

**Reflecting:**  
*Leadership after an overwhelming tragedy*

I am drafting this contribution to my *ISHN* column one week after the most horrific and devastating day of my life. It dramatically changed me forever, as well as the lives of numerous friends and colleagues. Since that day, I have tossed and turned every night, attempting to get sufficient sleep—so far to no avail.

Perhaps an attempt to put my troubling and recurring thoughts in words will be therapeutic. But as Virginia Tech President Charles Steger said the day following this tragedy, “Words are very weak symbols of our emotions.”

I expect some emotional healing to benefit from a focus on heart-warming rather than heart-wrenching sentiments. There were numerous examples of exceptional leadership.

**What Happened?**

I was driving to Virginia Tech (VT) on April 16<sup>th</sup> to teach 600 students in my Introductory Psychology class. I was anticipating a productive day, ending with a 7:00pm dinner to celebrate volunteerism throughout our campus and surrounding communities. I was thinking about my after-dinner keynote address for this event when my cell phone rang. The coordinator of our Center for Applied Behavior Systems told me to “Go home, our campus is locked down. No one can enter or leave. We’ve been instructed to stay away from windows because a gunman is loose on campus.”

In shock and disbelief, I returned to my home office and turned on the television to MSNBC live and saw, “Two students shot and killed at Virginia Tech.” Then, five minutes later the news report was revised to “20 killed at Virginia Tech.” Most readers know the rest of the story, because this worst day in VT’s 135-year history was headline

news for a week. As you already know, 28 VT students and four professors were gunned down by a 23-year-old English student from South Korea—Cho Seung-Hui.

I stayed home on Monday glued to the tube (so to speak) and finding myself in diverse and troubling person states—shock, vexation, confusion, anger, sadness, grief, disbelief, denial, and extreme sorrow. These cognitive and emotional states continue to intermittently invade my days and nights. And all of these emotions intensified on subsequent days when the media began reporting personal stories of the victims, including notable acts of heroism by some killed or injured.

### **The Post-Tragedy Convocation**

All classes were cancelled for Tuesday, and a special convocation was scheduled for 2:00pm at Cassell Coliseum—home of our “Hurrying Hokies” basketball team. I arrived at 1:15pm, only to find the 9,000-seat coliseum filled, and the overflow was lined up to enter our outdoor football stadium.

I sat in the middle of the football field, in the midst of 10,000 students, faculty, and staff, watching the large scoreboard screen. This is when I began to perceive some positive aspects of this unthinkable affliction. The campus community—a Hokie Nation—was coming together to comfort and console each other. The University motto *Ut Prosim*—“That I may serve”—was coming to life.

After our University president clarified the difficulty we all have in verbalizing the extreme emotions we’re feeling, the Governor of Virginia spoke with passion about belongingness and the need to “not lose touch with that sense of community.” Then, President Bush asserted “schools should be places of safety and sanctuary and learning,”

He encouraged us to reach out to one another with the affirmation “you have a compassionate and resilient community here at Virginia Tech.”

A rebounding and healing Hokie Nation was evidenced after the world-renowned poet and VT professor—Nikki Giovanni—delivered her rousing, almost defiant, oration. Her entire presentation appears in the sidebar.

<Insert Sidebar 1—Nikki Giovanni Speech here>

At the conclusion of Professor Giovanni’s contribution, the students inside and outside the coliseum clapped, cheered, and chanted “Let’s Go Hokies.” Perhaps some emotional healing had already begun.

### **An Emotional Vigil**

Since classes were cancelled for the rest of the week, I wondered how many would attend the 8:00pm vigil scheduled for Tuesday night, planned and organized by “Hokies United”—a student-run alliance of several VT organizations. I was amazed. Literally thousands of students, faculty, and community residents gathered on the 40-acre drillfield at the center of the VT campus. Each of us received a candle donated by local businesses, resulting in a sea of small “points of light.”

<Insert candlelight vigil photo here>

Dr. Zenobia Hikes, the VT vice president of student affairs, gave the only speech, asserting “We will move on from this, but it will take the strength of each other to do that.... We are a community of strength. We are a community of pride.... We are a community of compassion.”

