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Personal Reflections on the Virginia Tech Tragedy From a Victim's Spouse With Commentary by a Close Colleague

Jerzy Nowak and Richard E. Veilleux

This is a story of one of the Virginia Tech professors whose wife, a charismatic French instructor, Jocelyne Couture-Nowak, was killed in her Norris Hall classroom on April 16, 2007 while trying to protect her students from the armed, deranged student-shooter threatening her classroom. Jerzy is the head of the Horticulture Department at Virginia Tech. The author reflects on his and his youngest daughter's posttraumatic and secondary traumatic experiences, focusing mostly on the interface between family and his profession. Jerzy's reflections are complemented by those of Richard Veilleux (*text in italics*), a professor in Jerzy's

department who served as acting head while Jerzy was coping with primary needs after his wife was slain. As a plant stress physiologist/eco-physiologist, Jerzy sees a more generic biological pattern of adaptation to extreme situations by comparing the role that community played in his and his family's posttraumatic adaptation to everyday life to the alliances that plants form with soil microorganisms that help them to withstand stresses.

Keywords: posttraumatic experiences; family/profession; interface; community; alliances

The tragedy of April 16. Sunday, April 15, was a great day for yard work. Ever since we moved to our new house from another Blacksburg neighborhood 5 weeks previously, Jocelyne seemed to have twice her usual energy. She loved the kitchen, the open space, the new appliances she selected; everything seemed to be right for her. I had not seen her so enthusiastic since we relocated to Blacksburg from Nova Scotia more than 6 years ago. I cleaned some dead branches of a rambling rose that obscured utility boxes at the corner of our lot and suggested we give up for the day because it was getting dark. It was not quitting time yet for my dear wife. She shrugged and asked me to hand over the pruners. "The electrician will not be able to get under there," she sympathized. Half an hour later

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the boxes had fully emerged from the engulfing rose. I had to compliment the outcome and her effort. We decided to leave the pile of thorny brambles and call for a pick-up on Monday. I noticed that, despite wearing gloves, her hands had a few bleeding scratches.

That night I had a bad dream that the entire house was a mess and we were packing again to move. I seemed to be worried about her emotions. Moving again? I vividly remembered her emotional departure from our beautiful house located in a park-like setting in Nova Scotia. We had remodeled and expanded it the way she wanted, just 2 years before relocating to Virginia. I woke up and could not get back to sleep until early morning. I was planning to share my dream with her but got up late and left in a hurry to take Mr. Wiggles, our little pug, for his morning walk before leaving for work. The dream haunted me all morning. About 8:30 a.m. my secretary, Connie, called to say that someone had been shot by a jealous boyfriend at a nearby dormitory, West Ambler Johnston, and that the shooter was apparently on the run. I was somewhat surprised that there had been no siren alarms or any notification by the campus police. We only heard a few rescue squad sirens. I tried calling Jocelyne's cell phone

before her 9 a.m. class to tell her about this and about my dream, but there was no answer. She often forgot to turn on her phone, so I was not worried. I tried to call her shortly after 10 a.m., at the end of her first class but, again, no answer. She usually called me between her classes but not this time. The sirens seemed more frequent now, and we all started worrying. Someone brought some horrifying news to our building, but we were not sure whether it could be confirmed. I tried calling Jocelyne again and again while working on a project and trying to meet a deadline; no answer. The horrifying news about a massacre in Norris Hall seemed to be confirmed now. I made a few phone calls to the international office to check on our three exchange students from the Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC) and learned that they were OK, locked down in one of the dorms. I followed by calling my NSAC contacts, left messages, and sent emails to reassure them.

Shortly after 2 p.m., the middle school called to inform me that Jocelyne had not arrived to pick up Sylvie, my 12-year-old, after school as usual and that they were unable to get through to her by phone. I was perspiring. I immediately called Jocelyne's department and asked where she had been teaching that day (she usually taught in modern Torgersen Hall). "In Norris Hall" was the bone-chilling reply. I quickly told my secretary what had happened, asked her to call me with any updates, and ran to the car to pick up Sylvie.

I told Sylvie what had apparently happened on campus, although I said that we were still unsure how many people had been shot. (I did not tell her, however, that her mother had been teaching in Norris Hall). She immediately asked how is Mom and why didn't she pick her up. I avoided a direct response as we drove home. Connie called to say that there would be an official briefing at the Virginia Tech (VT) Conference Center, The Inn, at 4 p.m. Sylvie grabbed her snack, and we ran to the car. On the way, I received a call from a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) radio in Halifax, Nova Scotia asking whether I knew anything about the exchange students. I assured the reporter that they were OK but that I was devastated because my wife may be one of the victims. I did not remember Sylvie in the back seat. She got very upset with me.

