

Stewart Justman
Liberal Studies Program
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812
stewart.justman@umontana.edu

School Shootings: Warning Signs and Tea Leaves

As one school shooting follows another in an unthinkable procession, conventions arise to frame the events, contain their horror, and wrap them in verbal cotton. Precisely because these bursts of violence seem to come out of nowhere, commentators soon begin to theorize about warning signs, and soon thereafter refer the entire issue to those presumed competent in the interpretation of such signs, the readers of the human soul: the psychologists. At the same time, everyone knows the attempt to identify “potential murderers” is a nonsense exercise, because only after a person has committed murder can you tell he was a potential murderer. But while we can never know who the potential murderers in our midst may be, many—perhaps most—of the perpetrators of school shootings do commit outrageous acts before the fact. Upon reflection it seems unlikely that someone who guns down defenseless others in cold blood maintained a clean record to that point, leaving behind nothing but signs so subtle and ambiguous that they need to be professionally interpreted.

What is needed, therefore, is not ever-earlier intervention by therapists armed with dubious interpretive systems but ordinary diligence in responding to

actions so shocking that their transgressive character speaks for itself. A year before killing a teacher and a student at Richland High School in Lynnville, Tennessee in 1995, Jamie Rouse held his own brother at gunpoint and threatened to kill him—in response to which, his father temporarily confiscated the gun. A few years before 15-year-old Andy Williams killed two students and wounded 13 others in Santana High School, he set a fire in the woods near his Maryland home.

Reported a neighbor, “It was a pretty big fire by the time the fire department got there.” He was not charged. Only 13 years of age at the time he opened fire on the ambushed students of Jonesboro High School with a semiautomatic rifle, Mitchell Johnson had already molested a two-year-old girl. For reasons known only to them, the authorities let the matter drop. His confederate Andrew Golden, aged 11, was known to torture and kill cats and threatened to shoot children with a BB gun. For his part, Eric Harris, prime mover of the Columbine massacre, actually published a death threat against a named acquaintance. “I don’t care if I live or die in the shoot-out,” he wrote in part. “All I want to do is kill and injure as many of you . . . as I can especially a few people. Like brooks brown.” No merely psychological signal could possibly be as informative as this actual threat the authorities knew of but ignored.

While no one can say with any certainty that the carnage at Columbine would have been averted if the threat had been investigated as a criminal act by the Sheriff’s Office, it might have been. Here I propose to review two school massacres which also might have been averted if people in positions of responsibility had acted with due diligence instead of shrugging off violations of the

law and rewarding the violation of academic standards: Kip Kinkel's 1998 murder of two classmates and injury of 25 others at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, following his execution of his father and, some hours later, his mother; and the recent murder of 32 persons at Virginia Tech by Seung-Hui Cho.

The Case of Kip Kinkel

On May 20, 1998, Kip Kinkel, aged 15, bought a stolen gun—a felony under Oregon law—and stowed it, loaded, in a brown bag in his locker at Thurston High School. In short order the school authorities found out, and both Kinkel and the friend who supplied the gun were arrested. Although under the law Kinkel could have been held for 72 hours, and although the record reveals that his friend informed the police that Kinkel intended to kill someone, it was decided that merely possessing a loaded .32 caliber Beretta at school (in addition to a knife illegal on school grounds) was not sufficient grounds to hold him, and he was released to the custody of his father, whom he executed around 3:00 PM that day at the Kinkel home with a single shot to the back of the head. A school killing had taken place in Edinboro, Pennsylvania but four weeks before, a massacre in Westside, Arkansas, two months before, and two other massacres, in Pearl, Mississippi, and Heath, Kentucky, a few months before that. If the Springfield police had looked out for the public safety with due prudence, the terrible sequence of events following Kinkel's release might not have occurred.

