When good people happen to bad things: Student learning in unfortunate times

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As a new member of the Virginia Tech community, Frank Shushok encourages us to recognize that tragedy, albeit incredibly unfortunate and difficult, provides a temporary openness to the bigger questions of life and living.

By Frank Shushok, Jr.

WHEN GOOD PEOPLE HAPPEN TO BAD THINGS
Student Learning in Unfortunate Times

IT WAS THE SPRING of 1990 and “Diadeloso” (the day of the bear) at Baylor University, where I was wrapping up my junior year. This special day was part of a long-standing tradition at Baylor in which classes are canceled and the campus bustles with activities for students, most of which are coordinated by a student organization called the Baylor Chamber of Commerce. Scott Adams, that year’s Diadeloso chair, had become my friend during the first few weeks of my college experience. Although Scott and I had gone our separate ways as our undergraduate years unfolded, I held Scott in high regard and looked forward to our unplanned encounters around campus here and there. By late afternoon on that day, Diadeloso appeared to be yet another successful event. Scott was riding in the back of a pickup truck charged with collecting signs and other materials that had been used during the day. While Scott was holding a sign, a strong gust of wind surprised him, lifting him from the truck and depositing him headfirst on the road. Scott never regained consciousness.

UNFORTUNATE EVENTS THAT OPEN LEARNING WINDOWS WIDE

I CAN STILL PICTURE MYSELF at the moment I heard the news of Scott’s death. It was devastating. One minute, I was an invincible twenty-year-old college student. A moment later, the reality of life and death engulfed me. I was sad, confused, and overwhelmed by questions—big questions. Why did this happen? When will I die? What is the purpose of life? Am I living life well? Why am I so sad? I was not one
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of Scott’s close friends or a roommate or a member of his student organization. My lack of an obvious relationship to Scott meant that no one checked in with me. I remember feeling lonely but also embarrassed by my emotion. The invincibility I had embraced as a young adult was shattered by the tragedy at hand, and I found myself open to thinking about life’s bigger questions. This passing life—one that looked a lot like mine—pressed me into being vulnerable and open to learning about new parts of myself.

Today, as an administrator and faculty member, I wonder what those in my position at the time of Scott’s death were considering as they prepared to respond. Of course, those most directly and obviously affected by the accident received great care and attention. I suspect, too, that there was a review of risk management procedures and protocols, as well as coordination of the memorial services and other appropriate formalities. But what about learning? While campus tragedies create difficult circumstances that we must confront immediately, is it possible that they also provide opportunities for student learning and growth that would be unavailable under ordinary circumstances?

Ut Prosim: That I May Serve

“UT PROSIM” is the motto of Virginia Tech. This Latin phrase, which translates “that I may serve,” advocates a vision for the outcome of education that is other-centered. While most students enter our college and university campuses with the aspiration of building a life for themselves, my greatest hope is that each student will learn to embrace the idea that his or her education—and the life he or she builds—is best spent when it is given away in service to making the world more just and humane.

This summer, I began a new administrative post at Virginia Tech. Like so many around the country, I had developed a profound respect for how this campus community responded to the unimaginable tragedy that resulted in the deaths of thirty-two of its members in April 2007. Even now, as I comfortably traverse the Virginia Tech campus, it seems unfathomable that such an event could happen within the confines of this quintessential college town surrounded by the farmlands and mountains of southwestern Virginia.

The April 16, 2007, tragedy at Virginia Tech brought about a nationwide review of campus safety and risk management policies. There is little doubt that colleges and universities across the country are now safer and more prepared to prevent and respond to campus violence and tragedy. While the scale of the immeasurable pain inflicted at Virginia Tech reformatted our imagination, the unfortunate reality is that tragedy, as a reality of life, is something all campuses confront. Due to the shootings at Virginia Tech, the daily routine of students was halted and the bigger questions of life became fodder for conversation. One brief conversation with a student caught my attention when he recollected, “The whole thing made me question the purpose of my life... thank goodness that I had good friends and faculty to help think through these things with me. I changed my major, changed my relationships, changed my priorities, and I started taking the Virginia Tech mission, ‘that I may serve,’ to heart.”