We arrived at The Inn shortly before 4 p.m. and joined a group of concerned people and a few harried administrators who were unable to respond to questions. The briefing started late and was only on

TV monitors. We heard more or less what we already knew. Sylvie got hungry and Jocelyne's former department head took her to his house where she could stay with his daughter, her classmate. I became agitated when sent from one person to another in a vicious circle. No info. I finally captured the attention of one of the high-ranking administrators who started calling hospitals to ask whether Jocelyne had been admitted. After a while, I heard the "good news" that she had not been admitted to any of the hospitals where the wounded had been taken. My first reaction was to call Sylvie to tell her the "good news." Immediately afterward I became devastated thinking about the worse alternative. The person who told me the good news approached me again and said, "By the way, she could be among the dead." "You did not need to tell me that," I snapped and left The Inn to pick up Sylvie and go home.

A hotline had been established and managed by the top administrators for families and friends to call in for information. I called several times during the next 4 hours or so, getting the same response, "Nothing new, we will call you as soon as we hear anything." My close friend, Al Wicks, arrived at our house and used his medical contacts to get direct phone numbers to hospital emergency rooms to contact people who would give us reliable answers. Jocelyne used to say: "No wonder you are good friends, you look alike and act alike." We called all the hospitals on the list; Jocelyne had not been admitted. "I am ready for the worst," I said to Al, choking on my tears. Sylvie came in and said that she was going to lie down on Mom's bed because she wanted to smell her.

A few journalists started calling with ready-made scripts accusing the VT administration of neglect and asking me to say either "yes" or "no" to their statements. I only responded to a journalist from *USA Today*, expressing my disappointment about the lack of information. At 11:30 p.m., Provost Mark McNamee called and asked me if he and David Ford, the vice provost for undergraduate education, could come to our house. This confirmed my worst nightmare. I could not stop thinking about Jocelyne and felt so guilty that I had not shared the dream with her and asked her to stay home. "Had I been explicit enough letting her know how much I respected her and valued her contribution to the family well-being over our 17 years of marriage?" "Did I buy flowers frequently enough?" Although the flower arrangements that I would occasionally get

from our department's floral design class may have been fresher or more beautiful, it was not the same. "Did you buy them or get them?" she would ask quickly. I could never come up with a convincing white lie. "Without her wages, will I have to sell the house and pack all by myself this time?" "Why is it she and not me?" My mind was racing, and I could hardly control my emotions. I particularly agonized about my having declined job offers that I received during the summer of 2005. Although it was she who did not want to leave the Blacksburg community because of her belief that it was a safer place than most American cities, I should have insisted.

I made tea. Sylvie woke up and came downstairs, asking about Mom. I told her that two administrators were on the way to our house to tell us. She went to my bed this time and fell asleep.

I forgot to tell the Provost that we had just moved, so he did not know our new address. I called his house and left a message. After a while, his wife called back and gave me his cell phone number. Both administrators arrived at approximately 12:30 a.m. Their words were compassionate. Despite the fact that I subconsciously knew what had happened ever since Jocelyne had not picked up Sylvie after school, I was shaken by the undeniable truth and could not control myself. The most comforting words came from the Provost: "She did not suffer—a bullet went through her head." Later, when I was finally able to see her at the funeral home, I looked for the scars of the rambling rose thorns on her hands and touched the remnants of her blood along the track of the bullet which went between her left hand fingers, scratching the wedding ring and hitting the left side of her forehead. She very likely had been holding the door to try to protect her students.

The administrators left, and I asked Al to go home. I wanted to be alone and compose myself before speaking to Sylvie. The phone rang. It was the reporter from *USA Today* asking for an update and looking for evidence that the crisis was being mishandled. This was the last time I spoke to him. He was disappointed to hear that a top administrator, Provost McNamee, had come personally to inform me compassionately about Jocelyne's death. I also responded to his question "What would you say about her, in a few words?" "It is very ironic," I said. "Ever since we moved to Blacksburg, Jocelyne was so afraid of guns and violence in the U.S. that we never traveled as a family to cities she considered

dangerous." For her, Blacksburg was a safe place, "We live in a bubble," she used to say.

I went to look in on Sylvie. She was not sleeping. I embraced her and whispered the truth into her ear. We were both crying. After a while, she said a few very warm words about Mom and how much we will miss her. At one point, she stated that there is a boy in her class whose mother died of cancer 2 years ago and that he is OK. Then she started planning our life together.

I could not help but notice the police cars at West Ambler Johnston dormitory, visible from my office window, early in the morning of April 16, dismissing their presence as a minor emergency. I went to teach my class at 10 a.m., wondering about all of the sirens and police cruisers rushing around the Drill Field. The class was well attended, but the sounds of sirens and the howling wind were unsettling throughout the hour. After class, we learned that the campus was in lockdown; we were to remain in whatever building we were in until further notice. The whole class worked in the lab for the next hour or so. One student received a call on her cell phone from her husband with the news that 20 students had been killed. We all assumed it must be exaggerated. By 12:30, the announcement came that we could go home. My 22-year-old son, Micah, was working on campus and we drove home together, still clueless about what had happened, discussing the various rumors. When we got home, a short drive, my wife was on the phone with a close friend who had called from Israel to find out if we were all right. He knew in Israel as soon as my wife did in Blacksburg from a CNN broadcast about the magnitude of the slaughter. Micah and I were horrified to see the CNN screen: 22 dead in massacre at Virginia Tech. We received many calls from relatives, colleagues, and former students from around the world. At around 9:30 that evening, after we had been watching TV for hours incredulously, a colleague called to inform me that Jocelyne had not been accounted for. I called Jerzy immediately while he was anxiously waiting to hear some confirmation one way or another. It was a short call—I didn't want to tie up his line.

