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WHAT HAPPENED AT COLUMBINE?

It was April 20th, 1999, the day that the corridors, the classrooms, and the library of Columbine High School reverberated with the sound of gunshots. Two students, consumed by rage and armed with an arsenal of guns and explosives, went on a rampage, killing a teacher and several of their fellow students. They then turned their guns on themselves. After the shooting stopped, the building was eventually secured by a SWAT team. They found fifteen people dead (including the two shooters) and twenty-three more who needed to be hospitalized-some with severe wounds. It was the worst school massacre in our nation's history.

As horrendous as it was, we now know that the carnage could have been much worse. The two shooters made videotapes a few weeks before their massacre, and from these we have learned that they had carefully planned the event several months in advance. They had actually placed three sets of pipe bombs that failed to go off: One set a few miles from the school was intended to explode first and distract police by keeping them busy away from the school; a second set was supposed to go off in the cafeteria and kill several students there, but it was also supposed to cause hundreds of terrified students to evacuate the building where Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold would be waiting to gun them down; a third set was planted in their cars in the school parking lot, these timed to explode after the police and paramedics had arrived on the scene, creating more chaos and increasing the number of casualties. The videotapes show the two perpetrators gleefully predicting that, before the day was over, they would kill 250 people.

Try to imagine that you were the parent of a student at Columbine High School. That morning you lovingly packed a lunch for your daughter and sent her off to school before going about your own business. You were content in the belief that her high school was a safe and secure place. So there you are-listening to music on the radio while in your office, writing a memo to the boss, or driving home from the supermarket-when suddenly the music is interrupted by a news bulletin. The somber and somewhat rattled reporter makes the following announcement: "There has been a shooting at Columbine High School. Several students appear to have been killed or seriously wounded. Police have surrounded the school but have not yet entered. The gunmen are roaming free, armed with automatic weapons and explosives. Some students have managed to escape unharmed but most are still trapped in the school at the mercy of the gunmen."

I have four children and five grandchildren, all of whom have gone or will go to public school in various sections of this country. I know how I would feel. I can empathize with the shock and panic that undoubtedly gripped the parents of the Columbine students. I share the feelings of helplessness, despair, and anger that most parents and grandparents must have felt while watching the horrifying events unfold on the network news that evening or reading about them in the newspapers the next morning. Until recently, most residents of small towns and suburbs believed that extreme acts of violence were an unfortunate and tragic aspect of day-to-day life of the inner city, but that such things did not happen in affluent suburbs and small towns. The realization hit most parents like a punch in the stomach: If such a thing could happen in the middle-class community of Littleton, Colorado, it could happen anywhere. And, unfortunately, it does seem to be happening anywhere and everywhere-small towns and little cities that conjure up Norman Rockwell paintings: Littleton, Colorado; Conyers, Georgia; Notus, Idaho; Springfield, Oregon; Fayetteville, Tennessee; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Jonesboro, Arkansas; West Paducah, Kentucky; Pearl, Mississippi; Fort Gibson, Oklahoma.

Ironically, these tragedies come at a time when violence, in general, and school violence, in particular, have been declining. In the past ten years, the annual number of school shootings has actually decreased. Broadly speaking, our schools are safe places. Indeed, for those youngsters who live in the crime-ridden, war zone neighborhoods of some of our most troubled inner cities-places like Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Houston-their schools have become the safest place for them to be. Consider the data: There are approximately 50 million students attending some 108,000 public schools in this country, but fewer than one percent of adolescent homicides occur in or around schools.

So why all the panic? Shouldn't the media pundits be celebrating rather than wringing their hands in despair? Is all the attention being devoted to gun control and the safety of schools just another instance of the media taking a single tragic event and blowing it way out of proportion-manufacturing "trends" and "implications" where none exist?

I don't think so. Let's take a closer look. Yes, there has been a decline in the overall number of homicides in our schools. But this decline is almost certainly due to the fact that school officials in dangerous areas have installed metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and security guards in a prudent (and largely successful) attempt to prevent particularly violent or troubled youngsters from bringing weapons into the school.

