Virginia Tech: Rethinking blame

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Don’t just blame somebody, resource us!

What if I told you this: The impulse to “just blame somebody” — to blame anyone including, or perhaps especially, ourselves — is the primary toxin poisoning our spiritual and psychological constitution as human beings? Would you allow, contrary to conventional wisdom, that blaming is not a necessary feature of fairness, of morality or justice? Consider the possibility that blaming is counterfeit. Pretending to be about accountability, it’s really about something more pernicious, even sinister.

Deep justice knows something better about human nature than mere blame can ever acknowledge, something more true about our common humanity — our co-humanity with one another. That deeper truth is something like this declaration I learned from one of my teachers, Harvey Jackins, founder and chief theoretician of Re-evaluation Counseling: “Every single human being, when the entire situation is taken into account, has always, at every moment of the past, done the very best that he or she could do, and so deserves neither blame nor reproach from anyone, including self. This, in particular, is true of you.”

I’ve been invited to reflect on the Virginia Tech massacre and on the college student who perpetrated such a horrendous atrocity. And I’ve chosen to do so through the lens of the preceding quotation. How dare I do so? I dare on the basis of these hypotheses informed both by my studies and experience:

• **Blame and self-blame account for the kind of mental state that leads to such atrocious actions;**

• **Intervention resources competent to dissolve the blame/self-blame dynamic can prevent such behavior;**

• **The wellspring of that behavior is not something that distinguishes perpetrators from the rest of us — their mental health profile or the pathology of mass murderers. Rather it is something they share in common with the rest of us; something we can not ordinarily bear to know about our perpetrators / ourselves;**

• **Just blaming perpetrators succumbs to the very dynamic that renders us part of their dysfunction, pathology or inhumanity.**

In what follows I challenge all of us, both myself and Emory as my academic community, to bear this kind of trans-disciplinary knowledge, to bear to know this “something” that we share with the Virginia Tech gunman, Seung-Hui Cho.

In searching for that “something” such hypotheses serve as groundwork for a phenomenology of perpetrators. Phenomenology as a discipline strives to predate or resource explanations with a prior moment of description. Prior description can allow a phenomenon to manifest itself as a subject in its own right, not simply as an object at our disposal. Thus phenomenology inserts a crucial interval, enjoining us to put aside our prejudgments about the data.

Here I’m greatly instructed by the classic text often read by our religion majors and in religious studies programs across the nation, authored by the celebrated Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber: “I and Thou.”
“When I confront a human being as my Thou and speak the basic word I-Thou to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things . . .

The I of the basic word I-Thou is different from that of the basic word I-It.

The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself as a subject (of experience and use).

The I of the basic word I-Thou appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity . . .

Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos.

Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons.
One is the spiritual form of natural differentiation, the other that of natural association.

The purpose of setting oneself apart is to experience and use . . .

The purpose of relation is the relation itself . . .”

What if we dared be in relation to perpetrators, prior to merely explaining and properly restraining them as agents of crime and objects of punishment? Why is such relation so counter-conventional, even forbidding? What is it that we can hardly bear to know about them; about ourselves in relation to them?

Suggestive here is the classic poem by the popular Arabic language author of the early 20th century, Kahlil Gibran. Gibran’s relational spirituality offers a search engine for the kind of resources needed in this time of war, genocide, terrorism and the excesses of counter-terrorism. Consider Gibran’s spirituality of crime and punishment in “The Prophet.”

“Oftentimes have I heard you speak of one who commits a wrong as though he were not one of you, / but a stranger unto you and an intruder upon your world. / But I say that even as the holy and the righteous / cannot rise beyond the highest which is in each one of you, / So the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower / than the lowest which is in you also. / And as a single leaf turns not yellow but / with the silent knowledge of the whole tree, / So the wrong-doer cannot do wrong / without the hidden will of you all.”

What is this hidden will we share with our offenders? Is it not the will-to-denial — denying how deeply we need and yearn for those who have injured us to acknowledge that injury and thereby restore us? Their rage manifests their own prior inability to secure such restoration from those who have injured them. In reaction they target-out and activate the pernicious shame-rage cycle common to us all: targeting-out (rage) to relieve targeting-in (shame). On this view no human being would target-out were we not already targeting-in and, in the most extreme cases, imprisoned in abysmal, unbearable shame.

Could we observers, less traumatized by abysses of internalized blame and thus better resourced, summon the courage to take on ourselves accountability for this state of affairs? That means first facing our co-humanity with those who injure us; acknowledging there’s something we yearn for so deeply we can hardly bear admitting it. It’s the great unspeakable of human desire in the face of implacable injury and mistreatment, offense and abuse, injustice and oppression: that our offender would turn and repair their violation by according to us the dignity of being the truly valuable, worthy and desirable beings that we are. That is the secret, hidden or occluded need that we share with our offenders: the deepest human need. Desperately they seek to wrest it from their victims by violation and violence, but that form will not satisfy them. Nor will our blaming, punishing or executing them truly satisfy us. For this deep desire is granted only voluntarily, humanely, resourcefully.