Posttraumatic Adaptation

Dealing with the primary needs. We could not fall asleep until after 5:00 a.m. but woke up at our

regular time, 6:15 a.m. I took the dog for a walk, and Sylvie started preparing breakfast as promised.

I was calm that first morning, planning the day—made calls to family members and close friends who had not yet been contacted. Some had tried to leave messages on the phone but the mailbox was full—it was Jocelyne's job to handle phone mail. I forgot the access code and my attempt to get help from Verizon, our telephone service provider, was an unsatisfactory patience-testing experience. I needed to visit the funeral home, make travel arrangements for family members living in Canada, contact the Canadian Embassy to allow those without passports to cross the U.S. border, contact the university for help with family travel expenses, discuss the handling of departmental affairs with Richard Veilleux (associate department head and family friend), deal with the problem of the constantly ringing phones, and manage the media and cameras that started gathering on the street. I was also hoping that the arriving friends and neighbors from our former neighborhood would bring their children along to distract Sylvie (and bring me some Starbucks coffee).

The response of the community, friends, and coworkers was overwhelming. We probably had more than 100 visitors that day and at least as many the day after. I received more Starbucks coffee than all of us could drink. My adrenaline level was so high that I could not stay still. I also hardly slept. I fell apart at 6:30 a.m. on April 18. "How can I manage?" Suddenly everything was so overwhelming, my demanding job, raising a 12-year-old, and managing her after-school activities, the household, the projects Jocelyne and I had planned, and the funeral, along with the realization that Jocelyne was gone. No one to argue with, no one on whom I could constantly rely. At 7 a.m., the doorbell rang. Megan Hicks, a neighbor and close friend from our old neighborhood, brought me coffee. She must have sensed my emotional limit and arrived just in time to help me pull myself back together. Her calm voice and rational personality were what I needed.

After 2 days, the house was filled with flowers, cards, food, and supplies brought by neighbors, friends, coworkers, and strangers. Close friends and neighbors managed the household affairs smoothly and kept away the snooping journalists. Craig Brians, a political science professor, effectively handled the media, spending hours in front of the house giving interviews to pre-selected journalists. I was

able to get to the bank, the mortgage lender, and the insurance company to be briefed on our financial affairs/obligations and simplification of payments. Jocelyne had always handled the family finances. I became obsessed with getting a grip on basic functions. Everything seemed to have been paved for me by Jocelyne's warm personality and the friendships that she managed to establish with local businesses and anyone I contacted in the community.

Family started arriving on day 3. First, I picked up our daughters, Magda and Francine, from Vancouver, British Columbia and then Jocelyne's sister, Gigi, from Montreal, Québec. Others, arriving from four Canadian provinces, were shuttled to my home by the Red Cross from the airport during the next 4 days. The assistance provided by the Red Cross helped to bring the family members who otherwise would not have had the resources to come on their own. On her mother's side, Jocelyne's family is Acadian, from Nova Scotia (Budreau) and on her father's (Couture), Québécois, from around Montreal. We all celebrated Jocelyne's life and her love of nature and people in particular. Everyone had a few warm and funny stories. I wish I had recorded them.

Jocelyne's sister took over the household duties. Francine, a senior at the University of British Columbia double majoring in theatre and French, handled the media (giving interviews in French and English). Magda, a graphic designer, took care of me, the flowers, and played the role of co-hostess with her characteristic subdued, friendly demeanor. She was a great balance to Gigi and Francine, who are very outgoing, outspoken, and energetic. After a week, half the Blacksburg community seemed to know Gigi.

Visiting students in the hospital. Jocelyne's French class suffered the greatest casualties—1 professor and 11 students dead and 6 wounded. Dr. Nyusya Milman-Miller, a colleague of Jocelyne's in foreign languages and literature, helped to arrange visits for Francine and Gigi with those students still hospitalized. Francine and Gigi met with students and their families who embraced them like members of their own families. During these visits, "Madame" (as her students called Jocelyne) returned to the world as conversations with students focused on her endearing idiosyncrasies and warm personality in the classroom while Gigi and Francine joked about her routines around the house and quirkiness that only

the closest family and friends could know. I later met some of these students and their families. One of them, Colin Goddard, was among the three students who spoke at Jocelyne's funeral; he was still on crutches, having survived multiple gunshot wounds. He managed to rise to the microphone and spoke while standing, likely suffering from the pain in his shattered leg. I will never forget.

Sylvie. Sylvie started to limit her visiting friends and to appreciate newly discovered members of her family as they arrived. This was a new experience for her. When we moved to Blacksburg, she was 6 and we only traveled twice to Canada to visit family in 7 years. (Being on temporary visas, it took 4 years to process our Green Card application despite the fact that I was granted Outstanding Researcher status; it was hard for us to deal with harassment by immigration officers each time we crossed the border from Canada.) She joked, played soccer with them, chased Mr. Wiggles when he ran away a few times, raced, and laughed. "Too bad they live so far away. It is nice to have family, isn't it, Dad?"

