Inside the Heart of a Teenage Killer:
What Kids Need in Order to Not Have to Kill

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Introduction

Across America both educators and parents are asking the question: Why does a teenager kill? If one was able to look inside the hearts of teenage killers, what might one see? What common thread can be found woven throughout the lives of those young men who have killed classmates in the schools throughout the United States? If one closely examines the lives of Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, T. J. Solomon, Luke Woodham, Kip Kinkel, Michael Carneal, Larry Golden, Mitchell Johnson, and Andy Williams, one of the common issues for each "killer" was the struggle for a strong sense of self– a good self-esteem or self-image. The individual young men had received strong messages from peers that somehow each did not "measure up" (Begley, 1999; Canon & McGraw, 1999; Gibbs & Roche, 1999; Labi, 1998; Lacaya, 1998). What might it be that these teenage killers need in order to not "have" to kill? Perhaps, the answer is not complicated, but more basic. When the five roots of violence (abandonment, shame, ungrieved losses, depression, and anger) are traced, one finds the roots all involve a failure to meet the basic needs in the lives of these teenagers. Could the answer lie within meeting kids' six basic emotional needs? How powerful is the impact of unmet emotional needs in the life of a child or teen? Is it potent enough to drive a child or teen to kill? Is it truly a life or death issue?

Each individual born comes into the world with six basic lifelong

psychological needs (Busch, 1980). These needs include the need for affirmation or validation, someone to idealize, experiencing twinship, the opportunity to be adversarial, making an impact, as well as the need to merge (Rowe, 1989). A child must have these needs met from the first breath of life until the last for healthy emotional development. It is the effect of these needs either being met or unmet that makes the crucial difference in the lives of children, teens, and adults. When these six basic emotional needs are consistently unmet, any individual—a child, teen, adult, or even a senior citizen—will starve to death emotionally. Unfortunately, this is all too often illustrated when an older adult is placed into a nursing home. In spite of receiving more nutritious meals, more regular medication, a more comfortable and perhaps safer physical environment, the nursing home resident often quickly declines — emotionally and eventually physically. Why? Perhaps this older individual starves to death emotionally.

What do individuals need to develop a strong sense of self? What must be present in the emotional world of a developing child for that child to develop a sense of feeling valuable and loved? Initially, self-esteem or self-value evolves from the way in which a child's basic emotional needs are either met or not met by significant others in the child's life. From the earliest moments of time, a child learns that he or she is either loved or not loved, valued or not valued, heard or not heard, and so on. This message is communicated in a multitude of ways by the manner in which significant others interact with the child as the child passes through major developmental stages of life (Bowlby, 1988). As children grow and develop, these six major lifelong needs must be met in an appropriate manner for the child to develop a strong sense of self.

The first significant need for a child to develop a strong sense of self is the need for appropriate affirmation or validation (Rowe, 1989). The need for affirmation or validation is met when the child receives the appropriate responses from the child's significant others. The significant others of the child change as the child grows and develops. At first, the significant others in the life of the child's mother and father. Soon the sphere of significant others widens to include siblings

and grandparents. When the child enters school, teachers join the sphere of significant others. In just a short time, classmates are also included. As the child enters the teen years, peers as well as romantic interests become the primary significant others for the teen. Finally, in young adulthood, the spouse becomes the most significant other in the individual's life.

Having the need for affirmation met communicates three important messages to the developing child—that the child is: (1) acceptable, (2) desirable, and (3) important. The child needs to feel unconditionally accepted when the true self of the child is exposed. Exposure of the true self at first comes naturally for a child. As long as a child continues to receive the appropriate responses from significant others when the true self is shown, the child will continue to grow and develop into the person that child was meant to become (Whitfield, 1991). This continues unless, at some point, the child begins to feel a sense of being "unacceptable" or a sense of shame when the true self is exposed (Bradshaw, 1988). If this occurs, in time the child will begin to slowly submerge the true self to a place where it cannot be made to feel unacceptable. In essence, the child loses the real person he/she was truly meant to become. The greater the validation the child receives or does not receive, the greater value the child does or does not place upon the "self." The greater value placed upon the self, the greater the sense of self-esteem or self-worth (Whitfield, 1991).

The second major lifelong psychological need is the need to idealize someone. This is the need to have someone that a child can look toward as stronger than the child—a "hero" of sorts. This is the person to whom the child runs when the child feels fragmented or afraid—physically, emotionally, sexually, or spiritually. The need to idealize is strongest when the child or teen is either frightened, in danger, frustrated, or in search for meaning in a life experience. For a child, the parent is initially seen as the one to idealize—the "perfect" person who can always solve the problem or conquer the fear. As a child grows into a teen and later an adult, the need to have someone to idealize is never outgrown, although others will join or replace the parent as the one to be idealized. Each individual—child, teen, or

adult—must have someone to idealize and lean upon when that individual feels overwhelmed by life (Busch, 1980; Rowe, 1989).

The next vital lifelong psychological need is the need for twinship —the need to have one's sameness with others acknowledged. This is the strong need to have a sense of belonging. All individuals need to become a part of a larger group. Human beings are social by nature (Austin, 1999). Although adults are quick to criticize teens in regard to this need for belonging, it is equally strong for adults. For example, when adults attend a workshop at a conference, what is the first thing that most individuals do upon entering the room? Usually, one can see participants scanning the room. For what is that individual searching? The search is not for "what," but for "whom." It is for someone familiar—someone that the individual can "join." The need for twinship is also seen in the way in which individuals dress. Why not wear the same clothes that were popular in the 50s? It would be far more economical than buying new clothes as the styles change; however, the need to belong or to be accepted is stronger. The message each child, teen, or adult is yearning to hear when seeking twinship is that he/she is accepted and fits into a larger group (Levin, 1988).

