

Virginia Tech, Tall Timbers, and the Search for Hope By Bruce Smith

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The deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history.

This day was a day of immense sadness for us as Americans. Once again, dozens of our young and promising youth have been snatched from among us. In a bizarre and random act of brutality, families have been torn apart, a campus and community has been sent into shock, and a nation's conscience has been seared, again. We grieve with the families, friends, and students. The questions will linger even beyond the pain that most of us will feel as a result of this trauma.

In a country in which affluence, progress, entertainment, and pleasure are seemingly without end, why is it that we continue to witness such extreme horror? How is it that a holocaust survivor who embraces life in the civilized and *Christian* America comes to a horrible death at the hands of a 23 year old mass murderer on a prestigious college campus? Many around the country and around the world are now asking these questions in light of the massive violence which took place on the campus of Virginia Tech. Shockingly, a school campus yet again, and in this case one of America's heralded settings for intellectualism and leadership, a setting which has produced many well known leaders in commerce, science, politics, and sport, has become the epicenter for one of the most gruesome public attacks in recent memory. Over 30 people are dead, many more are wounded, and the details of the attack are yet to fully emerge. What we do "know" is that one gunman, apparently armed with two guns, methodically went about gunning people down, one after the other, seemingly determined to inflict maximum pain. At least one account suggests that Cho, a 23 year old South Korean resident alien, broke out in laughter on a number of occasions as he was taking people out with his arsenal while others suggest he went about his killing spree without a sound and showing little emotion. He is now being described as a disturbed loner, hell bent on vengeance for yet unknown "mistreatment".

In the days ahead, sociologists, criminologists, psychologists, and many others will take to the radio and television to expound upon why these kinds of tragedies take place so often in the world's wealthiest nation. The killer's profile will be assessed and a "reason" will be given, yet, like so many times before, we will all be left wondering just what *really* went wrong. Though authorities, news services and viewers have now been given the terrible details on the killer's video and pictures which were sent to NBC News between the killings, the madness will be studied for some time to come. In the wake of such tremendous sadness, one question we all ask is, "Why?" Many will also ask, "What is wrong with *us*?" The *us* question is one we must wrestle with, for in the midst of such events, we all seem to recognize that this kind of violence reaches us all and we are all in this together in one way or another. Many other questions always follow in the aftermath of such events:

Why do such unspeakable acts of violence continue to beset us in this “civilized” age?
Why do people flip out and go into violent rages that take the lives of innocent people?
Why is the world such a dangerous place?
Why do we see hints of such self-destructive and hurtful behavior in each of us?
How do we fix this?

These questions and others are now being asked by commentators, news anchors, and others in the media, often with obvious shock and bewilderment. Though we have seen a string of these kinds of events in recent years, each one still assaults our souls.

What follows in the pages ahead, is one humble attempt to help us wrestle with this tragedy, and an attempt to help us find our way through this maze of grief and questioning. In the end, my aim is to offer some perspective and a bit of hope. In the final analysis, it is clear, that this one individual, who has inflicted so much pain and death in the span of a couple hours and who ultimately brought about his own demise, was one who had lost all hope. It is this loss of hope, I submit, which is the epidemic of our age. What is sadly ironic is that our quest for more, more money, more toys, more power, more sex, more pleasure, more education, more opportunity, more, more, more, never quite ends in hope, meaning or purpose. The thirst for more only leaves us craving more of more. In many instances, when more is not granted, bitterness and anger set in. This is at least part of the story, it appears, with Cho.

Cho’s story, ultimately, will remind us again just how vulnerable human beings are and how fragile our psyche is when we attempt to navigate a world filled with so much pain, inequality, hurt, oppression, and injustice without the aid of a moral compass. This shooter’s story and the story of all who lust for vengeance and attention is one that calls each of us to recognize that hope is found, ultimately, not in things, whether we attain them or simply pursue them, rather, it must be found in an object that can truly provide us with a real hope. Such hope, I submit comes only from the recognition that our lives, though they are brief, have purpose. A purpose and a future bring us hope. Ultimately, the knowledge of a purpose for our lives and the hope of a future is the only thing which instills within us the ability to engage society in a meaningful way. The loss of purpose and the lack of an internal compass leave us open to desperate cravings which can never be filled regardless of how obsessive our quest becomes. Thankfully, for most, the internal struggles do not manifest themselves in ways quite as horrible as they were made manifest on the campus of Virginia Tech. Yet, the whisper of the same desperation can be heard in the heart and mind of many of us.

