THE DEVIL CAME TO BLACKSBURG

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CALL TO WORSHIP

There's an old joke about two campers in the forest who spot a huge grizzly bear making a beeline for their camping area. One starts lacing up his running shoes. The other says, "whaddya think you're doing? You're not gonna outrun that bear." The one in the running shoes says, "I don't have to. I just have to outrun you."

This makes a great joke, but as an ethic for community living, it's no laughing matter. What gets taken when we let the devil take the hindmost? Whose soul gets swallowed up in that bargain? What does this little morality lesson have to do with the Virginia Tech massacre? And honestly, what does the Virginia Tech massacre have to do with your life? Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

A student methodically accumulates weapons and ammunition. He writes extensive reflections on what he is about to do. On an otherwise ordinary Monday morning, he walks into a university building and starts shooting. The bullets spray everywhere. Dozens of students and faculty unknown to the shooter are killed or injured. Within a short time, he too is dead.

Understandably, the initial reaction to the massacre was a combination of fear, sadness, and bafflement. But now we've had over forty years to reflect and learn. Yes, forty years have passed since the massacre I'm describing, in which a high-performing University of Texas student named Charles Whitman climbed to the top of a thirty-story tower on the campus and opened fire on whomever happened to be walking by below. The saga of Charles "Texas Tower" Whitman brought rampage killing into the public consciousness in America. Over a hundred such rampage killings have occurred since.

What have we learned?

In the days following the Virginia Tech rampage killing by one its students, Cho Seung-Hui, on April 16, there arose a cacophony of recommendations. Many were for tighter gun control laws or better procedures for identifying mentally ill, violence-prone individuals. A television personality known as "Dr. Phil", weighed in with a condemnation of violent video games.

President Bush ordered various cabinet secretaries to investigate the broader issues raised by the killings. On June 13 they issued a 22-page report. It recounted meetings with experts on law enforcement, mental illness, and college and university security. No real changes were

proposed. The language in the report concerning gun control repeated almost verbatim the call made by President Johnson forty years earlier – after the Texas Tower rampage killing -- for better laws to prevent "the wrong persons" from obtaining firearms.

Most of mainstream commentary on Virginia Tech has suffered from three serious occlusions of vision. First, the recommended strategies have focused almost entirely on what I would call containment – measures designed to assure that the private hells of the Cho Seung-Hui's of the world remain private. The suffering going on in those private hells is treated as beyond the scope of community concern.

Second, the causal focus has been limited to mental illness. This otherizes the killer, relieving the fear that he might actually not be so different from "our kind" as we would like to believe. It also fits the containment model of medicating, incarcerating, or otherwise incapacitating those whose who act out their internal torment. This equates the "presenting patient" with the underlying cause of the violent behavior. Often that patient is reflecting the impact of serious emotional problems that originate elsewhere in the community. Focusing exclusively on the "presenting patient" is a turning away from the deeply disturbing possibility that the community itself, and the culture it has spawned, are themselves emotionally toxic.

Third, the commentary has ignored the distinctive historical pattern of such events since 1966: one rampage killing after another, followed by one set of perfunctory recommendations after another, all to no avail. This is, ironically, the classic definition of insanity, or at the very least, inanity: to do the same ineffective thing over and over again and continue to expect different results.

Neither the panel assembled by Governor Kaine nor the groups convened by President Bush's cabinet secretaries have included any sociologists or cultural anthropologists. Despite the ostentatious piety of our political leaders, no religious leaders are involved either.

In trying to get my hands around the commentary, I did spot two significant exceptions to these occlusions of vision. The first came in an article by Bob Herbert, a New York Times columnist who said the killings made him feel "as if the devil himself had appeared from out of nowhere." He described the work of a prison psychiatrist who has studied rampage killings, discerning a pattern of homophobia, misogyny, and feelings of shame, humiliation, and self-doubt about masculinity – "a feeling," says New York University psychiatrist James Gilligan, "that one has to prove one's manhood, and that the way to do that, to gain the respect that has been lost, is to commit a violent act."

