

Afghanistan, Murdering Your Spouse, Finding Your Biological Parents
What Happens Next – 8.22.2021
Robi Ludwig QA

Larry Bernstein:

Let's start with a question about why spousal killing fascinates us so much. There's a whole industry of television programs about some spousal killing. The OJ Simpson trial, for example, this took on global interest for a marital dispute gone wrong. Why do spousal killings become front page news? What is our fascination? Why do we care so much about it? What is the universality of it?

Robi Ludwig:

We go into relationships thinking, "This person is going to help us become who we want to be," that, "This person is going to take care of us." And so within any long-term relationship, there's disappointment. And these people who act on their murderous feelings, in some ways, they're extreme versions of all of us. We've all been in relationships where at times we wanted to kill the partner or just wanted to seek revenge, or whatever the case may be. Even for couples who divorce, they're higher functioning than these people who actually murder. But I think it's very identifiable, and there is something by curiously thrilling about watching somebody behave in this primitive way when we can understand maybe the feeling or the mindset, but know better than to act on it.

Larry Bernstein:

I hear that half of all marriages end in divorce, but very rarely does it get to be murderous. Why do certain spouses choose murder over divorce as a solution? You kept mentioning rage and inability to control emotion. Is it emotive failure? What is it that divorce solution isn't the right way to go?

Robi Ludwig:

I would get a lot of questions when I would talk about these high-profile marital homicide cases. Why didn't they just get divorced? And really, divorce is expensive. It sometimes takes a really long time. A person's status changes. There's a lot of financial loss. And in some cases, a person's standing in the community falls. And so there are a lot of risks associated, even today for getting divorced. And the people who end up killing, I think in part have personality disorders where their needs come first, and they truly see their partner as getting in the way. The partner is the obstruction to them living a happy life. And their coping skills are not highly developed. They're more primitive.

Robi Ludwig:

So for somebody who's having an argument with their partner, sometimes humor can really reduce that tension in the room. Or the ability to communicate better so that each person can see the other's side. I think with the people that we see who murder, they don't consider their

partner as a three-dimensional human being. They become demonized in a way. And it's almost like a very concretized idea of how to resolve a solution. The partners in the way, get the partner out of the way and like magic. Now they can live a life of freedom, or now they can be with the person they really love, or now they can be truly happy. And so it's a distortion in thinking in addition to not being able to neutralize the anger that is going on within them.

Larry Bernstein:

One of my favorite chapters in your book was on black widows. These were women who had killed a number of their husbands in the past, usually for the insurance money, that there had always been very little love in their relationships, and this has been some sort of diabolical plan from the beginning to get the insurance money. That seems very different than the other examples you gave of rage and aggression, to plan subterfuge by the black widow. How do you compare the black widow and the pregnancy murder?

Robi Ludwig:

The black widow is basically a con woman, and the fact that she targets her partner shows a deep rage about relationships, however that gets expressed. So in the cases I wrote about in my book, there was a deep rage towards men, and so they go into the relationship planning their revenge. And also seeing these men as basically ATM machines. So the anger is there. It's like they go into a situation where they already hate who they're with, they just have an agenda. I remember when I was co-hosting *Scorned* on Discovery ID, there was this woman, and all the men were seduced by her, and she would take their money and run and just go on to live her best life until she found her next victim. And what was so striking in Discovery ID, everybody looks like a Victoria Secret model.

So of course, the protagonist was this gorgeous woman, so you could see how men would fall in love with her and be victimized by her willingly. And then they did a split screen and this woman looked like, oh my God, like everything you would never imagine a man would love. And I gave her more credit because she was obviously able to seduce somebody who was vulnerable. And very often con people go after people who are lonely, who are desperate, they have a sixth sense about where they could seduce. So there is a rage there, but it's more, the goal is greed, the goal is retaliation. Only it's probably more transference when you think about it, whatever their hate was towards, it wouldn't surprise me if they were sexually abused, or beat up, or saw something that got them to believe men were evil and deserve to be punished.

Larry Bernstein:

The other example of angry, murderous women was when the man had an affair and really pushed it in their wife's face to a level where the wife could no longer control her rage. There are lots of affairs out there. What is it that causes certain women to crack and others don't? These are very public cases that I'm sure you've dealt with on your television programs. And why does the public find it so scandalous when the women take matters into their own hands to not only kill the man, but also his adulterous?

Robi Ludwig:

I'm thinking of Betty Broderick. She was the perfect example of that. And I think for someone like Betty, she really envisioned life looking a certain way and her husband became her property. And there was a dependency there. In order for Betty to feel good about herself, she needed to be with her husband who she really felt she helped him to become successful, to be the person that he became. And what did he do to thank her? He was disloyal and went with a younger woman. I thought it was interesting in her case, how she killed her ex after stalking him and threatening that she was going to kill him, and his new wife, that she killed her ex and his new wife in their bedroom. And I think that's symbolized a lot, that she did not want to see her ex have a new life with new children. And it's interesting to me that it happened in their bedroom.

And when you saw interviews with Betty Broderick after she was in prison, she was knitting. It seemed like she was still happy that she killed her ex. Why? I think the feeling was, if you're not going to be with me, then it will be till death do us part and I'm going to kill you. You do not deserve to live if you can't honor your agreement or keep your promise. But if you scratch the surface again, there's some kind of impairment because there's no resiliency. The idea to move on and actually have a successful life with other love who can love her differently or better did not exist. So many of these people because of a dependency or an inability to have a resiliency that's productive, they end up being in prison. And I think of Betty Broderick case, she had no regrets. I think her rage was that deep.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned at the beginning of your talk, when we get involved in relationships, when you get involved in a marriage, we really don't know the partner at all. We're blinded by love. And it's true of all of us, of all of our marriages, of all our relationships, we get to be intimate very quickly without a lot of knowledge. There's a lot of risks that we take. And for many of us it turns out fabulous. Why focus on those few rare, bad apples? Why can't we focus on the positive? How should we think about risk taking? And how would you advise our children of taking these risks?

