

"I Will Never Know Why"

By Susan Klebold



Susan and Dylan Klebold celebrating Dylan's fifth birthday.

Since the day her son participated in the most devastating high school shooting America has ever seen, I have wanted to sit down with Susan Klebold to ask her the questions we've all wanted to ask—starting with "How did you not see it coming?" and ending with "How did you survive?" Over the years, Susan has politely declined interview requests, but several months ago she finally agreed to break her silence and write about her experience for *O*. Even now, many questions about Columbine remain. But what Susan writes here adds a chilling new perspective. This is her story. — *Oprah*

Just after noon on Tuesday, April 20, 1999, I was preparing to leave my downtown Denver office for a meeting when I noticed the red message light flashing on my phone. I worked for the state of Colorado, administering training programs for people with disabilities; my meeting was about student scholarships, and I figured the message might be a last-minute cancellation. But it was my husband, calling from his home office. His voice was breathless and ragged, and his words stopped my heart. "Susan—this is an emergency! Call me back immediately!"

The level of pain in his voice could mean only one thing: Something had happened to one of our sons. In the seconds that passed as I picked up the phone and dialed our house, panic swelled within me; it felt as though millions of tiny needles were pricking my skin. My heart pounded in my ears. My hands began shaking. I tried to orient myself. One of my boys was at school and the other was at work. It was the lunch hour. Had there been a car accident?

When my husband picked up the phone, he shouted, "Listen to the television!"—then held out the receiver so I could hear. I couldn't understand the words being broadcast, but the fact that whatever had happened was big enough to be on TV filled me with terror. Were we at war? Was our country under nuclear attack? "What's happening?" I shrieked.

He came back on the line and poured out what he'd just learned during a distraught call from a close friend of our 17-year-old son, Dylan: There was some kind of shooting at the high school...gunmen in black trenchcoats were firing at people...the friend knew all the kids who wore trenchcoats, and all were accounted for except Dylan and his friend Eric...and Dylan and Eric hadn't been in class that morning...and no one knew where they were.

My husband had told himself that if he found the coat, Dylan couldn't be involved. He'd torn the house apart, looking everywhere. No coat. When there was nowhere left to look, somehow he knew the truth. It was like staring at one of those computer-generated 3-D pictures when the abstract pattern suddenly comes into focus as a recognizable image.

I barely got enough air in my lungs to say, "I'm coming home." We hung up without saying goodbye.

My office was 26 miles from our house. All I could think as I drove was that Dylan was in danger. With every cell in my body, I felt his importance to me, and I knew I would never recover if anything happened to him. I seesawed between impossible possibilities, all of them sending me into paroxysms of fear. Maybe no one knew where Dylan was because he'd been shot himself. Maybe he was lying in the school somewhere injured or dead. Maybe he was being held hostage. Maybe he was trapped and couldn't get word to us. Maybe it was some kind of prank and no one was hurt. How could we think for even a second that Dylan could shoot someone? Shame on us for even considering the idea. Dylan was a gentle, sensible kid. No one in our family had ever owned a gun. How in the world could he be part of something like this?

Yet no matter how hard I wanted to believe that he wasn't, I couldn't dismiss the possibility. My husband had noticed something tight in Dylan's voice earlier that week; I had heard it myself just that morning. I knew that Dylan disliked his school. And that he'd spent much of the past few days with Eric Harris—who hadn't been to our house for months but who'd suddenly stayed over one night that weekend. If Eric was missing now, too, then I couldn't deny that the two of them might be involved in something bad together. More than a year earlier, they had broken into a van parked on a country road near our house. They'd been arrested and had completed a juvenile diversion program that involved counseling, community service, and classes. Their theft had shown that under each other's influence they could be impulsive and unscrupulous. Could they also—no matter how unbelievable it seemed—be violent?

When I got home my husband told me the police were on their way. I had so much

adrenaline in my system that even as I was changing out of my work clothes, I was racing from room to room. I felt such an urgency to be ready for whatever might happen next. I called my sister. As I told her what was going on, I was overcome by horror, and I started to cry. Moments after I hung up the phone, my 20-year-old son walked in and lifted me like a rag doll in his arms while I sobbed into a dish towel. Then my husband shouted from the front hallway, "They're here!"

