January 2010

Twenty-Three Days: An Autoethnographic Account of the Washington, D.C. Sniper Shootings

Chelsea Jordan Gutshall
James Madison University, gutshacj@dukes.jmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/ctamj

Part of the Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons

Recommended Citation

This General Interest is brought to you for free and open access by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.
Twenty-Three Days: An Autoethnographic Account of the Washington, D.C. Sniper Shootings

Chelsea Jordan Gutshall
Undergraduate Student
gutshacj@dukes.jmu.edu
Department of Communication Studies
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

ABSTRACT
Our lives are often defined by the struggles we confront because in facing these trials we must reflect upon experiences and the power others have in shaping our reactions. The Washington, D.C. sniper shootings of October 2002 are one case of such terror. My own experiences with two shootings in my hometown and living extremely close to others serves as the background for this autoethnography, detailing what I and my family faced during that single month. The focus, however, is not the snipers but family communication and how parents help children cope during unimaginable crises. This autoethnography is divided into three sections: a history of the sniper attacks, my narrative account, and a connection to pertinent literature along with my reflections seven years later.

Introduction

I was fourteen years old, a freshman in high school, when I discovered what it meant to be afraid. Barely a year earlier in New York City the twin towers had fallen and the Pentagon, not an hour away from my home, had been attacked. From those catastrophes I learned the meaning of grief, of hopelessness, and of terrorism. But it was not until 2002 when two men, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, came to Spotsylvania, Virginia, that I looked fear in the face.

What follows is an autoethnographic account of the 2002 sniper attacks. I have chosen to relate this story in the style of an autoethnography for various reasons, the most prominent of which is the immediacy of the events (Crawford, 1996; Tillmann, 2009). Though years have passed I will likely never again see a white van without instinctively seeking a place to hide. To this day I think of the people who weaved and danced from place to place at gas stations when I stand there unprotected and seemingly unafraid. My mind overflows with such memories, memories of myself and my family, of schools desolate and silent. I am invested in these. While I acknowledge that seven years have passed since the shootings, my memories of those days will not weaken in my lifetime. This autoethnography opens with an overview of the sniper shootings and transitions into my narrative account of those twenty-three days. The snipers, however, are
not my central focus. Instead, I conclude this ethnography by connecting my memories to relevant communication research which examines the role of the media and parents in times of terror; emotional communication; and, most importantly, the power of family communication. Communication within my own family, whether discussing a recent shooting or emotions, was a salient and critical factor in helping me to not only understand but also recover from the attacks.

Chronology of Sniper Shootings

On October 2, 2002, a shooting in Maryland began a twenty-three day spree of terror (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2007a). James Martin was crossing a grocery store parking lot when he was shot and killed (FOX News, 2002). This shooting occurred in the evening hours of October 2; “by ten o’clock the next morning…four more people…had been similarly murdered” (FBI, 2007b). Twelve hours later, one more victim, a passerby on the streets of D.C., was also dead (FOX News).

Two days after the first six attacks, a forty-three year-old woman was shot in the back loading packages into her car at Michael’s Craft Store in Spotsylvania, Virginia (Pugh, 2002a). She became the first of three survivors. The following Monday, October 7, Iran Brown, a thirteen-year-old boy walking into his middle school, became the next victim (Pezzullo, Gould, & Pugh, 2002). With this shooting the snipers forged an identity for themselves as ruthless killers. Near the scene the first communiqué was discovered: a white tarot card on which the words “I am God” were scrawled (Epps & Pugh, 2002).

Wednesday, October 9, brought the next murder, this time at a gas station. Two days later, on the 11\textsuperscript{th}, the snipers returned to Spotsylvania, again targeting a gas station (FOX News, 2002). The week closed with that shooting in Spotsylvania, the second in as many weeks. Roads were shut down and all white vans in the area through were thoroughly checked after witnesses claimed to have seen the vehicle in the vicinity (Pugh, 2002b).

Monday morning an FBI analyst was killed outside of a hardware store in Fairfax County, Virginia (Fox News, 2002). Following the attack, The Department of Defense approved airplane surveillance over Interstate 95 and the American Trucking Association ordered all truckers to be alert for a white van matching the description police had been circulating (Gould, 2002a). Later on October 17, one of the two snipers called the police to brag that he had also been responsible for a separate murder in Alabama (FBI, 2007a), which eventually linked the snipers to other unsolved murders. Within hours, the FBI had been provided with a fingerprint of the suspect and a name was not far behind (FBI).

