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OBSERVER

Learning From Loss at Virginia Tech

By CURT GERVICH

On Sunday evening, April 15, 2007, I read the article "Ideology as a Strategy: the Discourse of the Anti-Nuclear Movement in France and Germany" for my science- and technology-studies class at Virginia Tech. The article was about the ideologies of different groups involved in the anti-nuclear movement during the cold war. At the top of the page I wrote: *Question of ideology is "Who defines you? You, in here? Or them, out there?"* What I meant was, when I read a research article about someone else's ideology, am I getting an accurate understanding of that person's ideology, or am I understanding it through the writer's filter first, and then through my own?

It probably doesn't matter. Now I read my note, and my eyes well with tears.

Everything has changed.

At lunchtime on Monday, April 16, the campus shootings felt distant. I watched the tragedy unfold at home, two miles from the campus. The first shootings happened in a dorm I'd never visited and the second in a building that I'd only walked through in an effort to stay dry on a rainy day. Statistically, I calculated, the victims were probably not people I knew. That somehow made the events feel as if they did not happen to me. Of course the shootings were horrible and sad, but they were not mine.

That changed Monday night, when my wife and I found out that a neighborhood friend — whom we would see with his wife when we walked our dog or at barbecues — was one of those killed in Norris Hall. Now his wife is alone.

The moment I learned of my friend's death, the shootings became personal, and I was forced to reflect and ponder their implications more deeply. It was then I began to realize that there are no injured and uninjured, victims and nonvictims, affected and unaffected, close and distant. Sadly, these events belong to all of us, no matter how close one was to the victims, how many classes

one had in Norris Hall, if one was on the campus when the shootings occurred, or how well one knew Cho.

On Tuesday afternoon, I watched the convocation from the grass in Lane Stadium. By Wednesday I felt well enough to return to the campus for a few minutes to see how colleagues from my graduate program were coping. Our student office was empty. On Sunday my wife and I returned to reclaim the campus for ourselves. We walked the Drillfield, looked at Norris Hall and the fence being built around its perimeter, and watched undergrads return to their dorm rooms in West Ambler Johnston. The places we visited when we made our decision to move to Blacksburg one year ago had become memorial sites. Our campus had become a cemetery. We wondered if vibrancy, energy, and humor could ever return.

A week later, I realized it would not. As I made my way to my department, a grief counselor greeted me: "Welcome back to campus." "Welcome to the new Virginia Tech," she meant. "Welcome to the place where everything has changed."

We lost 33 colleagues and much more as well: innocence, drive, desire, and whatever else it was that defined us before April 16. In addition to losing friends, family members, roommates, classmates, co-workers, and advisers, the killings took something else very personal from us at Tech: our purpose and our educations.

As a graduate student in environmental planning, the tools of my trade are my abilities to integrate theories, case studies, and personal research into new ideas and insights that aid in the management of natural resources. In short, my work takes place in my head, and as the academic semester crescendos so do my energy, adrenaline, anxiety, and excitement to use my tools and illustrate my abilities. The morning of the shootings, I was busy at home writing a final paper, finishing the semester's work and classes into one neat knowledge package. Then came Cho and his Glock. He not only robbed me of my opportunity to illustrate what I'd gained from the semester, he also took my energy and passion for work. I came to Virginia Tech for school and schoolwork, and without them I am unsure of my purpose.

Virginia Tech instituted a policy after the shootings that gave students great flexibility: They could request that any poor grades they received after the shootings be discarded; assignments and exams became optional. The policy changes left me feeling violated and angry, as if something of mine had been vandalized or destroyed.

Don't get me wrong: I think the policy was correct given the circumstances, and I applaud the administration for recognizing that. I understand that we were all put into an impossible situation, one for which there was no precedent. And, of course, I have the option of doing the remaining work over the summer, but even if I wanted to complete my assignments, I could not. I find it nearly impossible to concentrate these days, and when I can, it is only on the shootings. Perhaps some of my professors might not want to grade my work anyway. Who could blame them? Faculty members lost friends, colleagues, and students, and feel the loss of innocence and spirit from the campus, too. This affair deeply hurt all of us. Cho took away the very thing that defines us as an academic institution: our passion for learning and teaching. Now we wait for new definition: *Who will define us? Us, in here? Or them, out there?*

Defining ourselves, in here, means that we decide what the events of recent weeks mean to our community and that we tell our story. It means that our story is not a reaction to others, but that it is shaped and told by us, and that we care nothing for the ways that others interpret and react to its telling. Forget them. It's about us, and we have decisions to make. Is our story about violence and victims, or community? Is it about Cho and mental-health services? Gun control and security? Are we angry about our university's response to the first shootings, or do we believe that our administration did the best it could at a horrible moment? Perhaps our story is about all of those things.

If they, out there, are to define us, our story will be unfamiliar. We will be likened to Columbine, Kent State, and the University of Iowa. We will be victimized. We will become black ribbons on football jerseys, moments of silence at political rallies, and the stuff of sermons. We will become an annual news story about a community overcoming tragedy, a historical marker without a present. Like watching a bad film based on a good book, these stories will make us angry. We will shout: "That's not how it happened! That's not how we felt! That's not how we remember things!" The world, however, talks loudly and listens poorly.

Even the cries — "We will prevail!" and "Let's go Hokies!" — of one of our own, the Virginia Tech professor and poet Nikki Giovanni, missed the mark on what unifies our community. Those cheers, while invigorating, carry messages that divide us rather than bind us. They are masculine, athletic, fraternal, and aggressive. They urge us to treat our tragedy like a football game; to move past it rather than reflect upon it; to beat our sorrow rather than embrace it; and to wear our sadness on our sleeves rather than feel it in our hearts and understand it in our minds. Those calls overlook the one feature of our university that does unify us: We are all here to learn.

Since the killings, our university's administration, faculty members, and students have performed gracefully against the din of the media, but were still no match for the sensational blather produced by Katie Couric, Brian Williams, and *People* magazine.

Just as the media proclaims "We're all Hokies today," why not also proclaim "We're all learners today"? As we memorialize our sadness with "National Orange and Maroon Effect Day," can we not also honor our university's tradition more admirably with a National Day of Learning? As we don our maroon T-shirts, can we not also engage books, newspapers, and people?

The victims of April 16 were mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, daughters and sons. But they were also students and teachers, and they were gunned down in the act of teaching and learning. While the victims' family members mourn the loss of their lives, I hope that the rest of us can honor them by learning from this dark experience and teaching others. Let us not allow the missed opportunity to learn from April 16 to be our university's second-greatest tragedy.

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