When I saw this, I said to myself, "We're finally getting somewhere in understanding the sociopathy." Then Bob Herbert took a ninety degree turn and ended his column with the familiar call for gun control. For containment. And let the devil take the hindmost.

The second unconventional view showed up in the Daily Press, in a column by Reverend Hilda Martin, a religious leader with a Christian community outreach group in Hampton called Ministry of Truth. Here is her take. "We cannot afford to overlook demonic persuasion in these massacres. . . . Demons, by the power of suggestion, are able to control and manipulate the

minds of those they possess. We often hear those who commit horrible crimes relate that a voice told them to do it. These seductive spiritual forces are so powerful that people whose minds have been weakened from traumatic, emotional and abusive experiences have little will to fight or even to refuse the evil suggestions. . . . These crimes," she concluded, "could possibly recur and not because of copycat acts, but because there are still many more frustrated and emotionally wounded young people and adults in this country. . . . We need to develop strategies that address both physical and spiritual means which could enable us to stop these crimes from recurring."

If the commentators offering diagnoses of the Virginia Tech rampage killing were actors in a play, and I were the director, I would cast Reverend Martin in the leading role, with Dr. Gilligan in a solid supporting role. I would assign nonspeaking parts to the rest – anything to get them on and off with merciful speed. I assure you that the Tidewater heat has not cooked my brain. I also assure you that I'm not a fan of demonology. But I do think it is crucial to avoid the trap of condemning the literalism of fundamentalist Christians and then rejecting what they have to say by insisting that it be taken literally. Reverend Martin did get the most basic point of all exactly right: what happened at Virginia Tech is reflective of a grave spiritual malady. If there is to be a cure, it will be spiritual one.

The spiritual issue presented by Cho Seung-Hui is identity. The most basic question every person asks himself is "who am I?" And since identity isn't formed in a vacuum, but rather in community, the answer to the "who am I" question depends on the answer to the question, "who are the we of me?" The answers Cho got from our society were hostile to the development of a healthy identity. Answers like --

"You are unsocial, standoffish, shy to the point of reclusiveness. A hider in class, on the playground, everywhere. Scrawny, with a mismatched throaty voice that makes you incongruous, and a face that will probably still look immature, in the eyes of America at least, when you're forty. Your spoken English is poor. You are hopeless with girls, having no idea how to relate to them. You make inappropriate advances – not serious enough to call stalking, but clumsy and off-putting. You are an embarrassment, to yourself and everyone else. No wonder you're bullied and taunted. Why can't you be like your sister, who made the honors lists at Princeton and does important work for the State Department?"

Here was a person who lived way out on the fringes of the village, psychologically speaking; writing bleak poems and plays about death; and no one came to visit. No one put an arm around a shoulder and said "come on, you don't have to be a big talker to join in. You're one of us." For him there was no village. No "we." The upshot of society's messages to him was "you're nobody. You're nothing." Certainly nothing of value. Certainly nothing noble.

Writing of young people making the transition to adult identity, the mythologist Michael Meade observes "the most lost and dangerous people in this world are those not emotionally bonded to family, community, and humanity as a whole . . . ." Why dangerous? Because each has a deep self that will not give up on expressing itself in the world – even if it seems like the only way is through violence. A rampage killing is a sure way to banish forever the labels of nobody and nothing. It is a perverse, bizarre way to claim an identity, but to a damaged soul trying to claw its way out into life, it might be better than nobody. Better than nothing.

This can be described as mental illness, but are there broader cultural and spiritual causes? Not much interest has been shown in those possibilities. From that blinkered perspective, the wisdom to which Cho's story might open us remains invisible.

Cho was not simply a lamentable freak of nature that inevitably comes along once or twice in every million births. If he had been, what happened to him and to his victims would not deserve the label tragedy. Calamity, yes; but not tragedy. The essence of a tragedy is that it might have turned out differently – but for a tragic flaw, and the tragic flaw is always, in one way or another, an occluded vision.

