Nietzche at Northern: An Existential Narrative of Confronting the Abyss*

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When he spoke of murder, suicide, venereal disease, amputated limbs, and altered faces, it was with a faint air of persiflage. "This is unavoidable," his voice seemed to say; "this is what we have got to do, unflinchingly. But this is not what we shall be doing when life is worth living again." A wave of admiration, almost of worship, flowed out from Winston towards O'Brien.

—George Orwell, 1961

When good people do violently bad things, we seek answers, drawing from our repertoire of theories and concepts that have served us well. Underlying our attempts to understand violent behavior is the belief that we can impose sense on seemingly insensible actions. Sometimes, in the face of inexplicable events, we are left to try to reconstruct a narrative that, while not providing a satisfactory explanation of motive or state-of-mind of the perpetrator, at least imposes a sense-making format to give us a more comfortable sense of closure. When a mass murder is committed by one who gave off no prior signs, was well-liked and respected by peers, and had no apparent reason for acting violently, as occurred at Northern Illinois University (NIU) early in 2008, friends, family, police, FBI profilers, and a stunned community asked WHY? Drawing from Nietzsche, Orwell, symbolic interactionism, and existential literature, I construct a narrative account that attempts to make sense of the Valentine's Day shootings at NIU in which six students died, at least 18 were injured, and 25,000 members of a campus community were forever scarred.

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THE PROTAGONIST

The shooter, Steve Kazmierzak, was a 27 year-old graduate student who enrolled at NIU in the fall of 2002. His intellectual journey and commitment to social science and social work arguably began in the fall of 2003 at Cole Hall, where the shootings occurred. There, he took his first sociology class and decided to invest his energy in social science. He entered graduate school in political science in 2006, but returned to sociology when the term began. Because the sociology program was not preparing him for his intended profession in social work, he and his girlfriend transferred to the University of Illinois Champaign/Urbana (UIUC) to begin graduate school in social work in the fall of 2007. He was an academic success, graduating with nearly a 3.9 grade-point average, receiving prestigious academic honors. During both his time at NIU and UIUC, he read voraciously and pursued ideas that he was always eager to discuss. Even three weeks prior to the shootings, he discussed ideas with others and spoke of a long-term intent to pursue them.

In many ways an archetypical reflection of Enlightenment and modernist idealism with an unwavering commitment to social justice, Steve was committed to the power of reason to understand and change the world and challenge social inequality. He viewed human suffering as anathema to civilized society, and was described by friends, family, and acquaintances as gentle, caring, and nurturing. He was, by all accounts, including those collected by police, outside any profile into which mass murderers could be placed.

THE STORY

On February 14, 2008, Steve walked into room 101 in Cole Hall, a large NIU campus auditorium seating nearly 500 students. On this day only about half of the 187 students enrolled were present. Armed with a sawed-off Remington 870 twelve-gauge pump shotgun, three semi-automatic pistols, and extra ammunition, he stepped onto the stage of the classroom and blasted students in the front rows with the shotgun. Some students ducked under the seats, others sat immobile, and some sitting near the only two exit aisles fled toward the rear doors. Students who observed the shooting reported that after firing the first salvos, Steve came down from the stage and walked down one aisle, continuing to shoot at students who had not yet left their seats and at the students pushing into the aisles. After walking past what one witness described as "the first seven to ten rows," Steve turned around, walked back up on the stage, placed a pistol barrel into his mouth, and pulled the trigger. It was over barely two minutes after it had begun. After firing six blasts from the shotgun and up to 42 from his handguns, six students were dead, at least 18 were injured from the shooting or from trying to escape, the NIU campus community was left to reconstruct campus life.

THE NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

For social psychologists, attempts to link human behavior to the social processes in which they are embedded create problems. How do we make sense of seemingly senseless events when conventional explanations fail?

Herbert Blumer (1940) notes the problem of explanations that overemphasize concepts, theory, the sociology of correlates, and technique. This tends to make invisible the role of communication in social understanding. The solution, he suggests, requires accepting our theories and concepts as heuristic devices and focusing on the communicative elements reflected in the behavior. Drawing from Blumer, Maines (1993) developed a narrative sociology built around the idea that when behaviors emerge, understanding only follows later by translating the story into a sense-making narrative. Narratives are rational accounts that provide at least a minimally credible story to make mysterious events less so. They are a kind of story that references other activities, or sometimes themselves, and require that we ignore the distinctions between discourse and behavior produced in our conventional theories and concepts against which Blumer warned. Further, narratives are social transactions that allow us to examine behavior as a narratively structured outcome (Maines and Bridger 1992). Unlike a generic story, which is a conversational activity that recounts events, a narrative is structured on cultural paradigms that contain group beliefs, images, values, and shared meanings bound in and containing already articulated plots.

