

## **Four-Sixteen-Oh-Seven**

**Ezra Brown  
Alumni Distinguished Professor  
Department of Mathematics, Virginia Tech**

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The wind had been blowing in Blacksburg for five solid days with hardly any letup, and the Monday morning of April 16 arrived with no indication that it would stop.

It did not stop. It got worse – a whole lot worse.

At 8 a.m. that morning the barometric pressure was extremely low, but the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day as I walked from my home near the Blacksburg Library to my office in McBryde Hall. I needed to prepare for my Tuesday classes, the one at 11 in 211 Patton and the one at 12:30 in 211 Norris. My office is right in the middle of the side of McBryde Hall that faces Norris Hall. Shortly after 9 a.m., I looked out the window and saw a sheriff's car by a tree just outside of Holden Hall, between McBryde and Norris. And then a colleague came running into my office, saying something about a shooting going on Norris Hall. I then saw police officers running toward Norris, and remained glued to my window, thinking "What could this possibly be?"

I soon found out.

As I watched the events outside of Norris Hall unfold, there was a knock at my open door and Sam Abboud, a member of the Hillcrest Honors Residential Community, came into the room. "Have you heard about the shooting at West A-J? Somebody shot an RA (Resident Advisor) and another student around 7 this morning!" I had not heard; Sam and his friend Michael Miracle from Hillcrest told me that McBryde was locked down, and asked if they could stay in my office for the time being? Of course they could, and while acts of unspeakable carnage were happening not 200 feet away, there I was, blithely talking to students about a couple of interesting mathematical puzzles. Occasionally I looked out the window and would see several groups of students racing out of Norris Hall with their arms raised, running toward the drill field. Again, I thought "Two students shot? Are they dead? What next?"

You know about "what next."

Eventually, a uniformed officer knocked on the door, informed us that they were closing McBryde Hall and telling us that we should go home. Sam and his friend left, a few minutes later my wife Jo called, and I heard her say such things as "Virginia Tech is on CNN...a shooting in Norris Hall...are you okay?" "Yes, I'm fine. They closed McBryde, and I'll be home soon." A short while later, I looked out and saw that the frenzied activity outside Norris had stopped.

People were walking, not running. As I walked home, I saw what seemed like dozens of police cars – actually hundreds – and began to realize that something really horrific had happened.

I got home, hugged and kissed my wife, walked into our den, and watched CNN in slack-jawed amazement. My sense of astonishment and horror rose with each new report about the numbers of slain students and faculty members...after which my mind became blank. I had no recollection of the rest of That Day until two days ago (May 2) when I asked my wife, “What did I do on the afternoon of April 16?” She said, “You went upstairs to the office, you turned on the computer, and until 11 o’clock that night you did nothing but answer emails other than to talk on the phone about a dozen times, have supper, and go to the bathroom.” I did not, and still do not, remember having supper that night.

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On a more-or-less weekly basis, I send out an email to a few dozen friends, alumni, mathematicians, relatives, classmates from college and high school and a variety of colleagues from different times, places and venues. Since I bake Biscuits for my students, I call this email a Biscuit and its recipients, Biscuiteers. I sent out the following Biscuit, entitled “An Unimaginable Horror,” Tuesday morning, April 17, 2007 (with a few subsequent editorial comments):

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Yes. An Unimaginable Horror.

Here is a haiku that probably describes it best:

#### DAY OF HORROR

There is no doubt that,  
On the sixteenth of April,  
God sat down and cried.

<http://198.82.160.236/> is the website you are looking for.

Jo and I are well and reasonably sound. Thanks to all of you who have sent us your good wishes, either by phone or by email; they have been of great comfort to us.

One of the slain professors was G. V. Loganathan of the Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE) Department. Last year, he received the William E. Wine Award for Outstanding Teaching, Virginia Tech's most prestigious teaching award. (NOTE: On Thursday, April 26, at the spring meeting of the Virginia Tech Academy of Teaching Excellence, Dr. George Filz of CEE received the Wine Award and gave an eloquent and moving tribute to G.V.)

Another slain teacher was Jamie Bishop of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures; he taught German. One or two times a week, I would take my lunch over to the FLL department's lunch table, and Chris was usually there. He was a familiar figure around campus: a tall thin guy who wore granny-glasses and rode a bicycle practically everywhere. A Georgia lad, "Herr Bishop" – as his students knew him – was a friendly fellow, easy to talk to, interested in his students, and just a real presence at the lunch table. Chris was part of the scene. Jamie loved talking about teaching, I was also from the Deep South, and I had spent a year in Germany, so we had lots to talk about!

