

# **Abortion Survivors At Columbine**

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**Abstracts.** This paper is a comprehensive analysis of the two adolescent perpetrators of the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School. Using psychoanalytic, family systems, and prenatal psychology resources, the author explores various theories advanced to explain their behavior and offers the new observation that the boys match the clinical profile of abortion survivors. In concluding, he predicts the increasing appearance of more and ever younger killers in a culture which features the multigenerational transmission of the threat of being aborted and suggests that this insight may help us understand other examples of antisocial behavior and pathological syndromes.

## **Introduction**

Abortion survivors are persons who were born after having prenatally experienced either a direct attempt to physically abort them, or who have survived after having lived in an unwelcoming and ambivalent prenatal environment in which the possibility of their being aborted had been consciously or unconsciously considered by their parent(s) or others. Evidence will be presented in this essay showing that the thinking, feeling and behavior of the Columbine killers represent an extreme example of the complex of symptoms of abortion survivors seen in clinical practice.

To begin my presentation, I shall describe in detail the killers' behavior during and prior to the massacre, and outline various theories that have been advanced as to its possible cause, none of which so far have touched on abortion dynamics. Following this I shall review evidence from the field of prenatal psychology that has documented that the unborn are sentient beings possessing the capacities of mentation, communication and response to trauma, and review some of the unconscious defense mechanisms used to cope with the threat of being aborted. I shall then summarize the symptoms of abortion survivors, show these symptoms in the school killers, and deal with the question of what is required to satisfy the burden of proof that the Columbine killers were indeed abortion survivors.

**The Massacre.** On Tuesday, April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, two senior high school students, Eric Davis Harris, 18, and Dylan Bennett Klebold, 17, wearing ski masks, walked into the school cafeteria at lunch time and began firing automatic weapons and tossing shrapnel filled explosives about. They killed twelve of their classmates, wounded twenty-four others, killed one of their male teachers, and then committed suicide.

The massacre lasted about six hours, and involved the killers' making threatening and derisive comments and questions to the victims. A student recalls one of them saying, "Look, there's that little nigger," before shooting the student, a popular black athlete, three times in the head, then laughingly saying, "Hey, I always wondered what nigger's brains looked like." A young female student was asked if she believed in God, and when she answered in the affirmative, she was shot. One girl told how, as she was begging for her life, she was told by one of the gunmen, as he laughingly put a gun to her head, that he was doing this because people had been "mean to him last year." Several students reported the killers as being excited and laughing triumphantly as they went about their killing. Nicholas Schumann, 19, who heard the shooting and voices from the library below, said "They were, like, orgasmic." To one student, hiding beneath a desk, they said, "Peekaboo," and then shot him.

### **Behavior of the killers to the massacre**

Fellow students have described Harris and Klebold as "not present," and difficult to get to know. They were members of a group that school jocks called "The Trench Coat Mafia," which consisted of about a dozen students known for their unusual dress in black leather coats and high black steel-toed leather boots, a Gothic look popularized by rock singer Marilyn Manson and reminiscent of the garb of Nazi stormtroopers. Sometimes they wore white pancake makeup and dark eyeliner. They were fans of the video game, "Doom," and the movie, "Matrix," and also devotees of the German band KMFDM, whose name means "No pity for the majority," and whose lyrics question the meaning of life and are full of violence to the status quo and intense self loathing. One student described Harris and Klebold as having a "devilish, half-dead, half-alive" look. They were known as devotees of Hitler, and it is noteworthy in this regard, that the killings occurred on the 110-th anniversary of Hitler's birth. Popular jock athletes, minority groups, and anyone religious, particularly Jews, were targets of their scorn.

There were many indications of impending disaster preceding the massacre. In January 1998, Harris and Klebold were arrested for breaking into a commercial van and stealing electronic equipment. The two boys paid weekly visits to a "diversion officer" and were subjected to a range of reform programs, from community service to a "Mothers Against Drunk Driving" panel to an "anger-management class." They were subsequently prohibited from owning weapons or explosives. The program officers for both boys marked their prognosis as "good." Klebold's officer wrote, "Dylan is a bright young man who has a great deal of potential," and "He is intelligent enough to make any dream a reality, but he needs to understand hard work is part of it." Harris' case officer wrote, "Eric is a very bright young man who is likely to succeed in life," and,

“He is intelligent enough to achieve lofty goals as long as he stays on task and remains motivated.”