Narrative understanding comes from a contextual interpretative process linking the meaning of human conduct to its social expressions. The cultural frames, once we learn them, condition us to report on events in a consistent way. Mass school-shootings, for example, are interpreted by media or law enforcement by imposing prior narratives on new, similar events, and we analyze these by invoking a common vocabulary and shared metaphors. We expect narratives to have a denouement that leads to a credible climax: Shooters slay, causal warning signs occurred, warning signs were missed. The conclusion that tragedy could have been prevented with appropriate intervention reaffirms a narrative grounded in the fundamental master frame that events are predictable, the social world is understandable, and violence is not random.

One problem with narrative interpretation—as with all interpretation—is the tension between conjectural story-telling, confabulation, and data-free claims on one hand, and credible, potentially testable, and "objective" claims that can be assessed and evaluated as demonstrably wrong on the other. Generally, we begin with the data, with what we know.

THE DATA[1]

The credibility of a narrative is a function of how well we translate the story. Credibility precedes the telling, in part because of the paradigm on which the telling rests, and in part because of cogency of elements of the story that we call "facts" pertinent to the story. In the narrative of the NIU shooting, both friends and law enforcement possess insufficient elements for a satisfying narrative.

We know that Steve possessed another side, one that few people noticed, perhaps because any cognitive dissonance displayed in the front-stage persona of his public self and the less-revealed, although hardly secret, cues of his private self were no different than that of many others with whom we interact. Although a superior student and popular leader, Steve's self-doubts constantly led him to express that he felt he was "faking it," that he didn't deserve his honors or reputation, and that he "wasn't worthy" of the accolades he received. He felt that he wasn't worthy of his girlfriend and occasionally mentioned that she would be better off without him.

We also know that he spent a year in a group home for psychological intervention after high school. He entered the army in 2001 and was administratively discharged for psychological reasons after six months, after which he started college. He constantly struggled with depression, for which he periodically took medication. He loved his girlfriend of two years, and even up to the weeks prior to the shooting, they were planning their future life together. But, at the end of January 2008, he stopped taking his medications.

While we may not know what was in Steve's mind, we do know how he spent his final days. We know that he was reading Nietzsche, leaving behind his own marked copy of *The Anti-Christ.* He sent his girlfriend a copy that she received after the shootings.

Nietzsche, the vehement critic of modernism, of Enlightenment and Christian values, of reason, and of pity and caring about others represented the antithesis of Steve's values and goals. Yet, he often wore a t-shirt, originally intended as an ironic reference to the uneasy tension between good and evil faced by social workers in criminal justice, with a quote by Nietzsche printed on the back (1966:89):

> Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you

We also know that Steve was enamored with *Fight Club,* a nihilistic film celebrating violence and pain as a means to reject contemporary values and give meaning to life. We know that he identified with some of the characters and motif of the film. One character who died violently, "Robert Paulson," became a memory throughout the film as a referential (and reverential) memorializing chant: "He had a name. It was ROBERT PAULSON!" "ROBERT PAULSON!" We know that Steve sent his girlfriend gifts in the days prior to the shooting using as a return address "Robert Paulson."

Steve planned the shootings days in advance. Nearly one week before they occurred, he purchased the shotgun and Glock pistol. He sawed off the barrel of the shotgun. He left Champaign/Urbana, telling friends he was going to visit his godfather. He checked into a DeKalb motel on the Monday prior to the shootings. He had no known contact with anybody he knew.

Steve had no exit strategy. He left his possessions in the Dekalb motel where he was staying. He left no note or any other explanation of his actions. The communications with his girlfriend in the days up to and especially after the shootings indicate that he was saying "goodbye." All evidence indicates that he entered Cole Hall with no intention to leave.