Another slain faculty member was Jocelyne Couture-Nowak, who taught French, and was occasionally at the Foreign Languages lunch table, though not as often as Jamie. "Madame" to her students, she would bustle into the lunch room, all smiles, say something to one of her colleagues, wave at the rest, and leave just as quickly. As the saying goes in the South, we'd "howdied" but we hadn't "shook." (NOTE: Jocelyne's class was in Norris 211. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, my Math 4176 class met from 12:30 to 1:45 pm – in Norris 211. This is something I don't really want to think too much about...)

One of the wounded professors was Wally Grant of Engineering Science and Mechanics (ESM), whose son Stephen and our son Benjamin grew up together (well, "grew up" isn't exactly right, for they have both stayed very young at heart). I would usually see Wally at least once a week when I went to teach my Cryptography class...in Norris Hall.

Another slain professor, Liviu Librescu of ESM, was a Holocaust survivor, only to be killed by a madman on April 16. The date April 16 is observed in Israel as Yom Ha-Shoah. In the US, we call it Holocaust Remembrance Day. The motto of Virginia Tech is *ut prosim*, which means "that I may serve." That day, Liviu embodied the ultimate expression of *ut prosim* when he barricaded his classroom door against the gunman, buying time for his students to escape, and knowing that the gunman would undoubtedly shoot him through that door...and the gunman did just that. (NOTE: I have heard that certain figures at certain religious schools in our fair land have called the "men of Virginia Tech" wusses because they did not take action against the gunman. These figures have assured their students that *their* men would certainly take such action. I wonder whether they know that one of the true heroes of that Day of Horror was an elderly Jew who survived the Holocaust. I wonder...)

I don't know if any of my students were killed or injured; I have heard from a few of them, and hope to hear from the rest. (NOTE: They were all okay; most of them emailed back, saying "I'm okay, and thanks for worrying about me!" and a fair number said, "I'm okay – but what about you? Are you okay?" The concern that my students showed for me replayed itself hundreds of thousands of times that week, in many places and at many times.)

I will be going to a school-wide convocation at Cassell (pronounced "Castle") Coliseum at 2 pm today and a candlelight vigil on the drill field at 8 pm tonight.

At 7 pm tonight, we will be saying Kaddish at the Blacksburg Jewish Community Center. The Mourner's Kaddish is one of the oldest prayers in the world, and it is said at the time of the death of a loved one and at the anniversary of a loved one's death.

It does not mention death or dying or sadness or mourning or grieving. It is a prayer praising and exalting God. Here is a possible English translation, together with a possible transliteration of the Hebrew:

“Glorified and sanctified be God's great name (Yit-gadal ve-yit-gadash sh'mei rabo)

“throughout the world which He has created according to His will. (Be-olmo divrah khiru-tei)

“May He establish His kingdom (ve-yamlikh malkhu-tei)

“in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, (ve-khayyei-khon u-ve-yomei-khon ve-khayyei de-khol bait Yisroel)

“speedily and soon; and let us say, Amen. (ba-golah u-veezmahn koreev ve-imeru Amein)

“May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity. (yehei sh'mei rabo mevorakh le-olam u-ve-olmei ol-my-hyah)

“Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, (Yit-borakh ve-yish-tabakh ve-yitpoar ve-yitromam ve-yitnasei ve-yit-hadar ve-yit-haleh ve-yit-halal sh'mei de-kuhd-shah)

“blessed be He, (be-rikh hu)

“beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and let us say, Amen. (l'elam mikhoh bir-khata ve-shirata toosh-be-khata ve-nekhemata da-miron be-olma ve-imeru Amein)

“May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and let us say, Amen. (yehei shlomo rabo min shemaya ve-khayim oleinu ve-al-kohl Yisroel ve-imeru Amein)

“He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and let us say, Amen.” (Oseh shalom bim-romav hu ya-a-seh shalom aleinu ve-al-kohl Yisroel ve-imeru Amein).

Say it with us.

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The Candlelight Vigil on the drill field took place shortly after we said Kaddish at the Blacksburg Jewish Community Center on Tuesday evening, April 17. Before we said Kaddish together, several members of the Jewish community and several Engineering Science and Mechanics faculty spoke briefly, eloquently, and courageously about the life and death of Liviu Librescu, who threw himself in harm's way so that his students could escape.

