Social media can be deadly
Leonard Pitts Jr., Miami Herald, October 12, 2013 7:00 PM

The thing might be funny, except that somebody died. That part isn’t funny at all. But the rest of it, the moments before Justin Valdez was killed, read like some twisted skit on Saturday Night Live.

You have to get the picture as captured on surveillance video and described by authorities in a story published last week by the San Francisco Chronicle. You have to see the suspect, 30-year-old Nikhom Thephakaysone, sitting on the light-rail train, pulling out his .45 caliber pistol, pointing it across the aisle, putting it back, pulling it out several times again, and at one point wiping his nose with the hand holding the gun — and nobody notices because they’re too busy staring down at their smart phones and tablet computers. We’re talking about a train crowded with commuters and this guy is waving a gun around but nobody sees him, so engrossed are they in texting, tweeting and playing Angry Birds.

Finally, according to police, Thephakaysone shot Valdez in the back of the head as the 20-year-old college student was exiting the train. That got people’s attention. Indeed, the apparently random Sept. 23rd tragedy has rocked the Bay Area. It ought to rock the whole country.

In the murder of Justin Valdez and the bizarre scenario leading up to it, we find fresh, albeit bloody, evidence of how social media and high technology have changed us. These devices and new platforms of communication were supposed to allow us to be better-connected to one another. Take this murder as Exhibit A for the argument that they actually do the opposite.

Granted, they provide a link to someone who is not there, but it is at the cost of separation from someone who is. Next time you’re on a plane waiting for takeoff, next time you’re on public transit, next time you’re in a restaurant, count all the eyes fixed to all the screens, all the ears stuffed with tiny white buds, all the spaces that once would have been filled with casual conversation and eye contact, now filled by the silence of people who are not there, people who occupy the same place at the same time worlds apart.

Then these people go home to their families where they watch separate programs in separate rooms while the kids retreat to rooms of their own to text and tweet the night away. Because we have all these new options for self-entertainment and the option we most frequently choose, it seems, is to be alone, together.

Your humble correspondent is as guilty as anyone. Indeed, with an introvert’s instinct for solitude, he may be guiltier than most.

But even an introvert can see there is something wrong with this picture. Even an introvert can feel something is lost when human connectivity, human society, human intercourse, are reduced to pixels on a screen and everybody is looking down.

Yes, it sounds like an abstract plaint, the kind of observation one makes when one is paid to navel gaze and think big thoughts.

However, the death of Justin Valdez robs us of the luxury of believing this does not matter or has no real world application. This killing may speak to our refusal to take
guns out of the hands of those who should not have them. It might bear upon our unwillingness to impose safeguards ensuring that those who need mental healthcare receive it.

But surely it speaks at least as loudly and directly to the alienation and disconnect which have been the ironic, unintended consequence of devices and platforms designed to bring us together. After all, Justin Valdez is dead, at least in part, because it is now possible to wave a gun around in a crowded train without being noticed.

Technology has trained us to look down in search of connection. This man’s death is a cruel reminder:

You need to look up sometimes as well.


Bullying: Why Zero-Tolerance Policies Don’t Work”
Andrew Zack, Huffington Post, 11/17/2011

I’ve been reading a lot on the subject of bullying lately, whether it’s the "Star Wars"-loving little girl or Chris Colfer from "Glee" creating a PSA addressed to LGBT youth and assuring them, "It gets better."

As I read these stories of bullying -- many tragic stories involving suicides of LGBTQ youth -- I’ve pondered the responses. Fort Worth City Councilman Joel Burns made an emotional speech directed to LGBT youth, telling them, like Colfer did, that "it gets better." And from the White House to your local school system, a zero-tolerance approach to bullying has been advocated or adopted. Suspension and expulsion are often the cost of being caught as a bully. And while I understand the desire to end bullying in our schools, I can’t help but wonder if this approach is flawed.

I have been bullied. And perhaps, in a few instances, I have even been a bully. And if I could travel back in time and meet with my young self, I would certainly try to coach myself on how to adjust my behavior so that I would be less obvious a target for bullies. I would drill into my younger self that one cannot react, take the bait or be reduced to tears by bullies because that merely encourages more bullying.

But I would also tell myself that bullies are often being bullied themselves and their attacks on you are more often about what is happening to them than how they feel about you.

Recently, I contacted two classmates of mine on Facebook. Both had bullied me in middle school -- not repeatedly, and mostly opportunistically. Each incident ended in a few punches being thrown, and for one we both received an in-school suspension for fighting. When I contacted these individuals, neither one remembered the incident. Each was also enormously apologetic, and each related stories of being bullied himself -- one at home, verbally via sarcasm and mocking, and one, quite physically, by older kids and other kids in our class.

I’ve yet to have the courage to contact the one kid who tortured me from second to seventh grade, but I already know this boy never saw himself as a bully. When my mother passed away during my freshman year of high school, he phoned our home to
express his sympathies. I remember my response went something like, "You made my life a living hell for years. Why on earth do you think I'd want to hear from you now?" and I hung up. When I considered our "relationship" over the years, I came to realize that he probably saw us as being friends of some sort. To me, though, he was Damien Thorn with blond hair.

