

Addressing Limitations in the Wake of Catastrophe

By SHELTON L. WILLIAMS

“A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”

— Joseph Stalin

After reading Stalin’s menacing quotation recently in an *Atlantic Monthly* article about the Soviet Union’s struggle against the Nazis, I could not help applying it to the terrible tragedy at Virginia Tech. The American penchant for noting records marked the shootings at Blacksburg as the “single worst massacre on an American campus.” I understand the demarcation, but the label doesn’t tell the whole story. You see, I survived the previous record-setting event, that awful day in 1966.

At noon on August 1, I was in my brand new red Ford Mustang at a stoplight in front of the University Co-Op Bookstore, just across the street from the University of Texas campus. By that time Charles Whitman had already begun his assault on innocence from the Texas Tower. Barely ten feet away from me a paperboy had been felled by a single, incredibly accurate shot just minutes before. Others had died or were dying on the street, across the campus, and at points nearby. That I was not a statistic that day is either a coincidence or a miracle. That I was among the hundreds, maybe thousands, deeply and personally affected by this tragedy is an undeniable fact.

In truth, I had more or less seen it coming. Over the previous few months I had numerous encounters with Charles Whitman, and I had long been fearful of him. Twice a week my senior year I had seen or heard him as he sat in a windowsill or stood in the hallway outside his upcoming class in the Architecture Building. I had a Political History class at the same time in the same building, and the windowsill where I waited for class was next to his. The persistent nervous habit of chewing his fingernails with a vengeance had earned him the nickname “Charley Fingernails” in my household. His military bravado and occasional flashes of anger worried me so much that I had confessed to others, “If this guy ever does anything violent, no one had better say, ‘he doesn’t seem the type of person who’d do something like that.’” In fact, we know without question that at some point, perhaps during spring semester, Whitman had confessed to the University psychiatrist, “sometimes I feel like going up to the Tower with a deer rifle and killing people.”

That summer of ’66 my wife and I also had reason to worry about another troubled young man in our world, someone whose name I have never learned. We called him simply the “Mystery Man.” He was a squatter in an abandoned Victorian home adjacent to the apartment complex that my wife and I managed. He stole things, harassed young women, and frankly raised more red flags than the Soviet navy. We addressed our concerns to the University psychiatrist, to the Austin police, to our church minister, or to anyone we thought might listen. No one would. The young man was clearly lost and

disturbed. We knew the latter because my wife had discovered hundreds of mutilated pictures of women when she bravely investigated his lair in the abandoned building during one of his absences.

No one thought his behavior rose to a sufficient level of concern for them to intervene, however. Only the pictures had been cut up, we were reminded, and not the women. His menacing and scary habits were a frightful part of our daily routine that summer, so much so that before we learned that the Tower sniper was Charley Fingernails, we speculated that it almost certainly had to be our Mystery Man. Were the authorities correct in ignoring the antics of the Mystery Man, while simultaneously wrong-headed in ignoring those of Charles Whitman?

Forty-one years and a long career of college teaching later, I wrote a book about all this. Tragically, the book came out the Friday before the fateful Monday at Virginia Tech. In *Summer of '66*, I do not condemn UT authorities, the Austin police, or the campus psychiatrist. I agree with Gary Lavergne's conclusion in these pages that Charles Whitman bears full responsibility for UT and that Seung-Hui Cho carries that heavy weight for Virginia Tech. Both individuals were determined to kill themselves and to take others with them. Such heinous decisions cannot be guarded against even with the heavy security found in Baghdad. How can it be different on an open American campus?

My concern in the book—and in the aftermath of Blacksburg—is for the victims and all others touched by these tragedies: the dead, the wounded, the relatives, the faculty, students, and staff. Equally, I fear how they all face the future. The impact of these events is deeply personal and profoundly individual. Their timeframe is infinite. The sense of loss, the disappearance of trust, and the incredible sense of personal vulnerability will not soon or easily disappear.

Meanwhile, as a parent, a friend, and a survivor of August 1, 1966, I say that when confronted with the troubling presence of a Charles Whitman, a Seung-Hui Cho, or a Mystery Man, for God's sake do something. Intervene. Like Nikki Giovanni, Cho's courageous English professor, alert someone.

Alas, universities must now address these limitations.

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