

April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech— To: Multiple Recipients: ‘There is a Gunman on Campus

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Monday, April 16, 2007 dawned coldly in Blacksburg, Virginia. This reflection about that terrible day for Virginia Tech is difficult to write, but something must be written. Universities work best when they are free, open, and untrammelled sites for intellectual growth, constant learning, and scholarly inquiry. This has been true at this university, and it remains the case in many places around the world. Because of April 16, there will be repeated, strong and understandable calls to abridge, if not, constrain these conditions, through expanded policing and constant surveillance.

To admit they are understandable, however, is not to agree that they are acceptable. Indeed, they could lead to overcompensating police measures that no outstanding university should tolerate as well as create a far more restrictive academic setting for teaching and learning that I would not wish to experience. Careful consideration of the violent events of that day, therefore, must defend, fully and forthrightly, the place of every university to serve as a free and open site for scholarship and study. Here is my effort to meet that task. While I have had many people at the university read through this account, my observations about April 16, and this analysis of what occurred here on that day, as well as many of the days since that event, represent only my personal perspective on many of the contradictory issues involved rather than an official statement of any sort. Many official statements already have been issued from the President of the United States to the Governor of the Commonwealth to the President, Board of Visitors, and various faculty, staff, and student organizations here at the university. More official findings and statements will be forthcoming in the months to come; so this is just one study of the April 16 events and their aftermath during the last sixty days.

I. The April 16 Events

After a night of intense blustery winds, the weather outlook from Roanoke TV stations promised light snow and more gusts of high wind in Blacksburg. As usual, I drove into the office before 6:30 A.M., crossing Washington Street (about a quarter mile east of where the West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall sits) on my way to campus. Once there, I parked on Drillfield Drive 120 yards or so down from Norris Hall. I had several sessions with graduate students, and a long executive committee meeting for the School of Public and International Affairs down on my calendar for this date. It was to be a long hard day, but I did not know how long and hard it would be until after my first advising session about how to ready an M.A. thesis for its oral defense ended just at 9:30 A.M.

Checking through my e-mail, which had been stacking up as my co-workers and students got to campus after 8:00 A.M., this message popped up:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 09:26:24 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu

Subject: Shooting on campus.
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

A shooting incident occurred at West Amber Johnston earlier this morning. Police are on the scene and are investigating.

The university community is urged to be cautious and are asked to contact Virginia Tech Police if you observe anything suspicious or with information on the case. Contact Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411

Stay attuned to the www.vt.edu. We will post as soon as we have more information.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

This news was troubling. The bad grammar and misspellings all signaled haste, worry, even panic.

This now triggered memories of another bad morning months earlier. The first day of school in the 2006 Fall semester was disrupted terribly by a police man hunt; and, much of that effort came in an area of campus very close to West Ambler (not Amber) Johnston. Still, this area was over half-a-mile away, so I just waited for more news and e-mail alerts. Then many wailing sets of sirens—police cars, SWAT vans, EMS trucks—began converging outside my office as scores of officers ran up Old Turner Street, a dead-end, short side-street, across from my building on Stanger Street. Another far more disturbing e-mail popped up on the screen:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 09:50:07 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu
Subject: PLease stay put
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

More strongly, this text soon became a voice message broadcast over the emergency alert system; the terse warning echoed off buildings in the wind for many minutes. Of course, then, many people went to the windows, looking for the gunman. Others, who were eager to observe the flurry of police activity, or, who were hardy enough to brave the winds, then bundled up and left their offices to go see up close what was happening across Stanger Street. Within minutes, a more daunting e-mail came up in my in-box:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 10:16:40 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu
Subject: All Classes Canceled; Stay where you are
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

Virginia Tech has canceled all classes. Those on campus are asked to remain where they are, lock their doors and stay away from windows. Persons off campus are asked not to come to campus. <http://april16archive.org/object/62>.

This message was quite ominous. Classes are rarely cancelled in Blacksburg, even on days with much rougher weather than April 16's. The note suggested a lockdown, quarantine, or hunkering down before some major lethal threat. Within the hour, we learned why that warning came as an e-mail relayed this news:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 10:52:45 -0400
From: Unirel@vt.edu
Subject: Second Shooting Reported; Police have one gunman in custody
To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

In addition to an earlier shooting today in West Ambler Johnston, there has been a multiple shooting with multiple victims in Norris Hall.

Police and EMS are on the scene.

Police have one shooter in custody and as part of routine police procedure, they continue to search for a second shooter.

All people in university buildings are required to stay inside until further notice.

All entrances to campus are closed.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

Again, the poor diction, redundancies, and a terse tone were all fearsome. More ambulances, more police, more reporters kept arriving (<http://april16archive.org/object/279>). Then a single sentence came right during lunch:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 12:15:57 -0400
 From: Unirel@vt.edu
 Subject: Counseling support available
 To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

Counseling is available in the Bowman Room in the Merriman Center (part of the athletic complex) for employees who seek assistance following today's events.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

Coupled with fragmentary on-the-scene stand-ups being generated by local TV stations from Roanoke, this announcement suggested an extremely severe incident was unfolding. Within a half hour, a brief statement was sent out by the University's President:

Date: Mon, 16 Apr 2007 12:41:44 -0400
 From: Unirel@vt.edu
 Subject: Statement by President Charles W. Steger
 To: Multiple recipients <LISTSERV@LISTSERV.VT.EDU>

Shooting at Virginia Tech / Statement by President Charles W. Steger

The university was struck today with a tragedy of monumental proportions. There were two shootings on campus. In each case, there were fatalities. The university is shocked and horrified that this would befall our campus. I want to extend my deepest, sincerest and most profound sympathies to the families of these victims which include students. There are 22 confirmed deaths.

We currently are in the process of notifying families of victims. The Virginia Tech Police are being assisted by numerous other jurisdictions. Crime scenes are being investigated by the FBI, University Police, and State Police. We continue to work to identify the victims impacted by this tragedy. I cannot begin to convey my own personal sense of loss over this senselessness of such an incomprehensible and heinous act. The university will immediately set up counseling centers. So far centers have been identified in Ambler Johnson and the Cook Counseling Center to work with our campus community and families.