Since 1966, over 100 people – most of them young males – have committed rampage killings. If the inner agonies of this many have erupted in violence, how many are turning to less spectacular forms of perverted self-affirmation, like gangs, crime, drugs and alcohol, machismo blood sports? And how many more than that are simply suffering in anonymous, miserable silence, the way the powers and principalities in America would have them do, so long as they don't spill their messy tragedies and struggles onto the comfortable constituencies of our society?

And whose tragedy is it, anyway? Whose occluded vision? How could our culture have been different, how could everything have turned out differently – for Cho; for the undoubtedly much more numerous young men to whom his story points; for all the people whose lives are touched for better or worse by them; and for us – for all of us? What would it take?

Well, to borrow an old African expression made famous in America by Hilary Clinton, it takes a village. The village is the vessel in which the essential pieces of adult identity are held: the overarching traditions out of which identity is fashioned; and the community of elders who introduce the young people to the traditions and to their own place in them. The elders convey these pieces in communal stories. Every young person who hears these is listening for a matchup with the untold story already inscribed on his soul, waiting to be expressed into the world.

The elders of a community are the stewards of this continual regeneration of identity. Being an elder means more than being old. An elder is someone who has allowed himself to be wounded and shaped by the trials of life, rather than insulated from them. He appreciates the value of risk, loss, and tragedy. His life has a sense of edge, sharpened by consciousness of his own mortality. He is able to convey the community stories without making them suffocating. He understands the importance of listening to the young people, grasps the problems weighing on their souls, and appreciates their need to be <u>seen and admired</u> by their elders, rather than merely <u>watched</u> for signs of misbehavior.

The elders connect with the young people by engaging them, by inviting them to reciprocate, creatively finding something of mutual interest. It could be anything – the elder's interest in beekeeping, poetry writing, fishing, or painting; or maybe the young person's interest in science fiction, hip hop, juggling, or a foreign language. The real importance of these subjects lies in the need to have what I would call a "thing in the middle" – something to give the relating

some traction. The real purpose of delving into them is to see how the elder and the young person have fastened onto these things – and what that reveals about the meaning of being an adult, or being on the verge of becoming one.

Young people might learn many things about adult identity in these encounters. The most important would be about love. The crucial gift elders have to share with the young people is their experience of loving. When our elders die, we conduct funerals and memorial services in which we read off lists of their accomplishments. But these rites of passage only start to sing when someone begins to speak of what the departed one loved. The only real bequest we make is whatever we have conveyed about how we have loved.

The sharing of the capacity of the elders for love ignites a recognition of that same capacity within the young people. It moves them to whisper, "maybe I am a king. Maybe my own private story, the one I do not tell, is a story that could be true." Maybe it is the story of someone who becomes the king of fishing, or parenting, or bricklaying, or whatever. And even if not a king, then surely at least a person of nobility. A person with some kind of genius to share with the world, a way of fastening onto his own beloveds. This is not the genius label we apply to an IQ of 200 or to a brilliant artist. It is the spirit that lives in every young person, waiting to be called forth – a distinctive character that makes him unique, memorable, a gift to the world, whether a butcher or a dancer it matters not. It is the "howness" of his relationship with what he loves that matters.

The importance of elders patiently cultivating these connections becomes evident when the time arrives for a young person to leave the innocence, the harmlessness, of childhood behind. The time when he embraces the complex adult world of joy and sorrow, in which he will find out who he is and pursue his destiny.

The sign that the time is right for this self-discovery often comes in the form of trouble. The young person's self grows more insistent in its efforts to break into life. Trouble – as disruption, separation, disorientation, or almost any radical change – is greeted by the self as an opportunity for this break-in. Modern societies often fail to see this as positive. With that tragically occluded view, the only response they can envision is repression.

Having run toward trouble, it is not surprising that young people seem to be in turmoil most of the time. Michael Meade calls this "holy confusion." "It is better to wander without a guide in uncharted lands," he declares, "than to follow a map made by tourists."

It is not the job of the elders to keep the young people out of trouble, but rather to see that they get into the right kind of trouble, and in the right amount – enough to fuel the transformative work they need to do, but not so much as to pitch them into irrecoverable losses. They must assure that the work of self-discovery will leave the young people with a clear conviction that they are now adults; that there is no need for spectacular behaviors to prove it to anyone.