The sobering statistic is that the number of incidents involving the killing of multiple victims in and around schools has risen sharply in the past few years. In less than two years, there have been eight multiple shootings of students by students, each of these in a place far removed from the turmoil of the inner city. A recent CBS/NY Times poll shows that fifty-two percent of teenagers from relatively benign communities now live with the fear that a Columbine-style attack could strike their school. And it is not only the students living with that fear; their parents also show a great deal of stress and anxiety around the issue of school safety.

WHAT TO DO?

In the sad aftermath of a school shooting-especially one as horrifying as the Columbine massacre, our first impulse is to blame someone. We demand to know who might have been negligent, who might have conspired with the killers, who should have seen the handwriting on the wall. We are not content with the explanation that this was performed by two disturbed youngsters. We want to look beyond them for the "real" culprit:

- Were the teachers or the principal negligent? Why didn't they spot trouble before it erupted?
- What about the parents of the shooters? How could reasonable parents not be aware that their sons kept guns in their bedrooms and were manufacturing pipebombs in their garage?
- What's wrong with our schools, anyway? Why aren't they teaching our kids the difference between right and wrong?

- And aren't those video games and slasher movies making our youngsters more insensitive to the pain and suffering of real people-and to the permanence of death? If we could ban these forms of entertainment, wouldn't that make our schools safe again?

The need to blame is fully understandable. But if we truly want to address the problem, if we truly want to prevent future tragedies of this kind, then it is vital to make a clear distinction between two kinds of blaming: 1) The blaming that is aimed at finding the cause of the disaster so that we might come up with a workable intervention; 2) The blaming that is mere condemnation. Condemnation is a great indoor sport. It somehow makes us feel less helpless if we can unmask a culprit who we can then proceed to vilify. If we decide that the culprit is a school administration that was asleep at the switch, then we can demand that the school principal be fired. But firing a principal will not solve the problem. If we decide the culprit was lax parenting, then perhaps we can humiliate or sue the parents of the killers. But humiliating and suing the killers' parents will not solve the problem either. This kind of blaming is a simple knee-jerk response. It won't do us much good in the long run.

But a lot of good can come from rational problem solving. And we humans are problem-solving animals. When a tragedy occurs, we want to know why. This is not idle curiosity. If we can pinpoint a cause, then we can fix it. For example, whenever an airliner crashes, a great deal of time and effort is expended to try to find the black box even if it's lying under 250 feet of turbulent ocean water. The black box becomes the focal point of a full-scale investigation: Was there a faulty design? Was there metal fatigue or a frayed electrical wire that had been overlooked in the previous inspection? Was it pilot error? Had ice been allowed to form on the wings of the plane while it waited on the runway? Was the plane carrying dangerous cargo? Could it have been a deliberate act of sabotage? The investigation is slow and painstaking. It typically requires several months or even years to complete.

In the aftermath of a school shooting, we are not inclined to be patient. We are tempted to look for instant solutions before we fully understand the cause of the problem. This is why Congress voted to tack on an amendment to the crime bill following the Columbine massacre. The amendment gives the right to allow the display of the Ten Commandments in schools. "I understand that simply posting the Ten Commandments will not instantly change the moral character of our nation," said Robert Aderholt, the measure's sponsor. "However, it is an important step to promote morality and an end of children killing children." Ah, if it were only that simple!

Understandably, parents demanded more security and many school officials were quick to comply. Schools across the country have rushed to install metal detectors and surveillance cameras.

They have instituted ID policies. They have ripped out lockers and required students to carry see-through backpacks. They have also asked students to report other students who threaten violence or who even seem different (dress strangely, keep to themselves, and so on). Some schools have required that personality tests be administered to all students-tests aimed at profiling those students who might be most apt to go on a murderous rampage. Local police departments have conducted SWAT training at high schools.

Newspaper columnists, TV pundits, politicians, and the general public have been quick to blame permissive parents, lax school officials, the media, and society as a whole. Self-proclaimed experts abound. Each seems to have a different idea of cause and cure. Here are those most frequently mentioned:

POLITICALLY EXPEDIENT INTERVENTIONS	
Problems	Quick-Fix Solutions
Not enough moral training in our educational institutions	Allow prayer in schools or post the Ten Commandments in every classroom.
Too much violent imagery in the media	Clamp down on violent movies, TV, and video games.
Too many guns, too easily available	Institute more stringent gun control.
Youngsters are not respectful enough	Make rules forcing them to call teachers "sir" and ma'am."
Some students act different from what is considered the norm	Identify them and either keep them under surveillance, remove them from the school, or subject them to intensive therapy until they are able to be like everybody else.