Here are some of the facts we know:

At about 7:15 A.M. this morning a 911 call came to the University Police Department concerning an event in West Amber Johnston Hall. There were multiple shooting victims. While in the process of investigating, about two hours later the university received reports of a shooting in Norris Hall. The police immediately responded. Victims have been transported to various hospitals in the immediate area in the region to receive emergency treatment.

We will proceed to contact the families of victims as identities are available.

All classes are cancelled and the university is closed for the remainder for today. The university will open tomorrow at 8 A.M. but classes will be cancelled on Tuesday. The police are currently staging the release of people from campus buildings.

Families wishing to reunite with the students are suggested to meet at the Inn at Virginia Tech. We are making plans for a convocation tomorrow (Tuesday) at noon at Cassell Coliseum for the university community to come together to begin to deal with the tragedy.

<http://april16archive.org/object/62>

So within barely six hours of getting to work on April 16, we now knew this event was horrendous. I also feared its horrors would increase. They did.

As sharp bursts of high winds up to 50 mph, and spinning flurries of snow with temperatures in the 30s skittered around our building, this April 16 morning was the sort of day that has earned Blacksburg one of its most common nicknames, "Bleaksburg." It rapidly became, however, its bleakest day after a silent solitary shooter—

Seung-Hui Cho—allegedly slipped into West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall just past 7:00 A.M., and apparently shot a female student, Emily Hilscher, and Ryan Clark, a resident advisor in the dormitory. Running back to his room in nearby Harper Hall, he gathered up an overnight mail package that he sent to NBC News in New York from the downtown U.S. Post Office.

Then he made his way over to Norris Hall (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/333>) on the north side of campus (where he was taking a sociology class, “Deviant Behavior,” this Spring term). Once there, he chained the main exits closed, killed 30 more people, wounded dozens more, and then shot himself in the head as a police SWAT team closed their pursuit on him. Those who could ran outside, EMS units evacuated the wounded to three nearby hospital trauma centers, and swarms of police closed off and locked down all of Norris Hall as a crime scene (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/419>). For the rest of the day, and into the night, almost all of the 30 fallen lay where they were shot all around the building, awaiting identification and removal. Undoubtedly, those officers on the scene, who were unable to touch the bodies (pending the visit by medical examiners), it was excruciating, since they had to listen helplessly as the cell phones of the dead rang incessantly as terrified relatives called their loved ones (Gangloff 2007:V1, 4). As many media reports noted, little could be bleaker than that frantic soundtrack floating over this scene of slaughter.

II. Violence, the Media, and America

On one level, events like the April 16 shootings no longer are a surprise (Newsweek 2007;Time, 2007). Rampage shootings in America, whether they happen at a post office, cafeteria, office park, playground, high school, factory, college campus, stoplight or commuter train, fascinate TV audiences (Newman 2004). The fast capitalist media apparatus of 24x7 news, weather, sports, and other information has implicitly scripted attacks like these on its many screens of power for nearly four decades (Agger 1989; Luke 1989). The shock and horror of August 1, 1966 when Charles Whitman shot and killed 16 and wounded 31 from the clock tower at the University of Texas set out the basic plot in black-and-white film at eleven for April 16, 2007 when Sueng-Hui Cho shot his way through West AJ Residence and Norris Halls at Virginia Tech in almost real-time cell phone video with CNN’s high-definition color and stereo—only minor variations in the basic story-line occurred—not unlike stylized police dramas, sitcoms, game shows, and the news itself.

An English major, Cho first came to the university’s attention in 2005 after a professor and students complained about him causing disturbances in a writing class. He was given special tutoring in the department, and then later he was referred to mental health professionals for treatment under a court order (Time, April 30, 2007:40-42). He had trouble with other professors and students in 2006, but he did not obtain his two handguns until February 9 and March 13, 2007 (Newsweek, April 30, 2007:27-29). After what was apparently a month of disciplined preparation and focused intention, he launched into his rampage on Monday, April 16. For the media, differences in the props (weapons, dress, vehicles, etc.), settings (K-12 schools, universities, professional academies, etc.), and criminals (troubled veteran, alienated teen-ager, angry immigrant, etc.) keep the viewers fascinated, the newscasters fixated, and the prior incidents freshened with each new example of such “programming.”

While all of these themes and tropes turned as they do through the corporate media, it was interesting to see how many Blacksburg residents, university staff, and Virginia Tech students turned to non-print, nonbroadcast, and noncorporate media in the hours after the attack. Beyond conventional radio or TV programming, cell phone videos, pictures, and calls often delivered the fastest breaking words and images of the event itself. To touch base with friends and families or colleagues and neighbors, many turned to the Internet, scanning blogs, official websites, Facebook, YouTube or university news posts to capture the nature of the incident as it unfolded moment by moment. Virginia Tech and Blacksburg itself are heavily wired and wireless environments, so as Ralph Brauer notes on this point (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/455>), Cho’s rampage quickly became an immense web of endless hypertexts, web scans, and video posts for millions on campus and off, especially during the first 72 hours of the shootings and their aftermath.

Still, for the corporate established media, school shootings in fast capitalist conditions of production have become a very valuable commodity to be delivered in a time-urgent “live” and “on-the-scene” manner; hence, they are hot sellers with long legs for the ratings regime. Any mention of Columbine school shootings still draws immediate attention eight years later, so it was no accident that ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN as well as numerous other

foreign TV networks and American local TV stations sent their anchors to Blacksburg for their joint roll-out of a new raw reality show: “the Virginia Tech Massacre” (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/248>). As former all-pro New York Giants running back, University of Virginia football star, one-time Montgomery County, Virginia resident, and now “Today” Show TV personality with NBC, Tiki Barber observed about his few days in Blacksburg, the April 16 shootings media coverage was frenzied: “Anybody who was anybody in the industry was here, and for the most part I got to watch. I talked to the camera men and the people who run those big trucks, and they said they’d never seen a staging ground like that” (Doughty 2007:A6).