After killing his father, Kinkel lay in wait for his mother. As she ascended the steps into the house from the garage at around 6:00 PM, he shot her twice in the back of the head, then in the face and finally the heart. Leaving the bodies of his parents on the floor, the following morning he drove his mother's car to school, armed with several weapons and over 1000 rounds of ammunition. After shooting two students in the head he proceeded to the cafeteria, having timed his attack for its busiest hour, sprayed the crowded facility with semiautomatic gunfire from the hip, and shot a wounded student in the back of the head before finally being subdued.

Kinkel eventually pled guilty to four counts of aggravated murder among other charges and was sentenced to 111 years in prison.

When Kinkel was arrested for possession of a gun in school, through some bureaucratic bungle the Springfield police had no record of his arrest in Bend, Oregon, on January 4, 1997 for throwing rocks from a railroad trestle at the traffic below, and in fact hitting one car with what was described as “a fairly decent-sized rock.” The driver of a vehicle at highway speed could easily have been seriously injured, even if he or she were simply startled and momentarily lost control of the vehicle. Despite the seriousness of this offense—also a felony—little came of it. Kinkel was held for one night in a facility in Bend, then referred to the Department of Youth Services in Eugene where a psychologist, duped by the youth's show of contrition, ordered him to perform thirty-two hours of community service and “write an apology letter to owner of car he hit with a rock and pay for damage to car

(\$50.00). No prosecution though.” If the authorities had prosecuted the offense in a manner commensurate with its seriousness instead of writing it off as a minor infraction or boyish incident, maybe Kinkel would have been locked up somewhere on May 21, 1998, or at least been known to the Springfield police when he was arrested.

Concerned over her son’s arrest in Bend as well as his “fascination with guns, knives, and explosives,” Faith Kinkel took him to see a psychologist, Jeffrey Hicks, in Eugene. Informed of Kinkel’s obsession with bombs, Hicks recorded in his notes that the youth

makes explosives from gasoline and other household items and detonates them at a nearby quarry to vent feelings of anger. He denies intent to harm people or property. If he has a “bad day” at school, he feels better after detonating an explosive. I cautioned Kip that gasoline is very dangerous and advised he not use it for such purposes.

Hicks later testified at Kinkel’s sentencing hearing that detonating explosives was “a pretty alarming symptom, and whenever it would come up, I would certainly discourage him from doing that.” It doesn’t seem to have crossed the therapist’s mind, even in the courtroom, that Kinkel’s play with bombs violated the law. The therapist didn’t agonize over his conflicting responsibilities to his client and the law. He didn’t concern himself with the law at all. Someone mindful of the law and

cognizant that no citizen stands above it would have made it clear to both son and mother that playing with explosives was not only hazardous but illegal, and might well have insisted that Faith Kinkel put a stop to her son's practice, if necessary by going to the authorities. He might have added that reporting her son to the authorities would have been a more responsible and even loving course of action than conniving in his deeds by pretending they weren't the law's concern.

According to *Time*, following Kinkel's arrest the police found "five homemade bombs (two with electronic timing devices) in a crawl space under the [Kinkel] house, along with at least 15 other explosive devices, including a hand grenade," among other treasures. Some were packed with home-made shrapnel. In contrast to the psychologist who took Kinkel's criminal pastime so lightly, the police, when they discovered this arsenal, evacuated the nearby houses and left the bodies of the Kinkel parents where they lay "for another thirty hours until the afternoon of May 22, when the site was declared safe."

While the Kinkel case is a Thanksgiving feast of signs for the psychologists among us (what with the youth's tormented relation with his parents, especially his father), Kinkel committed one act after another outrageous in itself. He smashed the windows of a farmer's tractor with an ax. A month or so before he opened fire in the cafeteria of Thurston High School, he was suspended for karate-kicking a fellow student in the head. Reportedly, he decapitated cats and exhibited their heads to neighborhood children, an atrocity that some adult or other must have caught wind of. Additionally, as we know, he regularly assembled and exploded bombs (and was

known to do so) and had been charged with, but not prosecuted for, the felony of throwing rocks at speeding cars. The pity of the Kinkel case isn't that people missed or misread psychological clues but that they attached so little import to violations of the law. When Kinkel was finally arrested for possession of a stolen gun on school property, it was as if his entire history of lies, violence, and lawbreaking caught up with him in one moment. Before he was prosecuted on charges of aggravated murder, not one of Kinkel's violations of the law had ever come to a hearing.

