A Mythology of Bullets

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There's a phrase you often encounter concerning gun violence in America—"an addiction to guns." The term "addiction" Laptures the national obsession and inability to disarm in the face of destructive and deadly consequences. It is evident first in the prevalence of guns (two out of five households1), second in their manufacture (3.85 million new firearms in 2007, 95% of which remained in the country²) and third, most of all, in the results (30,000 annual deaths and 70,000 non-fatal injuries3). Talk of an addiction to guns is heard most often in the aftermath of shooting sprees and always implies an armchair diagnosis and treatment plan: "If only we were less fixated on guns and their availability was limited, we'd not see so much bloodshed." There is certainly something to this initial hit on the matter. Yet addictions and fixations are immune to rational argument and indicate enduring patterns of fantasy and behavior. And whereas the availability of firearms is problematic and must be continually taken up in social and political arenas, focus on this aspect can deflect our attention away from the issue's deeper roots. We need

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to understand the need for guns, and we need to put our finger on what makes us so inclined to pull the trigger when we get them.

The idea of an addiction may both reveal and conceal the extent of the problem. What "addiction" reveals relates to addiction psychology: the intractability, the fabrications, the rituals, the denials and dissociations. It conveys the resistance to admitting the extent of the problem and the lack of will to do anything about it. Fitting associations abound: When guns are your drug of choice, highs at the firing range increase along with the caliber, but hitting bottom means certain death and may lead to innocent bystanders memorialized on the cover of Newsweek. Yet declaration of "war" on this substance remains a distant prospect. Imagine the irony of a war on firearms in a country that is the world's chief supplier—though the government does put alcohol, tobacco, and firearms together in one bureau. As with other substances, when the addiction becomes normative, the neurotic pattern is cloaked—a phenomenon well conveyed in the oftquoted statement by the former senator Phil Gramm of Texas: "I have more guns than I need, but fewer than I want."4

The idealization of guns and the rationalizations for their accessibility are part of the syndrome. Shooting sprees lead to short periods of critical attention, but after the fleeting analysis the patient regresses back to a defended state. Like a complex that's thrashing about after exposure to the light, spectacles of gun violence just motivate the gun barons to reinforce the supply lines, while their lobbyists double their efforts and crazies start arguing how much safer we'd all be carrying concealed weapons. But we would be missing something to simply address the problem at this level. Addictions and their defense mechanisms conceal deeper problems. Their self-medicating function prevents a more conscious suffering and provides a boilerplate for more enduring and harder to address concerns, concerns that are apt to confront the whole of the personality (in the case of an individual) or the entire collective character (in the case of a nation). Let's cut to the chase: There's a vested interest in maintaining the status quo on this issue; gun violence keeps the national psyche in a holding pattern, preventing it from a more conscious encounter with more soulwrenching issues. The obsessive need for guns, the paranoid fear of having guns taken away, the lack of will to effectively legislate or litigate, and even the violence itself are bonded in a conspiracy of collective

defense and denial against a deeper darkness and pathology. Cracking open the neurotic dynamics means going in search of mythic and archetypal roots. The first step is to take a few theories off the table and cut through the most convenient but ultimately insubstantial understandings of the gun violence problem.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Of the 30,000 people killed by guns each year in the United States, about half are suicides, but more than a third are homicides. On average, for a quarter century now, between ten and fifteen thousand people per year are deliberately targeted and killed by someone else with a gun. These raw numbers are startling enough, but they are shocking when placed in global perspective. A study published in 1998 in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* indicated that in the United States the likelihood of being deliberately shot and killed by someone else is more than 10 times that of Canada, 17 times that of Australia, 35 times that of Germany, 89 times that of England and Wales, and 355 times that of Japan. Even with these comparisons, the nationwide view can dilute the impact of the problem in particular communities. For example, during the first half of the 2007-2008 school year, the Chicago public school system had already seen 20 students killed by other students with guns.