Members of a SWAT team in dark uniforms with bulletproof vests had arrived. I thought they were coming to help us or to get our assistance in helping Dylan; if Dylan did have a gun, maybe they were hoping we could persuade him to put it down. But it seemed that in the SWAT team's eyes, we were suspects ourselves. Years later I would learn that many of their actions that day were intended to protect us; fearing that we would hurt ourselves or that our home might have been rigged with explosives, they told us we had to leave the house. For the rest of the afternoon, we stayed outside, sitting on the sidewalk or pacing up and down our brick walk. When we needed to use the bathroom, two armed guards escorted us inside and waited by the door.

I do not remember how or when, but sometime that day it was confirmed that Dylan and Eric were indeed perpetrators in a massacre at the school. I was in shock and barely grasped what was happening, but I could hear the television through the open windows. News coverage announced a growing tally of victims. Helicopters began circling overhead to capture a killer's family on film. Cars lined the road and onlookers gawked to get a better view.

Though others were suffering, my thoughts focused on the safety of my own child. With every moment that passed, the likelihood of seeing Dylan as I knew him diminished. I asked the police over and over, "What's happening? Where's Dylan? Is he okay?" Late in the afternoon someone finally told me that he was dead but not how he died. We were told to evacuate for a few days so authorities could search our home; we found shelter in the basement of a family member's house. After a sleepless night, I learned that Dylan and Eric had killed 12 students and one teacher, and injured 24 others, before taking their own lives.

As a young child, Dylan made parenting easy. From the time he was a toddler, he had a remarkable attention span and sense of order. He spent hours focused on puzzles and interlocking toys. He loved origami and Legos. By third grade, when he entered a gifted program at school, he had become his father's most devoted chess partner. He and his brother acted out feats of heroism in our backyard. He played Little League baseball. No matter what he did, he was driven to win—and was very hard on himself when he lost.

His adolescence was less joyful than his childhood. As he grew, he became extremely shy and uncomfortable when he was the center of attention, and would hide or act silly if we tried to take his picture. By junior high, it was evident that he no longer liked school; worse, his passion for learning was gone. In high school, he held a job and participated as a sound technician in school productions, but his grades were only fair. He hung out with friends,

slept late when he could, spent time in his room, talked on the phone, and played video games on a computer he built. In his junior year, he stunned us by hacking into the school's computer system with a friend (a violation for which he was expelled), but the low point of that year was his arrest. After the arrest, we kept him away from Eric for several weeks, and as time passed he seemed to distance himself from Eric of his own accord. I took this as a good sign.

By Dylan's senior year, he had grown tall and thin. His hair was long and scraggly; under his baseball cap, it stuck out like a clown wig. He'd been accepted at four colleges and had decided to go to the University of Arizona, but he'd never regained his love of learning. He was quiet. He grew irritated when we critiqued his driving, asked him to help around the house, or suggested that he get a haircut. In the last few months of senior year, he was pensive, as if he were thinking about the challenges of growing older. One day in April I said, "You seem so quiet lately—are you okay?" He said he was "just tired." Another time I asked if he wanted to talk about going away to college. I told him that if he didn't feel ready, he could stay home and go to a community college. He said, "I definitely want to go away." If that was a reference to anything more than leaving home for college, it never occurred to me.

Early on April 20, I was getting dressed for work when I heard Dylan bound down the stairs and open the front door. Wondering why he was in such a hurry when he could have slept another 20 minutes, I poked my head out of the bedroom. "Dyl?" All he said was "Bye." The front door slammed, and his car sped down the driveway. His voice had sounded sharp. I figured he was mad because he'd had to get up early to give someone a lift to class. I had no idea that I had just heard his voice for the last time.

It took about six months for the sheriff's department to begin sharing some of the evidence explaining what happened that day. For those six months, Dylan's friends and family were in denial. We didn't know that he and Eric had assembled an arsenal of explosives and guns. We believed his participation in the massacre was accidental or that he had been coerced. We believed that he did not intend to hurt anyone. One friend was sure that Dylan had been tricked at the last minute into using live ammunition. None of us could accept that he was capable of doing what he did.