Harris was reported to the police in early 1998 by parents of a fellow student, Brooks Brown, for breaking the windshield of their son’s car and then posting on his web site “If anyone wants to kill someone, why not Brooks Brown?” He also wrote threats that he himself was going to kill their son and many others: “I don’t care if I live or die in the shoot-out, all I want to do is kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can,” and “Oh God dammit. Dead people do not argue! God dammit, I am pissed!” The Browns warned the police that Harris had boasted of making bombs, and they also warned neighbors to watch out for Harris and Klebold.

The Browns also spoke with Eric’s mother. All we know about this interchange is that the mother cried, but we have no further amplification of this as to what her crying meant, nor do we know whether or not she talked to her son about what she had been told. As for the father, a retired Air Force officer, Eric was able to convince him that he didn’t mean what he’d written. The Browns also spoke with a sheriff’s investigator and a bomb-squad specialist just weeks before Harris and Klebold were to be sentenced for stealing from the van. The sheriff’s department said that they couldn’t act on the Brown’s complaint because the Browns refused to put their names on a sworn complaint for fear for their son’s life.

On July 4, 1998, after an exchange of words with fellow student, Peter Mahker, at a 7-Eleven store, Harris and Klebold waved a pistol at him from the window of Klebold’s BMW. Also in 1998, in one of their classes in school, the killers presented a violent home-made video in which they pretended to shoot friends dressed as jocks. Early in 1999, one teacher and two parents warned school authorities that Harris and Klebold were violent. The father of Isaiah Shoels, the black student later killed in the massacre, reported to the school authorities that his son had repeatedly complained to him that “These guys keep getting into my face.” The father regrets that he didn’t do more to really press the matter.

Many have found it incredulous to think that Harris and Klebold could have accumulated their extensive arsenal without their parents being aware of it. After hearing about the killings, Klebold’s father, through an intermediary, called authorities and told them his son might have been involved, and offered to help. Whether the father had just discovered evidence or had known of it before, has not been reported, but neighbors recalled having heard sounds of clanking metal and breaking glass coming from Harris’ garage the day before the massacre. Police searching the home of one of the killers after the massacre found bomb-making materials and a shotgun barrel lying in plain view in the bedroom. They also found a detailed diary revealing that extensive planning had been going on for a year. The killers had planned to blow up the entire school with everyone in

it, including teachers and the 500 student body. The diary was replete with Nazi themes, and anti-Semitism. They also found what was left of the arsenal in several places in the school: 30 bombs, several built from propane gas cylinders, a 9 millimeter semiautomatic rifle, two pistol grip shotguns, one handgun and at least 100 rounds of ammunition, according to investigator Sheriff Stone. There also were bombs in two or three cars in the school parking lot. A bomb hidden in the school exploded unexpectedly several hours after the massacre.

There have been questions raised as to where and how Harris and Klebold obtained their arsenal. Two of their guns were purchased a year before the killings at a gun shop in Colorado Springs, Colorado, 60 miles from Littleton, by Robyn Anderson, whom Klebold had met in an advanced-placement class. According to Mel Bernstein, co-owner of the shop, Anderson, 18 at that time, quickly jumped in to volunteer to buy the guns after he had declined to sell them to a group of four underage young men who were dressed in trench coats. Anderson was Klebold's prom date on Saturday night before the massacre and at a post-prom party on Sunday night. Authorities believe that the killers planted bombs in the school during these events. Although Anderson's friend Tiffany Burk, 18, insists Anderson had no idea what the guns were for, Anderson was in the school parking lot when the shooting started, and squatted under the steering column of her car the entire time.

The morning of the killings, Klebold went bowling at six thirty A.M. wearing a T shirt with "Serial killer" printed on it, which he usually wore at bowling. When either he or Harris made a strike or a spare they would shout, "Heil Hitler!" in celebration. After bowling that day and changing into his black leather outfit, Harris, as he passed Brooks Brown in a school hallway, told him that he liked him now, and advised him to go home immediately. On Harris's web site prior to the killings there was a reference to something big happening on Hitler's birthday. Harris allegedly wrote in his America Online profile, "Kill 'em ALL."