After the service, the students walked over to the drill field for the Candlelight Vigil. Someone,

apparently from Charlottesville, found out that there would be a Candlelight ceremony Tuesday night, called up the University, and said, "I am donating forty thousand candles, and paper cups to protect the flames from the wind. They will arrive in a truck on Tuesday afternoon. This is a donation and you cannot refuse." Whoever you are, we thank you.

The drill field is an oval-shaped lawn ringed with trees, crossed by several sidewalks, and encompassing twenty-three acres. According to the University Provost, who watched the ceremony from a window in the President's office on the second floor of Burruss Hall, the entire drill field was covered with people. Some said ten thousand, others said twenty thousand. There was a brief procession of a detachment from the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets, Sumeet Bagai of Hokies United said a few words, and then one person lit one candle with one match. He lit two other candles with his candle, and so it proceeded across all the thousands of candles, now flickering in the high winds that continued to blast across campus. At various times we heard the singing of various melodies, including the VT alma mater, Amazing Grace, and the National Anthem. Someone began the Lord's Prayer and soon we were all saying it together. When all candles were lit, Sumeet said, "We will now have the playing of Echo Taps." One trumpeter near the public-address system would play a phrase from Taps, which was echoed by another trumpeter at the far end of the drill field...then another phrase, and its echo...and so on until the end of Taps. The playing of Echo Taps at the Candlelight Vigil is one of the most chilling things I have ever heard.

Then Sumeet said, "Thank you", and we all blew out our candles.

You don't forget something like that. And the students organized it with breathtaking rapidity and class. This also holds true for the following Monday's Ceremony of the Balloons and the Ringing of the Bell.

At this point, let me add a word about the Virginia Tech students. In the time since April 16, they have been simply sensational. In their dealings with the media, and with the huge numbers of visitors, they have conducted themselves with dignity and their responses to interviewers of every kind have been uniformly positive. They saw every trap set for them by interviewers, and without heat or anger, cleverly avoided those traps. They reached out to each other and to the entire University community, and because of the 24/7 media coverage of this tragic event, the world knows what a classy bunch of students we have here, and we faculty are tremendously proud of them.

If you want to express gratitude, go up to our campus and town law enforcement officers and members of the Rescue Squads. Shake their hands and tell them "Thank You." Because the ones who went into Norris Hall saw unspeakable horrors and helped clean up those horrors so that you and I would not have to see them. They are also heroes.

One more vignette. Somebody donated thirty-two trees, to be planted in memory of the 32 slain students and faculty. We planted the first one yesterday, Thursday May 3, in the pouring rain out in front of Main Campbell residence hall, in memory of Leslie Sherman, a member of the Main Campbell Residential Honors Community and a history major who was in Norris Hall. Her

parents drove down from Northern Virginia just for this event. The ten-foot tulip poplar had been planted, and a large amount of dirt from the planting hole was covered up by a tarpaulin. Several faculty, administrators, and students spoke briefly, after which we handed out four shovels and held umbrellas for any and all to put a shovelful of dirt in the hole who wished to do so. The Shermans then spoke of their daughter's love of Virginia Tech, and her eager anticipation of a study abroad in the fall, led by one of the Russian teachers. Mr. Sherman then told us that Leslie's younger sister was in her first year at UNC-Wilmington, studying oceanography, but that she was not so interested in oceanography anymore, and that she was transferring for next fall.

She has transferred to Virginia Tech.

And if that doesn't make you cry, then you are not my friend.

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That Monday night of April 16, I now recall being worried because I had not heard from several students; in particular, Jessica Kline, who was doing research on Sudoku for me, and Brad Shapiro, my advisee for the Class of 1954 Honors Scholarship, had not yet checked in...then the relief I felt on getting an email from Jess ("I'm fine"), but not from Brad...surely he was okay...wasn't he?

Tuesday morning, April 17, my wife and I went to the Weight Club at the Corporate Research Center. I don't remember anything about the 35-minute workout on the elliptical trainer, but I do remember seeing dozens – maybe over a hundred – police cars and the now-ubiquitous TV satellite trucks at the Tech Airport, ready and waiting for the President of the United States and the Governor of Virginia to arrive and to be escorted to Cassell Coliseum for the 2 pm Convocation. My wife expressed the thoughts of many thousands when she said, "This can't be happening in Little Old Blacksburg, in our safe little town where the number of murders over the past 38 years suddenly doubled in as many minutes. No, this can't be happening." Can't be, can't be.

Is Be.