Tall Timbers Subdivision / Brutality in our Own Communities

Just a few days after the Virginia Tech slaughter, news of another unfathomable attack sent shock waves through my own community. On this day, like most days in my life, I was busy running around after my kids and some of their friends. We were all getting ready for a concert we were attending later that night. Just as we were leaving, and unknown to us at the time, in the neighborhood of one of the children attending the concert with us, an unthinkable and heart-wrenching episode was unfolding.

The details of this tragedy are all too familiar, and so often repeated it seems, in our country. A father recently estranged from his wife and children had gone into a violent rage. After many threatening phone calls and confrontations with his wife, and by his own admission, this man “snapped”. In his snapping, reasonable thought was pushed aside as this man waited for his wife and children to return home after school, work and daycare. As he lay in wait near the neighborhood, a subdivision like many in the family populated suburbs of America, children were at play on the streets and in the driveways and yards on a beautiful day. The wife and children had “escaped” to this community, far removed from the estranged and violent husband, hoping to be in a safe place away from the rage and dysfunction of this man. Sadly, this quiet little community filled with children and families, ultimately, could not provide the safety they were hoping for. Not even a restraining order was enough to keep this woman and her small kids safe from a man gone mad.

As the children and their mom were headed home that day around 5pm, the father ambushed them, ran them off the road, jumped out of his car with a twelve gauge shotgun and inflicted horror upon a family and a community. In a few short moments, what was previously a scene of tranquility and domesticity became a torrent of hellish fury. As the father ran the family off the road in the middle of suburbia, he unloaded his shotgun, shooting his estranged wife in the head, and then turning the gun on his five year old as he ran screaming from the car. Chasing his own son down the street he pulled the trigger shooting him in the back and then standing over him, shot him in the face. He then shot his young daughter, hitting her in the shoulder. The last of the children lay in the back seat of the mother’s car, covered with blood, playing dead. WHAT IS WRONG WITH US? Does this question not come to mind when we hear of such tragedy?

It is only somewhat helpful, in light of such misery, to study the annals of criminology, psychology, sociology, and any other “ology” in our quest for an answer to such events which bring us to our knees writhing in emotional, spiritual and even physical pain. For, who among us can read even the summary details just listed without feeling ill? As I read more of the details in the paper, as I sat in a coffee shop, I wept inside and became physically ill. As I was given some second-hand accounts by a friend who lives in the neighborhood where this tragedy took place I again became ill and emotionally wrought with grief. Don’t you ever get so sick of hearing all of this crap that you just want to turn off the television for good?

In the final analysis, it is very clear, that events such as those detailed here and so many others we see on local and national television news every day of our lives are associated with humanity’s loss of hope. Why would anyone who had a hope for a bright future even consider inflicting such pain?

If we are honest with ourselves, we can see hints of this kind of desperation lurking within each of us. Who of us does not begin to panic or at least feel the temptation to panic amidst seemingly hopeless situations? When we hear that our relationship, which we had invested so much in, is coming unglued, who of us does not wonder where life is

headed? When we are rejected, lied to, defamed, or dethroned, who among us does not feel the internal pull to get even, get mad, or get after those who are harming us? When we repeatedly find life to be unfair, unjust, and unmanageable, who among us does not feel the desire to just throw in the towel without thought of consequence? And why is it that such realities are not the exclusive property of any particular social class, race, creed, or color? These events happen in Beverly Hills just as they do in the Bronx. They take place in Middle American and Manhattan.

Making Sense of the Sorrow

It is my conviction that the critical event in human history which bears some light on this subject is that of the life and death of Jesus. More clearly, it is the teaching of His life and the reality of His resurrection which offer insight, answers, and hope amidst the painful realities and the big questions of this life. In Jesus' interaction with others, His moral teaching, and His purpose, we find the only lasting cure for our pains and for the horrible realities of this world. Time and time again, as the accounts of Jesus' interaction with others unfold, we find His teaching addressing, and healing, brokenness. As the accounts of His astounding life are read what one finds is a key, the key, to unlocking the dungeons which hold us captive in our own dark worlds.

