

Abandoned to Death: Our Inability to Reach Murderous Youth

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Although I will present some suggestions for reaching young men like Seung-Hui Cho, my main ambition is to help us accept our society's inability to do so. We need to accept that people like Seung-Hui Cho are on the frontier of our understanding. If we can, we are more likely to at least consider promising new methods that go against the grain of conventional wisdom.

Consider the hallmark for me of our inability. The Columbine killers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, were forced into anger management by a judge and were pronounced cured. This counseling happened during the fourth month of their planning to commit mayhem. The anger management staff apparently had no idea what was going on in these kids' minds. Incidentally, anger management trainers also gave O. J. Simpson a passing grade.

This is a stunning circumstance, especially when you consider that anger management is the treatment of choice in almost every county in the US. It is routinely recommended by our courts and a wide variety of professional people. So it at least seems that the principles and practices of anger management reflect the state of our society. More than anything else, this method impresses on angry people the terrible consequences of their actions. That reflects prevailing morality, not any unfamiliar psychology. Like morality, anger management works sometimes, and like any other method, some professionals are better at using it than others. But how can we be satisfied with anger management in light of these tragic oversights and its only 50% success rates?

Kip Kinkel, the Oregon teenager who killed his parents and two classmates, also was pressured to get professional help. He was in psychotherapy and was taking psychiatric medications within a year of his violent outburst. His therapist and his parents felt that he was doing much better, enough that he was taken off the anti-depressant, Prozac. And one month prior to the killings, his sister reported that he was more positive and engaging than she had ever seen him. She saw no evidence of his torment.

Seung-Hui Cho, the murderer at Blacksburg, Virginia, also talked with a mental health professional to no avail. According to available reports, he did not follow up on a judge's order to pursue outpatient counseling. But he was considered a danger only to himself, not other people. He evidenced no thought disorder, meaning that he didn't seem delusional or otherwise insane.

John Hinckley, the young man who tried to kill President Reagan, also had been in therapy. There are many stories like these.

It is a shock to our system to glimpse in these cases that our conceptions of well being—no insanity in Cho's and Hinckley's cases, a normal, positive outlook in Kinkel's, and a lack of anger in Klebold and Harris—seems of no value in determining the lethality of a person's inner world. And it is striking that no one knew the hidden, tormented part of each of these dangerous people. What really is going on in their minds that could help us determine how dangerous they are? And how might we try to connect with the tormented hidden selves we only learn enough about after they explode?

In each of these cases, particularly respectful, caring people tried to connect. Lucinda Roy, a professor at West Virginia University, stands out partly because she is a lay

person. I think she is representative of a naturally occurring alternative to anger management and other mostly victim-centered methods. Her approach turns the prevailing view on its head. *Instead of thinking about the plight of victims and our responsibility to them, this sensitive professor focused on the potential perpetrator's plight.* She said that Cho was one of the loneliest people she had ever met. She was not taken in by him, however. She believed he might be dangerous because of the violence he depicted in the plays he submitted to professors, and she contacted authorities. But in her descriptions of him, she emphasized his vulnerability rather than his hostility. Moreover, instead of trying to expel him from her class, she engaged him in private instruction.

According to an emerging understanding of these kinds of youth, she was on the right track. At least she understood him as a suffering person, suffering from abject loneliness. At this stage in our evolution, this empathic understanding and method is still in the minority. It is counter to the prevailing picture—that he was evil, lacked a conscience, or any feeling for other people, that he freely chose to commit murder, and should have been expelled. Anything else seems to many people to be excuse-making psychobabble.

Those of us who identify with Professor Roy have partly deserved the dismissive label, “bleeding heart liberal,” because most expressions of tolerance and caring don’t work much better than harsh punishment. The Dutch are amazingly tolerant and caring, but their criminals’ recidivism rate is roughly the same as ours.