APPROACHING THE PROBLEM SCIENTIFICALLY

We need to look beyond the perpetrators if we want to reduce the number of school massacres in the future. If we simply dismiss the recent spate of multiple shootings at schools as the random acts of a handful of disturbed youngsters, we would be making a grave mistake. At the same time, it is important to look beyond the perpetrators in a meaningful way-with reasonable tools for looking. Before we rush in with an intervention, we must understand the deepest origins of the problem and the consequences of each proposed intervention.

Basically, there are two classes of intervention: root cause interventions and peripheral interventions. In my judgment, some of the so-called "cures" outlined in the box above have merit; others are useless; still others are almost certain to cause more harm than good. But they are all peripheral interventions. None of them-not even the useful ones-succeed in getting to the root of the problem. If a peripheral intervention (like gun control or metal detectors, for example) proves to be useful, there is no reason why it cannot be utilized. But we must realize that the deeper underlying problem will remain. And before we implement any kind of intervention, we must make sure that there is evidence supporting its use. What is immediately apparent is that most of these "cures" are not based on solid evidence-but rest on emotion, wishful thinking, bias, and political expediency.

Why do I say this? As a social psychologist, I have spent more than forty years studying how we humans behave and what motivates us to behave as we do. Social psychology is a science that is concerned with important aspects of human social behavior: persuasion, conformity, love, hate, aggression, prejudice, and the like-the stuff of human beings relating with one another. When I say I've been "studying" these things, I don't mean that I've simply been observing human behavior and speculating about what might have caused it. I mean that I have used these observations to specify concrete hypotheses, and then have tested these hypotheses in a rigorous scientific manner.

It might come as a surprise to most readers, but experimental social psychologists use strategies and techniques that are functionally identical to those used by medical researchers testing a new drug. Medical researchers would be drummed out of the business if they allowed themselves to rely entirely on idle speculation, bias, hearsay, folk wisdom, or political expediency to determine whether this or that drug might be helpful, harmful, or of no consequence. Moreover, medical researchers have learned that they cannot simply rely on the testimonials of patients who say they feel better after taking a new drug. After ingesting sugar pills or snake oil, many people feel better and some even think they are cured of serious illness. This is the well-known "placebo effect." The positive feelings generated by a placebo are of limited and temporary value. Yet, there are still plenty of people around-some well-intentioned, others charlatans-who capitalize on the placebo effect by peddling untested substances as magical cures for a variety of illnesses from acne to cancer. Fortunately, most consumers are now sophisticated enough to avoid spending huge sums of money on untested cures; most of us now require rigorous scientific investigation before we will ingest any old drug or concoction touted to cure a serious illness.

Such standards should be no less important in designing policies to influence human behavior—especially when the behavior in question is dysfunctional or destructive. For, in the absence of careful scientific investigation, we are just as apt to be fooled by our so-called "commonsense" notions of human nature as by a convincing huckster of snake oil. The fact is that common sense notions of human behavior are frequently wrong and the consequences can be tragic. For example, from 1896 to 1954, most policy makers, as well as the general public, believed in the doctrine of "separate but equal." They believed that it did no harm to separate African-American school children from their white counterparts as long as the facilities were roughly equivalent. In 1954, social psychologists helped reverse this "commonsense" policy; they used scientific evidence to convince the Supreme Court that the mere fact of being segregated has a strong and negative impact on the self-esteem of minority youngsters that interferes with their ability to learn and can permanently stunt their intellectual and emotional development. In short, separate but equal is an oxymoron; being segregated, in and of itself, produces inequality.

So what wisdom does scientific social psychology have to offer concerning tragedies like Columbine and how to prevent them? Quite a lot. In the next several chapters, we will look at the speculations and cures mentioned in the box above through the lens of careful scientific studies. In doing so, we hope to separate the wheat of well-founded knowledge from the chaff of idle speculation on such topics as the easy availability of guns and the impact of media violence on the behavior of children and adolescents. We will also look at data pertinent to such interventions as the posting of the Ten Commandments and requiring students to say "sir" and "ma'am" when addressing their teachers. Most important, we will try to get to the root of the problem: We will scrutinize the social atmosphere prevalent in most high schools in this country and try to determine how this atmosphere might have contributed to the tragedies that unfolded in the classrooms of Littleton, West Paducah, Springfield, and other communities in recent years.

