

Ignore the gunman behind UCC shootings? Just the opposite

BY JASON RENAUD
AND JENNY WESTBERG
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNISTS

Jason Renaud and Jenny Westberg are with the Mental Health Association of Portland. This column was inspired by a keynote address to the supporters of Street Roots by Multnomah County Chief Operating Officer Marissa Madrigal.

In the days since the Umpqua Community College mass murder, communities grieve, mourners weep, survivors twist in anguish, and we — all of us — grope for answers. “How will we get through today? How can we face what might happen tomorrow?”

Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin thinks he has the solution, which he expounded on cue for any journalists with pen in hand. Hanlin believes we heal best when we embrace denial, ignorance and the virtues of silence — starting with the shooter’s name.

“Let me be very clear: I will not name the shooter,” Hanlin said. “I don’t want to glorify the shooter, I don’t want to glorify his name, I don’t want to glorify his cause.”

He urged the media to “avoid using (the name), repeating it, or engaging in any glorification and sensationalization of him.” Of course, the media took the non-disclosure as a challenge, and they had the name later that day: Chris Harper-Mercer.

Hanlin, apparently, believes suspects of certain crimes should not just be prosecuted and punished; they should be forgotten, disappeared, scrubbed from public memory, ciphers who never existed — and then we can heal. That forgetting a name, a crime, an existence, will somehow salve our wounds, somehow comfort the terrorized.

In M. Night Shyamalan’s “The Village,” there are monsters in the nearby woods — monsters that can never be mentioned or named, lest an uneasy truce be broken. To keep the monsters at bay, the villagers refer to them only as “those we don’t speak of.”

Every village creates monsters.

But the sheriff’s advice on keeping our monsters at bay is completely wrong. We need to know everything possible there is to know about Chris Harper-Mercer in order to interrupt the next Harper-Mercer. The stop is not heroic; it does not happen at the firing line; it can only happen hours and days and weeks prior, with careful planning by families, friends, medical and social-service experts, and trained police officers. We can plan, anticipate and act — if, and

only if, we know.

George Santayana told us we’re doomed to repeat what we forget. We suggest you reject oversimplification, false solutions and repetitive doom, and remember Chris Harper-Mercer.

Will we ever know entirely why Chris Harper-Mercer decided one day to shoot strangers? No. Not really. Below, we’ll make a guess, but an inner aspect of his terror is the ambiguity he left behind. It’s simple to get lost in the ambiguity, and people will insert their political agenda in the void. But collectively we can be wise, rise above the prurient post-mortem, and seek a better solution.

The why is unimportant. What caused him to shoot strangers is very important.

Let’s get the uncomfortable facts on the table.

Harper-Mercer identified as mixed race; his father is white, and his mother is black. There are millions of non-white Americans who don’t shoot anyone. Being mixed race isn’t why he shot strangers. You can split hairs and find reasons to be racist — but you’d be wrong and still a racist.

Harper-Mercer was isolated and angry. There are millions of isolated, angry young men in America who don’t shoot anyone. Being isolated and angry doesn’t predict a shooter.

Harper-Mercer was a gun nut. America is home to millions of gun nuts. Even mixed-race, isolated gun nuts. Lots. As investigators dig, they will probably find some of those guns shouldn’t have been sold to Harper. Reasonable people, like our president, will opine Americans have so many guns that we as a nation are unsafe and gun regulation is important and necessary legislation. He’s right. We agree. Guns should be regulated — within reason. But it’s unlikely any level of regulation would have slowed down Chris Harper-Mercer.

Being a gun nut alone didn’t make Harper-Mercer dangerous.

Chris Harper-Mercer had bipolar disorder — a severe and difficult-to-treat mental illness, which, if left untreated or poorly treated, can manifest delusions, fears and hatreds powerful beyond any media pundit analysis. People acutely affected by bipolar disorder have very little control over their impulses and, when sick, will do seemingly crazy things, like buy five cars, have sex with seven people, paint half a house —

or kill 10 people — including himself — wound 9 others, and terrify a quiet rural community.

Did his bipolar disorder cause Harper-Mercer to shoot strangers in a peaceful college campus in rural Oregon on a sunny summer afternoon? By itself, no. Millions of Americans have bipolar disorder — even untreated or poorly treated bipolar disorder — and those millions barrel through life without ever deciding it’s a good time to shoot strangers.

Can we hold a person with mental illness responsible for their crimes? Yes, of course. We do it all the time. Our jails and prisons are filled with people with untreated alcoholism, addiction and mental illness.

But it’s shortsighted to hold only the individual accountable. In a sense, Donald Trump is right. Crazy people are going to do what they’re going to do. So the first question is, what can we, as thoughtful, planful people, do to solve a complex tangle of unknowns? We collectively miss the opportunity to solve the problem if we skip the larger solution, which is effective and welcoming treatments for mental illness, alcoholism and addiction.

The harder question is, whom do we hold responsible for the fact that Harper-Mercer was sick with his bipolar disorder and unable to control his impulses? That responsibility is held by the people of Oregon and its elected representatives, who for decades have refused to provide those effective and welcoming treatments for mental illness.

It’s our fault. Our fault.

But it’s not one thing or another. It’s a combination of at least several things. If we find the combination, we’ll find the next Harper-Mercer. If we look, and look in the right place, if we say his name and think compassionately of his parents, if we don’t give up — we aren’t doomed.

These tragedies are predictable and preventable. It’s up to us.

The why is unimportant. What caused him to shoot strangers is very important. Let’s get the uncomfortable facts on the table.

Freshly cooked delicious meals in Old Town Portland
Served with love since 1979
Cash, EBT or Green Card - All Are Welcome

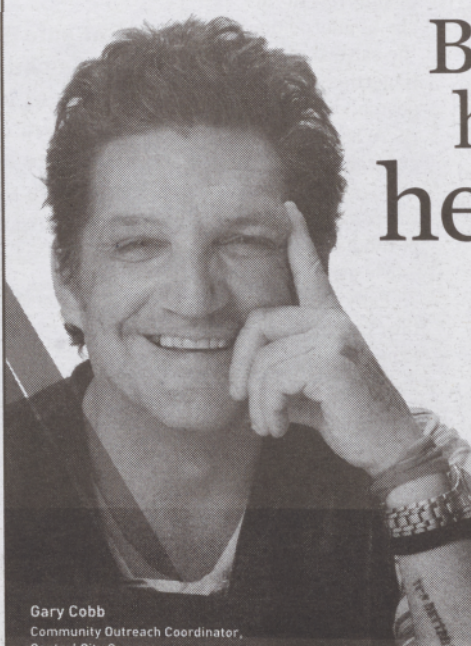


New Hours!
Tuesday - Saturday
10am - 2:30pm

133 NW 6th Ave, Portland, OR • 503-222-5694

SISTERS
OF THE
ROAD.org

Better
health
here for
you



Delivering physical, behavioral health and dental health care for over 230,000 children, families and individuals on the Oregon Health Plan in the Portland Tri-County area.

Together we are **health share**
Health Share of Oregon

Gary Cobb
Community Outreach Coordinator,
Central City Concern

www.healthshareoregon.org