An emerging view, however, doesn’t sound much like psychobabble and is more in touch with specific revealing experiences than previous sympathetic understandings. James Gilligan, the former Director of Harvard’s Center for the Study of Violence, explains a more complete version of Roy’s empathic understanding. He says that the serial killers he studied during his tenure as Director of the Mental Health Division of the Massachusetts State Penal System were driven to murder by *unrecognized* humiliation. They were, as noted psychoanalyst, Helen Lewis first put it, overwhelmed by “humiliated fury.” Gilligan explains that

the first precondition of (lethal violence) is probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men. . . . The secret is that they feel ashamed—deeply ashamed, chronically ashamed, acutely ashamed, over matters that are so trivial that their very triviality makes it even more shameful to feel ashamed about them, so that they are ashamed even to reveal what shames them. And why are they so ashamed of feeling ashamed? Because nothing is more shameful than to feel ashamed.

He also says,

. . .the degree of shame that a man needs to be experiencing in order to become homicidal is so intense and so painful that it threatens to overwhelm him and bring about the death of the self, cause him to lose his mind, his soul, or his sacred honor (all of which are merely different ways of expressing the same thought).

A murderer I met while I was a prison chaplain alluded to this torment. He said, “If I thought about what I did to that innocent old shop keeper I killed, I wouldn’t be here; I’d be in a mental institution.”

Gilligan’s understanding guides us to emphasize seldom highlighted experiences the killers mentioned above had in common. While Kinkel was making a positive impression on his sister, his diary was pocked by intense humiliation, or self-hatred. He wrote,

I sit here all alone. I am all alone. I am always alone. I don't know who I am. I want to be something I can never be. I try so hard every day. But in the end, I hate myself for what I've become, ... I am strong, but my head just doesn't work right. I know I should be happy with what I have, but I hate living. I also would like to add that I hate each and every one of you. Because everything I touch turns to shit.

John Hinckley wrote,

Pretend you are a virgin on fire, An outcast in the midst of madness, The scion of something unthinkable, Satan's long lost illegitimate son, A solitary weed among carnations, The last living shit on earth, Dracula on a crowded beach, A child without a home, The loser of a one-man race, Rare meat thrown to a hungry lion, A faded flag on a windy day, Welcome to the truth, Welcome to reality, Welcome to my world.

For four years, Klebold and Harris were daily degraded by bigger kids, degraded by slams against the wall and other physical torments. And there was a drumbeat of degrading words, like "faggot," "dirt bag," and worse. So it is easy to imagine that those powerful indoctrinations "got to them." They raged wildly at anyone who even slightly represented their tormentors as if to say, "I'm not a dirtbag faggot deserving only of degradation and violence—you are."

Cho implied as much in his video. He directly implied that all of the well-heeled and normal students thought that he was, to put it mildly, less than worthy of any attention. He was perhaps the most abandoning and abandoned person any of us might ever have heard of. He was small, not particularly attractive, deep voiced, unable to establish a friendship, much less date a girl, unable to speak correct English, filled with strange, violent thoughts, and more—all of which invited derision from age-mates as he was growing up. In a society that sanctifies degradations of violent people, it is difficult to imagine that Cho did not degrade himself for being murderous as his violent thoughts developed.

An insidious mutation of self-hatred sealed these youngsters' fates. Gilligan mentions it without elaboration, as do other prominent professionals who arrived at this understanding independently. It is one thing to hate yourself, to think you are a worthless creep than nobody can or should want to spend time with at all, much less love. It is quite another to believe that *self-hate is the worst failing, the fault most deserving of total abandonment and, therefore, psychological death*. Psychologists term this problem, "humiliation for feeling humiliated," or, "self-hate for feeling self-hating. This is difficult but essential to understand.

I once was consulted by a jail chaplain who was ministering to a young probationer. This young man reported that he was going to blow up a large store. His reason? A clerk had insulted him. Like the murderers described above, *his psyche had been scraped raw during a long history of gross degradations so that, like a hospital patient with a third degree burn who's visitor drops a napkin on him, even a slight would inflame him*. He made a bomb and planned his mayhem in great detail. As social scientists know, if a potential murderer has a weapon and a detailed plan, he is very likely to follow through.