For young adults and, therefore, for all of us, Sharon Daloz Parks writes, “There is much at stake in how they [students] are heard, understood, and met by the adult world in which they are seeking participation, purpose, meaning, and faith to live by” (p. 3). Students appear especially open to big questions and life learning in the midst of tragedy, and when these moments occur, making space to engage is important. In the introduction of a special edition of About Campus addressing the Virginia Tech tragedy, Peggy Meszaros poignantly reminds

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us that “[w]hen tragedy strikes, our first inclination may be to quickly get beyond it and move on with our lives. This is a predictable reaction but not one that allows us to stop, reflect, and learn about our communities” (p. 1). Whether they are dealing with loss on a scale like Virginia Tech’s tragedy, or the more frequent losses that all of our campuses face, students are listening and ready to learn what such moments can teach us.

While it is important for faculty and staff to learn new ways to manage risks, perhaps campuses should place as much emphasis on what students can learn about the nature, meaning, and purpose of life when unfortunate circumstances emerge. Too often, our attention is disproportionately directed toward institutional learning that improves policy, procedure, and immediate response to those most closely affected by an unfortunate event. However, an important role for those of us who work at colleges and universities is remembering that these difficult moments may provide powerful opportunities to educate both inside and outside the classroom by convening purposeful conversation and orchestrating learning-rich environments. In The Higher Learning in America, Robert Maynard Hutchins writes, “Thinking cannot proceed divorced from the facts and from experience” (pp. 89–90). The goal is to point all resources in the same direction: student learning. And although it is rarely considered as such, tragedy, albeit incredibly unfortunate and difficult, is a special, unique, and powerful time to invite students to learn about some of the most important questions related to living: Who are we? Why are we here? How can we make the world more humane and just?

A LEARNING LENS IN LOSS

Although some students are disproportionately affected by tragedies because of their proximity to those involved, such events profoundly influence many in the campus community. More important, the way institutions respond to the needs of the broader campus population influences the extent to which students are able to learn in the midst of their temporary openness. Robert Neimeyer, Anna Laurie, Tara Mehta, Heather Hardison, and Joseph Currier provide an overview of research that describes how students seek to find meaning after experiencing loss. Moreover, Neimeyer and his colleagues encourage college campuses to explore institution-based strategies for facilitating sense making; in some circumstances, community-based sense-making activities allow community members to create shared meanings. “Deaths, particularly when they attract considerable media attention (as the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech did), challenge not just individual students’ sense of themselves but also the campus community’s sense of its collective identity” (p. 36). Lori Patton’s About Campus article, “Learning Through Crisis,” reiterates this point: “Unfortunately, when conversations about human crisis are ignored or rushed through, the learning process is stunted. . . . Furthermore, students lose the chance to uncover deeply embedded assumptions and values that guide how they view themselves and others” (p. 11).

MENTORING COMMUNITIES:
THINKING IN CIRCLES

If a campus community is a large circle, imagine dozens of smaller circles within the boundary of the large one. Each of these smaller circles can be conceptualized as a community of care in which each and every student has the opportunity to know other students, faculty, and staff, as well as be known by them. In the best of circumstances, these communities of care are multigenerational and longitudinal—that is, they consist of all types of students and span multiple years. Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini provide compelling evidence from three decades of research on student outcomes that meaningful interaction with peers and faculty, especially over time and in the context of community,
makes an important difference for students and their learning. The more successful that colleges and universities, whether large or small, are in organizing a campus into circles, the greater the potential to facilitate learning about topics such as meaning, purpose, civility, diversity, and community. And when these circles are in place, the task of mobilizing to help students translate tragedy into learning is a much easier endeavor.

I recently heard the director of Virginia Tech’s honors program recount the enormous loss of his student who resided in one of Virginia Tech’s honors houses. As the news traveled, faculty, staff, and students instinctively retreated to their houses, communities of care, or as Sharon Daloz Parks would call them, mentoring communities, where they grieved together, explored life’s most difficult questions, and chased an understanding of the meaning for their lives in the face of tremendous uncertainty. Parks writes, “A mentoring culture inspires young adults by offering worthy images that . . . have the power to shape into one the whole force field of our experience, thereby evoking moral vision and a sense of vocation that inspires the finest aspirations” (p. 217). In short, these communities help students translate experiences, both the good and the worst of all, into a mission for their life—a vocation.