Shortly after noon that day, I was crossing the drill field to go to the 2 pm Convocation, following a river of orange and maroon jerseys and jackets and hats. I met up with David Kingston, University Distinguished Professor of Chemistry, who was debating whether to go to the Convocation. Right then, a student coming the other way saw a friend and said, "We might as well go to Lane Stadium and watch the Convocation on the Jumbo-Tron. I just heard that the line to get into Cassell is over one mile long." On hearing this, Dave and I went to Owens Dining Hall and had lunch, after which we returned to our offices.

Shortly after 2 pm I walked over to Hillcrest Hall, home of University Honors and the Hillcrest Honors Residential Community. There was a TV set up in Hillcrest Dining Room and over a hundred students, faculty and staff were watching the Convocation. I saw, and hugged, my faculty colleague Terry Papillon, Professor of Classics in the Foreign Languages and Literatures (FL&L) Department, the University Honors Preceptor and a frequent diner in the FL&L lunch

room. We both cried. I did the same with University Honors Director Jack Dudley, one of my most long-standing friends in Blacksburg. Finally Brad Shapiro saw me, and we went outside and hugged like family members. He spoke these chilling words: "Main Campbell lost one resident: Leslie Sherman." We returned to the Dining Room and watched the last third of the Convocation. We heard Zenobia Hikes, Vice-President for Student Affairs, introduce two good people from the Counseling Center. We heard these counselors tell the students to "go where you get the most hugs...don't isolate yourselves."

And then we heard Nikki Giovanni.

We heard her recite that heart-stopping valedictory poem that she later said took about twenty minutes to write. We heard those words that are now familiar all over the planet: "We Are Virginia Tech: We Will Prevail!"

We heard "Let's Go, Hokies!"

And somehow, that was exactly what we all needed to hear: that this dreadful horror was something that happened *to* us...that it did not and will not define who we are...that we are One Tough Bunch Of Hokies...that we may never get over it, but we will get through it...that we are a Community. And the whole world knows it.

That night, I went to the Kaddish service at the Blacksburg Jewish Community Center and the Candlelight Vigil on the drill field...but you've already heard my experiences there. Well, not quite. After the Vigil was over, I walked over to the front of Burruss Hall and shook the hand of Wendell Flinchum, VT Chief of Police, and thanked him.

Tuesday and Wednesday I received many emails from my students, including two who stated that they would be gone until the last day of classes, because they would each be attending the funeral of a friend. As a faculty member, as their teacher, what do you say to them? How do you respond? At any rate, I held it together, with occasional tears, through the rest of that week. The first event on Monday, April 23 was the Bells and Balloons Ceremony at 9:30 a.m. on the drill field. A huge brass bell was placed on the platform on the drill field right in front of Burruss Hall, and thirty-two blocks of Hokie Stone had been placed in a semicircle downhill and directly in front of that platform. Sumeet Bagai of Hokies United made a few remarks, and thirty-two students, faculty, and staff members walked in and arranged themselves in the semicircle, each behind one of the thirty two blocks of Hokie Stone. They were carrying white balloons. Then, a large and very strong Virginia Tech staff person seized the rope and rang the bell to call everyone's attention. After a full minute, when the tone of that great bell had died away, he rang the bell again, and the balloon on the extreme right end of the platform was released and rose into the air. After fifteen seconds, the bell rang again, and the next white balloon was released and rose into the air. Then the bell rang again...and again...and again...a total of thirty-two times. One by one, thirty-two white balloons rose into the breeze over the drill field and rode off toward the east.

When the sound of the bell faded for the last time, a vast number of orange and maroon balloons were released from in front of Burruss Hall, and they rose and traveled east. Twenty seconds

later, a second huge crowd of balloons were launched from another point in front of Burruss Hall, and they rose. Twenty seconds later, a third and last collection of balloons went up in the air. And the ceremony was over.

There was, however, one very striking thing about the launch of those maroon and orange balloons.

Although the three bunches were launched at different times, they joined up together and traveled out of sight together, almost as if the earlier launch waited for its comrades to join it...and then they disappeared as one.

On leaving the drill field, I noticed a young woman sitting on the ground, having lost the battle to hold back tears. I walked over to her and hugged her, and all I could say was, "I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry..." There was a whole lot of that going on all over campus and probably all over the world. The rest of that day, I did hall duty with the yellow ribbon and the "May I Help?" badge, giving directions and hugs.