These thoughts may seem foolish in light of what we now know, but they reflect what we believed to be true about Dylan. Yes, he had filled notebook pages with his private thoughts and feelings, repeatedly expressing profound alienation. But we'd never seen those notebooks. And yes, he'd written a school paper about a man in a black trenchcoat who brutally murders nine students. But we'd never seen that paper. (Although it had alarmed his English teacher enough to bring it to our attention, when we asked to see the paper at a parent-teacher conference, she didn't have it with her. Nor did she describe the contents beyond calling them "disturbing." At the conference—where we discussed many things, including books in the curriculum, Gen X versus Gen Y learners, and the '60s folk song "Four Strong Winds"—we agreed that she would show the paper to Dylan's guidance counselor; if he thought it was a problem, one of them would contact me. I never heard

from them.) We didn't see the paper, or Dylan's other writings, until the police showed them to us six months after the tragedy.

In the weeks and months that followed the killings, I was nearly insane with sorrow for the suffering my son had caused, and with grief for the child I had lost. Much of the time, I felt that I could not breathe, and I often wished that I would die. I got lost while driving. When I returned to work part-time in late May, I'd sit through meetings without the slightest idea of what was being said. Entire conversations slipped from memory. I cried at inappropriate times, embarrassing those around me. Once, I saw a dead pigeon in a parking lot and nearly became hysterical. I mistrusted everything—especially my own judgment.

Seeing pictures of the devastation and the weeping survivors was more than I could bear. I avoided all news coverage in order to function. I was obsessed with thoughts of the innocent children and the teacher who suffered because of Dylan's cruelty. I grieved for the other families, even though we had never met. Some had lost loved ones, while others were coping with severe, debilitating injuries and psychological trauma. It was impossible to believe that someone I had raised could cause so much suffering. The discovery that it could have been worse—that if their plan had worked, Dylan and Eric would have blown up the whole school—only increased the agony.

But while I perceived myself to be a victim of the tragedy, I didn't have the comfort of being perceived that way by most of the community. I was widely viewed as a perpetrator or at least an accomplice since I was the person who had raised a "monster." In one newspaper survey, 83 percent of respondents said that the parents' failure to teach Dylan and Eric proper values played a major part in the Columbine killings. If I turned on the radio, I heard angry voices condemning us for Dylan's actions. Our elected officials stated publicly that bad parenting was the cause of the massacre.

Through all of this, I felt extreme humiliation. For months I refused to use my last name in public. I avoided eye contact when I walked. Dylan was a product of my life's work, but his final actions implied that he had never been taught the fundamentals of right and wrong. There was no way to atone for my son's behavior.

Those of us who cared for Dylan felt responsible for his death. We thought, "If I had been a better (mother, father, brother, friend, aunt, uncle, cousin), I would have known this was coming." We perceived his actions to be our failure. I tried to identify a pivotal event in his upbringing that could account for his anger. Had I been too strict? Not strict enough? Had I pushed too hard, or not hard enough? In the days before he died, I had hugged him and told him how much I loved him. I held his scratchy face between my palms and told him that he was a wonderful person and that I was proud of him. Had he felt pressured by this? Did he feel that he could not live up to my expectations?

I longed to talk to Dylan one last time and ask him what he had been thinking. I spoke to him in my thoughts and prayed for understanding. I concluded that he must not have loved me, because love would have prevented him from doing what he did. And though at

moments I was angry with him, mostly I thought that I was the one who needed his forgiveness because I'd failed to see that he needed help.

Since the tragedy, I have been through many hours of therapy. I have enjoyed the devotion and kindness of friends, neighbors, coworkers, family members, and strangers. I also received an unexpected blessing. On a few occasions I was contacted by the parents of some of the children killed at the school. These courageous individuals asked to meet privately so we could talk. Their compassion helped me survive.

Still, Dylan's participation in the massacre was impossible for me to accept until I began to connect it to his own death. Once I saw his journals, it was clear to me that Dylan entered the school with the intention of dying there. And so, in order to understand what he might have been thinking, I started to learn all I could about suicide.

Suicide is the end result of a complex mix of pathology, character, and circumstance that produces severe emotional distress. This distress is so great that it impairs one's ability to think and act rationally. From the writings Dylan left behind, criminal psychologists have concluded that he was depressed and suicidal. When I first saw copied pages of these writings, they broke my heart. I'd had no inkling of the battle Dylan was waging in his mind. As early as two years before the shootings, he wrote about ending his life. In one poem, he wrote, "Revenge is sorrow / death is a reprieve / life is a punishment / others' achievements are tormentations / people are alike / I am different." He wrote about his longing for love and his near obsession with a girl who apparently did not know he existed. He wrote, "Earth, humanity, HERE. that's mostly what I think about. I hate it. I want to be free...free... I thought it would have been time by now. the pain multiplies infinitely. Never stops. (yet?) i'm here, STILL alone, still in pain...."

