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Palaima: Let's make this our 9-28

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The tragic shooting event at the intellectual, residential and geographical heart of our campus is already a thing of the past. As Americans, we are doers. We have a tendency to deal with troubling issues by just getting on with our lives, by getting back to work or, as former President Bush urged us to do in 2001, by going to Disneyland. Many Longhorns just went to OU weekend.

We should not do this with the campus shooting incident. If we do, we might not learn lessons that might help us prevent another such incident. Our country has learned a lot from the tragedy of 9/11. Let's make this our 9/28.

First, we can now shift our perspectives away from the big picture and take a good close and honest look at the individual who caused the crisis. The person most deserving of thanks that we did not have another Virginia Tech on campus is the gunman himself. I use the word "gunman" with real sorrow. He was a suicide victim, a tragic waste of a young and promising life.

UT sophomore Colton Tooley was just 19 years old. A *Dallas Morning News* online headline announces, "UT shooter described as 'not the most popular student in high school'." But it quotes a high school peer who gives quite a different impression: "We always had a good time in the classroom. He helped everyone that asked for it. Of all people at UT, I never would have thought it would have been him."

It is easy to demonize a shooter who becomes a suicide victim. We should not. Depression and other psychological conditions that lead to suicide are very difficult to treat and overcome.

I have lost three close friends to suicide in the last five years. All three were in their 40s, men with good values, sterling characters, loving wives, beautiful young children and socially important careers. One was a military officer who took his life in Iraq. The other two were University professors. Even their wives and mothers had no inkling that they would ever consider taking their own lives.

Tooley was armed with an AK-47 and had ample opportunity to use it on his fellow students and others on campus. He did not. We will never know why. But we should

be grateful nonetheless that Tooley had the moral will to overcome the inner demons that might have been urging him to use his AK-47 on others.

Tooley took Latin classes at UT. One of his graduate instructors, who wishes to remain anonymous, wrote this to me: "Thank you for recognizing Colton [for] his 'restraint' (for lack of a better word). Colton was a student of mine last semester and I am finding this whole turn of events very difficult to process, especially since Colton was such a model student in Latin class. Given all the comments that are swarming on the news, e-mails, Facebook and more, I am happy to see someone point to the good that still resided in this individual, even in his most disturbed moments."

College students have enormous economic, emotional and educational pressures upon them as they try to figure out who they are and who they want to be. But our universities and colleges now spend less and less time and resources on the human side of education. At UT, we pile on requirements for majors, hardly make a dent in historically high student-faculty ratios, eliminate staff positions and emphasize getting through quickly at all costs. Counseling hotlines are important, but they are often Band-Aids that are never applied to deep psychological wounds. Law-enforcement emergency response teams mostly react to violence that has already occurred.

At an institution of our size, it is possible for a sophomore to have no meaningful contact with a professor or a peer. I teach yearly an upper-level history course, which ideally should have 15 students. It has 75 students. How can I identify a Tooley in the making? And how would a troubled student be able to know me well enough to reach out for help?

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