

Duane Morrison: A Profile

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

THE INCIDENT

Morrison is included as a school shooter even though the shooting appears to have been secondary to the sexual molestations he committed. He held a classroom hostage, dismissing the teacher, male students, and most of the female students, but keeping six girls with him. He then molested the girls and threatened that “something would happen” at 4:00 PM.¹ A half-hour before this deadline, the police burst open the door. Morrison shot and killed one of the hostages, a sixteen-year-old girl named Emily Keyes. The police fired on Morrison, wounding him three times. He killed himself with a gunshot to the head. His autopsy found no trace of alcohol, psychiatric medication, or illegal drugs.²

Morrison reportedly had no connection to Platte Canyon High School. It was not an impulsive choice, however, because he had scouted out the school at least one day prior to his attack.³ Why he chose this school remains unknown. During the hostage situation, he questioned people about their names and commented that he knew one of the student’s fathers.⁴ This appears to have been a coincidence. There is no indication that he knew who was in that particular classroom or sought out anyone as a victim. Confusing matters, however, is the report by a male student that within days of the attack, Morrison talked to him about a list of girls’ names.⁵ The names of the girls, and whether or not they were the ones he molested, remains unknown.

Morrison apparently had two goals in mind: to molest girls, and to kill himself. There is no evidence that he went into the school with the intention of killing anyone else. Nonetheless, he was armed and willing to murder, though why he did so remains a mystery.

CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

The facts about Morrison are meager. He was born in 1953⁶ and had five siblings.⁷ His father reportedly told him that he was the product of an affair and that he was not his son.⁸ It appears that Morrison believed this. In his suicide note, Morrison refers to “he’ (your father),”⁹ implying that his siblings’ father was not his father. It appears that his mother had an affair that resulted in Morrison’s birth. This might explain Morrison’s sense that he was singled out for abuse:

I’ve lately began to wonder why “he” (your father) chose me to be the “one.” Do any of you know? Did he ever tell anyone or did I do something wrong as a baby? Don’t get me wrong, I [am] thankful that none of you had to go through what I did!¹⁰

DUANE MORRISON

Date: **27 December 2006**
School: **Platte Canyon High School**
Location: **Bailey, CO**
Age: **53**
Killed: **1**
Wounded: **0**
Outcome: **Hostage situation / suicide**
Shooter population: **Aberrant adult**
Psychological type: **Traumatized / psychotic**
Attack type: **Targeted group**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see “About the Site” at schoolshooters.info.

Morrison's childhood, both according to his suicide note and the testimony of his siblings, was one of abuse and terror. After the attack, his siblings reported that childhood for Morrison, his sister Judy, and his brother Gary, was "hellacious."¹¹ Why it was only hellacious for three of the six siblings is unknown. The parents reportedly "split up" when the children were young,¹² so perhaps some lived with their father and the others with their mother.

Morrison clearly felt he was the primary target of his father's abuse, yet Judy and Gary also seem to have been targets. Whether or not he was singled out as much as he thought is unknown.

Though Morrison did not report details of what his father did to him, he left a vivid description of the impact it had:

Some people will say that I may have had a terrible childhood. Well, they couldn't be more wrong! Actually, I had no childhood at all. It was stolen from me. Taken before it began. Replaced by constant fear and occasional terror. Why would any parent mentally and physically abuse a child ...

I know all of you love him so I won't go into any details of what happened ...

As soon as I heard my name, fear would turn into panic and sheer terror! ...

He would come right for me as soon as he saw me. Terror was then replaced by something I don't think I can put into words. When I would see "him" coming after me I froze, unable to move [he presumably meant "move"]. I would shake from head to toe my stomach in knots and my heart pounding, preparing for his temper to be unleashed on me. I would often wet myself.¹³

Morrison's victimization was confirmed by other sources. His sister said that her father beat Morrison with his fists and a belt-buckle. Another relative said, "Often times the beatings took place for no reason ... If one of the other children did something wrong, [Duane] got a beating."¹⁴

Apart from his mother's alleged affair, the only other information I have found on her is that she died when Morrison was fifteen.¹⁵ After her death, Morrison moved in with his Aunt Lela, who died of cancer a few years later.¹⁶ Thus, he lost two mother figures and was traumatized by his father figure.