On another hand, the events of April 16 in Blacksburg are quite a surprise. While it is not unknown, one cannot say Virginia Tech is well-known. The largest university in the Commonwealth, Virginia Tech has 153 major buildings on 2,600 acres of land with 19 miles of roads and many more miles of paved bike paths and sidewalks (<http://www.vt.edu/about/vtsnaps/aerials/2.html#Anchor-604709-46919>). Up to 35,000 people are on campus everyday, so it is very much like a small city in its own right. The university once was a small military engineering school, founded in 1872 (paired with Virginia Military Institute right after the War Between the States, in part perhaps, for when the South might need to rise again). Its mission was to teach “the agricultural, mechanical, and other useful arts” in accord with the Civil War-era Morrill Act, but for only white students rather than blacks whom, in turn, attended Hampton Institute or Virginia State University. Like many Southern colleges and universities, Virginia Tech did not admit its first African-American students until the late 1950s. The university more than quintupled in student enrollment from the mid-1960s to mid-2000s in response to the Baby Boom and Baby Boomer Echo generations, and it has a respectable portfolio of academic strengths in many areas of study in addition to being a Big East, and more recently an ACC, college football powerhouse. Consequently, as an academic center, Virginia Tech tends to float uncomfortably in a gray zone between the Commonwealth’s much lesser-known quick and dirty academic building projects from the frantic flurry of 1960s, like Old Dominion University in Norfolk, George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond or James Madison University in Harrisonburg, and more venerable academic establishments in the state like the College of William and Mary or the University of Virginia. Unlike the crime-ridden areas of Norfolk, Northern Virginia, or Richmond, however, Blacksburg is a relatively small, out-of-the-way settlement with few big city social ills, a low crime rate, and many small town qualities (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/303>). Violent criminal acts do happen on and around the Virginia Tech campus, but they tend to occur once a decade, rather than as daily events.

Seung-Hui Cho’s murderous rampage on April 16, 2007 therefore seemed more hideous, because it took place in this basically peaceful, rural college town with very little crime, few murders, and no sense of everyday violence (http://www.ee.unirel.vt.edu/index.php/vt/flip_book/C11/P5/). Yet, the larger expanse of Montgomery County and the New River Valley, which surrounds Blacksburg and Virginia Tech, does have a higher crime rate—much of it tied to oxycodone and other illicit drug infractions all across Southwest Virginia. In fact, during 2006, there were two very high-profile shootings—now known as “the Morva incident”—that also affected the University after an escaped county jail prisoner shot and killed a security guard at the near-by Montgomery County Regional Hospital and then fled on foot into the woods.

K-9 units, SWAT teams, and helicopter patrols were called out through the night and into the next day when the suspect—allegedly armed and dangerous—was supposedly spotted on campus after shooting a county sheriff who had been searching for this escapee on a popular bicycle path near campus for the suspect. At the university, there were rumors of a hostage-taking in Squires Student Center. In the confusion, some buildings closed, students stampeded; but, in the end, the criminal was caught some distance away from the central campus out in a patch of high brambles and thick weeds. Coming on the first day of class during Virginia Tech’s Fall 2006 semester, this odd event startled many among the student body, faculty, and community into rethinking their sense of security, but it did not lead to many pleas for more policing.

To spurn greater policing on campus after the Morva incident might appear odd, especially to those who remembered one of Blacksburg’s more infamous criminal distinctions, which its quiet, small college town atmosphere usually occludes, namely, the “local boy goes very bad” story of Henry Lee Lucas, one of America’s most wanted and vicious serial killers. Born in 1936 in sorry circumstances outside of Blacksburg, Lucas allegedly was subjected to considerable mental and physical abuse. His first murder was committed in 1953 during a rape, and his second murder was his own mother. A professed practitioner of bestiality and necrophilia, he claimed credit for killing over 3,000 people with accomplices or by himself, but many now believe these confessions are fabrications. Some attribute only around five murders to him, but a Texas-based investigative team ultimately credited him with only around 350

murders—using different weapons and methods—from 1953 to 1985 when he was taken into custody by Texan law enforcement authorities (for some on-line documentation of varying utility about Lucas, one can begin with: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Lee_Lucas).

Convicted of murder, and sentenced to death, his execution order was commuted, ironically, by then Texas Governor, George W. Bush, during 1998 after the evidence behind one of his confessed crimes was thrown into doubt. He died in prison in March 2001, but he remains one of the 20th century's most notorious serial killers. Since the long vicious crime sprees of Henry Lee Lucas mostly took place outside of Blacksburg, the intense murder frenzy of Seung-Hui Cho clearly will probably eclipse those of Lucas for their intensity and publicity forever. The major media spin placed on “the bucolic Blacksburg environs” must not be believed in toto. It is true, in some part, as much as it is just as false in another part.

Like the Columbine High School massacre, in which Dylan Klebold used a Tec-9 semi-automatic 9mm weapon, the Virginia Tech April 16 massacre featured a 9mm handgun—a Glock 19 semi-automatic—in many of the murders committed by Seung-Hui Cho. Indeed, he also used a Walther .22 semi-automatic pistol, and he apparently was also found with several combat-style knives on his body. Cho could have killed this many people, or even more, with some other weapons, but it was his 9mm pistol that has become a pretext for pushing the popular technofix of additional gun control measures (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/315>). This rhetorical ball and bat—tied to “the ideology of gunism”—was swung and swatted around yet again all week in the five-ring media circus staged for the April 16 events (Lifton 2007:B 11).

Here, again, things are not clear as the Newsweek issue about the massacre strangely documented in its own coverage (April 30, 2007:22-47). Among industrial countries, the U.S.A. does have the highest level of gun ownership with 270,000,000 for over 300 million people (90 per 100 persons) vs. 2,900,000 guns in Finland (56 per 100 persons), 3,400,000 guns in Switzerland (46 per 100 persons), 19,000,000 in France (32 per 100 persons) or 25,000,000 (30 per 100 persons) in Germany. The U.S.A. also has 10.08 gun deaths per 100,000 people, while Switzerland has 6.40, France 4.93, Finland 4.51, and Germany much less than 1.00 (Newsweek, April 30, 2007: 44-45). Of course, the media pundits who sat around town for weeks failed to focus on the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets, whose ranks now number several hundred. VTCC cadets are frequently seen on campus carrying drill rifles, sabers, and assault weapons as part of their military training and/or tradition. Except for perhaps Texas A&M University, the Citadel in South Carolina, Virginia Military Institute or the U.S. National Military Academies, Virginia Tech probably has more guns on campus out in the open everyday than any other American university, because it also is a national senior military academy. Most of these weapons are just training pieces, but a few others are not. However, such guns and swords are always handled responsibly, and few object very strenuously on campus to seeing them.