### **Various theories advanced as to cause**

Subsequent to these killings, there have been many theories advanced in an attempt to explain why this massacre happened. They have included: too easy access to guns, lack of religious education in schools, lack of personal attention and care on the part of school authorities, social and religious institutions and police, including failure to detect imminent signs that students are in trouble and potentially violent. Other theories have been inadequate parenting, particularly lack of supervision; unfriendly, mocking, or ostracizing behavior from fellow students; the influence of portrayals of violence on television and in the movies; the influence of violent rock music, drugs, including psychotropics; and an overall cultural decline in morals, described by Bill Owens, the Governor of Colorado, as

a “Cultural virus.” Owens also said, “We have to ask ourselves what kind of children we are raising.”

Although Owens did not say, “We have to ask ourselves what kind of *parents* are raising our children,” this question has occurred to some of the parents of those murdered, several of whom have instituted suit against the parents of Harris and Klebold. The Harris and Klebold families in turn have hired attorneys to defend themselves, and are not talking to the media.

What is noteworthy about the speculation as to possible causes of the massacre, even those that point to inadequate parenting, is that they all focus on post-natal life experiences, and that there are none that focus on prenatal experiences, prenatal mentation and communication, or on the possibility that abortion dynamics may have been operative.

When I heard and read descriptions of the thinking, feeling and behavior of Harris and Klebold, I was immediately struck by how similar these were to the thinking, feeling, and behavior of numerous abortion survivors with whom I have worked intensively in psychoanalysis, psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy, and marital and family therapy over the past several decades. Realizing this, over the next few days I wrote a brief preliminary essay on the Columbine killings entitled, “Abortion Dynamics and the Trench Coat Mafia,” (Sonne, 1999), and submitted it to over a dozen major newspapers and newsletters. I also submitted it to several talk show hosts, along with an offer to be interviewed by them. No one was interested except Judie Brown of the American Life League.

### **A wall of silence about abortion**

The fact that no mention of abortion was made in several hundred articles in the print media, or on several television news, talk and commentary shows, including “Meet the Press,” and “Good Morning America,” or by any public officials, both shortly after the massacre and even a year later, deserves examination. On the Dan Rather CBS Evening News program on April 20, 2000, the first anniversary of the massacre, one scholar said, “We still don’t have the answer.”

Discovery comes to the prepared mind, and it is quite clear that the minds of numerous inquirers are not prepared to consider prenatal psychology or abortion dynamics in their search for causes. Perhaps this should not be surprising, for we are living in a culture of abortion on demand that has existed since the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973. During this period, one out of four of the unborn have been aborted in America, a total of 29 million, and during roughly the same period, abortion on demand, even forced abortion, has become a global phenomenon. In addition to the prevalence of abortion on demand, there has been increasing pressure to enact laws legalizing physician assisted suicide, which could be looked at as another form of abortion. Both of

these trends are reminiscent of the Nazi program to perfect the human race by eliminating the “unlebenswert” (unworthy of life) through abortion, genocide, the killing of the physically or mentally handicapped, and the infirm elderly.

### **Abortion survivors and the threat of being aborted**

Not to minimize the importance of the deaths of millions of unborn by abortion, but there is a consequence of the greatest importance deserving urgent attention--the plight (and plague) of the traumatized abortion survivors in our society. These children are alive today not because of a development respected, welcomed and facilitated by others, but because a consideration of their extermination was not consummated. Both their fathers and mother have a role in this. The survivors are alive by default, by the sufferance of others, somewhat like convicted criminals whose death sentences were reprieved while they were on death row awaiting execution. Considering this, it is not surprising that they have the symptoms they have. In addition, the effect of their prenatal trauma can be compounded by postnatally experiencing in their parental or broader social environment a betrayal of basic trust that is similar to what they experienced prenatally. They are immersed in a culture rampant with examples of psychological and physical abortion, and other threats to soul and body.