The unwillingness of the adult world to draw a line in its dealings with Kinkel persisted up to the very hour of his father's death, when a counselor at Thurston High School and friend of the family called to report that all of Kip's teachers agreed to send him homework. Kinkel was to have been summarily expelled from the school as a result of the gun incident. Evidently the teachers decided, one and all, that very day, to circumvent that penalty. Some minutes before this call Kinkel's father did not live to receive, the counselor talked over with Bill Kinkel the option of placing the young man in an outdoors survival camp, the Youth Challenge Program, to straighten him out—not knowing that youths with criminal charges pending were ineligible. It seems the counselor was entertaining the idea that Kinkel had the option to walk away from a felony charge once again. If, as some think, it was the prospect of being sent to boot camp that moved Kinkel to murder his father, he committed this—the act of no return—in the mistaken belief that his father and not the law held power over him.

The Case of Seung-Hui Cho

More of an enigma than Kinkel, Cho left no trail of crimes behind him when he turned a gun on dozens of trapped and defenseless persons at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, and unlike the many perpetrators of school shootings who boast or warn of their intentions, he confided his plan to no one. In the annals of school shootings perhaps no one conforms more closely to the image of the killer who suddenly bursts out of the unknown into the light of infamy. According to the *Newark Star-Ledger* of April 18, 2007 and other sources, however, “Officials [at Virginia Tech] said he once set fire to his dorm room.” (The Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel notes that “Several times when suitemates came in the room, it smelled as though Cho had been burning something.”) What “warning sign” could possibly be more eloquent than an act of dormitory arson? But because thought and speech fail at this point, I will pass to another matter: how a student could receive academic credit for the stuff Cho submitted in his English courses at Virginia Tech.

Like other schools, Virginia Tech has policies dictating the suspension of students whose performance falls below a certain threshold. Specifically, a student with two consecutive semesters with a GPA of less than 2.0 is automatically suspended at Virginia Tech. It is known that Cho was a senior, meaning that he had amassed enough credits to be close to graduation, and that

most of his credits were clustered in his major, English (the home of a course Cho took in Contemporary Horror, with slasher movies on the syllabus), and more particularly in Creative Writing. His Creative Writing instructors have been widely depicted as responsible professionals who did what they could with Cho and sought to refer him to therapists, but if they had upheld academic standards with any diligence—like the Fiction instructor who in fact gave him a D+ in Spring 2006—Cho might not even have been a student at Virginia Tech in Spring 2007.

The following is an excerpt from Cho's "play," *Richard McBeef*:

JOHN: Why am I so angry at you! Because you murdered my father so you can get into my mom's pant [sic]!—

RICHARD: Now hold on right there mister. It was a boating accident. I did everything I could to save your father.

JOHN: Bullshit! Are you always full of shit, McBeef? I can see that you are by the extra fat you have packed on! You MURDERED my father and covered it up! You committed a conspiracy. Just like what the government has done to John Lennon and Marilyn Monroe. . . . Guess what, Dick. You wanna know something. You wanna know why I don't like you? Because you can't provide for my mom. You barely make the minimum wage, man. All you do for mom is all this honey-poo shit. Honey-poo! Honey-poo! You piece of shit! You were a janitor one time. . . . The pinnacle of your career was when you were a pro football player. How long did that last? Three weeks! Ha!

You're over the hills [sic], buster! Just look at yourself, all fat and lazy. Only if you were smart enough to stay in the league, you wouldn't be like this. A former player. No wonder your name is McPork—I mean McBeef. While the guys were packing on muscles, you were packing on McDonald's fat, chowing down on three Big Mac's in three minutes. You wanted me to call you dad? Okay. Hey, *dad*, you are such a asshole! Asshole of assholes, *DAD!* And as for you banging my mom, looks like that lasted a long [sic] as your pathetic career, you prematurely ejaculating piece of dickshit. Sucks for you, you motherfucking McBeef.