ADULTHOOD

Morrison's father served in the military, and when he was approximately twenty years old, Morrison enlisted in the Navy. He only lasted six months, however, being discharged a month after he went AWOL from basic training.¹⁷ Also in 1973, he was arrested for burglary and marijuana possession.¹⁸ Morrison reportedly never had steady, full-time employment. He worked as a carpenter and helped out in the fall at a haunted house run by

two relatives. His brother Gary, believed that Morrison received disability payment for injuries sustained in a car accident.¹⁹

His personal life was no more successful than his occupational life. He reportedly "was not close to anyone, family or friends."²⁰ His brother said that Morrison was married for less than a year during the 1980s.²¹ A woman who worked with him at a gas station from 1985 to 1988 said he had a large collection of pornographic videos and also ran up \$200 in telephone sex charges.²² More recently he had dated a woman who also worked at the haunted house.²³ At some point he told a girlfriend that he "couldn't perform sexually because of pain medications he took for his back and asthma."²⁴ Morrison reportedly made inappropriate sexual comments to the woman who ran an apartment complex where he lived, giving her the impression that "he thought he was a ladies' man or that he was God's gift to women."²⁵ Despite this, he apparently had little success with dating and relationships.

Morrison engaged in illegal behavior that was not apparent until after his attack. He reported that several firearms had been stolen and collected over \$10,000 in insurance money on them. After his attack, however, some of the guns he claimed had been stolen were found among his possessions.²⁶ It was also reported that he had a relationship with a 17-year-old female co-worker at the haunted house.²⁷

Morrison's financial situation, and life in general, deteriorated during the last year of his life. He reportedly had "no recent or romantic interests or relationships."²⁸ In the fall of 2005, he had a falling out with his relatives who ran the haunted house. They then tried to start a business selling Christmas trees, but this was not successful and further strained their relationship: "By January of 2006 Duane Morrison was extremely upset over the business dealings, and it became a major problem in his life."²⁹

On 7 April 2006, Morrison was served an eviction notice to vacate his apartment for failure to pay rent.³⁰ That summer, a long-brewing conflict with a business that sold him a motorcycle came to a head. Morrison had made threatening comments to the staff at the business and left threatening voicemail messages: "He called us faggots and threatened to come down to the shop with an assault weapon."³¹ Morrison was arrested for harassment (and possession of marijuana) on 11 July 2006,³² and pled guilty to the harassment charge on 15 August, just six weeks before his attack.³³ In the weeks leading up to his attack, he was unemployed³⁴ and homeless, living out of his Jeep.³⁵

DISSOCIATION OR PSYCHOSIS

The state of Morrison's psychological functioning throughout his adulthood is of particular interest, given what he wrote in his suicide note:

Sometime in my mid to late twenties, I began to lose touch with reality. I would forget things that I had done or wonder if some of my other memories had actually happened.

Things got bad in the early 1990's while I was living in Sacramento. There were times my mind would go completely blank. I wouldn't know where I was or what I was doing. Sometimes this would only last one minute, sometimes ten minutes. This was when thoughts and urges began entering my mind. These were easier to control at first but now seem to run my life, going in and out of my mind at will. I have no idea what life is about. I have no idea why I'm alive. I have no idea what's real and what's not real.³⁶

Besides his suicide note, the only evidence I have seen of possible psychosis was a comment by a woman who knew him in the 1980s and described him as paranoid.³⁷

To properly explore the question of Morrison's possible psychosis, we first need to consider the potential impact of his childhood trauma. We know from both his suicide note and the reports of family members that he was physically abused. It is also possible, however, that he was sexually abused by his "father." The comment in his note, "I know all of you love him so I won't go into any details of what happened," implies that there were secrets he kept from his siblings. They already knew about his physical abuse. What would be so horrific that he couldn't reveal it?

Perhaps it was incest. This could account for the terror and paralysis Morrison described. Also, he had an obsession with pornography, ran up bills for telephone sex, made sexually inappropriate comments, and ended his life by molesting girls. These behaviors taken together, along with his description of his childhood, suggest the possibility that he was molested as a child. This, however, is speculation.

Whether he was sexually abused or the victim of unusually severe physical abuse (or both), he may have suffered from dissociative episodes. His comment about brief periods in which he didn't know where he was or what he was doing sound like dissociation. Similarly, confusion about whether his memories were "real" or not may have been a dissociative symptom.

What about the comment that he was paranoid? Without knowing what was meant by this it is impossible to interpret it. One possibility is that he was "hypervigilant," which is a common reaction to trauma. This refers to being very wary of one's environment, always on the lookout for potential threats. This might be seen as paranoia.

Alternatively, his comment "I have no idea what's real and what's not real," suggests a more chronic sense of having lost touch with reality, indicating possible psychosis. In other words, Morrison may have become schizophrenic. In addition, it is possible that he was both traumatized and psychotic.

