# Virginia Tech Massacre: Coping with Grief

As the world joins Virginia Tech in mourning a terrible massacre, I've found myself experiencing poignant memories of an earlier visit to that campus when students also struggled with recent death. Though that tragedy was smaller in scope, grief and confusion abounded then as now.

Several months before my evening lecture at Virginia Tech, I had recommended that my hosts have me speak on love, sex, and dating . . . nearly always a popular campus draw. But they preferred I speak on death and dying: *One Minute After Death*. Reluctantly, I agreed; they publicized accordingly. Though they didn't claim clairvoyance, their selection proved providential.

A few days before my presentation, three Tech students died tragically in separate incidents involving suicide and a fire. The campus buzzed with concern about death and dying. The lecture venue was packed; the atmosphere electric.

**Death's Shuddering Finality**

I told the audience of similar sadness: The spring of my sophomore year at Duke, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends wrestled with questions like, "What's life all about?" "What does it mean if it can be snuffed out in an instant?" "Is there life after death?"

Our springtime happiness became gloom. A memorial service and personal interaction helped us process our grief. I vividly recall a classmate driving Mike's ashes home to Oklahoma at the end of the term. Death had a shuddering finality.

Now, in the recent massacre's immediate aftermath, stories both heartrending and inspiring are emerging. Rescue workers removing bodies from Norris Hall, where the bulk of the killings occurred, encountered cellphones ringing, likely parents or friends trying to contact missing students. Parents wandered the campus that first evening seeking to learn their children's fate.

During the siege, engineering professor Liviu Librescu, an Israeli Holocaust survivor, blocked a door with his body, sacrificing his life so students could flee.{1}

**God and Evil?**

As mourners process their anguish, it's only natural to wonder where God is in all this. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, who once served as a volunteer missionary, noted at the campus convocation that even Jesus, in his dark hour on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"{2} He encouraged grieving students to embrace their community to help everyone process their pain.

The late William Sloane Coffin gained fame as a controversial peace and civil rights activist during the Vietnam War. He also served as chaplain of Yale University and had a helpful take on the question of God and suffering.

"Almost every square inch of the Earth's surface is soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent," Coffin told *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, "and it's not God's doing. It's our doing. That's human malpractice. Don't chalk it up to God."

"When [people] see the innocent suffering," continued Coffin, "every time they lift their eyes to heaven and say, 'God, how could you let this happen?' it's well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: 'How could you let this happen?'"{3}

The problem of evil has many complex facets, but the horror in Blacksburg resulted from human action. Students and faculty face considerable healing. President Bush reminded them, “People who have never met you are praying for you…. In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God…. ‘Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'”{4} Sound counsel for a grieving campus community.

**Notes**

1. Laurie Copans, “Holocaust Survivor Killed in Virginia Shootings,” Associated Press, April 17, 2007; on ABC News at http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048967&page=1, accessed April 18, 2007. See also Richard T. Cooper and Valerie Reitman, “Virginia Tech professor gave his life to save students,” Los Angeles Times, April 18, 2007; http://tinyurl.com/2lnomg, accessed April 18, 2007.
2. Matthew 27:46, quoted here from the more contemporary language of the New Living Translation. Kaine appeared to be quoting from the King James Version. Audio of Governor Kaine’s April 17, 2007, Virginia Tech convocation speech is at http://www.vbdems.org/, accessed April 18, 2007.
3. “Profile: William Sloane Coffin,” Religion & Ethics Newsweekly interview with Bob Abernathy, Episode no. 752, originally broadcast August 27, 2004; rebroadcast in 2007; http://tinyurl.com/2vdr6t, accessed April 18, 2007.
4. Text of the president’s April 17, 2007 speech at the Virginia Tech memorial convocation is at http://tinyurl.com/2t6txa, accessed April 18, 2007. The third sentence in the Bush quotation here is from Romans 12:21.

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# God in Our Nation's Capital

## U.S. Capitol Building

In our minds, lets take a walking tour through Americas capital city, Washington, DC. What we will be seeing in our minds eye comes from the book *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nations History and Future*.{1} As we consider what religious symbols are found in the buildings and monuments, I think we will gain a fresh appreciation for the role of religion in the public square.

We will begin with the U.S. Capitol Building. No other building in Washington defines the skyline like this one does. It has been the place of formal inaugurations as well as informal and spontaneous events, such as when two hundred members of Congress gathered on the steps on September 12, 2001, to sing God Bless America.