Despite the uproar over high gun ownership and high gun deaths in the U.S.A. (about 10 deaths per 100,000 people) after April 16, other countries, like Brazil, Algeria, Russia, Jamaica, South Africa, Nepal, Venezuela, Kenya, and Ecuador (all more than 11 deaths per 100,000 people), have considerably higher rates of gun-related violence and death. There was little talk of their “gun culture” after April 16, 2007, or the fact that places like Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Estonia, Thailand, or Croatia equal America's firearm death rates per 100,000 people with far fewer guns per person in these countries (Newsweek, April 30, 2007:44-45). Perhaps TV or video games are as much to blame in these other nations as the U.S.A., but it seems quite unlikely. Still, as one might expect, the evergreen gun control debate plainly has been revitalized by the April 16 shootings. The debate blossoms a bit each time high-profile murders occur, but it is clear that clever killers, like Cho, always have been able to conform to, or successfully defy, existing gun control laws in the U.S.A. (Newman 2007:B 20). Gun violence, however, is an exciting lead for the global news media. In a global marketplace where the various “Law and Order” and “CSI” TV franchises run all day in many cities, ugly shootings have very rich forward and backward product links to titillating crime dramas on all the world's TV networks and cable systems. So an event of this magnitude quickly can be mobilized to fuel a fresh feeding frenzy among print, radio, television, and Internet journalists as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Even though these violent events took place on campus, and the Norris Hall attack happened nearby, the ensuing police swarm and campus lockdown rendered most individuals' understanding, including my own, of this criminal attack into a layered media event, which was experienced mostly on TV, radio, and/or the Internet. While yards away, most of what I knew came from the local TV broadcasts, phone calls, Internet updates, or campus e-mail. On the first day, local TV reporters keep talking about what they saw some yards away from Norris Hall or repeating official news pool hand-outs from University Relations. Within hours, the murder scenes were marked with police tape and blockaded under a close 24-hour guard, sealing them off from all but a few crime investigators. As national

anchors arrived the next day, most TV coverage was staged at a comfortable on-campus hotel where the scores of satellite trucks could park, anchors could do picturesque stand-ups and comfortable interviews, and the crowded news conferences in the adjoining Alumni Center could be rapidly organized. As this international media cavalcade trailed into town, the entire event acquired an even more a layered juxtaposition of lived experience as seen on TV, as print documents ripped from today's headlines, and as a huge blog fest on the Web, which all were interwoven into one's daily routine on campus. I did not personally know any of the killed or wounded, although the highest number of dead and injured undergraduate students, or 9 killed and 5 wounded, was racked up in my department's two major academic areas of study—International Studies and Political Science—which together now number more than 1,000 students. Their identities for me are now almost totally print, broadcast, and televisual artifacts, but these young people also had walked our hallways, dealt with some of my colleagues, talked to all of our administrative support staff, and sat outside many of our offices. And, I have personally witnessed their families and friends on May 12, 2007 accept posthumous degrees and other academic recognitions for these students—it is obvious that those surviving loved ones share a pain as profound as these lost students' promise was vast.

It is difficult to write about any event as extraordinary and horrendous as April 16, because I know that the atrocity itself could make any one reading of these written words easy to overinterpret, take wrongly or see negatively when neither insult nor injury were meant by the analysis. Still, in this atrocious moment, and despite an inherent bias toward privileging a “readerly” over the “writerly” text, it must be noted that “extraordinary” does not mean unprecedented and “horrendous” cannot suggest unfamiliar when it comes to tragic violence. Indeed, Nikki Giovanni made clear mention of how endemic institutionalized violence is all across the world during her convocation address of April 17, 2007 (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/19>).

Americans today live with violence on this scale everyday as news from Iraq, for example, recounts tales of tens, dozens or hundreds dying daily, but those losses also are highly mediated through electronic communication over a considerable distance in space, time, and social situation. Happening on the Monday of the week bringing on its Friday, the eighth anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre, and standing out only for being the most recent, and most deadly, incident of school related violence, even this ugly crime was not purely a bolt from the blue. As Goss notes, a U.S. Secret Service analysis has found 37 incidents of violence at American schools with 41 shooters from 1979 to 2000 (2007:B10). Whether it is the Columbine incident in 1999, the August 1, 1966 shootings at the University of Texas, or even that very strange, and now almost forgotten, May 18, 1927 dynamite bombing of the Consolidated School in Bath, Michigan four decades earlier by a custodian who killed his wife, himself, 38 students, and 7 teachers, while wounding 61 people (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/us/17virginia.html>), April 16 should not come as a surprise, even if it was quite clearly a shock.

In a much longer view at the same time, April 16, 2007 strangely enough was not the first “historic massacre” or “brutal event” in Blacksburg. An earlier settlement, called Draper's Meadow, once lay on what are now the grounds of Blacksburg and Virginia Tech. Indeed, much of it is believed to have sat on land, quite ironically, in the background behind where Wolf Blitzer, Katie Couric, Matt Lauer, and Bryan Williams did their first national broadcasts from Blacksburg each day (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/384>). This tiny frontier outpost experienced a vicious assault by Shawnee warriors on a small group of settlers in which four Europeans were killed, five were abducted, and an unknown number of Indians perished in July 1755. This incident was one of many leading up to the French and Indian Wars, but it is regarded as one of the defining moments in the history of the town, the region, and the Commonwealth.

