

As published in the Post Register 10/18/2015  
<http://www.postregister.com/>

# THE SCHOOL KILLINGS – A COMMON THREAD

---

## OPINION & ANALYSIS



**By Jay B Gaskill**

The recent mass murder in the Oregon school was part of a disturbing pattern: Columbine High School (1999) 15 dead, including the killers; Sandy Hook Elementary (2012) 26 dead, including the killer; Umpqua Community College, Roseburg (2015) 11 dead including the killer. These were school shootings by would-be famous loners.

The FBI gathers statistics for mass shooting attacks by “active shooters.” From 2000 to 2104 the FBI registered 160 deadly incidents. The pace has picked up from 2007 to the present. We seem to be facing an epidemic of mass shootings by disturbed loners- in schools, theaters, trains... The Oregon school shooting was much too close to home.

Why is this happening?

My former career brought me into close, personal contact with thousands of criminals over more than two decades. Many were killers. Some were disturbed. None of them were mass murderers. None of them entered a school to commit

murders. The worst homicide case I defended was a triple murder, two attempted murders, part of two home invasions and one business invasion. However horrific that crime spree was, my client would not (in my opinion) have been capable of the school mass murders we are reading about.

During my career I consulted with forensic physiologists and psychiatrists. Post career, I've kept engaged on the topic of the criminal mind. Here are my thoughts.

Why are these mass killers different from garden variety thugs? I can detect three tells: ***a suicidal mindset, social isolation, and a frustrated desire for fame*** (especially notorious fame).

Why *suicide*? Years ago, one client was an alcoholic newsman who had attempted suicide, failed; then a short time later he strangled his wife to death with a toy snake from under the Christmas tree. Dr. B., a famous forensic psychiatrist, explained to me that there is a fine line between suicide and homicide: Both take a human life. Someone who is capable of suicide may well kill another.

The remaining *tells* relate to what clinicians call *malignant narcissism*. This describes a person who is the center of the universe, consumed with envy and resentment of those whose very existence is an affront - because they are too successful, too comfortable, too...you get the idea.

Such individuals don't solve their perceived injustice problems by working on self-improvement. Rather, the malignant narcissist's solution is to bring the offending people "down" to his or her level. Bear in mind the twisted perspective of the full-on narcissist ("Nothing can ever be wrong with me!"). The fault is always someone else's. This dark mindset festers in social isolation especially in individuals easily influenced by grandiose violent acts that end in grand immolation. Brooding loners need friends and family, but for the potential killers among them something deeper is missing – a sense of the moral center. We can't just pin these killings on mental illness. Schizophrenics, for example, almost never commit murder. These killings were voluntary, evil acts.

Idaho's moral culture is healthier than some, but the Oregon killings are cause for concern. We need to stay alert.

---

Copyright © 2015 by **The Post Register** and **Jay B Gaskill**, Attorney at Law

Jay B Gaskill was the former Public Defender for the County of Alameda, California. He lives in Idaho Falls

<http://www.jaygaskill.com/>