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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

U.S. gun laws allow normal day at UT to take a scary turn

Just before 8 a.m. Tuesday, I parked on 21st Street near the northeast corner of the Jester dormitory and walked with a few students, faculty and staff past the Perry-Castañeda Library on the University of Texas campus and toward Waggener Hall, two buildings to the north. As Walter Cronkite used to say, "It was a day like all days." I delighted in the cool air, the beauty of the overarching trees, and the sight of students starting their days on campus.

Our normal day disappeared around 8:30. Sirens sounded and news reached us that a gunman was near or in the library. Violence had come into the heart of our campus. The outcome could have been much worse, no matter how quickly our law enforcement officials responded.

I was listening to a superb graduate student at a formal doctoral defense in the small Classics seminar lounge in Waggener. We were told to stay in the rooms we were in.

A calculus class was quickly herded in because their classroom had big glass windows. Since I teach seminars on war and violence and study cases like the Virginia Tech shooting, I noticed certain behaviors.

We learned that a gunman with an AK-47 had run past students heading toward the PCL. He had fired shots, but for some unknown reasons not at them. It was soon reported that the gunman had shot himself inside the library, but that police were searching for a second suspect in nearby buildings.

The students in the classroom settled into a serious calm. Looking at them, I saw what I should see more often: how they are in the literal flowering of their youth and full of magnificent human energy and vitality of mind, soul and body. Most of them are also truly innocent, untouched by the smallest intimation of death.

Much later, some of us ventured out into the halls toward the restrooms. A group of law enforcement officers with heavy protective body armor came through sweeping the building. They ordered us to raise our arms and proceed back to a classroom.

That lasted no more than 90 seconds, but it was enough to distress one student who was seized with uncontrollable fits of sobbing. An officer tried to calm and comfort her and led her away for medical treatment. The picture of her frail, trembling form alongside his intimidating mass of uniformed gear and helmet and his ultra-modern weapon will stay with me. His overwhelming concern that she get help and be protected will stay with me also.

Later, we watched on the classroom audio-visual screen as UT President William Powers Jr. and Austin Mayor Lee Leffingwell congratulated the Austin and Travis County police and sheriff's departments for their rapid and efficient response. And indeed I found myself, finally cleared to walk toward my car a bit past noon, thanking every law enforcement officer I passed for keeping us safe.

I also wondered what kind of society would permit this to happen to the treasured children they carefully nurtured for 18 years. Why is an AK-47 — or any gun for that matter — legal to buy and use? The only reason UT was not another Virginia Tech is that the gunman chose not to make it so. The fastest response team in the world could have done nothing about the first shots that were fired with students, faculty and staff nearby. He could have fired at people at will at any time.

We are in the odd position then of thanking the law enforcement officials for their bravery and remarkable response but also thanking a clearly disturbed person for not making us pay a horrible price for the gun laws that prevail in our country.

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