Sylvie complained the first few days after returning to school that she had difficulty concentrating. Jocelyne used to spend hours working with her on homework assignments. She also had problems dealing with the sectarian religious undertone of condolences and advice she was getting from some of her peers. But her teachers were outstanding. Some of them visited our house, and all of them met with us to individualize her schedule, which enabled her to catch up with assignments. I believe that her teachers' professionalism and compassion, combined with the support of the school administration and the personal attention of her big sister, Francine, who spent several weeks with us before returning to her own studies at a university in Vancouver, were critical to her successful transition. Most important, of course, is Sylvie's own inner strength and determination. She now manages her homework independently and finished her year as an A student. She has accomplished one of the tasks of the plan that she outlined to me during the sleepless night of April 16-17.

Sylvie joined a local club, TriAdventure, and was quickly immersed in the team of children, youth, and adults of different ages, with two wonderful coaches. The group temporarily became our extended family. She has always been a good swimmer and runner but struggled with cycling. After 2 months of intensive training, she went to a competition in

Shelby, North Carolina and came in first in her age group. "I wish Mom could see me," she told me crossing the finish line.

The whole Blacksburg community was swept up with the sentiment of what could they do to help. Whenever disaster hits, there are always angels of mercy, either truly selfless individuals with the right instincts or those with their own agendas, busy doing irrelevant things to satisfy some personal need. As Jerzy's friend and colleague, I wanted to help him in any way without being intrusive and help protect him from those with secondary agendas with no regard for intrusiveness. What specific things needed to be done whereby I was the most logical person to do them. There is always a convivial element of community to gatherings for a funeral, even when the circumstances are as horrific as those of the Virginia Tech shootings. Jocelyne's large and gregarious family were delightful to meet, albeit briefly and under duress. Knowing that Jerzy and Jocelyne were not religious, how could I help to maintain their preferences for the memorial service?

But I also needed to think about the department. The whole campus was in shock and grieving. People were bursting into tears at the slightest provocation. Messages were coming fast and furiously from administration about handling students with emotional difficulties, grading fairness for finishing classes, cancelled activities. There needed to be some coordinated communication at the departmental level while Jerzy was preoccupied with his personal tragedy. As a department that suffered a "secondary hit," I learned that we were entitled to a group counseling session. I hastily called a faculty meeting to discuss the immediate issues at hand, followed by a department meeting with a clinical psychologist. Almost the entire department showed up, glad for the occasion late on Friday afternoon to talk and share their stories and concerns. At least two reassurances resulted from the session: one, that we did not all need to assume the role of counselors but should refer people in distress to professional counselors, and two, that we all grieve in different ways and there is no "right" way. The most poignant moment came when the clinical psychologist quoted her 6-year-old daughter who had been watching a TV broadcast: "Mommy, is it safe for me to go to school tomorrow?"

I felt that I should be the one to speak for the department at Jocelyne's memorial service, both because of our common French Canadian heritage

and my role as associate department head, so I made the offer to Jerzy. My worst fear was that I would get so choked up that I would be unable to deliver. One of the last conversations that I remember having with Jocelyne was to ask her to help me translate an obituary for my mother from English into French for a family newsletter. (Although Jocelyne and I shared a common heritage, I grew up in the United States and never developed French language skills beyond rudimentary.) Of course, she agreed without hesitation. In my wildest dreams, I never expected that I would be helping Jerzy to compose Jocelyne's obituary within a few weeks.

Everyone in town watched a lot of TV the first couple of days after the shootings, hungry for more information. It became an obsession. For us, however, the quick criticism directed toward our reluctant crisis managers and first responders followed by repeated attempts by the media to elicit agreement from members of the university community to support accusations that the situation had been mishandled were constant sources of irritation. If our administrators were not prepared sufficiently to handle a disaster of this magnitude, might it be understandable inexperience? But then NBC News crossed a new line of thoughtless sensationalism when they made the decision to broadcast the videotapes that Seung Hui Cho had sent of himself wielding weapons in a paroxysm of psychosis. The images were so disturbing, we turned off the TV immediately and kept it off for several days. I even wrote to NBC News to express my dismay with their decision to broadcast the images. No response. Thanks to my son, Micah, I learned that information was more accurate and timely through the Wikipedia Web site. It was also emotionally easier to handle.

Secondary Traumatic Stresses

Visit to the funeral home and the funeral. I was not able to see Jocelyne until she was released from the morgue in Roanoke and transported to McCoy Funeral Home in Blacksburg. We had our family visit on Sunday evening, April 22. I had been puzzled by the absence of her name on the Virginia Tech Web site yet, despite the fact that the information on her death was in the U.S., Canadian, and some European papers for at least 4 days. Why was her body released so late? Was it because the FBI agents could not find clear fingerprints when they invaded my house at 11:00 p.m. without announcement on the night of April 17? (They took a number of her

possessions, including a driver's license, which it took me nearly 3 months to recover.) Why did I have to describe in detail her body marks to two independent police officers? Was she dismembered so badly? I asked the funeral home's manager to see her accompanied only by him so that I could advise the family on whether or not they should see her themselves. She was "viewable" as the funeral home manager said. To help calm me down, Francine offered, "Dad, it is not her; it is not your wife."