Before police could apprehend the snipers, however, two more people were attacked. One man was shot in Ashland, Virginia (FOX News, 2002). He survived (FOX News) and a message, including a phone number, addressed to police was found at the scene (Epps & Pugh, 2002). The snipers were now threatening that “your children are not safe anywhere at anytime” (Miller, Woodruff, & Lumpkin, 2002).
The snipers would claim their final victim half a mile from where the shootings began on October 22, 2002 (Miller et al., 2002). A commuter bus driver was boarding his bus when he was shot and killed (Miller et al.). That same day the FBI discovered an identity (FBI, 2007a). Fingerprints from the arrest report in Mobile, Alabama were matched to Lee Boyd Malvo and John Allen Muhammad (FBI, 2007a). By that afternoon, FBI agents revealed that Muhammad owned a blue Chevy Caprice registered in New Jersey (FBI, 2007a).

After twenty-three days the killing spree was about to end. On October 24, a trucker at a rest area in Frederick County, Maryland saw the car police were searching for in the parking lot (Gould, 2002b). By the time police arrived, the trucker had blocked the exit and the snipers were asleep in their car (Gould, 2002b). Ten people were dead, three wounded (FOX News, 2002).

**The Snipers in my Life**

That October, the leaves would have been turning in welcome of fall and dropping from their branches. Only a few weeks more and I would have been able to see U.S. Route Three, the site of the first Spotsylvania shooting, through the bare trees of my neighborhood. After October 4, 2002, that road became an empty memorial and a sign that D.C. was closer than we had imagined.

My sister Ashley had a field hockey game that Friday afternoon. I had not gone, but my parents were there. Mom had heard about the shooting at Michael’s on the radio but was not worried about sitting outside exposed for a few hours. At that point, we were not afraid. Ashley’s teammates were explicitly told by the coaches not to discuss the attack but to instead focus on the game. In the moments following that first shooting the snipers had not yet thrown our lives into mass chaos. It would not be until later that night that my mother would begin to question whether the coaches put them in more danger by not moving everyone inside while an unknown assailant prowled the city.

That night was the first I heard of the attack. How many times had I stood in that exact spot? The woman was alive, but barely. As the news camera on television slowly panned the dark parking lot of the store, the road was for the first time in memory deserted. This road usually shut down because there were too many people; seeing no one terrified me more than seeing thousands.

My parents strove to assure Ashley and me that we were safe and that the probability of any of us being the next victim was too slim to even consider. The snipers likely would never come back to Spotsylvania, and we had to keep living. We did not even know the shooting had been the work of the snipers. Dad has since said that the greatest communication challenge he and my mother faced was convincing us that we could not stop because something terrible had happened a little too close. And though they could tell us we would be okay, they were not completely convinced. The woman at Michael’s certainly had not woken up that morning and thought she would be next in a haphazard shooting spree anymore than I did.
The weekend after the shooting my mother, sister, and I went to the mall in a defiant attempt to prove to the snipers that we would not be frightened. I did not want to go that day and my heart drummed in my chest. What did it matter if the snipers made us more cautious? It would not hurt to be more aware of our environment; the Michael’s shooting proved that. I was more than content to allow the world to spin without me until this madman was caught and everything fell back into place. I was scared, but I wouldn’t admit that and so went to the mall looking over my shoulder and feeling absent eyes staring at me.

In a poor show of conquering my irrational fear, I surveyed the parking lot as we drew nearer. Nothing was different. There were no puddles of blood on the ground, no police staking out the area with guns drawn. There was nothing: no traffic to see through, no mobs of people strolling through the parking lot. It was Saturday; the town should have been bustling. Perhaps it was, but not there. There was nothing there.

On any other Monday, the shooting would have been the gossip of the high school and listening to the dramatists expound upon how they had been in that parking lot only moments before the attack would have been normal. In a few days, we would have dropped the subject. It was on what should have been an ordinary Monday that a child was shot walking into his middle school in Maryland.

I was dropped off outside of my high school every morning and every morning walked laughing and talking inside. Middle schools started later than the high schools and when I began my first class of the day, Iran Brown was still getting ready. To be thirteen and known from Maryland to Virginia as the youngest and most remembered victim is a heavy burden for any child. As children ourselves, it was burden we all shouldered in different ways.