In my essay (1997), and in (1998), I give several examples of abortion survivors who were told such things as “You are only alive today because the bichloride of mercury didn’t work,” “I didn’t try to abort *you*, you were only a period then.” A woman who had always considered herself “basically defective” was told by her mother that she had considered aborting her because she didn’t want to risk having another child like the congenitally handicapped little boy she already had. Incidentally, this survivor’s career choice was to do full time intensive work with the handicapped. One male survivor was told, “We tried to abort you once, and we could still do it,” and another was repeatedly told in a joking manner that he was a “diaphragm baby.” One mother, when asked by her daughter why she had bothered having her, answered, “Abortion wasn’t legal back then.” Another young man told me that his father, upset with him for not providing him with a grandchild he felt was owed to him, condemned him for his ingratitude by angrily saying to him, “You know, we could have aborted you.”

### **Prenatal mentation, communication and trauma**

It is perhaps not too difficult for some to consider that an unborn developing in an inimical prenatal milieu might have been physically traumatized, as in fetal alcohol syndrome for example. But to consider that an unborn may have suffered *psychological* damage in utero requires that they accept the reality of prenatal mentation, communication and trauma, something many have great

difficulty doing--even though they may take postnatal mentation, communication and trauma as givens when discussing early childhood development or child abuse.

To understand how the threat of being aborted could have a traumatic psychological impact and lasting psychological consequences, one must consider research over the past several decades that has documented the existence of much more mentation and communication in the unborn than had been previously thought. The unborn pick up messages from their environment, including sensing they are living in an unwelcoming, ambivalent environment. They hear sounds, voices, languages, and music that they respond to and record prenatally. Subsequently they recognize and respond to these after birth, and later life experiences contain transferential derivatives of the prenatal experience.

Among the classic papers on prenatal psychology are papers Ferenczi (1929), Ploye (1973), Verry and Kelly (1981), Ney (1983), and Chamberlain (1994), to name but a few. Numerous other reports in the literature by Bion (1977), Kestenberg a.Borowitz, (1990), Cheek a.LeCron (1968), Liley (1972), Kafkalides (1980), Lake (1981), Grof (1988), Wilhelm (1988), Janus (1989), Piontelli (1992), Emerson (1996), DeMause (1982,1996), and many others, have convincingly documented the operation of prenatal mentation, communication and trauma in the unborn.

Even without considering these works, the study by Feldmar (1979) of four young women, each of whom had attempted suicide on the anniversary of their mothers' attempts to abort them (attempts verified by the mothers when interviewed) is alone sufficient to prove that the unborn possess the capacity for mentation and communication, that they can be traumatized psychologically, and that the consequences of prenatal trauma can find expression in later life. Documentation of such a magnitude, whatever doubts some might have, establishes the operation of prenatal mentation communication and trauma as incontrovertible truths.

As part of my own contribution to the study of prenatal psychology, particularly relative to prenatal trauma, I have published several essays (1966, 1975, 1994 a,b,c, 1995, 1996, 1998).

In these writings I have advanced the thesis that an "unthought known" (a term taken from the work of Bollas, 1987) continues to exist and dynamically operate in the minds of those threatened with being aborted. I suggest further that the psychological trauma the survivors have experienced resulted in a diminution of the exchange of information via the corpus callosum between the right brain, which is concerned mostly with affect, time and space, and the left brain, which is concerned mostly with words and logic.

### **Characteristic of abortion survivors**

Abortion survivors have a variety of obvious symptoms, and a variety of more subtle but pervasive characteristics in their thinking, feeling and behavior. Both the obvious symptoms and the subtle characteristics are clues that can help in making the diagnosis. Some of these symptoms can be seen in other psychiatric disorders but collectively they constitute a unique syndrome. Not all of them are necessarily present in any given person. These symptoms will ultimately be seen as transference derivatives from prenatal trauma, even though initially abortion survivors in most instances have little awareness of their repressed traumatic origin.

Abortion survivors feel like outcasts, unwelcome, unloved, undeserving, unlovable, unattractive, and worthless. They tend to develop false selves. Despite these negative feelings and self view, they do seek attention. They are pessimistic about their chances of ever finding love, but often when it is offered they cannot accept it. They can have turbulent marriages with a great deal of acting out. They choose bad mates, destroy good ones, and not uncommonly marry and divorce several times. Many have difficulty embracing and enjoying their sexual identity. They also have difficulty enjoying the simple things in life, such as savoring a cup of coffee in the morning. Many survivors are adopters, who can have additional problems (Sonne, 1998).