I would submit that the likes of Cho and so many others in our world, who are trapped inside a world of darkness, pain, rage, and mental anguish, could be freed through an understanding of the real life, message, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is not only true for those who seem to be the grossest of humans, but it is true for anyone and everyone who has been looking for answers to the questions life poses.

Jesus' life speaks to the fathers who kill their own children, but also to the executive who inebriates his or her own sense of meaningfulness with another paycheck. Jesus' life speaks to those who massacre innocents but also to the man or woman who has looked for love in all the wrong places only to be hurt again and again. Jesus' life speaks to Billy Graham, but also to the young person who has been left numb by the rampant pursuit of pleasure which leaves them only with deeper cravings and a greater sense of purposelessness and boredom.

Ultimately, as individuals and as a human community, all the ills we have been exposed to find healing only in something, someone, who transcends us. Without any transcendent being who offers us a way out, a way forward, we are left merely with six billion different ideas on how to navigate the seas of life. One embraces survival of the fittest, while another embraces total selflessness, while another embraces power, while another embraces sex, while another embraces karma, while another embraces suicide, while another embraces the zealous murdering of those outside their camp, while another embraces... With so many choices, and so many "truths" how are we to make sense of such competing views? Into this world of choices the life, teaching, and reality of Jesus, the personality upon which all of human history is hinged, appears, and His words come forth like a much needed light in total darkness. He says, "I am the way, the truth, the life".

At the very beginning of His earthly ministry, before many in the synagogue, Jesus announces His mission statement. It is recorded in Luke 4:17-21, and the message is one that addresses the needs of our world today. This is a mission statement which offers hope amidst the worst life has to offer, and purpose regardless of circumstance.

The passage reads,

*And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

As I wrote in a recent essay addressing this passage,

Jesus, the lover of souls, who healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons, rebuked the self-righteous, and conquered the grave, is the one who is able to make good on His promise to give to us the life we were meant to live. If we find ourselves in spiritual or material or relational poverty, He offers hope. If we find ourselves held captive by greed, lust, and illicit pleasure, He offers freedom. If we find ourselves unable to view life as it should be viewed, He offers renewed vision. If we find ourselves oppressed by the weight of this world, He offers liberty. And where we find ourselves on the short end of the stick of life, He offers His favor. Indeed, the life we were meant to live is found as we sit before Him and received His words which are a spring welling up unto eternal life. We find our place, and we find our heart’s desire met as we accept His offer to drink from a well which offers to us the quenching of our strongest thirst, and the provision to settle our deepest longings. Jesus, at all appearances to the onlookers at the cross, was a loser in death, yet, days later, reveals the power of the life He was meant to live. The resurrection settles the questions of the human heart. (Jesus and the Resurrection of Hope, by Bruce Smith, p. 8)

It was critical for Jesus to clearly point to Himself as The Answer, because humans are far too easily tempted to think that it only matters that we believe rather than that we believe the right things about spirituality. Here, as Jesus states His purpose, He suggests that the human heart needs to look no farther for purpose, direction, meaning, and hope. Our hunger for a transcendent hope is met in the person of Jesus Christ. Until and unless we find our hunger met there, we will continue to grope in the dark, hurting ourselves and

others along the way. As St. Augustine suggested long ago, the void in our souls can only be filled with one thing, one Person. Our hearts will never rest until they rest in Him.

The Necessity of Hope

Victor Frankl in his important book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, points to the necessity of hope. Frankl, a holocaust survivor, writes vividly of his experiences in the death camps. Amidst so much evil, death, and despair, Frankl suggests that only those who found a bit of hope and beauty in that hate filled place made it from one day to the next. The suggestion that any beauty could be found is astonishing amidst such horror. Yet, in the death camps then and in the events of Virginia Tech and the other painful realities of our world today, beauty and hope can be found. It must be found if we as a people are to move forward and fight for a better world. We must learn to appreciate the brevity of life, and we must remind ourselves of the importance and beauty of those we have around us while they are still here. Frankly tells of the difference beauty made in the lives of those struggling to survive the camps. He tells of the clear and imminent signs of death on the faces of those who had lost all hope and given up. In contrast, he writes of those who found the will to continue another day. Frankl writes of this eye toward hope in the various camps,

As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances. If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that fact—or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature's beauty, which we had missed for so long.