Despite the semblance or pretense of artistic form, such writings represent nothing but spewed hatred, much like the diary entries of Kip Kinkel or Eric Harris. It is as if Cho were setting fire to the classroom itself. According to Nikki Giovanni, in a poetry class he handed in a formless "tirade" the object of which was the bodies of the women in the class. She threw him out of the course, but evidently he continued to accumulate academic credit despite submitting his obscene monologues to one instructor after another. Those who awarded credit for such productions, while referring him for therapy, defaulted on their responsibility while imagining they were fulfilling it.

Interviewed regarding the Virginia Tech massacre, Edward Shapiro, a psychiatrist in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, observed that "The legal system and the medical system conspire to leave these kids [that is, kids like Cho] more alone

than they should be. If the kid isn't failing courses, if they're not hassling people, and they're doing their work, there's not much the colleges can do." But why wasn't Cho failing courses? To many, this may seem an impertinent question. Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* shortly after the massacre, the lead author of *Rampage*, an investigation of the West Paducah and Jonesboro massacres, praised the English faculty at Virginia Tech:

And here we must take our hats off to the colleagues and students at Virginia Tech who did exactly what we would want them to do. They alerted the counseling staff to the scary writing submitted by the shooter; they tried to cajole him into treatment; and they warned the police.

How efficiently the author whites out the faculty's specifically *academic* responsibility—one which, if fulfilled, could have seen Cho suspended from Virginia Tech instead of being rewarded with academic credit for sinking ever deeper into the obscenity of his own fantasies.

Asking how it is that a school massacre could take place in a small town like Westside, Arkansas or Heath, Kentucky (sites of Jonesboro and West Paducah), *Rampage* concludes that the town's very idealization of itself as a place where everyone cares for everyone else blocked the reception of information that didn't fit this "narrative." A university English Department can be likened to a small town united by the narrative that its members are not only specially caring but highly

enlightened. How could such a community, bound in ideological togetherness, possibly have harbored a Cho? In an elegy for Cho's victims a member of the Virginia Tech English faculty wrote in part,

For

As long as I can think I will wonder if I could have seen

Something in him to ring an alarm and get him treated.

But I swear on the lives of my children and the family genes

That he showed nothing but extreme stubborn shy retreat.

He held his tongue as one would hold onto a precious thing

So I could only guess what he was really thinking from his writings.

But perhaps the poet protests too much. For the question is not what signs could or couldn't have been detected by psychological subtlety, but why a university instructor of creative writing would award credit for compositions that were poems in name only ("call them that"). While public discussion of the "warning signs of violence" is inspired by a concern to identify danger before the fact, the actual effect of the new cliché is to enable anyone looking for exoneration to clear himself or herself after the fact by claiming that the signs were indecipherable, as in this case.

Cho gravitated to the one academic field where he could receive credit for indulging in demented fantasies and obscene ranting. The laxity of grades in creative writing courses is an open secret in the academic world, where many believe the word “creative” constitutes a dispensation from ordinary standards. The issue is not a new one. In a 1944 essay critical of Dali, whose compositions appeared to him “a direct, unmistakable assault on sanity and decency,” Orwell wrote, “It will be seen that what the defenders of Dali are claiming is a kind of *benefit of clergy*. The artist is to be exempt from the moral laws that are binding on ordinary people. Just pronounce the magic word ‘art’, and everything is OK.” Those at Virginia Tech who gave passing grades to art like *Richard McBeef*—and it seems Cho submitted such effusions in one class after another—acted as if they believed the same thing, except that Cho lacked the technical genius of a Dali. Somehow the fallacious notion that art is by nature transgressive has popularized and entrenched itself, subject to the further distortion that the transgressive is therefore art. Indeed, the word “transgressive” in the parlance of the humanities is generally a compliment, meaning “bold and liberating.” Did Cho’s instructor discern signs of promise in *Richard McBeef*, sparks of boldness and protest? Cho’s farewell curse to the world, “You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience,” with its muscular wording, reads like a facsimile of the sort of *strong writing* seen in creative writing courses.