A theory we immediately turn to for answers is *access* to firearms, which, while it has some bearing on the overall rate of violence, doesn't account for many aspects of the issue. It's important to be differentiated on this matter: On the one hand, we need to unhook the availability and the use of guns so that the availability factor doesn't prevent us from digging deeper. On the other hand, as we will see in the American context, the accessibility of firearms *in combination with* the proclivity to point them at others is a volatile mix.

Let's take the first side of the question: Whereas some studies have shown a worldwide correlation between the availability of guns and their homicidal use, others have shown little correlation. Switzerland and Finland have high rates of gun ownership but very low firearm homicide rates.⁷ The gun lobby loves to hear this, thinking it supports their cause. "Guns don't kill; people kill" is their motto. Yet while these numbers support the idea there may be no *necessary* link between

having a gun and using it to kill someone, it only provides a vivid backdrop to the American *tendency* to use guns in deadly ways: International surveys indicate that Americans use guns in homicides between 60 and 75% of the time, compared to 30-40% of the time in Canada and about 30% of the time in other comparable nations.⁸ In other words, murderous impulses are more hardwired to gun use in America. Which simply underscores the question: what is it that makes this nation more inclined to kill others with guns?

Is it a function of overall crime? Well, no, the overall number of reported crimes per capita is similar to that of Australia and less than that of Britain.9 Besides, the prison population here is about six times higher than these countries, which might lead one to assume that all the dangerous folks must already be behind bars. 10 Not so, apparently. Is it about the influence of media violence? This favorite argument is unloaded each time someone who grew up in the information age shoots a bunch of fellow citizens. So are Grand Theft Auto, Marilyn Manson, and the offspring of Dirty Harry to blame? Although there's some evidence that violent imagery leads to more aggressive behavior in children, especially in those with a predisposition to aggression (surprise, surprise!), there's little to suggest direct links to criminal behavior.¹¹ More compelling is the fact that many European countries with low rates of crime in general and of gun violence in particular consume violent imagery with similar gusto as Americans. Japan provides another point of comparison: Violent anime films, manga comics, and video games are pervasive. They are also on a steady diet of Hollywood movies. Businessmen read pornography on trains. Alcohol may be found in vending machines on street corners. Japan has higher rates of suicide than the United States and mental illness is on the increase; it's not a perfect culture. But violent crime is almost non-existent, the population accepts the highly restrictive gun laws, and people aren't going around shooting each other. So the almost universal diet of violent imagery is hardly an explanation for rates of gun violence, either here or abroad. Images of gratuitous violence may add to the pervasive desensitization and numbness of modern culture, but it's worth keeping in mind that the association of violence and the dramatic arts is archetypal—as any reading of Shakespeare or The Bible will attest. The media is implicated in other ways, but we will get to that in a moment.

Mental illness is another suspicious culprit, dragged out for shadowy treatment whenever gun violence is in the spot light. Sometimes the evidence seems compelling, as in the case of Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter. But as psychologists well know, being depressed or anxious or schizophrenic even is not in itself a predictor of violence. A more compelling idea is that the mad concretize the fault lines of society, living the pathological aspects of our myths in literal ways, which still brings us back to the basic question: What makes the gun the American drug of choice?

While the above survey is only a thumbnail sketch of some common arguments, the resulting picture is fairly clear: The usual suspects produce no smoking gun. Neither availability, nor criminality, nor media influence, nor general states of psychological distress offer decent paths of understanding.

A PSYCHOLOGY OF BULLETS

Shortly after Klebold and Harris shot 12 students, a teacher, and themselves at Columbine High School, I started to consider the gun violence problem. Beyond the polarized glibness of the blame game, I was struck and continue to be struck by one thing: So often in these mass shootings the shooter appears to walk straight out of the fabric of everyday life. As I wrote in an article at that time: Inevitably there'll be an interview "with a benign-looking elderly woman whose lawn the shooter once mowed. In a chillingly honest statement, she will say . . . 'He seemed like an ordinary American boy to me . . ."13 Alongside such impressions, the search for motives and causes in these most dramatic and deadly incidents of gun violence often produces meager results. It all begs the question: what *is* ordinary and American about gun violence?