Tuesday was the first day that my own classes resumed. My Math 3134 class met in Patton 211 at 11 a.m. Patton Hall is the home of Civil Engineering, which lost Professor G.V. Loganathan and eight graduate students. I welcomed my students back said, "We can talk about mathematics or we can talk about important things. It's up to you." They did talk for about fifteen minutes about the events of the previous week. I told them that they could only improve their grade by continuing in the course and taking the third mid-term and the final exam. They said, "Let's review for the third test," and so we did. It turned out to be a lively class, of all things, and apparently they made an effort to cheer me up. It succeeded, and by the end of the class, we were all laughing. Maybe nervous laughter, but hey, it was better than none.

The 12:30 cryptography class on Tuesday had met in Norris 211. The mood in McBryde 233, the new meeting room, was much more somber. Two of my cryptography students were out of town, attending funerals of their classmates. The third, a triple major in math, electrical engineering and French, left in the middle to go to a memorial service for Jocelyne Couture-Nowak over at the Hahn Horticultural Gardens Pavilion. We did not talk about mathematics; I don't remember what we said to each other, but apparently it comforted the students. I was very sad for my three students who were saying good-bye for the last time to friends and teachers.

And then on Wednesday April 25, I went to the Memorial Service for the Foreign Language Department's teachers and students who were slain. This was held in Donaldson Brown in the large multipurpose room, and there was hardly a vacant spot on the floor. Many faculty colleagues and friends of Herr Bishop and Madame Couture-Nowak spoke about the lives of these two beloved teachers, and about how much their students meant to them. Poems were read in English, French, German, Latin, Greek, and Russian. Then, one by one, fifteen students walked to the microphone and each one read two or three sentences about one of the fifteen slain students. I was standing by the door, looking at a program that listed those fifteen students, and kept saying to myself, "There were so many of them...so many...so many..."

...and I did what I did just now as I was typing the previous sentence.

I finally broke down and sobbed...not for me, but for them, for their loss of life, for their vibrant young lives cut down in such a horrifying manner. And when you get to the point that you can grieve, not for your loss, but for their loss, then maybe you will begin to heal yourself.

And this is what I told my student JT who came to my office on the last day of our Math 4176 class, the one that had been moved to McBryde Hall from 211 Norris. I told him of my own grief at losing Tom, my best friend in college who died in a car wreck in May 1967, one week before my wife and I were married. I told JT that it took a long time to reach the point where Tom's death wasn't a daily source of pain, where I wasn't waking up in the middle of the night crying. That point came when I was sad for Tom's loss, not mine, and that was when I began to get better. This is what I told JT. I hope it helps him.

Again, one more vignette. On Thursday April 19 I called my student Brad and asked if he'd like to go out to lunch. He said, "I'm making pancakes up here in Hillcrest Hall; do you want to join us?" I sure did, and said so. "One question: do you mind having chocolate chips in your pancakes?" "Certainly not...chocolate chips will be fine." So I walked over to Hillcrest and up to the kitchen on the second floor, sat down in a small kitchen with half-a-dozen students standing around, and ate pancakes with them. This general Being Together comforted me greatly, and again drove home the point that we have a truly classy bunch of students!

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I got a call on Sunday April 22 inviting me to represent the University in a media-pool interview, to take place on Monday, April 23 – the day Virginia Tech resumed classes. About a dozen faculty, staff and students met in Burruss Hall with various VT public information specialists and a crew of crisis management experts from an outfit called Firestorm. The experts helped us understand what we'd be up against, and we all discussed the message we wanted to give to the media, namely that this was a tragic event that happened to us, and that we are strong and will continue to be a great university. As I saw it, our mission – and we all chose to accept it wholeheartedly – was to convince the media that We're Okay Now So Please Go Home. Really, it was very simple: we would tell our stories and avoid side issues.

On Monday afternoon, we assembled in a room at the Inn At Virginia Tech. The format called for four students and four faculty/staff, who would collectively be interviewed by one representative each of TV, radio, and press media representatives. The only one I'd heard of was the radio person, namely Noah Adams, the highly respected National Public Radio correspondent. I was both relieved and disappointed that I would not be one of the eight, because I had not met any of my classes since before April 16. I watched from behind the cameras and microphones as my colleagues and our students gave interviews that were simply superb.

The world saw and heard the award-winning Professor of Chemistry Joe Merola talk about being locked down in Davidson Hall with his 9:05 class for two hours on that fearful Monday...how he met with both his class and the previous (8:00) class that met in the same room...how a student from his class had been wounded, and a Hokie T-shirt was placed in the student's chair...how a student from the previous class had been slain, and a vase of flowers (or maybe a wreath) was

placed in that student's chair. He talked about the emotions in both of these classes, the unutterable sadness and grief that both he and his students expressed, how he was moved to tears in both classes, how proud he was of all of our students.