President George Washington laid the cornerstone for the Capitol in 1793. When the north wing was finished in 1800, Congress was able to move in. Construction began again in 1803 under the direction of Benjamin Latrobe. The British invasion of Washington in 1812 resulted in the partial destruction of the Capitol. In 1818, Charles Bulfinch oversaw the completion of the north and south wings (including a chamber for the Supreme Court).{2}

Unfortunately, the original design failed to consider that additional states would enter the union, and these additional representatives were crowding the Capitol. President Millard Fillmore chose Thomas Walter to continue the Capitols construction and rehabilitation. Construction halted during the first part of the Civil War, and it wasnt until 1866 that the canopy fresco in the Rotunda was completed.

The religious imagery in the Rotunda is significant. Eight

different historical paintings are on display. The first is the painting *The Landing of Columbus* that depicts the arrival on the shores of America. Second is *The Embarkation of the Pilgrims* that shows the Pilgrims observing a day of prayer and fasting led by William Brewster.

Third is the painting *Discovery of the Mississippi by DeSoto.* Next to DeSoto is a monk who prays as a crucifix is placed in the ground. Finally, there is the painting *Baptism of Pocahontas*.

Throughout the Capitol Building, there are references to God and faith. In the Cox Corridor a line from America the Beautiful is carved in the wall: America! God shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea!{3}

In the House chamber is the inscription, In God We Trust. Also in the House chamber, above the Gallery door, stands a marble relief of Moses, the greatest of the twenty-three law-givers (and the only one full-faced). At the east entrance to the Senate chamber are the words *Annuit Coeptis* which is Latin for God has favored our undertakings. The words In God We Trust are also written over the southern entrance.

In the Capitols Chapel is a stained glass window depicting George Washington in prayer under the inscription In God We Trust. Also, a prayer is inscribed in the window which says, Preserve me, God, for in Thee do I put my trust.{4}

## The Washington Monument

The tallest monument in Washington, DC, is the Washington Monument. From the base of the monument to its aluminum capstone are numerous references to God. This is fitting since George Washington was a religious man. When he took the oath of office on April 30, 1789, he asked that the Bible be opened to Deuteronomy 28. After the oath, Washington added, So help

me God and bent forward and kissed the Bible before him.{5}

Construction of the Washington Monument began in 1848, but by 1854 the Washington National Monument Society was out of money and construction stopped for many years. Mark Twain said it had the forlorn appearance of a hollow, oversized chimney. In 1876, Congress appropriated money for the completion of the monument which took place in 1884. In a ceremony on December 6, the aluminum capstone was placed atop the monument. The east side of the capstone has the Latin phrase *Laus Deo*, which means Praise be to God.

The cornerstone of the Washington Monument includes a Holy Bible, which was a gift from the Bible Society. Along with it are copies of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

If you walk inside the monument you will see a memorial plaque from the Free Press Methodist-Episcopal Church. On the twelfth landing you will see a prayer offered by the city of Baltimore. On the twentieth landing you will see a memorial offered by Chinese Christians. There is also a presentation made by Sunday school children from New York and Philadelphia on the twenty-fourth landing.

The monument is full of carved tribute blocks that say: Holiness to the Lord; Search the Scriptures; The memory of the just is blessed; May Heaven to this union continue its beneficence; In God We Trust; and Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

So what was George Washingtons faith? Historians have long debated the extent of his faith. But Michael Novak points out that Washingtons own step-granddaughter, Nelly Custis, thought his words and actions were so plain and obvious that she could not understand how anybody failed to see that he had always lived as a serious Christian.{6}

During the first meeting of the Continental Congress in

September 1774, George Washington prayed alongside the other delegates. And they recited Psalm 35 together as patriots.

George Washington also proclaimed the first national day of thanksgiving in the United States. In 1795 he said, When we review the calamities which afflict so many other nations, the present condition of the United States affords much matter of consolation and satisfaction. He therefore called for a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. He said, In such a state of things it is in an especial manner our duty as people, with devout reverence and affectionate gratitude, to acknowledge our many and great obligations to Almighty God and implore Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experience.{7}

## The Lincoln Memorial

The idea of a memorial to the sixteenth president had been discussed almost within days after his assassination, but lack of finances proved to be a major factor. Finally, Congress allocated funds for it during the Taft administration. Architect Henry Bacon wanted to model it after the Greek Parthenon, and work on it was completed in 1922.

Bacon chose the Greek Doric columns in part to symbolize Lincolns fight to preserve democracy during the Civil War.{8} The thirty-six columns represented the thirty-six states that made up the Union at the time of Lincolns death.

Daniel Chester French sculpted the statue of Abraham Lincoln to show his compassionate nature and his resolve in preserving the Union. One of Lincolns hands is tightly clenched (to show his determination) while the other hand is open and relaxed (to show his compassion).