AN EXISTENTIAL NARRATIVE

In the aftermath, explanations for the shootings included adverse reactions to medications, withdrawal psychosis, or insufficient medication. Others suggested Freudian reac-

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[1] The details of the events leading up to the shooting and its aftermath come from personal communications and interviews with police, friends who were intimate with the shooter, and from my own familiarization with some of the evidence. And, of course, much comes from my relationship with Steve Kazmierczak, our emails, our conversations, and our shared experiences.
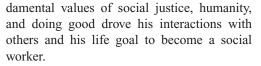
tion formation or acting out against authority (father) figures. Still others suggested academic jealousy, and one Chicago newspaper has maintained the theory that Steve was disgruntled over grades assigned three semesters prior and wanted them changed (unlikely, because students rarely want to change a grade of A). Some have attempted to explain the shootings as the result of a "culture of guns," the influence of violent video games, or heavy metal rock music. None of these explanations are particularly satisfactory.

Steve told his story through his actions, and the narrative places it in a social context, both ours and his. The structural narrative of his actions reflected a rejection of who he was as he became something quite different, more primal, as he played out existential authenticity of a character who, through violence, became that against which he fought. As a result, the world became absurd.

Existentialist literature depicts the individual as faced with the dilemma of choosing between acquiescence and constraints of existence on the one hand, and resisting or rejecting it on the other.

By acquiescing, one embraces and promotes one's own further domination. But the choice to attempt to escape from the absurdity of one's existence is futile, because it resolves nothing. The unhappy irony, of course, is that only through such action can one live with more rather than less freedom. Yet, when individuals confront absurdity through resistance and rejection, even violent rejection, they may give meaning both to their existence and their actions by creating dissonance (Goodwin 1971:843), regardless of whether they are successful in ultimately altering their conditions. In this sense, authenticity derives from rejection of conventional external standards and staring into the abyss.

As a rationalist, Steve believed that through reason he could understand the world, address his own depression and psychological troubles, and become the success that he never believed he was. His voracious reading of theory and philosophy, his insistence that we "stick to data," and his ruthlessly logical approach to understanding characterized his front-stage persona. His commitment to fun-

damental values of social justice, humanity, and doing good drove his interactions with others and his life goal to become a social worker.

However it played out in his mind, the reality is that there were two Steves in the final few weeks, each living in a parallel universe. Only one was visible to those sharing his external reality and witnessing his presentation of self. The other was the darker, increasingly violent, unstable Steve planning mayhem, and he successfully concealed the inner reality from those closest to him.

Whatever he absorbed from Nietzsche, his actions reflected consistency with the Nietzschean contempt for conventional thought and action and rejection of fundamental (Christian) morality. The significance of the Anti-Christ played out in his final drama (2003: 125):

> One must dare become indifferent, one must never ask whether truth is useful or a fatality. . .Strength which prefers questions for which no one today is sufficiently daring; courage for the FORBIDDEN; predestination for the labyrinth.

In Camus' (1958) tale, "The Renegade," the narrator began a journey to help others, guided by the belief that the intellect and a good soul were all it took, with sufficient work, to make the

world a better place. The narrator was captured by devil-worshipers and eventually rejected his own beliefs and values, replacing them with theirs. Like the narrator in Camus' story, Steve ultimately rejected all that, for him, held value. Reason failed him, leaving him with no anchor; idealism and humanistic values provided no hope. But, there was a difference. For Camus, we must recognize the struggle of the human condition, face its antinomies, and celebrate the power of reason and virtue. Meaning in life derives from the struggle. Steve chose the opposite. He looked into his abyss, confronted his demons, and then joined them.

CODA

The pain that I and others share is indescribable. My own centrality in the events

makes explanation more difficult: I am a sociologist. One of the murdered woman was a sociology major. One of the most seriously injured was a sociology major. Others among those wounded or present were sociology majors or other former students. Most traumatic, the shooter was one of our own sociology family, one of the most respected, an A-student, and an award-winning department leader. He was my student in his first sociology class in Cole 100 in February 2003. He was my teaching assistant in Cole Hall as an undergraduate and graduate student. I was his mentor. He was my coauthor. Most devastating, he was my friend.

This narrative is my narrative, a narrative I share with friends and others. It connects the sociological to the personal. It is also Steve's narrative, one that attempts to understand the meaning of the outcome of events, while being cautious of imputing motivation. Sometimes, however, in a dialectical narrative there may be overlap, because both the act and the outcome have similar narrative structures. This narrative brings no relief to grieving victims; it brings no relief to the rest of us. It brings his girlfriend, also my close friend, no peace. It is simply a narrative that tries to understand a story.

Because narratives change over time with retelling as new elements become available and the underlying paradigm that supports it shifts, this narrative will likely also change. It's intended as an initial starting point, not a conclusion. While this narrative may not be fully satisfactory, at the moment it's all we have.

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