

'I'll Never Know If I Could Have Prevented It,' Says Mother Of Columbine Shooter

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Sue Klebold at Colorado Public Radio on Monday, Feb., 15, 2016.

(Hart Van Denburg/CPR News)

Sue Klebold's new book, "A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy" is a frank reflection on the challenges of grieving for her son's death while at the same time grieving for his many victims. Klebold's son, Dylan, was one of two shooters who stormed Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, killing 13 people and injuring many more before taking their own lives.

- **Read An Excerpt From 'A Mother's Reckoning'**

In the book, Klebold ponders what she could have done differently as a parents and offers lessons she's learned in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings. She also includes her memories of the day of the shootings, and of the moment she heard about her son's involvement. "While every other mother in Littleton was praying that her child was safe, I prayed mine would die before he hurt anyone else."

Klebold is donating all profits from the book to mental health charities and research. Click on the audio to hear the full conversation. Edited highlights are below.

On writing about her son Dylan's birth of being "overcome by a strong premonition. This child would bring me a terrible sorrow."



Sue Klebold with her son Dylan on his 5th birthday September 11, 1986.

(Courtesy Sue Klebold)

"I think I still make of it what I did at that time. It was a passing feeling that went over very quickly, like a shadow. And right after that occurred, my, Dylan became very ill and he had to have surgery. And with all the care and all the worry over that surgery, I looked back on that moment and thought how that it must have been a moment of intuition regarding his health and that we had intervened in time to save his life and make him healthy.

And I've totally forgot about that moment where I had that premonition until I woke up the day after his death and I remember waking and remembering that that had actually happened."

On grieving the loss of her child while understanding the mayhem he inflicted:

"It is just a complex mix of every awful emotion one can imagine. There was terrible sorrow that I felt for the families of the other victims. I was obsessed, once I realized

what had happened, with the manner in which the children and the teacher had died and it was such a complex layered set of feeling because I was feeling sorrow for them. I was feeling sorrow for my own son, trying to understand.

Mostly I remember being completely bewildered because I didn't understand what had happened or how it had happened. I would read things in the paper that didn't seem to be true so I entered a period of denial where I thought perhaps much of this wasn't true and Dylan wasn't really there as a participant, maybe somehow he was an observer, had gotten tricked.

And on top of all that sorrow and grief and confusion, was also humiliation. Terrible shame for being associated with someone who would do such a terrible thing. And then having to be exposed to the world and then to be judged and to be hated. To turn on the radio and hear yourself being called disgusting. To see that vandalism is occurring and crosses are being chopped down and trees. So I actually began to feel very paranoid on top of all the other feelings I was experiencing."

Why she worries that people will think she's callous for having grieved for her son, first, or even at all:



A boy looks through the fence at the Columbine High School tennis courts in Littleton, Colo., days after the April 20, 1999 shootings.

(AP Photo/Eric Gay)

"I think that is a perception that some people have and that has been expressed to me in certain ways. One of the difficult things about this tragedy and to talk about it and to write about it, is that Dylan's death, was technically speaking, a murder-suicide. That he killed other people and then he killed himself and in trying to understand his death and why such a thing happens, in Dylan's case, I believe his suicidality was the mechanism through which he participated in this. So when I focus on his loss or talk about his death as a suicide, I'm sure it feels very offensive to some people that, because it seems that I'm disregarding the murders. And I'm not, and, of course, but this is the way that I am trying to understand it."

Why she pushes back against the phrase "commit suicide":

"I noticed that you used the words to commit suicide and that is a term that the suicide prevention community is trying to eradicate. We don't like to think of a suicide as a crime. And of course, in Dylan's case it was because he murdered others. But when someone dies by suicide, it is the result most often of an illness and it is not technically some kind of a choice in the manner that you and I would think of as a choice. So we like to say someone died by suicide or someone took his own life. Or killed himself. Those are terms. And we urge people not to use the words 'commit suicide.'"

How she learned about the news coming out of the high school:

"So that day, in the morning that day, Dylan had said goodbye in a most peculiar way. I was getting ready for work that morning. And it was dark and his bedroom was upstairs and mine was on the main level and I heard him bounding down the stairs heavily, and he ran past my bedroom door, without turning on lights, and I opened the bedroom door and I called out. I couldn't see anything but I said, "Dyl?" and at that point he was at the front door and he said, "Bye." And he slammed the door and he left. I was very concerned. It didn't sound like him. I didn't know why he was up early. I woke my husband and I said "something is bothering Dylan, will you be here today when he comes home from school so you can talk to him and find out what it is. He said, yes, I'll talk to him."