Robi Ludwig:

You bring up a great point. And I've often said the healthier you are as a person, better chance you have of choosing another person who is also healthy. So very often just if someone goes into therapy and can think through, what does a healthy relationship look like? What are the characteristics of somebody who is trustworthy? Somebody that I feel I can grow with? That is tremendously helpful in terms of using your head and your heart to be in a situation that is rewarding, fulfilling and non-murderous. But for people who kind of go into relationships, they're young, and naive, and just think feeling is everything and don't think through, who is this person? What are their past relationships like? To get more information that would fill in the blanks. And it leaves them vulnerable to somebody like an abusive partner who very often comes off as a romantic hero.

They really do put the woman on a pedestal at the beginning. There's something called love bombing, where they buy flowers. They act like these men in the movies or in soap operas. And for somebody who is unaware, they might see that as perfection. So I think that's one thing. But, truly the ability to kind of raise awareness, that there's a difference between romantic fantasy and reality. And the more that we can get that idea across then it's really like armor. It's helping people think through the most important decision in their life, because who you choose as a partner impacts everything. Everything. So I think there probably should be some skills taught in school, or kind of imparting that knowledge of get healthy, be a whole person, and then you'll find someone who is more like-minded and that will be who you resonate with.

Larry Bernstein:

Sometimes when we hire people for jobs we ask for references, maybe your previous places of employment. But when we're dating, we never ask to talk to your old girlfriends or old boyfriends. We would view the question as absurd on its face. But that seems to be what you're suggesting?

Robi Ludwig:

What were your past relationships like? And if there's a lot of hate towards women or a lot of hatred towards exes, that should be something to think about. And this is the challenge with online dating, because you don't really have the advantage of a community who can share information about who you're dating. But I think it's through conversation and using your intuition, asking questions, how somebody feels about their parents or relationships in general. And people will tell you about themselves, especially at the beginning because they have nothing to lose. Don't dismiss the red flags, consider the red flags,

Darren Schwartz:

You said something else that was very interesting that you should see, relationships that are fulfilling, rewarding and non-murderous. I think that's a fair bar. But I guess my question is, have there been any scenarios or instances where there's a murder, but the murderer gets off because there's some kind of justification? And I don't mean self-defense, but there's some kind of justification, whether it's psychological abuse is proven or something else,.

Robi Ludwig:

I'm sure there are and there should be. And it used to be called battered woman syndrome, and they would consider that in the court of law. And sometimes it works out and sometimes not. But there is a gender bias where actually women are considered less murderous than men. But in some cases, it is life or death. For the woman who is being battered, and beaten and threatened that her husband is going to kill her, if in a moment she feels it is life or death, it's going to be him or her, then what choice does she have in that moment? And very often murderers feel that way anyway. They feel like their partner is draining the life from them and that it's a survival. Now, maybe it's a distortion, but the feeling is it's me or them and the survival instinct kicks in.

I think people do look at those cases very carefully in an attempt to be fair. What was going on in the home? Because some homes are war zones, where people's lives are at risk. And it does need to be considered, and hopefully with the right lawyer, it can be, on the right judge or jury.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to just continue on Darren's question about punishment. In reading your book, you often described the Jury verdict for the homicide. And in many of the cases, the jail sentence was life. And they were even considering the death penalty in a number of them. But it seems bizarre that, I mean, you're not going to kill your next spouse. You're not really going to feel this sort of rage and aggression generally. Are we over punishing spousal killers? Should there be much less time in jail for spousal murder as compared to a random killing? Or are we trying to send a message to the community? Look, we find nothing more sacred than marriage, so killing your spouse is going to be the ultimate penalty. How do you think about punishment and spousal rage?

Robi Ludwig:

Of course each case is different. Do I think life for Scott Peterson is a sound sentence? Yes, I do. Because there used to be this thinking that if you beat your partner, well, you're fine in the community. You're probably not going to go up and beat somebody on the outside. So what goes on in the home stays in the home. And that was the thinking for a very long period of time. But then there was a recent study looking at spree killers, and they found that many of the spree killers were abusive partners. And so to look at this kind of abuse in the home from a different lens, that these people are violent, that they're out of control and dangerous. And it was interesting that they focused on these spree killers and looked back, how were they as husbands? How were they as fathers?

And there's another case in my book where I called it the transference killer. This guy had this beautiful wife, beautiful life. He ends up killing his wife, getting away with it because it looked like an accident. Then he married somebody who looked exactly like his first wife. Exactly. They almost looked like twins, and he kills her too. And the second time he didn't get away with it. So when you use murder as a problem solving solution, your mind is already gone there. There are no more boundaries. That becomes a potential solution. I think these people can be dangerous, because they probably will get married and the rage will come up for them. And the potential to be dangerous is there.

Larry Bernstein:

Robi, I'd like to end each talk on a note of optimism. How would you combine marriage, love, anger into something positive to end on?

Robi Ludwig:

Well, I think if we expect it to be a norm, but not a deal breaker, then mentally we will be prepared instead of being shocked. Oh, marriage should be perfect. You should be happy every day. I think for young couples, sharing the realities and offering tools. And also helping people get the mental health treatment that they need as soon as they need it. To take away the

stigma. Because very often what I see in my own practice, and I have somebody who was dating somebody who was really lethal, just teaching her just a few small ideas, and now she's in a nice relationship with a dentist who's non homicidal. So sometimes it just takes a little bit of information to set your life on a better path.

Larry Bernstein:

Robi, thank you.