That shooting was the end of our childhood. We could no longer pretend to be carefree when a boy was rushed to the hospital in a wailing ambulance and into surgery while his parents paced the waiting room. Any conceptions I had had about enjoying those last moments before adulthood vanished. I lost the chance to be a child because that shooting shattered any idea that I was invincible.

My teacher turned on the television as news of the shooting filtered in. Doors were immediately locked and no one entered or left the building. Due to overcrowding, our school had trailers which made it necessary for students to be outside every forty-five minutes or so. Now every class was escorted by teachers to and from the trailers. I wondered at the time, as I do now, what one teacher could have done if the snipers had opened fire.

There was a sense of helplessness in my family after that. While my parents would throw themselves in front of a bullet for my sister and me, they could not protect us if they did not know where the threat was. The snipers went on to warn that children were not safe, and no one doubted that after this latest demonstration. We had no reason to believe that the snipers were making idle threats to keep us at their mercy. To be as helpless as both my mother and father were must have been devastating; I cannot imagine what they felt. We never again left the house without saying we loved one another at least once, often rushing back inside for one more hug.
my parents had to release us into an unpredictable world, then there was nothing they could do but let us know they loved us before we stepped into the crosshairs of the shooters.

In the morning the mother who drove us to school watched from her van in the parking lot as we scampered inside, this time without laughter. It was only a show, however; she could do nothing to save us and we knew that. Iran Brown’s aunt too had sat in the parking lot watching him. We ran, checking over our shoulders as though hoping we would be able to see the snipers before they saw us. My school is not far from Interstate 95 and none of the other attacks had been either. Gossip flew through the school. At lunch someone swore that the shooter was using a silencer and though I am wholly ignorant of guns, when I heard that, I believed it automatically. A silencer that would keep me from hearing a shot automatically meant that I would be shot.

When I got off of the bus that afternoon, I was alone. It was not unusual; I was the only one at the bus stop most days. I live at the very back of my neighborhood, the end of the road with a backyard that is nothing but woods with direct access to busy thoroughfares. Two lots I passed on the way home, then, were just thick trees where anyone could hide. I did not run but I wanted to. The bus pulled away almost as soon as my foot touched the pavement, and suddenly alone, I began to walk. If I did not zigzag along to way to make myself a more difficult target, what did it matter? If the snipers were lurking in the woods then they would hit me no matter what I did. My eyes scanned the woods around me, hoping I would have enough time to duck before the bullet struck. I wondered if it would hurt. Those afternoons were the only times I thought I could be the next victim. I was alone and no one would be able to help me. Who would find me?

On Wednesday a second person was killed at a gas station. Panic broke out. My parents started going to fill up their cars at stations that were hopefully too far for a sniper to bother with. Others ducked and wove as they stood at the pump. This small burst of irrational behavior was our attempt to take back control of the situation. We would no longer be content with remaining passive targets, though that was all we were. My father was walking across a parking lot one afternoon during all of this when another man turned to him and asked if they “should be ducking and running?” (G. Gutshall, personal communication, October 1, 2009).

October 11th came, a Friday. I was in world history when the principal came over the loudspeaker and announced that we were to go to the back of our classrooms and sit down against the wall. Teachers were to immediately turn off the lights and lock the doors. We had never before been told to hide. Now, crouched in the back of a dark room, I shook. I cannot remember how long we stayed like that, but it was long after classes should have changed. It was not until much later that we learned that the police were at the school searching the grounds for the sniper. Massaponax High School is, like most places in Spotsylvania, surrounded by woods. That day, not two miles away, a man had been killed at an Exxon Station while pumping gas and police had no idea where the snipers had gone next. We would be the logical place to stage an attack, and were also the only school within easy reach of Interstate 95. And so, while police...
scoured the campus, we sat in huddled masses realizing there had been a shooting but knowing nothing else.

After school we walked outside as teachers and police patrolled the pavement. My sister was for once coming home with me and we sat together on the bus, silent but with linked hands. No one spoke because to get to our neighborhood we all knew that we would have to drive past the scene. If we had tried, we could not have prepared ourselves. The bus inched slowly down the road, every moment closing in on the roadblocks and stopped traffic. When we were a stop light away from the station we could see flashing lights, blockades, yellow tape. Ashley squeezed my hand tightly as I looked on in shock. There were cars still parked there as witnesses who had not witnessed anything. The fear came from never seeing anything. The man, the victim, was not even from Spotsylvania.