During the time of crisis at Virginia Tech, mentors in the honors house facilitated meaningful dialogue, afforded uncanny care, and, perhaps unwittingly, took advantage of the learning window afforded by unfortunate times. When I contrast this story with my own loss of a friend during my undergraduate years, I recognize that I lacked a community of care. How many students on our campus also lack such a community? Classroom teachers, residence hall directors, and student organization advisors, among others, have a rich opportunity to gather students together in times of campus crisis, even if the students are not directly affected, and help them learn in the midst of uncertainty. Nevertheless, we ought not to wait for tragedy to call forth these mentoring environments. John Tagg admonishes, “The ubiquitous features of the organizations for which we work become invisible to us, and we cease to notice how powerfully they affect our lives, and our students’ lives” (p. 4). Although it is unpleasant to admit it, it may take a campus tragedy to wrestle loose our lenses so that we can better see that many students lack membership in a learning, caring, mentoring community. Can we be satisfied with this reality?

**Dialogue: Opening to Powerful New Possibilities**

In his 1998 book *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*, Stephen Carter offers concrete suggestions for reconstructing civility in society. In fact, Carter’s fifteen rules for reconstructing civility in America are powerful tools for engaging students in dialogue about nurturing a campus ethos of care. Students seem especially open to considering such ideas in the months that follow a campus tragedy, and as students think about campus life and beyond, the innovations that result can blossom into climate-changing movements. It is precisely such dialogue that has nurtured students’ commitment to creating an actively caring environment at Virginia Tech.

A group of Virginia Tech students initiated a movement with the mission “to change the world with small intentional acts of kindness.” They handed out green “actively caring” wristbands as symbols that students were “empowered to actively care by doing an act of kindness for someone else.” When students witness someone else being kind, they are encouraged to thank the person for this kindness, offer him or her their wristband, and ask the person to “pay it forward” when next he or she witnesses an act of kindness. I encourage you to read some of the student stories that are documented at [www.Activelycaring4people.org](http://www.Activelycaring4people.org). These actively caring students have discovered the real meaning of civility—that is, as Stephen Carter suggests, “the set of sacrifices we make for the sake of our common
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journey with others, and out of love and respect for the very idea that there are others” (p. 23).

**Five Things Campuses Can Do to Strengthen Learning in Preparation for Times of Tragedy**

1. Take a serious look at how your campus is organized and begin efforts to ensure that every student is in a mentoring community. Although it is not specifically directed at learning in times of tragedy, John Tagg’s book *The Learning Paradigm College* offers a critical look at how colleges and universities need to be reorganized to better facilitate learning.

2. During a time of stability, develop a mission-specific curriculum of questions that can be used to facilitate student learning in times of uncertainty. In short, given your college or university’s mission, what questions will best assist students in exploring questions of vocation, calling, or meaning and purpose? Good educators regularly ask questions such as “What is the purpose of life, and how can we help students discover it?” “For what goods or ends do we teach?” Such questions are ideally raised within the context of communities that share a substantial vision of what human life at its best is or might be.

3. Engage members of the faculty and student affairs staff in a collaborative, interdisciplinary think tank to consider where circles of care exist on your campus and to train facilitators to use the mission-specific question curriculum from item 2. Reading Sharon Daloz Parks’s book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* is a good starting point for this activity.

4. Engage students in discussion about civility—especially early in their academic experience. First-year experience courses, residence hall communities, and leadership classes are excellent venues in which to introduce the topic. Stephen Carter’s book *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* provides an excellent framework for such conversations.

5. Create a campus ethos that teaches all members of the community that being vulnerable with their feelings, emotions, and life circumstances is valuable behavior. As part of matriculation to the community, offer faculty, staff, and students a question that will be known to all as a signal that honesty and vulnerability is appreciated, for example, “How are you doing—really?”

**Reframing Tragedy**

*Each of us* at some point has asked the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Even while asking it, most know that finding an answer to this question is not likely in our future. Our best responsible action, then, is to manage our risks to prevent future bad things from occurring, to the greatest extent possible. Risk management, policy development, and increased security are all important responses to making our college and university environments safer. However, might a slight reordering of the words in the phrase help us remember that when good people happen to bad things, the pain that is too frequently a reality of this world can be a valuable conduit for learning? This learning, no doubt, is hard, but it can teach us—and our students—to better understand our humanity. And our humanity calls on higher education to face tragedy head-on in order to make the world more humane or even, perhaps, less tragic. Though some bad things will always be bad things, what if our efforts to learn in the face of tragedy actually bring about a goodness that is seldom experienced outside the confines of tragedy?

**Notes**


