

The Question Mark Kid

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

There's a ritual for this now. The first news bulletins are sketchy, but then the TV trucks arrive, and the horror starts to spread. Through the camera's long lenses there are red emergency flashers and cops with drawn weapons and paramedics struggling with victims. Confusion and misinformation are everywhere. And in the gut is the feeling, "No. Not again," shocking in its familiarity.

This was a tragedy for a diverse and striving 21st century America, uplinked by cell phones to computers to the world. "Stay out of harm's way, but send us your pictures and videos," pleaded a CNN anchor.

Then the accounting started ... four dead, eight dead, 11 dead, 15 dead, the terrible wheel stopping this time at 33 with a like number wounded, among the worst mass shootings in American history.

Talk radio offered its usual cacophony of uninformed opinion, people seeing in this tragedy what they see in every other: validation of their own beliefs. This proves we need gun control, says the left. This proves we need to arm teachers, says the right, or at least put a loaded weapon within handy reach at a faculty lounge.

Then the blaming began: blaming the response by university officials and cops, guns, permissive social norms, foreigners, whoever's handy. Television trotted out the talking heads, shrinks and profilers to offer what were, at best, informed guesses.

Tuesday brought stories of heroism and close calls, along with recriminations about what should have been. Today, here and on college campuses all over America, important conversations are taking place about emergency planning, about what this horrific incident has to teach us about being prepared for the unimaginable.

"A college Columbine," one student at Virginia Polytechnic University called Monday's massacre in two

buildings on the Blacksburg, Va., campus. "It's weird," student Ryan Gatterdam told reporters, "because this is like the safest place. It's in the middle of nowhere."

There is no place that's safe from the combination of troubled, disaffected people and readily available weaponry. Cho Seung-Ho, the 23-year-old South Korean citizen identified by authorities as the shooter in Monday's incident, was described as a closed hostile loner who sat in the back of classrooms with a hat over his eyes and wouldn't talk to anyone. "We called him The Question Mark Kid," former classmate Julie Poole told reporters.

Authorities said Cho, an English major, left behind a rambling, nearly incoherent note of explanation, blaming "rich kids, debauchery and deceitful charlatans" for his rampage.

His family and friends will seek answers in this, and experts will seek clues, if not comfort.

Clearly, this was yet another deeply disturbed young man playing out his revenge fantasies. In Cho we see shades of Charles Whitman, who shot up the University of Texas in 1966; George Hennard, who killed 23 at Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas, in 1991; Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who shot up Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999; and dozens of other demon-haunted killers.

The screeds contained in Cho's writing assignments had so troubled some in the English department that they suggested he seek counseling. Yet last month, Cho had no trouble presenting a Virginia drivers license (he had been a legal alien in the United States since 1992) and other documentation, along with \$571, and buying a 9-mm Glock-19 semi-automatic handgun at a Roanoke, Va., gun store. The receipt was in his backpack. The Glock, which holds as many as 19 rounds (33 with an extended clip), and a .22-caliber Walther P22 semi-automatic pistol were found next to his body in a Virginia Tech classroom building after he had killed himself.

President George W. Bush, the first lady and Virginia's two U.S. senators were among those who attended a moving campus convocation Tuesday afternoon to acknowledge and mourn the victims. And everywhere

today, there are hard conversations and prayers for solace as we feel the pain of total strangers.

The troubled shooter was a South Korean. His victims included blacks and whites, kids of Indian and Peruvian heritage, a professor from India and a Holocaust survivor from Romania. There were accomplished scholars and kids just starting out who were studying French and German and engineering. They had come together in Virginia's Blue Ridge to live and seek the American dream. They found, instead, an all-too-familiar American nightmare.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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