Miles around were crawling with police and the FBI. The entire gas station had been roped off as police paced the area. My body shut down as cold chills raced down my arms and I moved closer to Ashley, instinctively seeking the comfort she could provide just by being my sister. What I did not realize as I clung to her was that she needed someone to take care of her too.

The snipers never left the scene but there was no way to know that. We did not even know what they looked like. Police may have stopped them countless times and no one had been any wiser. Across the street was a Howard Johnson motel. By the time the investigation was launched, the snipers were sitting comfortably in their room overlooking the gas station, watching police chasing ghosts.

Dad was at the bus stop when we finally made it home. For once I would not be alone in the house with only my fear as company. Ashley and I climbed into the car, crying as we choked out the broken phrases in an attempt to describe the death, the fear, and the helplessness. And as he listened and comforted as best he could, his own anger grew, never having considered that the bus driver would be so careless as to take impressionable and already terrified children through the heart of an active crime scene, making them indirect witnesses to murder.

With every shooting, Interstate 95 was shut down because it was the only connection between the snipers and the victims. Perhaps whoever they were, they did not know the area any better and were unsure of other escape routes and would be on I-95 when it was closed. Maybe police would get lucky. Thousands of maybes that never came true. That afternoon, I-95 was closed in both directions from Richmond to D.C., and Dad’s fastest route to us was cut off. A normal thirty-minute drive became “a nerve wracking two hours plus” (G. Gutshall, personal communication, October 1, 2009) as he twisted his way through the back roads we could only pray the snipers did not know.

Eventually Mom made it home. She walked in the door, dropped everything into a heap in the middle of the floor, and enfolded my sister and me into her arms. Squeezing as though she would never let go or feared we would be ripped suddenly from her, she sobbed uncontrollably. Since the shootings began I had not seen her shed a tear, but that day, and only that day, she was
inconsolable. After she had heard that there had been a shooting near the school, she had been convinced that we had been hurt and there had been no way to get in touch with us.

When the tears at long last slowed, she gasped out what had happened that day. As she had been walking down the hall, her principal had carelessly mentioned there had been a shooting. Mom asked where; he replied Massaponax. The intersection where the gas station sits is called Massaponax but the man had not thought to clarify that it was not our high school. Mom had simply folded into herself, collapsing into a heap as the principal struggled to realize why. As soon as he remembered where we went to school, he dropped down beside her and told her that it was not at the school, just close to it, as though that made a difference. There was no reason to believe that my sister and I were not safe. But not knowing and not being able to talk to us did nothing to set her mind at ease. She knew where that gas station was and she knew where we were as well.

The principal had sent her to the school psychologist, who locked the door and tried in vain to calm my mother down. Mom has since said it was the longest half hour of her life and that “the hardest was not knowing” (C. Gutshall, personal communication, September 14, 2009). By now she had confirmed that the school had been locked down but where the snipers had fled to was a mystery. My father called to tell her he was leaving work to make it home before we did. As she herself drove home later, Mom passed white vans with orange stickers plastered on their trunks. It was the police’s way of marking vans that had already been searched.

Our grandparents started to beg us to leave Virginia and come to stay with them, either in West Virginia or Ohio. But Mom and Dad refused. We would not abandon our home or our lives because to do so would admit any possibility that we could be next. They had asked the same thing after September 11th, but we had said no then too. This was our home for better or for worse and to leave was to say that the snipers had won.

Ashley and I were supposed to go to a homecoming dance at another high school the week after the Massaponax shooting. Our dresses were ready and the school was nowhere near the interstate. After not letting us do many things, our parents were going to let us go to the dance to hopefully enjoy one night of blissful normalcy. There had been one shooting on Monday, but nothing since and so we saw it as a sign that we should go, rather than a warning to stay away.

The dance began at eight o’clock and we arrived a little before, hurrying in. From the school, we called to let our parents know that we were with our friends and safe inside. They told us to have fun, and Ashley and I separated with our respective groups. Eight o’clock came and went. What we did not know was that as we were dancing the first dance, a man had been shot in a restaurant parking lot forty-five minutes away.

It was a while before the administration had enough information to share and to make a decision. I do not know what time it was but the lights came on and the music stopped abruptly. I think we all knew what the principal was going to say before he did, but we pretended like we did not anyway. Over the intercom the principal told us that there had been another shooting. I was more surprised that it had happened on a weekend than that they had struck again. All of the
other shootings had been on weekdays. Vaguely, the principal continued that I-95 was closed in either direction. The dance was over and the administration would stay until everyone was gone.