The funeral arrangement posed a major challenge. First, I fell apart when asked if I wanted her body to be cremated or buried. We had never talked about this. The assumption had always been that I would depart first. "I need to consult my daughters." After a brief discussion with them later that week, we decided to cremate and put her remains into small, engraved urns for family members who wished to have them. As our family is spread all over the continent, this seemed to be the most practical solution. Being nonreligious, finding an appropriate place for the service became a formidable task. I considered different locations and the only one I could think of that Jocelyne would appreciate was the Virginia Tech Horticulture Garden. The Garden was like our second home. We visited it as a family almost weekly, even throughout the winter. We had had an elegant pavilion built in the garden in 2006. I asked Garden Director Holly Scoggins what she thought about this option. She agreed that it was a great idea and offered to make the arrangements (if I could get permission from the VT administration). Security issues were critical that week, with students returning to classes and the scare of copycats.

I got the permission and an offer of an alternative location at the basketball arena in case of rain. A closed-casket viewing took place in the Hahn Pavilion, and the final ceremony was held by the stream garden, under a small gazebo. Both the Blacksburg and the campus police effectively managed parking and security. Colleagues from my department helped at all stages of the preparation and the funeral itself. The funeral took place on April 24, on my birthday. Steve Darr, director of the Peacework Village Network and a serving minister for various denominations, agreed to conduct a non-religious ceremony. We celebrated Jocelyne's life. In my short, emotional speech, I said "If Heaven exists, this is your Heaven."

"This was the best ceremony I ever attended," I heard from many of the estimated 700 who

attended. Some also added, “and God was not mentioned even once.”

Helping to organize the memorial service occupied much of the next few days. Many competent people came together to make it all flow smoothly. It was truly memorable. Jocelyne again came to life briefly during that service as three of her students, as well as colleagues and family, through tears and laughter, took turns describing their interactions with her. Time stood still. Jocelyne’s students had insisted on speaking at her service. They were incredible—sincere, articulate, glowing with admiration for her teaching and classroom persona and determined to pepper their talks with as much French as she would have wanted. The weather held. I managed to get through my short eulogy without breaking down. After Jerzy’s heart-breaking tribute, Nancy McDuffie sang Celine Dion’s beautiful and appropriate song, “S’il Suffisait d’Aimer.” There were few if any dry eyes.

Jerzy’s family stayed a few days after the service, and he returned to work the following week. His entire department continues to support him as much as possible. The Virginia Tech tragedy is often in the press: tributes at football games, the Hightie Tights marching in missing man formation at Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, possibilities of lawsuits, families trying to cope. I had never known anyone so closely affected by such a senseless tragedy. I applaud Jerzy’s and Sylvie’s resilience in coping during the past few months. The small town community has been a source of support. But the small town is a microcosm. How could it happen here?

The benefits. At first, I was told by the university administration that the funeral costs may not be covered and that my family and I would likely not be eligible for any benefits because Jocelyne was only a part-time instructor. “But she was killed on duty,” I said. “What’s the difference?” As a “company man,” I always have hope that rationality will prevail. Although not everything has yet been resolved, we have received significant assistance. The assistance of Doug Martin, the director of the Virginia Tech benefits program, made a huge difference in guiding me through the quagmire of potential benefits.

Dealing with large companies providing services. I want to mention the companies with several offices dealing with different types of services across the States. I faced particular challenges with Verizon

Wireless and Chase, the mortgage company. Changing the name on the accounts, changing the correspondence address (which was requested by my wife in March and, according to her notes, confirmed!) and other such formalities were a nuisance. I was continuously receiving mail addressed to Jocelyne at our old address until July. I also had to pay her cell phone bill, until June and after losing my patience, I finally received a refund in July. Chase even played a threatening recorded message over the phone. Every time I went to the mailbox or listened to the recorded telephone messages, I was stressed out. There was always something I thought I had dealt with weeks ago. Some of the attendants were plain rude and never completed what they promised to do. What a contrast to the local providers.

It would seem that helping with the details would be an easy way that neighbors and friends could pitch in, particularly in those early days. But issues over privacy and fraud prevention make that impossible, and dealing with poor customer service from faceless call centers is not easy even in the best of circumstances. There may be a role for trauma providers to serve as a liaison in such matters, cutting through the red tape to interface directly with the higher levels of companies to make things happen with a minimum of fuss.