Among the items police found in his room were two half-empty bottles of Saint-John's-wort, an herb believed to elevate mood and combat mild depression. I asked one of Dylan's friends if he knew that Dylan had been taking it. Dylan told him he hoped it would increase his "motivation."

Each year there are approximately 33,000 suicides in the United States. (In Colorado, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 34.) And it is estimated that 1 to 2 percent of suicides involve the killing of an additional person or people. I will never know why Dylan was part of that small percentage. I will never be able to explain or excuse what he did. No humiliating experience at school could justify such a disproportionate reaction. Nor can I say how powerfully he was influenced by a friend. I don't know how much control he had over his choices at the time of his death, what factors pushed him to commit murder, and why he did not end his pain alone. In talking with other suicide survivors and attempters, however, I think I have some idea why he didn't ask for help.

I believe that Dylan did not want to talk about his thoughts because he was ashamed of having them. He was accustomed to handling his own problems, and he perceived his

inability to do so as a weakness. People considering suicide sometimes feel that the world would be better off without them, and their reasons for wanting to die make sense to them. They are too ill to see the irrationality of their thinking. I believe it frightened Dylan to encounter something he did not know how to manage, since he had always taken pride in his self-reliance. I believe he tried to push his negative thoughts away, not realizing that bringing them out in the open was a way to conquer them.

In raising Dylan, I taught him how to protect himself from a host of dangers: lightning, snake bites, head injuries, skin cancer, smoking, drinking, sexually transmitted diseases, drug addiction, reckless driving, even carbon monoxide poisoning. It never occurred to me that the gravest danger—to him and, as it turned out, to so many others—might come from within. Most of us do not see suicidal thinking as the health threat that it is. We are not trained to identify it in others, to help others appropriately, or to respond in a healthy way if we have these feelings ourselves.

In loving memory of Dylan, I support suicide research and encourage responsible prevention and awareness practices as well as support for survivors. I hope that someday everyone will recognize the warning signs of suicide—including feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal, pessimism, and other signs of serious depression—as easily as we recognize the warning signs of cancer. I hope we will get over our fear of talking about suicide. I hope we will teach our children that most suicidal teens telegraph their intentions to their friends, whether through verbal statements, notes, or a preoccupation with death. I hope we come to understand the link between suicidal behavior and violent behavior, and realize that dealing with the former may help us prevent the latter. (According to the U.S. Secret Service Safe School Initiative, 78 percent of school attackers have a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts.) But we must remember that warning signs may not always tell the story. No one saw that Dylan was depressed. He did not speak of death, give away possessions, or say that the world would be better off without him. And we should also remember that even if someone is exhibiting signs of suicide risk, it may not always be possible to prevent tragedy. Some who commit suicide or murder-suicide are—like Eric Harris—already receiving psychiatric care.

If my research has taught me one thing, it's this: Anyone can be touched by suicide. But for those who are feeling suicidal or who have lost someone to suicide, help *is* available—through resources provided by nonprofits like the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the American Association of Suicidology. (If you are having persistent thoughts about suicide, call the national suicide prevention lifeline at 800-273-8255 to speak with a counselor. And if you are dealing with the loss of a loved one to suicide, know that National Survivors of Suicide Day is November 21, with more than 150 conferences scheduled across the United States and around the world.)

For the rest of my life, I will be haunted by the horror and anguish Dylan caused. I cannot look at a child in a grocery store or on the street without thinking about how my son's schoolmates spent the last moments of their lives. Dylan changed everything I believed about myself, about God, about family, and about love. I think I believed that if I loved

someone as deeply as I loved him, I would know if he were in trouble. My maternal instincts would keep him safe. But I didn't know. And my instincts weren't enough. And the fact that I never saw tragedy coming is still almost inconceivable to me. I only hope my story can help those who can still be helped. I hope that, by reading of my experience, someone will see what I missed.