I could see my sister from across the cafeteria and by the time we got to each other, she was dialing Mom’s cell phone as she hugged me. Ashley’s friend who had driven us was on her phone as well. For most of our teenage years we had striven to prove that we did not need our parents to take us around. Having licenses was proof of that. That night it did not matter how old or aloof we were. That night what we wanted most was our parents. Mom and Dad were on their way already by the time they got Ashley’s call; they had heard about the shooting and left immediately. Teachers kept us inside as we searched the dark parking lot for our parents’ cars. Mom and Dad could not get close enough to the school to pull up in front and so when they called to tell us that they were there, Ashley and I took each other’s hands and ran as quickly as we could in high heels to their car in the back of the lot. There was no point in asking if we had had fun because it was irrelevant. They were just “happy to have [us] in [their] circle again” (C. Gutshall, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

In my mom’s words, that shooting “brought our lives to a complete stop” (C. Gutshall, personal communication, September 14, 2009). After the Massaponax shooting, we had tried to find something positive to look forward to. But the snipers stole that from us. Now we were too scared to do anything. We stopped telling one another to keep moving because not moving forward was okay when every time we tried the snipers laughed. We were tired.

The Marine Corps Marathon, which my father worked, loomed closer and there were no plans to cancel the race. But the track wound thirty miles through the heart of Washington, D.C. and there was a sniper or two on the loose who was randomly shooting and had yet to miss. With fifty thousand people in the finish area, not to mention around the rest of the course, the marathon would be “like shooting fish in a barrel” (G. Gutshall, personal communication, October 1, 2009). My dad was going to be there, on the sidelines and distracted as he took care of details. He was going to be another target. Luckily, the snipers were caught three days before the race.

I was in health class. It was a Thursday. At some point our teacher turned on the television, though I cannot remember know why. At the time I thought there had been another attack. There, on every station, was the image of a rest stop in Maryland and an empty blue car. Not long before the snipers had been sleeping inside.

Nothing happened on the screen but we were riveted to it as though we expected at any moment someone would announce it was a joke. If that were the case, then I at least wanted to cling to this hope as long as possible. The blue car, now the focus of the case, looked nothing like the white van police had searched for. A newscaster began to fill us in slowly. The FBI had linked John Allen Muhammad to a fingerprint from a shooting in Alabama and discovered Muhammad had a car registered in his name. Within hours the FBI had known the license plate and truckers were advised to watch for the car but not approach it. This was no time to be a hero. By some miracle a trucker who had heard the newest developments stopped at a rest area that
night, October 24, 2002, saw the mythical blue car, and used his truck to block the exit. It was finally over.

Lee Boyd Malvo. John Allen Muhammad. Those were the names of the faceless demons who had haunted and destroyed countless lives. Malvo was seventeen, only a few years older than me. Muhammad would be accused by Malvo for having extensively brainwashed him but no one believed the claim and it was forgotten. Malvo was convicted for the majority of the shootings. Virginia, an active proponent of the death penalty, was the first to try the snipers. Because Malvo was a juvenile at the time, he was ineligible for the death penalty and so was sentenced, in Virginia at least, to life in prison. Muhammad was sentenced to death for his role and was executed outside of Richmond on November 10, 2009.

A few years after the events we would learn that the ultimate plan of the snipers had been to kill one person a day, focusing on children. They had wanted to gather orphans into a terrorist camp in Canada where they could train them to carry on the attacks. By the time that information was released, I was finishing my junior year of high school and viewed the event with the eyes of an adult. My parents never spoke about that part of the plan; they had barely survived one near school shooting. And besides, this was no longer about me; it was about them. It was about how they kept me safe when my world collapsed.

Families in Crisis

Having now told my story, I turn to that communication literature which best expresses how families survive during a crisis. I look first at how the media impacts emotional experiences and how parents can help children understand events and I then transition into the power of emotionally open communication. The final section will detail the influence and strength of family communication.

Media and Coping

Due to my age and maturity during the shootings, I frequently watched the nightly news with my parents. According to Schuster et al. (2001), such co-viewing can have both positive and negative effects. For instance, children who watch shows with detailed coverage of a trauma are not as removed from the horror and thus report higher stress and exaggeration of the threat (Schuster et al., 2001). They believe the attack poses more danger than it actually does (Schuster et al.). I agree. I walked home from my bus stop convinced I was a target when there was no reason why the snipers would have been lurking in my neighborhood. It was not their style. Nonetheless, I saw people killed in everyday places and so thought that every everyday place was a threat.

