We're not all victims

Not everyone was connected to Virginia Tech, but you wouldn't know it by watching Americans.

April 20, 2007

FIVE DAYS after the Virginia Tech massacre, the friends and families of the victims are grieving — and despite the relentless glare of the media spotlight, their pain is still private. It belongs to them, not to the rest of us.

But you sure wouldn't know it from the way we talk about the tragedy.

In modern America, there's always plenty of trauma to go around. Even if you knew no one involved in the shootings, have never been to Virginia and can't tell the difference between a Hokie and a Wahoo, there's no need for you to feel left out.

Did you feel sad when you heard the news? Did you ponder, however fleetingly, the mystery of mortality? If so, don't just go on with your ordinary life as if nothing has happened to disrupt it (even though nothing has happened to disrupt it). Honor your grief!

Attend a candlelight vigil, post a poignant message on one of MySpace's Virginia Tech memorial pages and please, seek trauma counseling as soon as possible.

Convincing ourselves that we've been vicariously traumatized by the pain of strangers has become a cherished national pastime. Thus, the Washington Post this week accompanied online stories about the shooting with a clickable sidebar, "Where to Find Support" — apparently on the assumption that the mere experience of glancing at the news? Did you ponder, however fleetingly, the mystery of mortality? If so, don't just go on with your ordinary life as if nothing has happened to disrupt it (even though nothing has happened to disrupt it). Honor your grief!

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[of young people] has witnessed... The Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine, Sept. 11. The space shuttle disasters. Hurricane Katrina. And now Virginia Tech. Previous generations... had their allotment of horrors — two world wars, Vietnam... but no cohort of American youth has ever endured repeated mass catastrophes in the... 24/7 media environment."

Excuse me? More than 400,000 American soldiers died in World War II, and 58,000 died in the Vietnam War, but the Millennial Generation is uniquely traumatized because it has watched sad things on TV?

Lumping together the space shuttle disasters, Columbine and Virginia Tech with terrorism, natural disasters and war dangerously decontextualizes these disparate events.

The Virginia Tech massacre was catastrophic for the victims and their loved ones, but, unlike war, it was not catastrophic for the nation. Yet President Bush — who refuses to attend the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq because that might "politicize" the war his administration started — ordered all federal flags at half-staff and rushed to Blacksburg to bemoan the "day of sadness for the entire nation." It's a good strategy. People busy holding candlelight vigils for the deaths in Blacksburg don't have much time left over to protest the war in Iraq.

The insistence on collective mourning even operates to depoliticize the Virginia Tech tragedy. Those who made the mistake of suggesting that the massacre might lead us to consider tighter gun regulation were quickly told to shut up because this is "a moment for grief," not politics.

But we live in a political world. Searching for policies that can reduce the violence that plagues our world, at home and abroad, is the best way to honor the dead.

Second best? Let's at least stop pretending that we're victims too.

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