

Truth Lives: My Columbine Story

By Carey Christian

The office is dark. The only window is in the door and we decide to block that off with a tall, metal cabinet. We sit in silence for the most part. It's hot and stuffy. We wait. We listen. Someone pops a ceiling tile out of place, searching for air. There are sobs and whispers.

A classmate calls his dad from the office phone. Now the police know where we are. They tell us to stay put, and then feed us some lies about what is happening outside. We continue to wait in suffocating darkness. It closes over my heart, my eyes, my life. Three and a half hours of darkness. No air. No knowledge, just questions and lies. Suffocating uncertainty. Waiting and wondering.

Then suddenly there are noises echoing through the halls. *More gunshots?* We wonder. More sobs. Then a banging on the door. "Denver Police," we hear. We cheer. We follow the police out into freedom, light, air. Out the door where we find truth lying on the ground. Already blue. Dead. Up the hill, our hands behind our heads there are more police, more tears. I don't cry. Not yet. I don't comfort anyone. Not ever.

"Go comfort the girls," Craig, a friend, had said to me in the office. The last words of his prayer still hanging in the air in that small, dark office full of more than 50 of our classmates. When the gunshots had first started, Craig ran up to me, knelt and said "Pray with me." We prayed until the door shut behind us. The words are forgotten, eroded by time and stress. But his charge to me is emblazoned in my memory: *comfort the girls*. I turned from that moment and made a choice. I kept my mouth shut. I didn't say a word from the moment I heard the gunshots to the moment I had to answer the paramedic's questions to prove I wasn't in shock. So there was no comforting the girls in that stuffy space, not by me. I looked into their familiar faces. Girls I should have known, but didn't, not really. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. I chose silence and isolation. And the dark crept into my heart.

When we are freed from the room, we encounter a stark reality, a reality defined by confusion, doubt, questions, hurt, seeking, tears. The community is in turmoil, but they come together. Thousands gather at the park, as close as they can get to the school. Flowers. Teddy bears. Signs. Notes of encouragement and love. I watch on the news. Friends holding hands, holding each other. I stay home. There is a memorial at the local movie theater that Friday. I don't go. I don't even watch the live coverage. I stay home again. In the weeks and months following the shooting, I start to feed myself a lie I have believed for more than 15 years. It is the lie that bound me and kept me from healing properly. The lie that kept me at home and keeps me there still. "This tragedy didn't impact me as much as other people," I tell myself. "I have nothing to mourn. I wasn't really a part of it."

The truth, of course, is that I am a Columbine survivor. I was never shot at. I didn't know any of the victims personally. I was locked in a room for three and a half hours with my fellow choir students waiting for rescue, someone to tell us it was safe. If Craig hadn't prayed with me, it could have happened differently. If the bombs set to go off below us had gone off, it *would* have happened differently. But those things don't matter. What matters is what happened. Tragedy. Tragedy that rocked a community, but that I told myself didn't affect me, that I was not a part of. I told myself I had no role to play. Lies. So many lies. Keeping me at home. Keeping me locked in that room of regret and shame.

It is a few weeks before the 15 year anniversary; I feel compelled to visit the permanent memorial they erected at Clement Park. I have wept there before. Reading and rereading quotes, memories, lives. This visit is different, though. Tears come before I reach the entrance. I stand in the center of the memorial before I leave and spin around, looking at the 13 names etched in lifeless stone.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into the wind. "I'm sorry. I wish this hadn't happened. I wish you were all still here." I know it is not my fault, but the words come again in a whisper: "I'm sorry." I reread a few tributes. Names defining who they were. Lives defining how they are remembered. I cry as images and memories fly across my mind unbidden and yet always there, right there.

"I'm sorry."

But these monuments, these echoing memories, these stones do not need my apology.

I didn't even know I had wronged anyone, not until I recognize that my life is atrophying. I ask myself "why?" Why do I feel useless? Worthless? Silenced?

Mankind is designed for community. We are born into families, we make friends, fall in love, continue the cycle. Presence is a gift we offer each other. In the midst of a dark time in the life of my community, I stayed home and denied my presence to others and denied myself the presence of others.

I chose silence over words of life. I chose isolation over community and shared tears. At a time full of confusion, sadness, questions, weeping, brokenness, I was at home lost in my own confusion, convincing myself I had not experienced the tragedy, not really, that I was somehow less.

I would have walked through Clement Park alone, surrounded by people. But at least I would have been there. I would have stood at Bowles Crossing Theater, probably with my parents, listening to my pastor speak truth to a multitude, surrounded by tear stained cheeks. I would have left without a word, but at least I would have been there, sharing a significant experience with my community, showing myself I was a part of the tragedy, not just an outsider looking on. Staying silent, staying home, denying others my presence, denying myself the company of others, taught me something about myself that wasn't

true. I was not in a position to care for others then, and I have convinced myself this will always be true of me. Over the years, through college, career, starting a family, I have stayed home in my heart and mind, feeling locked up in my silence, seeing only uselessness.

I cannot change how I responded to those events all those years ago, no matter how much I may desire a chance to stand in that multitude, to grieve with a community of strangers. All I can do is face the affect the choices have had on my life and my faith. I must ask for forgiveness, new eyes, and a willingness to take the 17 year old in me by the hand, so she might embrace herself as she is now and walk with me as we grow into the future. A future just as unknown as it was that dark day, but full of hope.

So hear the apology on the wind, bouncing off of granite memories: I'm sorry I stayed silent. I'm sorry I stayed home. I'm sorry it took me 15 years to realize what I had done. I've been locked in a room with a key for a long time. This is the key. I no longer feel shame. Sadness, yes, but not shame. I turn from this moment and make a new choice. The door is open and on the other side is freedom, light, air. Truth. Alive and well.

Hello, world. It's been a long time.

I wrote this essay in 2014, 15 years after I graduated from Columbine High School in Littleton, CO. Through this tragedy I clung to God and my family. I was always able to talk about my experience, but there were fears and choices I grew to be ashamed of, as you have read. Since writing the above, a tremendous period of healing was unlocked in my life after the 20th anniversary of the tragedy. In 2019 I walked the halls of the school once more. And once more had the opportunity (and temptation) to stay home from a memorial. But instead I went. Though I had been to the memorial on the 10th anniversary, somehow this one was different. I made the choice to go despite feelings that I didn't need to. It was after I had written this essay and had begun to understand that one's presence, even in silence, is a gift. And so, as predicted, I went and stood with my father in silence, I spoke to no one, but I was there. I heard others like me and saw others like me and recognized myself as a member of this incredible community. Like they say in video games, my healing was "unlocked." April will never be an easy time of the year. But April brings Easter, my son's birthday, spring. So much life. New life. My prayer for you is that these words hold grace and hope and freedom. No matter your hurt, may you see your value. Always.