The Therapy Addiction

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech massacre innumerable articles and stories held forth the hope that experts in the human psyche would be able to avert the next massacre by the timely interpretation of warning signs. Terms like “warning signs” had become official conventions of understanding. But it bears remembering that a sign, in the sense of symptom, is inherently ambiguous and always, therefore, potentially misleading. Any checklist of psychological signals we might care to draw up—depression, anger, interest in guns, fantasies of violence, thoughts of suicide, infatuation with depraved music—will yield multitudes of false positives, even as some slip through the psychological net by not conforming to type. Moreover, the fact is that a number of perpetrators of school massacres, including both Kinkel and Cho, received psychiatric or psychological evaluation, or therapy or counseling, and nevertheless went on to do what they did. Not long before the Columbine massacre, in which he aspired to kill hundreds, Eric Harris completed an anger management class. “I learned the four stages of anger; tension building, verbal escalation, physical escalation and opportunity for change. I believe the most valuable part of this class was thinking up ideas for ways to control anger and for ways to release stress in a nonviolent manner,” he wrote afterward in some kind of assigned exercise.

According to the Virginia Tech Review Panel, Cho underwent years of weekly therapy sessions. His record is crowded with art therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors. Following a report by one of his acquaintances that he

might be suicidal, Cho was ordered to undergo a psychiatric evaluation on December 13, 2005. The next day doctors concluded that “his insight and judgment are normal.” Presumably on the basis of these mixed messages, a special justice classified Cho as a danger to himself but not to others. Perhaps we misplace our hopes in looking to therapeutic expertise for the accurate interpretation of warning signs or “potential warning signs” or “potentially informative signals”—in fine, psychological tea leaves.

Students of the humanities ought to be familiar with the absurdities that result from the imposition of interpretive systems on inherently ambiguous literary works. Similarly wayward readings would follow from a systematic hunt for the presumed warning signs of mental illness, an amorphous category in itself. In the expectation of mounting a psychological defense at Kinkel’s trial, a private investigator “was able to identify at least seven individuals [on Bill Kinkel’s side] who were either diagnosed with, or presented clinical symptoms of, mental illness. Although Bill himself had no history of treatment for mental illness, during the investigation psychologists noted several significant peculiarities about Bill, including his tendency to keep the heat in the house turned down so low that the family wore down jackets at home.” (I quote here from a polemic on “Mental Illness and the Betrayal of Kipland Kinkel,” as if he were the victim in the case, in the *Oregon Law Review* of Winter 2000. The author, a law student, makes no secret of her disdain of the legal system.) Could any one of us withstand a determined

search for significant peculiarities? I too have worn goose down in the winter in my house in the Northwest.

Animating the fantasy that psychology can deliver us from the threat of yet more school massacres is the questionable assumption that homicidal rage is amenable to therapy. Some perpetrators of school massacres are reported to have laughed in the act or in the police car afterward, or taunted their victims as in the case of Harris and Klebold. Had Harris and Klebold lived instead of killing themselves—their version of the last laugh—we can be sure some would have made the argument that these sadists were themselves victims of psychological misfortune and deserve profuse sympathy and competent therapy. (Harris had been treated with anti-depressants.) The truly ruthless are unlikely to be touched by therapy and may even take pride in their ability to feign improvement and penitence. Caught with computer equipment stolen from a van, Harris and his confederate were not prosecuted but instead run through a “diversion program” of counseling and community service. In a cynical simulation of regret, Harris wrote a letter to the owner of the stolen goods professing his sincere remorse, even as he scrawled in his diary,

Isn't America supposed to be the land of the free? how come, if I'm free I can't deprive a stupid fucking dumbshit from his possessions if he leaves them sitting in the front seat of his fucking car out in plain sight and in the

middle of fucking nowhere on a Frifuckingday night NATURAL SELECTION—
fucker should be shot.

