

# The Hidden Roots of the High School Massacres

**by Mark Dillof, Ph.D.**

mdillof@verizon.net

© Copyright 1999, Mark Dillof

Could it be that the fundamental cause of the Columbine high school killings has completely eluded us, despite all the analysis by the press and discussion on TV? That is quite an unsettling thought! After all, it is not easy to understand a series of events that has no precedent in American history, nor even in world history. We are, therefore, unable to draw parallels, and gain a sense of historical perspective.

We also remain perplexed for another reason. Many perceptive people suspect that the real cause of these high school holocausts is a contagion sickening our souls, and that it is retarding the psychological maturation and moral development of American youth. But when it comes to actually describing the nature of the contagion, they find themselves peering into the dark, trying to make out something not quite

tangible. Like the air that surrounds us, but is invisible, the ubiquity of the contagion is what keeps it hidden from our sight.

To clearly discern the true meaning of the series of violent events in our schools, we need to descend into the depths of American society's "heart of darkness." But first we must penetrate the surface.

---

## **Surface Explanation**

The usual explanation for the school massacres is that teenagers today inhabit a terribly violent world causing some of them to go off the deep end. The TV shows and films young people see are brutal; the music they hear is savage; the video games they play are an orgy of destruction. Then there is the fact that many of these young killers were teased and bullied, taunted and tormented by the other students. Alienated from their peers, they became angry and hostile outcasts. The lack of parental supervision is also a contributing cause. And, of course, guns are more readily available.

All these explanations initially seem persuasive, but further examination reveals that something critical is still not being recognized. Consider, for example, the ill-treatment of these students by their peers. That was, indeed, a strong contributing factor to their becoming violent. But we must remember that schools have always had bullies, and there were always children, and teenagers, who were socially ostracized. But they did not go on to commit mass murder in their high school, at least not until now.

What are we to make of such baleful influences as viciously perverse video games, films, and "shock-rock" music? Pandering to these violent attitudes undoubtedly has the pernicious effect of reinforcing them. Furthermore, making assault weapons readily available is the height of folly. All the same, the violent influences that exist in our society, as well as the other factors, even taken as a whole, could not in themselves foment violence. These factors could not set off a violent response unless these

teenagers were already violent. In other words, *what reinforces violent attitudes, and often fuels them, is not the same thing as what initially engenders them.*

Furthermore, to state that people are violent because our social environment is violent is to beg the question. After all, the reason why the social environment is violent is because the people who inhabit it are violent. Social explanations only lead us in a hopeless circle, and really explain nothing.

It is the original bloodlust of these teenage killers, of young people generally, and of our society universally, that we must understand if there is to be any hope of preventing future such tragedies. What, then, has been causing this destructive and, we may add, increasingly self-destructive behavior?

---

## **The Missing First Act**

Let us view each of the school shootings as a tragedy in three acts. Act Three is the murder. Act Two consists of all the forces that have directly contributed to the disaster, everything from violent video games to lack of parental supervision, to the ready availability of guns. These forces are the immediate cause of what has been happening, but not the fundamental cause.

Act One, the fundamental cause, consists of that which differentiates our age from previous ages. Act One is selfhood as we experience it today. It is who we take ourselves to be, which is quite different from selfhood as it existed in past ages. What is selfhood today? It has been said that this is an age of individualism. If so, individualism as it presently exists is not “rugged individualism,” the doctrine that if you want something you must go out into the world, work hard, and get it. There are still plenty of rugged individualists, but for an ever increasing number of people, selfhood is characterized by a sense that the individual is born free, unlimited, absolute, unconditioned, and infinite. Furthermore, it is believed that the individual has the right

to be so, and that if the individual feels limited, then society is to blame and is obliged to restore him to happiness.

This contemporary sense of self has its historical roots in the eighteenth century. The French intellectual, Jean Jacques Rousseau, declared, “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.” Karl Marx later made a political program out of Rousseau’s sentiments, and we know what violence that created. In any case, according to Rousseau, if a person commits evil, it is not due to his original base nature. On the contrary, society has perverted man’s innocence. Rousseau’s ideas are very much alive and well in America today.

One of the descendents of Rousseau’s ideas is the contemporary notion of “entitlement.” Entitlement is the belief that, “what I want should be given me because I deserve it.” The corollary is, “if I feel limited or finite in any way, if there are obstacles in my path, it is because other people are in my way; society is to blame.” Entitlement has a social component which says that other people have a similar right to have everything be given to them.

Just as entitlement may be contrasted with rugged individualism, entitlement may also be contrasted with a magnanimous concern for the common good, the attitude expressed by President Kennedy, “Do not ask what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Entitlement knows not such lofty sentiments, for it derives from a sense of selfhood that is infantile and narcissistic.