The world saw and heard Art Keown, the Pamplin Professor of Finance honored by being named a Virginia Outstanding Faculty Member, who expressed my own thoughts perfectly when he said something like this. "I've been on the faculty of Virginia Tech for 33 years [for me, 38]...my wife and I raised our kids here...this is our home. Now that our kids are grown, I think of our students as 'my kids'...and one consequence of this dreadful event is that I've been able to tell our students how much I love them."

The world saw and heard four of those students, including Sumeet Bagai, Scott Cheatham and Sarah Saxton of Hokies United, and I have never seen a group of students who were more poised and gracious, individually and collectively. [NOTE: I can't remember the fourth student who was part of the interview, but one of the ones "backstage" with me was Greg Sagstetter, Undergraduate Representative to the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors.] "Is there adequate help available on campus for troubled students?" Yes. "Are students informed about the help that is available?" Yes. "Tell us about the quality of that help." It's terrific. No heat, nothing defensive, no reacting to questions...just quality.

In short, they were sensational. But that has been typical of our students.

On Tuesday, May 8 I bought two Hokies United tee-shirts. Best \$10 I've spent in a long time.

Today, Thursday May 10, I had lunch with my good friends and colleagues Jack Dudley and Terry Papillon of University Honors, along with their staff: Associate Director Barbara Cowles, Assistant Director Russell Shrader, Office Manager Michelle Wooddell, Pre-Med Advisor George Simmons, and Receptionist Tammy Jo Craft. At tomorrow's University Commencement at Lane Stadium, the University Honors graduates march in a procession to the stadium together, to the accompaniment of a Pipe and Drum Band, and we discussed plans for this event. During the ceremony, President Steger will confer posthumous degrees on each of the slain students. This year, the parents of Austin Cloyd and the parents of Leslie Sherman, two Honors Students who were slain, will come in to the stadium with us. Jack asked me to be right behind the Cloyds and the Shermans, and to accompany them up to the front row, where they will receive class rings from President Steger in memory of their daughters. Jack told me that I needed to be particularly attentive to the Cloyds. He said that when Austin arrived at the University Honors office, she learned, among many other things, that when they graduate, the Honors students march to Lane Stadium with a band of pipers and drummers. She thought that was the coolest thing she'd ever heard of, and looked forward to the time when *she* would march to the tune of the pipes and drums. Because of this, Jack said, her parents arranged for a lone piper to be at Austin's funeral.

And at this point, I again broke down and cried.

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So it was that Commencement Day dawned with dire predictions: thundershowers were expected in Blacksburg for the time of the evening ceremony at Lane Stadium, with a probability of 60%. In the afternoon I walked over to Hillcrest Hall carrying my cap and gown, and arrived to see Jack Dudley squinting at his computer monitor, which was showing the local weather map. We must have checked the map ten times, until about 5 p.m. it appeared as if the bad weather would pass south of the VA-NC state line and we'd be okay. But I brought an umbrella, just to be on the safe side.

It was just about 5 p.m. that Austin Cloyd's parents arrived at Hillcrest. They and the Sherman family were to be at the head of the line, leading the Pipe and Drum Band and the hundreds of Honors students and graduates with distinction in our annual procession to Lane Stadium. After introductions, Austin's dad said, "You teach math, don't you?" I said Yes, and he mentioned being at the New Faculty Orientation in August of 2005, where he heard a Veteran VT Professor, namely me, give some advice and words of welcome to the recently hired faculty members. We chatted for a while, then were joined by Leslie Sherman's mom and dad and younger sister who, as previously mentioned, has transferred to Virginia Tech and will enroll in the fall.

Eventually, we all got underway and a huge procession of honored guests, pipe band, faculty members, Honors Flags carried by Sam Abboud and Kristin Brugh, and five hundred members of University Honors and graduates with distinction snaked its way from Hillcrest past Wallace Hall, across West Campus Drive, down Washington Street and across by Cassell Coliseum and through the Merryman Center to line up in the Tunnel, where we'd enter the field. Soon enough, the ceremony began and it took quite a while to seat the thousands of students, followed by the stage party. We on the Commencement Committee had wondered about the ceremony and hoped that it would strike a proper balance between the joy of the day and the sorrow of the previous month.