Now at that point, all I knew was that something was bothering him. I had no conception that it was a life and death issue. I thought it was just perhaps a teenage issue of some kind. I went on to work. And about noon my telephone on my desk had a message light on it and I returned to my desk. The message light was flashing and I got a message from my husband and his voice was terribly broken and breathless and he said, "Susan, this is an emergency. Call me back immediately." And I knew from the tone of his voice instantly that something had happened to one of our children. I was searching my thoughts to try to think where are they? You know one of them was at work, and one of them was at school. What could there be? An accident?"

[...] "And then I called Tom back and he just said listen to the television. And he put the phone in front of the television. And then I was really filled with horror because I thought what could be big enough that would be on television and I thought perhaps we were at war. And I yelled into the phone, what's happening? And then Tom got on the phone and just poured out, there's a shooting happening at the school. Some people in trench coats are shooting at people. I don't know where Dylan is. His friend just called here to see if he was at home. And he was just tumbling over his words and I just said, I'm coming home right now. And I left work and came home to face the rest of the day."

On the point at which she suspected Dylan was involved:

"I did have a sense of foreboding that something was wrong but I had no idea of the magnitude of what was actually occurring. Dylan had mentioned to me in passing in the weeks before the tragedy that there was going to be some kind of a senior prank. And I remember talking with him about this and saying I don't care if the whole senior class is involved, don't do anything. You're on a diversion program, shaving cream on a banister could get you in trouble. And I was remembering that he had mentioned a prank so in my mind this was some kind of a prank that had gone wrong somehow."

And the point at which she knew for sure:

"After I got home, it was very chaotic, it was just my husband and myself, but running around. My husband had called an attorney because, since Dylan had been on diversion and we believed he was involved in some kind of prank, not really knowing the level, the magnitude, of what was happening, that he would need an attorney. And the attorney then was able to contact the sheriff's department and get word back to us and they said, yes, there is something going on at the school, it appears that there's some kind of a shooting and somehow your son is involved with this. And that was how we learned of his involvement before it opened up and as the day went on, we learned, it just got worse and worse."

How the reality of what happened affected her:

"Shattered is the right word. I had believed, up until that point that somehow this was something that was really not Dylan's 'fault', and I use air quotes because I mean it's like, of course it was his fault, he was there, he did this. But I think, in my mind, I believed that somehow he had, it had either been very impulsive that he was responding to or that he had been tricked or coerced or there was some kind of theater that was supposed to happen and real guns had been used to replace, you know, I don't know, a toy."

I know it sounds ridiculous, but honestly, that is where our frame of mind was, because those of us who knew Dylan could not believe that he was capable of doing this and being there willingly and doing the things that people were saying he had done. So when I heard the police report and I, they sat me down and it was very, they were

very respectful. They showed the weapons that were used. They talked about the planning that had gone into it.

I was just so stunned and sickened. I remember standing up and thinking I was going to be ill. I almost, you know, left the room. And we had gone into it, sitting in my lap, were questions that I had regarding, could he have been brainwashed and how could that have happened? Because I was so sure that that's what they were going to tell me. And when I learned that he was certainly a participant who had planned this terrible thing and I saw some of the planning, some of the conversations that they had filmed, I was, it was almost as shocking for me as the day of the shootings. I was just completely, I don't know, numb, ill."

How she responds to people who ask, "How could you not have known?"

"I have been asked that many times. And, my response is that the way Dylan presented himself to me and what was happening in his life did not show me any indications that he was as ill as he really was, as disturbed as, you know, off the rails. He had gotten into trouble fourteen months before he died. There was a sort of a series of things that were abhorrent in his behavior. He'd gotten arrested. He got in trouble at school.

After that, we searched his room. We took walks. We talked with him. We tried to understand what that little episode meant, and he, at that time, promised us that he would get his life on track, that he didn't need help, he was fine. And, really, that last year of his life, he really was behaving well.