It didn't take long to discover that "beneath the cloak of normative goals and aspirations . . . [lies] . . . a cluster of social values that can be identified as precursors to gun violence." A book by two sociologists, Steven Messner and Richard Rosefield, *Crime and the American Dream*, came closest to articulating my sense that the decision to pick up a gun, take aim, and pull the trigger has to be traced back to cultural pathology. They describe the American Dream as "entail(ing) a commitment to the goal of material success, to be pursued by

everyone in society, under conditions of open, individual competition," but also note that this ethos produces a shadow effect: "an environment in which people are encouraged to adopt an 'anything goes' mentality in the pursuit of personal goals." They reach the conclusion that the high rate of gun violence in particular "result(s) in part from a cultural ethos that encourages the rapid deployment of technically efficient methods to solve interpersonal problems." ¹⁶

As it turns out, sociology has a name for this collective backdrop to overt violence; it's called "structural violence." When you look hard enough you come to see that the ethos of the American Dream has a built-in but well camouflaged structural violence, a series of dynamics that promote opportunity but create disenfranchisement. Both the shock and awe over shooting rampages as well as the pressured rhetoric about pursuing the Dream work to keep this built-in violence under wraps. But once your eyes adjust to the dark, gun violence can be seen growing in the backwoods of the country's highest aspirations.

For one thing, there's a blurry line between legitimate and illegitimate ways of being successful in America. If you think there's no connection between what happened on the trading floor of Enron, or in the offices of Bernie Madoff, and what happens in South Central Los Angeles, think again. In his book *The Cry for Myth*, Rollo May, meditating on that archetypal self-made man, Jay Gatsby, writes:

There has been in America no clear-cut differentiation between right and wrong ways to get rich. Playing the stock market? Finding oil under your shack in Texas? Deforesting vast areas of Douglas fir in the state of Washington? Amassing piles of money for lectures after getting out of prison as a Watergate crook? The important thing in the American Dream has been to get rich, and then those very riches give a sanction to your situation.¹⁷

For another thing, whereas the ethos of the American Dream suggests that you can become whoever or whatever you want—that everyone can be a winner—it's just not so. Few are willing to see this. People in low-income brackets often vote for candidates and policies that support the wealthy because they believe that one day they too will be wealthy. They don't see the bind they are in, a phenomenon that's been carefully described by Thomas Frank in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*¹⁸ The conditions within which both idealized goals and

significant but largely unrecognized obstacles to those goals are fostered are continually reinforced. Gaps between aspiration and reality are the result, gaps that are far larger in this country than anywhere else in the developed world, gaps that appear on whatever rung of the ladder you happen to be standing.

Whether it's in the high school cafeteria, the college lecture hall, the streets of Detroit, in a Wendy's restaurant, or between the Crips and the Bloods, gun violence grows out of these gaps. As I wrote previously:

The gun appears when the gap between actual life and the idealized American Dream opens too wide; the gun is fired when there is no thing left to satisfy the belief that we make our own destiny. . . . As a distorted realization of willful accomplishment, the gun becomes the final solution, the way out, (and often) a ticket to immortality, even in the face of suicidal intent. The gun is a pure expression of controlling one's life. As such, it is the dark epitome of the self-made way of life. ¹⁹

Neither the danger involved, nor the prospect of life in prison, nor in some instances the idea of taking one's own life can compete with the shame and belittlement that occurs with not "making it." These deterrents can't compete with the need to eliminate feelings of failure and social alienation. As James Gilligan writes:

The death of the self is of far greater concern than the death of the body. People will willingly sacrifice their bodies if they perceive it as the only way to avoid "losing their souls," "losing their minds," or "losing face." ²⁰

When "soul," "mind," and "face" are all aligned with climbing a narrowly defined socio-economic ladder and you lose your footing, violence becomes an attractive option. The narrowness starts early. To compensate for their outsider status in high school, Klebold and Harris imagined shooting their way to the cover of *Time* magazine. The prospect of notoriety on the heels of being alienated from the adolescent version of American Dream surpassed the significance of life itself. This is quite an inversion of values. No doubt today's blurry line between fame and notoriety parallels that between legitimate and illegitimate paths to success.