As a base for other brutal events, the lands around Draper's Meadow were resettled in 1772 by Colonel William B. Preston as the seat of Smithfield Plantation, which was one of the western-most slave-holding estates in the Commonwealth for many years. Built in part as a fort, the oldest surviving section of the still standing plantation house was erected in 1790. Again, quite ironically, some its fields and woods also were out in the background as the media filmed their accounts of the April 16 shootings from their own little media outposts on the Drillfield or from the Inn at Virginia Tech. Many Blacksburg natives see their small town, first founded in 1798, as an exceptional place far removed from the antebellum slave-based latifundia of the Shenandoah Valley, Piedmont, and Tidewater areas, and, in some sense, it is. Still, close studies of slave-holding in Blacksburg up into the 1850s show that enslaved and freed African-Americans had made up much of the town's population prior to the Civil War.

An unnerving racial undertone in April 16 also must not be overlooked. The initial characterization of the shooter, first, as an “Asian male,” and, then, as “a Korean” was, on one level, factually correct. On a second level, however, the label of “Korean,” which many fixed to Cho until his name was lost, and only the label “disturbed

Asian and/or Korean student” remained hovering dangerously in the air for days. It challenged many of the psycho-babbling TV experts’ stereotypes about the Columbine shooters, but it also sparked considerable anxiety among Virginia Tech Asian students after April 16. For some citizens, this racialized description of the shooter enabled them to explain away Cho’s behavior as a case of difficult assimilation, failed acculturation or personal anomie. Ironically, a few of Cho’s own family members in reaction to his martyr video from April eased the possibility for making this interpretation when they reported that he talked more on camera than they ever heard him speak in real life at face-to-face family gatherings or occasional personal visits. For others, however, it has also effected the degrees of “whiteness” attached to prior cases of angry, anomic or alienated white middle class kids who became school shooters, allowing police profilers more leeway to multiculturalize any next potential case of a likely school shooter. Either way, there is now a new “race factor” in the policing protocols for such crimes in the future.

Meanwhile, during the first few days following April 16 in Blacksburg, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, and Indian students reported random incidents of name-calling, threat-making, and even occasional fist-throwing against them; but, to their credit, the students and administrators, who were guiding the Hokie United memorialization campaign, moved the collective narrative about April 16 past this easily-circulated “cop perp talk” about “an Asian male” and into a more complex register of communal grief over the loss of so many individuals of different races, nationalities, classes, and majors in an extraordinary act of unforeseeable violence. The racial dimensions, like many affairs in Virginia, will never disappear, but it is no longer as intensely front and center as it was the first week.

None of this darker side in the area’s history is hidden or secret. One easily can begin tracking it down from the VT “Where We Are” web pages (http://www.vt.edu/where_we_are/blacksburg/area.php). One of the older established neighborhoods next to the University, where I have lived for almost twenty years, is called Draper-Preston; every local grade-schooler learns of Mary Draper Ingles’ abduction in the Draper’s Meadow massacre along with her captivity and return on her “long way home;” and, Smithfield Plantation now operates as a historic trust on the Virginia Tech campus surrounded by university property. In this regard, Blacksburg is no different from any American town: they all rest uneasily upon once contested, and then conquered, ground taken by force or guile from their original Native American occupants. And, like many southern towns, and almost any Virginia town, Blacksburg has a sorry past linked, in part, to the Commonwealth’s practices of slavery legally-sanctioned from 1667 until after Appomattox. Violence and brutality are as American as apple pie, and Blacksburg has been as much one of their bakeries as any place in the country.

Consequently, the media circus ringmasters’ barking about “the Massacre at Virginia Tech” or “the Virginia Tech Tragedy” must be taken cautiously as cynical hyperbole meant to hook viewers into staying with their networks’ coverage. Yes, in one register, April 16, 2007 was the single worst instance of gun violence of a certain type in American history. Yet, there are many different types of “gun violence” in the U.S.A., and those other types were ignored completely by the April 16 coverage. Numerous massacres committed by people of many races against other races mar Virginia’s history back into the 17th century’s first conquests, and then since that time in wars, race riots, nativist panics, and labor revolts all across America. There were more trigger men, more victims, more resistant acts, and more witnesses in those violent incidents, so the mass media blather about April 16 tends to ignore these other types of gun violence. Still, this media coverage cannot be taken too seriously, as April 16 was not even as the single worst day of school related violence. That distinction goes, once again, to the Bath, Michigan school dynamiting and murder rampage in 1927—eight decades ago.

Still, Kristin A. Goss repeats this gun-fixated myth-making about “mass shootings” over two weeks later in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as the opening line of an editorial calling for better gun control policies in the U.S.A., when she asserts “when news broke April 16 of the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, the question many horrified Americans most wanted to answer was, ‘Who was the shooter?’” (Goss 2007:B10). Her sense of the situation, however, begs too many questions. What a mass shooting actually is, that one must always assume there is only one, or a few, shooters(s), how the record of what counts as the worst is counted up, and who is given the task of making that measure are complex questions that are totally oversimplified by the very narrative itself. The Goss storyline about contemporary rampage shootings is already set: it always ends up being about deranged individuals who should be prevented, through better public policy, from getting access to guns. While she calls for collective policy solutions, she sees the individual shooter narrative is what audiences expect, and the media deliver it.

If one bites on such leading analytical questions, then “mass shootings” can only be these more recently observed pathological acts, like the murder rampage with 32 victims at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. However, is it that simple when it comes to “mass shootings”? There have been so many other massacres on a larger scale,

which also can be tied together through “the guns,” but few Americans wish to ask or remember, “who were those shooters?” Often a rampage also would be involved, but it typically is recategorized by exculpatory histories as a civic response, military battle, police action, or state-sanctioned strike that lets too many American citizens excuse, accept, or just forget those mass shootings and the massed shooters. Hence, Goss perpetuates such myth-making with a self-fulfilling prophecy in which she asserts, “if history is any guide, the nation is about to embark on a collective search for a narrative to explain what happened at Virginia Tech. And if history is any guide, those narratives will revolve around the private story of the killer, Seung-Hui Cho; his mental health status; his parents; and his upbringing” (Goss 2007:B10). Here, Goss is correct inasmuch as this guidance from history has shaped the current federal government’s anodyne administrative analysis of the Virginia Tech shootings, which calls for more vigilant gun control and mental health interventions everywhere in the future as its main “official” response from Washington (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/523>).