Another peril I faced from the news was becoming more aware of the danger (Wilson, Martin, & Marske, 2005). In turn, being reminded of the threats led to a more intense reaction (Cantor & Omdahl, 1991). Just as Schuster et al. (2001) found, the evening news increased my
apprehension and struggles to cling to normalcy. Instead of obtaining comfort in hearing how far away a shooting had been, I personalized the attack (Schuster et al.). As a family, we avoided specific places, such as gas stations close to the interstate when we could (Schuster et al.), going out of our way to try to feel safe. Cantor and Omdahl (1991) discovered results similar to Schuster et al. (2001). In their study of children’s fear reactions after watching a media clip of a particular danger, they discovered that children remember vivid scenes for a prolonged time (Cantor & Omdahl). It is not the information, but the fear they remember (Cantor & Omdahl).

In an investigation of how parents and children respond to kidnapping stories, Wilson et al. (2005) observed that when television is employed as a prominent role to disseminate information, parents increase protective actions. Children as young as kindergarten pay attention to the news (Wilson et al.), especially when a threatening event is center, causing parents to shield their children from portions of the news. My mother and father were able to find the balance Wilson et al. (2005) stressed between warning children appropriately and making them too afraid to face daily life. We did not hide. While certain activities were curtailed, we left the house. They kept us informed with the most important information but were also extremely careful to know how much information my sister and I could absorb (Lavoie, 2004) and how to ensure that we were also still allowed to be children.

**Parenting and Danger**

A predominant theme running through the research was the steps parents take to protect their children when they cannot constantly be with them. My own parents faced this struggle repeatedly, especially when the shootings adopted a more personal nature. Osofsky (1995) stated that “parents may become overprotective” (p. 786), limiting the activities their children take part in. My mother recalls not letting us do things we once enjoyed without restriction. It was her and my father’s small way of keeping us near and thus safe. Children themselves attempt to avoid areas they think are dangerous (Osofsky, 1995); after the Michael’s shooting I did not want to go to the mall because I no longer felt safe. I could not depend on my parents to wholly protect me and it became simpler to withdraw from normal activities (Osofsky, 1995).

In their study of how families can counteract the effects of danger, Garbarino, Kostelny and Dubrow (1991) found that while parents adjust their parenting styles to protect their children, they at the same time refuse to allow them to participate in activities that take them away from the family. Parents, however, cannot always refuse to let their children take part in routine activities. And when they can no longer know for sure that their children are safe, they may display signs of helplessness (Osofsky, 1995). They become overwhelmed with the need to protect their children from all imaginable threats (Lavoie, 2002); the crisis my parents faced was what to do when they could not act in accordance with that instinct. My entire life I relied on them to see me through the harder times; this was the first instance when they simply could not.

De Groof (2008) noted how parental fears can be adopted by children who are unsure how to react in the face of catastrophe. While I agree with this claim, I disagree with another
finding from the same study. De Groof (2008) claims that parental supervision increases a child’s fear while spending time outside of the family lowers the inhibition. If the world is falling to pieces, though, what child wants to be left alone? Had I been outside of my home more than I was, I cannot help but think that I would have been more afraid and constantly checking over my shoulder for a threat I would not know was coming.

My parents were not hesitant to discuss their emotions, which in turn helped me understand that it was all right to feel as though the world was beyond my control. When my mom returned from work after the Massaponax shooting and collapsed, or my father waited at the bus stop, they communicated both their growing helplessness and fear for our safety at the expense of their own. Though they never said as much, they displayed fear far above any I imagined possible. They had no concern for themselves as the shootings crept closer and closer. While I was scared for my family, I was also terrified for myself. I walked home thinking that the snipers had me in their sights. My parents never thought to worry about themselves.

**Family Communication and Support**

These emotionally open communications helped me learn how to cope with an uncontrollable situation (Gentzler, Contreras-Grau, Kerns, & Weimer, 2005). By focusing on the problem and how I felt (Gentzler et al., 2005), I was able to put into words everything within me and pass off the burden to another. My parents had more than enough to worry about, but they were willing to shoulder my fears as well. As a family we discussed the snipers often, which, while a catharsis, also increased the intensity of my emotions (Buijzen, Walma van der Molen, & Sondijet, 2007). From my parents I received the majority of information about the snipers (Buijzen et al., 2007) and after an attack, I wanted to be home because it was where I could make sense of what otherwise would have crushed me.