What I'm getting at is this: There's an idea or fantasy behind the gun that animates its role in this society long before anyone picks the thing up. It's the fantasy of ultimate individualism and willfulness, which can be engaged when all else fails, to compensate for the lost Dream. When you can't live like the Bradys or the Huxtables, the Corleones and the Sopranos are offering an alternate lifestyle on other side of town. In this alternate American Dreamscape, one pull of the trigger and you can instantly and permanently alter the world and whoever or whatever is standing in your way.

The power of this fantasy is at the root of the addictive attraction of guns. When you hear from childhood on that you live in "the land of opportunity," that you are "special," that you can "be all you can be," or you simply see this self aggrandizement all around, then someone or something comes along and clips your wings, the ability to reach for a gun is like having a god-like sense of agency in your back pocket.

A MYTHOLOGY OF BULLETS

The psychology of bullets, which stands behind the addiction to guns, derives from a deeper mythos. One of the earliest images of humans assimilating god-like powers has to do with the fashioning of projectiles by smith-gods or divine-smiths. As Eliade points out, myths in which smith-gods make weapons for divinities indicate the movement into the Metal Age. He writes: "The smith of the gods forges weapons similar to lightning and the thunderbolt . . . In their turn, human smiths imitate the work of their super-human patrons." A Finnish myth amplifies the same theme—the story of a world-tree, a Giant Oak, being felled by a hero from the sea, whereupon the chips are taken to a sorcerer who crafts the first arrows. At the moment of dissolution of original unity the first projectiles fall into human hands. In the words of the story: "So as the Cosmos is created with light, earth and the conscious man, the arrows of evil are also made simultaneously." 22

So myth tells us that the original projectiles belonged to the gods and only secondarily did they fall into human hands. Thousands of years of weaponry have yet to dilute this root metaphor, this original transmission of god-likeness. It backgrounds the grandiosity, the

inflation that comes from having your finger on the trigger. As Caroline Burnham says in the iconic film *American Beauty*, "All I know is that I LOVE shooting this gun." And she drives home from the firing range singing along to Bobby Darin: "Nobody, I said nobody, had better rain on my parade." The more one is swept up by the idea of pulling a trigger here and instantly, profoundly altering someone's reality over there, the more you transcend the normal limits and boundaries of human interaction. The ability to launch a cruise missile a few hundred miles from its target, or aim a few hundred nuclear warheads at Russia has the same feeling—the feeling of omnipotence.

At a certain point you can't help but see the connections between projectiles at home and projectiles abroad. Lying on the couch watching laser-guided bombs going through doorways in Baghdad reinforces the idea that you can deal with everything by firing from a distance. It's a distance that no number of "imbedded" reporters on the network newscasts can overcome. It goes too deep. It's a mirror of the distance between the upper and underworld of the American character. It's the distance between the rhetoric of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the faces of dead Iraqis that the imbedded reporters never seem to come across. Seeing this pattern in 1970, in the aptly titled *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, Philip Slater wrote, "America has developed more elaborate, complex, and grotesque techniques for exterminating people at a distance than any nation in the history of the world." He suggested that, "perhaps the distance itself carries special meaning." ²³

Projectiles are fired when the imagination can see no option but continued forward movement, when the only way out of a predicament is to move ahead by targeting, then removing the objects in your way. "Objects" being the operative word, because by the time someone pulls the trigger that's what their targets have become. In Klebold and Harris' case it was the jocks and the Christians, at Virginia Tech it was the "rich kids." It may just be "the cashier," standing between you and what you want. By the time you pull the trigger, the human face has already gone and some projection has stepped in to beckon its projectile twin. Objectification and distancing, projection and projectiles go together. Your victims are the disagreeable parts of your inner pantheon, in need of a lightning bolt or two.

If we can for a moment deliteralize the gun, keeping in mind its psychic firepower and its mythic background, we see that working on the problem means working on the cultural values and imaginings that give weight and energy to the *idea* of needing and using a gun. What it comes down to is this: Can a way of life be cultivated in which there isn't such exclusive emphasis on willful accomplishment and material success, where it isn't as easy to objectify and stereotype others, where instant gratification is a sickness not a right? If the playing field in each of these areas were altered, the need for guns and the motivation to use them would significantly decline. Which brings us back to the question of media influences.