This last point requires some elaboration. There is no doubt in my mind that these violent acts were pathological. The perpetrators of these horrifying deeds were disturbed. Their behavior was beyond all reason. But if we chalk up these events simply to individual pathology and nothing else, then we are bound to miss something of vital importance. Based on my experience in schools throughout the nation, I would suggest that it is highly likely that the perpetrators were reacting in an extreme and pathological manner to a general atmosphere of exclusion. This is a school atmosphere that most of the student body finds unpleasant, distasteful, difficult, and even humiliating. If this is the

case, then instituting a significant change in the social atmosphere of the classroom might succeed in making the school a safer place (reducing the possibility that students will become so disgruntled that they go over the edge and commit acts of extreme violence). This might also succeed in producing the kind of social environment that will make the school a more pleasant, more stimulating, more compassionate, and more humane place for all of the students. This is our ultimate goal.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO AVOID JUMPING TO THE WRONG CONCLUSION

Why do we need to go about this scientifically or cautiously? Given the extreme importance of the problem, what's wrong with a scattershot strategy-trying several possible interventions at once-in the hope that one or more will do some good? As I implied earlier, the problem is that it is highly likely that some apparently sensible interventions could produce negative or even disastrous consequences, depending on what is actually going on in the school. Let me give you one cogent example. A few days after the Columbine tragedy, my 16-year-old grandson came home from high school and said, "Guess what? The principal sent around a notice asking us to report any kids who are dressing strangely, behaving weirdly, appear to be loners, or out of it."

At first glance, this might seem like a reasonable course of action: The authorities merely want to identify the kids who seem to fit the description of the Columbine shooters-kids who might be unbalanced or might cause trouble, kids who seem unpopular or separated from the other students, kids who dress in black trenchcoats or in other strange ways. The authorities can then keep an eye on them, offer them special counseling, or whatever. But my best guess is that the principal is shining his spotlight on the wrong part of the equation. Here's why: From my classroom research, I have found that the social atmosphere in most schools is competitive, cliquish, and exclusionary. The majority of teenagers I have interviewed agonize over the fact that there is a general atmosphere of taunting and rejection among their peers that makes the high school experience an unpleasant one. For many, it is worse than unpleasant-they describe it as a living hell, where they are in the out-group and feel insecure, unpopular, put-down, and picked on. By asking the "normal" students to point out the "strange" ones, my grandson's high school principal is unwittingly making a bad situation worse by implicitly sanctioning the rejection and exclusion of a sizable group of students whose only sin is unpopularity. By doing this, he is making the life of the unpopular students even more hellish.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a large number of school administrators have been tempted to go this route. They do this because, on the surface, this intervention seems sensible and harmless. Moreover, from the perspective of a bureaucrat, it is a self-serving response. Here's why: If, in the aftermath of the Columbine massacre, my grandson's principal did nothing, and a shooting subsequently took place in his school, he would be in serious trouble. But if a shooting took place after he had made an attempt to identify the "weird loners," very few people would fault him-even though it might have been his action that exacerbated the tension and, therefore, contributed to the outcome.

It is for this reason that school administrators will want to do something-anything-that will keep them from looking as though they are not attempting to address the problem. In my opinion, this is a formula for disaster.

If my reasoning has merit, it might serve to underscore the importance of refusing to rush in with half-baked interventions that have not been properly researched. But we parents are understandably impatient. We crave action. If there is something dangerously broken in our schools, we want to fix it-and fix it fast. We are reluctant to wait for scientific social psychologists to get around to doing the research that will lead the way to better outcomes.

The good news is that we don't need to wait for the research. The relevant research has already been done. Indeed, scientific social psychologists have been doing careful research on these issues for years. We have discovered and tested ways of transforming the general atmosphere of schools from highly competitive, cliquish, exclusionary places-places where you would be shunned if you were from the "wrong" race or the "wrong" ethnic group, came from the wrong side of the tracks, wore the wrong kind of clothes, were too short or too fat, too tall or too thin, or just "didn't fit in"-into places where students have learned to appreciate one another and to experience empathy, compassion, and respect for one another. I have witnessed this on countless occasions: Students who had been prejudiced against each other because of racial or ethnic differences-or simply because they looked or acted differently-actually become close friends.

