

On the Corner

TROUBLED YOUTH

“Columbine,” more than a pretty wildflower

BY ROBERT DOCTER –

A shocking, disorganized television image breaks into regular programming, and once again we see hurrying ambulances dodging scurrying children, faces frozen in fear, escorted by men armed and dressed for war. The children, freed from their escorts, rush to join arms then lock in huddles seeking solace against the backdrop of a stately, well-manicured school building, the pride of a middle class suburban neighborhood.

The unknown name of another high school becomes permanently etched on our minds as a breathless voice repeats well worn phrases of horrifying, obscene violence where children spray bullets within crowded hallways and classmates lie bleeding beside a tumbled spoil of forgotten books while screams echo through panicked corridors.

The reports come slowly, the death toll mounting. Frightened and anxious parents appear, seeking information and complaining about the lack of organization. We sit numbed, bewildered, shaking our heads, struggling to answer questions that all start with “why”.

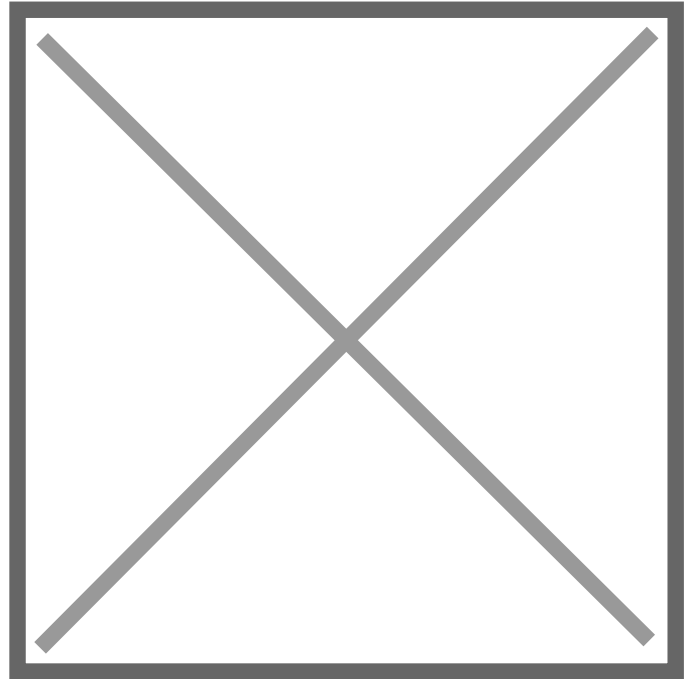
Without answers, we rush to place blame — the school failed, the parents failed, the society failed. Then, as other hypotheses come and go, we finally arrive at the “media”, that all pervasive conglomerate which seems to shape and shake everything in its path with the delicacy of a steam roller and the appetite of a voracious crocodile.

The ghosts of Klebold and Harris nightly swagger through the hallways of America’s high schools to find and trance isolated, unaccepted, forgotten, lost children on their way to “pull another columbine.”

The television newscaster works diligently. Different individuals interviewed seem to add bits to a story resonating from previous similar incidents. “The shooter’s house had a lot of guns, and he (usually, it’s a “he”) used them a lot and liked to play with them” — “People seemed tease him all the time — they didn’t seem to let up — he was an easy target for the bullies” — “He was into ‘dark stuff’ — you know — gothic” — “He seemed to be a loner much of the time.”

Then, some energetic reporter places another face before the camera. The guy had told him what he was going to do — he had shared his plan with him but hadn’t been believed.

Why?



Three factors seem always to be present in each of the score of occasions involving adolescent violence of this type. First, guns are easily available and accessible. Second, the individual feels alienated, isolated and the target of peer abuse. Third, he has told others of his plan.

Schools tend to be the safest areas within a community for teenagers. The helicopter shot from above reveals a “good school” — many activities, lovely grounds, beautiful buildings. But schools never exist in the absence of those who inhabit them. Buildings exist. Never schools. The words and faces on the television screen hint at an underlying sickness within the system. Somehow, many adolescents at this place spew cruelty and act out their own needs with hostility toward their classmates. Where do these needs come from?

It’s clear that some parents have failed to work at the process of parenting. They have neither tried to gather information about adolescent development nor about the habits and activities of their own children. They don’t know how to teach discipline. They have failed to demonstrate positive values, and their voices often beller a critical, self-centered communication process designed to poison any vestige of positive self-esteem. Somehow, what they model sews the seeds of alienation.

It’s clear that the media teaches violence in horrendous ways. This free society has not been able to leap the chasm between free expression of ideas and the consequent behavior of vulnerable people interpreting those ideas in a skewed fashion. Despite volumes of research evidence, we don’t seem to realize the impact of “modeling” on human behavior. We pretend that the images portrayed have no effect on people’s behavioral choices.

What to do.

Alienated youth need someone positive with whom to identify. They need someone who will smile at them, help them, listen to them, hear their unvoiced, silent cries for help. They need an advocate. It’s best if it’s a parent but not essential. They need someone with positive values willing to spend time. They need an awakened sense of their own spirituality, and they need to be taught how that part of them that is spiritual can reach out to God. They need to know they have choices.

Children seem to gravitate toward those like them and those who will allow them a sense of belonging. If lost, alone in the end, the only one available to impress is themselves.

So here we are — listening to gun shots reverberate through now empty school hallways, wondering what changed from when we attended school. We know the three characteristics of troubled, acting-out youth. But kids have always felt alienated and isolated and bullied. Kids have always shared their frustrations and fantasies with someone they believe might listen. Many kids for many generations have come from cold, unloving homes with distant, aloof parents.

So what’s different? What has changed between then and now? It seems obvious. Figure it out.