Other messy narratives about nonsolitary shooters, more victims, and organized rampages, then, do not fit into either Goss’ tidy moralizing fables about gun control or America’s most wanted scripts about psycho-killers on the loose. Whether it is Wounded Knee, Sand Creek, Bear River, or Gnadenhutten, or it is Haymarket, Ludlow, Watts, or Kent State, April 16 effectively screens off other “mass shooting” atrocities by serving as a polemically correct form of “hideous murder” that mass media audiences now wish to watch in the U.S.A. Cho’s ugly martyr video came to light on April 18, 2007, but that day also saw five carefully planned car and suicide bombing missions in Baghdad, which targeted Shi’ite gatherings, killed 171 people and wounded scores of others (Semple 2007:A1, 10). Seung-Hui Cho and his bizarre information bomb from Blacksburg, delivered through the U.S. Post Office to NBC News, overshadowed this massive cluster of killings in Baghdad completely in the U.S.A. Page one of *The New York Times* on Thursday, April 19, 2007 visually depicted this imbalance of attention with a still frame color photo of Cho brandishing his two hand guns in his camo ammo vest and backward baseball cap at the layout’s top left column with two stories about his troubled mental state and the inability of colleges to do much in response, while the Baghdad bombing butchery sat on and below the front page fold.

III. Strategies of Response to April 16

The Old Dominion, as its 400th anniversary celebration of Jamestown this year shows quite clearly for all to see, prides itself on “being first.” So “Virginia Leading the Way” (<http://www.governor.virginia.gov/initiatives/caleads/index.cfm>) has been advanced as the motto of the Kaine Administration in Richmond to bring distinction to Virginia: a place and people “constantly striving to surpass previous achievements.” Governor Kaine clearly did not mean to include occurrences like the April 16 shootings at Virginia Tech when making this claim. Nonetheless, neither he nor the Commonwealth can deny the sinister effectiveness of Seung-Hui Cho in his spectacular strike to surpass the horrors of the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 has, in a sad sense, now “led the way” in setting a new benchmark for brutality. This attack must be set into the market-driven context of such fast capitalist-celebrating accolades by which the Commonwealth now judges its “national leadership”: in August 2006, *Forbes.com* put Virginia first of all 50 states in a ranking of “Best States for Business”; in March 2006, corporate relocators Pollina Real Estate, Inc., ranked Virginia as the second friendliest state in the nation to business; in May 2006, *Forbes* magazine ranked Northern Virginia as no. 17 among the nation’s top 165 “Best Places for Business” among metropolitan areas and Blacksburg was ranked no. 65 out of 105 “Best Small Places for Business”; and, in August 2006 *Entrepreneur.com* ranked Virginia as the second best state for entrepreneurs and Fairfax County as the second friendliest county for entrepreneurial activity.

Likewise, *Newsweek* ranked 18 Virginia High Schools, including Cho’s Westfield High School in Chantilly, VA at 46th in 2002 among the 150 best in the country; Virginia Tech was ranked 77th out over 300 Best National Universities and 34th out the top 50 public universities by *U.S. News and World Report*; and, *Education Week* in 2007 reported that the typical Virginia K-12 student “enjoys higher achievement and is more likely to finish high school and continue on to college than in other states” (<http://www.governor.virginia.gov/initiatives/valeads/index.cfm>). Amidst this ranking-crazed corporate consciousness for defining and then gaining “the No. 1 Spot,” and in this business-friendly environment, Cho Seung-Hui and his family settled in the Northern Virginia suburbs as his parents set up shop in the dry cleaning business in 1992.

Cho did attend success-obsessed Westfield High School in Chantilly, VA and then matriculated at Virginia

Tech—a big state university eagerly restructuring itself after 2001 in an effort to rise as rapidly as it can on key national academic ranking scales. He was 15 years old in 1999 when Columbine happened, 17 years old when Al Qaeda terrorists flew an airliner into the Pentagon not far from his home, 19 years old when President Bush invaded Iraq, he died his last semester in college by his own hand at 23. Nonetheless, Seung-Hui Cho in many ways, was a cipher. His web page presented him in these terms as he superimposed a “?” over his face, anticipating his final act of suicide in which the gunshots blew away his visage. The Virginia Tech 2006-2007 University Directory on page 43 “Virginia Tech Student Listings” just records “Cho, Seung-Hui (ENGL)” —no phone number, no campus address, no home address, no home telephone—very unlike most other student entries. He was “Mr. Question Mark.” (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/230>.)

A senior who was to graduate in May 2007, Cho had no friends, refused conversation with his dormitory suite mates, and worked at maintaining this near invisibility. Unable or unwilling to participate in the contrived communities of today’s collegiate living, he idolized the Columbine killers, frightened his teachers and classmates in the English department, endured psychiatric observation by local mental health professionals, and then went ballistic on April 16, 2007. Of course, becoming first a Hokie fan, perhaps then a Virginia Tech student, and maybe then a university graduate is, in large part, a continually unfolding consumer relationship—rooted most deeply in big-name college athletics as it is at many other major American universities. One buys maroon-and-orange VT flags, sports VT baseball caps, finishes VT classes, writes VT tuition checks, and then supports the VT Alumni Association. Contriving such community from this mode of sports-driven consumption under fast capitalism appears to work for many individuals, but Cho did, or could, not buy it.

While many accept the embrace of “Hokie Nationhood,” a few others cannot find a place within its community. Despite years of “orange and/or maroon effect” days, as the Hokies won football games and garnered post-season bowl bids, Seung-Hui Cho never seemed to connect to his classmates, academic major, or university life. Instead he believed, rightly or wrongly, that the Virginia Tech community had its own darkside as he excoriated his school mates for allegedly being alcoholic hedonists, rich kids, and arrogant proto-professionals. In the pressure cooker of persecution he seemed to experience, in fantasy or reality, Cho declared to the Hokie Nation and America at large in his own martyr video: “You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscience,” and so, “Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people” (cited in Dewan and Santora 2007:A1).

