

# My Conversations with Sue Klebold

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“What happened to Dylan?” This was the question Sue Klebold put to me last year. She was working on her book, *A Mother’s Reckoning*, and thought I could help her understand how her sweet son had become one of the two Columbine killers.

Her trust in me – someone she had never met and who had never met her son – was humbling. It also triggered anxiety about how she would react to my conclusions. I had studied Dylan intensively, struggling to make sense of his transformation from a shy, gentle boy into a cold-blooded killer. In fact, he was the only shooter in my book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* to whom I devoted an entire chapter. Besides my book, I had written extensively about Columbine and collected thousands of pages of documents relating to the attack. Though I knew my research was exhaustive, what would his mother think of my analysis? After all, she knew him in ways that I simply could not.

I had so immersed myself in studying Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that for months their journals were my nightly bedtime reading; I pored over them again and again, looking for insights. Columbine seeped into my dreams: I was there at the attack; I faced the killers; I met their parents. And then in real life, there I was on the telephone with Sue Klebold asking me to explain what had happened to her son. Suddenly, I felt the awesome responsibility of being a researcher on this topic and the importance of getting it right, not just for the scholarly community, but for those most closely connected to the trauma.

At the time of our first conversation, Sue had not yet read my book, and I worried that I may have written something that would upset her. After the emotional devastation she has lived with since Columbine, I did not want to add to her distress. As soon as I got off the telephone, I quickly re-read my chapter on

Dylan and tried to see it through the eyes of a parent. I saw that it contained intimate details about Dylan that might be embarrassing, but these had already been made public. I thought the tone was respectful, even sympathetic, yet I worried about having invaded the family’s privacy.

The night after our first conversation, I had trouble sleeping. I was choked up with emotion. To come into contact, even briefly, with Sue’s suffering was a profound experience. I wanted to tell her that as I had read about her family, I felt more of an affinity for her than for other parents of school shooters. At the time of the attack, Dylan was seventeen years old; at the time I was writing *Why Kids Kill*, my son was seventeen years old. Dylan was into theatre tech; my son was into theatre tech. Sue named her two sons, Byron and Dylan, after famous poets: Lord Byron and Dylan Thomas. I wrote a poem and a play about Byron and set poems of both these poets to music. I wanted to ask Sue about her interest in poetry, but that wasn’t why she reached out to me.

We spoke a second time a few weeks later. We talked about my view of Dylan and his psychological decline. She said that she was not hurt by anything I had written, but the whole process of looking at him through the lens of psychology was stirring up a lot of feelings. She talked about her feelings of guilt for not having recognized what he was going through or having been able to “save” her son. I tried to reassure her that children with good parents often face struggles that do not seem to make sense in the face of their outward circumstances. For example, I know many people whose children took their own lives – not because of how their parents treated them but in spite of how much their parents loved them.

I remember reading years ago about a brief encounter Sue

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Originally published as a blog post on the website of *Psychology Today*, 15 February 2016.

had with someone who said in effect, “I just want you to know that I forgive you.” Sue responded along the lines of, “I haven’t done anything for which I need your forgiveness.” Though some people saw that as an attempt to evade responsibility, I was impressed by her moral clarity. She did not kill anyone. She was not responsible for Columbine. Nonetheless, she has agonized daily about what she did and didn’t do as a parent. When I reminded Sue of her comment to the woman who “forgave” her, she became choked up. She said she tries to hold onto that clarity but it is very difficult.

It has often struck me how much we want to blame other people for the actions of high school shooters. We blame their peers for picking on them. We blame the movies they watch and the video games they play. And we blame the parents. These may be contributing factors in some cases, but we shouldn’t forget that Eric and Dylan knew exactly what they were doing, that they planned their attack for a long time, and that they committed premeditated murder. If they had survived, they would have been tried as adults and imprisoned for life. They would have been held responsible.

Blaming the parents of killers, however, seems to stop once the perpetrators graduate from high school. Nobody blames the parents of Charles Manson or Timothy McVeigh for their actions. Even in the case of Seung Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, nobody vilified his parents for having raised a killer. He was twenty-three years old and thus an adult. Similarly, Elliot Rodger was twenty-two years old; his parents were not blamed for creating a “monster.” Does this mean that if Dylan had committed a shooting at college, no one would have blamed his parents? Would Sue Klebold have been “off the hook”?

Of course, sometimes the families of school shooters have been guilty of horribly mistreating their children. As I have documented (*School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*), many school shooters have come from homes that are rife with domestic violence, physical abuse, and parental alcoholism or drug addiction. This, however, was not the Klebold home.

If Dylan’s parents didn’t cause him to become a murderer, then what did? The focus on parenting ignores two other factors: mental illness and peer influence. I believe Dylan experienced the onset of significant mental problems in adolescence. This was not simply depression, which can be devastating enough, but his journal indicates he was losing touch with reality. His thinking was fragmented and jumbled, and he wrote about himself as not being human, as if he were some sort of god-like entity. The line between reality and fantasy was disintegrating. His deteriorating psychological state, combined with the influence of Eric Harris, led Dylan to engage in acts that seemed incomprehensible to people who knew him.

Dylan, however, hid his internal world from everyone. His friends didn’t know how he was suffering inside and they didn’t know about his homicidal plans. Everything seemed okay. He had applied to colleges and been accepted at his first choice. He went to the high school prom three days before the attack. He and his date rented a limo with five other couples. Dylan talked about staying in touch through college and having a reunion the following summer. It was not simply a matter of his parents not seeing any warning signs – nobody in his life saw what was coming.

Sue Klebold impressed me as an intelligent, articulate, and compassionate person. And a brave one. She did not change her name and seek anonymity somewhere far away from Littleton. She has not shied away from confronting a horror that few can imagine; rather, she has sought to understand it and to make the world a better place. She actively supports improved mental health care and suicide prevention efforts to avoid tragedies. I have studied dozens of school shooters and their families, and am not aware of any other parent of a perpetrator who has pursued this path. I applaud Sue Klebold for her courage and her commitment. And I remain touched and honored by her trust in opening her heart to me.

P.L. · 15 February 2016