Only a Pollyanna would assume that therapy can cure the soul that wrote those words. (As he opened fire during the Columbine massacre, Harris peeled off his trench coat to reveal a T-shirt emblazoned with the legend, “Natural Selection.”) If, as some believe, Harris and Klebold began to plan the Columbine massacre shortly after their release from psychiatric oversight in April 1998, it may be that the sugary pieties of therapy merely enraged them. In any case, much as with Kinkel, if the authorities had paid attention not to psychological signals but to manifest outrages and explicit violations of law, something could have been done about Klebold and Harris. In 1997 or early 1998—over a year before the massacre, at any rate—the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office learned that Harris was making death threats against Brooks Brown on his website, as well as boasting that he and his accomplice had built pipe bombs and were looking for “a place that will be ‘ground zero.’” In a park near the Harris home police actually found a bomb fitting the description. A search warrant was drawn up but never executed. The Columbine chronicle argues powerfully that we delude ourselves to look for psychological clues even while systematically overlooking actions that advertise transgression.

In direct opposition to the principle that actions matter is the pop-psychological doctrine, now in general circulation, that the self cannot be tied down to or measured by its actions. As the public psychologist of the hour, Phil McGraw,

asserts in a typical expression of antinomianism, “There is a whole other level of existence, distinct from what you do, that is the real, true, genuine sum and substance of who you are.” A sort of inflamed version of this doctrine entered into Kinkel’s sentencing hearing when a clinical psychologist argued that despite killing people, Kinkel was not really a killer. The hesitation of many in the press to label Cho, the murderer of 32 people, as in fact a murderer attests to a definite reluctance to link this person, too, to his own actions. As Gregg Easterbrook observed in the *New Republic*,

On ABC, CBS and NBC news broadcasts in the 72 hours after the [Virginia Tech] tragedy, the word “shooter” was heard roughly three times as often as “killer” or “murderer.” [The same ratio obtained across the entire expanse of major newspapers and wire stories.]

The fact that murder had happened at Virginia Tech was clear within hours, if not minutes, of initial reports. Yet plenty of media figures could not bring themselves to say that the killer was a killer, that the murderer was a murderer.

One wonders how people who can’t bring themselves to acknowledge mass murder for what it is are going to be able to recognize the clues that supposedly foretell mass murder. While the delicacy of speech Easterbrook points to stems in part

from mere squeamishness, it also reflects the same refusal to hold a self to its deeds that induced others to look past one transgressive act after another committed by the eventual perpetrators of school massacres, from the molestation of a two-year-old to the torture of animals to the manufacture of bombs to arson to the submission of obscene ravings at an institution of learning.

In many school shootings (Virginia Tech being an exception) the killer declared his intention to others, only to have his threats interpreted as jokes or idle boasts. Now that students are being urged not to interpret overheard threats but report them, many shootings have been intercepted. Adults should follow the students' lead and respond with due diligence to outrageous actions rather than putting their hope and trust in the reading of psychological clues. The notion that the best preventive of school massacres is some special faculty of interpretation must be abandoned.

*

On December 14, 1992, a package arrived in the mailroom of Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts labeled "Classic Arms." A concerned employee of the mailroom notified the college authorities, who then impounded but did not open or investigate the parcel, allowed the addressee to claim it, dithered, and failed to call the police despite being warned that the addressee had a gun—illegal on a college campus—and intended to use it. The package contained

ammunition and the addressee was Wayne Lo, who went on a rampage with an assault weapon that evening, killing two and wounding four. If only the dean had acted as responsibly as the mail lady.

Note

Sources for this essay include Katherine Newman et al., *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic, 2004); Stephanie Verlinden, Michel Hersen, and Jay Thomas, "Risk Factors in School Shootings," *Clinical Psychology Review* 20 (2000): 3-56; Joseph Lieberman, *Shooting Game: The Making of School Shooters* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2006); and Gregory Gibson, *Gone Boy: A Walkabout* (New York: Anchor, 2000).