April 16, 2007 strangely now has vaulted Virginia Tech to the heights of some ignominious first-place rankings for Virginia: site of the worst single incident of gun violence by one shooter in the U.S.A. history, site of the highest number of on-campus deaths and woundings at an academic institution, and site of the worst single murder of students and faculty by a student. Knowing how the university is very keen to jump into the ranks of Top 30 in the NSF rankings of research expenditures, a few enterprising University faculty members recognized within 24 to 36 hours that they had gained a remarkable place of comparative advantage for their research. Of course, no one sought this position, but some now do hope to now leverage this cluster of number one records in collegiate murder and mayhem for their varied research programs. In this vein, the Virginia Tech faculty received a fascinating e-mail (redacted below) on May 10, 2007 from the University’s Provost, because April 16, 2007 is now a major new “external funding” and “research initiative” opportunity:

Date: Thu, 10 May 2007 09:38:31 -0400
 From: “McNamee, Mark” <mmcnamee@vt.edu>
 Subject: Committee Formation Announced
 To: Deans, Department Heads, and University Center Directors
 From: Mark McNamee (mmcnamee@vt.edu), University Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

(PLEASE SHARE)

Dear Colleagues:

As we move forward from the events of April 16, our university community is flooded with offers of assistance and support. We are getting requests from multiple faculty members and groups about research and response initiatives for which external funding may be available. Many of these projects require IRB approval and most will involve working closely with the Office of Sponsored Programs.

We run the risk of overloading our students, faculty, and staff with surveys, interviews, and other forms of data collection. It is important that we be strategic in managing processes related to conducting research and assessment in which our community is asked to be involved. Our own faculty members would like to be key players and it is important for us to be

coordinated in our efforts.

I am appointing a small committee reporting to the Research Division to provide me and other senior administrators with high-level advice on projects and strategy. The added review is in addition to requests to the IRB for technical review and approval. The purpose of this committee is to ensure coordination with faculty members and university units in order to be responsive to the needs of the university community.

Thank you for your support of this important work. Anyone planning to submit a research proposal related to the April 16th events should contact Robert Walters at rwalters@vt.edu.

Mark

Intent mostly upon protecting wounded psyches from rapid bombardment by waves of upsetting questionnaires, this Provost also now has a gate-keeping body to monitor the players pursuing any externally funded research on April 16. The Provost's immediate goal is to protect and preserve everyone's emotional state; yet, this intervention also organizes the rush for research dollars as well as controls access to the populations to be surveyed. Both goals necessitate being "strategic" about managing the collective processes of research and assessment. Having become number one nationally in campus violence, if only for a moment before a worse incident yet to occur in the future, Virginia Tech is now intent upon being number one in studying how it happened, coping with its aftermath, and managing its assessment. Under fast capitalist conditions of knowledge production and consumption, any study of mass murder—as it transpired both on and off the screens of power—is a very fundable research undertaking (Luke 2005:13-32).

Since that day, like 9.11.01 with its diverse global contingent of victims, the 33 dead individuals from 4.16.07 also have been since transformed into lost "Americans" posthumously, even if they were perhaps Korean, Canadian, Israeli/Romanian, Peruvian, Indian, Egyptian, or Indonesian beforehand (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/343>). Another memorial on Main Street on the grounds of a local Baptist church has the other nation's flags flying amidst an array of American flags along with the Puerto Rican and Lebanese flags to underscore the murders' transnational impact, but the effect is still one of "the red, white, and blue" (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/43/>). Violent death on Virginia as well as American soil, coupled with 24x7 media coverage for almost ten days across the globe on so many screens of power, earned each victim (and the alleged murderer, too) an American flag billowing by their individual Hokie Stone markers for the campus' makeshift memorials within two weeks, although Cho's stone tends to disappear a lot. Here, in its cultural practices of coping with violence, prejudice or injustice, Virginia, again, strangely leads the way, and often in a uniquely unanticipated fashion. While it legalized slavery in 1667, and kept it in force for nearly two centuries, Virginia also elected the nation's first African-American governor in 1989 as well as expressed the nation's first "deep regret" for slavery by official legislative action in 2006. Similarly, in 1958, Charlie L. Yates graduated from Virginia Tech with an honors mechanical engineering degree as the university's first black graduate. This landmark event preceded the graduation of any other African-American from any state university as well as all other white land-grant schools in the eleven former break-away Confederate states. On the one hand, it was this strange culture that seemed to enrage Cho to commit mass murder; but, on the other hand, the culture also carries a strong enough sense of care to accept a 33rd Hokie Stone for Cho at the memorial semi-circle of 32 markers for the fallen (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/551>).

Regardless of their national origin, cultural background, current passports or ethnic diversity, the dead now all are "American" characters set into several long-running scripts of national shame and pride, economic division and unity, political cohesion and fragmentation. Thanks to the memorializing efforts of Virginia Tech students, and coupled with the mythos of Virginia Tech's Hokie Nationhood for all of its intense fusion of athletic boosterism and academic community, the fallen students and faculty now serve as a rallying point to further advance the maroon and orange consciousness of this single university within the universal state of emergency hovering over the U.S.A. in general. Not everyone left dead on April 16 was "all-American" or "all-Hokie," but this gradual naturalization ritual has transformed each of them into individuals worthy of the stars-and-stripes. And, in an act of memorialization by the university, the students, regardless of prior progress toward completion of their degrees prior to April 16, became posthumous degree winners on May 11 and 12, 2007 to comfort friends, family, and the community.

Memorials, like these stone markers, as they have risen after April 16 also have become a strange exercise of healing in which the University community is intent upon finding proof its new "We Will Prevail" slogan, which was put forth in the poem by Nikki Giovanni on April 17, 2007 at a memorial service with President Bush, Governor

Kaine, the Virginia Congressional delegation, and thousands of students, faculty and townspeople in Blacksburg actually has meaning (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/416>). From one perspective, it has worked with candlelight vigils, vernacular memorials, and mass rallies (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/390>). The imagined community of the Hokie Nation is proving to be a tangibly active society. Its maroon and orange wearing fans, alumni, graduates, and faculty whose fascination with both the dead and wounded students are all walking and talking more and more each day toward their reconciliation with the April 16 events. Undeniably, their passions are frequently quite moving. However tenuous, there is a tangible *Gemeinschaft* of sorts here that one cannot simply reduce to ACC football, frat parties, engineering culture, Southern traditions, or rural Appalachia. Hence, the university has now planned to semi-finalize this shrine by turning its vernacular origins into an “intermediate official memorial” (<http://www.vtnews.vt.edu/story.php?relyear=2007&itemno=333>). With 32 permanent new stone markers, a paved arcing pathway, and an evergreen hedge to the site, construction on it has already begun. And, it is meant to maintain many of the meaningful traces of what the community first created so spontaneously during that first week (<http://www.april16archive.org/object/546>). A permanent memorial will be built elsewhere on campus—further away from Norris Hall and West AJ—but still on the Drillfield closer to more visitor parking and better road access.

