

Stop the Heartbreak

How heartbreaking that a young man at Virginia Tech was in such a dreadful state of mind, emotions and spirit that he needed to end the lives of many other people along with his own.

My heart aches for all the injured people, their families and the families of those who died. I send loving energy to all those who suffer from this event.

As usual, I was horrified that the news media made us relive and re-experience the event repeatedly, adding more painful details and opinions each time. Since what people watch on television determines the ratings and the news media respond to ratings, I can only assume that is what the citizens of this country want to see.

Apparently, most people thrive on the suffering of others and devour the gory details with relish. How sad for us all. I am ashamed of how our nation sits drooling and eager in front of a television, greedy for more details of the violence and pain people inflict on each other. Even people who say they are shocked and do not want to see it, will not turn off the set and walk away. They continue to watch, whipping themselves into an emotional reaction, while declaring that somebody do something!

We love to blame people! The police did not respond quickly enough or correctly. The University did not do enough. Realistically, how can anyone prepare a response to an event of this magnitude? This is beyond the scope of a normal person's thinking process – as it should be!

No amount of planning to prevent or stop this kind of thing with force or violence will ever succeed! Any violence only creates more violence! We need to replace our constant thoughts of violent retribution with thoughts of acceptance and love for our fellow human beings. We would then be aware of each other's needs and reach out to help each other.

Many people are sure the gun was at fault. A gun is a tool, like a hammer, car or a kitchen knife. A gun cannot kill a person all by itself. However, a person intent on killing can and will, with or without a gun. I believe it is foolish to waste the time and energy arguing about gun laws. That just creates more discord. Offer someone a kind word, a helping hand and get on with your day.

The blame belongs to the shooter! However, does it all? Clearly, this young man was in pain and, after a life of unhappiness, desperately in need of acceptance, comfort and understanding. I heard some interviews of people who knew him as a kid. They said he was always weird and they stayed away from him. I do not believe their behavior was benign. I bet he was always excluded but felt the stares and heard whispers and snickering around him. How crushing to a sensitive soul!

When a sick, hurt or angry individual reaches the exploding point, there is no stopping them. The solution must start, at the individual level, early in life. Every one of us needs to start paying more attention to the people around us. We need to approach every person we meet with compassion, acceptance and empathy. By doing that, we would start the process of change.

Children do not act as told. They learn what they see and feel around them and behave accordingly. If you tell your child to treat everybody equally and fairly but he hears you speaking with contempt about people in the neighborhood, he will treat the children of those people with contempt, continuing the pattern.

I know how badly it hurts to be a child outside the clique. My parents were not socialites in our community. I did not have the latest style clothing or the most expensive toys. I was too fat and too smart and was persecuted and tormented, from my first day of school, because of it. By seventeen, when I graduated from high school, my self-esteem was non-existent. I would not look people in the eye or speak to strangers in an effort to avoid the expected insult or rejection and resulting embarrassment.

My parents however, were kind and nurturing people. As a truck driver, my father constantly ran into people down on their luck and needing help. He often brought home people he found stranded in truck stops. He casually introduced someone who needed a hot bath, some good food, a clean bed and some time to figure out what they needed to do next.

My mom and I fed folks, washed their clothes and shared what we had that they needed. We respected and treated everybody like a new friend and enjoyed visiting. I heard my parents advising people how to get where they needed to go, how to do what they wanted to do or how to fix their problem and return to someplace. Usually my Dad started them on their way with bus tickets and food money.

Apparently, because of their example I learned at an early age to be sensitive to, and caring of, other people's feelings and needs for acceptance and respect. My parents did not go to church and did not make me go. They had strong personal beliefs, lived by them and passed them on to me by their actions in addition to their words.

On the other hand, the kids who were cruel and harassed me went to church every week with their parents. Weekly attendance was required to be socially acceptable but apparently listening, learning and practicing the lessons was not necessary for either the parents or the children.

For a few of my teenage years, I choose to go to one of the churches. I remained an outsider the whole time. Many people were judgmental and criticized me. The adults snubbed, insulted and fought among each other and so did the children. It hurt my spirit to be there so I quit going to church. That is my personal example about how behavior patterns continue from generation to generation.

It seems very clear to me that the way to protect people from emotional damage as children, to the point that they explode in violence as adults, is for everybody to think about everything they do and say to others. If we become more accepting and compassionate toward everybody we encounter, youngsters will automatically begin to behave the same.

If children and young people are kinder to each other, less will grow up fighting and killing each other. Mind-altering drugs will not be attractive if one feels useful, accepted and happy. In addition, children abused by sick adults will be easier to identify and help because the other children will notice their pain and want to help, instead of excluding and taunting them and making the situation worse.

It is that simple. Give up every prejudice and treat every person with respect and kindness. As you behave in that manner, others will learn to do the same. All the attitudes and behaviors that caused the prejudice in the first place will begin to disappear. Eventually, people will not suffer lifelong judgment and rejection from others and will not feel any desire to torment others.

That does not mean it is easy to do. We all have to do radical self-examination. We have to pay attention to our attitudes toward others. We have to listen to what we say and watch what we do to identify our actions that are hurtful to others. We have to be honest with ourselves about ourselves. We have to, consciously, change behavior patterns that we learned unconsciously from our elders.

It is difficult to give up long-held beliefs and adopt new ones but certainly not impossible. I believe it is our responsibility, as adults, to review our lives and choose what beliefs and behaviors we want to continue and which we should eliminate and replace to improve our experience and the lives of our children.

If we acknowledge what was damaging and harmful in our childhood and vow that we will behave in a manner that will not hurt our children in the same way, we begin to change. We are not our parents or ancestors. We can continue to love and respect them while choosing to behave differently and show our children how to continue to improve their relationships with other people.

It takes time, effort and patience to make changes but, in my opinion, it is certainly worth trying. Force, violence, more laws and war certainly have not improved the state of the planet.

Please turn off the television, stop watching and listening to negative, violent stories on the news. Go out into the world, smile and visit with your neighbors. Get to know them and let them get to know you. Be kind and make the world a better place.

Patricia Kenworthy ©May 2007