Can the media open up the imagination with complex, multifaceted characters with strengths and shadows rather than express formulaic American success stories? Media images of structural violence, including objectification, stereotyping, character assassination, and polarizing commentary may well be doing more damage than depictions of overt, literal violence. Graphic violence imbedded in an underworld narrative and aura of psychopathology should not be confused with the constant stream of gun-toting bright, shiny heroes who swagger through the world and shoot from the hip. Television shows like American Idol, with its endless parade of winners and losers, may promote more violence than The Sopranos, with its anxiety-ridden and deeply flawed protagonist. The former is full of structural violence but hides it; the latter puts the violence in your face but places it in context. Here's the point: Half an hour of Nancy Grace or Rush Limbaugh with their rapid-fire opinions and inability to sustain dialogue is effectively more violent, more sustaining of a bullet psychology and mythology than an afternoon of Spaghetti Westerns.

LOOKING BACK

What I hinted at the start can now be stated more directly: The obsession with guns, with projectiles and with their devastating effects, whether in the world or in media depictions, keeps us from seeing a deeper more pervasive cultural violence. Both the incessant drive forward that goes with the gun and the utter blindness to what's going on beneath the surface indicates where the missing and corrective mythos resides: namely, backward, down and in.

Gun violence is the most acute expression of the American propensity to act rather than think or reflect. The actual gun translates this tendency into bloodshed, but the real culprit is the constant movement and the rugged individualism that's welded to it: The going West in the Western; the sense of right in the right to bear arms; the hip's swagger not what it's wearing. Gun violence is a perverted, mindless attempt to maintain progress in a world that values assertion and getting ahead above all else. When you hit a wall there are too few images for turning around, looking back, retracing steps, or simply stopping for a while. What's missing on the Juggernaut that moves the American psyche is a rear-view mirror—something, anything, that helps us engage the underworld, that aspect of the imagination that holds the weight of death and cultivates a relation to loss, mourning, and sacrifice. An underworld imagination gives us options and alternate routes when the way ahead is blocked. It would make meaning from failure. It would give us a real understanding of being stuck. It would slow the Titanic down. It would provide a counterweight to the triggerhappy mania of this collective. Beyond individual psychopathology, failed background checks, assault rifles, and video games, open up any incidence of American gun violence and you'll find a distorted idea of achievement and an incapacity to imagine well being when the movement stops.

James Hillman, in his recent work, *A Terrible Love of War*, emphasizes this downward direction in trying to understand the pull of warfare. He considers the American Civil War by "attempting to imagine it from below."²⁴ He writes:

To visit the dead for knowledge repeats a long tradition. The great teachers of culture entered the underworld to gain understanding, sometimes to rescue or repent. Ulysses, Orpheus, Aeneas, Ianna, Dionysos, Psyche, Persephone, even Hercules.²⁵

Hillman links this underworld style of understanding to the very nature of understanding, reminding us that Hans-Georg Gadamer said "understanding involves a 'loss of self'." He goes on: "It is an unconditional surrender, a falling from mental superiority to a falling in with, going along with, the peculiarly devious paths of Hermes *chthonious*, the earthly aspect of the god of hermeneutics." This idea echoes Keats' notion of "negative capability" and is present to Paul

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FINALLY

If you've tracked the meandering path I've taken here it's not too difficult to see that actual guns and their use are extensions of a whole series of cultural conditions, psychological patterns, and ultimately mythic images. Episodic acts of gun violence literalize an everyday mythology. Guns express the compulsive need for individual agency, for expedient, black and white solutions to complex problems, and for the exercise of power at a distance. They carry the feeling of connection to something essentially American, running through the Wild West, the right to bear arms, the citizen militia and reach back into an entire mythos of projectiles. "God and Guns" is the bumper sticker version, conveying just how much guns carry an archetypal power in the national psyche.