Abortion survivors are attention seeking. Sometimes, as part of resolving their prenatal trauma, they may seek recognition in socially constructive positions of leadership, perhaps in pro-life causes, philanthropy, government, or other activities that promote the general welfare; or in law, medicine, philosophy or the arts. In other instances the seeking of attention takes a destructive and anarchistic path of notoriety and a glorification of their unconventional public enemy role.

Abortion survivors are half-alive and half-dead, suffering with a sense they are not present, do not feel real, and that life has little meaning for them. Although time passes, they have a sense that nothing is happening over time. They often describe themselves as drifting through life, and in therapy seldom talk about their future. They make limited use of poetic metaphors, metonyms and synesthesia in their speech, and have little sense of humor.

Abortion survivors frequently regard themselves as incurable or genetically flawed. Their efforts to convince the analyst of their inherent defectiveness can often be so unrelenting the analyst may be tempted to accept their hopeless conclusion about the unalterable genetic determination of the difficulties they have had with life since the day they were conceived. Relative to genetics, the fact that certain individual and interactive characteristics may have been manifest from birth is not proof that they are expressions of genetic programming present at conception. Kandel (1989) and Edelman (1989, 1992) have demonstrated that neuronal networks or maps, are plastic, and genetic programming is not immutable. Depending on one's experience, previously *dormant* genes can be



activated and previously *active* genes can be deactivated. Their work supports the possibility that experiences in utero, such as the threat of being aborted, have the potential of altering genetic programming, but therapy or other metamorphic life experiences can do the same.

As a transference derivative from precarious prenatal experience, abortion survivors have extreme difficulty trusting others. They are not thankful, grateful or appreciative. They do not feel present or connected, have little faith, and do not believe in the soul or in God. Their abortion wishes and fears are acted out in social relationships, and can come to the fore in therapy in the transference. James Grotstein (1992), my longtime friend and colleague, gave me permission to quote his letter to me in which he wrote of how, after reading one of my papers, he had asked a woman patient he had been seeing in analysis for fourteen years, whether she had ever been afraid of being aborted. She responded, "Yes, by you." In my own experience, I was struck by the fact that the first question one of my survivor patients asked me in his initial interview was whether I was sure that I wanted to accept him as a patient.

In my essay (1996), I suggest that one of the problems with interminable or interrupted analyses could be that abortion dynamics being acted out in the transference were not recognized by the analyst in the womb-like setting of the consultation room. Although abortion survivors fear being aborted, or being interminably confined (also an abortion) they also have a wish to be aborted, physically or psychologically. They want what they fear, and they are what they hate. Seeing themselves as loathsome, dirty, defective, incurable, unworthy and discardable, abortion survivors tend in part to regard the traumatic abortion threat experienced prenatally, and the poor treatment they often experienced postnatally, as justified. They have identified with the aggressor, the abortion-minded mother and/or father, or the indifferent world.

Abortion survivors are suicidal and self-aborting, and when in a suicidal mode they almost seem to seek, and often experience, repeated psychological abortions from their intimates or from their therapist. They are often very bright, competent, and overqualified for what they are doing, so that one might wonder why they hate themselves so much. But because of their fear of success or happiness, their competence doesn't do them much good: They tend to repeatedly psychologically self abort when on the verge of fulfillment. If the dynamics are intense, there may be gross acting out in the form of actual suicides.

They can have murderous sibling rivalry. One of my patients as a child tried to kill his younger sister by pushing her off a second story balcony. In a homicidal mode they will attempt to abort, or sanction the psychological abortion of any potential competitor or friend, including their therapist. Similar to abused children who later become abusers, they are inclined to act out by aborting others, including their own children, or to sanction the abortion of others, either psychologically or physically. They feel resentful and hostile toward anyone who

competitively threatens their existence, including siblings and the sibling substitutes they see in the world around them.

Murderous hostility can be directed toward their parents or acted out on people in authority, i.e., symbolic parental figures. They can be daredevils acting out their fears and wishes dramatically in relation to tunnels, caves, bridges, airplanes, and in sensation-seeking, counterphobic, death-defying, risk-taking activities such as spelunking, hang gliding, parachute jumping, motorcycle or automobile racing, flying, white-water rafting and scuba diving. These activities represent both a life wish and a death wish. They could be seen as symbolic re-enactments of the abortion survivors prenatal trauma, leading either to the mastery of birth and a genuine life, or to a completed abortion and death.

