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'I Hope He's Not Korean'

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'I Hope He's Not Korean'

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Byline: EDWARD J.W. PARK

All of you will take with you agonizing memories of this spring. But I hope that you -- and the society you will help build -- will be able to take on one more challenge.

Let me share with you how some of us experienced your tragedy. When I arrived at work on the morning of April 16, my campus was abuzz with your tragic news. As I busied myself with what every professor does in the course of the day -- committee meetings, advising students, attending a luncheon -- the headlines inserted themselves in ominous and revealing ways.

At first we did not know the identity of the perpetrator. After a discussion about choosing a major, a Latino student quietly shared his anxiety: "God, I hope it's not a Latino." Then we heard that the first two victims had been an African-American man and a white woman. "I hope it isn't a black person," an African-American colleague told me in the mailroom. "If it is, we're going to catch hell."

At a luncheon to welcome prospective Asian and Asian-American students, the fact that the shooter was an Asian man had already entered the conversation. Many in attendance were on edge as they speculated about his ethnicity and immigration status. In an odd game of "guess the shooter," they didn't want it to be one of their own: "I hope he's not Vietnamese"; "I hope he's not Filipino." The list went on. By the afternoon, the false rumor that he was a Chinese student from Shanghai took hold. A tiny part of me was relieved that he hadn't been Korean.

Of course, it wasn't to be. Seung-Hui Cho's Korean identity became so firmly fixed that, for a time, it seemed to obviate all other parts of who he was. He was a Korean who battled depression; a Korean who wrote violent plays; a Korean who stalked women. He was, simply, the Korean shooter. The scenario unfolded in predictable ways: Korean and Korean-American students here said they were afraid for their safety, while from Los Angeles to New York, fears of a backlash gripped the Korean-American community. Newsweek reported online that chat rooms "throbbled with hate."

I was bombarded with voice- and e-mail messages from the news media. Could I comment on the incident? It was as though Cho's ethnicity itself held the key to his rage. At a faculty meeting, one of my white colleagues said, "I'm so sorry about what happened," as if I had been in Blacksburg dodging the bullets. Being a Korean-American had become all-consuming.

It goes without saying that race and ethnicity still play a powerful role in American society. For racial and ethnic minorities, especially those of us who are marked by visible reminders of difference, minority status sets us apart as vulnerable. It is revealing that on the day of the shooting, everyone who played the "guess the shooter" game with any sense of personal investment was a member of a minority group. Given our past experiences, we knew that, if the shooter had been white, the responsibility, blame, and anger would have begun with the individual. But for us, the responsibility, blame, and anger also implicated our racial and ethnic identity.

The nation knows that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold committed the Columbine High School massacre. I hope that the national memory of the heartbreak at Virginia Tech doesn't stop with these words from an April 17 Voice of America headline: "University Gunman Was South Korean Student."

In your efforts to see beyond racial and ethnic labels, I implore you to draw on your educational and personal experiences at Virginia Tech. In this diverse and multicultural university, you learned about the perils of racism, and you were enriched by sharing your lives with people of diverse backgrounds. Let this empower you to transcend hollow labels so you may understand the individual circumstances that conspired to create this tragedy. Our collective fate as a multicultural nation -- committed at once to social justice and to individual rights and responsibilities -- depends on it.

Edward J.W. Park

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By EDWARD J.W. PARK

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