

# Only questions

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

The question of "why" dominates our conversations about the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. But there is no answer to such a question. Evil does not yield to rational inquiry. Evil of such magnitude overwhelms us and leave us grasping for explanations, but no explanation satisfies.

It took considerable creativity and careful planning for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to put together their killing spree. They were not the first innocent-appearing youths to set off on a rampage of destruction, nor will they be the last. Theirs was a grandiose plan, born out of that mysterious dark side of human existence.

Why would youthful creativity take such a dark turn? These are two boys who, under other circumstances, might have built rockets, entered science fairs or started a computer club. Instead they embraced a culture of death. These kids on the edge of adulthood were filled with so much anger and so many distorted views of their seemingly comfortable existence that they wanted to destroy and punish all those who would not, or could not, understand them. The acts of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were so grossly evil that we desperately want to know why.

But when we look for explanations we find only possible causes, none of which will suffice. At the top of the list, of course, is the easy availability of guns. The National Rifle Association knew it had a public relations problem with a national meeting scheduled for Denver a few days after the killings, so in an empty gesture of respect, the NRA reduced its meeting from three days to one.

On the other side of this largely rhetorical political struggle over guns, government officials called for more restrictive gun-buying laws. Their gestures were also hollow, rendered meaningless by a steady stream of campaign contributions from gun lobbyists who have survived the embarrassment of earlier massacres and assassinations and who know they will survive this one as well.

Then there is the plaintive "if only" cry: If only parents, teachers, counselors or fellow students had listened to the two lonely teenagers when they praised Hitler. If

only someone had noticed something deeper was wrong when two seemingly stable kids were arrested for stealing and put on probation. These teenagers were on a march toward death, and no one noticed.

Was it parental neglect? From all reports, the two sets of parents gave their sons at least the average attention that well-intentioned suburban families offer their children. Could the Internet and computers have been the technological diversions that pushed the boys over the edge? Authorities have reported that Eric and Dylan engaged in heated video contests, and their favorite game was "Doom," in which a gunman wanders through hallways in search of enemies. Should video games bear some of the blame?

*Matrix*, a popular film at the time of the killings, features Keanu Reeves as the hero wearing a long black coat, Goth-style, who defeats his enemies in a final shootout. To prepare for this encounter, Reeves is transported, in a virtual-reality sequence, to a space where a huge collection of guns zooms around him, lined up and ready to be chosen for a feast of destruction. The Columbine killing duo was already well into Goth clothing before *Matrix* appeared, but many other films have glorified violent solutions to any and all problems. Could such movies have encouraged Eric and Dylan's destructive behavior?

What about the impact of the media's saturation coverage of earlier mass killings? From the moment the story first broke, media continually reported the details of the shootings, providing instant fame for the perpetrators--celebrity status that a disturbed child might fix upon in preparing to attack his perceived enemies. Earlier school killings were given similar treatment. Could Eric and Dylan have coveted the attention that media paid to these earlier mass killings and envisioned that they would finally achieve the recognition their fellow students had previously denied them? When does legitimate reportage slide into exploitation and provocation?

All these questions point us to disturbing parts of our culture and to reasons to be more diligent in protecting children. Still, none of these causes, taken alone or in combination, answers the question of why the shootings happened.

If we can't answer the question of why, we can answer the question of how to respond to "tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword," to use Paul's description. Confronted with the presence of evil, we are called to respond in the certainty that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor

depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."