A stalker. Among friends from our former neighborhood was a lady I hardly knew who started to spend 10 to 12 hours each day at our house immediately following April 16, trying to answer phones but mostly just hovering. She especially perked up when the VT benefits administrators arrived and, out of the blue, sat at the table ready to represent me. I started getting concerned and asked her to stay out of my financial affairs. A good friend mentioned that this lady was always staring at me. One afternoon she brought her handicapped daughter along, introduced her to me and, while I was cleaning the kitchen floor, leaned over and expressed her love for me. At my insistence, she left reluctantly but called during the next 3 days offering help. I later received e-mails from her. After she appeared in the family section during the memorial service (apparently right behind me), I knew I needed to contact the police. I went with a witness and inquired about getting a restraining order. As advised, I sent a firm message to her and contacted Sylvie’s school to prevent the stalker from ever picking up my daughter

after school, as she had occasionally done prior to April 16. So far, it's working.

A pervert. For several weeks we were getting calls from a "Private Caller" on the caller ID. Whenever I picked up the receiver, there was silence. I assumed someone had dialed a wrong number. One Friday evening I left the house for an appointment while Sylvie was with a friend. When the phone rang, she picked up the receiver without paying attention to the caller ID. She said "Hello," and after a few seconds, heard someone asking "Are you Sylvie?" "Yes, who is speaking?" "I am Teddy, I have been wanting to meet you for the past 7 years." "Can you get together with me?" Sylvie said, "What?" and hung up. She called me immediately, and I contacted the police. The policeman with whom I spoke joked about Teddy. "Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, ha, ha, ha." "It is no laughing matter over here," I said. He immediately became official and advised me to contact Verizon to allow identification of the "Private Caller." That was easier said than done. After several attempts to penetrate, Verizon's voice recognition system, which never was able to understand my accent, I eventually got through and was served by a compassionate lady who advised me to change our phone number (get a restricted one free of charge). Well, the "free of charge" turned out to be an overcharge on the next phone bill. It took me another hour to argue about the bill—apparently successfully.

Unveiling the new memorial. It took quite a while for different contractors to prepare and develop the site, including a brick paving, on the Virginia Tech Drill Field. We were planning to build a patio in our backyard more or less at the same time but lost our contractor to the Memorial project. "I want to be on Virginia Tech's list more than anything else. I am very sorry, but I have to decline your job" was the message he left on my cell phone.

I convinced Sylvie to attend the unveiling of new memorial stones for Virginia Tech victims on Saturday, August 19. The memorial dedication was scheduled for 12 p.m., with practice at 10 a.m. and a reception to follow. When we returned to the Drill Field after the reception, I was surprised to see the central area cordoned off and patrolled by security. "This is supposed to be a symbol of unity for the campus and community," I thought. With the exception of the families and close friends of the victims

who were under tents, everyone else stood in a scorching heat. During the eloquent but much too lengthy speeches, I observed several people who needed to be escorted after they fainted. Sylvie and I relived the tragedy. This was only the second time that she cried since April 16. "Why does this need to be so elaborate?" she asked. The next day we also discovered that Jocelyne's family name was misspelled on the stone; it was promptly replaced.

Workplace trauma. As I mentioned, my job is demanding—managing people, developing vision for the future, making contacts to try to achieve those visions, providing input into upper administrative decisions, hiring and firing, evaluating accomplishments, and trying to distribute limited resources fairly. As would only be expected, my job satisfaction depends on my own success or failure to achieve my goals. Since returning to the workplace, the budget in the state of Virginia is expected to undergo a significant cut in the next biennium. Our department had just completed three rounds of interviews during 2 years to fill a faculty position that was a critical component of my vision for a new research direction, and we had identified an accomplished researcher who was keen to join us. My best efforts to negotiate permission to proceed with making the job offer to fill the position resulted in a disappointing outcome. I felt stressed to the limit, suffering several sleepless nights and feeling demoralized.

For nearly everyone employed at the university, returning to work after classes had been suspended for a week was difficult. Those of us who were teaching classes during spring semester had to face the immediate demands of finishing our courses. Would the students return? Would they be able to concentrate? Would we be able to reassume our roles as instructors of seemingly esoteric subject matter? Would we be able to counsel students who were emotionally distraught? Well, the students did come back. Attendance that first Monday was better than usual for late in the spring semester. A typical comment from the students was that they were glad to come back and be with those who had shared their experience rather than respond to their well-meaning families about their emotional state. But the first day, the day before Jocelyne's memorial service, was particularly rough. In classes where there was an empty seat that had been previously occupied by one of the victims, little was accomplished except group mourning. I was

teaching a graduate class in the plant sciences where we delve deeply into obscure knowledge about plant genetics. I started by acknowledging the tragedy and discussed it for a while with participation from the class, weighing when it might be appropriate to revisit our syllabus. I mentioned how our careers as professors and researchers demanded that we focus narrowly on some subject that seems rather trivial compared with life or death issues. The students accepted this but reiterated that that was why they were here. I told them that I had prepared a presentation on the intricate details of pollen biology, more than almost anyone wanted to know. One young man who had lost a good friend in the shootings and whose body language conveyed that he was obviously distraught was the first to respond: "Let's hear it." Somehow, we managed to get through the last few days of the semester. Grades have never been so inflated in the history of Virginia Tech.

