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THE SCHOOL Administrator

October 2007

A Reflection on a Violent Day

By George A. Goens

The phone call at 2:01 p.m. on a cold, wintry Wednesday almost 15 years ago started a journey I thought I would never take as a superintendent.

The school secretary hurried into my meeting with the principal and said starkly, "Dr. Goens, you have an emergency call."

Scott, the school district's director of instruction, hastily said, "A principal has been shot at West High School."

I told him to stay at the central office and to keep the phone lines open. I sat back in the chair in shock, disbelief and fear.

Sometimes it feels as if I dreamed the incident and did not live it. In some ways, the crisis remains vivid and clear to me; in other ways, it is foggy and vague. By being so intensely burrowed in the job at hand I must have lost details.

Following the call, I sped to the school, darting through traffic lights. Throughout that day, ambiguity and uncertainty stalked me like a dark, bleak shadow. The kids and staff were in lockdown. The perpetrator was unknown. The police were investigating. Getting everyone out of the building safely was a priority.

I was dazed and stunned, but paradoxically my behavior was controlled, linear and logical. Each decision that day carried immense magnitude because of the consequences for people's lives.

Time literally stood still or sped by in a vapor. It seemed surreal. For me, seconds and minutes moved in torrents and streaks and then stagnated while the clock dragged in slow motion.

Occasionally, brief shimmers of feeling broke through the cocoon I placed around my emotions when all hell was breaking loose. But honestly, I don't know how I got through those first few hours. I felt removed, as if I was having an out-of-body experience watching things unfold.

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The psychiatrist, who worked with us in the aftermath, was a wonderful resource. He called me every month, from January through June, each time asking, "How are you doing?" My programmed response was "I'm all right. Things are going fine." In May I exploded at him, "Why the hell are you calling me all the time?" He retorted, "Because you are not fine. People in your position take care of others and deep-six their own feelings and emotions."

Looking back, he was right. I wasn't doing fine. The gravity of the situation caused me to "gunnysack" my emotions. Out of sight. Out of mind. Out of consideration.

Emotionally and professionally, I depended on many people that day. My colleague Mary Pat and I are bonded together by that experience. I leaned on her in invisible ways for support. In a quiet moment our eyes communicated what words could not clearly express. Together we faced the turmoil of that day, which included dealing with the crush of news media.

The press deluged us. Klieg lights, microphones, cameras appeared in force at the news conference that evening. The talking heads on television also have bodies, and with them frailties that were infuriating. To be fair, some reporters acted with sensitivity and even nobility. One reporter in particular understood that the sanctity of a school was violated.

But there were others. I was furious at the unfounded speculation and allegations of a mass of weapons in school, the knee-jerk conclusion that one of our children committed the crime and other irresponsible guesswork. Reporters' conjecture and flimsy interpretations were distressing. There is a time for human compassion, and there are moments for analytical speculation. Some media types do not understand the difference.

A Personal Toll

The intensity of everything diverted any thought of calling home until after 5:30 p.m. when the school was emptied safely. The call was short: "Are you OK? Can't imagine what you're going through. ... Come home when you can. ... Take care of yourself" are the fragments I remember my wife saying. I just wanted to hear a voice from home. When I got home that night, I felt dense, heavy numbness as I sat on the couch in leaden silence petting the cat, disbelief seeping back into my head.

Taking care of people in a crisis exacts a toll on leaders. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, I fell out of balance — emotionally, physically, cognitively, spiritually. When needs in one or more of these areas are ignored, we can get into trouble. That is what happened to me. Even if I knew it was happening at the time, I don't think I would admit it. Leaders after all, I thought, are supposed to be strong. But what is strength?

Burying feelings and being an anchor amid chaos requires a countervailing balance. Care-taking and helping others does not mean denying your own grief and needs. Recognizing them, in fact, is a sign of strength.

I also hid a flash of culpability that maybe I could have done something to stop the tragedy. In quiet moments, questions crept into my mind. Could we have seen this coming? Did we prepare adequately? Was I responsible through benign neglect or not being vigilant enough?

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I never shared my feelings of fear of not being up to the task of handling the crisis. Feeling a deep sense of responsibility haunted me; even though rationally I knew an emotionally disturbed 21-year-old with bizarre schemes in his head could not be stopped under almost any circumstance. My second-guessing produced doubts in my mind that maybe more could have been done.

Adrenaline Rush

Crisis also produces an adrenaline rush that was almost addicting. I never shared with anyone that a month after the crisis, I missed the intensity of the moment and the critical nature of each decision. I felt guilty about those feelings and thoughts because a colleague had been murdered. I should have faced these feelings. Just getting back into the swing of work was not the antidote. My balance began to wobble.

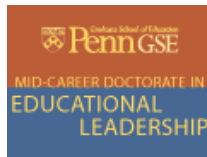
The psychologist was correct. Denying my feelings and thoughts was destructive, not a sign of strength. When I see school leaders under the duress of a crisis, my heart goes out to them. In their silent moments, I wonder whether they think the same thoughts and have the same feelings I had. My life has changed dramatically as a result of that incident, and my future, in part, is galvanized with that cold December day in Wisconsin when I learned that the depth of crisis has many levels.

George Goens, a former superintendent, is a senior partner with Goens/Esparo, 71 Litwin Road, Litchfield, CT 06759. E-mail: gagoens@snet.net. He is the author of *Soft Leadership for Hard Times* (Rowman and Littlefield Education).

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