

OPINION

## Despite the shootings, we must hold on to what is most precious about Nova Scotia life

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People pay their respects to victims of a mass shooting at a roadside memorial in Portapique, N.S., on April 26, 2020.

ANDREW VAUGHAN/THE CANADIAN PRESS

*Silver Donald Cameron is the author of 20 books, including Blood in the Water, which will be published in August.*

I vividly remember the moment I decided to join the Isle Madame Volunteer Fire Department. It was the night that Willy Bonin's elegant old house by the harbour burned to the ground. As I watched, a fireman turned to me and said, "Here, buddy, can you hold this hose for a minute? Brace yourself like this, and hold it against your leg. Aim it at that window." And away he went.

Braced there, trying to manage the surging power of that hose, I thought, "These guys protect my house too. And they do it for nothing; they're volunteers." (More than 80 per cent of Canadian firefighters are, in fact.)

I should pitch in. So I did, and it changed my life forever.

A village in Nova Scotia is not a place, but a complex, dense web of relationships that ultimately embraces everyone. Our fire department included carpenters, teachers, mill workers, fishermen, a cook, a car dealer, a courier and a potter. The chief was a trained opera singer. Fighting fires – slithering over icy roofs, groping through choking smoke, wading in the harbour to get the water pumps hooked up – brings people close. It must have been about 1973 that I joined, but to this day I think of those men and women as brothers and sisters.

Voluntary associations are the foundational feature of every small Nova Scotia community. The co-op store, the credit union, the parish council, the recreation association, the cemetery committee, the chamber of commerce, the literacy council, the senior citizens' club, the darts league, the boat club, the farmers' market, the festival committee – sometimes the list seems endless.

And that doesn't count the informal groupings – the knitting circle, the garden club, the astonishingly good musicians who gather every Friday night for a jam session, the fellows who assemble every morning in the coffee shop to swap jokes and tell lies. Small Maritime communities are exuberantly, relentlessly sociable places. When you walk out the door, you're in a warm broth of friendliness and companionship.

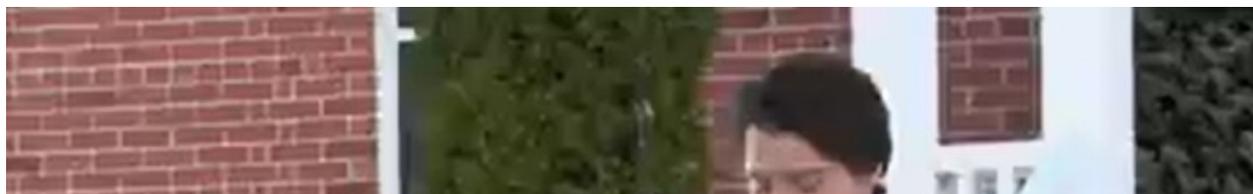
That's why these communities are so difficult to leave, why so many emigrants choose to return. The ambience elsewhere feels chilly and thin, like a misty November morning. If you had told me in 1971 that in 2020 I would still be in D'Escousse, on Isle Madame, I would have been astounded. But here I am.

Before I bought my little house in D'Escousse, I looked at properties in a dozen stunning villages around the province. One of them was a charming little place called Portapique. Two weeks ago, nobody had ever heard of it. Today, everyone knows about it. It's the place where Canada's worst mass shooting began.

When I consider the 22 Nova Scotians we have lost, I am struck by two things. First, these were people who were defined by their service to others – a teacher, a social worker, two correctional officers, a retired long-term care worker, four nurses, an RCMP officer. Some were retired, disabled or unemployed. Second, they were known in their communities, and are now known to us, in the round – not just by what they did for a living, but by how they lived. They were musicians, hockey moms, gardeners, parents, grandparents. They were into fishing, cooking, salsa dancing, leatherwork. They were known and loved in the fullness of their being.

For me, the victim who epitomizes this dimension of our loss is Tom Bagley, 70, a navy veteran, a trained paramedic, a Harley-Davidson enthusiast and a retired firefighter. Bagley was out for his morning walk when he saw the home of his neighbours, Sean McLeod and Alanna Jenkins, enveloped in flames. He ran towards the house to help. But McLeod and Jenkins had been shot, and a few moments later other neighbours found Tom Bagley lying face-down in a pool of blood.

We can never replace the people that the killer has taken. But what he has not taken – and must not take – is the quality in Tom Bagley that drove him to run into danger. That deep sense of connection with one another, of responsibility for one another, is the most precious thing in Nova Scotian life. It is who we are. It is the source of our strength, and we have never needed it more.





Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says the horror of the killing spree in Nova Scotia is compounded by the anxieties Canadians were already feeling amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Trudeau says bans on public gatherings limit funerals and in-person vigils but there will be an online memorial.

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