Nearly all my colleagues complained about sleep disturbance and lack of concentration for several weeks following the tragedy. One obsessed about cleaning off his desk, to control one small space in the world that was his own domain. I found myself distracted, getting lost in the blogosphere, staring out the window, avoiding the tasks that required deep concentration, like writing and editing. There was a gradual improvement in about a month. Since the tragedy, when I walk around campus, I see others differently. Are there other victims and perpetrators in our midst? There is more suspicion but also more collegiality, more sensitivity to others' suffering.

For several weeks after April 16, Jerzy's house was brimming over with his and Sylvie's friends, colleagues, neighbors from his old neighborhood, new neighbors whose names he didn't even know yet, and university officials. People brought mountains of food, offered transportation, space for his visiting family to sleep, advice for the memorial service, logistical and recreational help for Sylvie, advice on legal and financial matters, and so on. In addition, Blacksburg was invaded in the week after the shootings, not only by media but also by organizations, religious and otherwise, who came determined to help. These efforts were mainly well meaning but it all fell to Jerzy, in his emotional state, to sort out all the advice and assistance. Often he seemed to listen to whomever was in front of him at the time. People in the community instinctively knew that helping victims and survivors is therapeutic, and those who had known Jocelyne and Jerzy for several years had the greatest need to maintain their strong support by being part of the recuperation

effort. They were most at risk for feeling guilt and alienation when the more aggressive, but more distant, do-gooders rendered their help unnecessary. I saw that many competent, caring people in the department, including the spouses of some of our professors, were discouraged from playing a role by the constant presence of so many people. In one effort to foster a sense of community, the university cooperated with local businesses to sponsor an event open to everyone, such as a free picnic on the Drill Field. I spoke to several people who hadn't come to campus before that event, including students who had left the campus for a few weeks and alumni who felt compelled to return, who experienced a great deal of relief by joining the rest of the community.

Memorial Projects

Backyard projects. Jocelyne and I had it all planned even before we moved to the new house. Our realtor patiently allowed us to visit the property several times to measure inside and outside. For the backyard, we planned to screen the deck, build a larger shed, install a patio, convert the playground into a French *potage*, and after my convincing presentation, build a gazebo at the corner of the lot overlooking the yard and the street. A large rock garden and a retaining wall on the side of the sloping driveway were planned for the front. If we could sell our old house for the expected price, we would have enough money for the screen porch, the shed, and the patio. To do all of it would take us 3 to 5 years.

After the tragedy, I became obsessed with implementing our joint dream projects. It was easier to decide than to find a contractor willing to take on this small job. After approaching six different contractors, three of whom refused a couple of days before their expected start date, I eventually found the young manager, Patrick, of a small company, Bottom Creek Builders. I almost joined his crew. Almost every evening, he and I would get together to discuss the next steps. I started to treat Patrick like a son. After 3.5 months, we had constructed a beautiful screened porch, a shed, and a gazebo even more majestic than we originally planned but in keeping with the architecture of the house. Visitors do not realize that these are additions. I asked Jocelyne's forgiveness during a visit by one of the neighbors. "I am sure she will easily forgive you once she sees it," she said. The patio was built shortly afterward by a reputable company for a price I did not want to entertain

at the beginning of the project. Patrick and I will be working on a design for the French *potage* this winter, and his company will build it early next spring.

Jocelyne's Memorial Terrace Garden. The Memorial Terrace Garden will be a part of the Phase II expansion of the Virginia Tech Horticulture Garden (<http://www.hort.vt.edu/hhg/>). The fundraising started with a generous donation from the Hahn family. The response has been overwhelming. I have a cardboard box almost filled with photocopies of checks sent to us by individuals and organizations from all over the United States. Although my involvement in the planning process has been minimal so far, I have been asked to join the team next spring when we start planning themes and colors. I will also contribute to planting.

Hokie Spirit Garden Trail. This concept originated with plans for a group of small memorial theme gardens around the new Virginia Tech Conference Center and Hotel, located on land occupied by the on-campus golf course. Ever since I became head of horticulture, I have been thinking about how we might integrate existing green spaces and gardens to create a trail. When Diane Relf, a recently retired faculty member who taught horticulture therapy and was a founder of the People–Plant Interaction theme, mentioned to me that the Green Industry was interested in supporting the development of a Memorial Garden, I sensed an opportunity to merge their interests with general support for memorial gardens for April 16 victims. The VT administration was easily convinced, and we are now working on the logistics of the implementation of a Hokie Spirit Garden Trail. It will include the construction of five new gardens, upgrading three existing gardens with a design for new trails linked to the Huckleberry Trail, a popular bike path, and pedestrian walkway managed by the town of Blacksburg. Here again, we have the overwhelming support of the industry, families of the victims of the April 16 shooting, Virginia Tech, and the Blacksburg community. The Web site for this project will be managed by our industrial partners. We have already received offers of support from several organizations, including donation of a garden by Blooms of Bressingham, Inc.