And so, as we continue to watch news briefing after news briefing on the unfolding discoveries of the case at Virginia Tech, we must remind ourselves of the beauty which remains, the beauty of music, art, family, nature, a smile, a loving embrace, and so much more. Indeed, many of those plagued by tormenting thoughts could find release from the anguish if, but for a moment, they could turn their gaze away from all that is bad, and spend a few moments gazing upon the good which still remains. We are left wondering if Cho, perhaps, could have found healing from some measure of beauty and love.

Ironically, it was Nietzsche who wrote, "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How". Nietzsche, who once proclaimed the Death of God, a proclamation that logically and necessarily ends in the abandonment of all hope, is right in this statement about having a Why to live for. The reality is that no true Why exists without the existence of a Why Giver. If there be a giver of purpose, then, we must recognize that life, no matter how unfair it has been, always has the potential for transcendence. This

foundational truth is the only hope which can support a society over the long haul. The embrace of an ethic, an anti-ethic actually, which asserts that this physical world is all there is, and that living for today is all that matters, will always lead communities and societies toward painful conclusions. If there is nothing beyond this physical reality then why does it matter if we go around killing each other by the dozens? It is kill or be killed. Take or be taken. Win at all costs or be run over.

Intuitively, we recognize that this kind of ethos cannot possibly lead to a fair and just and civil society. Fairness, justice, civility, these are all concepts, we must recognize, which in themselves point to a transcendent measure of goodness. Only in transcendence do we find our way out of our pain, vengeance, and bitterness.

Virginia Tech and Beyond

What the massacre at Virginia Tech reminds us of is our need for a better definition of life and its purpose. 4-16-2007 is a painful call for all of us to remember that life is precious, and our souls are vulnerable. What lurks in the heart of people like Cho, resides in the heart of each of us. The potential for the abandonment all reasonable behavior is in your heart and in my heart. And the only cure is beyond us, it is transcendent.

Jesus suggests that He is the light amidst our darkness, He is our way where we see no way, and He is our hope when it seems all is lost. Even when it seems to be too little too late, in turning to Jesus we can find help and hope for our wounded hearts. Against the ethos and the ethic of Jesus there is no law. Who among us would not like to see more love, humility, giving, self-sacrifice, justice, provision for the poor, healing of the sick, perspective for the confused, love for the unlovely, light for the blind, freedom for the addicted, and purpose for the bored?

If we are to be the people we were meant to be, and if we are to be the country we were meant to be, it all begins with an embrace of the central figure in the history of this human drama. It has been said that the difficulty with the Gospel is not that it has been tried and found wanting, rather, it has been found hard and left untried. We tend to view the message of Jesus as difficult because it is easier to hate than to love, easier to kill than embrace, easier to reject than accept, easier to do our thing than to do for others. Jesus' call is one that prompts us to swim upstream. It is the hopeful alternative to a shockingly desperate way of living.

Just as the woman at the well in John 4 found herself looking for love in all the wrong places, we must recognize how destructive our patterns of living are when we reject God's agenda for life. Like the woman at the well who had been through a string of husbands and was then living with a man who was not her husband, we too often try to find peace, love and hope in all the wrong options. Jesus, just as he met her that day, offers us the same deal. If we want to stop groping in the dark, and we desire to truly walk into the light of hope, we need only to take Him up on His claim to be able to lead us, change us, and instill purpose within us.

In the deaths at Virginia Tech we see so much loss. Yet beauty can be found again. For each of us the call comes to embrace the resurrection of hope. The resurrection of a soul, a son, a daughter, a dream, a relationship, a sober life, sanity, eternal security, meaning, significance, and purpose, are all ours for the asking. While the earthly life of Jesus was walked out some two thousand years ago, his living, dying and resurrection is still a relevant and active reality. His touch reaches across time, space, continent, campus, and household, and is able to bring us hope today. Today your life can be resurrected from even the most tragic of circumstances. As a people we must find our purpose and our future in the example, ethic, and living truth of Jesus. This is our only way forward.

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