With regard to student life at Virginia Tech, the media spotlight on the mass murder in Blacksburg seems to have proven, once again, that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Each articulate student, engaged townspeople, and every faculty member interviewed on TV seemed to project something to the outside world that appears serious, solid, and supportive. There is no student exodus out of Blacksburg. Freshmen enrollment with paid deposits at Virginia Tech for Fall 2007 is 5,215 up from 5,185 in 2006; average SAT score for this new 2011 class is 1,205, up from 1,201 for 2010; and, the average GPA for the 2007 entering freshman class is 3.77, up from 3.74 in 2006. Application levels for 2008 entry will not be known until December 2007, but all indications are that interest in Virginia Tech remains very strong and will increase. Indeed, there were 1,441 students on the 2007 admissions waiting list who have been told there is no space for them, and only seven students offered admission turned the offer down because of the shooting (Esposito 2007b:8A).

College years are now such a part of so many individuals’ personalities, and the life of any large university anchors the economy and society of quite a few localities. The atrocity that rose out of restless anomie in both the D.C. suburbs and dorm life in Blacksburg poses uncomfortable questions; and, the strange solidarity that athletics and academics co-generate pulls many admixtures of mixed meaning in America from many dark recesses of today’s global economy, transnational society, and world culture. Cho may have been deeply disturbed when he arrived at Virginia Tech, but his painful isolation never eased while he was in residence on campus. Not all loners are mass murderers, but the multitude has before, is now, and will again in the future bring others here and elsewhere who need better, bigger, and broader community than that given by gridiron *Gemeinschaft*. These kinds of mass shootings have happened in many places, from Scotland to Tasmania, Canada to Japan, California to Virginia. Empire brings forth multitudes (Hardt and Negri 2000; and, 2004), but too many members of the multitude are angry, isolated, and powerless in this age of endless war and fitful democracy, which the ethos of endless emergency is only aggravating post-9.11.01.

Access to camcorders and guns, in turn, enables a few to shoot, and reshoot, their way into infamy, which works well for Empire’s televisual economy of celebrity even for those who were ciphers in life and criminals in death. While many were aware of Virginia Tech on April 15, 2007, few will forget April 16, 2007 at this university for decades. April 16 is already on its way to serving as a salient teletradition as the media networks carry the endless replays of images from the attacks of that Monday, and then replay the bizarrely banal death manifesto from Cho released on video that Wednesday, April 18, 2007. These pixels will be played, printed, and pounded on the screens of power innumerable times all around the planet again and again in the years to come. Likewise, this day’s events in and around the “Blacksburg Electronic Village” will spin up through blogs, Facebook, YouTube and their successor media for just as long.

In this violence-soaked media environment, however, one must avoid greater policing, additional security, and more intrusive surveillance. Already the Commonwealth has launched a special investigative commission to examine the events of April 16, which is headed by former State Police Superintendent Col. Gerald Massengill; and, part of its charge is how to improve campus safety (<http://www.vtreviewpanel.org/index.html>). Universities are open, free, and unfettered sites by their very nature, and reacting to the violent act of a disturbed individual by abridging these freedoms is a serious mistake. Of course, everyone at Virginia Tech will be more vigilant and cautious in the future, and they need to be. Nevertheless, “a gunman on campus” can be a gunman in the mall, at the stadium, on the beach, at the race, in the factory or on the plaza.

Living is risky, and having freedoms is riskier, but those benefits are well worth running the risks. The costs of reducing risk, especially at a university, are far greater than their potential benefits, particularly if the campus is made—through densely embedded security measures—more like a prison, a command center, a casino, a major airport, or a bank with metal detectors, swipe card locks, biometric scans or ubiquitous video sweeps. After all, Cho killed his first two victims on April 16 after getting past a swipe card door locking system on a dormitory that he was actually cleared to enter for mail service. None of these other allegedly more “high security” sites prevent all acts of violence, and turning college campuses into such restrictive zones of control and surveillance will surely ruin the university’s bigger, greater, and deeper purposes.

Norris Hall is being quickly renovated and redecorated to keep it in service for the College of Engineering; but, after being brought back into service during June 2007, it will be used only as a laboratory and office building (Esposito 2007a:A1, 6). Even though it once provided about five percent of all classroom space on campus, no classes will ever be taught there again. Moreover, access for all will be very highly controlled through a single guarded entry point by security guards. While understandable, this new practice sets a dangerous precedent for future policing of the campus’ academic and nonacademic space everywhere else.

Because one disturbed individual committed heinous acts of murder, it makes little sense to spend millions disturbing the everyday routines and basic freedoms of thousands at the university with videocams everywhere, building access restrictions anywhere, and routine body scans somewhere on campus until the end of time. Further reflections on those contradictory realities—when some new mass murderer, lone gunman, or twisted gang tries to best the toll at Virginia Tech or Columbine at some newly hardened site or still soft target—must wait for another day. I hope, of course, that such violence will not occur again, but we should fully expect at the same time that it will. Responding to those incidents to come with additional thoughts shall be an assignment that we could accept at that time; however, we can consider that task only when they come, since they undoubtedly will. By the same token, anticipating such acts of violence on America’s college campuses inevitably will direct some of our attention to personal safety in the present and collective protection in the future. Meanwhile, these security measures must neither determine everything we in the university community always have resolved to be nor define anything less than what we already as scholars hope to become.

— June 16, 2007

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