He was behaving as if he were, he was focused on his future. He applied to and was accepted at four of his, four colleges, got into his first-choice school. He had a job. He hung out with various friends. He went to a prom three days before the massacre. Twelve friends went in a limo together out to dinner. He came home and told me he'd had the best time of his life."

Why she still wonders what clues she missed:

"Even though it's been almost 17 years, I continue to do this, and I probably will do it for the rest of my life. And I know that when there is a death by suicide in families, this particular process is very common for the survivors of that loss. We always blame ourselves, find a tremendous amount of guilt for not saying that one thing that would've made a difference or listened in such a way that something would've been drawn out.

I know that after Dylan died, I would go back through his life. I remember thinking seriously at one point that some, that the fact that I hadn't decorated his birthday cake when he was three, you know, I had only put sprinkles on it, and I had decorated his brother's cake, you know, was a sign that somehow he felt unloved. I know that sounds so insanely stupid, but that's the kind of thing you go through. You examine every moment, every conversation, and, yes, I do that. "

On finding support among those affected by suicide:

"The thing that eventually brought comfort to me was getting aligned with other survivors of suicide loss, because they, to some scale, had experienced the same thing that I had, certainly among their own families and friends. If there was a death by suicide, someone, someone would always be there to imply that this death had been their fault, that they had not been the right wife or mother or daughter. And they understood that, and it was very helpful to me to be around other people who, to some degree, understood what I was going through."

Why the police didn't feel her family was safe in its own home:

"They were going to do investigation. And so we were asked to leave. And we found refuge in a home of a relative, and we lived in their basement. And we were virtually terrified, living in hiding, and I had, it's hard to imagine, but I had nothing to do. I had been cut off from all family and friends, people who loved us and wanted to support us couldn't find us, because we were in hiding, and I had long hours sitting there, you know, with nothing to do.

I was grieving. I was lying around. And I remembered that I had a haircut scheduled, and I thought, I may as well go do this, and I remember asking my attorney, is it alright? Should I just go to this appointment just to get out of the house, get out from underfoot? And I did that. And, two friends accompanied me and they held my hands through this, because it was an ordeal for me to do this. And then, the very next day, apparently the hair dresser had gone and told the press about my being there. And then that story spun out of control to portray me as Marie Antoinette or somebody who was, you know, busy thinking about her appearance at a time when everybody was suffering.

And, what that experience taught me was the tremendous need that people had to see me as that kind of person, that to believe that I was very different from them, that I was very vain and negligent, that that somehow explained why such a thing could happen. And I think stories like that occur often for those reasons."

Reading a passage from the book:

Like all mythologies, this belief that Dylan was a monster served a deeper purpose. People needed to believe they would recognize evil in their midst. Monsters are unmistakable. You would know a monster if you saw one, wouldn't you? If Dylan was a fiend, whose heedless parents had permitted their disturbed, raging teen to amass a weapons cache right under their noses, then the tragedy, horrible as it was, had no relevance to ordinary moms and dads in their own living rooms, their own children tucked snugly into soft beds upstairs. The events might be heartbreaking, but they were also remote. If Dylan was a monster, then the events at Columbine, however tragic, were anomalous.

On learning to recognize teenage depression:

"One of the things I certainly would've done differently was I knew nothing about teen depression when this happened. It was something I didn't understand. ... From what all the experts are saying, and from what I believe, I believe he was depressed. And, my experience with depression was working with adults in a psychiatric hospital years ago, so I saw catatonic adults or people who were moving very slowly and who behaved in a manner that showed that the weight of the world was in their bodies.

Teen depression does not show itself that way. In boys, it can be irritability, even rage. It can be sleep disturbances, either lack of sleep or too much sleep. It can be changes in behavior, and I highlight that because I believe that what I saw in junior year, when Dylan got in trouble at school, when he got in trouble for stealing the equipment, those occurred in a cluster. And, if I look back on that now, those were indications of a change in behavior, and rather than just making the assumption that he would get his life on track as he promised, I wish I had found counseling for him."

On the first interaction she had with a family member of the victims:

"The letters were the first. The only thing I had done was I read about them in the paper as much as I was able to. And you have to understand that it was so painful for me to do that. I couldn't read the paper or the accounts of what had happened because it just, I couldn't function if I did that. I would be too incapacitated. But once I made the decision that I wanted to write, then I began to try to read and know who these individuals really were."