Lincolns speeches are displayed within the memorial. On the left side is the Gettysburg Address (only 267 words long). He said, We here highly resolved that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new

birth of freedom.

On the right side is Lincolns second inaugural address (only 703 words long). It mentions God fourteen times and quotes the Bible twice. He reflected on the fact that the Civil War was not controlled by man, but by God. He noted that each side looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other.

He concludes with a lament over the destruction caused by the Civil War, and appeals to charity in healing the wounds of the war. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

It is fitting that one hundred years after Lincolns second inaugural, his memorial was the place where Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his most famous speech, I have a dream. An inscription was added to the memorial in 2003 that was based upon Isaiah 40:4-5: I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

At a White House dinner during the war, a clergyman gave the benediction and closed with the statement that The Lord is on the Unions side. Abraham Lincoln responded: I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lords side.{9}

# The Jefferson Memorial

Thomas Jefferson was Americas third president and the drafter of the Declaration of Independence, so it is surprising that a memorial to him was not built earlier than it was. In 1934, Franklin Delano Roosevelt persuaded Congress to establish a memorial commission to honor Jefferson. After some study the commission decided to honor Pierre LEnfants original plan, which called for the placement of five different memorials that would be aligned in a cross-like manner.{10}

The architect of the memorial proposed a Pantheon-like structure that was modeled after Jeffersons own home which incorporated the Roman architecture that Jefferson admired. The original design was modified, and the memorial was officially dedicated in 1943.

When you enter the Jefferson Memorial you will find many references to God. A quote that runs around the interior dome says, I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the minds of man.

On the first panel, you will see the famous passage from the Declaration of Independence: We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

On the second panel is an excerpt from A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 1777. It was passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1786. It reads: Almighty God hath created the mind free. . . . All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion. . . . No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions of belief, but all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of

religion. I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively.

The third panel is taken from Jeffersons 1785 Notes on the State of Virginia. It reads: God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.

## The Supreme Court

Of the three branches of government, the Supreme Court was the last to get its own building. In fact, it met in the Capitol building for over a hundred years. During that time, it met in many different rooms of the capitol until it finally settled in the Old Senate Chamber in 1860.

Supreme Court Justice William Howard Taft (who also had served as president) persuaded Congress to authorize funds for the Supreme Court building. It was modeled after Greek and Roman architecture in the familiar Corinthian style and dedicated in 1935.

It is ironic that the Supreme Court has often issued opinions which have stripped religious displays from the public square when these opinions have been read in a building with many religious displays. And it is ironic that public expressions of faith have been limited when all sessions of the court begin with the Courts Marshal announcing: God save the United States and this honorable court.

In a number of cases, the Supreme Court has declared the posting of the Ten Commandments unconstitutional (in public school classrooms and in a local courthouse in Kentucky). But

this same Supreme Court has a number of places in its building where there are images of Moses with the Ten Commandments. These can be found at the center of the sculpture over the east portico of the Supreme Court building, inside the actual courtroom, and finally, engraved over the chair of the Chief Justice, and on the bronze doors of the Supreme Court itself.{11}

Nevertheless, the Supreme Court has often ruled against the very kind of religious expression that can be found in the building that houses the court. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich says in his book *Rediscovering God in America*, that we see a systematic effort . . . to purge all religious expression from American public life. He goes on to say that for the last fifty years the Supreme Court has become a permanent constitutional convention in which the whims of five appointed lawyers have rewritten the meaning of the Constitution. Under this new, all-powerful model of the Court, and by extension the trail-breaking Ninth Circuit Court, the Constitution and the law can be redefined by federal judges unchecked by the other two coequal branches of government.{12}

This is the state of affairs we find in the twenty-first century. If five justices believe that prayer at a public school graduation is unconstitutional, then it is unconstitutional. If five justices believe that posting the Ten Commandments is unconstitutional, it is unconstitutional.

If the trend continues, one wonders if one day they may rule that religious expression on public monuments is unconstitutional. If that takes place, then you might want to invest in sandblasting companies in the Washington, DC, area. There are lots of buildings and monuments with words about God, faith, and religion. It would take a long time to erase all of these words from public view.

The next time you are in our nations capital, make sure you take a walking tour of the buildings and monuments. They

testify to a belief in God and a dynamic faith that today is often under attack from the courts and the culture.

**Notes**

1. Newt Gingrich, *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nation's History and Future* (Nashville, TN: Integrity House, 2006).
2. Ibid., 77.
3. Ibid., 81.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Ibid., 39.
7. Ibid., 40.
8. Ibid., 50.
9. Ibid., 54.
10. Ibid., 44.
11. Ibid., 87.
12. Ibid., 132.

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