Some abortion survivors are episodic wanderers, looking for a home, i.e., a safe uterus that they never seem to find. They tend to move repeatedly, often after living in a house only briefly. They may seek or avoid cozy, sequestered spots, symbolic representations of the uterus. Light is very important to them, representing life outside the womb, and may be either sought or avoided. Sexual intercourse is seen as dangerous to both male and female survivors. The male's fetal self is afraid of coming close to the place symbolic of where he had been traumatized prenatally, and the female fetal self is afraid of being aborted by the invading penis.

The hostility and fear present in abortion survivors do not seem to be primarily connected with a desire for gratification, resentment at not receiving it, or resentment toward a competitor who interferes with their gratification, as in Oedipal conflicts. Nor do the hostility and fear seem to be very much about the need for affirmation of self or affirmation of one's gender or identity that is operative in the various stages of separation and individuation beginning in early childhood delineated by such researchers as Winnicott (1949), Erikson (1950), Jacobson (1964), Blos (1967), Mahler (1975), Kohut (1977), Bowen (1978), and Stern (1985). Instead, the hostility and fear seem to center around a fundamental struggle between being and non-being. Abortion survivors are not connected, and therefore cannot aspire to higher levels of fulfillment and gratification. The most they can hope for is momentary, fleeting, sensual stimulation, that gives them some partial sense they are alive. This is often experienced in impersonal sex, drugs, and masochistic and sadistic acting out. Nothing has been sacred for abortion survivors, so nothing is sacred to them.

### **Identification with the aggressor and acting out**

Of the various defensive behaviors mentioned above, the major defense of abortion survivors is acting out (upon themselves, upon their progeny, and against other persons) the abortion impulses which they felt directed at themselves prenatally. This behavior can be thought of as similar to that of abused children

who in later life become abusers (Johnson a. Szurek, 1952; Steele, 1970). The underlying dynamic is an identification with the abortion minded aggressor parent or parents. In this identification, and its inherent denial of hostility to their parents, some abortion survivors say that it would have been better if they had been aborted. They reason that they then would have been spared suffering. Combined with this, however, is a belief (again similar to that of abused children who feel that they deserved the treatment they received) their suffering was deserved because they were “bad seeds,” unworthy of life and love. Abortion survivors are often imperceptive when they are being psychologically aborted in social interactions.

As far as parenting by abortion survivors is concerned, instead of allowing themselves to feel anger toward their parents and thus freeing themselves to have the happiness of enjoying parenthood and loving children, they are often inclined to lethally act out against their own offspring the unconsummated abortion wishes of their parents. They rationalize that aborting their unborn would save them from the suffering they would experience in an “abusive, uncaring, polluted and unsafe world.” This rationalization involves a projective identification of the unborn or newborn as destined to experience suffering similar to that which the abortion survivors themselves experienced. Beneath this is a hidden wish that their children would indeed suffer as they have, and rivalries feelings at the thought that their children might have a happier existence than they. Aborting their unborn also represents an acting out of their own fear of being, and wish to have been aborted.

Combined with hostility to themselves and to the unborn, abortion survivors often exhibit a reaction formation consisting of a sentimental over-emphasis on good parenting and the welfare of children. Espousal of abortion is presented as an example of this, i.e., parents who are willing to abort their unborn are good parents, therefore society should sanction abortion as a moral and legal act. Despite their self hatred and tendency to self abort, abortion survivors are often very concerned about their health, education, wealth, and social position, yet may unhesitatingly abort others psychologically in these pursuits. Sibling rivalry is an important dynamic motivating the espousal of the abortion of others, often rationalized on the basis that “There are too many people in the world.” Those deemed unworthy of life are often those of a particular race, religion, or nationality.

Even abortion survivors who are psychologically sophisticated, and who focus on trauma, abuse, neglect, or unfortunate mishaps in early infancy as significant determinants of child and adult psychopathology, will frequently dismiss those who present mounting evidence documenting the importance of prenatal experience and prenatal trauma, including their own, as being misguided proponents of “So much nonsense.” Beneath this defensive exterior they are often plagued with feelings of anger and guilt they cannot acknowledge to

themselves or to others. These feelings can be compounded if they have aborted, or considered aborting, one of their unborn. Unable to forgive themselves or to be forgiven, pretending to themselves and others that all is well, abortion survivors are among the most miserable of humans. They are locked in a prison of defenses upon defenses unless helped by therapy or other metamorphic life experiences to have an authentic, happy, loved and loving life.