Much has been written in criticism of entitlement, of the economic enfeeblement it creates in a nation, of the moral lassitude it fosters among its people. The consequences of entitlement, we shall see, are far more deadly.

Since the ability to be unlimited, infinite, and totally free does not belong to the human estate, it cannot be fulfilled. Consequently, nothing is felt ever to be enough, and other people are always to blame. Those who possess the attitude of entitlement are

continually beset by feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, anger, and sometimes rage at other people.

What may seem surprising is that the attitude of entitlement should lead to actual violence. Violence is engendered when this attitude of infinite expectation clashes with the harsh realities of the world. It clashes because every person shares the same attitude, which means that every person wishes to be king. Needless to say, there can only be one king, and even if we could be king or queen, we would still be limited in countless ways.

Violence erupts at the place where the individual is confronted by other individuals who also feel that they are entitled to be free and unlimited. It erupts, for example, on the highway, as “road rage,” where we have the symbolic sense that, “Somebody’s forcing me to slow down, and is preventing me from getting to where I want to go in life,” or, “Somebody just sped past me, which means that they will get the goods of this world, and I will be left behind with nothing.”

The frustration and rage that leads to terrorism may be greater in quantity, but is no different in kind, from the frustration that we feel on the highway, or which often erupts on the checkout line at a supermarket. If someone gets on the express line with ten items when there is a seven item limit, this event symbolizes to us all the injustice that we have ever experienced at the hands of other people.

Young people seek relief from these dark feeling by playing video games. They can imaginatively blast people who are in their way. A game like bowling symbolically, and therefore far less obviously, accomplishes the same thing. We hurl a wrecking ball, knocking down that which is in our way. We may add that the student killers at Columbine High School, Harris and Klebold, took a bowling lesson in the morning, before going off to school to murder their classmates.

Video games and bowling may work cathartically to free us of our pent-up poisonous feeling for a time, but they also serve to reinforce these feelings. In that sense they are addictive. But we must remember that, as bad as these games are, they do not

initially create feelings of frustration and violence, even though they reinforce and fuel these feelings.

Rage towards other people may appear on any occasion and at any time. Basically, this rage appears whenever we feel that there are people in the way of the happiness and freedom that we naively claim to be our birthright. We see, then, that entitlement is not just endemic to the young, it has infected our entire society.

---

## **Groundless Self-Esteem**

Related to the doctrine of entitlement is the modern valorization of self-esteem. Advocates of self-esteem training are saying, in effect, that each of us deserves to be confident and feel good about ourselves, not because we achieved anything, but simply because that is what we deserve; we are entitled to feel that way.

The modern romantic notion that we are all born innocent and good — indeed wonderful — just as we are, contrasts with the older notion that our existence on this earth is a trial, that we must make arduous efforts to raise ourselves above our fallen condition, that the fate of our soul hangs in the balance, and that we are to be ultimately judged by our actions. This traditional philosophy likewise asserts that the limits of egocentric existence must be transcended through hard-earned moral development and, if the occasion demands it, by heroic self-sacrifice.

How different the traditional notion of moral and spiritual development is from the psychologist Carl Rogers' notion that everyone should be given "unconditional positive regard." Regardless of what we do, and what we don't do, and of the mess that we make, we should be loved unconditionally.

Recent psychological experiments have confirmed that self-esteem training fosters violent attitudes in people. It fosters violence because the modern inflated sense of self soon collides with the realities of the world, and frustration, depression, feelings

of worthlessness, and anger quickly ensue. We become enraged at the world for threatening to burst the empty bubble of our egocentricity.

If we are to make sense of the recent high school killings, there are several more pieces in the puzzle of contemporary selfhood that we must now examine.

---

## **What's the Bull Market Got to Do With It?**

The stock market has been reaching all time highs, unemployment is low; the economy is in great shape. We are not involved in a major war; we don't even have a cold war. Ironically, ages of peace and prosperity have invariably been ages of dissatisfaction and despair. Life is supposed to be good; we're supposed to be happy, but we aren't, and we are perplexed as to why. It is the same dark sense that many people feel, but often won't even admit to themselves, about the letdown they feel at Christmas time.

If we feel entitled to be happy, we will then suspect that other people must be to blame for our unhappiness. We feel resentful towards those we suspect of hoarding all the goods and joys of the world for themselves. Envy and resentment fuel the fires of race hatred and violence, and it particularly has this effect on those people who possess the feeling of entitlement. A demagogue will bring his countrymen into a war at times during hard times, to get the people's minds off domestic problems. But a demagogue will also find a war when peace and prosperity are creating an increasing sense of boredom and inner emptiness. In any case, we must not underestimate the emptiness, boredom and despair that lead to violence in times of prosperity.

