

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Virginia Tech massacre: a glimpse into another world. As the harsh reality of last week’s Virginia Tech massacre continues to settle in, on the other side of the horror and the outpouring of compassion and sympathy for the fallen and their families, part of what we’re left with is a *glimpse into another world*.

The world of the shooter is a place most of us cannot begin to fathom. Shaped by mental imbalance, depression, anger, rage, fear and who knows what else, it is a world of stark alienation and estrangement. It is a world marked by distance from God, family and one’s peers.

Can any of us imagine such a world (I’m not sure I can)? Awaking each day to the self-contained stirring of an implacable, internal agitation. Awaking alone ... all alone ... really alone; somehow incapable, unwilling (whatever it is) to connect, to be a part—however minimally—of the fabric of life unfolding all about.

And always, every day—not just now and then—but every day, a growing distance from everything. And all the while, the tortuous upheaval from within: the anger, rejection and self-hatred, all morphing into violent urges, lying dormant for a time, but itching to break out.

The wanting to lash out, to somehow get back at the world, to take revenge, to be in control. And all this ... to somehow quiet the throbbing tension in the spirit, the empty feeling of being cast outside—always outside—outside of everything ... into the darkness of a solitude that knows no end.

Can any of us imagine such a world?

Perhaps the unspoken shocker of the Virginia Tech violence is revealed in the question: to what extent are there others *out there* who live in the similar darkness of such an, ultimately, uninhabitable world?

That’s the question that shakes my foundations. And then the avalanche of questions that follows.

How can we begin to reach these troubled people? And to what extent can they be healed, transformed, changed ... ushered into a life that bridges the distance; that, over time, welcomes in more of their surrounding, social world.

Mental health pundits suggest that we would be stunned at the number of deeply *troubled* people (many of whom are youth) who live among us every day.

So, what do we do? How are we to respond?

What to do? Certainly one thing we can do is tighten up our gun laws, making it as difficult as possible for such *troubled* persons to have access to guns in the first place.

Secondly, we can scale up our commitment of time and funding to the increasingly widespread problem of mental health in our country. Perhaps we need a new assessment of the depths and causes of such illness. Beyond that, clearly, as a culture, we need to find workable ways of making mental health services available to the disturbed persons in need.

Also, there ought to be some way of connecting the mental health function in our society to the gun shops and stores across our land. Lists of persons for whom particular mental health assessments have been conducted could be made immediately available to these shops and stores.

Finally, however, to some extent, just as with 9/11, the burden is on us all. Just as we are the best eyes and ears our nation has to detect possible terrorist impulses and activity, in the same way, we are the ones (at some point, in some manner) who interact on whatever level with the *troubled* people in our communities.

We are the ones who, everyday, have opportunities to respond to one another with kindness, patience, tolerance and compassion. Not that we can save the world, but we *can* make our little parcel of the world more humane, more civil and more touched by love's presence.

It's possible that no amount of kindness and love could have dissuaded the shooter and therein prevented the carnage at Virginia Tech. Still, over time, the best any free society can do is to continually raise the standard of kindness, compassion and civil treatment of one another.