

The VT Murders: A Son Reflects

Written by Administrator
Friday, 20 April 2007 06:05

JP Mason, a son of The High Country and a senior at Virginia Tech, sent this email home to parents Lynne and Andy, who shared this with goblueridge.net:

I know this e-mail is a long time in coming. I want to first thank each of you for your concern about my personal safety and wellbeing - as well as that of the larger Virginia Tech community. Many of you I haven't talked with in quite a while

Family and Friends,

I know this e-mail is a long time in coming. I want to first thank each of you for your concern about my personal safety and wellbeing - as well as that of the larger Virginia Tech community. Many of you I haven't talked with in quite a while – some of you I talk to more regularly. As strange as it sounds, I am blessed by this opportunity to get back in touch with each of you.

The last several days have been very dream-like. The truth is I don't really know how I feel or how I am supposed to feel for that matter. I go back and forth often between wanting to cry and wanting to laugh – and in the middle I just am. As some of the excitement of this all begins to fade away – as the media slowly begins to leave and move on to other stories and news – the entire community up here is slowly starting to realize and actualize what in fact happened up here. You can all read the news reports and watch stuff on T.V. to get the facts of what happened; most of you probably know them better than I do at this point. I guess all I am trying to get across in this e-mail is where my heart is with all of this right now, and where we all go from here. I pray that you take your time to read through this e-mail – to reflect on it – to pray about it.

For the last several weeks, I have been feeling the tension between graduating in less than a month – and therefore not wanting to do anymore work – and the realization that I have never been able to just not do my work because I didn't feel like doing it. I felt as if I was sprinting towards some finish line in early May, but that I would look back at the race and wonder what I had given up along the way so that I could get to the finish a little more quickly – a little faster than everyone else... The truth is school was not at all what I want to be doing right now. Don't get me wrong – I feel amazingly blessed that I even have the opportunity to go to school – and even more blessed that I am studying something which I find fascinating, applicable, and useful. In short, I wanted to be spending more time with friends, and less time in front of my computer at two o'clock in the morning with a cup of coffee in one hand, a book in the other, and an unfinished term paper waiting to be written on the screen ahead of me.

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Monday morning, I was working on finishing a term paper for my social influence class in psychology. The paper was to be due on Tuesday morning, and I was having a hard time focusing in my apartment, so I decided to take a shower and head towards campus to study in the student union. On my way out the door Monday, one of my roommates received the first e-mail from the University about a shooting that had taken place in West AJ – one of the resident halls on campus. I remember my roommates and I were joking about it all at first – about how Morva (the guy who had killed two police officers on the first day of classes last fall) had escaped or something and was back at it. At this point, I decided not to leave just yet... We joked as the second e-mail from the university came into our inbox, “A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows.” Really professional we thought – way to be ambiguous...

In theatre you can talk about the ‘moment of tragic realization’ – the point in the play where either the main character or the audience realizes the events that have befallen them. I felt as if everything that happened next was analogous to that – realizing that our candid jokes were somehow fueling the fire of what was unfolding across campus at that time. I remember going up to a friend's house, which overlooks campus and the stone-clad buildings I have come to be more than familiar with over the last several years, and watching some news on his TV. I can not remember a time when I felt more detached from myself as when I was watching CNN in his living room with the buildings themselves lingering – almost playfully – in the corner of my eye. I have never felt so distant from reality. For most of the rest of that day – as we all learned more about what happened – as I tried calling friends to make sure they were alright despite the overloaded cell phone towers – as I ran along the outskirts of campus later that afternoon – as I prayed with some of the people in my church later in the day – I felt as if it were all a dream. Most of the day – as I said above – I didn't know how to feel. I expected I should feel sad – but in reality I felt (and still do) numb and detached.

The surreal nature of it all, however, has slowly begun to fade as we have learned pieces of information about our friends (and the friends of friends) who were killed on Monday. I was at a prayer service Monday night when I learned a girl in my small group Bible study was reportedly still missing. She had not been admitted to any of the hospitals in the area - and she had never been accounted for anywhere else. We didn't receive word until yesterday around 3:00 pm that she had been one of the students in the German classroom of Norris who had died. It took

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so long for the medical examiners to identify her body – she was the last to be identified – because she died with another student’s identification in her hand. All we can figure is that the gunman left the room for a moment, some of the students, including my friend, tried to get the people who had already been shot with their identifications in their hands, the gunman had heard them talking, returned and killed the others in the classroom. Of the twenty-three or so students in the German class – only four survived.

I think it is probably as bad having friends of friends who were killed. You always hear about the degrees of contact – how we are all separated yet connected to each other, but a relatively small number of degrees of contact. There is nobody on this campus that was not affected by Monday’s events. There is nobody in this country that was not affected, and indeed, I argue there is nobody in this world that was not somehow affected by these events.