---

## **Commencement**

Our analysis, thus far, offers us clues into the psychopathology of the two deranged student mass-murderers at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. It was in April, close to graduation, the time of commencement. "Commencement," after

all, means a beginning, a time when students are to enter into the world to compete with everyone else in a much bigger pond, either in college or in the work world. High school students are highly competitive, as is most everybody in our society, but not having found their place in the world, nor even a direction, they are all the more anxious about their future. Lacking inner direction, they focus keenly on how their contemporaries are doing, and this breeds those dark feelings of jealousy, resentment and hatred for each other.

The most competitive students are the scholars and the athletes. The teenagers who went on a rampage in Colorado, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were intent on killing, among others, the “jocks.” The jocks are the students who are bigger and stronger than the others. To the resentful eye, the jocks are viewed as those people who can push other students around, get the girls,<sup>1</sup> and acquire the goods of the world for themselves. The library — the place where the worst carnage took place — is where the studios are seeking to get ahead, to acquire the goods of the world for themselves.

We may note that Harris and Klebold chose the occasion for the high school massacre to be Adolph Hitler’s birthday. More than any other person in history, Hitler was the incarnation of the demon of envy, resentment and hatred. He fueled the fires of German resentment towards the Jews, foreigners and other groups he accused of stealing what belonged to the German people for themselves, and of being responsible for Germany’s economic, social, and political plight. Is it any surprise, therefore, that Hitler would symbolize to these students the revenge of the resentful?

---

---

<sup>1</sup> We must remember that Eric Harris was rejected by a girl that he asked to the prom shortly before. This is another factor contributing to his feelings of anger and resentment.

## Why Gothic?

Harris and Kebold belonged to a high school clique, “the Trench Coat Mafia,” so named because the attire of these students included a long black coat, even on summer days. This style of dressing — reminiscent of Morticia Adams in the old TV show *The Adams Family* — has been called “Goth,” meaning Gothic.

Everything about Goth is redolent of death and decay, reflecting the sense that Goth people have about life. Although many are only in their teens, they feel inwardly dead. They have no hopes, no dreams, no real aspirations. They have cast aside American values, and they fear ending up like their parents, whose lives they reject as empty. These young people are usually right about their parents’ lives being empty, an immensely important factor, and a factor not properly acknowledged by those who analyze the problems of young people in America today.

It is also important to understand that the shock-rock music and the grotesque and decadent Goth culture popular among the young today, have similar psychological roots to the culture in Germany during the time of the Weimar Republic as well as during the Nazi regime. What is being rejected, in all cases, is middle class materialism and the well-planned, practical, sober-minded and boring bourgeois life. It also rejects liberal Western values like democracy, the rule of law, individualism, religious tolerance, and freedom. Instead, it celebrates violence, chaos, orgiastic sexuality, racial hatred, and obedience to a dictator.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, it worships thanatos, the death principle, in its expression of hatred for life. The long black coats serve symbolically to protect those who are demonic and ghoulish from the life-inducing rays of the sun.

Harris and Klebold didn’t reject their parents’ world from some higher vantage point, whether it be idealistic or spiritual. On the contrary, they rejected it because the culture of achievement and recognition brought into bold relief their own sense of

---

<sup>2</sup> We might add that this is not unrelated to the dark force that has recently swept over Serbia.

worthlessness, their sense of being outsiders and losers.<sup>3</sup> Resentment is often the dark motive of rebels.

Why couldn't Harris and Klebold just graduate, which they were about to do, and then go on their way? Not everything in life is Columbine High School; it's a big world out there. Were they inwardly free they could leave it all behind. But like all those who are chronically insecure and resentful, they were still psychologically attached to what they hated. In other words, they wanted all that the jocks had, even if they were unable to admit it to themselves. Therefore, they could not go on their own way, for to do so would be to abandon the goods of life to the jocks of the world. The only alternative was to destroy it all — in a giant conflagration, Hitler style — so that no one could have it, even at the price of their own death. In seeking to destroy their high school, they symbolically hoped to destroy all it stood for, the middle class world to which they were still inwardly attached. They sought to scorch the earth so that nothing would ever grow again.

---

## **The Dark Side of a Permissive Age**

*“Love is not enough.” — Bruno Bettelheim*

One of the galling things about the Columbine High School tragedy is that the parents of these murderous teenagers did not react appropriately to what was clearly visible in their son's rooms — items like sawed-off shotguns and Nazi literature. Nor did they take seriously enough their sons' erratic behavior. These parents might represent

---

<sup>3</sup> The sense of worthlessness is not fundamentally due to the criticism of other people. Worthlessness comes from a perception of one's nothingness, the realization that one's time on this earth is most limited. The love and admiration of other people cannot overcome the sense of nothingness. The only effective cure is the transcendence of egocentricity.

an extreme case of parental indifference, but this incident represents a phenomenon that is far from being unique.