One of the first issues that arose within a few days of the tragedy was sensitivity in handling those who wished to donate to memorial gardens. Several nursery growers called with the offer to send 32 trees or other plant material to commemorate the victims. This immediately raised two questions. The first was easy. As

a university, we were not in a position to receive bulky plant material and store it until it could be used effectively in a garden design, so we had to tactfully thank them and decline. The second was more difficult, raising the question of how many victims we should consider. It can be a touchy subject to try to categorize a criminal as another victim rather than an evil villain. But in the case of a undisputed, documented, mentally ill individual who lacked control, I think blame is not only inappropriate but superfluous and damaging to his or her family as well as to those of us whose hearts ache of righteous and unforgiving rigidity. I suggested in an early meeting of unit leaders that we should count 33 victims. A colleague immediately challenged the diagnosis of mental illness, that anyone who could so skillfully plan and execute such a successful mass murder was functioning at too high a level to be psychotic. Later, after the meeting was over, another colleague quietly thanked me for bringing up the topic. His own son was mentally ill, and he was especially sensitive to the stigma. Even the number of memorial stones on the Drill Field has changed, initially 32, then 33, then back to 32, as university administrators wrangled with the issue of categorizing Cho as victim of mental illness or cold-blooded mass murderer. But emotions have run so high in the aftermath of the tragedy, the decision of victim counting has reverted to gut reaction.

Center for Violence Prevention and Peace Studies. The concept of establishing a Peace Studies Center on the second floor wing of Norris Hall came from our daughter, Francine, when asked by a journalist at CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corp.) television what she would envision for the future of the major site of the tragedy. When she later shared her response with me, I strongly supported her idea, suggesting that the center include a component of crime prevention. "We live in a society where dealing with the effects of crime and violence is much too painful and too costly both emotionally and otherwise because the tools of crime are so readily available and have become very sophisticated and thus deadly," I said.

To my disappointment, the university announced a preliminary Norris Hall space utilization plan in early May without broad consultation. I spoke with a colleague who lost her husband in the shooting, and we decided to explore whether this space could be reconsidered to be used for peace studies and crime prevention research and education. I later met with the Provost, who proposed the idea of opening the space utilization planning for a cross-campus competition. Once the competition was announced,

numerous faculty from various departments sent me e-mails committing to our project. We submitted a pre-proposal entitled "Center for Violence Prevention and Peace Studies" (CVPPS), and our project has been selected as one of the finalists. Briefly, the CVPPS would strive to develop leaders for the new century, focusing on the formation of task-oriented multidisciplinary teams.

What Alliances Help Handling Stress? Is There a Similarity Between Humans and Plants?

It is well-established that, besides the immediate family and friends who play a critical supporting role immediately after a traumatic event, the community (Freedy & Hobfoll, 1995, p. 402) and the workplace (Tehrani, 2004, p. 277) determine the rate of post-traumatic adaptation and its extent. The compassion and support that we have received from our community, including coworkers and university colleagues, are so unique that I never considered leaving Blacksburg. As stated in the interview I gave to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "This is my home" (Wilson, 2007, p. A9).

As a scientist, I have spent most of my professional life conducting research on plant stress physiology—for instance, how plants react to biotic (pathogens, insects) and abiotic (drought, heat, cold) stress. In particular, I have focused on the interaction between plants and the microbial community with which they continuously interact in the soil (Glick, Cheng, Czarny, & Duan, 2007). The root system of a plant imposes order on the chaotic congregation of microbes by releasing nutrients that feed microbes. This "loading up" of the root zone environment with nutrients is strictly regulated. The quantity and quality of these nutrients depends on a plant's genetic makeup, its developmental stage, health status, the type of soil, and other environmental factors. The extent of microbial colonization also depends on the species of microorganisms present in the soil in proximity to the root surface. Moreover, some of these microorganisms can penetrate plants and colonize their internal organs (Welbaum, Sturz, Dong, & Nowak, 2004). Consequently, the phyto-microbial relationship can become very intimate, extending over the life cycle of the plant. Plants are not solitary organisms. Their capacity to withstand stress is heavily dependent on their interactions with other organisms in the rhizosphere, the zone that surrounds their roots.

From a genetic perspective, there are humans and plants that differ in their tolerance to stress. Many of us know that cacti and bristlecone pines can survive in extreme environments, but even within a species of plant, when geneticists have looked for differences in reaction to stress (heat, cold, salt), they have found tolerant and susceptible individuals. The more tolerant individuals can often be found to express genes differentially compared to susceptible individuals. So genetic predisposition can affect physiology. The endophyte interactions and the different ability of plant genotypes to establish such interactions can also affect stress tolerance. In the human analogy, individuals differ in their ability to establish not only social relationships but also physiological functions. Emerging data from obesity research has shown that obese individuals differ in the microbial composition of their guts from non-obese individuals and that their social network affects their life-threatening condition. Individuals within plant communities also can benefit from interaction. Orchid seedlings grow much better if several are placed into a single pot rather than individually planted. All advanced life forms share certain physiological and genetic similarities and are interdependent on other life forms. One individual's ability to endure trauma in a particular time or place depends on a complex set of factors. The Hokie spirit, the Blacksburg community, the university network, family unity, and Jocelyne's persisting charisma all contributed to her husband's and daughter's resilience.

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