Dean Hikes’ touching and heartfelt words were followed by buglers playing “taps”. Then the crowd stood silent for many minutes, holding their candles high. After

about 30 minutes, a group of students cheered “Let’s Go”, and a group in the opposing half of the field yelled “Hokies.” This chanting accelerated in volume until “Let’s Go Hokies” could seemingly be heard for miles.

### **Let the Healing Begin**

We were not the only campus to hold a vigil on Tuesday evening. Throughout Virginia and beyond, churches, colleges, and neighborhoods held candlelight vigils to grieve for the victims at VT. Many ceremonies included bells or chimes sounding 32 times for each of the fallen Hokies. Nationwide, people showed actively-caring sympathy for the pain our VT community was feeling. People near and far were wearing the gaudy orange and maroon VT colors. Our ACC sports rivalries melted away as universities expressed their condolences. A bridge at the University of Virginia was painted “Hoos for Hokies.”

The 40-acre Drillfield at the center of the campus was filled with solemn silence. The blossoming trees had black, maroon, and orange strips of cloth tied around their trunks. With classes cancelled for the entire week, VT students and faculty gathered to reflect, mourn, and attempt to heal. Some stood in circles at the center of the Drillfield, hugging, praying, and singing hymns. Others sat on the grass to watch the scene and ponder the horrible fate of their colleagues and classmates. And, hordes of journalists and TV cameras from around the world crowded in to document the events.

For many, the shock of the incident had worn off. Now, students, professors, and VT administrators were feeling the glare of unwanted media attention. A large neon orange sign read “Hokie Nation Needs to Heal. Media Stay Away.”

Thirty-three Hokie stones were placed in a semicircle around the podium at the head of the Drillfield, each topped with flowers, an American flag, and a Virginia Tech pennant. Each stone included the name of a victim, and notes and memorabilia commemorating the life of the individual represented.

Yes, there was a memorial stone for the killer, although the local newspapers reported the stones numbered 32. By Friday, however, the Hokie stone for Cho Seung-Hui was gone, but the flowers and his name card remained. Apparently, some mourners could not accept this commemoration for the gunman—and who could blame them?

I told the associate dean for the College of Science, a clinical psychologist and previously the head of our Department of Psychology, I was dedicating this book to the 32 fallen Hokies. His response, “We lost 33 Hokies on Monday.” I was surprised and astounded by this remark. “Can you forgive this killer,” I asked. He replied, “It’s not about forgiveness, but about recognizing this individual was mentally ill and his family grieves for their loss.” I walked away from this conversation thinking “Our University is so fortunate to have this individual in a key leadership position.”

### **Student-Centered**

With classes cancelled for the week, many students left campus. However, most faculty worked daily to plan for the remainder of the semester and prepare for the following week—with so many questions. How many students will return? How should grades be determined for those who return and those who do not? How can we help our colleagues and the students heal? How can we help ourselves?

The administration disseminated numerous thoughtful emails, addressing ways to aid the healing process, and detailing protocol for handling classes and assigning grades.

The fundamental principle behind these administrative decisions was specified as “student-centered.” Faculty were urged to be student-centered in all decisions involving students.

### **Email Support**

Amidst the planning and healing this week, our campus was bombarded by actively-caring voicemail, email, cards, and poster displays from other universities. Thousands of people worldwide delivered thoughtful and sympathetic email messages to individuals and to the university as a whole. A “condolence link” was established on the VT website, and before the week ended more than 25,000 entries were logged, covering 81 pages.

I personally received over 200 emails communicating concern and compassion for our plight. In addition to past students, colleagues, and current acquaintances, people whom I had never met personally, or met only once many years ago expressed sincere condolences.

Many emails to our entire University community were inspirational, desiring to be on board the VT train of collective compassion. For example, the sidebar includes excerpts from a university-wide email from West Virginia University—our arch sports rival for many years. This is only one representative example of extensive outreach in our time of need. Our campus is saturated with signs and posters filled with thousands of heartfelt notes from people reaching out to lament with us and help us heal.