### **Symptoms of abortion survivors in Harris and Klebold**

Harris and Klebold demonstrated feelings of unworthiness, being of little value, misfits, or outcasts. They identified with other misfits, as exemplified by the expression, "Ich bin ein Auslander" (I am an outsider). They were unable to love or be loved. They went through life half alive and half dead, and were described as such by their classmates. They developed false selves and were not really fully present in social interactions. They were described by some classmates as unknowable.

The two boys were suicidal, aborting themselves psychologically and physically: "If I had a shotgun, I'd blow my brains out." They experienced and elicited psychological abortion from others, were repeatedly mocked by others and called weirdoes and faggots. Their ultimate self abortion occurred when they committed suicide at just at the point when, as high school seniors, they were about to graduate and symbolically be "born" from the "mother womb" of their high school, which they simultaneously attempted to destroy--a behavior reminiscent of Ferenczi's (1929) point about the unwelcome child's refusal to be born, and his death wish. That their suicide was on Hitler's birthday suggests an identification with one of history's most hated people, a murderous soul mate who also committed suicide.

Both sought recognition and respect, although they saw themselves as rejects. They acted like leaders of the world, non-conformists out to change society even if it meant killing their classmates, their teacher and blowing up their school. They succeeded in making an impact on society. As notorious killers, they will never be forgotten, and we can no longer say that they were not present.

Harris and Klebold engaged in risky, daredevil activities, indifferent to danger in provocative, threatening behavior, stealing, writing publicly available violent web content, and presenting destructive amateur movies at school. They demonstrated an intense, murderous sibling rivalry, transferred to others who symbolically were siblings seen as undeservedly more loved, advantaged and successful than they, particularly athletic jocks who resembled Harris' brother. Other symbolic siblings were racially and ethnically different or religiously offensive to them. They aborted their "siblings" psychologically by demeaning, disaffirming behavior and comments, and aborted them physically by actually killing them.

A murderous hostility to their parents was expressed in acting out against authority figures (symbolic parents), and killing one of them, their male teacher “father.” Hostility to mother is reflected in trying to blow up their “alma mater,” the murderous hatred of his Jewish mother implicit in Klebold’s anti-Semitism and his identification with Hitler, the killer of Jews.

Whether Harris and Klebold had difficulty with symbolization, synesthesia, metaphor, metonym, and simile is not clear, but they did tend to be literal, dogmatic and opinionated. As far as a sense of humor is concerned, the information we have does not mention any examples of it except in the bizarre humor they displayed in laughing as they murdered people.

### **The burden of proof**

A natural question may come to the reader’s mind whether showing the existence of abortion survivor symptoms in the Columbine killers is sufficient evidence that the genesis of their symptoms came from being traumatized prenatally by the threat of being aborted. In clinical practice it is possible to obtain confirmation from the abortion survivor’s parents, or from statements given to the patient by others. In this case, however, only limited information is available. What little we do have makes one suspect that there were serious problems with family communication. For example, what did Klebold’s Jewish mother think of the fact that her son was preoccupied with anti-Semitism? Did she pick up the hostility toward her implied in this? Her father, Leo Yassenhoff, a wealthy real estate developer in Columbus, Ohio, was a Jew, who was such a generous contributor to the Jewish Community Center of Columbus that the Center was named after him (New York Times, April 25, 1999).

We must wonder how Harris was able to convince his father that he didn’t really mean what he said in his website threats against his classmates. It is hard to believe that the killers’ parents were unaware of their children’s accumulation of an arsenal or indifferent to the cumulative instances of their antisocial behavior. For them to be unaware, or for them to be aware and not react appropriately, could both be considered psychological abortions of their children’s existences. One of the parents whose child was killed in the massacre expressed this sentiment well when he said that if his child had six butane tanks in the garage and he didn’t ask him about it, it would suggest that he didn’t give a damn about him.