I am not mad. I can’t be mad, and I would speculate that a large number of people on this campus are not mad. What should we be mad at after all? The gunman? I think not: I try to look at his life as a novel or a storybook in which the events from this past Monday were the tragic conclusion to twenty or thirty chapters preceding the conclusion. He is a human – just like me and you – and while I can’t imagine the events and situations which he lived through which brought him to the place he was Monday morning, I can’t help but feel that some of the responsibility for his actions must fall back on me and you. I speculate that for every time one of us asks God why He let this happen, He is asking the same thing of us... I also don’t think we can be mad at the University’s reaction to this all – or the police’s response. It is human nature to want to blame something when stuff like this happens. Put yourself in President Steger’s shoes and question what decisions you would have made. Try to begin to empathize rather than criticize and I think you will begin to see that this blame game is rather futile.

No I am not mad – I can forgive. I can forgive because Jesus could forgive when he was part of the ultimate injustice – ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ – I can forgive because as Nikki Giovanni – a Civil Rights activist and English professor at Virginia Tech – said after speeches yesterday by President Bush, Governor Kaine, and President Steger, “We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid

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being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy.”

No one deserves tragedy. But tragedy still persists and will continue to persist. What happened at Virginia Tech, I speculate, is so upsetting because it disrupted the normalcy of everyday life with such fervor. In an academic environment stressing unity and peace and academic pursuits to enrich life in this world – we don't expect for things like this happen. And at the same time, I must also realize that things like this happen everyday around the world – maybe it has the façade of a natural disaster – or occurs on the battlefield rather than in a classroom – but this maxim remains the same; tragedy is as much a part of life as living is itself. Please don't get me wrong...I am mourning the death of my friend and trying to support my classmates and friends I can in anyway. I just know that God mourns the deaths in these other tragedies just as much as He is mourning the tragedy here at Tech – media coverage and presidential speeches or not...

And so I leave you with these things right now...

- Please don't ask the question why right now. It is a natural thing to want to be able to understand the world in which we live. Understanding enables us to control – yet in times like these, hastily drawn conclusions about 'why' or 'how' somebody could be capable of doing something like this, puts all the blame in all the wrong places. It is a tragedy – nothing more and nothing less – and that cannot simply be explained away...

- Learn to forgive more. This world is often cruel and cold. My friend died the other day – she did nothing wrong – she was beautiful, full of energy, devoted to God, and someone you just wanted to hug when you saw her. She was a freshman – young, full of dreams and hope and life and love. I can't help but picture her being able to forgive Cho – the gunman before he shot her, just as Christ was able to forgive us all – because we simply don't know what we are doing. Life is too short and too fragile to harbor animosity in your heart. The power of forgiveness is remarkable – certainly stronger than bullets. Learn to forgive and you will learn more about yourself and the nature of this world than you will in any college setting. We are told to 'love our enemies.' This is unconditional and without regard to how sickening of a thing that has befallen you or someone you know. Power begets power and hate begets hate, but love and forgiveness have the power to overcome anything else. If you don't believe me

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here, I would argue that you have never tried...

- Be slow to blame. As I said before, we all want to pass the blame off on someone else when things like this happen. It has to be someone's fault we think. Does it? Why can't there be things out there which are beyond us and our attempts at explanation? What has happened now is in the past – we have the ability to decide how we respond. I pray that you are able to extend grace to those who hurt you, love those who hate you, forgive those who persecute you, and try not to cast blame when all we are in fact called to do is care for one another. I do not care whose 'fault' any of this was. It happened. How will we respond to it?

- Develop your faith. I haven't talked to many of you in years, so this is a little awkward. I do not know where many of you are in your faith journey or whatever you want to call it, but these last couple of days have been a wake-up call to me and so many other people about what matters in life. Like I said, we operate for the most part with the expectancy of normalcy close at hand, that when something like this happens, everything gets messed up. I want more than anything to let each of you know that you are loved, your life is important, and no matter where you are now, never underestimate your personal ability to be redeemed and justified through Christ. You each have the potential to change the world by embracing each other and doing life together in a world that tries to pull you apart. Don't expect life to always be perfect by our definition of success. Rather embrace life and those around you with a love and forgiveness which we can only really see in God. I would love to talk to any of you more about this if you want. Like I said, I don't know where this e-mail finds you today, but please take time to reflect on this, on your life, and try to dig a little deeper into places you have not explored before. Disrupt your complacency of life – remove yourself from what this world expects from you – and you see that so many things we swear are so important are little more than a finish line you will never reach.

So take this, and apply it. Take this and share it with others. Take this and ask questions about yourself. Learn to love, forgive, and change the world by embracing your friends and family – one day, one question, and one heartbeat at a time. Love the place in which you are right now, rather than sprinting towards some conclusion which is ultimately uncertain. And love your Maker with all of your heart.

I love you all, please continue to keep the entire Virginia Tech community in your prayers – and please don't hesitate to call me.

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faith.hope.love

~ JP

John Paul Mason

Boone ResidentSenior at Virginia Tech "Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world - indeed it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Meade