<Insert Sidebar 2 – Email from a Mountaineer to a Hokie>

### **A Fault-Finding Media**

As readers are well aware, VT was besieged by the media. Throughout the first week, TV anchor persons conducted news reports from our campus—Katie Couric from CBS, Brian Williams from NBC, Greta Van Susteren from Fox, and Larry King from CNN. The clear focus of most media coverage was identifying causes of the event.

Why was the campus not locked down during the two-hour delay between the killings in the dorm and the classrooms? How was a student with a demeanor like Cho able to reach his senior year at VT? Why was Cho treated as an outpatient from the local mental health facility? How could a person adjudicated “mentally defective” purchase two hand guns? How could Cho walk across the center of campus in broad daylight with guns, several rounds of ammunition, and chains to lock the classroom building from the inside?

News reporters posed these and other fault-finding questions to campus administrators, police officers, and relevant faculty. And they asked friends and family of the victims such loaded questions as “Are you going to return to Virginia Tech after this disastrous event?” “Are you angry with the university for their inadequacy in preventing this incident?” Larry King asked a graduate student who got his undergraduate degree at Penn State, “Why would you select Virginia Tech after attending Penn State?”

The most despicable stunt was showing the videos Cho had sent NBC. Instead of turning the horrid scenes to the FBI and describing the content in a news report, NBC followed the killer’s wishes and made him infamous. This was a clear lack of leadership and emotional intelligence. But, Bill O’Reilly of Fox news applauded NBC, saying “We need to see the face of evil.”

In spite of the media “witch hunts” and VT slamming, the students’ reactions were overwhelmingly positive. “Of course, I’m returning to Virginia Tech, I love this place”, “We don’t blame anyone but Cho for this terrible happening”, “We Hokies stick together, and we will survive.”

### **The Measure of Leadership**

What does all of this have to do with leadership? I say “everything.” In their *Measure of a Leader*<sup>12</sup>, Aubrey and James Daniels claim the best way to determine the quality of leadership is to evaluate the behavior of the followers. I discuss this measurement concept further in Chapter 3, Part 4. Here I only want to make the point that the unity and fierce loyalty shown by those interviewed by the fault-finding media reveals strong leadership at all levels of our university community.

The Hokie spirit, inspired by leaders with clarity, focus, and sensitive perceptiveness is capsulated by the following excerpts from a campus-wide email from our Dean of the College of Science: “Virginia Tech is still a vibrant and nurturing community.... We are bruised but we are not daunted. Even after the reporters leave, and national and international attention turns elsewhere, we will still be here for one another, and we will remember.”

### **The Week After**

On April 23, one week after the VT massacre, classes resumed. The preparedness for this week indicated leadership. More than 250 mental health counselors, including several graduates of our Ph.D. program in clinical psychology, traveled long distances to be available for our students. Every class in which the victims were enrolled had at least

one counselor and staff volunteer on hand throughout the class. Three counselors were assigned to each of my large introductory psychology classes.

But was all the preparedness necessary? Would VT classes be well attended? Answer: “Yes indeed.” We were all surprised to see so many students in our classes. Practically everyone returned and attended their Monday classes—another measure of campus leadership.

At 9:45am, the campus held another special memorial service. Thousands gathered on the Drillfield and surrounded the semicircle of 33 Hokie stones. After a moment of silence, a white helium-filled balloon was released about every 30 seconds from one of the Hokie stones. After each balloon rose from its memorial site, a loud bell sounded. After 32 balloons were released; a galaxy of at least a thousand orange and maroon balloons was discharged. A group of students attempted to start the “Let’s Go Hokies” cheer, but it fizzled. This was not a time for celebrating the Hokie Spirit.