Do I hate these boys? No. While I wish I hadn't endured their attacks (and the attacks of others, both verbal and physical), I cannot deny the simple truth that I learned a lot from those experiences -- that I gained something from having been bullied. My sense of humor runs to the satiric and sarcastic. There are those who find me quite funny. But that sense of humor was honed largely by trying to find ways to retort what the bullies said. I am persistent and argumentative, many would say. And while the latter can be a flaw at times, both traits have served me well, on behalf of those I represent as a literary agent. And I developed those traits, I feel, in response to bullies.

And let's not forget that bullying by no means ends with school. I have worked in the publishing industry for more than 20 years and would describe at least three of my bosses over the years as genuine bullies. While a young editor at a major publishing house, several editors and assistants clearly attempted to bully me -- one going so far as to ask a friend to dump a drink on me at an after-work get-together. Of course, this was the more blatant and juvenile kind of bullying, which is often easier to deal with than the less-obvious gossiping and axe-grinding that goes on in corporations that is nonetheless a form of bullying. When someone in your office gossips or lies and turns others against you, that is simply bullying, even if it's more sophisticated than calling you a "fag" on the playground or dumping your books on the staircase of your school. And this will not end because schools have a zero-tolerance policy against bullying.

It seems to me that we should be teaching kids today how to deal with bullies, and we should be taking those bullies aside and looking at their lives to find out what is making them act as bullies. Are they abused at home? Are they being bullied, in turn, by someone else? Kids are not inherently bullies. Bullies are made, and thus we must unmake them. And suspensions and expulsions will not accomplish this. If schools and government are eager to stop bullying, then more resources must be put into counselors and therapists who can engage with the bullies and get to the heart of what makes them act as they do.

And more can be done with those being bullied. I was terrified of physically standing up to my bullies, yet there's no doubt that in the three instances where I actually threw a punch or two, I was never again bullied by those kids. Kids being bullied are often lacking in the self-confidence to stand up to their bullies, verbally or physically. I would argue that those kids also need counseling to increase their self-confidence because, just as the lion looks for the younger and weaker members of the herd to attack, the bully looks for the kid lacking the ability to stand-up to him -- the kid who is a bit socially awkward, who is a bit "different" from the pack -- to target. These kids can be engaged in different ways to help them be more self-confident, which won't happen through a strict zero-tolerance policy in schools.

Thus, I sing the praises of bullying. I endured it and was made stronger. My heart goes out to the families of those who couldn't take it anymore and made tragic decisions. Let's go beyond "it gets better" and provide real resources to make it better.

Andrew Zack, President and Literary Agent, The Zack Company, Inc., Publisher, Endpapers Press

It's not just guns and society. It's the person
By Mitch Albom,
Detroit Free Press, Commentary and criticism, July 22, 2012

We were coming out of a movie theater. There were four of us. This was Thursday, just about midnight.

"Hey, we could go see the Batman premiere," one of us said.

We looked at one another. It was tempting -- to be so spontaneous, to act so young, to stay out late and be among the first to see this hot new film.

"Nah ... I can't stay up."

"Why go and fall asleep?"

"We'll see it next week."

We drove home, feeling old.

We awoke the next morning, feeling lucky.

Twelve people dead. Fifty-eight wounded. A gunman spraying bullets as the movie played on, then later allegedly telling police he was the Joker. You wonder how many people outside the Aurora, Colo., theater that night were just like us in Michigan, only instead of saying, "Nah" they said, "Yeah, let's go in."

Are any of them dead today? Or carrying fragments of bullets in their bodies?

What do you say after an event like this? Do you say it's the guns? It's the violence? It's society?

It is the guns, but not just the guns. It is the violence, but not just the violence. It is society, but not just society.

It's the person.

And it's always the person.

Random acts of violence
Look, you can fill the streets with weapons; I still won't pick one up. You can show me a marathon of violent films; I still won't want to act them out. Something likely snapped inside the mind of the suspect, James Holmes -- as it likely did for an immigrant who shot and killed 13 others in Binghamton, N.Y., in 2009, or a former student at Northern Illinois University who shot and killed five others in 2008, or the Virginia Tech murderer who killed 32 people and then himself in 2007, the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history.

And when a mind snaps evil, that's when easy gun availability becomes a factor; that's when violent images may fuel the imagination; that's when an alienating society may fan the murderous flames.
But we know very little about what motivated the Colorado shooter except what has been slapped against the wall by a frantic media. We only know that he purchased his guns legally, he'd never had anything worse than a speeding ticket, and on paper, anyhow, he was an unlikely killer, a doctoral student in neuroscience.

People always say, "We should have seen this coming." But if your first bad act is going to be a mass murder, I'm not sure anyone can see it coming.

And the truth is, nobody knows anybody.

I do know this. Like many of you, I grow increasingly depressed by the randomness of it all and by survivors who make you heave with sadness, like the 19-year-old woman named Salina Jordan who told a Denver news camera, "You hear the alarm go off, it says, 'Murder in the theater.' It's just going off: 'Murder in the theater! Murder in the theater!' It's crazy that they got an alarm saying there was a murder in the theater."