We must realize that these parents were, for the most part, good parents. They were educated, affluent people, community-minded, and there is much to indicate that they loved their sons. Of course, it is easy to have 20/20 hindsight, but all the same we must ask, why didn't they intervene when it was clear that their sons were having emotional problems? Likewise, we need to ask why didn't the school intervene when it was plain as day that the behavior of these two students was bizarre and potentially dangerous?

The answer is that the parents and educators of today's teenagers are the generation of the 1960s, the generation that defied and overthrew society's rules and restrictions. This is the generation that spawned the antihero, the person who robs the bank, makes it to Mexico with everybody's money, and then is applauded for having gotten away. That is our perverse sense of freedom. Having asserted that all morality is relative, and therefore that all authority is groundless, the 1960s generation has been left without a justified foundation from which to discipline their children.

We must also add that this is the dark side of a notion discussed above, which says that everybody can be, and has the right to be, unlimited, unconditioned and free. Everyone is to be a king, including, of course, children and teenagers. No one is to be prevented from doing what they want to do. The fact that one person's actions prevents another person from being free is ignored. It is this belief — that no one should be limited in any way — that makes today's baby boomer generation impotent when it comes to disciplining their children. This palsy of their will is the dark side of their cultural and moral relativity.

We are not suggesting here that the loss of a moral foundation can be solved by a return to the values of an earlier age. What makes conservative and reactionary solutions short-sighted, and ultimately futile, is that they don't consider the

fundamental reason why traditional values were abandoned in the first place. They were not abandoned because our society simply got indolent, or because degenerate leaders demoralized us. Traditional values were really abandoned for, what philosophy calls, dialectical reasons. The human spirit simply outgrew these values. When we outgrow something, there is the dangerous possibility that rather than ascending to a new level of awareness, we will instead go down, degenerate. That, unfortunately, is what has happened here. But this is a long discussion, involving the history of ideas, which we must defer for a future essay.

Suffice it to say that we can never return to who we once were. We can only awaken to who we are, as if out of a dream. Clearly seeing the attitudes to which we unconsciously subscribe frees us from those attitudes. Then we are not children of our times. In awakening to who we are, something new and unanticipated invariably appears, a new level of awareness. This is what is needed to renew American life.

---

## **The Only Real Form of Prevention**

“Can thou minister to a mind diseased?” — Shakespeare’s Macbeth

It was known 3000 years ago, and it is still true today: the only cure for the passions that vex the soul is education. By education, we do not mean the acquisition of information, ideas and theories. Such learning is essential, but it is far from being sufficient. The real purpose of liberal arts education is, as the name implies, to be liberated. What liberates us is the clarification of our interests and desires. In latter times, this became the goal of psychotherapy. But the various psychotherapies that are popular today are merely a reflection of our diseased zeitgeist, and are themselves greatly in need of clarification.

Of course, the proposal that we introduce true education into our schools is a mighty tall order. First of all we are dealing with a population of jaded students who believe that they already know everything about themselves and about life. They declare, “been there, done that.” Of course the young have always thought themselves wise, despite the fact that they are completely ignorant of who they are, and clueless as to what life is really about. What is different today is the fact that youth’s attitude is respected, rather than acknowledged to be patently absurd. The fact that it is respected tells us something about the educators that we have today, the cultural relativists who believe that all points of view are equally valid.

This brings us to the second obstacle in the way of educational reform. It requires those who have themselves become free of the passions to educate those still in bondage to them, but such educators are hard to find. This is partly because many of the educators of today are from the generation that took over the universities, declaring themselves the best judges of what they were to be taught. And so we now have the blindly arrogant leading the blindly arrogant. There are, of course, many notable exceptions, but we are analyzing here the norm.

The third obstacle to reforming education is, by far, the most difficult to overcome. Self-knowledge is truly the least thing that human beings desire; this has always been true, for all peoples in all ages. We are only open to life’s deeper questions for a brief time, usually during a personal crisis, such as the breakup of a romantic relationship, or the loss of a job. Then people are open to fundamental questions, as they have been in the face of the tragedy which has happened in Littleton.

Such windows of opportunity do not remain open for very long. The crisis passes, and the windows close. They remain firmly shut, at least until the next crisis. Only those rare people whose purpose in living is to acquire knowledge and personal power will not wait for a crisis. Instead they will create a crisis for themselves by daring to peek into the mirror of self-reflection. If they are true educators, they will help other people — young

and old — whose lust for a real life makes them willing to risk peeking into the mirror of self-reflection.

Only insight, self-seeing, can illuminate the dark passions of the soul, and liberate us from them. Without it these passions rage on — in the old as well as in the young. What is required to bring about a spiritual renewal of ourselves and our society is anything but easy, but amazing things are possible if we seek to accomplish them. Do we have a less difficult alternative? We can simply install metal detectors in every high school, indeed in every building. Then we'll have saved our lives, but lost our souls.