At the time of my sister’s field hockey game, no one knew the full extent of the sniper shootings but we still look back and wonder what would have happened had the snipers come near. Gaffney (2008) found that schools are not often prepared to adequately address trauma and provide long-term coping aid to children. This was clearly illustrated by my school system’s hesitation to disrupt our lives. They did not know how to take the steps necessary to ensure that we were safe. A bus driver should have been given explicit directions not to take students through a crime scene and a field hockey coach should have immediately cancelled the game. Neither did, and so the schools that were meant to protect us were at times putting us at even greater risk.

Cohen and Dotan (1976), in their study of families during the 1973 conflict in the Middle East, observed that during times of violence, family members increase contact with relatives. Hours away from my extended family, we relied heavily on the telephone not only as a means of keeping them updated but also to continually reassure them that we were safe. As I previously noted, my parents faced mounting pressure to leave Spotsylvania and stay with our grandparents. That was simply not possible. Our lives could not be packed up and abandoned. Consistent with
Zivotofsky and Koslowsky’s (2004) analysis of the effects of the D.C. sniper shootings, my parents did not consider leaving. And so we turned to the phone. Every time there was a shooting, we could expect a phone call around dinner. We could also use this time to tone down the information we passed on to lessen their fear.

Earlier I noted that when my mother, sister, and I went to the mall the weekend after the shooting, I did not tell them how I felt. By ignoring the threat, I hoped it would disappear and I would not have to think about it. At that point, none of us thought that the shooting was anything more than a random act. Because “the primary goal of healing is to assimilate the trauma…[one’s] life” (Gaffney, 2008, p. 47), I tried to force myself to heal by keeping what I felt inside, an ultimately poor decision. Coping mechanisms have the power to either “mitigate or exacerbate the impact of a stressor on personal functioning” (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989, p. 1337), which I learned the hard way. Not talking about what I was going through did not ease my fears because I gave up the opportunity for the support I desperately sought (Trees, 2005). I relied on avoidance (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989) and through the multiple setbacks I encountered doing so, eventually turned to open communication. I did not make the same mistake twice.

After the first instance of shutting down rather than opening up, I began to lean on my parents more than I had. My parents and I have always been close but the shootings lifted us to a new level. They united us as one selective group against the world. And while Hoffner and Haefner (1993) concluded that children rely on conversations with parents in place of physical comfort in hard times, I disagree. When the snipers struck two miles from my school, the greatest comfort I found was hugging my parents and sister. I was untouchable when with them. I feel that now, still.

Multiple studies have documented the effects of parental expressions of fear on children (Muris, Steerneman, Merckelbach, & Meesters, 1996; Wilson et al., 2005). My parents were supposed to be the strong ones, the fearless. Muris et al. (1996), for example, wrote that mothers are more likely to display fear around their children than fathers. This was true in my family. Dad was leaving for Washington, D.C. in the midst of the shootings and if I known how afraid he was it would have made it even more difficult to cope with my own emotions. This finding was further corroborated by Dunsmore, Her, Halberstadt, and Perez-Rivera (2009), who found that fathers mask their emotions in front of their children with greater frequency. The above authors concluded that doing so is meant to shield the child from heightened emotional intensity (Dunsmore et al., 2009). While Dad was always physically present, I never saw him cry. Even now he is better able to talk about the effect the attacks had on him than Mom.

Altshuler and Ruble (1989) noted that older children are more dependent on their parents than peers as a means of support. My parents were the only ones who could reassure me, and at least part of the time I believed them. Friends, on the other hand, knew no more than I did. Unlike the Burleson and Kunkel (2002) study which found that adolescents rely more on their peers for emotional support, I cannot remember ever talking to my friends about what I felt. My thoughts of helplessness were reserved for my parents when it was all right to be weak. I would
argue that in such painful circumstances, parents are most adept at helping a child to understand. As has been supported by communication literature detailing coping and friendships, I significantly decreased my social interactions with others (Zivotofsky & Koslowsky, 2004) and when I needed help I turned to my parents first (Zivotofsky & Koslowsky). My friends were as afraid as I was; there was nothing they could say that would alleviate my fears.