Crazy?

That's a good word for all of this.

**Sense of safety shattered**

On Friday, I spoke with a Denver news anchor who was covering this story, as she had covered the Columbine High School shooting 13 years ago. She said she was "trembling." She's a mother of three, and she lamented that "now we have to worry about going into a movie theater."

But the fact is, we always had to worry about going into a movie theater. It's a dark place with few exits and lots of people. If a deranged individual wants to shoot it up, you're in trouble.

But the same can be said of a church. A crowded mall. A concert hall. A train station. Should we never go to those? Columbine proved that high school hallways are not safe. Virginia Tech showed that even a campus is not big enough.

You always have to worry, but it's not the places you have to worry about. It's the shooters. They can strike anywhere.

While it may be true that guns don't kill people, people kill people, a person with an assault rifle can do a lot more killing than a person without one. And another one just did.

It's a cliché when this happens, but it's nonetheless true, that you never know how many moments you are given in this world, and you never know which decisions -- like going home instead of going in -- might save your life.

You only know that when you wake up in the morning, safe and with your loved ones, you should count the hour as lucky, and keep your eyes open as the day goes on.

To the Time Machine!
Summer camp: where the living is easy and the world is wi-fi-free
By Nancy Gibbs Saturday, July 02, 2011

The travel experts predict that this will be a staycation summer, with gas prices over $4 and the economy melting like an Eskimo pie. It's always been a luxury to be able to hop a plane to Paris, to Venice, to the Grand Canyon. But as I read the welcome letter sent to my daughter from her camp director, I decided that she is luckier still. The real luxury travel of the modern age is not through space; it's through time.

Just the fact of the letter startled me: seven leisurely pages, single-spaced — sentences that meandered from subject to object through a forest of rustling asides. It bore no resemblance to the tweets, texts, e-mails and alerts that race across my screens all day. The director, the aptly named Mr. Woodman, writes of health insurance and head lice, permission slips and spending money. As I read on I came to feel that the letter had arrived not from New Hampshire but from the 19th century.
(See 10 high-end summer camps for kids.)

The language is stern: there will be no tolerance of behavior that is "abusive, aggressive, offensive or otherwise ill-mannered." It is playful: no blow-dryers, "as the use of them is still prohibited under the terms of an exclusive contract we have for that service with Sun & Wind, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of the highly reputable Mother Earth Inc." It is philosophical: contrary to popular belief, there is no such thing as perfect safety, and being around horses, water, farm animals and, for that matter, humans involves some risk, which must be accepted and embraced, and please sign here to indicate that you understand this simple premise about a life worth living.

And it is elegiac. According to modern risk managers, camp staff should only hug a camper or pat her shoulder if they have the girl's and her parents' explicit permission. "'Tis a sad day," Mr. Woodman writes, "when the spontaneity of expression of encouragement or concern for a child with a timely hug or touch is lost to worries about the possible adverse consequences ... " But such are our litigious, suspicious, ambivalent times.

By the time I finished reading, I realized that while my daughter just wanted two weeks around horses, I was pleased she’d have two weeks around 1880. Two weeks in a place where the kitchen smells of fresh sweet things, floorboards are wide, hopes are high, hands are callused. Before To Catch a Predator.
(See photos of summer camp for autistic kids.)

A lot of camps and summer programs for kids seem to have discovered that among the most valuable things they offer is what they don't offer. No wi-fi. No grades. No hovering parents or risk managers or parents who parent like risk managers. The world as it was, or maybe just as we imagined it was, 100 years B.S. (before screens).

But it's not only kids who thrive on time travel. Time dissolves in summer anyway: days are long, weekends longer. Hours get all thin and watery when you are lost in the book you'd never otherwise have time to read. Senses are sharper — something about the moist air and bright light and fruit in season — and so memories stir and startle. Go on vacation with your siblings; you will be back in the treehouse of code words and competitions and all the rough rivalries of those we love but do not choose as family. I am more likely to read trashy books, eat sloppy food, go barefoot, listen to the Allman Brothers, nap and generally act like I'm 16 than I'd ever be in the dark days of February.
Return to a childhood haunt, the campground, the carnival, and let the season serve as a measuring stick, like notches on the kitchen doorway: the last time you walked this path, swam this lake, you were in love for the first time or picking a major or looking for work and wondering what comes next. The past was plump with questions whose answers you now know, and summer is when we get to review the exam and make corrections.
(See photos of a massive treehouse that is soon to be named the world's largest.)

And then having gone back, touched base, found our firm foundations, we flip the hourglass and travel forward. Summer is also the season of the college visit — and on the way to Mr. Woodman's idyll, my daughter and I did our first, the 16-year-old with the learner's permit driving through winding country roads to arrive at campuses that invite her to imagine herself in new dimensions: the philosophy major, the actress, the astronomer. As I watched her, in wonder and envy at what lay ahead, I remembered that any of us can ask the same questions about what comes next: What do we want to learn? Who shall we be when we grow up? Because it's summer now, and it's never too late to change majors.

http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2080752,00.html