Relative to the lack (at this time) of more specific documentation that the Columbine killers experienced a threat of being aborted, it is important to remember that these data, although desirable, are not absolutely necessary to make the case. In medicine, if the signs and symptoms of an illness bear a strong resemblance to those seen in numerous other cases in which the etiologic agent has been identified, it is permissible to make a presumptive diagnosis, including

presumed etiology, on this basis. This is what I have done in this essay pointing to the resemblance of the signs and symptoms of Klebold and Harris to those of other abortion survivors.

The fact that not everyone exposed to a pathogen (or impacted by trauma) becomes ill cannot be used as an argument to minimize the importance of the threat of being aborted as a cause of psychopathology. As DeMause (1982, 1996) and Grof (1988) have pointed out, life in the womb under the best of circumstances is not as idyllic as many would fancy, and some degree of prenatal trauma has probably been a very real experience for all of us. Whether or not a disease state develops depends on the virulence of the pathogen or trauma, the vulnerability of the host, the timing and duration of exposure, and the presence of ameliorating or exacerbating factors. The fetus is probably most vulnerable in the early stages of pregnancy. All of these factors are important to an understanding of the variation seen in the severity of the symptoms of abortion survivors, some of whom may have had more lasting consequences of the threat of being aborted than others.

Another point to consider in making a psychological diagnosis is that the symptoms of psychological diseases and trauma often resemble and bear the imprint of the original pathogenic situation to which they are associatively linked. This is generally not true of physical diseases, the symptoms of which seldom resemble their causal agent. This clue is particularly applicable to the symptoms of abortion survivors, for many of them appear to be symbolic reenactments resembling what we know from clinical experience to be the survivors' original prenatal trauma.

Considered collectively, all of the points mentioned above support the legitimacy of using examples of the thinking, feeling, and behavior of Harris and Klebold as evidence they were probably abortion survivors. Further support for this conclusion comes from a piece of startling confirmatory evidence that comes from one of the killers in the form of a negation in a videotape Harris left at home on the morning of the massacre. In it he quotes Shakespeare, "Good wombs have borne bad sons," implicitly condemning himself and exonerating his mother. Here is a truly remarkable find--one of the killers telling us about himself.

What is the significance of this? What was Harris' motive in making this videotape and quoting Shakespeare? Two psychoanalytic axioms can help answer these questions. The first is that denial connotes the opposite; the second is that the greater the denial, the greater the trauma and the intensity of the feelings associated with it. Obviously, for Harris to make this videotape indicates that he had, at the least, thought about prenatal trauma being related to destructive behavior. However, he needed to deny the "unthought known" his unconscious was sending him about himself. Thus, to someone listening with a third ear, Harris is saying, "My mother damaged me when I was in her womb, and I have murderous feelings toward her." Several hours later, instead of killing his

mother, he acted out his rage toward her by killing others, and punished himself by committing suicide.

### **The phenomenon of anticipation: more and younger killers**

The Columbine massacre is but one of many examples of an increasing prevalence of violent and murderous acts by young people. Why are we seeing this? And why are we seeing similar behavior being exhibited more and more by ever younger children? A possible answer might be that we are witnessing a phenomenon of anticipation in the psychological realm akin to the phenomenon of anticipation seen in the physical realm, such as diabetes appearing earlier and earlier in succeeding generations, leading back from juvenile to early infant and prenatal diabetes or death. This phenomenon of anticipation could be revealed in the psychological realm as the cultural inheritance of destructive traits multi-generationally (Sonne, 1994 b).

### **Broader applicability of abortion survivor dynamics**

In closing, I would like to suggest that the knowledge of abortion survivor dynamics could be applied more broadly than to the Columbine killers. It is conceivable that these dynamics could be operative in other criminal behavior such as serial killings, mass cultural exterminations, suicidal and murderous cults. This knowledge might also help us better understand the behavior of tyrants, tyrannical governments, the dynamics of international conflict and warfare, ethnic and religious intolerance, and marital and family conflict. We might be able to shed new light on the traditional definitions of psychological disease entities, an idea I have discussed in an essay, "Social Regression and the Global Prevalence of Abortion" (Sonne, 1994c). But much more work needs to be done on this subject. Perhaps this essay on abortion survivors at Columbine will inspire others to pursue this avenue of research.