Romeo and Juliet is arguably the most poignant of Shakespeare's tragedies. Two innocents fall in love and in attempting to live out of natural impulse, they bring down dark forces upon themselves, forces they can neither control nor understand.

A long-standing feud between their families has poisoned civic relations in their native Verona and repeatedly spilled over into violence. Exasperated by the brawling and disruption, Verona's prince poses the parties a lethal constraint: “If ever you disturb our streets again, your lives will pay the forfeit of the peace.”

While the patriarchs seem sullenly compliant, Lady Capulet's nephew Tybalt is not. For him, hatred has become an aphrodisiac. An alpha male unwilling to take yes for an answer, he forces conflict that engulfs both factions and leads to his own untimely death.

The countervailing force to Tybalt's malice is the gentle and nurturing counsel of the Franciscan Friar Lawrence. Lawrence would have been seen by the patrons of the Globe as more than a cleric. Indeed, he was a scientist and as such one who probed the world's mysteries by all the means at his disposal. Alchemy, elixirs, spells and incantations were all the stuff of early “science,” and this was a discipline far removed from the rarified pursuits of philosophy and theology. Science had its dark side, and its practitioners were often seen as secretive and their methods suspect.

For all that, Friar Lawrence is unquestionably a Christian presence in the play. His admonitions to loyalty and sincerity and his attempt to reconcile the clan enmities through a union of the children, comport with church teachings. But in pursuing the plan, with the complicity of Juliet's nurse, he weaves an intricate web of deceptions that can hardly be maintained for long. In the end his elaborate scheme to help Juliet feign her own death backfires and results in a catastrophic double suicide.

In gleaning from the script clues to moral orientation, we are struck by the fact that while Christianity forms the cultural and ceremonial backdrop for the play, the sensibilities of the principals seem robustly pagan.

Romeo in his premonition soliloquy discerns “some consequence yet hanging in the stars” and fatalistically avers, “Let him that hath the steerage of my course direct my sail,” a reference as plausibly to Jove or Apollo as to any God of free will and moral
choice. Juliet, in the famous balcony scene, teasingly challenges her suitor’s protestations of love, reminding him: “They say at lovers’ perjuries Jove laughs.” And in his despair at having killed Tybalt, Romeo cries, “I am Fortune’s fool!”

The play is a thriller, and as with all thrillers, there are many “What ifs?” What if the marriage had been discovered after consummation but before the fateful duels? What if Brother John had beaten Balthasar to Mantua with the true account of Juliet’s fate? What if she had awakened in the crypt mere minutes earlier? But tragedies are by definition thrillers in which the cavalry arrives too late.

What lessons may be recovered from this celebration of bad choices and extreme behavior?

First, good intentions are not enough. If a project can only be achieved through elaborate ruses, something is wrong.

Finally, forbearance and patience yield long-term benefits. A willingness to endure the loss of a loved one would have averted either suicide, and had Romeo stayed his hand, both he and Juliet would have survived, making Shakespeare’s tragedy into a near-miss thriller.