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THE TRUE ROOTS OF THE VIRGINIA TECH MASSACRE.

Generation Columbine

by Sacha Zimmerman

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In 1992, Cho Seung-Hui came to the United States from South Korea; he was about eight years old. By the time Columbine became the latest and deadliest theater of war for the new scourge of teen terrorists plaguing the country's high schools, Cho was 15--just a couple of years younger than Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. As the echoes of that Colorado nightmare are stirred up (and endlessly regurgitated on cable news), I can't help but wonder what the very disturbed Cho was doing back then. We now know that Cho watched Harris and Klebold's reign of horror--eight years ago tomorrow--on television with the rest of us. He watched not with shock, as so many of us did, but with a grotesque sympathy. Those two sullen predecessors provided a kind of twisted inspiration for Cho, the crazed young man who murdered 32 people on Monday morning.

It seems that, at least as a college student, Cho had much in common with Harris and Klebold: He was described as such a "loner" by a Virginia Tech official that the administration was actually having difficulty collecting information about him. But now we know more of his vexing psyche; we know that Cho was seriously troubled, unnerved more than a few English professors, stalked some female students, and even found the time after his first attack to leave a kind of note, a rambling multimedia manifesto that condemns "rich kids," "debauchery," and "deceitful charlatans." Like the duo from Littleton, Cho despised the in-crowd and was well-prepared--with chains to seal the exits and enough ammunition to ensure the greatest casualty list in U.S. history from a single mass shooting. But, unlike other school shootings, this latest gunman was clearly ill in some new, horrific way--red flags dot the stories of his life.

This unexpected slaughter so close to that other grim anniversary is now garnering the same un-nuanced media blitz as eight years ago. The same stock discussions and faux analyses are hurtling down the information superhighway as they did after Columbine; talking heads and anchors are congregating mindlessly on the vast plateaus they call "coverage" and "special report." But the Virginia Tech massacre is not about **gun control**, suburbia, or even human heroics; it's about delirium. Just as in 1999, we are asking all the wrong questions.

Before the blood had even dried at Tech, the gun-control debate erupted. Both sides of the issue seemed to be in a race for the first word, for the best spin. "It is irresponsibly dangerous to tell citizens that they may not have guns at schools," said Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America. Meanwhile, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino was quick to awkwardly assure the world that the president still believes in the right to bear arms. And Suzanna Hupp, a former Texas state representative and concealed-weapons advocate, appeared on CBS's "The Early Show" not 24 hours after the shootings for

a debate: "Why are we removing my teachers' right to protect themselves and the children that are in their care?" Her opposition, Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, swiftly sprung into action: "Let's prevent these folks from getting these guns in the first place. ... If they can't get that gun with a high-powered clip that's shooting off that many rounds that quickly, then we're making our community safer." Within a day of the massacre, the gun debate is making us mathematicians: Without a semi-automatic weapon maybe only 20 people would have died; of course, with an armed faculty and student body, who knows how many would have died after a gun fight?

Suddenly, the utilitarian approach to gun control supersedes reality. Yet it is too easy to blame external elements--elements we could perhaps change. Not that gun control isn't a worthy issue, but 32 innocents didn't die only because there are too many guns in the world; they died because Cho decided to kill them. And if the cause wasn't too many guns, then there were plenty of other influences--and plenty of other sources for reporters to harangue: the violence-in-media people, the psychoanalysts, the criminal profilers, and the pharmaceutical companies (Cho was taking an antidepressant). But these are just aspects of this melancholy crisis; they're quite different than the cruel ambition to kill. It is that wicked impulse we should be trying to figure out.

Of course, introspection into the heart of evil is not nearly as telegenic. Somewhere between the cloying statements from presidential candidates and the apoplectic wail of CNN's Nancy Grace, the broadcasters found their first hero: Ryan Clark, the triple major, 4.0 GPA student who apparently rushed to intercede in a brewing struggle between Cho and his latest obsession, Emily Hilscher. Clark was an incredible kid, by all reports, and the press' constant reminder of his academic achievement told us that our nation has lost a talent, a contributor, one of the good guys. But then, more gloomy calculations: Is the kid with good grades worth more than the kid working at the Burger King just steps from Norris Hall? Just how do we quantify our losses these days?

The stunned commentators talk about how "this sort of thing" doesn't happen in this kind of small community--as though crazed mass shooters are the sole provenance of an urban environment. But to conflate a maniacal, armed college student with the perils of the inner city is to misunderstand. This isn't gang warfare; this isn't a drive-by or a drug deal gone bad. There is even something in that phrase--*this doesn't happen here*--that seems to terrify so many of the reporters who utter it in astonished lamentation. It is as though they have fled the big bad city for the sanctuary of a suburban village, or perhaps they expect nothing but benign and ordinary goings-on in the heartland. But sadly, "this kind of thing" *does* happen in bucolic, small communities. Madness knows no borders, and deranged gunmen shooting up schools is not a new or urban phenomenon.

Youth is torturous, to be sure, but the school shooters who selfishly impose their pain and anger onto others--often randomly--bring to light new horrors that we never thought possible. And Cho, however sick he was, knew the story of Columbine--and maybe also the Amish schoolhouse, or Paducah, or Red Lake, or Jonesboro. Cho's raving manifesto mentions his reverence for Harris and Klebold, the specters of whom are like dark martyrs to those whose hate consumes them. But Cho is not a copy-cat; he knew that a mass shooting is a disturbingly real, potent, and viable option. The troubled loner looking for vengeance on a pitiless world may just consider it; the idea suddenly and irretrievably exists.

As we sift through the sound-bitten detritus of the tragedy at Virginia Tech, I wonder about all the kids of this generation. Undergraduates at Tech would have been teens, as Cho was, during Columbine. Were they scared to go to high school after that? Perhaps the kids of that generation thought they'd escaped when they graduated--only to find that the gunman they'd eluded as an adolescent was back as an English major. A grisly college sequel. What does the world look like to a generation who has grown up with the frightful knowledge that killers can lurk in classrooms? I doubt their first concern is gun control.

SACHA ZIMMERMAN writes "Inner Tube" for TNR Online and is the author of *For America: Simple Things Each of Us Can Do To Make The Country Better*.

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