We needn't have worried. The ceremony was perfect. The speakers all set the proper tone, Charles Steger's speech was truly impressive, and the presentation of class rings to the families of the slain undergraduates was tastefully done and very moving. Eventually we rose to leave. The first ones to leave were the families, and the Cloyds were in front. As they came closer, I saw that Austin's mother had finally broken down and was crying. I was there for a hug – I hoped it helped.

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## **Blacksburg Before...**

### **Graduation Day, May 11, 2007**

On September 9, 1969 a young couple with a seven-week-old boy arrived in the town of Blacksburg, VA in a Volkswagen Squareback, together with a U-Haul truck being driven by one of their fellow students from LSU in Baton Rouge. The young father had never lived anyplace with a population under 150,000; the young mother grew up in a small college town. Their first memory of Blacksburg is driving up and down Main Street – looking for the downtown. Of course, they passed through the downtown several times, a fact the young mother soon realized. They moved into an apartment at Terrace View and a few weeks later the young dad, a newly-minted Ph.D., began work as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at a small but growing

college known as VPI. Early on, the young family drove onto campus and walked around with babe in arms, looking at this place that was so entirely remote from the mathematician's experience. The buildings were out of some curious kind of limestone, and the place looked very austere. The center of the place was called the drill field, which was similar to the center of LSU – the parade ground.

Our mathematician grew up in New Orleans at a time when New Orleans was one of the most culturally interesting cities in the world, a cosmopolitan but provincial place with a whole lot of people. He did not know from small college towns. Our English major mom knew from college towns and liked the place. It took the mathematician a while, but he learned to do the same.

The family, individually and collectively (adding another boy and some pets) grew. So did the college. It became Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, popularly known as Virginia Tech. It grew from 11,000 students in 1969 to nearly 20,000 in 1977. The first few years they were in Blacksburg, the downtown business would shut down at noon on Wednesdays. There were very few female students. Student life was dominated by the Corps of Cadets. The achievements of the varsity sports teams were modest. The school had a curious reputation of being easy to get into, but not so easy to graduate from. With new faculty came new attitudes and new dreams, and slowly the college transformed into a Real University. President T. Marshall Hahn brought in the emphasis on research, his aim having been to make the place a Top-50 research university, an aim at which he succeeded. The young couple and their two boys settled in.

In those days, Blacksburg was quiet, clean, safe, and very much a part of the South. But it wasn't like the Deep South where our mathematician and eventual librarian grew up. And the changes that swept the country during the late 1960s and early 1970s also affected Blacksburg and Virginia Tech. The students wanted relevance in their courses. Many of the students were the first in their families to attend college. But even in those early days, the students were friendly and helpful, and some of them were very bright. Eventually the town grew, shopping centers sprang up near by, and the campus became very much more international: in its faculty, in its student body, in its scope.

Still, with its emphasis on research, some things needed to be changed, and by the 1980s, it was clear that there was a problem. The problem was reflected in the following shocking statistic. In 1986, Virginia Tech enrolled six hundred students who had been wait-listed at James Madison University. That's right: 600 Virginia Tech freshmen in 1986 had been denied admission to JMU. Shortly thereafter, a new President came aboard: James McComas saw this and other such statistics as a challenge. He began to re-emphasize the undergraduate program. It took some time, but eventually the old ways were changed. By the early 1990s, Virginia Tech had a reputation as a school that is hard to get into, but once a student is there, they will do whatever it takes to help that student succeed. And that is the origin of the three aspects of Virginia Tech that surprise students the most after they arrive, namely (1) the place is so beautiful, (2) the professors are so accessible, and (3) the people are so friendly.

And Blacksburg reflected this change, too.

A young woman visited here in the spring of 2000 having been accepted at several major engineering schools, including MIT and Carnegie-Mellon. She visited as a favor to her mother, not because she was particularly interested in going here. While at Hillcrest Hall, she asked Jack Dudley a question whose answer – when she asked it at MIT, Carnegie-Mellon and the other places she visited – was “No, you can’t do that here.” The question was just this: “Is it possible to double-major in both engineering and music here?” Without a pause, Jack said, “I don’t see why not.” It was that answer that convinced that young woman to come to Virginia Tech. Five years later, that young woman – whose name is Ashley White – graduated as one of the most highly honored students Virginia Tech ever enrolled, was on her way to Cambridge as a British Marshall Scholar and, after graduation, cried in the arms of her mentor for the University Honors Scholarship, that once-young Assistant Professor who was now an Alumni Distinguished Professor, saying that Virginia Tech Is Eden, And I Don’t Want To Leave.

