

## THE GUNMAN IN BLACKSBURG <sup>1</sup>

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**T**WODAYS AGO, on Monday morning, April 16, while this class was in session, a lethal, hyper-modern tragedy was unfolding on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute, more commonly known today as Virginia Tech. The precise details of the deadly episode in Blacksburg are still preliminary and will undoubtedly be clarified in the coming days. What we do know is that a disturbed young man, a fully-credentialed college senior, shot and killed some thirty persons — black and white, classmates and instructors — and seriously wounded dozens more. He then took his own life. The shooter employed small, industrially-produced, rapid-firing handguns. It was an horrific happening, a guided doing of the most awful and perverse kind, a grizzly and exploitive fabrication wherein dozens of unwitting and unwilling victims suddenly faced the unthinkable consequences of the vulnerabilities we all share as embodied humans.

The Blacksburg shooting was, in a statistical sense, a relatively rare event. But, as C. Wright Mills and others have so often and so astutely reminded us, statistical improbabilities, over the long run, become near certainties. Somewhere, someplace, given enough time, similar tragedies are likely to transpire. We live in a society of three hundred million people, a society awash with firearms, explosive chemicals, lethal poisons, industrial machinery, and sophisticated technologies, all of which can be readily perverted to malicious and ever more destructive purposes. Indeed, it should be somberly recalled that the most deadly school killing to-date occurred in Michigan during the 1920s when a disgruntled school board member used explosives to blow himself and forty other people to oblivion. As embodied humans living in a fast-changing, hyper-modern world, we live increasingly in a society of risk. The risks are real, and we are all vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

As a society, it appears that we are often unwilling to face squarely the reality and pervasiveness of these risks. Likewise, we too often discount the potential consequences of our vulnerabilities. Quixotically, it seems, we frequently underestimate some risks while simultaneously exaggerating others. And, in the same vein, we curiously privilege some very mundane vulnerabilities (such as our rampant fears of illness and aging) while failing to understand our extraordinary malleability and resilience in the face of devastating and mind-numbing catastrophes. And thus, the media, in responding to, reporting, and keying the tragedy in Blacksburg, have largely run roughshod over the realities of the risks and the acuteness of the vulnerabilities that we all share

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<sup>1</sup> Presented April 18, 2007, to the students in my Introduction to Sociology course (SOC1 101) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael R. Hill, "Terrorism in Oklahoma City," unpublished remarks presented to students in the Introduction to Sociology course at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, April 24, 1995; and Michael R. Hill, "Risk, Trust, and Technology in the Aftermath of the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001," *Footnotes* (American Sociological Association) 29 (No. 6, September/October 2001: 12), a talk originally presented to students in Introduction to Sociology at Iowa Western Community College in September 2001.

as fellow citizens and fellow humans. The media, focusing narrowly on the concrete instantiations in Blacksburg, have again failed to explicate the proverbial forest by concentrating on the individual trees.

Beyond the headlines, Blacksburg provides us with a national moment for reflection and taking stock. For those whose friends, colleagues, or loved ones died on Monday, it is as well a time of mourning and profound grief. Eventually, there will also be exculpatory finger-pointing, scapegoating, illogical calls for blue-ribbon investigations, and unwarranted recriminations. For grieving parents, for example, who insisted that their son or daughter attend Virginia Tech, we can only imagine their pointed anguish and self-blame. But, the reality is that this shooting could have happened anywhere, at any school, and parents have no reason to punish themselves for urging their children to get college educations. But, to say this will do little to help the parents who lost their children. The dialectic between concrete blame, on the one hand, and diffuse, unsatisfactory absolution, on the other, will in the coming days reverberate in opinion columns, during church services, on talk shows, and in uncounted counseling sessions. Parents, friends, classmates, administrators, politicians, police investigators, reporters, members of the clergy, and many others, including sociologists such as myself, will try in various ways to frame this violent event, to “make sense” of a tragedy that is inherently “senseless” and *without meaning* as we commonly understand it. Making sense of senseless violence is a social challenge.

Vicious, violent brutality is the polar opposite of meaning, the inversion of constructive discourse, and the antithesis of creative ingenuity. Violence is dangerous in a society, not only for the immediate visceral damage it inflicts on its victims, but also for what it can call out from the survivors in response. Putting our heads and hearts together to devise non-violent, non-repressive ways to reduce the incidence of violence in our society is a major social and sociological challenge. As sociologists, we can begin by acknowledging that the problem of campus violence is bigger than Blacksburg. Refusal to fully understand that Blacksburg could happen at Nebraska, as it almost did in 1992,<sup>3</sup> is to collude, to contain ourselves in a consequential self-deception. We know that we live in a riskier, more dangerous, more complex, and more vulnerable world. The Blacksburg shootings are a stark reminder of this sociological fact, and we ignore this reality at our common peril. Your challenge, as leaders of the next generation, is to grapple openly and honestly with this reality, to find constructive, workable ways to live with risk while reducing violence, to enjoy life, to love, and to celebrate our shared humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> On October 12, 1992, Arthur McElroy, a student, entered Room 112 in Ferguson Hall on the UNL city campus and attempted to kill several of his assembled classmates. Fortunately his weapon did not fire. The MI-1 carbine, loaded with 30 live rounds, inexplicably jammed when McElroy leveled it at his classmates and pulled the trigger. See Michael R. Hill, “The Gunman Downstairs,” unpublished remarks presented to students in a Social Problems course at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, October 13, 1992.