There has been a precedent for these possibilities in the lives of other school shooters. Patrick Purdy was a highly traumatized child who committed a rampage attack against elementary school children. James Wilson was a traumatized child who became floridly schizophrenic as an adult. Like Morrison, he committed an attack against children at a school he had no connection to.

AN ABERRANT ADULT SHOOTER

Because Morrison was a 53-year-old adult who attacked high school students, he is classified as an aberrant adult shooter. Like other shooters in this category, he was unable to function in multiple domains: he was unemployed, he had no significant other, he had no close friends, and was unable to maintain a home. This level of dysfunction is typically seen among psychotic shooters. Patrick Purdy, however, also had poor functioning in multiple domains; he was not schizophrenic, however, but severely traumatized. Purdy also had chronic, severe substance abuse problems that interfered with his ability to function. Like many school shooters, Morrison used marijuana, but his substance abuse does not appear to have been significant enough to account for his inability to work or maintain relationships.

Like many other shooters, both aberrant adults and others, Morrison had challenges to his masculinity. The first may have been his abuse, whether this was physical or a combination of physical and sexual. Sexual abuse can be particularly damaging to a boy's sense of masculinity. As a young adult, he enlisted in the Navy but was shortly discharged. This may have been another blow to his identity. In addition, the fact that his father served in the military may have exacerbated his sense of failure. Other damaging factors may have included his failed marriage, lack of success with women, occupational failures, and perhaps most painful, his impotence.

CONCLUSION

I label Morrison as both traumatized and psychotic, though the nature of his "losing touch with reality" remains unclear. Apart from Morrison, all other traumatized shooters have been ages 12 to 24. Whereas there have been multiple middle-aged shooters who were psychotic and/or psychopathic, Morrison is the only middle-aged traumatized shooter I am aware of.

His combination of sexual assault and school shooting is unusual but not unique. In 1975, Robert Poulin raped and killed a girl at his house before committing a rampage attack at school. And just five days after Morrison's attack, Charles Roberts IV committed both sexual assaults and murders at an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania.

The fact that Morrison molested teenage girls at gunpoint may indicate how inadequate he felt as a man. Apparently incapable of maintaining a real relationship, he ended his life coercing kids. Finally, in his suicide note, Morrison wrote, "School was nice. I was safe at school," because he was away from his father. For the students of Platte Canyon High School, Morrison turned the refuge of school into a nightmare.

NOTES

- 1 Carlos Illescas, Karen Rouse, and Joey Bunch, "Hostage Horror," *Denver Post*, 27 September 2006.
- 2 Kirk Mitchell, "Gunman Not on Drugs, Autopsy Finds," *Denver Post*, 5 October 2006.
- 3 Felisa Cardona and Allison Sherry, "Killer Scouted School a Day Earlier," *Denver Post*, 3 October 2006.
- 4 Morrison JCso (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office) Report, p. 3. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 5 "Clues, But No Answers," *Newsweek*, 28 September 2006.
- 6 Morrison ATF Report, p. 64. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 7 Kirk Mitchell and Felisa Cardona, "Shooter Described as Quiet, Gruff," *Denver Post*, 28 September 2006.
- 8 Kirk Mitchell and Kieran Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman Fixated on Porn, Guns," *Denver Post*, 10 August 2007.
- 9 Duane Morrison's Suicide Note, p. 4. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 10 Suicide Note, p. 4.
- 11 ATF Report, p. 51.
- 12 ATF Report, p. 51.
- 13 Suicide Note, pp. 4, 6, 7.
- 14 Mitchell and Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman."
- 15 ATF Report, p. 52.
- 16 ATF Report, p. 52.
- 17 ATF Report, pp. 51-52.
- 18 "Clues, But No Answers," *Newsweek*, 28 September 2006.
- 19 ATF Report, p. 52.
- 20 ATF Report, p. 52.
- 21 ATF Report, p. 52.
- 22 Mitchell and Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman."
- 23 ATF Report, p. 52.
- 24 Mitchell and Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman."
- 25 "Gunman's Motives Remain Unclear as New Clues Surface," *The Denver Channel*, 29 September 2006.
- 26 Mitchell and Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman."
- 27 Mitchell and Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman."
- 28 Morrison Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI), p. 10. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 29 ATF Report, p. 51.
- 30 Morrison CBI, p. 11.
- 31 ATF Report, p. 69.
- 32 Morrison CBI, p. 12.
- 33 Kirk Mitchell, "Shooter's Letter Recounted Childhood Abuse," *Denver Post*, 1 October 2006.
- 34 Morrison, CBI, p. 10.
- 35 Mitchell and Cardona, "Shooter Described."
- 36 Suicide Note, p. 3.
- 37 Mitchell and Nicholson, "Bailey Gunman."