

OPINION

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How Do We Keep Missing the Signs?

Fallout from the Virginia Tech Massacre

BY GLORIA MORROW

At Virginia Tech, the lives of thousands were changed drastically when a troubled 23 year old man acted out everyone's worse nightmare.

According to the Associated Press, the shooter displayed signs of mental instability. For example, he was described as "troubled," with a past history of writings that may have raised red flags about his mental stability and overall mental well-being.

He was referred to the counseling center on campus, but refused to give permission for counselors to review his writings and other pertinent documents, and he also

refused to give any personal information about himself. He was also described as a loner with few if any who knew much about him. It almost appears that there were signs,

the impact of mental illness on one's life as well as those mentally ill people we come into contact with.

As we listen to the news coverage of this horrific event and other

mentative with odd behavior, may be suffering from clinical depression, such as bi-polar disorder that can contribute to both homicidal and suicidal thoughts, feelings and behaviors. These individuals can also be present with psychotic thinking [hearing voices] and paranoia, which can cause them to feel threatened or fearful, resulting in the need to protect oneself from the world.

Others may be suffering from a thought disorder, such as paranoid schizophrenia, and without the benefit of medication of either of those disorders, one can be at risk of harming him or herself and/or others.

Thus, it is often our propensity to simply write these folks off as crazy or odd, and neglect making sure they are receiving consistent treatment for their problems. Furthermore, in a society where folks are much too busy to check up on one another, even in academic institutions where therapy has been

recommended, it is easy for someone who is really sick to fly beneath the radar. When people [especially young people] are isolated and their only friend is a violent video game, they may be more at risk of acting out in violent ways, especially if they are not doing well emotionally.

What can we learn from this tragedy?

We must admit that there are people who are suffering from mental illness in our society. We continue to be in denial about the realities of mental illness, how it develops and how it can be treated.

Rather than writing hurting people off or ignoring them, we must work harder to get them the appropriate help. Once referrals have been made, good follow up must occur to make sure they are in treatment and their progress is monitored.

Second, we must help people to become connected to other people.

Everyone needs a good support system in order to survive. Man was not designed to live alone and those who have no one to provide them support and nurturance may be highly vulnerable to giving up hope. When one gives up hope, the chances become very slim that one will be able to exercise compassion and care for others.

Third, we must do more to fight the sale of guns in our country. It is amazing to me that an already violent society makes it even more possible for unstable people to purchase tools to promote violence.

I am saddened because of the tragedy at Virginia Tech, but I become saddened every time I hear of a senseless killing on a small or large scale, both for the victims and the perpetrators; because I know that somewhere along the line, we keep missing the signs.

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although subtle, that this troubled young man could have really been in trouble and in danger of hurting himself or others.

So the question for the day is how do we keep missing the signs? Without placing blame on anyone, I think it is very easy to miss the signs and symptoms of mental illness because we tend to minimize

events of this nature throughout history, it is much easier to view the perpetrator as a depraved animal with a lack of regard for human life than it is to view him or her as a mentally sick individual who somehow slipped through the cracks of a faulty mental health system.

Persons who tend to be isolated and alone, easily aggravated, argu-

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Reform Ex-Felon Voting Laws

Bans weaken democratic spirit

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

In 13 states, a felony conviction can result in loss of voting rights even after a sentence has been completed; those rights are often for life.

In one of the most ex-



treme cases, individuals convicted of a felony in Florida are stripped of their civil and voting rights, even after they complete their sentences.

For example, a 22-year-old in Florida, with no prior record, who is convicted of felony drug possession will permanently lose the right to vote unless he can obtain a pardon from the governor.

Such controversial bans have served to disenfranchise millions of Americans — most of them African-American — and have served to weaken the nation's democratic spirit.

Florida's Republican Governor Charlie Crist, however, has shown great courage by publicly announcing he will push his state legislature to reform the felon voting laws. Other states are taking similar steps to restore ex-felon's voting rights. It's about time.

state to automatically restore felon's civil rights after they finish their sentences. This could restore civil rights to as many as 1 million ex-felons in the state. In Maryland, a bill that would end the three-year waiting period and lifetime voting ban on certain felony convictions awaits the governor's approval. In North Carolina, a bill that would reform that state's felon's voting laws has been introduced.

These states are taking an important step in restoring true democracy to this country, ensuring every American has a voice.

If Florida's ex-felons were allowed to

About 13 percent of the country's disenfranchised voters are black men.

It is estimated that more than 5 million Americans are unable to vote because of laws that prohibit voting by people with felony convictions. While such policies have existed in some form or another since America was founded, many of the laws that disenfranchise ex-felons were used to keep recently freed blacks from voting.

In some southern states, for example, legislators restricted voting privileges by passing laws that restricted voting privileges for individuals who committed crimes that were believed to be more likely committed by blacks. And those laws, no matter how old, continue to keep blacks away from the polls: about 13 percent of the country's disenfranchised voters are black men. Many states, folding under the pressure of civil rights organizations, are now working to overturn laws that disenfranchise ex-felons. In Florida, the governor wants the

vote, the controversial 2000 presidential elections could have turned out very differently. Perhaps this country, 7 years later, would not be wasting money and sacrificing lives in Iraq, protecting the wealthy with tax breaks, while neglecting the poor and squeezing out the middle class.

The work of groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and the Sentencing Project, along with the support of Americans who saw the injustices these laws wrought, have forced these states to see it is time to reform their antiquated felon voting laws.

Hopefully, governors in other states that disenfranchise ex-felons will follow suit. Thanks to the power of protest, America is one step closer to becoming the democracy she longs to be.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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