The chaplain did what comes naturally to most of us. However gently, he threatened this man with the negative consequences to others and himself of this violence. This chaplain didn't realize that these words implied, "You're doing something evil and will be severely punished." The crucial implication here was that the man's torment wasn't

even acknowledged. He was abandoned to it and the death of the soul it augured. This abandonment is the most devastating kind of shame for being a humiliated, strange person, as all of these killers were. This potential murderer otherwise appreciated the chaplain kindnesses, but this implied gross judgment threatened to end their relationship. That's why the chaplain sought my help.

I recommended trying to *empathize with the impulse to murder and the torment behind it*. Rather than either expressing concern for victims or a kind of vague tolerance and care for the perpetrator, I recommended *profound and precise* expression of respect and caring for this man's torment. Or in Gilligan's precise language, I recommended countering his shame for feeling intensely tormented by shame about "nothing," a mere slight.

The chaplain returned to my office the following week. He explained that he said to this man, "I can understand you wanting to blow up the store, because what the clerk said to you was tormenting; you must feel really terrible." Surprisingly, this seemingly impenetrable man broke down sobbing. At long last, someone had sensed his suffering and responded respectfully and with caring. Instead of implying that he was ridiculous for being as upset as he was, he made at least some sense of this inmate's feelings. This enabled him to express his torment. This man began to change substantially and never again was a threat to kill anyone. I have had a few other similar experiences that also suggest that the most effective means to help a dangerous person is the opposite of what seems most popular.

The unfamiliar idea here is that we act out in behavior and overwrought words what we feel too ashamed to express accurately and with intense, genuine emotion. If our impulses and the feelings associated with them seem worthy only of disrespect and condemnation, we bottle them up and they become ex- and implosive. Alternative, as is well known in some multi-service treatment centers throughout America, profound expressions of respect and caring aimed at countering shame for feeling terrible can save lives. It can enable even hardened criminals to feel okay enough about their torment to express it and seek further understanding and care.

Cho was a particularly difficult person to reach, because he was sensitive to any hint of degradation. In the last months of his life, he spoke to no one, because he was unable to risk being set off by a slight. As some therapists know, it is extremely difficult to avoid subtly implying a degrading thought during a conversation with a client. To an intensely humiliated person, a blank stare can seem insulting.

The violent plays Cho wrote and gave to Roy at least provided a possible entry. If Roy had sought consultation, she might have been helped to experiment with profoundly respectful, caring words. She might have said, "I can understand these characters wanting to kill the people who insulted them; those people were amazingly cruel and terribly upsetting." I would have had her encourage him to detail more of the cruelties and his feelings about them, helping him to develop his complaints into increasingly realistic and understandable ones against people who had put him down. Although the particular words I suggest might not have engaged Cho, the principle implied in them, the principle of respecting the underlying motives of a dangerous person would enable me to conceive of revisions in search of a winning opening comment.

If I didn't have the plays to comment on, I might approach him, saying, "I see you not talking to anyone and looking away from everyone; that makes so much sense to me; if

you give them something to respond to, they are very likely to disrespect you, because you keep to yourself and people can be cruel—that kind of stuff is all around us; it’s amazing anybody can stand to be in the same room with anybody else.” This sounds strange, but it has some truth in it. People can be casually disrespectful. In light of how likely it was for people to abandon or deride him, it is profoundly respectful to genuinely point out that slights abound and that, if you’re vulnerable to them, life is hell. The contrast with conventional, dismissive views of him is powerful.

I would then nurse this beginning connection, hoping to gradually be trusted with increasingly revealing feelings. Instead of trying to get him to feel for others, I’d be trying to get him to, with increasing reasonableness, feel for himself as the unwitting victim of soul-murdering humiliation and the cruelties of life.

Although this principle seems wholly counter-cultural, it is what most people naturally do whenever they are convinced that a person is an innocent victim. They encourage victims’ feeling for themselves. They help validate that they are suffering and in need of care. Perhaps we should explore for making humiliation, rather than anger, the focus of our efforts to prevent these kinds of murders.

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