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.

The Littleton Shootings: Looking for the "Why"

Amidst the discussion of the gruesome details of the Columbine High School shootings, the question of "why?" inevitably comes up. People have talked about the killers' identification with the Trench Coat Mafia, with Nazi values, with an obsession with violence in music and entertainment. They point to the boys' experience with violent video games, the easy access to guns, and parents who were distant enough to not notice teenage boys building bombs in their garage.

But all of these things, contributing to the total picture that produced the worst school shooting in American history, are all components of the "how."

People who have studied shame{1} think they understand a big part of the "why."

Shame isn't talked about very much, because, well, it's shameful. We don't discuss it, but we all experience it. Shame is the feeling that I am defective, unacceptable, unworthy. Guilt, someone has said, is the awareness that I did something bad; shame is the horrible feeling that I *am* bad. We fear that at our core, something has gone terribly, terribly wrong, and that wrong is me. And we fear being exposed, that others will find out our dirty little secret—that I am a deficient, damaged human being.

Everyone carries around shame baggage, starting with Adam immediately after the Fall. And since we are all burdened by this invisible coating of "shame slime," we are vulnerable to the further shaming messages that others send us or which we perceive. Shame slime is sticky, and shame messages stick.

When asked how others related to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, students at Columbine High School report that most

kids didn’t pay any attention to them, and some kids made fun of them. Both of these are perceived as shaming messages: “You’re so worthless you’re invisible,” and “You’re so worthless and weird that you deserve to be ridiculed.”

What makes high school seniors go on a killing rampage? There is a strong link between unbearable shame and rage. Those who fly into violent rages do so because they fear they can’t take any additional shame. Something happens one otherwise normal day when the painfully tolerable becomes the unbearable, and the person carrying such awful shame crosses a line. A switch is tripped. Some people act on their rage immediately, pulling out guns or knives or fists, or screaming hurtful words. Other people, apparently Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold among them, channel their rage into a plan for later revenge.

This is where another dimension comes into play, I suggest: spiritual warfare. It took Eric and Dylan a good amount of time to prepare for April 20. As a result of their decision to do something so horrendously evil, they were especially vulnerable to the lies of the Enemy. Those lies fueled them: “They’re not going to get away with this.” “They deserve to die.” “I’m justified in meting out revenge for the way they treated me.” “This is a good thing to do.” “Suicide is the only way to finish this off.” “This will solve everything.” Two kids planned, and demons cackled.

But when rage is expressed, it changes things. People who fly into rages end up with greater rejection and more shame, the very thing they couldn’t bear in the first place. So it makes sense that these two bright young men would decide that they couldn’t—and wouldn’t—handle the consequences of their hurtful, unrecoverable decision to hurl pain and violence at the school, and they planned to take their own lives during the rampage. CNN reported that one of them left a note saying, “This is the way we planned to go out.”

There is a significant difference between the Jonesboro

junior-high killers, and these high school seniors in Littleton. Children are still mainly shaped by their family. 17- and 18-year-olds, on the other hand, have spent several years traveling through the stage of adolescence where their family no longer has as much impact on them as their peers. What other students think about a person is more important, and more powerful, than what his family thinks. This is a normal part of growing up and getting ready to be an adult, but it makes young people exceptionally vulnerable to those who often don't understand the power they wield. And sometimes, unfortunately, the popular and accepted kids very much do understand their power, and they use it as a weapon against those who don't fit the mold by ridiculing and ostracizing them.

Perhaps this is what happened in Colorado.

Students who appeared on ABC's *Nightline* the night of the shooting reported that the two boys strode into the school, shouting "Now you're gonna pay for what you did to us!" They were especially interested in targeting jocks, who were evidently the source of at least some of the ridicule and put-downs. Earlier this year, the two boys are reported to have made a video for a school project, which featured the two of them in trench coats with guns, mowing down jocks in the halls.

The diary of one of the killers was found, giving insight into the reasons behind their desire for revenge.

> *We want to be different, we want to be strange and we don't want jocks or other people putting (us) down….We're going to punish you.{2}*

Shame is everywhere in this awful tragedy. Why would students make fun of other students in the first place? Their own shame. Putting down others is a time-honored and unfortunately effective way of battling one's own sense of inadequacy and

incompetence: “I’ll step on you to make myself higher.” People who accept themselves, who are content with who they are, usually don’t feel any need to bash others. Unfortunately, the teenage need to feel the approval of one’s peers can inspire people who ordinarily wouldn’t insult or degrade others to do so simply to look good in their friends’ eyes.

There is no question that the ultimate responsibility for this tragedy lies squarely at the feet of the two students who chose to inflict pain and suffering on others. They made a conscious decision to choose an evil and hurtful path. Still, that choice was not made in a vacuum and without provocation. In order to understand the bigger picture, we need to look beyond the two boys whose own shame cost them their own lives and the lives of at least 13 others, not to mention the wounds of other students and the damage to the building. What students do and say to each other is immensely important. Our personal power to hurt and to build must never be underestimated. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” is one of the most grievous lies ever told. Bones heal; insults maim the soul for a long, long time.

It’s helpful to ask ourselves, What if we could rewrite history? What could we have done to change things, so it never got to this point? What can we learn from this tragedy that can prevent it from happening somewhere else?

The antidote for shame is love and grace. Those who feel loved and accepted, validated for their differences instead of ostracized for not fitting in, don’t have to be crippled or controlled by shame. It is the privilege of those who know God to be able to communicate the truth about how He has created people in His image, as beautiful, worthy, and acceptable because of what Christ did for us on the Cross. That’s the grace part. We need to tell each other the truth, in love, just as the Bible commands us. We need to reach out and touch people to communicate “You’re valuable. You matter. I’m glad

God made you.”

Regrettably, those were messages that Eric and Dylan apparently didn’t get.

Notes

1. Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride* (New York: W.W. Norton &Co.), 1992.
2. http://www.freep.com/news/nw/qshoot25.htm