With few exceptions—think of Melville, the Gothic vision of the South, the subterranean power of the Vietnam memorial, and the Coen brothers' films—America has little imagination for loss and failure. It knows only how to move forward. Perhaps both the recent economic downturn and the prospect of leadership with an eye for what we've turned our backs on will begin to loosen the collective blinders. But I wouldn't hold my breath. For the most part, America remains identified with *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* running to their deaths with guns blazing, with Caroline Burnham in *American Beauty* at the shooting range, with Dirty Harry's law unto himself, and with the psychopath, Anton Chigurh, in *No Country for Old Men*.

There's no surgical solution to gun violence because the tumor is growing on too many vital organs of the collective body. The symptoms, which might be curtailed or managed, will ultimately resist treatment because they're imbedded in the national character, whose great strengths—perseverance against the odds, innovative spirit, and determination—are also its weaknesses—a lack of introspection and an inability to digest its transgressions. Remaining transfixed by "the rocket's red glare" and "the bombs bursting in air," means the night remains unseen.

The consistent aim of projectiles is to distance the shooter and an experience of the underworld. The corrective move—the therapeutic intervention—would be to validate and cultivate ways in and down rather than up and out: mindful reflection instead of mindless action, negative capability instead of the power of positive thinking, imagination instead of concretization. Perhaps then the eagle eye of American consciousness, which is always scanning the horizon, always searching, might start soul-searching too.

NOTES

- 1. According to a survey conducted in 2004 by L. Hepburn, M. Miller, D. Azrael, and D. Hemenway at the Department of Health Policy and Management, Harvard School of Medicine, 38% of households in the United States have firearms.
 - 2. http://www.atf.gov/firearms/stats/index.htm. Retrieved 2/19/09.
- 3. See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website for up to date and comparative statistics on firearms related deaths and injuries: http://www.cdc.gov/. In 1993, according to another survey, 39,595 were killed by firearms. (E. G. Krug, K. E. Powell and L. L. Dahlberg, "Firearm-Related Deaths in the United States and 35 other High- and Upper-Middle-Income Countries," *International Journal of Epidemiology*, [1998], 27, 214-221).
 - 4. Bob Herbert, The New York Times, January 1, 2001.
 - 5. Krug, et al., op. cit.
- 6. National Public Radio. "All Things Considered." Broadcast 4/3/08.
- 7. Switzerland and Finland have household gun ownership rates of 27% and 23% respectively (http://www.allcountries.org/gun_ownership_rates.html). However, the homicide by firearm rate in the United States is 8 to 10 times higher than these countries. Retrieved 2/19/09.
 - 8. Krug, et al., op. cit.
- 9. Gordon Barclay & Cynthia Tavares, "International Comparisons of Criminal Justice Statistics 2001." Issue 12/03. http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/statistics/statistics30.htm. Retrieved 2/19/09.

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- 10. Ibid.
- 11. Kevin D. Browne and Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis, "The Influence of Violent Media on Children and Adolescents: A Public Health Approach," *The Lancet*, Volume 365, Issue 9460, 2005, 702-710.
- 12. See the Virginia Tech Review Panel Report, available online: http://www.vtreviewpanel.org/report/report/11_CHAPTER_IV.pdf.
- 13. Glen Slater, "A Psychology of Bullets," *The Salt Journal*, Volume 2, Number 3, 19.
- 14. Steven Messner and Richard Rosefield, cited in Slater, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- 15. Steven Messner and Richard Rosefield, *Crime and the American Dream* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1997).
 - 16. Slater, op. cit., p. 21.
 - 17. Cited in Slater, op. cit., p. 21.
- 18. Thomas Frank, What's the Matter with Kansas? (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).
 - 19. Slater, op. cit., p. 21.
- 20. James Gilligan, Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 96.
- 21. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 101.
- 22. http://www.finnishmyth.org/p11projectiles1.html. Retrieved 2/19/09.
- 23. Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point* (Toronto: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 42.
- 24. James Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 102.
 - 25. Ibid.
 - 26. Ibid., p. 103.
- 27. Roberts Avens, *The New Gnosis: Heidegger, Hillman and Angels* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2003), p. 99.