I have noted again and again how instrumental my family was during these times, how I doubt I would have coped as constructively were it not for them. My parents’ physical presence gave me a feeling of stability (Trees, 2000). When I came home after a shooting, I knew that they would be there and even if I was not completely comforted, I could lean on them. A few days after a shooting, talking about the effects with my family decreased the pain, as Gentzler et al. (2005) found in their own study of reflection after a horrific event. Through reflection I could understand the grief and cope with it in ways I was not immediately able to do. Continuing our dialogue about the Massaponax shooting weeks later allowed me to discuss why I did not feel safe at school or when I walked home and rather than keeping such doubts inside of me, I was able to confront them. I never had to pretend to be all right when I was not. Mom and Dad freely showed emotion and never thought it would harm me to see.

Lemieux and Tighe (2004) determined that not only does the context influence how likely a person is to seek support, but also that individuals are more likely to want explanations not emotion. I wanted to know why the sniper shootings were happening and when they would stop. Would tomorrow bring the end? Who were these invisible men? There was a fear in not knowing the future or what the next day would bring (Quarta, 2006) that no amount of comfort could completely destroy. Knowing that, I used factual information to console me when nothing else could.

Communication obviously played a critical role in helping me not only then but now in giving an outlet to the roiling emotions I experienced. As a family unit we reappraised the threat to make it less terrifying and monitored our reactions by looking at specific aspects (Hoffner, 1993) while discussing how those particular details related to us, in line with the majority of published research studies. The most important lesson I took from those days was that talking about my emotions had more power than I had ever believed. I now conclude with my final reflections and the limitations I faced writing this autoethnography.

Conclusion

This narrative transported me back to a time I would rather not revisit. There are days now that I walk alone down a busy street and flashback to that fourteen-year-old who once could not stand to be alone outside. At times I cannot help but wonder if something will happen again. In order to survive the times during and after I repressed a large part of what I experienced. An eerie and uneasy feeling still pervades when I catch a glimpse of an unmarked van and I fight to keep myself from searching out the nearest hiding place. White vans were not involved in the shootings when everything finally came to an end, and yet I cannot erase that image.
A particular limitation is how much time has passed since October 2002. I will not deny that at moments it was hard to recall the exact nature or time of an attack or what I felt as it unfolded around me. I relied on news reports as a means of jump-starting my memory to give a definite shape to the dim picture in my mind and spoke extensively to my parents about what had happened. That is not to say that the sniper shootings are not an incredibly salient memory or that I have forgotten those days because I never will. Only the details are a little blurrier than they once were. I would like to think that in spite of that difficulty I did justice to those weeks and those emotions. The sheer volume of what I discovered I had to say convinces me that what I wrote is the strongest memoir of October 2002 that I will ever be able to write.

My emotions acted as a different type of limitation. I constantly wondered whether I was clear enough when discussing how we felt and what it was like to live through the sniper shootings. I write and I feel the same, with the same pit in my stomach and cold chills racing down my arms as I bring forth an image of a gas station or mug shot. It was transferring those emotions to the page that was more challenging than I had originally thought. Friends in college have asked me to explain the sniper shootings to them, and one has told me that she heard of the attacks but they meant little to her. Had the snipers not to come to Spotsylvania, they would have meant little to me as well.

And so, I have obviously changed since the snipers, both because of what they did and because of the aftershocks. I had to grow up very quickly when it became clear that I could not pretend I was still safe in a world where I was not. I could not close my eyes and pretend it was not happening. The world is different now than it was before: I am less trusting of strangers and wonder whether another will someday repeat the attacks. I grew up in a world where a seventeen-year-old took it upon himself to play God and chose children as targets. As I have stressed often in this narrative, the attacks were random. It is no wonder that I question now whether they are still happening.

The final point I wish to make is that my father was right. Life does go on. I sometimes feel guilty that I do not always think about what happened in Spotsylvania all of those years ago, but my life did not and cannot stop because of it. When Dad would tell me that it would be all right eventually and that I could not stop living my life just because there was a madman on the loose, I did not believe him. Why shouldn’t I put my life on hold because I was afraid? I am indebted to him that I did not. It has been seven years and the scars on our town and within us remain. Those will not fade. But I believe I do more justice to the memory of the victims and to that little girl I once was when I walk outside and do not think I am wearing an imaginary target on my back. I have to continue, if only because I will not allow the snipers to taint my future as well.
References