### **Exemplary Leadership**

Throughout our ordeal, which is far from over, we all witnessed numerous examples of leadership from every dimension of our campus community. And, one leader’s actively caring efforts enabled helpful leadership from others. Here’s one example:

On Monday afternoon April 16, Tod Whitehurst, a VT employee and a nationally certified massage therapist, was sent home from the devastated campus. He immediately got on the phone to local members of the massage community and to the Blue Ridge School of Massage & Yoga, where he is a part-time instructor. He and Valarie Beasley, CMT, also a graduate of the school and a

member of the local Red Cross, had massage therapists working in churches, at the Inn at Virginia Tech, where grieving families were gathering, at the university's Cook Counseling Center, and other Virginia Tech locations within 24 hours of the tragedy. Both Tod and Valerie spent long hours at Virginia Tech, as well, providing nurture and stress relief to students, families, staff, faculty, EMTs, police, counselors, and clergy.

On-site massage continued at various locations on and off campus through May 10, with about 30 southwest Virginia massage therapists participating in the volunteer effort, and providing housing for massage therapists from around the state and from as far away as California, Maine, and South Carolina, who had traveled to help ease the pain of the community.

Bottom Line: It takes world-class leadership to bring the best out of people in such trying circumstances as we experienced at Virginia Tech. I am extremely proud to be a 38-year veteran of our Hokie Nation, and I am eternally grateful for the special leadership that enables and empowers us all to be the best we can be. We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech.

**Words: 2573**

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics, including personality factors, to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's books on People-Based Safety, including his latest *Leading People-Based Safety*. For more information, please log on to [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com) or call SPS at 540-951-7233.

**Sidebar 1**

**We are Virginia Tech**

**By: Nikki Giovanni**

We are Virginia Tech.

We are sad today, and we will be sad for quite a while. We are not moving on, we are embracing our mourning.

We are Virginia Tech.

We are strong enough to stand tall tearlessly, we are brave enough to bend to cry, and we are sad enough to know that we must laugh again.

We are Virginia Tech.

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 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.

We are Virginia Tech.

The Hokie Nation embraces our own and reaches out with open heart and hands to those who offer their hearts and minds. We are strong, and brave, and innocent, and unafraid. We are better than we think and not quite what we want to be. We are alive to the imaginations and the possibilities. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all our sadness.

We are the Hokies.

We will prevail.

We will prevail.

We will prevail.

We are Virginia Tech.

**Sidebar 2**

**From a Mountaineer to a Hokie** (excerpted from an email received April 25, 2007 from West Virginia University)

We Mountaineers are with you, Virginia Tech....

In Morgantown, the Hokie-hating capital of the world, Virginia Tech football jerseys have been hung on the concrete parking at the Business and Economics Loop, banners with the "VT" logo have been laid out in our student union and hundreds of Mountaineers have gathered around Woodburn Hall—not dressed in blue and gold, but in maroon and orange.... Your story pulled on our heartstrings. Your pain became our pain, your city our city, and your struggle our struggle... not fallen Hokies, but fallen friends.... We saw your crying faces, Virginia Tech and we mourn with you. We mourn the empty holidays you will have to face, the weddings you will never attend, the dreams that have been vanquished.

We mourn with your administration, the members of which will spend the rest of their lives with unnecessary guilt, even though they did all they could do.

We mourn with your campus police, heroes who put their lives on the line.

We mourn with the parents.... We even mourn for the mother of Cho-Seung Hui, who will spend the rest of her life knowing that her son pained a nation and will forever wonder what she did wrong.

Virginia Tech, we are mourning with you—but we are also celebrating, for the heart and soul we have seen in Blacksburg gives us hope that there is goodness in the world, after all.

Do you realize what strength you have demonstrated, Virginia Tech?

Do you realize how beautifully you have banded together?

Do you realize what courage you have shown?

Do you realize the inspiration you have provided?

Watching the Hokie Nation band together this week, I wonder if we in Morgantown could have found the courage to stand in the path of a killer.

Could we have shown such strength? Could we have been so selfless and supportive of our friends? Could we have projected the same unity? Could we emulate the humanity—the goodness and the love—that emanated from our friends in Blacksburg?...

Hokies, in the face of such horror and such emotion, you should be proud of the way you handled yourselves this week. Your brothers in Morgantown applaud you for your strength, and we stand behind you in your recovery.