By now, the seriousness of the mortal coil in which we find ourselves should be evident: it takes a village, but we have no village. The cultural distance opening up between one

generation and the next is increasing exponentially. In our mobile, hyperindividualistic society, we just don't have much in the way of tradition to hand down from generation to generation.

But we do have churches. Whatever their limitations, at least they are intentional about cultivating and handing down traditions; honoring memory, history, and ancestors; strengthening intergenerational connections; and learning and practicing values that lead us toward good lives. In church, we can ask out loud, who am I, really, beneath all the role-playing? What is my real purpose in life? And what does it mean to say that I belong to a community – particularly, a religious one?

Most churches are part of a network of spiritual communities working from a shared understanding of spiritual values and practices. This is an antidote to the disconnecting effects of mobility. Imagine what it would be like if UU churches shared a common tradition and practice of elders mentoring young people. Relocation would still cause UU families to lose continuity in community relationships, but at least they could be confident of stepping into the same kind of intergenerational tradition they were leaving behind by moving.

So. Churches have some possibly useful communitarian tendencies. But we don't view our church as simply an instrument of good citizenship, or even good sociology. We would not bring our religion into the work of mentoring young people simply because it is a valuable source of wisdom in that cause. Rather, we would bring the mentoring of young people into our religion because of a conviction that our journey toward wholeness cannot take us where we need to go unless a radically different way of relating between elders and young people is found.

Do we have that conviction?

I do. I believe we must embrace this radical aspiration because we need it to express our nature as loving creatures; and love is first and foremost about seeing clearly. Carl Jung said, "your vision will become clear only when you look into your own heart." Sharing what we love with young people requires us to do that. For all the differences between generations, looking inside ourselves enables us to see ourselves in them, and enables them to see themselves in us; to see that we belong to them and they belong to us. Every last one of them. Our love for them is part of our bequest to the world. We have to open it, and open ourselves to it, before we can pass it along.

This means that there will be no wholeness for any of us if even one of them is left out – cast beyond the circle of blessing. The shepherd in us, the one who understands spiritual community, already knows that. His attention turns naturally to the one who is lost.

The pious scholars listening to Jesus in this morning's reading could not envision the shepherd in their own hearts. Their tragically occluded view would not permit it. Working to broaden their outlook, Jesus asked them "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" But they were too busy to hear the message – too busy burnishing their reputations, attending to their high status, maintaining a spotless personal record of conformity with the Torah.

We have to heed the call of our shepherd nature with humility. The young person with whom we want to open up a radically different kind of relationship might say, "Go away. Can't you see I'm IMing?" We can't let ourselves romanticize the role of elder. But we can act on the faith that someday, somehow, this role will make a difference in the lives of young people. Maybe not today, maybe not in ways that will be captured by the metrics of sociology. But when the love inside us is poured out, it will deepen the pool of love from which young people living in an overheated world can drink and be sustained.

Young people walk along that tragic edge that waits for them at the threshold of maturity. Their impulse toward nobility does not inevitably prevail. The only inevitability is the insistence of the self on breaking into life, through whatever opening can be found. Wound and trouble are the usual openings. Through such openings, as Michael Meade observes,

> "Either a person comes to some self-knowledge and thereby contributes something genuine to life, or he adds to all that is unauthentic and distorted. Unless a person comes to know who he or she truly is in this world, he is a nuisance and a danger to others. For no one can be neutral on the road of life and death."

Preaching is a strange genre. It's not really about expertise or dispensing wisdom or proving anything. It's about assisting people in remembering truths they already know but may have forgotten. Looking at the Virginia Tech massacre, I believe the wisdom we seek is found in such forgotten truths -- about what young people need from elders, about the terrible price paid when we live as if community doesn't matter, and about the impossibility of spiritual wholeness in a world that treats even one lost sheep as expendable. May these truths live in us, that we may see with unclouded eyes.

AMEN.