

# Trying to Make Sense of the Senseless

I have spent most of my professional life since 1990 organizing a community-wide violence prevention initiative in Saint Paul – Ramsey County, Minnesota. On the morning of April 16, 2007, as the early news about the killings at Virginia Tech began to arrive, my boss asked me whether, and how, this newest tragedy could have been prevented. At the time I was also struggling to understand terrible news coming in that morning from my son's school, Grinnell College in Iowa. Today, my best attempt to answer this question starts with the premise that we must try to understand, learn and then act to prevent future horrors, rather than simplifying, blaming and eventually forgetting much of what has happened, waiting for the next tragedy to befall us.

## 1. What All Young People Need

Most news stories concerning the killings at Virginia Tech refer to Cho Seung-Hui as “The Shooter.” While that description is an accurate term for the last 2 hours of his life, I would argue that it would be more accurate to refer to him as “The 23-Year Old Virginia Tech English Student Who Shot and Killed 32 People and Himself.” We will continue to expend a great deal of energy and big words showing how different Cho Seung-Hui was from us: he was a “monster”, a “loner”, a “shooter”, and he was a “South Korean – not an American.”

I don't know how to prevent a “loner”, a “monster”, a “shooter” from going on a killing rampage. I do know however that most 23-year old college students, and most all young people have certain basic needs, and at the top of the list is the requirement for caring, responsible adults to act as mentors and guides to help make sense of the difficult task of becoming an adult. I also know that the nationality of an individual has no bearing on their potential for violence; as a “white American male”, I do not feel that Timothy McVeigh's actions place me at any higher risk of committing a terrorist act or crime.

Dr. James Garbarino of Loyola University in Chicago states that “All people have three fundamental needs: Stability, Security and Affirmation.” I firmly believe that if we were to take action so that these three fundamental needs were met for all boys and men, and girls and women, there would be a good chance of preventing many of these tragedies in our schools and communities. How do we accomplish this task? A good starting point might be to set up systems in middle and high schools, and colleges and universities where we assign personal mentors to every student, just as we presently assign academic advisors. Yes, there would be a cost involved – but a far lesser cost than what is being paid at Virginia Tech and is still being paid across our nation from all of the killings that have taken place in our schools.

## 2. Be Careful What Young Men Are Exposed To

In his work, Dr. Garbarino cites the impacts of “social toxins” on the behaviors of individuals and groups. Depending on what is going on in the rest of a person's life as well as their individual temperament and biology, exposure to “social toxins” can lead some individuals to act out violently toward themselves and/or others. Based on the videotape and writings that he sent to NBC News as well as more recent reports of the isolation and harassment he endured in middle school, we know that Cho Seung-Hui had at least two “toxins” within him at the time of the mass murder/suicide at Virginia Tech: a reverence for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the

two Columbine High School students who slaughtered twelve students and a teacher and wounded dozens of others, before killing themselves at Columbine High School; and pent up rage at the bullying and isolation he experienced in his middle school and perhaps high school years. While it has not come to light yet, Cho Seung-Hui's ability to kill so many people so efficiently may also end up being explained in part by exposure to another "social toxin", point and shoot video games, which are derived from technology designed expressly to desensitize soldiers to allow them to shoot "the enemy" more effectively, and have been documented to have been the training tool for many of the recent young men who have killed themselves and others in our nation's classrooms, cafeterias and dormitories.

Anti-depressant medications may have also been acting as a toxin within his body at the time of the killings at Virginia Tech. On April 18 the AP reported, "Cho Seung-Hui...may have been taking medication for depression and that he was becoming increasingly violent and erratic." On that same day the AP also reported findings of a new study about the impacts of anti-depressants on children and teens which found that "for every 100 kids treated with antidepressants, about one additional child experienced worsening suicidal feelings above what would have happened without drug treatment." (For those who would argue the relevance of this finding in light of the fact that Cho Seung-Hui was 23 years old and an adult, recent research by Dr. David Walsh and others has found that in fact "adolescence" as measured by brain development often does not end until the age of 27 and older.)

At this point in time we cannot say, and may never be able to say with certainty, exactly how the introduction of social and possible chemical toxins into Cho Seung-Hui's system affected his actions on April 16<sup>th</sup>. I would argue, however, that we can better protect our sons and daughters in the future by being intentional about not promoting and glorifying violent acts by students or anyone and dealing with bullying behaviors more intentionally and effectively. We must also be very careful about the use of any and all psychotropic medications – though the risk may be "small", we must recognize that the impacts on individuals of legal, prescribed medications can be as unpredictable as those of illegal drugs, and all people given these medications must be closely monitored to assure that we have not inadvertently provided one more toxin that could lead to an individual doing terrible harm to themselves or others.

### **3. Address The Fact That Guns Are Very Dangerous**

Our nation has a long-standing and paralyzed debate about guns – this debate can be summarized as opposing viewpoints that guns are either a sacred right and our last hope for personal and community safety, or they are intrinsically terrible tools that should be disallowed in civilized society.

I would suggest that in light of the deaths at Virginia Tech and around our country that we agree to instead focus on what we know: guns, like cars, are neither good nor bad. They are pieces of technology with a purpose – in the case of cars, they are designed to move people and objects from place to place; in the case of guns, they are designed to kill or injure people and/or other living things. Here is what we know about both guns and cars: within any population/community of people, the more cars people are driving, the greater the likelihood that people will be injured and killed in car accidents; similarly, within any population/community of people, the more guns people have in their possession, the greater the likelihood is that people

will be shot. We know from police reports and insurance companies that one group very likely to get into car accidents is teenage boys and young men; we also know that rates of accidental injury and death as well as successful suicide using guns is very high among teenage boys and young men.

As we all struggle to make sense of Virginia Tech and protect our children and ourselves, some have been calling for stronger gun control laws, while others are calling for arming college security officers, faculty, and even other students. My personal belief is that the latter would have possibly led to even more carnage at Virginia Tech: listening to the accounts of police breaking down the doors of the classrooms where the horror of April 16 had just occurred, what would the officers encountered had the classrooms survivors all been armed with semi-automatic handguns? How would those shocked, armed students and teachers have responded to the SWAT teams rushing into the scene of such unspeakable carnage? In the chaos that must have been the horrible reality in those rooms, could terrorized students or faculty have been expected to know who was the intruder and who was another victim – would the friendly fire we have seen claim so many of our soldier's lives in Iraq and other wars have been the next headline for Virginia Tech?

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In September 2006, a 19-year old student at Grinnell College, my son's school, disappeared from campus after leaving a suicide note. On the morning of April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007, as the news of the tragedy at Virginia Tech was beginning to come to light, this young man's body was found – he had apparently bound his hands and feet and drowned himself in the swimming pool in Grinnell's country club, his body discovered that terrible morning by workers removing the pool's covering for the Spring.

As I try to make sense of the events of this week at Virginia Tech, I find myself also trying to understand the emptiness and despair that this classmate of my son's must have felt last September. I think of my own struggles as a teenager, growing up without a father, as mine died when I was 13. I think of the passion, the promise and volatility of the lives of all youth, and in particular what goes on in the minds of young men and boys. I think of my boss's question: could this have been prevented – could either the tragedy at Virginia Tech, or the more personal tragedy at Grinnell have been prevented? In memory of all who have died and suffered this week, and across our nation and our world, I have to believe and hope that the answer is yes. As Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." In their memories, let us all commit to being that change.

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