My colleagues and I have accomplished these minor miracles in two main ways: The first involves teaching youngsters specific ways to gain greater control over their own impulses and how to get along with others so they can resolve interpersonal conflicts amicably. This will be described in Chapter 5. The second way involves the simple device of structuring the classroom experience so that it promotes cooperation rather than competition and, in the process, motivating students to listen respectfully to one another, help one another, and begin to care about one another. They learn all this

while they are in the process of learning history, geography, biology, and all the traditional academic subjects-and learning them as well or better than they would in more traditional classrooms. This approach will be described in Chapter 6.

Unlike the first strategy, the second does not require any new curricular material; it simply involves teaching traditional material in a nontraditional structure, where children pull together rather than compete against one another. My research and the research of my colleagues has demonstrated over and over again that, after working closely with one another in a cooperative way, students begin to see positive qualities in their classmates they hadn't seen before. Within a few weeks of these experiences, artificial barriers of exclusion begin to recede, and a general atmosphere of compassion, respect, and inclusion eventually prevails. Moreover, these positive outcomes are not accomplished at the expense of academics. On the contrary, in these classrooms the academic performance of most youngsters is enhanced-that is, youngsters score higher on achievement tests than they do in traditional, more competitive classrooms.

This is not a pie-in-the-sky solution. Over the past three decades, my colleagues and I have done careful scientific research on these cooperative strategies of learning and have applied them with great success in hundreds of schools all over the country. These findings just need to be implemented more broadly, so that every youngster in the country can have an opportunity to experience the benefits of being socially included. In the following chapters, we will present the relevant information and discuss the best ways to implement cooperative learning strategies, as well as other educational reforms-reforms that are important, humane, and, best of all, doable.

Wait a minute. If social psychologists have had this knowledge for more than two decades, then why wasn't it put into more general practice a long time ago? Unfortunately, a wide gulf exists between the scientific findings social psychologists uncover and the utilization of these findings by the relevant segments of our society. Most social psychologists publish the results of their experiments in rather esoteric journals that are read primarily by other social psychologists-not by the general public or policy makers. Moreover, unlike the results from medical research, most social psychological findings are not picked up by the mass media and do not find their way onto the evening news.

It's not the fault of the media; by and large, we social psychologists have not done a very good job of making our findings accessible to the average person. (As an aside, I am inclined to state that this is not always the case. Given a financial incentive, all kinds of people have been able to ferret out useful social psychological knowledge published in our obscure journals. Advertising copywriters and

marketers have made use of our research on such phenomena as the power of familiarity on persuasion and the importance of scarcity in increasing the attractiveness of a product. Corporation executives have studied our research on effective leadership. People who manage political campaigns know something of our work on the relative effectiveness of positive or negative messages. Writers of books aimed at helping couples achieve marital happiness have delved into our research on the antecedents of interpersonal attraction.)

Unfortunately, it often takes a tragedy like Columbine to arouse the general public's interest in changing the atmosphere in our schools and to motivate social psychologists to make our research more accessible to people who can make use of it: parents, teachers, policy makers, and ordinary citizens. Knowledge is power. Fortified with knowledge of proven, effective classroom interventions, parents and teachers can take action to make their children's school not only a safer place, but also a more humane and more compassionate place. That is why I have written this book.

Let me restate the aim of this book as clearly and as succinctly as I can: It is my contention that those students who killed their fellow students in schools across the country were undergoing intense stress as a result of having been excluded, mocked, and taunted. There is no doubt that their behavior was both pathological and inexcusable. In my judgment, their behavior was the pathological tip of a very large iceberg. The general atmosphere of exclusion means that a great many students are having a miserable time in middle school and high school. Accordingly, the aim of this book is not simply to try to prevent pathological "losers" from killing their fellow students. It is to create a classroom atmosphere where there are no losers. In that very real sense, this book is about creating an atmosphere in which there is nobody left to hate. It is intended to provide parents and teachers with the tools to make schools more humane and more compassionate places, without sacrificing the basic academic material students are supposed to learn. There is nothing mutually exclusive about learning biology, literature, and calculus while also learning important human values. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that the one will enhance the other.