another series. The roots of a

few lilies of the valley clung to the mountainside, looking as though they had grown out of solid rock. They had finished flowering, and the bases of their leaves were filled with rainwater that had trickled over the rocky edge. There were eleven of them.

As I was reading this, I thought to myself, Breivik's killing people, over twenty of them so far. If you are one of those adults or near-adults—teenagers are fully-grown—what is your response to being murdered? What do you do? The possibilities that came to my mind: One of you gets a gun and shoots him. Or you sneak up behind him and knife him. Or you swarm him and subdue him. Or one of you rushes him, perhaps dying in the process but saving the lives of the others.

But nobody did any that. Including the eleven teenagers. They didn't even scatter and run, get away from him, or at least make him fire in all sorts of directions and up their chances that he wouldn't kill all of them. What they did had me going "Oh no, NO!" I said it out loud as I scanned the words on the page:

They all did what the one boy said. 'Lie down!' They lay close together, their heads turned towards the forest and the dark trunks of the trees, legs against the fence. Some of them huddled up against each other, a couple were lying in a heap. Two girls, best friends, were holding hands. 'It'll be fine,' one of the eleven said. A raspberry bush had strayed out onto the cliff. Wild roses, pale pink, almost white, were clinging to the fence. Then they heard footsteps approaching.

Breivik stood on a little rise and looked down at them and asked, "Where the hell is he?" Nobody answered, nobody moved.

The first shot entered the head of the boy lying at the end. Then he aimed at the back of her head. Her wavy, chestnut brown hair was wet and shiny in the rain. The shot went right through her head and into her brain. He fired again. The boy with his arm around her was hit. The bullet went through the back of his head. A mobile phone rang in a pocket. Another bleeped as a text came in. A girl whispered: 'No...' in a low, scarcely audible voice as she was shot in the head. Her drawn-out 'No-o-o' faded into silence. The shots came every few seconds. His weapons had laser sights. The pistol sent out a

green trace, the rifle a red one. The bullets hit where the trace pointed. A girl near the end of the row caught sight of his muddy black boots. At the back of his heels, down at path level, metal spurs protruded. On his trousers a chequered reflective strip lit up. She was holding hands with her best friend. Their faces were turned to each other. A bullet seared through the crown, the skull and the frontal lobe of her childhood friend's head. The girl's body jerked, the twitchings ran into her hand. Her grip slackened. Seventeen years is not a long life, thought the one still alive. Another shot rang out. It whined past her ear and sliced her scalp. Blood ran over her face and covered the hands her head was resting on. One more shot. The boy beside her whispered: 'I'm dying.' 'Help, I'm dying, help me,' he begged. His breathing grew quieter and quieter, until there was no more sound. From somewhere in the middle of the group came a weak moaning. There were faint groans and a few gurgling sounds. Then only a little squeak or two. Before long there was silence. There had been eleven pounding hearts on the path. Now only one was still beating.

These are sheep being slaughtered, I thought to myself. My thoughts quickly became referenced in more than just these particular teenagers. They came to be about European heritage, white, people as a whole, my people. Have we become sheep, docile, helpless? If this had happened in, say, 1850, or 1930, would my people, even teenagers, have responded as the people did in this instance? Would they have lay down on the ground huddled together, holding hands, both boys and girls? Has something tragic happened to us? Have we somehow as a people become domesticated, weakened, softened? Have we become herd creatures? ("They all did what one boy said.") Perhaps white people would have done this same thing in 1850 or 1930; although it doesn't seem as if they would have . . . would they? In any case, that's what went through my mind as I read about what happened.