[...]"I don't remember in the chronology of the way the letters were written. I just remember that I took each one as an individual effort. I tried to personalize it by using information that I had gotten from the newspapers. And there was a common paragraph in each of those letters in which I referred to Dylan's involvement as a moment of madness because at that time, that's what I believed it was. It was inconceivable to me that he was there because it was something pre-meditated. In my mind, I thought his being there was literally a moment of madness."

[...]"Two of the parents, and it would be the father of one of the boys and the mother of one of the girls, did reach out to me and ask to meet me and meet my husband and me. In one case I met with the mother alone and in the other case, the father met with both of us. And I can't even put into words, how much that meant to me, how grateful I was to them.

We had an opportunity to share, talk about our children, share, in one case, shared pictures with each other. And the mother who met with me was so kind and gracious and the very first thing she asked me was, "Who was Dylan?" And I remember thinking that was such a lovely and kind thing to say, to not just assume that he was the monster that everybody portrayed him to be."

Her connection to the family of Eric Harris:

"We are in contact occasionally. And what I want to say about this whole issue of people who are related to individuals who carry out crimes such as this, I think no one should ever perceive their silence to be indifference. It is not indifference.

For people who have family members who do horrible things to other people, we loathe what they did. We are humiliated by what they did and for most people it is too difficult to make themselves public, to talk about it, to constantly go back to this and relive it.

That is true for the many survivors of murder-suicides that I have talked with. And I want everyone to understand that my willingness to talk about this is the aberration, it's an unusual circumstance and to never judge people by their inability, or by their not wanting to make themselves public. It's a terribly, terribly difficult thing to make yourself public after something like this occurs."

What persuaded her to write the book and become public:

"I'm not sure that there was an exact edge. I had been a writer, I was a journaler, I was somebody who always wrote and I had hundreds of pages written about this experience. So in my mind I knew that I would at some point write something. The difficulty was being ready to publish. And it took incrementally years to be able to get to a level of healing where I would be able to show my face, tell my story, withstand the criticism and the judgment once again when we had managed to get past it.

So I think stories such as one of the ones that I relay in the book, of people who knew me and would tell me that knowing my story had caused them to parent differently. There was a woman that I had worked with whose thirteen-year-old daughter was acting different to her and because she knew me, she pressed and dug and tried to really dig and find out if there was something behind this slight change in her behavior. And she did learn that her daughter had been raped on the street, when she had left the house during a time when she was not supposed to and was able to help her child after learning this.

So what I focused on in order to do this, was the importance of understanding that our loved ones can be deeply troubled and deeply disturbed and we may not know that and we don't want them to suffer in any way and we certainly don't want it to escalate into a major tragedy and I really finally got to the point where that desire to make that known overcame any fears that I had about it."

On whether she worries the book might re-traumatize families of those killed:

"I was very conscious of that for all the families, including my own family. My goal in writing this book was to try to help people understand the importance of being aware of these issues. To know how many people are in distress. To understand that suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth. And I tried to, and I sincerely hope that,

reading the book will help people learn and to help people be safer and to get access to care.

And I thought that by trying to prevent tragedies like this, so that these kinds of losses never happen again, outweighed the risk that I am taking of re-traumatizing. And I hope sincerely that some good will come and that conversations will occur."

[...] "I think it is a risk. And I know certainly in watching as this book is coming out, it is, it is causing stress and it is causing sorrow and it is stirring up feelings of anger and I understand that it is. I can only say that it is my offering to try to make things better. To say we have to do a better job in this country of helping people who need the help, before their issues escalate to a lethal situation."

How she says Columbine shaped her view of her own existence, and her son's, and how she grapples with the meaning of life:

"I have sort of flip-flopped on what I believe. There are times when I just believe, you know, all is chaos. You know, I was the one in 5 million who would have a son do something like this.

But I also have moments when I think, hmmm, why am I who I am, you know? I was always a teacher and I'm rather extroverted, that I was willing to go out and write this book and talk about it and, you know, was that somehow a destiny?

I don't have an answer for that. When something difficult happens, we do the best we can to just survive and to process it in our own way, and that's sort of the way I've looked at this. I'm processing this in a way that is meaningful to me, and that's all I've tried to do."