One only has to observe either a 2-year-old or a teen to see the fourth need vividly illustrated—the need to be adversarial with significant others. This means that a child or teen is allowed to experience significant others as a benign force—is able to push up against those significant others without breaking the bond of connection with them.This bond remains strong and supportive regardless of the adversarial force being exerted upon it. Every child and teen needs to know that there will be a significant other who will (1) set appropriate limits; (2) allow those limits to be tested; and (3) either keep the limits or negotiate the limits, whichever is most appropriate for the situation. It is through the "pushing up against" that the child develops the necessary strength to make independent choices and decisions later in life. It is this very ability to say "no" (appropriately) that later allows the grown child or teen to say "no" to peer pressure, drugs, gangs, sex, and so on. (Busch, 1980; Rowe, 1989). Nature illustrates this concept with the caterpillar that eventually emerges as a butterfly. If the cocoon was cut open, and

the caterpillar was allowed to emerge prematurely without the struggle of pushing up against and breaking out of the cocoon, the butterfly would not be able to fly. It is in the very struggle of pushing up against and breaking out of the cocoon that the butterfly develops the muscles and strength to fly. Take away the struggle, and one takes away the butterfly's opportunity to be able to fly.

What is learned helplessness? It is the direct opposite of the fifth lifelong psychological need—the need to know that an individual can have an impact upon his environment as well as on the significant individuals in that person's life. When this need is no longer met, an individual loses hope. At this point, the individual comes to believe deep in his/her soul that no matter what the individual might do, it will not make a difference; this is learned helplessness. In a marriage or relationship, a divorce illustrates learned helplessness—the belief that no matter what the individual does, it will not have an impact upon the relationship. As a result, the individual gives up, and divorce is imminent. In the workplace, the concept of learned helplessness is illustrated as well. When an employee no longer believes that he/she can have an impact on the immediate work environment, then the employee suffers "burnout" and gives up. This individual no longer brings new ideas or proposes new projects to the supervisors because deep down the employee already knows that the "powers that be" will do nothing with the new ideas or proposals.In life, suicide illustrates the concept of learned helplessness—the belief that no matter what the individual does, it will not make any difference in that person's quality of life or in that individual's ability to find any amount of joy in life. In each instance—divorce, burnout, or suicide—the belief that nothing can be done to change the person's immediate environment causes a person to literally give up. Without the inner belief and the outward reinforcement that what an individual wants, thinks, or dreams makes an impact upon the immediate environment, that person will cease any attempt to bring about a change in his/her world. In time, that individual will simply cease to "be" (Seligman, 1975).

The final lifelong psychological need is the need to merge—the need to be totally one with another person. This is the need to be able

to turn oneself over to another person in times of great pain or great joy, assured that one will not be hurt in the process. Each individual craves a safe place or a person with whom true vulnerability is welcomed, heard, and honored. Created as social beings, individuals yearn to be with others both in times of great joy and in times of great pain. This merger makes the joy more full and the pain more bearable. Where does a child naturally first run to seek merger—to the child's mother. Although children may outgrow the immediate need to run to mother, individuals never outgrow the strong need to merge in moments of great joy or great pain (Bowlby, 1988; Cline, 1992; Garbarino, 1999; Poland & McCormick, 1999).

Summary

How vital is it for a child to have these six lifelong needs met? Is it truly a matter of life or death? It is so strong that if a child cannot find a way to have these six needs met appropriately, the child will find a way to have them met inappropriately. The need for affirmation will be met in seeking the approval from those individuals that others deem unacceptable. If the "acceptable" will not affirm a child, then the "unacceptable" will quickly and gladly fill this need. The need for someone to idealize will be met through gangs, the cult, where the gang or cult leader will provide the strong person to whom the individual runs in time of need. The gang or cult will also provide a place of belonging or twinship for the child who has no other place of belonging. Individuals who have not been allowed to push up against those in authority in a healthy way in order to meet the adversarial need will then push up against individuals, schools, and society in a rage that runs out of control. Simply look at James Byrd (the victim of racial rage) of Jasper, Texas (Pressley, 1998); Matthew Shepard (the victim of rage against homosexuality) of Laramie, Wyoming (Black, 1999); the bombing victims of Oklahoma City (Walsh, 1995); or the shooting victims of Columbine High School or Jonesboro, Arkansas (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). Individuals will find a place not only to be adversarial, but also a place to have an impact. Even having a negative impact comes closer to meeting this need

than the feeling of having a total lack of impact. Finally, one only has to look closely at each of the shooters identified in the introduction to see that each young man was an emotional island—finding no one with whom to merge in the deep abyss of pain felt by each.

Conclusion

So, what common threads can be found woven through the lives of the young men who have killed classmates in the schools throughout the United States? If one looks closely, the following interwoven threads can be identified: the voices of taunting, bullying, and harassing by classmates, instead of affirmation and validation; few strong male role models available to idealize; isolation, alienation, and an utter sense of loneliness in contrast to a sense of twinship and belonging; internalization of adversarial feelings until those feelings built into a rage that could no longer be contained and eventually erupted in violence; cries for help that had absolutely no impact upon changing these teens' immediate environments; and finally, each young man was an emotional island. Not one found a safe person to share the deep pain of the teen's young life. How potent is the impact of unmet emotional needs in the life of a child, teen, or even an adult? Is it potent enough to drive an individual to kill? Is it truly an issue of life or death? The answer, "yes," is clearly heard with each gunshot fired by a teenage shooter who kills fellow classmates.

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