It was this atmosphere at Virginia Tech, and it was this atmosphere in Blacksburg, that great big major university in a gorgeous setting in the middle of that pretty little sleepy little safe town, the town that has been home to the mathematician and the librarian for thirty-eight years, the University that became a powerhouse research enterprise with a one billion dollar annual budget and a world-class faculty and students who are the equal of students anywhere, the University of Addison Caldwell and Sally Miles and the Highty-Tighties and the New Virginians and the Marching Virginians and “Hoki-Hoki-Hoki-Hi” and Charlie Yates and Lucy Lee Lancaster and the Williams Hall takeover and the VTCC and Laura Jane Harper and Bobby Stevens and nine gargoyles and the Torgersen Bridge and crossing the drill field in zero-degree weather with a 50 mph breeze in your face and the 1973 NIT Basketball Championship and “EIEIO” and Bruce Smith and Mark Embree and Lucinda Roy and Stacy Smith and Michael Vick and Nikki Giovanni and Chris Kraft and the Pamplins and T. Marshall Hahn and Sarah Airey and Dell Curry and Ashley White and 190,000 alumni, this Great Place –

– that changed forever on April 16, 2007.

That event is part of the lore and the fabric of our great University, and as we say in South Louisiana, “That’s for a fact.” But the world knows how strong we are. The world knows that we will prevail. The world knows that We Are Virginia Tech.

And once again, I’m crying.

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## **Through the Eyes of a Child**

### **Graduation Day, May 12, 2007**

And finally, finally, here is an email exchange on the evening of Wednesday, April 18 that will convince us all that there is hope for the world. But first, some background.

Jason and Carla were students of mine back in the 90s, and we have been in continual contact ever since their graduation. After adventures in the “bidniss” world, they went to graduate school, got Ph.D’s in mathematics, and are now on the mathematics faculty at James Madison

University. They drove through Blacksburg when their son Sylvan was a baby, and since moving to JMU, we have seen a fair amount of each other. Sylvan has always called me Mister Bud, and so I call him Mister Sylvan. He is very bright and has certain other qualities, as you will soon see, and ... well, let's just cut to the emails.

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On Wed, Apr 18, 2007 at 09:35:37PM -0400, Jason Martin wrote:

This evening I had baby-sitting duty while Carla was at symphony practice. I was busy preparing a test for my students and listening to NPR; Virginia Tech was dominating the news. Sylvan was playing independently with his toys, and I naively assumed that he was ignoring the radio. Suddenly he turned around, almost crying. He said to me, "Daddy, Daddy! They said a man had a gun at Virginia Tech. Guns are bad, Daddy, Ms. Anna says that guns hurt people. That man was bad! Daddy, Mr. Bud is at Virginia Tech. Daddy, did the bad man hurt Mr. Bud? Daddy, Daddy, did the bad man hurt Mr. Bud? Daddy, is Mr. Bud okay? Daddy, did the bad man make Mr. Bud cry?"

I wasn't ready for that conversation, but I did the best I could. I told him that Mr. Bud was okay, but that the Bad Man hurt a lot of people. I told him that the Bad Man mad lots of people cry, even Mr. Bud and Daddy. Then Sylvan said, "When I see Mr. Bud, I'll give him a big hug so he can be better."

So, just thought I'd let you know that Sylvan was thinking of you, too. He's getting too smart... I'm going to have to stop listening to the news around him.

--jason

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You can imagine my reaction.

After I pulled myself together, I replied to Jason's email including this reply to set Sylvan's mind at ease, as follows:

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Date: Apr 18, 2007 9:50 PM  
Subject: Re: Sylvan was worried about you!  
To: Jason Martin <jason.worth.martin@gmail.com>

Dear Mr. Sylvan,

This is Mr. Bud. Your Daddy told me that you were worried about me.  
I am writing to tell you that I'm okay.  
The Bad Man did not hurt me.  
The Bad Man made me cry because he hurt other people.  
The Bad Man will no longer hurt anybody. That is something I can promise you.  
Give your Daddy and your Mommy and your sister hugs for me. That will make me very happy.  
The next time I see you, we will give each other hugs.

That will mean a lot to me.

Be well and be happy.

Mr. Bud

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The world needs more Sylvans. I am totally wrung dry of all emotions and of all words. There is nothing left. The locomotive has returned to the roundhouse.

That's all.